



In-between spaces in Klara du Plessis's *Ekke*: Identity, language and art

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In this review article, we focus on the depiction of the transnational and translingual as a state of being in-between in Klara du Plessis's debut poetry collection, *Ekke* (2018). This in-between state has implications for how identity, place and visual art feature in the collection. *Ekke* contains fragments of German and French, but consists mainly of English interspersed with Afrikaans. The creation of meaning through this linguistic slippage reflects the idea of identity as always in-process that comes to the fore throughout the collection. *Ekke* also represents an intervention in South African urban literature, as Bloemfontein, a city not much featured in literature, is represented in several poems. In these poems, the poet-speaker struggles to situate Bloemfontein and its surrounding areas' histories and symbolism in the transnational networks that she is a part of. The conception of identity and language being constantly in-progress is also conveyed in the collection's poems about visual art. In these poems, meaning is created through the interaction of language with visual art, a process the poet calls 'intervisuality'. **Keywords:** transnationalism, transnational identity, translingualism, multilingual poetry, Klara du Plessis, Bloemfontein in literature, ekphrasis.

Introduction

Few readers of Afrikaans poetry are probably aware that in 2019 the Pat Lowther Memorial Award, awarded annually to the year's best poetry collection by a Canadian woman, was awarded to a collection with the Afrikaans title *Ekke*. *Ekke* (2018) is the debut collection of South African-Canadian poet Klara du Plessis (Du Plessis had previously published the chapbook *Wax Lyrical* in 2015).

Ekke not only has an Afrikaans title—as this title indicates, the collection is primarily concerned with mapping the poet-speaker's transnational and translingual identity as an Afrikaans-speaking woman born in Montreal, but raised in Bloemfontein. Du Plessis currently divides her time between South Africa and Canada, “n land so ver as moontlik van Suid-Afrika af” (a country as far as possible away from South Africa), to quote Afrikaans poet and singer-songwriter Gert Vlok Nel's “Epitaph”.

Du Plessis's second collection, *Hell Light Flesh* (2020) is what in Afrikaans is called an “eenheidsbundel”, a collection constructed around a singular theme or with narrative threads or patterns running through the entire collection (see De Wet 33). In the case of *Hell Light Flesh* the singular theme is that of corporal punishment within an artistic family. The relationship between Afrikaans and South Africa is not as prominent in *Hell Light Flesh* as in *Ekke*, although “the difference between / light and sky is a motif” (*Hell Light Flesh* 57), *light* being 'lig' and *sky* 'lug' in

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Afrikaans. The meaning creation and meaning loss that takes place in the translation of, and interaction between, languages therefore play a small part in this collection, but is central to *Ekke*, as will be discussed later in this essay.

The transnational and the translanguaging in *Ekke* are the primary foci of this review article. In the first section we discuss the relationship between language and identity in the collection, and what the implications are when both language and identity are depicted as being in-between and in-progress, rather than fixed. Next we turn to the local pole in the global-local opposition by trying to untangle the collection's knotty attempts at representing Bloemfontein and the rural areas surrounding it from the poet-speaker's transnational perspective. This leads to an analysis of the Bloemfontein visual arts scene as portrayed in the collection, as well as the transnational networks the collection situates itself within by referring to the visual art world and its history.

Language and identity

Du Plessis's play with language represents her struggle with identity and the prejudices connected to different identities. As a person with both Canadian and South African nationality, she uses English, Afrikaans, German and French in her poetry. Du Plessis finds herself between these languages and the different identities they represent. English appears to be dominant in *Ekke*, but it cannot exclude fragments of Afrikaans, which the poet-speaker describes as "an affection / hidden / *geheim*" (*Ekke* 38).

The use of homophones, homonyms and polysemy is an important part of this work. The meaning of words gets lost between sounds, making them ambivalent. As the poet-speaker says at the end of the collection: "Words are sounds that sometimes pretend to have meaning" (75). It shows the confusion of the subject about her position within and between these languages. Already in the second poem we read:

Word
is to become
word is woord
which is not a word in
English
Engels
angels (11)

Du Plessis plays not only with the similarity in sounds between "word" and "woord", and "Engels" and "angels", but also with the meanings in different languages: "word" referencing language in English but meaning 'becoming' in Afrikaans, and "angels" both referring to the Anglo Saxon root of the English language as well as meaning 'stingers' (like that of bees) in Afrikaans, indicating something dangerous. These kinds of layers add a playfulness to *Ekke*, but are also a serious reflection on life between languages. In an article for *The Town Crier*, Du Plessis writes:

As I started writing multilingual poetry a few years ago—oscillating between English, Afrikaans, and French—I asked myself, what is the exact ratio of languages at which a turning point occurs and a text is no longer written in a single lingo? What happens to an English text if I add a few Afrikaans words for local flavour? Or if I add a few Afrikaans phrases to play around with sound? Or if I add a few Afrikaans paragraphs to compete with English in conveying information? What if the entire text is in Afrikaans, but disseminated in an Anglophone context? Does a text even have to include more than one language to be labelled multilingual?

In *Ekke*, Du Plessis experiments with all of these questions, juxtaposing different languages and reflecting what happens when one does this. She showcases the difficulties of multilingual identities and the concomitant confusion:

Confusing when lake is *meer* in Afrikaans
but *mer* is sea in French but *See* is lake in German
and *meer* is more
and *See* is sight. (*Ekke* 12)

Du Plessis finds herself in between all these languages and needs to navigate them. The non-English fragments are almost always presented in italics, making the polyglot reader conscious of the multilinguality and breaking up visual parallels in phrases such as "Hand / in / *hand*" (15).

The different languages connote different sociocultural associations and prejudices. This is specifically the case for Afrikaans. Being associated with Afrikaans means being associated with all kinds of prejudices which do not reflect the author's multilingual identity and dual citizenship:

When I look in the mirror I see / C
reflections of language.
It is prejudiced against me
I do not belong in any one mirror,
[...]
the glass responds differently when I ask in different lingos
there is no lingua franca of the mind (40)

These different associations also play a part in the way Du Plessis regards her own name. Officially spelled with a 'K', others in her Anglo- and Fancophone surroundings often spell it with a 'C'. Du Plessis emphasises that Afrikaans seldom uses a 'C' and English seldom uses a 'K', except in combinations like 'ck' (33). The 'K' in 'Klara' saves her, roots her in Afrikaans (34). Du Plessis rejects the English spelling, deeming 'Clara' "too British / too Victorian", and associating it with conservative ideals (34), and at the same time admitting that she rejects this exactly because she fears those precise qualities in herself.

Ultimately, her view of herself is most clear in Afrikaans, shown by the repeated use of "ek" or "ekke". "*Ekke / is not a mirror reflection / but it is a reflection*" (39). In the end, Du Plessis wants to look beyond the implications only one language has on her and embrace the plurality of her existence. "I walk across different languages as if they are flatlands / *veld* / felt like / origins are lost en route" (47).

Bloemfontein and the Free State

One of the concepts that Du Plessis struggles, "stotter[end]" (32) to translate into poetry is the idea of Bloemfontein as the poet-speaker's *veld*-origins, her "hometown" (56). Bloemfontein, South Africa's judicial capital, is a city that has not often been written into literature, despite housing the NALN, the Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Navorsingsentrum. The NALN is called in *Ekke* "a museum of language" (56), perhaps to evoke the debatable idea of Afrikaans as being on the brink of extinction, but can more accurately be described as a museum of Afrikaans literature. In terms of literary history, Bloemfontein is probably most well known as being the birthplace of J. R. R. Tolkien, while Karel Schoeman is likely Afrikaans literary history's most celebrated son of its Free State province.

In South African urban theory, Bloemfontein is often overlooked in favour of Johannesburg and Cape Town. This lacuna, along with the city's position in the middle of the country, leads Isolde de Villiers (55) to term Bloemfontein (which she calls "Bloemfontein/Mangaung" to acknowledge the contested nature of the city's official name), "the marginalised centre". Similarly, Lochner Marais and Gustav Visser (183) describe it as an "ordinary city"—"its lived realities perhaps relatively mundane compared with global or world cities and its importance to debates surrounding our understanding of the city as a concept of but little consequence to scholars elsewhere." If Bloemfontein is overlooked in South Africa, it is largely unknown outside of the country and the poet-speaker in Du Plessis's poems struggles to convey its political and cultural significance, as well as its materiality.

De Villiers (60) explains that while it may be Bloemfontein's bureaucratic role in the country that causes it to be overlooked, it is precisely because of its judicial role that it exerts "considerable national power" which should not be ignored. The poem which starts with the line "My hometown" seems to typify Bloemfontein similarly, when the poet-speaker compares her hometown with "[a] black box that conceals its apparatus, runs on invisible laws" (*Ekke* 58). In computer engineering, a black box is a system which can be understood in terms of its inputs and outputs, without any knowledge of its internal workings. Similarly, Bloemfontein has as input, "registered history" and as output, "products put on pedestals and monuments, adornments, defilements, / dedications, cake-stands and men as busts" (58), but the laws which make it function remain invisible or opaque. The reference to pedestals and monuments seem to denote the city's role in specifically Afrikaner nationalist history, given the many statues of and monuments to Afrikaner history in the city.¹ In the poem's seventh line the idea of Bloemfontein in relation to museums is evoked again, when it is said that "The museum is filled with black boxes" (58). It is not clear whether the definite article indicates that the museum referred to here is, again, the NALN and that the black boxes are to be read as the archives on Afrikaans literature. What is clear is that the poet-speaker

not only finds the city difficult to translate for others, she herself finds it difficult to comprehend as well. She can describe its inputs and outputs, without really understanding it herself.

If in *Ekke's* sixth section, "Hunter-Gatherer Criminals", Bloemfontein is mostly conceived of in terms of museums, the title of the seventh section, "Ceiling Roses" already seems to be a reference to the city's nickname, 'the city of roses'. Once again the city figures as the poet-speaker's hometown, a "placeholder for growing up" (69). While Bloemfontein is not mentioned in the later poem "*Skemerkelkie*", the difficulty of making sense in her current context of her childhood and the place it was rooted in, is implied in the floral terms used when the poet-speaker attempts to translate the word "*skemerkelkie*",

[...] the equivalent of a mixed drink.
The first half meaning dusk,
to sip at the onset of sunset.
Yet, there is literally no translation
sufficiently beautiful to convey *kelk*
almost the same pronunciation as the first syllable
of *quelque chose*, but lacking something—
the floral instinct, the tubular grace of a lily,
the insinuation of petals opening,
fingers cupping in nocturnal gestures. (76)

While this poem is mostly about the sensual nature of the word *skemerkelkie*, it is also reminiscent of the poet-speaker's attempts at conveying the embodied materiality of the city of roses. If one takes "*Skemerkelkie*" to be the start of a party which ends in the collection's final poem, "As night slips into sunlight", then the strangeness of thinking the word "kelk" from English is comparable to thinking of "home" in the early morning hours when it "assumes a wondrous sense of otherness" (79). While the poet-speaker of this poem experiences a sense of clarity in the aftermath of a party "devolve[d] to monosyllabic / communication moments of wow" (77), she is still "whisperingly inarticulate" (79) and the collection testifies to her nonetheless trying to communicate the meaning of "kelk" and the black box that is Bloemfontein.

In the collection's first section, "First of all we no longer write in black but in white stones", she turns her attention to Bloemfontein's surroundings, to "small towns on South African outskirts" (10)—spaces even more overlooked and indescribable than the relative social and economic hub of Bloemfontein. The names of these towns are often "outlined in whitewashed stones" (10) on mountainsides overlooking them. The poet-speaker sees these rocks as being "the reverse of flowers" (13), but in the next line they are equated to "[f]lowers in the semi-desert" (13) (linking these poems implicitly with those later in the collection dealing with the city of roses). The difficulty of imaging these places in (English) poetry is conveyed as a problem of scale and of emplaced perspective: The names of the towns written in white stones make sense when seen from afar, but "[o]n site, standing between words, letters deform, rocks roll away. / Names camouflage in vegetation. / Proximity instigates uniformity" (13).

Perhaps the implication is that these spaces can only be made sense of from the geographical and linguistic remove of the poet-speaker. Nonetheless, the complexities of linguistic variety arise through the references in these poems to the change of place names. The collection's first poem ends with the line "stones estranged in new names" (10), seemingly saying that the names spelled out in white stones will be archaic soon enough, or referencing the alienation felt by Afrikaans people with regard to these new names, because of their inability to pronounce these name as "[l]uxuriating ululations in the throat" (13). In this interpretation, the town names are not only spelled out in white stones, but can be taken as what J. M. Coetzee terms (in reference to literature written by white South Africans) "white writing", a colonial attempt to lay claim to what is perceived as empty landscape.

These town names in the Free State and Karoo are, largely, drawn from colonial history—towns are often named for white settlers or the farms they established. If we return now to the poem about the NALN and its being designated a museum, it is possible to interpret it not as implying that Afrikaans as language is literally dying, but rather as implying that the time of Afrikaner culture as dominant is dead. Bloemfontein and its surroundings is, in this reading, not only a museum of the poet-speaker's childhood but a monument to "disintegration" (*Ekke* 13).

Visual art

As Du Plessis is navigating the transnational and in-between spaces of identity and place, she also explores the landscape and relationship between visual art and poetry. Transporting visual elements to words in ekphrastic detail, there are quite a few references in *Ekke* to well-known and lesser known visual pieces of art, landscape art and rock paintings. As the poet-speaker says in the poem that starts with “Las Meninas”: “The curation of my reading list morphs into an actual gallery / of images” (27).

Du Plessis characterises the relationship between her words and visual art as firstly relaying the visual through words (*ekphrasis*), but also as a type of interpretation: “I understand my writing in this line as a form of art criticism, a way to discover things about artworks in a genre that can be free of linear argument and yet still offer a rigorous expression of it” (Du Plessis, qtd in Lindsay). By describing, translating, interpreting and critiquing the artwork, the poet-speaker is deconstructing it at the same time: “and yet everything falls apart through the eyes” (*Ekke* 60). In the same interview, Du Plessis ponders the ethics of basing her writing on art, and suggests the word “intervisuality” to entail the movement and collaborations between the creative mediums of poetry and art.

The cover of *Ekke* immediately makes a strong visual impact. It features a photo of an installation from the exhibition “Material value” by Nandipha Mntambo, a visual artist from Eswatini. The name of the artwork depicted on the cover, “Vela Sikubhekile”, translates from isiXhosa as “Come, we are watching”. The title of the art piece also emphasises the visual elements; and the importance of “looking” or “seeing” referenced through the whole volume.

The sculpture consists of a formal Western dress moulded from cowhide, playing with ambiguities and contradictions in dichotomies such as human/animal and modern/traditional. The fluidity of identity and navigating these in-between spaces is a theme throughout the whole volume.

In Gonsalves’s review of *Ekke* the following is said about the cover:

And this is indeed what I now see depicted by the book’s cover: a dress, a dress addressing [...] a dress that looks more a part of some scorched earth or a life-form in and of itself than a garment for someone addressable [...] And if one dwells a little longer on the cover one discovers, in the space of the head of the absented body, the rhetoric of mirroring within *Ekke*’s pages at play, right there, spilling over to the right [...]

The volume *Ekke* is dedicated to an artist and childhood friend of Du Plessis, Dorothea Vermeulen, who tragically died in an accident in 2016. Vermeulen won the Sasol New Signatures art competition in 2013 with her painting “Desperately Disciplined”. This painting is also used in a stop-motion animation video on YouTube to illustrate the dichotomy between “product” and “process”. Various stages of the painting are overlaid with one another so that the viewers have access to all stages of the creative process and the final product is not the only painting with artistic value. The author uses this work as inspirational starting point for the second section of *Ekke*, called “stillframe inbox”, by ekphrastically describing the painting in words. It depicts a beautiful naked young woman, lying on her stomach reading a thick book. The background is striped and colourful, evoking ever-changing and fluid motion:

The image is called Desperately Disciplined.
It is of a woman reading on her stomach on a couch
a beautiful position
with her head on her hand and fingers flattening the spine of the text,
feet rubbing up against or rubbing each other the wrong way. (20)

The poet-speaker interprets and allocates extra meaning to the visual representations referenced in the collection. This translation of visual artwork to poem navigates the transnational in-between space depicted in visual art and digital animation, described as a “subtle rivalry of stillness and activity” and the “beautiful contradiction” that involves time and the “continued existence of another in yourself” as the “only real definition of the hereafter” (23). The focus is on moments of the production process and moves away from the idealisation of one final product or interpretation. This idea reflects the poet’s general refusal to settle for absolutes, and her choice to rather explore the fluid and flexible in-between of binaries.

The close personal relationship between Du Plessis and Vermeulen is later referenced in terms of the difficulty and frustration that comes when friends need to communicate with and relate to one another across continents. The idea that the stop-motion animation using “Desperately Disciplined” is somehow delayed and getting stuck

hints at the challenges of these in-between spaces. Even the language Du Plessis uses, creates a stop-motion effect for the reader who might not be familiar with the Afrikaans:

*Die videos wat jy vir my stuur wil nie hier speel nie
gee net vir my sulke skewe gesiggies :-/ (23)*

The third section of the volume is called “Las Meninas” or “the Ladies-in-waiting”, a reference to the 1656 painting by Diego Velázquez and its later interpretations by other artists such as Pablo Picasso. Velázquez is regarded as the leading artist of the Spanish Golden Age and “Las Meninas” is considered one of the most important paintings in western art history. It depicts various role players in the Spanish court and plays with perception and light in ways that make an absolute interpretation impossible. The tension between reality and illusion thematically connects to the poet-speakers’s fluid identity and ideas surrounding the in-between spaces of interpretations. The importance of various viewpoints and perspectives that the painting(s) convey is also transported to words:

Whereas hands can touch / mouths can touch
eyes cannot touch.
Eye contact
is too naked to bear scrutiny, an eye for an eye isn’t physical
the uncertainty around catching someone’s eye—
you could think you looked at each other with intention
but then looked aside
eyes darting
between the portrait which is the face and the landscape which is life
organs so open they have to close from time to time
with a fleeting
shudder / shut
glistening
vulnerable undress. (26)

In the last poem of the volume, “Someone other than else”, the artwork by Antonio Saura called “Cocktail Party” is also referenced. Saura, a Spanish surrealist painter, limited his palette to mostly blacks, greys and browns establishing a unique personal style different from other artists of the time.

Shapiro (13) argues that “Words will never be the equivalent of visual images, and images will never speak (unless they incorporate words or codes).” However, one can argue that Du Plessis “acknowledges, laments, celebrates or exploits the gap between what is seen and what can be said” (13):

my writing is erect
in the smallest possible way
taut but not extended suggestive
then discontinued to the potential reach of the image. (*Ekke* 26)

Through the poetic the visual is transported and in that way surpasses the limitations that are set upon identity, language and landscape. In these poems “sexuality melds with art; art melds with language; language melds with nature” (Geisler).

Conclusion

In *Ekke*, the poet maps her transnational and translingual identity through languages, landscapes and art. Du Plessis directs the reader’s attention to the relationship between language and identity and shows the implications when both language and identity are depicted as being in-between and in-progress, rather than fixed. Her struggle with different identities are represented by a constant play with language, especially with homonyms and homophones in English, Afrikaans, German and French.

From her transnational perspective, the poet also reflects on Bloemfontein and its rural surroundings. By using the metaphor of the black box, the poet shows her struggle to convey both the city’s political and cultural significance, as well as its materiality. Possibly, the poet’s linguistic and geographical distance is necessary to be able to make sense of the city and its surroundings.

This same transnational perspective is used in this collection to situate itself within the visual art world and its history. Du Plessis refers to several visual pieces of art, landscape art and rock paintings. The relationship between the poems and visual art are characterised both by *ekphrasis* and as interpretation—and at the same time deconstructs both. The author’s focus on the moments of production instead of on the finished product reflects her general refusal to settle for absolutes, and her choice to rather explore the fluid and flexible in-between.

On 4 December 2021 Du Plessis announced on Instagram that she had signed book contracts with her publisher, Palimpsest, for two more collections: her third full-length collection with the working title *Post-mortem of the event*, as well as “a co-written, translangual project in Afrikaans, Farsi, and English with Khashayar Mohammadi”. While the transnational and slippages between languages therefore fades to the background in *Hell Light Flesh* compared to her debut *Ekke*, the work in progress co-authored with Mohammadi indicates that the transnational in-between is not a theme that she has exhausted, or a project that she is done with.

Notes

1. See Karin van Marle’s contribution to this volume for a discussion of the monuments of M. T. Steyn and C. R. Swart on the University of the Free State’s Bloemfontein campus, for example.

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