DEMOCRACY AT HOME IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Democracy at Home in South Africa: Family Fictions and Transitional Culture

by Kerry Bystrom

DEMOCRACY AT HOME IN SOUTH AFRICA

FAMILY FICTIONS AND TRANSITIONAL
CULTURE

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DEMOCRACY AT HOME IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-56198-5

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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

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ISBN 978-1-349-55814-8

E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-55692-9

DOI: 10.1057/9781137556929

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bystrom, Kerry, 1977– author.

Democracy at home in South Africa : family fictions and transitional culture / by Kerry Bystrom.

pages cm.—(Gender and cultural studies in Africa and the diaspora)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. South Africa—Social conditions—1994– 2. Domestic relations—Political aspects—South Africa. 3. Families—Political aspects—South Africa. 4. Families in literature. 5. Families in art. 6. Democratization—Social aspects—South Africa. 7. Social change—South Africa. 8. Post-apartheid era—South Africa. I. Title. II. Series: Gender and cultural studies in Africa and the diaspora.

HN801.A8B97 2015

306.80968—dc23

2015018590

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

For Florian, Lucia, and William

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PREFACE

Apartheid in South Africa was understood globally as an epic battle of good versus evil, a grand narrative calling for grand approaches to understand and combat it. Common questions included whether Pretoria's policies should be understood primarily through the prism of race or class, and in exactly what sense white South Africa could be analyzed as a colonial state. This habit of the grand approach often remains visible in studies of the postapartheid period. There has been an outpouring of interest in the collective trauma associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and the large questions of transitional justice and memory they opened; the shamefully unresolved struggle for land redistribution and other forms of redress necessary to complete a fundamental structural transformation; the scourge of HIV that largely coincided with the coming of democracy; and the troubling shift of the African National Congress from a liberation movement with social justice at its core to a ruling party firmly embracing global capitalism, harboring corruption on a massive scale and, with events like the Marikana mine massacre in 2012, itself becoming an armed and repressive state. Such "major" themes (and there are many more not listed here) moved scholars as well as public intellectuals, writers, and artists to celebrate South Africa's "miracle" and then forced them to question it—juxtaposing the idealistic visions of the "rainbow nation" or the "new" South Africa held out to the world in the early 1990s and the darker realities of "freedom" in the neoliberal global order.

Taking such a broad view is of course necessary, as I return to below. However this book does something else, or rather proposes a different route into the critical questions of the first 15 years of democracy. It looks at the micro—rather than the macro—level, focusing attention on how individuals navigate the transition to democracy in their home spaces, and in their relationships with those they consider to be family members, lovers, and close friends. It works from there to wider frames of social relation such as the nation or state. By shifting from the grand to the intimate

scale, I hope to draw attention to sites of possibility for the future as well as to show where the promise of democracy has not yet been fulfilled. Since this book is primarily about literature and art and the role of the imagination in South Africa's democratic transition, I focus on aesthetic figuration—in novels, performance, photography, and visual art installations—of home spaces, domestic life, and family histories; and I argue that writers and artists depicting the first 15 years of democracy from this perspective present compelling portraits of the intimate, emotional, and “everyday” aspects of change that can be drowned out by an inordinate focus on structural concerns, but which offer new ways of thinking and feeling. As they parse what Nadine Gordimer calls “the homeground of the present” (*None to Accompany Me*, 321), writers and artists present us with a diverse and often compelling set of options for working through the past and making demands on the future—temporalities tied together in knots impossible to undo. They also position private life at the heart of public culture.

This shift in tone, from an analysis of “major” to seemingly “minor” concerns, was inspired in the first instance by the works of art that I examine. When I as an American researcher began studying South African literature and culture in the early 2000s, from the comfort of the library in Princeton, New Jersey, and then on a graduate fellowship from the Social Science Research Council in Cape Town, I was struck by the interest shown by postapartheid writers and artists in private, personal, and family life. Especially fascinating was the seeming obsession in the mid-1990s with family trees, be they carved in words by André Brink with *Imaginings of Sand* (1995) and Achmat Dangor with *Kafka's Curse* (1997) or in wood by Claudette Schreuders with the simply titled “Family Tree” (1997). A wider look at intimate and domestic life was obvious in the celebrated technicolor portraits of township interiors by Zwelethu Mthethwa, which from the first days of democracy brought spectators inside home spaces often imagined during the apartheid period as sites of pure loss and deprivation. The same obtains in Penny Siopis' visual depictions of domestic work in “Maids” (1992–93) and in her use of found family video footage in pieces like “My Lovely Day” (1997). Over ten years of subsequent scholarship on and sometimes from South Africa, and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg specifically, confirmed a strengthening of this trend and has reiterated the questions that early postapartheid imaginative practice raised for me: Why did the transition unlock such a profound investment in things that seem so concretely personal, at a moment when the challenges of national transformation loomed so large? How is an exploration of private spaces and feelings connected to the massive public changes taking place with

the turn to majority rule, and what can it offer the democratic project? Further, to what extent can older models of reading culture illuminate these questions, or what alternative models are called for?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions. It also aims to think more widely about what is at stake in aesthetically representing private life in moments of political upheaval or change. If the personal is political, as feminists have long and convincingly claimed, what exact kinds of politics animate the imaginative portrayal of private life, home space, and family in transitional periods? How do these imaginative politics weave together the rational and the emotional registers to unfold for their various publics new visions of the past, present, and future? To what extent can the labor of exposing personal vulnerabilities and interiors create new kinds of publics, or articulate public spaces less masculinist and more attentive to a politics of care, as writer and public intellectual Njabulo Ndebele ("Afterword") has advocated? Closely analyzing the works of some of the canonized authors and artists already noted above, and engaging with emerging voices less widely recognized outside the country, *Democracy at Home in South Africa* tries to make sense of the striking outpouring of "private" art seen in the postapartheid period on the concretely local and more global theoretical levels, as it moves toward a practice of reading contemporary culture more finely attuned to the affective micro-politics that guide our everyday lives and both limit and expand our future horizons.

South African writer and scholar Rob Nixon has argued in the different context of our current global environmental catastrophe: "[t]o shirk solutions to the private and small is evasive, even if it does constructively enhance one's sense of agency. Planetary problems—and transnational, national, and regional ones—cannot simply be resolved by the aggregated actions of responsible individuals" (39). Real democracy, in the sense described by Achille Mbembe of a political, social, and economic life fundamentally restructured on the basis of radical equality, and through a rejection of practices of "waste" and a concomitant investment in "human mutuality" to become "a community of life" ("Democracy" 10), similarly cannot be entirely made at home, in South Africa or elsewhere. It depends on the existence and enforcement of local, national, and international laws, the (re)distribution of hoarded global economic power and resources, and state capacity for building and sustaining institutions such as schools and hospitals. Yet structures cannot be entirely disentangled from the people who shape, inhabit and contest them. The pages that follow take as their point of departure the beliefs that "turn[ing] to the private or small" is not always a way of "shirk[ing]" or "evad[ing]" complex structural problems and that enhancing the "sense of agency"

and the imaginative repertoire of individuals is a crucial part of transformative social change. Indeed (and here there might be less distance from Nixon's position than is immediately apparent) critical examinations and reconstructions of home life, whether our own or those of others we peer into through the lenses of art, may through their very smallness be sites where problems and potential solutions become most obviously visible or "apprehended" in Nixon's sense (14–15). It is my hope and contention that such examinations and reconstructions can help the democracy signaled in this book's title—democracy understood as the historical period of formal democratic or one-person, one-vote rule that began in South Africa in 1994—become the much more radical and robust kind of democracy we hoped this period might bring.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without input and assistance from friends and interlocutors on many continents. It grew out of a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University written under the supervision of Eduardo Cadava, Arcadio Diaz-Quinones, and Tim Watson. I am extraordinarily grateful for the time they dedicated to the many iterations of my project and the models of rigorous and engaged scholarship that they provided for me. My work was subsequently inspired and supported by colleagues at Bard College and Bard College Berlin, especially Tom Keenan, Christian Crouch, Drew Thompson, Nicole Caso, Danielle Riou, Susan Gillespie, Jonathan Rosenberg, Catherine Toal, Agata Lisiak, James Harker, and Irit Dekel. A portion of this book was written while I was at the University of Connecticut and I profited immensely from the wisdom and experience of colleagues in the English Department and the Human Rights Institute, particularly from Eleni Coundouriotis, Richard A. Wilson, Kathy Libal, Glenn Mitoma, and Manisha Desai. I also owe a huge debt to colleagues in Johannesburg who I met through my involvement with the Bard-University of the Witwatersrand International Human Rights Exchange program: Sarah Nuttall, Achille Mbembe, Pamila Gupta, Juan Orrantia, Isabel Hofmeyr, Thabisani Ndlovu, Becky Walker, Megan Jones, Kelly Gillespie, Julia Hornberger, Madhumita Lahiri, Ayesha Kajee, Liz Gunner, Michael Titlestad, and Gerald Gaylard.

There are many others whose example and insight added to this book: Rita Barnard, Simon Gikandi, Joey Slaughter, Jennifer Wenzel, Brenna Munro, Monica Popescu, Tina Steiner, Meg Samuelson, Donald Powers, Simon van Schalkwyk, Brenda Werth, Ramona Mosse, Katharina Schramm, Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong, Ellen Grünkemeier, Kathryn Lachman, David Ball, Sinead MacNamara, Elizabeth Foster, Lisa Cerami, Sonja Boos, Sarah Pourciau, Tobias Wilke, Yael Sternhell, Ingrid Horrocks, Nadia Ellis, Tim Aubry, Conor Healy and Leonora Snyder. I thank particularly those of you who read and commented on sections of this

manuscript prior to publication. Kathryn deserves special thanks for providing such engaged and inspiring companionship at all stages of this process, Thabs for his attention to both the big picture and to detail, Sarah N. for making me feel at home in South African intellectual life, and Eleni for her rigorous and always thought-provoking reading practice. I would further like to acknowledge the artists, gallerists, curators, and archivists who took the time to speak with me and allowed me to use their work: Terry Kurgan, Malcolm Purkey, Craig Higginson, Usha Seejarim, Sharon Cort, Anthony Manion, Clive van den Berg, Gabeba Baderoon, Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Santu Mofokeng, Lucia van Zyl, Raphealla Jehan, Ijeoma Uche-Okeke, and Frances Weber. You made this book much richer for your participation. Thanks to my student assistants: Vera, Camille, and Alison. And of course thanks to the supportive and responsive editors at Palgrave Macmillan: Shaun Vigil, Erica Buchman, Rachel Taenzler, Deepa John, Felicity Plester, and Oyeronke Oyewumi.

As is appropriate, a book about home and family benefits the most from those who make up my own: Florian Becker and little Lucia and William. My deepest gratitude also goes to my parents, William and Tilda Bystrom, and my parents-in-law, Volker and Margarete Becker, for their unfailing support.

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A small section of the Introduction was previously published in Kerry Bystrom, "The Public Private Sphere: Family Narrative and Democracy in Argentina and South Africa," *Social Dynamics* 36 (1), 2010. It is reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>. Fragments of the Introduction and chapter 4 appeared in Kerry Bystrom, "Johannesburg Interiors," *Cultural Studies* 27 (3), 2013. They are also reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>. Gabeba Baderoon's poem "The Way Home," from her collection *A Hundred Silences* (Kwela: Roggebaai, 2005), appears in the Conclusion with permission of the author and Kwela Books.

I have also been privileged to include a number of images in this book. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 are slide projections drawn from Santu Mofokeng's installation *The Black Photo Album* and appear courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg. Figure 3.1, "'Massa' and Minah 2," makes up part of Zanele Muholi's photographic series *'Massa' and Mina(h)* and appears courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Figure 3.2 is an image of Mary Sibande's installation "Sophie-Ntombikayise" from the exhibition *Long Live the Dead Queen* and appears courtesy of Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg. Figure 4.1, which documents the *Home Affairs*

exhibition initiated by Mark Gevisser, designed by Clive van den Berg and curated by Sharon Cort as a collaboration between TRACE media company and Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, appears courtesy of TRACE. Figures 4.2 and 4.3, which document the *Hotel Yeoville* public photography project created by Terry Kurgan, appear courtesy of Terry Kurgan. Finally, Figure 5.1 shows Usha Seejarim's sculpture "Three Sisters in Law" and appears courtesy of the artist.