



## Kaggen, the Trickser God. Bushman Mythology as a Clue to Reading *Dog Heart* by Breytenbach

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Saayman Sandra, « Kaggen, the Trickser God. Bushman Mythology as a Clue to Reading *Dog Heart* by Breytenbach », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.2 (Éclats d'Afrique du Sud/South African Literature), 2007, mis en ligne en 2021.

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### [Cycnos, études anglophones](#)

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

**Kaggen, the Trickster God.**  
**Bushman Mythology as a Clue to Reading *Dog Heart* by**  
**Breyten Breytenbach.**

**Sandra Saayman\***

In his most recent work published in English, *Dog Heart*<sup>1</sup>, Breyten Breytenbach introduces the trickster god, Kaggen. This intriguing character from Bushman<sup>2</sup> mythology plays an emblematic role in *Dog Heart*, but also, it can be argued, in Breytenbach's oeuvre.

After a brief discussion of the work's form, this paper will examine some of its idiosyncrasies, such as the discrepancy between the story the narrator sets out to tell and the story he tells, as well as the malaise that the reader of *Dog Heart* inevitably experiences. This tension is partly caused by inexplicable and unexplained encounters that occur between the narrator and the dead. Encounters with the living, however, are also often uncomfortable and underline the author's sense of alienation, in spite of his best intentions to "belong". Ultimately, the impossibility of knowing, not the other, but oneself, is underlined: "Is this not what life is about: to leaf through the book of yourself and come upon known stories you've never read before?" (*DH*, 67). Our analysis will attempt to make sense of this "tricky" text in the light of the presence of the trickster god, Kaggen.

**Heartland**

*Dog Heart* was commissioned by the German publisher Hanser to form part of a series of works by well-known authors on their favourite regions. *Dog Heart*, like all Breytenbach's works, refuses easy classification. The critic hesitates between "novel" and "*carnet de voyage*", but then it is also a "*carnet de rêves*". The fragments that make up the

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<sup>1</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Dog Heart*, South Africa: Human & Rousseau, 1998. All references are to this edition, unless indicated as *DH2*, in which case the reference is to the American edition of *Dog Heart*, United States: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Though the term "Bushman" (referring to a number of southern African hunter-gatherer groupings) is still controversial, it is considered as preferable to "San", which means "vagabond", and is seen as pejorative.

patchwork, *Dog Heart*, vary in nature : they range from descriptions of the narrator's experience of post-apartheid South Africa, of people encountered and places visited, of landscapes and dreams, to research about historical figures, poems, anecdotes and philosophical musings.

In her analysis of the tension between “heartland” and “middleworld”, the “local and the global”, Louise Viljoen underlines that Breytenbach chooses to write about the Little Karoo – more specifically about the town of Montagu – and not about the Boland, as is announced on the flap-jacket of the original edition<sup>3</sup>. One has the impression that the author had indeed *intended* to write about the Boland of his youth, as the work opens with a description of a trip to the Boland and to Breytenbach's old school. A stanza from a well-known early poem in which Breytenbach stated his love for – and his sense of belonging to – the Boland features towards the beginning of the work :

my heart is in the Boland  
and nothing can profane it  
it lies safely in its smallbox  
in white Wellington (DH, 31)

In the rest of *Dog Heart*, Breytenbach sets out to literally appropriate the Little Karoo as what he calls his “heartland”. A mixed community lives there and he identifies with the “coloured” community – from the outset references are made to Bushman characters, the ancestors of this community. But, as one can expect from Breyten Breytenbach, who has already recorded several painful attempts at returning to the country of his birth (the reader may refer to *A Season in Paradise, The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist and Return to Paradise*<sup>4</sup>), *Dog Heart* portrays this appropriation of the Little Karoo as his “heartland” as neither painless, nor unambiguous.

## Transgression and the Trickster God

Ironically, Breytenbach claims this space, The Little Karoo, where people speak Afrikaans, in and through a text that he writes in English. The grammatical transgressions that occur in *Dog Heart* form one of the first

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Viljoen, “Hartland en Middelwêreld : die hantering van die spanning tussen die lokale en die globale in Breyten Breytenbach se *Dog Heart*”, *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans*, N°2, December 2002, available at:

<http://academic.sun.ac.za/afrndl/tna/viljoen02.html>

I am indebted to Viljoen for the many of the points made in the introductory part of this essay – references to her article are translated from Afrikaans and acknowledged.

<sup>4</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*, New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984, *Return to Paradise*, London: Faber and Faber, 1993.

aspects of the work to leave the reader perplexed. Here is an example, to illustrate my point:

(Oom Tao)

Adam calls from Cape Town to say he goes to visit our mutual friend, Marthinus Versfeld, two days ago. It is many years that we have known the old philosopher, I always refer to him as Oom Martin or Oom Tao. In a guilty way I have thought about visiting him ever since our return to the country. He has been seriously ill for quite a while. This we all know.

Adam says he is invited into the study by Versfeld's wife.  
(DH, 50)

The grammatical transgressions that occur throughout the work were so problematical to Breytenbach's American publishers, Harcourt Brace & Company, that they simply "corrected" the text, rendered it smooth, readable, and, from a certain point of view, impoverished it. The following sentences were "corrected" in the American edition:

Adam calls from Cape Town to say he went to visit our mutual friend

We've known the old philosopher for many years

Adam says he was invited into the study (DH 2, 44)

Why then this choice by Breytenbach to write a text woven through with grammatical transgressions? One possible answer would be that he wrote in an "Afrikaans English"<sup>5</sup>, that is, a transparent English that allows the Afrikaans to show through. There is a tendency, in novels translated from Afrikaans, to leave more and more Afrikaans words untranslated (*Triomf*, by Marlene van Niekerk is an example, the South African edition of Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* does not include a glossary of the many Afrikaans words, words from African and Indian languages, but also Afrikaans words, are left untranslated in Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary*<sup>6</sup>). In contrast with an earlier negation of Afrikaans, the language of the apartheid oppressor, Afrikaans seems to be reasserting itself today in English texts, or works translated from Afrikaans to English. Breytenbach, however, does not use this kind of English in other works, not even in works initially written in Afrikaans and translated by himself into English. Though he has admitted to a certain stiltedness of his English, present in all his works, *Dog Heart* is not necessarily an exercise in taking that "Afrikaansness" of his English to an extreme.

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<sup>5</sup> Louise Viljoen, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story*, Cape Town:Kwela, 2000, Fatima Meer, *Prison Diary*, Cape Town: Kwela, 2001.

The interpretation of the grammatical transgressions in *Dog Heart* proposed here is linked to the presence of Bushman mythology and in particular the presence of Kaggen, the trickster god. For those who know Breytenbach's work, the following description of the trickster god will immediately call to mind the typical main character of a Breytenbach novel. This "enigmatic and slippery" personage embodies "ambiguity". He is "known by no single name common to all Bushman groups" (he is Kaggen to the Cape /Xam). The trickster is a hybrid creature, both animal and human, and amongst the many tricksters, Kaggen or the Mantis-Man<sup>7</sup>, is the best known: "he will sometimes spread out his stiff wings to fly, escaping from one or another of his nasty pranks that have gone awry and landed him in physical danger". This trickster god, like other trickster gods in the world, is, on the one hand "creator of beings and of things, as well as of rules and categories, and on the other, transforms, distorts, and inverts what he has created or decreed". Dream and reality, life and death are muddled by the trickster: Bleek calls Kaggen "a sort of dream Bushman". He is usually portrayed as male, but even his maleness is ambiguous. In spite of his excessive phallic exploits, he is referred to by his adopted daughter as "mild", "cowardly", a "runaway". He is slightly effeminate, and left-handed in a symbolic culture that assigns male and female values to right and left handedness<sup>8</sup>.

Narrative about the trickster mirrors the character's "shiftiness": "In the often lengthy tales about the Mantis trickster we find him shifting reality sets: the narrative starts out in a dream setting as a dream, then switches into reality, where it is set within the same scenario as before and continues the same plot"<sup>9</sup>.

The reader knows that Breytenbach's typical main character is situated in the ambiguous space of "*autofiction*" (to employ Philippe Lejeune's term). He is neither fictitious nor frankly autobiographical. The typical Breytenbach main character is also an unreliable narrator. He is an artist (poet and painter) or sometimes an actor, thus metamorphosis – through writing, painting or acting – is central to his existence. He is furthermore an exile with a double identity. He dies several deaths, or is severely hurt by incarceration and exile (it is to be noted that the trickster has the ability – "upon having been beaten, maimed, burned, crushed by

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<sup>7</sup> In a surrealist passage, Breytenbach's "Greatfather" is evoked as follows: "Like an ancient praying mantis (the god of the Hottentots), stiff as a stick with rheumatism, he climbs from the back of the lorry where he sat so wet and miserable onto my shoulders. (DH, 105)

<sup>8</sup> The description of Kaggen comes from *Tricksters and Trancers, Bushman Religion and Society*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 95-106. Note that Breytenbach insists on his own left-handedness throughout his written and pictorial oeuvre.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

rocks, eviscerated, swallowed up, or killed – to revitalize himself and to reassemble his severed body parts”<sup>10</sup>). The typical Breytenbach character is also hybrid, like the Minotaur in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Rab with the head of a bull in *Mouir*, or Horse the translator in *All One Horse*<sup>11</sup>, to name but three examples.

The narrator and main character of *Dog Heart* is an ex-political prisoner, an artist and an unreliable storyteller. He is an exile returning to the country of his birth and is named “Breyten Breytenbach”. Once again, the work is a distorted reflection of autobiographical reality, but does not assert itself as autobiography. The main character of *Dog Heart* ignores the frontier between past and present : he sets out to encounter the boy that he used to be and to this purpose visits his old school. More incongruous is the fact that, from the start, “Breyten Breytenbach” is said to be dead. In the first line of *Dog Heart*, the narrator informs the reader: “To cut a long story short : I am dead.” (*DH*, 9)

A reading of *Dog Heart* that focuses on the way the work ignores the frontiers between life and death and dream and reality allows the reader to perceive the way in which the text has been contaminated by the presence of the trickster god. This choice of ignoring frontiers has the effect of dream becoming accessible and reality inaccessible, the past accessible and the present inaccessible.

The simultaneous tangibility and intangibility of phenomena (events, feelings, people) seems to be signalled by the choice of placing the title of each fragment in parenthesis, a typographic detail that disappears in the American edition. In the fragment “(Montagu)”, the narrator tells the reader of his childhood, using the present tense : “When we are little, our parents sometimes drive to Montagu to relax by the hot springs.” (*DH*, 32) Over two pages the narrator indulges in reminiscences about the *past*, seemingly triggered by the area through which he is travelling (in the present of the narration). The present, future and conditional tenses are used: “Take the road to Ashton. It *may* be on a Saturday afternoon. In front of some worker’s cottage a brown labourer *will stand* holding the hand of his small daughter” (*DH*, 33). Movement in space (travelling to his brother’s house) and remembering merge. Past and present suddenly collide when the narrator and his wife arrive at his brother’s house: “Kwaaiman and Miriam’s white-faced house perches on the flank of a ridge” (*DH*,34). The visit to Kwaaiman is related in the present - no shift in tense takes place and the reader relies on the context and hints in the text to separate present from past. This example is not too disconcerting, but it was nevertheless

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<sup>10</sup> *Tricksters and Trancers*, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Mouir. Mirrornotes of a novel*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984 and *All One Horse. Fictions and Images*, London: Faber and faber, 1990.

“corrected” and separated into two distinct times in the American edition (“When we *were* little, our parents sometimes *drove* to Montagu” etc. p. 25 *DH2*).

## Trickster Text

The following passage is problematical, but at the same time provides a key to the reading of *Dog Heart* :

(Oom Tao)

Adam calls from Cape Town to say he goes to visit our mutual friend, Marthinus Versfeld, two days ago. It is many years that we have known the old philosopher, I always refer to him as Oom Martin or Oom Tao. In a guilty way I have thought about visiting him ever since our return to the country. He has been seriously ill for quite a while. This we all know.

Adam says he is invited into the study by Versfeld’s wife. (I visualise that room: books smother the walls to the ceiling, on a shelf there’s the only photograph in existence of Dirk Ligter, the legendary Hottentot outlaw who can outrun any horse and who has the power to change himself in whatever shape he wants – an anthill, a wanton lover, a shrub.) Marthinus Versfeld is lying on the cot in the study, a thin blanket over his legs, the embroidered smoking cap on his head, the eyes peacefully closed. The wife serves tea. They speak softly and take care not to clink the cups in the saucers so as not to disturb the deep thoughts of the recumbent thinker.

When he leaves (Adam tells), he asks to be remembered to the philosopher and he delicately enquires after the real state of his health, we all know he has been seriously ill for a while. Oh, Versfeld’s wife says, but he’s been dead these last two days. We thought it best to leave him among his familiar books until the burial which is tomorrow. (*DH* 1, 50)

“Oom Tao” refers to Martin Versfeld, a taoist philosopher from Cape Town, known for his eccentricity. He is one of Breytenbach’s mentors (the narrator later tells of how Versfeld, like the taoist masters of old, had passed his walking stick on to him – which incidentally reminds of the digging stick that Kaggen traditionally carries with him). In the above passage, the reader, like Adam who takes care not to disturb the resting philosopher by clinking his cup against his saucer, is tricked: the philosopher in his habitual position of meditation is alive for the reader, until the end of the passage, when we learn that the professor has been dead for two days. Note the

expression : “he’s been dead these last two days” rather than a more conventional “he’s been dead for two days”, the first giving the impression that death is an activity. It can be argued that *Dog Heart* presents us not so much with a *tricky* text, as with a *trickster* text. Trickery is linked with memory: “This memory which we have, to which we all contribute, which makes us, by which we are undone, this memory plays *tricks* on us” (*DH*, 188).

The numerous references to Kaggen toward the end of the work can be seen as clues to understanding both the narrator *and* his curiously articulated stories. Significantly, the trickster is unable to speak properly. He “may lisp or be unable to master any or some of the clicks, the last phonetic sounds a child masters as he learns the language”<sup>12</sup>. Thus the grammatical transgressions in *Dog Heart* may indicate the trickster’s confounding of present and past, but also of old and young : he is the trickster *god*, yet “he speaks like a child” (*DH*, 158).

Furthermore, the narrator, like Kaggen, is a nomad, a marginal figure. An epigraph opens the work (Erich Auerbach, quoted by Edward Said): “The man who finds his country sweet is only a raw beginner ; the man for whom each country is as his own is already strong ; but only the man for whom the whole world is a foreign country is perfect”. Not belonging seems to be held up as an ideal to be striven for. In tension with this, is the other epigraph : “*Die wat hier is, is maar net soos ons is*” (“Those who are here are just like we are” – my translation), attributed to a “white lady about brown Bonnievale compatriots”. It is to be noted that no translation of this epigraph is offered and that it disappears from the Harcourt and Brace edition. Estrangement and familiarity or belonging are thus constantly played up against each other in *Dog Heart*. In the following quotation these two notions feature in the same passage, and ultimately reflect on the narrator’s relation with himself.

One stares with unseeing eyes and a foolish smile down the years, one sees smoke tendrils and cascading fog and estrangement and the small twists and turns of change in which one did not participate. This bald man, could it be... ? And that scrawny turkey of a woman, surely... ? These are my people and I do not know them [...] And a hand firmly wrung (do you still know who I am ?). And the joviality of false recognition barked in laughter, a shoulder tapped or a cheek endowed with a pecked buss (of course, what do you imagine there ? how could I forget ?). The slow minuet of spectres. Intense remembering has scorched one’s memory. I insert too much meaning in the gaps and the cracks. Without knowing it I have become my own other. (*DH*, 22)

A character named Walker (a foreigner who never speaks to anybody, a violent and self-destructive nomad) crops up as the alter-ego or double of

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<sup>12</sup> *Tricksters and Trancers*, op. cit., 106.



the I-narrator<sup>13</sup>. The description of “Breytenbach” at the beginning of *Dog Heart* (“a prickly fellow with his arrogance of other-worldly notions, his foreign clothes” *DH*, 22) closely resembles that of Walker, which occurs later in the work (“the strange, well-dressed man with the grey hair” *DH*, 126, “this weird fellow”, *DH*, 160). Walker inhabits both the present and the past, for it is said that he raped the narrator’s great grandmother, Keet (*DH*, 95)<sup>14</sup>. Walker is also said to have flashed at young girls (*DH*, 160), he commits suicide by hanging and is reincarnated<sup>15</sup>. Louise Viljoen’s analysis of *Dog Heart* focusses on this mirror image between the narrator and Walker, without drawing the parallel with Kaggen, who is described in Khoi mythology as often showing his sexual parts to young women (the rather surreal Khoi myth of how Kaggen – disguised as an antelope - “rapes” a young girl, is related in *Dog Heart*). Viljoen explains the references to suicide in *Dog Heart* (there are at least 5) in terms of Buddhist philosophy (“*ontrekking van die wêreld*”, “withdrawal from this world”) whereas it seems that only the fact that the author is a practicing zen-buddhist points to this conclusion. It is therefore possible to see Walker’s strange death by accident or suicide and his presence both in the present and the past as symptoms of a typical “Kaggen figure”. As illustrated above, the text encourages the reader draw this parallel between Kaggen and Walker.

As the alter ego of the I-narrator, Walker contaminates him with his violence and his unreliability (the narrator tells several lies in the text). Through the description of his own violent behaviour, Viljoen argues, the narrator takes on a part of the responsibility for South Africa being a violent country. “This has always been a violent country” is a leitmotif that punctuates the work. The narrator / exile is therefore not, according to Viljoen’s analysis, an innocent observer of post-apartheid South Africa and its many flaws<sup>16</sup>. It must also be added that Kaggen, by violating social norms, drew attention to the dangers lurking at the edges of society, and thus the need for a prescribed order within society<sup>17</sup>. This creative role can perhaps be compared to that of the artist who often confronts contemporary society.

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<sup>13</sup> Walker also features in *Return to Paradise*, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> To be compared with the “rape” by Kaggen, *DH*, 158.

<sup>15</sup> *Dog Heart*, pp 22-23, 95, 160, 125-126.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Viljoen, *op. cit.*

*Dog Heart* appeared when South Africa was still grappling with the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the passages analysed above, Breytenbach seems to be opposing with the notion of group responsibility to that of individual responsibility.

<sup>17</sup> This is pointed out in Roger Louis Hewitt’s doctoral thesis entitled, “An examination of the Bleek and Lloyd collection of /Xam Bushman narratives, with special reference to the trickster, Kaggen”, Doctor’s thesis in Philosophy, University of London, 1976, p 147.

In order to conclude, a series of short passages in which a dog plays a central role, will be examined briefly.

A terrible accident happens to my friend, Professor Adam. He returns home from university yesterday and finds his dog Nietzsche chewing up a manuscript he's been working on – apparently all about the “silent voices” in the colonial discourse. It couldn't have been too thick a document ! In all the faculties, do-gooders are now trying to listen their way back into the past (like me), but the problem has always been our ears, not their voices. Anyway, he fights with the dog and his hands are bitten so severely that both have to be amputated. DH, 65

Is the narrator exaggerating, is he writing a surrealist text ? Is he simply lying (we later encounter Adam with both hands intact) ? A dream about a “boerboel” occurs earlier in the work, resulting in a discordant echo between the two versions of what could be the same story :

We are in the scorched backyard of a Little Karoo town, several of us, with dust on our shoes. Suddenly a boerboel comes around the corner of the house, we are trespassing on his territory, he viciously attacks my friend Adam, starts mauling him, shrieks splice the air in cords of raw terror, Adam manages to scramble through the fence with ripped pants. Then the dog turns on me, somehow both my wrists are now in his maw, I scream and scream. I have written a monstrous attacker which refuses to lie down on the page. DH, 57-58

The story of the attack finally gets completely out of hand (DH, pp 70-71) in a version that denies the version of the dog called Nietzsche eating Adam's manuscript. In the third version, the manuscript referred to in the first story re-emerges as a political document entrusted to a junior Nationalist Party minister by name of Jacobus Oberholzer Benadé. On the day he has to deliver the manuscript - that is to change the course of history by abolishing apartheid - to parliament, Benadé slips on an uncollected dog turd on the pavement and the manuscript is carried off by Botha, his “boerboel”, who chews it to pulp. (The story is said to have come to light at a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing.)

Like the trickster Kaggen, the narrator of *Dog Heart* makes and unmakes his stories – he uses his artistic liberty to construct and to deconstruct, transform and distort – and ignores the frontier between reality, fiction and dreams. The Dog / god palindrome is implicit in the way the author-god's creation sometimes gets out of hand: “I have written a monstrous attacker which refuses to lie down on the page” (DH, 58). The dog referred to above is in two cases said to be a *boerboel*, a name that playfully imitates the repeated b, but also the repeated assonance of *breytenbreytenbach*.

One is reminded of Breyten Breytenbach's 2001 exhibition of paintings and drawings, “Dancing the Dog. Paintings and other

Pornographics”, in Cape Town. Breytenbach explained that “dog” signified the unknown: “dancing the dog” would then signify confronting the unknown. “Porno – graphics”, according to Breytenbach, refers to the laying bare of the self<sup>18</sup>. In *Dog Heart* the narrator expresses the wish « (t)o write myself one last time » (*DH*, 172). This statement contrasts with the poem at the beginning of *Memory of Snow and of Dust*<sup>19</sup>: “The biography/ I am repeatedly in the process of/ writing is always the same one”. If this then is the “last time”, perhaps the introduction of Kaggen for the *first* time in a Breytenbach text, is to be read a clue as to how we should read the elusive “self” at the heart of Breytenbach’s oeuvre. A metaphor for this “self” in *Dog Heart* is the young boy, “Breyten Breytenbach” who remains just out of reach. The adult “Breyten Breytenbach” is at one point described as running after a woman and her child in a graveyard, convinced that she is his mother and the child, himself. The advancing and receding of the “self” is further illustrated by the discovery that the boy portrayed in the photograph inserted at the beginning of *A Season Paradise* - supposedly of Breyten Breytenbach with his grandfather - is in fact a photograph of one Breytenbach’s brothers with their grandfather. In the village museum “Breytenbach” discovers a photograph of Rachel Susanna Keet<sup>20</sup>, a midwife who delivered white and coloured babies without distinction. He is proud to learn that she is his great grandmother and *Dog Heart* ends with him claiming a grave for her in the Montagu graveyard:

We appropriate one of these unclaimed graves and try to make it neat. Lotus finds an empty jam bottle and I go look for flowers – purple jacarandas, red bougainvillea. This, we decide, will be the last resting place for Rachel Susanna Keet. [...] I’m planting a beacon in Africa. A landmark. Am I not allowed to mark out my own history? May one not adopt a dead person as ancestor? It will not harm anybody. Don’t worry, there’s nothing I want. Underneath the soil surely only soil is left. (*DH*, 202-203)

“Marking out” one’s history in order to trace the contours of the evasive self seems to be the project that underlies the writing of *Dog Heart*. Breytenbach’s project is both similar to and different from the general post-apartheid trend of seeking African ancestors, a trend that, in turning towards the previously forgotten Khoisan, contrasts sharply with the former NP government-sponsored project of tracing the entire white ancestry<sup>21</sup>. Both

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<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Breytenbach, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Breyten Breytenbach, *Memory of Snow and of Dust*, Faber and Faber, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> This photograph (*DH*, 47) is excluded from American edition.

<sup>21</sup> Until 1992, the South African government financed the research for an elaborate genealogical book covering the whole of the white ancestry. Their work was financed by the Human Sciences Research Council. Four volumes were published between 1986 and 1992, covering the letters A-K.

arbitrary and specific, as illustrated by the appropriation of an anonymous grave for an ancestor, the choice of the Little Karoo as a place to belong to, Breytenbach's individual quest ultimately relies on memory, which is unstable. "Memory is Kaggen, the trickster god. It says there is one certainty : nothing is what it seems. It says there is one finality : change" (DH, 188).

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