

# A “Funny” Feeling: Laughter and Nostalgia in Alex Latimer’s *The Space Race*

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## ABSTRACT

Alex Latimer’s *The Space Race* deploys the fairly conventional science fiction narrative where humans travel to the moon in search of a new home and, set in a post-apartheid context, the progressive possibilities of this search are exciting to consider. Yet, I argue, this future-oriented opportunity is – somewhat unwittingly – squandered in favour of a more nostalgic focus. Latimer uses the trope of space exploration to revisit the broken dreams of the Afrikaner *volk* whose goal of finding a home in South Africa has finally been thwarted by the post-apartheid era thus leading to a covert plan to colonise the moon. Latimer, wants us to laugh at the longings of the *volk* but the humour misfires, instead producing an uncomfortable state of disavowal that ultimately restores the nostalgic dreams of the *volk* by turning it into a science fiction prophesy.

## KEYWORDS

Afrikaner, nostalgia, South African literature, African Science Fiction, whiteness, Alex Latimer

Upon reading Alex Latimer's debut novel, *The Space Race* (2013), I was transfixed, caught between the enjoyment of what felt like a refreshing read and a lingering discomfort that I could not identify. As we shall see, Latimer himself attests to surprise at the divided kind of reception his novel received, which may mean that the contradiction is inherent in the text. *The Space Race* is still one of the few South African novels that count as science fiction,<sup>1</sup> and it is easy to assume that its narrative is invested in futuristic, utopic and progressive aims. Yet, as I illustrate, the novel situates the reader in a paradox of time, offering an alternative South African reality that instead evokes quintessential nostalgic fantasies that seek to restore the broken dreams of the Afrikaner *volk*. This paper explores how and why the novel is able to produce an effect of this kind. My sense is that the deployment of humour segues into unwitting nostalgia whose indulgence ultimately proves problematic in post-transitional South Africa.

Given that memory and the archive are particularly fraught concepts in the South African national and literary imaginary, the expression of nostalgia is extremely uneven, either bound to saccharine and unthinking renditions of the past, or invested in a display of disenchantment, negating and forestalling its own expression. Reflecting on the presence of nostalgia in current literary output, Dennis Walder describes it as often of "the more sentimental, indulgent, and unreflective kind" (62). Similarly, David Medalie concludes that "in the majority of cases, the nostalgia is glib, unambitious and utterly lacking in self-consciousness" (37), and cites only Anne Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007) as a unique and refreshing departure from this trend. Contrarily, in his reading of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, Dirk Kloppe seeks to account for "the ambivalence that seems to typify nostalgia" (147) in South African literature. Instead, he identifies a nostalgia that resembles the compulsive return of the repressed or the uncanny, noting that "the very resistance to nostalgia has the effect of evoking it" (Kloppe 149). The result is a kind of haunting, as nostalgic affect lingers and is simultaneously dismissed. There is only a jarring and disorienting performance of the various seductions of nostalgia that makes it impossible to enjoy in ways that are light-hearted, peculiar and pleasant. Yet, given Nicholas Dames's understanding of nostalgia as that which hinges on a logic of pleasure (6), my contention is that representations of nostalgia as a disorienting affect that so severely compromises the subject cease to count as nostalgia at all.<sup>2</sup>

*The Space Race* seems to be a departure from this trend, as it relies heavily on humour to turn nostalgia into a pleasurable feeling. According to Linda Hutcheon, the willingness to adopt strategies of irony and humour when dealing with nostalgia places us firmly in the ambit of postmodernism (*The Politics of Postmodernism, A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern"). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon describes postmodern nostalgia as a style – unsentimental, quirky and interrogatory – rather than an affective condition. She observes that "this is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 4). Nostalgia is understood as a pleasurable but unsentimental examination of the past, which is acknowledged to be fundamentally inaccessible (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism, A Poetics of Postmodernism*, "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern").

Arguably, the postmodern treatment of nostalgia can be read as a welcome and exciting intervention that ostensibly realises some of the goals of post-transitional culture in South Africa. For post-transitional South Africa desires to discard onerous political narratives in favour of idiosyncratic explorations of the past (Frenkel and MacKenzie), while postmodern forms of nostalgia evidently prize the individual over the political. They also have the canny ability to make the expression of subjective nostalgia correspond to certain sociopolitical necessities, as inflections of irony, humour and playfulness are invariably employed. By undercutting the gravity of sentimentality and the ideological pitfalls of an essentialised subject, postmodern nostalgia provides sufficient distance to temper one's nostalgic expression against that of others. Hence, it can indeed serve to recall contradictory histories while enjoying memory in ways that are ethically meaningful in the present.

This is a seemingly necessary strategy for a novel like *The Space Race*, which takes its central premise from the apartheid-era National Party nuclear arms programme. "Vastrap Airbase deep in the Kalahari Desert near the Northern Cape town of Upington was the site of South Africa's nuclear development and testing programme. This programme was discontinued in the 1980's due to international pressure. This much is fact," notes Keith Millar in his review of the novel (Millar, "The Space Race"). Latimer's fictional take, however, imagines that instead of disarming its bombs, the apartheid government has continued to develop a space programme in secret. Funded by various right-wing

organisations is a covert plan to send a select crew to a recently discovered moon where a new *volk* can peaceably be settled. But this plan is interrupted by Charlotte, her sister Lindy, and two engineers named Eugene and Tertius who, when fleeing from Stefan – an ex-Angola soldier and the brute force of the space programme – decide to hijack the spaceship and escape to the moon. From space, Charlotte laments her fate, sending back monologues of boredom and isolation to South Africa, where the entire country is awestruck, just having realised that they had a space programme and have successfully sent Afonauts into space. Through the journey towards an extra-terrestrial home, the novel attempts to poke fun at the “sacral nationalism” (Sparks 31) of the Afrikaner *volk*, whose quintessentially nostalgic identity has always centered on constant displacement and a subsequent longing to be returned to the stability of an otherworldly “home.”

Afrikaner nationalism, according to Allister Sparks, was informed by belief in “a chosen people in their promised land, imbued with a sense of divine mission and equipped with a utopian ideology” (31). As a culturally inclusive construct, the *volk* is undeniably informed by feelings of “lost innocence” and invests in a search for “the pure,” “the organic” and “the natural.” It is a model of a lost “home for posterity, even unto the remotest future” (Sparks 147) that needs to be reclaimed on South African soil.<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Boym suggests that nostalgic expression of this kind can be described as “restorative” in nature, because communities who feel culturally alienated in present sociopolitical circumstances often cultivate the past as an absolute fantasy that is worthy of recreating in the present. She is suspicious of this form of nostalgia because it erases ambivalence from history and leads to a culture of conspiracy, as the community sees itself as under threat (Boym 43). Yet *The Space Race* ostensibly seeks to challenge this form of nostalgic expression by imagining a narrative that unravels, thwarts and ridicules fantasies of the Afrikaner *volk*. For example, when Charlotte first meets Eugene at Vastrap, he explains the project to her as follows:

‘Who were they going to bomb?’

‘No one. That’s not what it was for – the third one wasn’t a weapon at all. The Afrikaans people were never bloodthirsty. We were pioneers first, way back when Jan van

Riebeeck landed on these shores. It's not like we were Australians or Americans. We didn't wipe out the native population; we tried to find a way of co-existing'.

'Is that what apartheid was all about?'

(Latimer, *The Space Race* 56)

This dialogue is an exemplification of the strategy that Latimer deploys throughout the text. As Eugene delivers an apologist's narrative of the past, filled with nostalgic admiration for the comparative virtues of the *volk*, Charlotte undercuts the obvious sentimentality and erasure with a humorous rebuttal. Her final question is rhetorical but not sanctimonious, and as readers we are encouraged to judge Eugene as naïve in his duplicity rather than racist. Latimer imagines that in foregrounding the resolute will of the *volk*, he is able to destabilise it with humour. Hence when Eugene explains that “we aren't just sending people into space. We're colonising the moon” (Latimer, *The Space Race* 57), he highlights that the project is less concerned with entering the global space race (ironic given the novel's title) than with the frustrated “Zionism” of the *volk*. His outright, dead-pan declaration of such an intention renders its history absurd, and we can only find it funny.

Yet in another prolix attempt to explain the Vastrap space project to Charlotte (gross exposition is, understandably, one of the pitfalls of writing science fiction), Eugene offers further justification:

this is all the work of an apartheid government organisation. There was a point early on in the development of apartheid when the leaders realised that suppression of a majority wasn't sustainable, and out of a desire for a real homeland came this crazy idea to colonise space. But it wasn't just the fact that it was a way to establish a true apartheid state, it was also something that no other nation was even considering. It would be a monument to their vision and national pride.

(Latimer, *The Space Race* 73)

This passage is just one example of where there are neither traces of ironic distance nor humorous ripostes to temper the nostalgia. These convictions are simply left to marinate in the reader's mind as the dialogue glosses over the broken dreams of the *volk*. Ultimately we find

that the text performs a series of fluctuations and slippages, oscillating between a desire to be critical of Afrikaner nostalgia and moments of whimsical indulgence of the *volk*.

In “Laughing at the Rainbow Cracks?” Grace Musila explores duality as a widespread concern in post-apartheid South African humour. She argues that “stand-up comedy surfaces the cracks that fracture the rainbow nation project by using laughter to ease the ‘taboo’ issues into the terrain of ‘the speakable’” (Musila 150). Intrigued by the effects of humour in voicing otherwise awkward circumstances of stark racial and socio-economic disparity in South Africa, Musila explores how comedians recycle old tropes and stereotypes in a manner that belies the rainbow nation. She describes this as potentially subversive, a critical laughter that navigates the tenuous terrain between causing personal offense and being subjected to state censorship. Yet Musila ultimately deems its effects ambivalent and contradictory, as its constantly countenances the “risk of secondary silencing in the form of discursive containment and co-option” (150). This leads her to question, “where does critical laughter end and complicity with class and racial politics condescension begin?” (Musila 163). For while the objective of comedians remains that of reversing inherited racial discourse, they remain culpable of circulating and reinforcing an old lexicon of racism, bigotry and prejudice. Musila thus concludes that the contemporary South African brand of comedy and laughter is a “double act of de-closeting uncomfortable questions and simultaneously taming indignation with laughter” (164–65).

Latimer has himself been taken aback by the ambivalent interpretation of the humour in his novel. He notes that “what was even stranger though is that in subsequent one-line write-ups someone decided to describe *The Space Race* as ‘a funny book.’ For me it’s a funny book just like you might say, ‘What’s that funny smell in here.’ or ‘I have a funny mole on my arm.’” (Latimer, “The Spark”). To use Musila’s distinction, Latimer sought to incite critical laughter in which humour probes and critiques the ugly and unsettling elements of the sociocultural body. But it would appear that in *The Space Race* the humour does not work in the ways that Latimer expected or intended.

As one discovers, the novel also evokes a more potent and overwhelming laughter of self-recognition for a niche audience, as there is a slide from critical laughter to a laughter of complicity that places the

novel in murky territory. Resultantly, it is with some cultural myopia that one of the novel's more hidebound reviewers declares the narrative "delightfully and authentically South African, from the acrid scent of the desert air to the stale smell of slap chips with a slug of Klippies and Kaapse Vonkel on the side" (De Klerk, "The Space Race by Alex Latimer"). The signifying parameters of "South African" narrow to serve the sensuous communal nostalgia of Afrikanerdom. This is not to imply that De Klerk offers a gross misreading of the text; rather, a conservative interpretation of this sort is implicit in and made available by the text itself.

In *The Space Race* the contradictions of nostalgia are again discernible in the treatment of the four unwitting subjects who eventually get sent into space. They are not the candidates chosen by the space programme and, given the blood politics of *volk* mythology, we read their presence as a taint. When they climb aboard the spacecraft, they are aware of their transgression: "'and we go and colonise a moon? Are we the right people for that?' asked Tertius. 'I've got eczema and IBS and hardly any social skills – except online'" (131). He understands that he possesses none of the biological criteria for the production of a pure or perfect Afrikaner race, but Charlotte speaks reason into their desperate situation: "'we're exactly the right people [...] on a planet where we aren't wanted fugitives. We'll be kings and queens. And to sweeten the deal, we'll be pissing all over the Afrikaner Space Programme'" (131). We thus bear witness to the pleasurable bastardisation of the heinous eugenic fantasy. And, further emphasising the point, when a dispirited Charlotte sends broadcasts back to earth, she states that "you'd think that I'd be proud to be part of this. The colonisation of space. But I'm not. The people who built this ship had in mind a sort of Noah's ark for humans. But Noah's ark wasn't victory" (173). Instead the ship is a symbol of failure and death, and she attests to feelings of loneliness and a sense of defeat on the now successfully colonised moon. Yet, succumbing to the seduction of the mythology that has been invoked, we find that before boarding the ship

Lindy and Charlotte were in awe of the whole structure. From the outside, from what Charlotte had seen two days prior, this was just a shed in the desert. But from where they were standing now, it was clear that they were in the very heart of

the most advanced technology on the planet. Their father had been right about calling *Vastrap* ‘the jewel in the crown of the Afrikaner nation’. He’d have been proud to know about it now, about its new role as the epicentre of space pioneering.

(158)

Again, there is the conflation of Afrikaner frontier discourse with that of space travel – a conceit that Latimer is evidently chuffed with – in a manner that is by no means reflective. Moreover, rather than seeing these four characters as unsuitable candidates, the text proceeds to imply that they are exactly the right ones.

The settler spirit he’d [Charlotte and Lindy’s father] inherited from his forefathers was nonetheless within him, and he’d passed it along to his daughters. But it had been a dormant spirit – dulled through years of neglect. Still, given the right circumstances, and the lack of alternatives, it could spring to life. And this was its rebirth here. The adrenaline in Charlotte’s blood was a sign of awakening, and in an instant the events of the past days didn’t seem so much like a misfortune as they had done a while ago.

(158)

Despite the author’s wish to pass off these four passengers as a random or hybrid contingent from South Africa, they are all, nevertheless, of Afrikaner stock. Whereas they once assumed time to be open it is, in fact, fated, as Charlotte and Lindy have not been selected but called to fulfil a divine mission. Just as “Charlotte’s blood” is subject to its “awakening,” the mythical recovery is realised as a “rebirth” that can, quite literally, occur through her body and her blood.

As Meg Samuelson writes in *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, the bodies of women are always contested sites of national ideology. In particular, the representation of a sacrificial mother is construed as a conservative strategy that “gestures to women’s reproductive capacities in order to re-member the nation” (175). *The Space Race*, like many of the texts discussed by Samuelson, evinces awareness of the discursive violence this involves: when Stefan crudely labels Charlotte and Lindy “a couple of excellent wombs along for the journey” (163),<sup>4</sup> everyone is suitably horrified, rejecting the premise that they will function in this manner when in space. Yet once there,



Charlotte listlessly laments her lot as she is "tasked to be not only the mother of new generations, and a farmer and a pioneer – but also an artist, a writer, a historian, a musician" (167). However begrudgingly, she accepts her fate as mother of the nation, and so it is again fitting that De Klerk perceives Charlotte as "broadcasting nuggets of homespun wisdom to a rapt world" from space (De Klerk). She is not an astronaut or some form of techno-scientific creature of the future; she is a familiar and homely *boerevrou* figure, and it is because of her *boerevrou* qualities – hardiness, resilience and resourcefulness – that Charlotte is exalted in the text.

Indeed, Leon de Kock's "Speculations on a White Counterlife" are helpful in understanding the mythological framework that is operative here. De Kock suggests that "whiteness, in its guise as a proxy of civilisation, stands in an intimate relation to wildness" (16). He argues that patriarchal Protestantism "marked whiteness as a site of commanding orthodoxy" (De Kock 16), thereby drawing limits in relation to the surrounding wildness. As a result, a myth of masculine heroism is produced by developing a constitution and identity that negates the shadow of wildness. More importantly, De Kock also explores how the active construction of a white counterlife, as an "anti-myth" (18), attached itself to ideas of wildness as a more "indigenous" way of living.<sup>5</sup>

The representation of the Afrikaner in *The Space Race* seems analogous to this "anti-myth," perhaps most lucidly valorised in the character of Stefan, the bounty hunter. Stefan is clearly a racist and a misogynist to boot. We are also duly warned that "Stefan fought in Angola. He's not okay" (88). At the very beginning of the narrative Greg comes to the launch site to write a story. While snooping around he finds a man on the brink of death and, despite feeling nervous, decides to save him without reporting him to the authorities because he promises to give Greg the entire scoop. While nursing Stefan back to health, and listening to him report the events of the novel, Greg often fears for his life when it transpires that he is in the company of the antagonist of the story. Yet the end of the novel is puzzling,<sup>6</sup> involving a filial exchange between Greg and Stefan that ultimately serves to exonerate him from our prior judgement. Ostensibly aware of this odd development, Greg tries to work out why he has come to France to witness Stefan taking his trip into space, and concludes that they have, as a result of their "shared

history,” become “brothers” (194). Putting aside his reservations, Greg now starts to serve as an apologetic mouthpiece for Stefan, saying:

I think he wanted to show off what he'd managed to achieve, to the only person who'd appreciate the magnitude of his accomplishments. And I did appreciate them. Stefan didn't see the world as I did. He was bigger than any obstacle that was stupid or unfortunate enough to land in his path. He acted above the law and outside of any realistic sense of morals. He was the ultimate go-getter – and, in a way, I had to admire him.

(Latimer, *The Space Race* 199)

Greg declares Stefan the ultimate Afrikaner by thus firmly entrenching him in the romantic “anti-myth” of the white male. Living as a law unto himself, he garners admiration and respect for a crass and dubious want of scruples. Having fully embraced the “wildness of Africa” in his soul, he has attained legendary status; an exemplification of the kind of man that others are too afraid to become. Because the “anti-myth” of a white counterlife is so successfully deployed, the official Umuzi page for the novel cautions that “you don't mess with an Afrikaner, not if you don't want to get a proper klap” (“The Space Race”).<sup>7</sup>

The figure of the “rogue” Afrikaner is central to *The Space Race*, where it serves to imply that Afrikaners – unlike their Anglo-Saxon counterparts – have cultivated an indigenous way of living in South Africa. Via the favourable representation of the “anti-myth,” we are meant to read the Afrikaner characters as to some extent integrated in South Africa. For example, in France Stefan confesses: “you know, I used to think I was a racist until I landed in France,” he said. ‘But these *okes* are white and I can't stand them” (191). In the cultivation of a white counterlife it is, precisely, the refined nature of French culture that perturbs him. Hence his discriminations are not racial but ethnic in nature, serving to distinguish him from the performance of continental white masculinity. Similarly, when Eugene proposes that “it just makes sense to hijack” the spaceship, Lindy responds by saying “It's the South African way [...] finding humour in his suggestion” (131). The roguish act of stealing is justified as an authentic performance of their contemporary South African identities. This also clearly informs Tertius's confession that limited resources when building the spaceship

led to "this culture of making do with what we could find. In that way, this spacecraft is truly African – and I'm not saying that in a bad way. This is real ingenuity. This is like that kid in Malawi who turned his windmill into a generator and started recharging people's cellphones for a fee. Except times that by a million" (150). According to these sentiments, the Afrikaner has adapted and survived Africa as a result of his stubborn ingenuity, and so qualifies as African.<sup>8</sup> And, giving in to a South African penchant for racialised humour, Charlotte responds by saying, "you say African ingenuity and all I think of are those stories of taxi drivers using monkey wrenches instead of steering wheels.' The other three laughed, but Charlotte hadn't meant it as a joke" (150). In some odd manner, the Afrikaner is proposed as a better African; unlike the Malawian child and the South African taxi driver, they have made better use of opportunities to innovate by accessing a techno-scientific reality and becoming space pioneers. Again, in wanting to use the example of a white counterlife to explore notions of an embedded and contextual identity, *The Space Race* embroils itself in the Afrikaner discourse of divine right to the land. And, as the text proceeds, it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the social and racial Darwinism at work in the novel.

In his remarkable monograph, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender III argues that "social Darwinism is one of the master narratives that governs racial thinking within science fiction" (50), for narratives involving "evolution, natural selection, and organic mechanism, can be tied to hierarchies of difference used to promote a sense of white superiority" (123). Hence, in *The Space Race*, it thus follows that:

the first people who knew about the launch were the Americans. They have satellites in space just watching Earth for the tell-tale double flash of a nuclear device. So before the South African government knew anything about what was happening, five horizon-obscuring US aircraft carriers suddenly appeared off the coast. Each one armed with more weapons than you could find in all of Africa. (Unless you count sharpened sticks, pangas and knobkerries). There followed some tense talks. Cold War stuff. The Americans, joined by the British, the Chinese and the French, couldn't believe that our government had no idea what was going on.

How could we not have the faintest clue about a nuclear-powered space programme developed within our own borders? They obviously didn't know our government very well, or the sheer size of South Africa.

(Latimer, *The Space Race* 10)

Latimer draws a clear hierarchy of international intelligence for his readers: first-world countries, the aspirational Chinese, the Afrikaners and lastly, other South Africans. Not only have the Afrikaners outwitted an ignorant government, but they have exposed South Africa's incredible dim-wittedness to the world. Moreover, South Africa, using rudimentary weaponry like "sharpened sticks, pangas and knobkerries" (10), would not have been able to stop them even if they had been privy to the project. Operating under the guise of science fiction, *The Space Race* rehearses a discourse of social Darwinism suggesting that technology, infrastructure and modernity have only existed as colonial imports in Africa. Hence, in closing, Greg states that "it is bizarre that something as heinous and despised as apartheid, that gave rise to something as despicable and selfish and murderous as the secret spaceship, could, with one turn of events, be transformed into something glorious and monumental. There is a sculpture of the ship out in the desert that stands more than eighty metres high" (201). The South African government, impressed by and grateful for the technological contribution of the Afrikaners, has decided to build a spaceship shaped monument on the launch site to honour them. Drawing a symmetry between the ox-wagon and the spaceship, the uncanny echo of the Voortrekker Monument is resounding. The text thus brings us full-circle via an alleged techno-scientific victory that ultimately restores us to the glorious plenitude of the *volk*.

According to Ross Truscott, the covert and unwitting expression of nostalgia can be more widely read as "a form of melancholia cultivated in Afrikaner subjects by the post-apartheid nation" (Truscott 97). He argues that "at a moral level, one must have an anti-apartheid conscience to be an authentic post-apartheid South African. This injunction is complicated for Afrikaners by the entanglement of apartheid and Afrikaner identity" (93). Because the post-apartheid era involves the loss of "the narcissistic support for Afrikaner subjectivity" (Truscott 93), much of Afrikaner identity is associated with that which has now been

declared a crime against humanity. However, Truscott observes, this loss cannot be mourned and so persists in a state of disavowal and melancholic repetition.

In his astute analysis of the annual Oppikoppi Music Festival, Truscott notes that

each year, people who attend the festival destroy the farm they love, or at least put this place sacred to Afrikaner mythology – the farm, where the order of patriarchal authority can be conserved – to use in ways that upset and unsettle conservative Afrikaners. (96)

The festival is “a convergence point for parody of Afrikanerdom” (Truscott 96), where critique and humour serve to ridicule and destroy Afrikaner culture, which aids in meeting the demands made of a post-apartheid subject. Yet, he continues, “the technique of self-parody preserves, as a spectacle, precisely what it negates. It is a rebellion against the social world that has occasioned the loss and has rendered lament for the object unavowable” (97). Despite the fact that the spectacle is rendered as a joke or distanced through irony, “it is precisely this turning against, this mutilation, that offers a new kind of narcissistic yield within a new sociopolitical context that values turning against the past” (Truscott 102). The complex structure of Afrikaner melancholia exhibits a taboo identity under the guise of its repeated destruction. Hence, the strategy of self-parody is a conduit to the satisfaction of nostalgic belonging to the past *and* the present, reconciling the contradictions through irony and humour.

In iterating this exact pattern of nostalgia and parodic disavowal, Latimer’s novel elevates myth to the level of science fiction prophecy by literalising the “new home” of the *volk* as a futuristic spatio-temporal escape from the harsh realities of life in South Africa. Accordingly, De Klerk correctly intimates that the narrative enacts some kind of desirable closure as “South Africa has won the space race by planting the first group of colonists – and the (old) South African flag – on the nearest habitable moon. It’s the ultimate *boerestaat*, the greatest trek of all, a proudly South African spaceship powered by the nuclear capacity we weren’t supposed to have” (De Klerk). The trip to the moon has helped

to realise the Afrikaner nation that time and history has disallowed, and the text arguably to some extent resolves the abiding economy of Afrikaner nostalgia by so unreservedly closing the conceptual and temporal loops of longing and return.<sup>9</sup>

In her reading of the “spaces shared by science fiction and postcolonialism” (257), Michelle Reid points out that the two “genres” are mutually invested in the exploration of the self/other relationship that results from processes of colonialism. As a result, the possibilities of postcolonial science fiction are rich and rewarding, as the intersection “enables a nuanced examination of science fiction’s complicity in and criticism of colonial discourses, and how science fiction presents ways of imagining futures that counter the argument that postcolonialism looks backward to the imperial center and colonial past” (Reid 257). Seeing that science fiction is infused with the aspiration for an alternative reality, and often uses technology as an imaginative platform from which to leap from this world into the next, Reid argues that the capacity to generate ethical and meaningful space adventures is vast. Science fiction in a postcolonial context can indeed bring the future to us by actively speculating about the fate of humanity in response to a brutal colonial past.

Contrarily, *The Space Race* uses the narrative of South African Afronauts, and the potential to sustain human life on another moon – all the paraphernalia of science fiction – to fulfil a long-lost prophecy of the past. As I have shown, the laughter that the novel provokes in order to render colonial fantasies absurd falls short, leaving only a laughter of self-recognition that ultimately restores the Afrikaner to the nostalgic fantasies of the *volk*. Somewhat ironically, the text is unable critically to engage these restorative longings, because it is incapable of perceiving them as such. Due to the fact that the text is working within the genres of science fiction and humour, it views its imaginative project as utopic and critical rather than nostalgic in nature, a progressive and not a regressive one. And, according to Reid’s assessment, this is one of the more regrettable manifestations of postcolonial science fiction. It abuses or denies itself the right to the ethical possibilities of alternative realities in favour of an old story that, despite Latimer’s hand at humour, is no laughing matter.

## NOTES

1. In her 2004 article entitled “Science Fiction in South Africa,” Deirdre Byrne argues that there is a dearth of science fiction, suggesting that huge socio-economic disparities have led to its general inaccessibility and subsequent unpopularity. Just more than a decade on, globalisation and the subsequent emergence of transnational literature has significantly overhauled the popular fiction scene in Africa. Now, science fiction can even be considered “trendy,” as can be discerned from the international acclaim of authors like Lauren Beukes and Nnedi Okorafor. While there is little critical material, *Paradoxa: Africa SF* edited by Mark Bould offers a comprehensive overview of the field at present.

2. In another research project on nostalgia I explore how various South African novels treat nostalgia as a path of undoing; bringing misery, self-doubt and confusion to characters who entertain it at their peril. By endorsing these representations, authors seem to suggest that nostalgia remains an act of hubris; an ever-elusive fantasy or deceptive ruse in the South African context.

3. The messianic construct of Afrikanerdom is mythological rather than utopic as the past and the future serve as mirroring devices for each other, operating on the imagined premise that “the past had been great and there would be a regeneration of that greatness through a spiritual awakening of the nation” (Sparks 164). Indeed this makes for an arbitrary experience of time and, rather tellingly, Sparks notes that “their isolation froze them in time” (42).

4. Stefan insists: “Wombs. You can’t colonise a planet without wombs, and these two ladies have a pair between them” (Latimer, *The Space Race* 163).

5. He offers examples of Wopko Jensma and Breyten Breytenbach, who adopted the “anti-myth” by pursuing “a searing, lyrically cast narrative of existence quite beyond the suffocating perceptual modalities of white life under apartheid” (De Kock 19).

6. This episode seems like an unnecessary tail; sketchy in its motives and unaligned with the rest of story, making it feel as if the novel has ended on a particularly weak note.

7. In his review of the novel Gareth Langdon argues that Latimer employs a lot of stereotype in his characterisation and feels that this is especially true in relation to Stefan (“n Boer maak a space programme”). Arguably, Detective Hendriks is the most stereotypical character in the novel (particularly unfortunate, seeing that he is the only black character). Detective Hendriks appears to be the last policeman with a moral compass in South Africa, and so when Lindy turns to him for help when escaping from Stefan, he makes it his personal responsibility to see to her safety and – without clear motive – sacrifices his life for her. In the novel, Stefan – who is given free reign for racist

jokes – refers to Det. Hendriks as Lindy’s “Bushman fairy godmother” (Latimer, *The Space Race* 160). In *Cybertypes*, a fascinating examination of race representation on the internet, Lisa Nakamura argues that there is an explicit paradox involved because technology – and, I would argue, by extension science fiction – induces forms of racial nostalgia: “all of these symptoms of modernity create a sense of unease that is remedied by comforting and familiar images of a ‘history’ and a ‘native’ that seem frozen in ‘a different time and a different place’” (7). She argues that the desire to revert to essentialised and stereotypical archetypes is meant to assuage fears that technology, science and the internet are producing a monoculture that lacks racial distinction. This form of nostalgia, she argues, is usually experienced by those who “mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed,” hence it “works to rescue the vision of the authentic raced ‘native’ that, first, never existed except as part of an imperialist set of narratives, and second, is already gone, or ‘destroyed’ by technologies such as the Internet” (Nakamura 26).

8. The character of Piet, the botanist, in Athol Fugard’s *A Lesson from Aloes* comes to mind. Piet is a retired activist turned botanist who attempts to name an unclassified species of aloe throughout the play. In her reading of the play, Rita Barnard notes how this play “is often taken as a rather simplistic depiction of an Afrikaner’s stubborn sense of filiation and rootedness, but which strikes me instead as a celebration of the human capacity for affiliation and cultural grafting” (12). She implies that we can choose to take the lesson of the aloes’ indigenous unshakable endurance as an exemplification of cultural “planting” that relies on resilience and stubbornness.

9. As contemporary theorists such as Svetlana Boym (*The Future of Nostalgia*) and Susannah Radstone (*The Sexual Politics of Time*) suggest, it is impossible to think nostalgia without time. Their respective expositions define nostalgia as a largely temporal dis-ease that is incited by a need to cope with time and, more importantly, with “the times.” Ultimately, the novel completes a mythical regression to a “zero” point of time and thus resolves the nostalgic temporal economy. In his attempt to distinguish between the conceptual alcoves of utopian and mythical thought, Luc Racine suggests that the cyclical nature of mythical thought assumes a negative value, as the passing of time must be cancelled out or undergo some form of ritualised “destruction” to return us to the zero point. In this manner, mythical narratives represent “the beginning of time” that is simultaneously “the end of time and outside time” (Racine 14).



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