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The shame of being a man - is there any better reason to write?

Gilles Deleuze

I

I FIRST SMELLED DAGGA when I was seven or eight, walking to primary school with my brother through a small veld, a familiar shortcut for school children and workers. Our neighbourhood, New Orleans, was new and of the 1970s, a ‘community development project’ by apartheid planners. It was part of the development necessitated by the Group Areas Act, new accommodation for those kicked out of areas then recently declared white.

The language of apartheid town planning hid the displacement by pretending that it cared about the inhabitants, thus ‘community development’ (‘Gemeenskapsbou’). But the road map of New Orleans revealed its apartheid truth. No regular grid, but curves and crescents, culs-de-sac which, while creating an idyllic image of community, also pointed to town planning as apartheid control. There were only three entrances/exits to the neighbourhood, and so it would be easy to close it off.

Each cul-de-sac had a footpath leading beyond the neighbourhood. Our road, Jacaranda Avenue, had a path onto a major junction in Paarl’s Dal Josaphat industrial area, with destinations for workers and train commuters. Workers from poorer areas east of New Orleans walked through the neighbourhood, down Jacaranda Avenue, and on to their various workplaces. The tramp and voices of these workers to and from work was familiar, and regular as a clock.

During the early 1980s, a new type of pedestrian joined: the poor who were addicted to cheap, sulphuric wine from a winery co-op in Drommedaris Road. This pedestrian type was identifiable by his or her *puza* face and, more markedly, by the round, black, plastic 5l jerry can hauled on the shoulder when full: *swart varkie*.

In the mornings and afternoons, Jacaranda Avenue also carried school children – my brother, myself and friends included – to and from my alma mater, Noorder Paarl Secondary, which stood its ground alongside Athlone Training College in Berlin and Sanddrift Streets in the now white area, or to and from the bus stop in Jan van Riebeeck Road. At that time, there was no bridge over the Berg River along Oosbosch Street, but in summer, when the river was easily crossed, the route to school down Oosbosch Street was a fifteen-minute walk. And so we saved our bus fare for cigarettes by wading through the river.

In summer it was a simple matter: socks and shoes off, trousers rolled to the knees. Girls' skirts tucked into underwear, as if they were getting ready to skip rope. But sometimes in autumn and spring, when the river ran fuller (but not at maximum), and desperate for cigarette money, we would still forego the bus and use the shortcut through the river. Boys only, in underpants, clothes and rucksacks in a bundle on the head, and water at one or two places reaching almost up to our chins. A rural scene, one to which, later, Cape Town friends always responded with disbelief, if not scepticism. Paarl is after all semi-urban, by nature of its own expansion. But it is also peri-urban, given its proximity to Cape Town.

As a child, I thought of Kraaifontein as the boundary between urban Cape Town and rural Paarl. A slight rise in the road, some industria on the left (Leyland was there), over a bridge over train tracks, and residential Kraaifontein started. From here on, there were few open expanses of land on the way to Cape Town and the sight of all the houses so close to the national road always excited me because now it signalled how close Cape Town lay. The sight of stretches of housing signalled the urban and the urban was Cape Town.



My mnemonic life – my coming to memory and, thus, to human life – starts after the rupture associated with the Group Areas Act. In other words, life in a group area was normal to me, not in schism, as it may have been if preceded by an established life in a prior place – as with my parents – on the western side of the Berg River. My family lived in the 'servant's quarters' – a converted garage – on my uncle and aunt's property on Charleston Hill, a previously white area then declared 'coloured' as apartheid shifted people around, turning South Africa into a giant sliding puzzle, like those found in the lucky dip packets of my childhood. I thus came to memory in an already 'coloured' neighbourhood and our subsequent move to New Orleans was a 'normal' move for my family and, for us, not directly, not immediately, associated with the Group Areas Act. Or rather, not for me as a child.

My parents must have suffered Group Areas indignities. Many times during aimless Sunday drives through the tree-lined parts of town – maybe driven there by my father's own unspoken longing for home, a hidden ague – the names of streets that used to be their haunts in youth rolled off my parents' tongues with just enough nostalgia to hide the hurt: Van der Lingen, Tempelier Straat, Malei Straat, as we rumbled through them in my father's old Ford. But the move to New Orleans was also a new world adventure for them. My father had his name on a waiting list and it was a move towards independence for him: the ownership of property, no matter how modest, via the long and slow rent-for-ownership scheme.

New Orleans had been a guava farm and pieces of veld still had guava trees and old farm buildings. Our shortcut to primary school passed such a building, in which a large, very poor family had taken up residence. We called that area *die plaashuis* or *die dam*. There were two empty cement dams, one round, about thirty metres in diameter, and in which we often played, and a smaller rectangular one closer to the farmhouse. *Die dam* was a site for the most ordinary of childhood playing and mischief; most ordinary but – and therefore? – most enduring

of childhood memories. The dam wall was easily scaled on the side of the main footpath, where a swell of ground brought you to within a step of the top of the wall. Inside, a set of steps led down to its dry, cracking cement floor. Cracking, but hard and smooth enough for games with tennis balls. Or *hokkie* – hopscotch. Or for sitting around in the shade of the wall, drinking a cool drink, or smoking a cigarette filched from a parent; and years later, for roller skating, but by then it was becoming frequently soiled by human faeces.

As a seven-year-old, I had a vague sense of what dagga might be. If I was not performing some chore efficiently, my father would ask: “*Is dji geroek?*” (“Are you stoned?”) So, I knew it caused some form of mental incapacity. And I knew, from both Islamic and broader social mores, that it was prohibited, taboo.

On our way to school one morning then, a pungent smell wafted past my brother and me, in the turbulent wake of a group of workers in blue overalls, rushing past us. It smelled strongly of raw peanuts. And it was nauseating.

“That’s dagga,” my brother said from the corner of his mouth, “They’re smoking dagga.” Two years older, he sounded affronted. I was quietly intrigued by the openness with which these workers were just walking along, smoking their dagga. They may have hidden the joint in cupped palms, but they did so casually, and they couldn’t mask the smell, that smell of raw peanuts that still causes me to gag when I smell marijuana being smoked or when I sniff at a bag of heads.

II

I first tasted raw peanuts when I was four. My family was on a road trip that took us along the east coast up to Durban, from there to Johannesburg and then back through the Karoo to Paarl. In Durban we stayed for two weeks with family friends, a Hindu household that had bought new pots and stocked their fridge with Halaal meat (no beef).

One branch of that family owned a smallholding in a lush, hilly area where they farmed ginger, but also grew peanuts.

My memories are necessarily fragmented, but augmented by photographs that my family, years later, would pore over with nostalgia; photographs which I now, with an even deeper cut of that ache for home, wish I had before me. One photograph stands out, a picture of a lanky, dark, moustachioed man, dressed in dark blue trousers muddy at the ankles, a hoe over his shoulders and staring deadpan and exhausted at the camera. The ground is dark and muddy; in the far background of the picture, a deep, indiscriminate, dark green jungle.

Paw-paw and mango, maybe banana, avocado, I imagine now, all part of a sub-tropical scenery otherworldly to us from the Boland, not itself unknown for its green landscapes, landscapes of mountain and fynbos, fern and protea, over which we roamed, my brother and I, with our father, often in winter, climbing rock faces, slipping over mossy ledges. That strange country of my father's heart – his own, yet not his own, or, differently, not his own but which he tried make his own, through all the strange, twisted logic and heartbreak of this heartbreaking country. My father, in winter, somewhere along a steep side of Bainskloof outside Wellington; my father, who loved the natural world, tugging at an obstinate king protea which he would himself stubbornly plant in his garden in New Orleans, where it would wither and die, again and again; my father, who would say: "Protected. Conserved. For whom? This is God's earth, it belongs to me too." It is for him I arrive now at this paragraph, crying as I write this, for which I am not ashamed, for which I forgive myself, knowing that in myself crouches something of that mangled masculinity my brother and I inherited from him. Here we are, the heirs of apartheid.

Most of the adults, my parents included, were back from mucking about digging up ginger and groundnuts. I may have been crabby for my mother wandering off into the muddy fields. And perhaps this lies behind the strong memory and strong rejection when, sometime that day, I tasted a handful of raw peanuts: not quite soft, but not crunchy, at once bland, alien and offensive to my tongue which already knew and liked roasted peanuts. But raw peanuts do not smell like dagga. Yet, to this day, the smell of dagga reminds me of the smell of raw peanuts.

I digress.

As I grew up, dagga, it turned out, was everywhere. Hidden, but everywhere. In high school everyone knew who the *daggaroekers* (dagga smokers) were. Dagga slang and mannerisms trickled onto that perimeter of straight life inhabited by those who smoked cigarettes but who were otherwise straight – those like me. Us cigarette smokers might decide to "make a pipe", huddling in dense reeds at the back of the schoolyard, smoking cigarette tobacco in a bottle neck, pretending it was dagga. And dagga lingo might be used by us wannabe toughs: "*Hou in, dis wit!*" ("Keep it in, it's white [mandrax]!"). Or in an act of bravado in the school corridors, someone might shout across in greeting: "*Maak 'n pyp, ek sê!*" ("Make a pipe, I say!"). But it would still be a few years before I smoked dagga.

As a young, cigarette-smoking teenager, I was hanging out with teenagers three to four years older than myself. In the veld and bush of undeveloped plots, we could smoke in peace, and sometimes the others would 'make a pipe', a dagga pipe. Intrigued by the ritual and the slang – making the 'diamond' with the foil from a cigarette pack by folding it into a flat strip, rolling

that strip into a tight disc and fitting it as filter in the mouth of the bottle-neck; distinguishing between good dagga and *majat* (dust, pips and twigs), cleaning this mess by crushing it onto a piece of paper held at an angle so that the pips roll free for easy discarding – intrigued by all this, I nevertheless didn't touch the stuff. My father would murder me if he found out. But there we were, middle-class and working-class kids, smoking dagga, consorting with dagga smokers.

III

In 1980, M—, a classmate, introduced me to reggae during the long months that we were out on national school boycotts. Deep in winter, and bored with the ‘alternative education’ programme – listening to speeches, singing ‘freedom songs’ that were mostly old spirituals or hymns – or wary that police action might be imminent, we stayed home. M— would visit, carrying his olive army knapsack brimming with vinyl: Linton Kwesi Johnson’s *Forces of Victory*, Peter Tosh’s *Equal Rights*, Jimmy Cliff’s *Follow my Mind*, “Remake the world” from the latter featuring as a freedom song sung at ‘mass meetings’ at school:

Too many people are suffering
 Too many people are sad
 Too little people got everything
 While too many people got nothing

Remake the world
 With love and happiness
 Remake the world
 Put your conscience to the test...

Bob Marley in there also, of course. *Kaya*, *Natty Dread*, *Rastaman Vibration*, *Zimbabwe*, later *Uprising*.

Rapidly becoming politicised during that period, and knowing something about 1976 through stories from older cousins, family and friends, we found in reggae an expression of what we were learning about racial oppression and what we were experiencing and seeing around us in our own neighbourhoods. And reggae was also a spur to further learning: about colonialism and racial oppression elsewhere, about the Bible and also about politics and culture, politics and poetry. And slavery.

Slavery in South Africa had become disembodied from our individual histories, washed from our consciousness – unlike, say, in the USA, where even in the dubious archive of blaxploitation film, the history of New World slavery is never far from the surface, ready to burst into the open as a platform for defiance. Instead, slavery here was present only as a linguistic tic, reappearing in language as a mark of shame and disavowal: “*Wat, dink djy ek is jou slaaf?*” (“What, do you think I am your slave?”) Slavery was a distant, distant item in a general South African history and not something we felt as part of our identities, as part of our history *in* South Africa. But in reggae, New World slavery was ever-present, and a historical node from which its descendants gained strength and pride in a tradition of rebellion.

Reggae provided the final pieces in a jigsaw puzzle we, as teenagers, had not realised existed: apartheid was part of a broader *colonial* history of oppression. Or was the picture coming into view because of circumstance and the spirit of the times – knowledge-hungry teenagers with a growing awareness of apartheid and, by the logic of that particular historical force, happening to fall also into a tradition of protest which leads to further quests? And does one see it as cruel coincidence? Were the paths along particular branches of enquiry determined by the forces of apartheid? Not to grant apartheid sole or fundamental agency in how I came to political consciousness, but could it be that when white friends claim teenage innocence, this is what they mean, that circumstances for them led along other branches, one of them being away from knowledge of apartheid?

Where does individual agency separate off from history? If apartheid and its legacy as rhetorical device (‘blaming apartheid’) be put to bed, as many people wish it, it is by insisting on individual agency. That is, the individual, no longer constrained by apartheid, is his or her own

agent and can transcend the legacy of apartheid. Does this mean that during their teenage years my white friends had been constrained by apartheid too, it determining, among other things, a particular focus of knowledge? Certainly. For me the most powerful argument against apartheid is that, in addition to producing material inequalities, it was also a psychological project that denatured normal human growth, for both victim and beneficiary.

The claim to innocence is an acknowledgement that, even for its beneficiaries, there is an apartheid legacy, that that structure brought its force to bear on the intimate lives of even its beneficiaries. Innocence is also a legacy of apartheid. How does one transcend a legacy of innocence? Can we transcend it?



We were in Grade 9 in 1980, attending Klein Nederburg Secondary, a prefabricated school with asbestos wall panels. The school was a fifteen-minute walk from our house in New Orleans, and situated, as its name indicates, in Klein Nederburg, a working-class area of council houses and cement-brick blocks of flats, the main group of which was Magnolia Flats, where M— lived. North of this neighbourhood, across the Hugo River, a small tributary of the Berg River, was Chicago, an even poorer neighbourhood. (By what irony did planners name these neighbourhoods after iconic US cities? There was also New York, and, later, Las Vegas).

Chicago was notorious for *smokkies* (shebeens; from ‘*smokkel*’, to smuggle) and *merts* (merchants, i.e. dagga merchants). It was a rough place and one I wouldn’t visit voluntarily. Outsiders were easily spotted and preyed upon. Even skirting it along the far pavement of dual carriageway Van der Stel Street on the way between Klein Nederburg and New Orleans, was a nerve-bitten endeavour (for me).

The boundaries between neighbourhoods were not rigid. Across the road on its western side, Klein Nederburg gave way to mostly middle-class Charleston Hill. On its southern side, it gave way to areas of middle-class housing stretching south to Klein Drakenstein Road and beyond, themselves interspersed with smaller houses and poorer households so that in one street a desperately poor family – bricklayer, single income, five schoolgoing children – would be living next to a household with two teachers’ incomes, teaching being then still a largely respected profession with a respectable income. Eastwards, towards Du Toit’s Kloof mountain, the area melded into *Die Rug* (possibly meaning ‘the ridge’) and Amstelhof’s council houses.

M— lived in Magnolia Flats, but would visit me in New Orleans. As my parents were both at work, and my brother and I had a rudimentary hi-fi squeezed into our small bedroom, we could smoke freely and turn the music up. Other friends might be there too, listening to reggae, assimilating and simulating Rasta-speak. M— and I eventually focused on reggae, shunning other forms of music as ‘bubble-gum’. Eventually, we saw ourselves as Rasta sufferers, *trodding* through Babylon. “Hey,” M— might say, “*dis four bells. Ek gaan nou eers trod.*” (“It’s four bells. I’m trodding/ leaving now.”)

It was not difficult becoming a sufferer. Photographs of Trenchtown used as album cover art could have been taken in Paarl. The dusty yards, the scrawny dogs, the feel of summer heat, the look on people’s faces, the signs of poverty, of the sufferer’s life, were strangely familiar. The same grey stoniness surrounded Magnolia Flats, fields of gravel strewn with glass and litter. In these photographs was something familiar, something universal, and a frame that we easily transplanted onto our own environment: the heat of a summer’s day radiating from blocks of flats and small houses, some with a shed or shack in the backyard, the web of footpaths, stony and dusty and shimmering, the sunned skin, shiny with sweat, of people encountered and passed

along footpaths, all was part of the same system, our own Babylon.

Soon, we were hunting for the kind of militarist clothing Rastafarian musicians wore. Someone somewhere always had a cousin or brother who was or had been in the SADF (Coloured Corps), and I scored a green beret which I festooned with a chain (oppression, naturally) and Rasta colours (liberation). Not having the money for a ghetto blaster proper, M— and I took to trodding Paarl listening to reggae on a small portable tape player, hanging out sometimes at Huguenot train station, where there was a good fish-and-chips shop. But most days we didn't have money for fish-and-chips, and consoled ourselves that our *sufferation* was all good and well, and made us better Rastafarians.

Our hair, however, would not turn into dreadlocks, even when a few years after I had lost my interest in Rastafarianism, M— was still trodding and his hair had grown matted. By my first year at university, I discovered that M— was working at Kohler Corrugated, the cardboard packaging factory down the road in Oosbosch Street, where my father was a mechanic, maintaining trucks, forklifts and conveyer belts. “*Daai jong met die verslonste hare? Nee, hy kom dikgeroek werk toe,*” my father once told me. (“That lout with the neglected hair? No, he comes to work highly stoned.”)

M— had been the truer Rastafarian and had started smoking ganja, hanging as he did with a growing band of real, committed Rastafarians close by Magnolia Flats. The strictures of my Islamic household kept me from doing the same. With some envy I listened to M—'s stories about the latest *gumba* held in Orleans Park, the drumming, the chanting, the smoking. For me, the pleasures of *skanking* to reggae while high on marijuana were still a few years off.

IV

I did start smoking dagga. The first time was at *die dam*, the farmhouse now abandoned. It was some time during my last three years of high school, with Bokkie, Hare (Hair) and MC. As our peers and friends were starting to drink, I was part of a smaller group of friends who eschewed alcohol. Naturally, my Islamic upbringing played a part, but Bokkie and Hare, not Muslim, also did not drink at that time. They even expressed a satisfaction that, hanging with me, they had not been curious or interested in alcohol. But dagga was approached differently. It was a mischief that a Muslim teenager could easily keep hidden. So when Bokkie and Hare presented the opportunity one day at *die dam*, I hesitated only for a moment. They reassured me that nothing much would happen. I took a few tokes.

Nothing happened. They told me that I was supposed to get the *laggies* (a fit of laughter), and later get hungry. Nothing, I said. Someone whispered to someone else; they giggled. Hare laughed non-stop, but MC dismissed his performance – he was putting it on. I was befuddled, bemused. They were behaving oddly. My mouth was parched. Demonstrating, Bokkie told me to smack my tongue repeatedly against my palate. What does it feel like? I shrugged: dry. He smacked his tongue against his palate a few times. Like putty, he said. A sweet-tooth and always prepared for eventualities, Bokkie drew some sweets from one of his pockets. We all cried out: “Sweets! You’ve got sweets!”

We walked to his house nearby. His parents were away and we had a house to ourselves, and a hi-fi. Funk. Mix-tapes, sometimes an nth-generation copy of the legendary DJ at Tiffany’s recent session. Tiffany’s, a new-generation dance club in Paarl, with strict door policies, expensive light and sound systems. And different from Mojo’s, the dingy club at Ivanhoe Park, a ‘shopping centre’ on *die Rug*.

I was still listening to reggae, that first time I smoked dagga, but now tolerated other music as well, like funk and disco; not disco as in ABBA, but a heavy, funk-infused music. So, in his lounge, Bokkie would turn up the T-Connection and he and MC might show off their steps. Perhaps they regaled me with stories reliving how the dance floor at Tiffany’s came alive when the DJ spun T-Connection’s “Girl Watching”. Perhaps Hare just sat there and laughed.

I didn’t go to dance clubs as my social life was proscribed by my religiously conservative father. I took some gaps; and some gaps I didn’t take. But I imagined Tiffany’s as a glittering space filled with sharply dressed boys and pretty girls. Mojo’s, on the other hand, I imagined as dark and humid, a sense based on one moment glimpsed through its door: a dark staircase, three sweaty teenagers bundling down it, out through the door, blinking at the bright sun and shaking their heads as if they were just waking from a dream. I understood that Mojo’s could also be rough, as I gathered from a cousin who had frequented it pre-Tiffany’s. Perhaps he had told a story about a brawl in the club, perhaps he was involved. Maybe someone was stabbed. “Steel blade drinking blood in darkness.” Whenever I hear LKJ’s line, I think of Mojo’s, a place I had never been, and imagine a West Indian blues dance in Britain.

After that first time at *die dam*, I would smoke dagga several times, but it didn’t become a habit. Not that I didn’t enjoy it. Circumstances and supply were always a problem. The second time I smoked it, with the same group of friends, I did experience fits of laughter. Bokkie, eyes narrowed, toothless smile widening, nudged Hare and pointed at me: “*Lampies is geroek*”. (“Lampies [my nickname] is stoned.”) Laughing fit. Euphoria. Hunger. What was there to eat in that kitchen? Peanut butter, jam, bread, tea. We gorged ourselves.

Emboldened by the fact that I had now smoked dagga twice and remained undiscovered, I was ready to smoke it whenever opportunity presented itself. Such opportunity presented itself

at school one day, during second break, on a hot summer afternoon. Again, Bokkie and Hare were involved. This must have been Grade 11, before Hare became head prefect the following year. As always, it was an ugly bullet of a *zol* (a hand-rolled cigarette, not necessarily including dagga), inexpertly rolled with dry *majat* that was difficult to coax into the rizla (we were beginners). A few hurried tokes behind the boys' toilets just as the siren signalled the end of break.

We were being foolish. There were still close ties among Paarl's community, even as the Group Areas Act had scattered earlier neighbours across different new neighbourhoods. Teachers knew our parents from their own schooldays, or might belong to the same congregation, or might even be related. The school principal at Noorder Paarl Secondary, indeed, was my father's cousin. And a year or two before, a big scandal had erupted when a few boys from prominent families were caught smoking a dagga pipe in the reeds at the back of the school. They tried jettisoning the evidence, but teachers found the bottle neck. "*Die bottle nek nog warm en bitter van die dagga,*" Mr Julius, my biology teacher fulminated, spitting out the words with utter distaste. ("The bottle neck still hot and bitter from the dagga.")

But we weren't caught. Hare and I, in the same class, had history with Mr Simpson after the break. History class on a hot Boland afternoon, while stoned – a triple soporific, a state of torpor, of being *geroek*, unrivalled ever since.



The Greek roots of "nostalgia" are *nostos* ("return home") and *algos* ("pain") – not simply a soft-focus recollection of times or things past; it is an ache to return home. But how does one ache for a past that is also marred by the barb of apartheid? What am I looking for in that past? Are the words 'home' and 'ache' adequate at all? Accurate, at all? To recollect, to describe something that survives only in memory? That survives nevertheless? That has or had a fullness which no language, try as I might from many different angles, that no language can summon to my full satisfaction? To say, this is how it was, in all its fullness. That it was full beyond apartheid. That apartheid did not matter at all; and yet, that it was all that mattered. That apartheid was *at once* ever-present and never-present. That that schism between the ever- and never-present fractures the lens into myriad shards and the image breaks into the multi-faceted, as if seen through a kaleidoscope: an image that is *individual*, yet *patterned*. But, beyond the charm of the kaleidoscope, the image remains at a distance, intangible, a chimera of something that is no more, but still a chimera, a 'monster with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail' (*Oxford Dictionary of English*).