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## *The futility of writing 24-page letters (2009)*

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### **I. Conception, context and theoretical concerns of the work**

*The futility of writing 24-page letters* is an extension of the work produced for the exhibition *Dis-Location/Re-Location*.<sup>1</sup> As such, it falls within the thematics of the latter exhibition, but focuses on one aspect thereof, namely how colonial settler women actually experienced nineteenth-century gender ideology through their life-experiences as well as their experiences as objects of a patriarchal social system.

The work consists of the following components:

- A framed series of 10 prints, resembling pages of a Victorian colonial woman's diary, and three prints listing the references from which the quotes, which make up the text, are cited. The prints are mounted on linen. They are pink in colour and edged with printed lace – formal elements used as signifiers of 'femininity'.
- A large pile of the above prints/pages, which appear to have been

crumpled, torn and discarded/ thrown away.

- A quote from one of the texts printed in vinyl lettering and mounted onto the wall adjacent to the framed set of prints.

#### **I.1 Context of the work**

The work, *The futility of writing 24-page letters*, fits into and extends the thematics of a major body of theoretical and practical research which I am developing for a practice-led PhD in Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria. However, this particular work does not form part of the practical component of the PhD submission, as it was not exhibited as part of the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* exhibition (which forms the practical component of the degree). Within this PhD study, and within *The futility of writing 24-page letters*, the practical and theoretical research components are closely interrelated in terms of topic, thematic choices and content, but I do acknowledge that each component has its discrete approaches, methodologies, aims and objectives and outcomes. The research mode is practice-led research.

During the process of producing the creative work, certain of the theoretical positions strongly informed the content of the work; in a similar manner, the theoretical component teases out themes and content from the creative work, effecting an integration of theory and practice, or *praxis*.

An overarching aim of the practical and theoretical research into which *The futility of writing 24-page letters* fits, is to propose an analogy between the subjective, psychological cultural and social dimensions of Diaspora and immigration as forms of geographical/psychological displacements and dislocations, and currently evolving formations of postcolonial, post-apartheid South African cultural identities, with particular focus on South Africa's white, English speaking communities. The research explores constructions of South African immigrant, first- and second-generation Jewish identities, with reference to three selected female personae. Geographic and temporal terrain, through Victorian England and late nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century Eastern Europe, to colonial and contemporary South Africa is traversed. Although marked differences lie in the

three personae's respective colonial, diasporic and postcolonial contexts, a central argument proposed is that each persona represents a form of 'immigrant' identity, linked by the ambivalences of dis-location and re-location. The following junctures of colonial, diasporic and postcolonial conceptions of South African Jewish immigrant identity are explored:

- Colonial immigrant Jewish identity, through the historically factual and partially-fictionalised persona of Bertha Marks (1862-1934) – an English, Orthodox, Jewish woman who was the wife of entrepreneur, Sammy Marks.<sup>2</sup> After having arrived at the age of 22, as an immigrant from Sheffield to South Africa in March 1885 to enter into what is thought to be an arranged marriage with Sammy Marks, Bertha Marks lived an insular life in which hierarchical Victorian conventions of class, language, race and gender differences were upheld. Inherent in this colonial attitude is the privileging of whiteness as a product of race and social class.
- Immigrant identities of those Jews who came to South Africa from Lithuania in the 1930s, as embodied in my mother, Freda Farber, (1932- ). While these Jews formed part of the white minority in South Africa, their position was not uncontested, as they themselves were subject to othering in the form of anti-Semitism.
- Second-generation (Jewish) immigrants' postcolonial experiences

of cultural transformation and re-negotiation of identity in terms of hybridity, using myself as the third persona. This investigation focuses on ways in which cultural identities are established, co-opted, rejected or 'hybridised' in South Africa as a transforming, postcolonial, post-apartheid society.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Conception of the work

One of the factors which attracted me to the historical figure of Bertha Marks was the paucity of information on her. Whilst Sammy Marks's rags-to-riches story as a successful entrepreneur is extensively documented, very little on Bertha Marks is available. This is, most likely, because of her marginalised status as Victorian wife and woman. This lack of information made her an enigmatic figure for me; one whose experiences I felt needed to be brought to the fore, and one who might have merited a case-study all to herself.

Given the paucity of information on Bertha Marks, in the making of *The futility of writing 24-page letters* I drew on two primary sources. The first is Richard Mendelsohn's biography of Sammy Marks (1991), particularly his chapter, 'The gilded cage: Zwartkoppies after the war', in which Mendelsohn provides factual details of Bertha Marks' roles as Victorian wife, mother and woman, and ways in which she was bound by Victorian convention to the confines of predetermined culturally constructed behaviours. Mendelsohn's text (1991:181-195) offers critical information as it details how she might have felt about having moved from an upper-middle class Jewish family in Sheffield, where, as the daughter of an

affluent businessman, she led an active social life and had the support of a community (Mendelsohn, 2008:35) to come to South Africa as a young bride; her sense of physical, social and psychological isolation at Zwartkoppies; her constant homesickness and longing for England, which she considered as 'home'; the patriarchal power dynamics upon which their marriage was constructed and what was expected of Bertha Marks as mistress of the household. In Bertha Marks' case, it might be argued that the physical loneliness and isolation which she experienced as an immigrant, living 12 miles from the then-developing town of Pretoria, and by her being alone as Sammy Marks' frequent business trips was exacerbated by her attempts to retain the colonial avoidance of others of different race, ethnicity, class, language and religion. The title of Mendelsohn's chapter reflects the ambivalence of Bertha Marks' position at Zwartkoppies – whilst Sammy Marks had spared no expense to make the home a luxurious mansion, for her, it was "a gilded cage"; a "place of loneliness" where she felt "so much alone" (Mendelsohn, 1991:187). Through his insightful observations, Mendelsohn conveys a clear sense of how, whilst Bertha Marks accepted these conditions, she also harboured and displayed a degree of resentment and resistance to the limitations of her position within the confines of Victorian constructions of femininity.

The second source is Bertha Marks' original letters to her husband that are housed in the Samuel Marks Papers Archive,<sup>4</sup> at the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Research, University of Cape Town. These letters, which were either sent to him whilst she was away on trips home to England or

from their holiday home in Muizenberg, or to Sammy Marks whilst he was away on business travel, are useful in that they provide insight into her frustrations, loneliness, homesickness for England, her alienation from her environment in South Africa, her concern for the Jewish upbringing of her children, as well as her ingrained colonial prejudices and values, that are particularly evident in her attitudes towards her servants.

Quotes from these letters form the basis of the work. In the component which comprises a series of IO prints, specific quotes from Bertha Marks' letters are printed in what appears to be a script-like, handwritten font. From these, I selected one specific quote, which, for me, seemed to epitomise Bertha Marks' frustration at her husband's typically Victorian, condescending, paternalistic and chauvinistic response to her lengthy letters to him whilst he was away:

I went to the trouble of writing him a 24-page letter and do you know what his response was? 'There are certainly some amusing little things in it, but of course being a woman you must be excused!!' 'I often wonder if he really reads my letters? Perhaps I need only write short ones in the future' (Sammy Marks Papers, University of Cape Town, Letters to Sammy Marks. B. Marks – Marks 29.04.06).

Bertha's words, intimate and personal as they are, struck me as particularly poignant. They speak of a sense of futility – time, energy and effort wasted; frustration and hurt at not being appreciated, acknowledged or heard by her husband,

and being infantilised because she was a woman. Ultimately, for me, her words evoke a deep sense of unfulfilled desire, longing and loss, epitomising the futility of investment. This futility of her investment is signified by the pile of torn and crumpled pages, upon each of which the quotes which form the series of IO prints, has been reproduced. Care was taken to select paper which is a cream-ivory colour, thus appearing as if aged; the transparency of the pages indented to suggest vellum or skins of skin.

### 1.3 Theoretical concerns

Whilst the above quote points to a gendered reading of the patriarchal ideologies which underpin colonial conceptions of femininity, and Bertha Marks' frustration within the limitations and restrictions of this institution, many of the other quotes cited in the work reveal that she herself was both victim of these ideologies, yet complicit in maintaining the racial, social and cultural prejudices and forms of subjugation, which underpinned colonial ideology. This is evident in quotes such as this one, (reproduced in the series of prints) in which she displays her attitudes towards black servants:

What I want is a good English parlour maid, one who has been in the Country for some years; also one who has no objection to coloured people, as I have two slightly coloured servants and one coloured boy. Should she object to occupying the same room as the Coloured Girls, I shall provide separate sleeping accommodation for her. I prefer employing respectable white girls. In the first

place native girls are not trustworthy and their morals, as a rule, are not of a high standard. In the second place, their wants are so few that they are very independent and if their demands are not met, they go away and live in their kraals (Sammy Marks Papers, University of Cape Town, Letterbooks I-4I 1880-1919, II. B. Marks – Klegg 20.05.1895; Sammy Marks Papers, University of Cape Town, Letterbooks I-4I 1880-1919, 17. Marks – W. F. Bailey 3I.07.01).

For me, this quote epitomises what Anne McClintock (1995) points to as the complex series of inter-relationships between gender, race and class situated at the core of and upheld in the interests of, maintaining imperial rule. McClintock examines the Victorian 'cult of domesticity' as a critical, concealed dimension of male as well as female identities, pointing out that the architecture of imperialism was gendered, in that it was white men who made and enforced laws and policies in their own interests. Barred from formal power, colonial women, of whom Bertha Marks is an example, served discreetly, upholding the boundaries of empire and bearing its children. Nevertheless, the rationed privileges of race also put white women in positions of 'borrowed' power, not only over colonised women, but also over colonised men. Thus, as McClintock (1995:6) argues, "women were not the hapless onlookers of empire, but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonised, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting".

In considering Bertha Marks' position as an immigrant, in the social world of

colonial South Africa, and particularly her role as mistress of the household, I attempt to highlight how Bertha Marks, as an example of a colonial English woman, both operated from within, and maintained the racial and social prejudices of the colonial era, yet, simultaneously was constrained by her positioning within it. Through the quotes, she is shown to occupy the conflicting positions of victim, witness, bystander, collaborator and beneficiary of colonial injustices and exploitation, and is thus shown to assume varying degrees of co-responsibility and co-liability for her roles and actions. *The futurity of writing 24-page letters* thus attempts to provide insight into how settler women actually experienced nineteenth-century gender ideology through their life-experiences as well as their experiences as objects of a patriarchal social system.

### Sources cited

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### Endnotes

I. *The Dis-Location/Re-Location* exhibition travelled to seven national South African galleries and museums from June 2007 to September 2008. The galleries were: The Johannesburg Art Gallery; The Durban Art Gallery; The Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein; The US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch; The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum, Port Elizabeth; The South African National Jewish Museum, Cape Town and the Albany History Museum, Grahamstown. The exhibition was accompanied by a live performance at the Premises Gallery, Johannesburg, in August 2006; as well as an educational supplement; a programme of public walkabouts and discussions with Fine Art students from tertiary education institutions in each venue and a mini-catalogue. A 156 page full-colour publication, titled *Dis-Location/Re-Location. Alienation and identity in South Africa (Law-Viloen 2008)*, containing 10 essays by local and international academics, as well as full documentation of the work, has been published.

II. Sammy Marks was born in Lithuania in 1844. At the age of 16, he left Russia for England, where he settled in Sheffield. Seven years later, at the urge of his future bride's father, Tobias Guttman, he immigrated to South Africa. Together with his cousin, Isaac Lewis, who became his life-long business partner, he became a successful entrepreneur with extended interests in diamond and coal mining. At the age of 40 he returned to England, and married Bertha Guttman.

III. Apartheid is often considered as an extension of colonialism (see, for instance, Jamal 2005:64-65). For this reason, when referring to postcolonialism in South Africa, I use the term postcolonial to denote the period from 1994 – the year of the first democratic election – to the present.

IV. Among visual art's most crucial developments since the 1960s has been a turn to the archive. In a seminal collection of writings on the archive, art historian Charles Merewether (2006:10) posits that:

*One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered ... The archive is not one and the same as forms of remembrance, or as history. Manifesting itself in the form of traces, it contains the potential to fragment and destabilize either remembrance as recorded, or history as written, as sufficient means of providing the last word in the account of what has come to pass.*

*This research might be located within the context of 'the Victorian postmodern'; a term which denotes work that excavates the relationship between South Africa's colonial past and a postmodern, postcolonial present through the revisiting of nineteenth-century Victorian themes within a contemporary context. Resuscitation of nineteenth-century tropes poses questions around how a 'counter-archival' grappling with the colonial past can open up new channels of discursivity in a postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa.*