

EWA KĘBŁOWSKA-ŁAWNICZAK
University of Wrocław

From Roots to Routes: Women Playwrights Negotiating their Authorship in Paratexts

Abstract

For a range of reasons, there has been a tendency to preach a dearth of interest in the ways writers assert their authorship, constructing individual and collective writerly identities to voice their authorial intentions. While some theoreticians and philosophers, evoking the ghost of biographical positivism, promoted anti-authorialism, postmodernity was immersed in intertextual studies. Though the announced death of the author assumed a significance matching the earlier death of God, the author returns as “writer,” sriptor or “function” in the writing of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, as the process of becoming (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) or as a performative concept (Gérard Genette, Erika Fischer-Lichte). The aim of the article is to examine a narrow selection of writing authored and co-authored by three women playwrights—Deborah Levy, Djanet Sears and Tanika Gupta—who set out to speak on why they write, aiming in that way to articulate their authorship in essays, notes and conversations which have the status of diverse paratextual forms. The article starts by exploring the relevance of discussions on authorship as well as the implications of institutional policies in regard to women writing for the theatre. Further on, on a tropological level, the article analyses the figurative rendering of self-reflection as a passage from roots to routes, from a concept of fixed identity to mobile, performative concepts converging on epistemological alertness and openness to recognising the ontology of writerly identity as becoming.

Keywords: authorship, paratext, Deborah Levy, Djanet Sears, Tanika Gupta

At the time Roland Barthes announces the death of the Author to negotiate *his* return as *scriptor* or guest (1977:145) and Michel Foucault reduces *him* to a function (1979:18–20), women playwrights—marginalised sexually, racially, ethnically and otherwise—begin to voice their claim to authorship and demand a more prominent place on the stage. The article explores samples of paratextual surround whose task—according to Gérard Genette and in contrast with the above-mentioned tendency to obliterate the author—is to foreground the authors’ “intention and ... responsibility” (1991: 266; 1997:3). Due to their

liminal status, Genette argues, paratexts mediate between text and off-text, fact and fiction, becoming, in the case of *authorial* paratexts in particular, a conveyor of authorial commentary (1997:2) whose addressees range from a broad public to the author herself when delivered in a diary form or elsewhere in intimate paratexts.

The following discussion sets out to examine the ways in which the complexity of defining and redefining authorship by three women playwrights—Deborah Levy, Djanet Sears and Tanika Gupta—is addressed, authored and protected by the writers in current and delayed autographic peritexts—texts preceding editions of contemporary drama—as well as in diverse and “hybrid” epitexts taking the form of *conversations* or *essays*. The inquiry refrains from an analysis of the whole spectrum of strategies pursued by women writing for the theatre and avoids generalisations but instead concentrates on a strategy involving the passage from a concept of authorship anchored in responsibility towards real or imagined “roots” to an understanding of authorship as the mobility of “routes” and “connections”. The three women playwrights, whose writing career goes back to the eighties, comment on how they conceive of their writing in the late nineties and in the new millennium.

1. “Death of the Author” and women writing for the theatre

For reasons that seem obvious, Barthes’s enunciation of the author’s death in his 1967 essay may mark a point of departure for this discussion. However, it can be also argued that “The Death of the Author” does not necessarily address women writing for the theatre as they were not, at that time at least, in the position of “Authors”. The policy of the Royal Court in the 60s converged on the promotion of a young male playwright treated as the only creative person whose “intentions” directors, designers and actors were to understand (Browne 1975: 6). The archives reveal the few women, including Anne Jellicoe and Shelagh Delaney, who wrote and sometimes directed their own work or that of their female colleagues. In the years 1956–1975 Terry Browne refers to three women playwrights (Mary McCormick, Caryl Churchill, Shelagh Delaney)—each had one play staged by the Royal Court—and two other women, who were more fortunate—Anne Jellicoe (four plays) and the French writer, Marquerite Duras (two plays) (1975:103–111). On the other hand, collective authorship involving workshop methods, sometimes perceived as a feminist response to established theatre and a source of writerly identity, were practised by both male and female artists often simply disappointed with established theatres not staging their work and frustrated with funding policies in general. In spite of the dominant theatrical policies granting privilege to male writers, there were women playwrights, some of them declaring feminist, materialist or socialist sympathies, who insisted on their recognition as individual “women” or “feminist” writers, for example Caryl Churchill and Sarah Daniels, whose career starts in the 80s, to name but two of the prominent female artists writing for the theatre. Further doubts concerning the applicability of the term “authorship” are raised by Lizabeth Goodman, who observes that the literary critical concept of the “‘death of the author’ [bore] a potentially problematic relationship to feminist theatre” as authors and practitioners disagreed on the meaning and range of the labels they had been assigned, including “feminist theatre” itself (1993: 30). Indeed, women playwrights in the seventies and eighties experimented by adopting a spectrum of attitudes to individual authorship, their views oscillating between immersion in collective creativity and challenge to male authorial exemplarity, as well as almost essentialist identities, which did

not necessarily entail stardom. Rather, for strategic purposes, as Judith Butler explains, feminists would accept a form of operational essentialism by putting forward “woman” as a universal category, a socially constituted category that remains beyond the philosopher’s own interest (1996: 129). In her essay, Deborah Levy invokes and problematises the concept when repeatedly misreading the “The Skeletal System” depicted on a poster in her bathroom as “The Societal System”. She recognizes the logic as well as the danger of this smooth connection in understanding her writerly identity and, metaphorically, decides to follow a different route (2014: 2–3).

Torn between critical theory and theoretical practice, the discussion on writerly identities of women has been additionally politicised. Issue-based drama in particular, Amelia H. Kritzer argues, was dependant on fixed identities so that their dissolution, aided by postmodern theory, delegitimised the socially active engaged theatre (2008: 21). The critique of the concept of fixed identity undermined the sense of agency rooted in strong identity forms, disabled activism in general and was therefore perceived as collaboration with political illusions created, for example, by Thatcher’s policies. As opposed to Caryl Churchill, who inquires critically into these socially constructed identities (notably in *Top Girls*) that Levy exposes much later as “institutions” and “delusions” (2014: 14), writers like Sarah Daniels and Pam Gems wanted to show powerful women on stage. The biographical *Piaf*, premiered in 1978 and transferred to the West End and Broadway to achieve a mainstream success, sets an example. Though in the course of time “woman” is perceived as no more than an umbrella term or a *rigid designator* (Žižek 2008: 104), variously approached, the subject of identity—including the writerly identity of women working for the theatre—remains an open wound, a seminal though difficult topic for women playwrights. It applies also to the later writing of Deborah Levy, Djanet Sears and Tanika Gupta, writers whose authorship, entangled in gender, racial, cultural and professional debates, becomes an object of their reflection on ego-constituting processes and writing.

2. Writing ‘on the run’ and ‘beyond’

The present discussion, in *rapport* with the selected texts, concentrates on “becoming a writer” rather than on “ready-mades” or templates, even if Tanika Gupta openly addresses such fixed stereotypes as “Asian writer” (2008: 262, 264; 2010: 38, 39). Emphasis on becoming as opposed to being a writer persuades Levy to single out “hesitation” rather than the moment of voicing what she calls a “wish” when writing or speaking up effectively begins (2014: 10). The distinctly performative self-presentations the three women writers stage while negotiating constructions of their authorship are located, significantly, in paratexts, i.e. in ontologically indeterminate zones, uncertain places of passage, Janus-faced vestibules and thresholds (Genette 1991: 261). Hence, “woman”—a category mediated by social, cultural and political transition, an analytical instrument signalling crisis and transformations which threaten any yearning for epistemological wholeness and distinctiveness—is placed in a transitional zone of becoming ready to speak up.

In the following explorations I concentrate primarily on two authorial and one co-authored paratext or, in other words, two epitexts and one peritext. Djanet Sears writes “nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL: 32 sHORT rEASONS wHY i wRTIE fOR tHE tHEATRE”, a peritextual note or foreword rather than an introduction preceding the 1997 publication of *Harlem Duet*, where she intentionally uses the inversion of upper and lower case. The epitexts include Tanika Gupta’s 2008 conversation with Aleks Sierz, “As Long

as Punters Enjoy It” (mediated epitext)¹ and Deborah Levy’s 2013 personal essay (delayed autonomous epitext) entitled “Things I Don’t Want to Know”. The sense of transition and unattainability of fixed identities is aptly captured in the title of Deborah Levy’s later, 2018 conversation with Rosie Goldsmith: “Divas, Delusions and Desire. From Bowie to Freud” – from the consciously fashioned to the unconscious. Leaving behind socially constructed delusions, breaking through templates of femininity and masculinity (like Bowie), consciously fashioning herself like a diva in search of her voice and journeying without end like Simone de Beauvoir, Levy turns to Sigmund Freud in pursuit of an ego-constituting process in the course of which “we never become ourselves” (2018 online).

The playwrights travel literally and metaphorically, recalling how they have arrived at the moment of writing rather than quest for a complete sense of writerly identity. The autobiographical paratexts, delivered in the first person, avoid closure often turning upon the speaker. Sears’s “Notes”, classified as introductory (Tompkins 2007: 84), provide everything except an Introduction in the sense of a systematic and traditional *Einleitung*. As a child Levy emigrated from white South Africa to London, embracing the role of an exile although it was actually her father who was forced to leave South Africa for political reasons. Impersonating an exiled poet’s life, she also exiles herself from England, piling up layers of real and imagined loss to boost up her ego (2014: 83ff). Their West Finchley home is provisional, a tent (2014: 98), and a place of restless interrogation where possibilities of identifying oneself with either old or new locations fall apart both literally and metaphorically. Djanet Sears was born in England to a Guyanese father and a Jamaican mother. When she was fifteen the family moved to Canada, where she became aware of her status of a culturally multi-layered emigrant. Both women start writing plays in the 1980s. Finally, Tanika Gupta is an English playwright of Bengali descent and therefore often dubbed “Asian” or, less frequently, “black”. Under the shadow of racial templates, her writing career commences in the 90s. None of the three women has accepted the identities invented for them by critics or publishers. All of them are what Levy terms “women on the run” when in her essay she refers to the Majorcan Maria who leaves her life in rage, to the nineteenth-century George Sand and to the South African Maria, and other real and fictitious figures that abandon their former selves: Writing “Things I Don’t Want to Know” (2013), a response to George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Why I Write”, Levy depicts herself in an inexplicable state of crisis, “on the run from the ... language of politics, from myths about [women’s] character and ...purpose in life” and from desires (2014: 105) to concentrate on herself. As opposed to Orwell’s conviction that “one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one’s own personality” in favour of political purpose (1953 np), the women prefer to give an account of themselves. Analogously, Djanet Sears, on the run from the white European cultural heritage she carries from England, travels to Africa in search of new roots only to change her given name from “Janet” to “Djanet”, a desert city. The project of going back to the roots is an illusion to be abandoned. The desert, Iain Chambers argues, “seduces us with the idea that we can start out over again, begin from zero”, a place for nomadic sentiments where we get lost (1990: 87) and a-mazed rather than find solutions. Also Levy finds getting lost in the Majorcan wilderness literally “comforting” (2014:4). Ultimately, Gupta also leaves the traumatic Bengali past of her family history

1 A later variant of the conversation authored by Aleks Sierz and Tanika Gupta, entitled “Writing Beyond the Stereotypes (Tanika Gupta in Conversation with Aleks Sierz) was performed during the conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) organised by the Department of English and American Studies of Vienna University and held at Don Bosco Haus in 2009. The conversation was published in *CDE Contemporary Drama in English: Staging Interculturality*, edited by Werner Huber, Margarete Rubik and Julia Novak, vol 17. 37–50.

behind (2008: 262). A mobility which consists in leaving behind locations, narratives, hierarchies and concepts, Levy understands as a form of transcendence. “Writing beyond” these provisional points of reference (Levy 2014: 72) seems to be essential for all of the three women.

3. Roots, routes and connections: disrupted journey narratives and writing in response

Traceable in the three selected paratexts—which can be classified as forms of life-writing—is a shift from enrootment in a definite beginning, location, template or culture to a state of restlessness. Culture itself, Cresswell contends, is mobile, “no longer sits in places, but is hybrid, dynamic—more about routes than roots” (2006: 1). This assumption leads to a displacement of earlier theories of place and identity and their replacement with what Paul Gilroy calls a “flow”, suggesting that “the notion of the crossroads ... might be an appropriate vehicle for rethinking ... tensions between cultural roots and routes (1993: 193). If Levy, Sears and Gupta should be located in a postcolonial perspective, the operative role of postcolonial concepts must be reconsidered. Bachmann-Medick and Kugele rightly point to the necessity of keeping them “provisional” and “porous” to be able to explore “occluded histories” (2018: 10), to reveal the hidden dimensions “ready-made syntheses” tend to conceal (Stoler 2016: 30). Developing Gilroy’s concept of crossroads or interlaces and following Gilles Deleuze, Anne Laurent Stoler attends to “co-temporalities” and sites “where they are threaded through one another”, where instead of calling upon the past *in toto* to construe a coherent, fixed identity, they produce clusters of piecemeal, often incongruous combinations of the reactivated past (2016: 30). Coming from elsewhere, Chambers argues, involves being simultaneously “inside” and “outside”, experiencing “arrangements along emerging routes” (1994: 6). The three women writers, cut off from their homelands, remain perpetual strangers trapped in the paratext of their waiting to speak up. Hence such a topological landscape invites unreliable narrators whose memories remain incoherent and hybrid.

Indeed, Levy’s “flow” of memories fails to consolidate into a coherent, developmental narrative in spite of her repeated though ambivalent efforts to reveal some unspeakable mysteries hidden amidst the images of crisis. Moments of being able “to hold it together” are rare and brief as, for instance, in the opening pages when she decides to light up and sits for a while smoking cheap Spanish sock-tobacco (2014: 4). Soon afterwards everything falls apart. Among the puzzling motifs pervading her interrogatory mode of writing is the recurrent question addressing the writer’s newly acquired habit of “crying on escalators” (2014: 25), repeated eruptions of non-narrativizable and incomprehensible grief. Such non-narrativizable beginnings, says Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, may create a sense of an inexplicable threat to life (2005: 65) or, as Brian Dillon argues, become ‘evidence of abiding anxieties’ (2017: 27). Further on, the fear of a narrator’s failure in producing a coherent narrative signals that “we cannot survive with an unconscious” (Butler 2005: 65) as it is the wakeful intelligence that should supervise the speakers in recuperating their beginnings and, in that way, putting together their identities. The indispensability of “knowing” the beginnings is articulated explicitly in Orwell’s essay when he admits that a writer’s motives cannot be assessed without knowledge of his early development (1953 np). Recalling the beginnings, her early life in South Africa, Levy recalls a series of mystifying memories: the snowman which melted and disappeared like her father; the water melons she was not able to see because she was sent away to her Godmother; and, finally, Mr Sinclair’s (the Headmaster’s) sinister and

incomprehensible behaviour. Each of these episodes—figures of loss—might furnish a separate story with a good beginning, but none of them does. Levy admits she has been encouraged to write down things she did not want to know (2014: 65-6), i.e. thoughts she feared to say out loud (2014: 65) and phrases “[read] between the lines” (2014: 64). Hence, putting down the incomprehensible, instead of the intelligible and coherent, she faces a heap of broken images and a list of objects congealing into a sedimentation of loss. Dillon seems to be right when, in *Essayism*, he comments on the functions of lists—a disruptive verticality or “a verbal midden ... dumped on the page” (2017: 24). What matters is not the meaning of the words but their function. In Joan Didion’s writing, he argues, lists become a form of compensation for absence and anxiety (27), a process of substitution whose aim, Butler claims, is a substitution of object by ego—a process which cannot be accomplished (1997: 169). Indeed, the items dispersed throughout “Things I Don’t Want to Know” add to a list of blocked or aborted narratives and events stored in Levy’s private memory, an inventory she pens at five o’clock in the morning, which reminds theatre goers of Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*:

Dad disappeared
 Thandiwe cried in the bath.
 Piet’s got a hole in his head.
 Joseph’s fingers go bitten off.
 Mr Sinclair hit my legs.
 The watermelons grew and I wasn’t there.
 Maria and Mom are far away.
 Sister Joan might not believe in God.
 Billy Boy behind bars. (Levy 2014: 65)

Even if chronologically correct, the listed items fail to produce a seamless narrative. On the other hand, if developed, some of them, the first-person narrator thinks, might meet with what the sign outside her Godmother’s house says: “armed response” (65)—a comment addressing the Billy Boy episode directly and the remaining ones metaphorically. Whether in gender-oriented or postcolonial terms, these attempts towards writerly identity do not contribute to a linear narrative whose form carries the knowledge of discovery. On the contrary, based on the ability to interrupt (Levy 2014: 105), to intersect, carrying fragments and mixing overlaps of temporalities, the items point to gaps, to something either forgotten or missing. Insistence on keeping these knowledge gaps is meaningful. Still, in accordance with Butler’s proposition, the method is productive as “the truth of the person ... might well become clearer in moments of interruption” (2005: 64). Unable to give a “proper” account of herself as a writer, Levy seems to speak on writerly ambition and its discontents, on the limits of self-understanding she feels compelled to avow. Once again, it is very tempting to follow Butler’s appropriation of Maurice Blanchot to conclude that what is revealed in this essayistic account is a subjectless, wounded and grieved writerly identity recognizing the impenetrable otherness or “foreignness” (Butler 2005: 84) she experiences towards herself and, in that way, foregrounds and re-interprets Genette’s requirement of the author’s *responsibility* (1991: 266; 1997: 3), customarily expressed in paratexts, a responsibility for the text the paratext introduces rather than the author’s *responsibility* to herself. Written in the first person and a work of memory, the account shuttles among locations and temporalities, between the past and the present, to look into the future.

In that way the account proliferates the number of first-person narrators, perhaps through what can be termed a Deleuzian repetition with a difference. Levy writes neither from her roots nor from narrativizable journeys, but from routes marked by the connections of the “first person”, multiple and dispersed, whose referential capacity is nebulous (Olney 1998: 229) and for some, like Samuel Beckett, simply unnameable. Therefore Aston and Reinelt’s attempts to seal Levy’s identity in terms of the postcolonial condition of exile and dispersal, claiming that she “writes from her personal connections to Judaism and to European Africa” (2000: 214), seems to be incomplete.

Essaying on the tropological level—resorting to memories of South Africa, images of Durban and London—Levy carefully avoids nostalgia and familiarisation. When compared to Levy’s writing, Orwell’s and Didion’s essays, divergent but corresponding, remain considerably more lucid and explanatory in articulating what motivation for writing consists in. Hence the long list of “things” Levy declares that she does not want to know sounds like a challenge. Further on, in an analogously negative mood, the first-person narrator refuses to be comforted. The opening pages introduce the speaker in a state of inexplicable emotional crisis when “[f]rom apparently nowhere tears poured out” and it would take all her effort to stop herself from sobbing (2014: 1). Escalators, the “travelling staircase”, become an expression of the painful “conversation” she is having with herself (2014: 1). The metaphor of the escalator returns once again with Africa, mentioned in an early description of the invention where it is called an “endless conveyor” (2014: 107). Pervasive inexplicability enables the suggestion that the narrator is suffering from *melancholia*, according to Butler the “effect of unavowable loss”, a loss that results in a “retraction from speech that makes speech possible” (1997: 170). The potential objects of loss range from material objects to abstractions and ideas like liberty: the whole spectrum can be traced in Levy’s essay. Following Butler, ego becomes “the congealment of the history of loss ... the resolution of a tropological function into the ontological effect of the self” (1997: 169). Assuming that a complete ego is an illusion, the figure of the endless conveyor substituting for the linear movement of history informs about limitations that prevent closure. Loss triggers the process of *becoming* a writer and makes speech or writing possible. If so, conscience (and responsibility) becomes an institution of the ego “maintained by melancholy” (Butler 1997: 172). The mechanism sponsors *becoming*.

Deborah Levy and Djanet Sears contemplate writing “in response” as another address to roots and a recurrent motif in autobiographical manifestos. The titles of both the essay and the notes echo George Orwell’s 1946 essay, “Why I Write”. Additionally, in the *Notes of a Coloured Girl* Sears invokes her conversation with Derek Walcott, whose *A Branch of the Blue Nile* she was about to direct, and who, like John Keats in his 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse, confesses that writing “is a type of organic urge” he has always experienced—not a question of writerly identity (1958: 386–387). Very much unlike Orwell, Walcott refuses to reflect on why he writes (Sears 2002: 12) as if assuming a biological privilege of “a born writer”. Although Sears chooses to “nurture” writing rather than write by nature (2002: 13), the 32 notes she jots down avoid Orwell’s explanatory style and the completeness of an autobiographical project. On the contrary, the collection of 32 “reasons” is another gapped list of “notes” whose status, in paratextual terms, comes close to that of dispersed, local footnotes focusing, again, more on writing and performing than on the text itself.² Hence Orwell’s understanding of authorial stance is invoked only to be rejected by

2 Prologues to plays with which William Shakespeare is associated oscillate around 32 lines in length. Bruster and Weiman refer to further six falling between 31 and 42 (2004: 10). This might give rise to further speculation on the importance of form and function in the case of Sears’s 32 notes.

both Sears and Levy, who clearly subvert its hierarchies. Orwell's objective is political—a desire to push the world in a certain direction—and he seeks a balance between his desire to retain the world view ... acquired in childhood” and the necessity “to efface one's own personality” in order to write something “readable” (1953 np), i.e. politically significant and public. The consolidating and homogenising effect of political activism is eliminated by Levy who, invoking Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, withdraws from the temptation of writing in response, which she interprets as writing “in rage” (2014: 106). The metaphor of “a room of her own” is replaced by the more useful “extension lead and a variety of adaptors for Europe, Asia and Africa” (2014: 108)—modern connections to plug in and provide oneself with “access” to diversity rather than a “gentleman's electric razor” (2014: 107). Sears replaces writing from the “nagging mind and raging heart” (2002: 14) with a search for her “innermost knowing and creative desires” (2002: 14). By cutting off these potential literary roots, the two women refuse to create in response to universalising concepts of exemplarity and do not let themselves be driven by a revisionist or activist impulse which amounts to a negative form of response or a consuming complaint (2002: 13). For Levy, more inspiration is drawn from conversations with another exile, her Chinese interlocutor who, unlike Orwell, forgets Paris. It is in the genre of conversation that she has the courage to admit that English is not her first language, not her mother tongue. Both Levy and Gupta are careful to define their dialogues—with Rosie Goldsmith, Jacques Testard or Aleks Sierz—as conversations, i.e. dialogues genuinely assuming the Hazlittian equality of voices. Finally, Gupta's concept of response is governed by the logic of commissions, where a theatre writer listens to the diversity of voices in the audience.

The motif of ancestors and genealogies that Levy either ignores or finds inconclusive, reappears in the voices of both Sears and Gupta. Commencing with an epigraph, marked as note one, which invokes African oral drum poetry, Sears recalls crowds of artists she has admired and would adopt as imaginary ancestors. Her cultural genealogy includes the author of *The Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry, on whose broad shoulders she imagines herself to be standing (2002: 13). A more complex relationship emerges from her fascination with William Shakespeare's *Othello*—*Harlem Duet* being its prequel or prelude. Like Jamaica Kincaid (Online) who, in an interview with Kay Bonetti, claims “every right to use” John Milton's poetry and to consider it her own adopted heritage (2002 np), Sears also reveals the complex nature of her relationship with the classic she adapts or appropriates. Tanika Gupta's conversations also begin with questions of heritage. The “artistic side of things” is introduced as inherited from her parents, who were “into Bengali literature” (2010: 260). However the great uncle's letters handed down to the family—Dinesh Gupta was an Indian activist sentenced to death by the British—turn out to be all “Keats and Shelley” (2010: 261), the “borrowed tongue” exempt from censorship. In pursuit of answers to the recurrent question of why they write, the three authors experience a sense of inevitable loss resulting from the need to exorcise the ghosts of the past and other delusions. Reformulating Orwell's “sheer egoism”, Levy parts with her real and imagined ancestors to write on the necessity of parting with the nostalgic phantasy of a woman's purpose, a prison house produced by “masculine consciousness” where women ventriloquise their husband's values :

Now that we were mothers we were all shadows of our former selves, chased by the women we used to be before we had children (14)

The world loved the delusion more than it loved the mother. All the same, we felt guilty about unveiling this delusion (2014: 15)

Renouncing delusions, a motif which reappears in her conversation with Goldsmith, does not imply going back. Levy does not return to South Africa—Africa returns to her. Neither does she follow in the footsteps of George Sand on Majorca—unless ironically. Travelling south to the Balearic Islands she enters a timeless zone, becoming an allegorist and a philosopher like J.E. Crawford Fritch (Moyà 2016: 210) Exorcising *Othello*, Sears reads the main character against the critical and theatrical tradition (Friedman 2014: 131) by marginalising Desdemona and revealing the existence of Billy, Othello's forgotten first wife. While Othello's assumption (in *Harlem Duet*) that liberation has no colour becomes a story whose stereotypical status is denounced, the fictional Billy's healing to achieve self-possession merges with the authorial notes where in No 30 Sears performs her own authorship on stage, dreaming herself into existence as writer, theatre artist and actor (2002: 15). Whether she is aware of the tradition of dreams entering the stage through the Gate of Horn and the Gate of Ivory is not clear, but her intention of speaking up and performing herself has been clearly articulated. The desire to reach beyond political, cultural and critical stereotypes is explicitly formulated by Gupta in the title of her 2010 conversation with Sierz. The earlier conversation voices her protest against being reduced to an Asian writer, the inherited roots.

When faced with the question of why they write and what their writerly identity consists in, the three women unanimously resort to life-writing, an autobiographical manifesto which avoids totalising autobiographical projects. Instead, they call upon performative discourse prioritising the liminal position of *becoming* rather than *being* an accomplished writer. In the final note, Djanet Sears refers to herself on stage, a counterpart of *Othello*, “a veteran theatre practitioner of African Descent” (2002: 14), capable of standing up, talking about herself and putting on plays about herself (2002: 15) in the role of writer, director and actor. The project collapses the subject/object binaries and promotes the concurrence of fact and fiction. Deborah Levy's essaying also concentrates on multiple moments of experiencing, on *Erlebnis* rather than on gathering experience as *Erfahrung*. Shuttling between Bowie and Freud, she endeavours to fashion herself in a series of dynamic connections emerging between the constructed First persons and their others. The conversation with Goldsmith, like Gupta's performance at Bosco House (2009), involves the presence of an audience. Gupta finds out about herself in the process of writing, often on commission, encouraged to pursue her own research. A mixture of memory and imagination, fact and fiction, the paratexts use first person pronouns seemingly invoking the writing person and the written though their referential capacity remains problematic rendering the subject absent and the ego ungraspable. Not any of the first person pronouns can be stretched so far as to cover the consciousness of the years separating the writing I from those mentioned in the fragments of the gapped narratives or utterances. This obliterates the difference between the remembered and the imagined (Warnock 1987: 12) granting the remembered first person (in plural forms) a “ghostly presence” (Olney 1998: 231). It is in the network of the overlapping temporalities and ghostly connections that we begin to wonder whether the speaking person is still “real”. Indeed, what is constructed might be an absence, Reinelt argues, as there is no real person speaking (2011: 110).

Conclusions

Expelled from the main text, the writers return in authorial paratexts whose status is that of an ontologically inferior complement (margin, frame, and supplement) enjoying certain advantages. If paratext is a form

enabling different ways of knowing, a locus of pragmatics and strategy, what can be known due to this instrument of cognition is of critical interest. Termed a “vestibule” by Gerard Genette (1997: 2), paratext can be considered an experimental stage, a liminal sphere of transition and transaction where the memory of the extratextual (and its First person/s) meets imagination/fiction (and its First person—always in the plural)—a locum where knowledge/knowing is enacted. Original authorial paratexts to contemporary drama tend to adapt a diversity of genres including such forms as a conversation, a note or a personal essay (often given the misleading title of an “introduction”) rather than a preface or formal introduction. The essay is tentative and hypothetical, rendering such terms as “true” and “false” inapplicable (Dillon 2017: 20), while the unifying “I” remains dispersed and provisional (18). Peritextual notes are generally optional, addressing readers who pursue supplementary and digressive considerations (Genette 1997: 324). Finally, conversations are not interviews and like the essay are released from the obligation to reach binding conclusions. What “attitude” then, to use Orwell’s phrase, is launched by these paratexts and what knowledge of the writerly identity of a presumably absent writer can be acquired with the use of these forms? Their openness, signalled by the permanently incomplete lists in particular, corresponds to Levy’s bitter meta-comment involving Farid, the tenant, and his egoism in his struggle to finish writing a PhD (2014: 93) whose sole value rests in its completion. Completion—a promise of achievement, degree, authority and income—terminates the process of knowing, a condition the three writers seek to avoid. Levy uses the metaphor of missing lids, and the need to keep all containers open, also in relation to her self-knowledge as a writer. While Orwell’s “egoism” denotes vanity and self-centeredness Levy’s narrator, after six years of exile in England, missing South Africa, whose birds and languages she has been unable to name, realizes the importance of not knowing:

The lids, like us, did not have a place.... I was born in one country and grew up in another, but I was not sure which one I belonged to. And another thing, I did not want to know this thing... (2014: 99)

Earlier in the essay she emphasises the value of hesitation, uncertainty and a desire to get lost (2014: 25). She finds the experience of being “literally lost” comforting (2014: 4) as it enhances the feeling of wonder—an attitude advertised in the title of her essay and an idea to be found in one of Plato’s dialogues, *Thaetetus*, where we read that the experience of wonder is the beginning (principle) of philosophy (1986: 155d). In this respect, Levy’s approach is reminiscent of Didion’s 1976 essay “Why I Write”, where the writer carefully disentangles herself from the authority of a knowing first person and admits that “had [she] known the answer to any of the questions [she] would have never needed to write a novel” (np). The pursuit rather than the achievement of self-knowledge, metaphorical self-birth, ego-formation, in Butler’s terms, is also the goal of Djanet Sears’s pursuits as a theatre artist. In Tanika Gupta’s conversation, the desire for knowledge is rendered in thoroughly comic terms as it requires eavesdropping in theatre toilets. It is the audience who tells the theatre writer what she has written. Assuming that writerly identities are ghostly and inaccessible, or do not exist, writing denotes a state of hesitation, readiness, waiting and mediation in which the three writers come close to John Keats’s epistolary confessions (1958: 386–387) on the absence of a solidified writerly identity—all three writers keep the metaphorical “lids” open.

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