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# Reading Primo Levi on "hybridity" in the context of South Africa: Moving towards humanizing descriptions of the other[1]

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**Abstract**

Primo Levi discovered his otherness – his Jewish identity – by experiencing discrimination: through the anti-Semitic laws enforced by the Fascist regime in the 1930's and the year of imprisonment in Auschwitz. After his return to Italy, the notion of the "hybrid" helped Levi describe his own non-fixated identity and was presented by him as a protection against the fear of the stranger and the return of the concentration camps as its threatening result. In this article I explore Levi's literary writings on hybridity and relate them to South African theologian Nico Koopman, who proposes a pedagogy of hybridity to support pluralistic societies in moving from alienation and oppression to human dignity and freedom. I propose that a dialogue between the post-Holocaust and post-apartheid context on hybridity can enrich our self-understanding as hybrid creatures and enable just relationships with others.

**Key words**

*Primo Levi; Nico Koopman; hybridity; justice; the other*

## 1. Introduction

It was with the implementation of unjust racial laws that Primo Levi (1919–1987) started to perceive himself as a stranger. Living as an assimilated Jew in Northern Italy, Levi only discovered his otherness – his Jewish identity – by discrimination: through the anti-Semitic laws enforced by the Fascist

1 This article is based on my contribution to the consultation of the Theological faculty of Stellenbosch University and the Protestant Theological University in Stellenbosch, October 2017, on the topic "Justice for strangers and the right to be particular".

regime in the 1930's and the year of imprisonment in Auschwitz. His life story shows the shadow side of particularity, since his particular identity was forced upon him by a political regime and his alleged "otherness" endangered his life. After the war, Levi refused to fix his identity and recurrently described himself as a centaur, meaning both Italian and Jew; survivor and writer; writer and chemist. The notions of the "centaur" and the "hybrid" helped Levi describe his own non-fixated identity and was presented by him as a protection against the fear of the stranger and the return of the concentration camps as its threatening result.

Because of this relationship between particularity and injustice in Levi's time and his presentation of "hybridity" as humanity's way forward, I decided to introduce Primo Levi's work during the consultation "Justice for strangers and the right to be particular" in Stellenbosch. Our conversation circled around the question of particular (group) identity in the context of a larger whole, which became specific in discussing the geographical issues of Israel and Palestine, multiple races living together in South Africa and immigrants in the context of both Europe and Africa. I was glad to find out that Levi's work indeed found a welcoming ear in the South African context, for several reasons. Firstly because Levi shows how social identity is not static, but complex, constructed and negotiated. Furthermore, Levi's writings describe the destruction and rebirth of man, thereby asking what it means to be human in and after Auschwitz. This question appeared to resonate strongly with the struggles in Stellenbosch, a city with the widest gap between rich and poor in South Africa. Many ask themselves how to resist the slow violence of poverty and insecurity that takes the life out of people and turns them into non-men and non-women,[2] as one of the colleagues formulated it.

In part 2 of this article, I will start with a close reading of the literary works of Primo Levi on hybridity. Part 3 links Levi explicitly to the South-African context by discussing an article by Nico Koopman, who, just as Levi, presents hybridity as a notion that positively affects "the way we define

2 This in direct reference to Levi's testimonial account on Auschwitz, *If this is a man* (1946), and his description of non-men and -women as result of the dehumanizing regime of the Nazis in the camps.

our humanness".[3] This conversation on hybridity between post-Holocaust and post-apartheid voices asks for an evaluation of such a comparative endeavour, which will be done in part 4. In reference to the work of Micheal Rothberg, I will show that there has always been a productive cross-referencing between different contexts regarding discussions on race and identity.[4] This article will use the powerful insights of these two "post-disaster" contexts in order to find out how they present hybridity as a notion, which enhances human self-understanding in relation to the other, working towards growing justice for the stranger.

## 2. Primo Levi

A hybrid is the product of a mixture of two different kinds of plants or animals. In social scientific discourse, the concept of hybridity became of growing importance in the context of post colonialism and globalization, in reference to the mixture of races, identities and cultures. This notion of hybridity creates a discourse where borders can be crossed and complexity acknowledged.[5] As Koopman puts it:

> Hybridity challenges certainties and essentialisms. It resists monophony and promotes the idea of polyphony. It carries the notion of liminality, which refers to an in-between state where old, certain, clearly defined identities are re-negotiated and the door is opened for the new, imaginative and surprising. Hybridity acknowledges complexity and ambiguity.[6]

In my discussion of the work of Primo Levi, I will show the different aspects of hybridity in both his biography and literary writing. Different time periods can be distinguished and will structure this section: being a Jew before the war; the destruction of humanity in Auschwitz; and the reconstruction afterwards. This section will show that hybridity is not only

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3 Nico Koopman, "Towards a pedagogy of hybridity, reconciliation and justice," in B. Leibowitz (ed.), *Higher Education for the public Good*, *Views from the South* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2012), p. 155.

4 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

5 Koopman, "Hybridity," pp. 154–155.

6 Idem.

a major theme in his work, but his writings can be regarded as hybrids themselves: a polyphony of science, literature, mythical and Biblical language.

### 2.1 An Italian Jew

In the first chapter of his book *The Periodic System* from 1975, Primo Levi tells the history of his Jewish ancestors, who came to the northern Italian region of Piedmont in the 16th century. Being a scientist, Levi compares them to inert gasses, inert referring to "the inactive" or the "alien"; these gasses are "so satisfied with their condition, that they don't interfere in any chemical reaction or combine with any other element, and so they passed unobserved for centuries."[7] They are the aliens who rest in their strangeness. The language spoken by these Jews though, is an intriguing combination of the Piedmontese dialect and the sacred Hebrew of the Fathers:

> This contrast mirrors another, that essential conflict of the Jews of the Diaspora, scattered among "the peoples" (the *gôjím*, that is) and stretched between divine vocation and the daily misery of exile; and still another, more general, and innate in the human condition, for man is a centaur, a tangle of flesh and mind, of divine breath and dust.[8]

Here we see the first indication that Levi understands human beings to be constructed from contrasting features: flesh and mind, divine breath and dust. The passage itself is also constructed from a mixture of vocabularies, as we see the mythical figure of the centaur – a creature with a human upper body and the legs of a horse inspired on Ancient Greek narratives – is combined with a reference to the creation of Adam from the dirt, who comes to life after the creator breathes life into him.

As a young man, Levi understood his Jewish identity as a negligible but curious fact; he only really differed from his Christian friends by the absence of a Christmas tree in their home and his learning a little Hebrew at the age of thirteen. However, since the publication of the journal *The Defense of Race* (*La Difesa della Razza*) from 1938 onwards, there was a lot

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7 Primo Levi, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, *II*, transl. Ann Goldstein (ed.) (New York, London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), p. 755.

8 Ibid., p. 760.

of talk about purity in Italy, and Levi felt himself proud of being different, of being impure.

> I am the impurity that makes the zinc react, I am the grain of salt, the mustard seed. (…) For the wheel to turn, for life to live, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities: in the earth, too, as we all know, if it is to be fertile. We need dissent, difference, the grain of salt, and the mustard seed. Fascism does not want them, forbids them, and so you are not a Fascist; it wants everyone to be the same, and you are not the same.[9]

The necessity of impurity for life itself is here contrasted with fascism, who wants all to be the same. Levi's rejection of fascism is reflected in his understanding of, and love for, science. The fascist regime had a great influence on the Italian education system, which resulted in the neglect of the scientific disciplines: "the entire education was (…) oriented toward the rhetoric of history of philosophy. Spirit overmastered matter, mind outclassed hand in the hierarchy of knowledge."[10] This explains his choice to start studying chemistry: school had taught him the revealed truths of the fascist regime, now he wanted to study matter itself, in all its complexity. Levi describes his trade in the following matter: "the chemist's work consists largely in watching out for these differences, in knowing them from close up, in predicting their effects. Not only the chemist's work."[11]

Although the racial laws make it hard to find a professor to supervise him on his thesis, he graduates in 1941. His degree states: "Primo Levi, of the Jewish race, a degree in chemistry, with honours". For Levi "it was therefore a double-edged document, half glory and half mockery, half absolution and half conviction."[12] Soon after graduation, Levi joins a group of unarmed partisans in the mountains of Valle d'Aosta. They are caught, and during the interrogations, Levi admits that he is a Jew: "in part out of weariness, in part also out of an irrational point of pride."[13] This confession convicts

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9 Idem, 781.

10 Massimo Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz. Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 18.

11 Levi, *Complete II*, p. 803.

12 Idem, p. 804.

13 Idem, p. 862.

him to an imprisonment in Auschwitz, where he stays for a year, until the liberation by the Russians.

### 2.2 The destruction of humanity

After returning to Italy Levi writes his internationally known testimonial account *If this is a man*, in which he narrates the destruction of humanity in the Nazi camp. I will look at Levi's language to describe this turn of man into non-man and the need for a second creation after Auschwitz. This re-creation of man will be only possible in the form of hybrids, doing justice to the hybrid nature of man.

In his testimony, Levi describes the daily life – or better: non-life – in the camp of Auschwitz. In the camp, all is focused on the degradation of the prisoners into non-men and -women: the shouting, the taking of clothes and personal belongings, shaving, tattooing, the daily slavery work and deprivation of food, water and comfort. All particularity and individuality is taken from them. *If this is a man* opens with a description of the prisoner of Auschwitz and asks his readers whether they still can be called human beings:

> Consider if this is a man
> Who toils in the mud?
> Who knows no peace?
> Who fights for half a loaf?
> Who dies by a yes or a no?
> Consider if this is a woman,
> With no hair and no name
> With no more strength to remember,
> With empty eyes and a womb as cold
> As a frog in winter.[14]

According to Levi the real witnesses of Auschwitz are those without story, face or thoughts:[15] the prisoner referred to in the camp as "Muselmann", completely subjected to the destructive force of the Nazis. Earlier I referred

14 Fragment from the poem, which in a later collection of poems gets the title "Shemà", referring to the daily prayer of the Jews. Levi, *Complete I*, p. 7.

15 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*: *the Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 34.

to Levi's description of the aim of Fascism: "it wants all to be the same," which seems to be achieved in the Muselmann:

> an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always the same, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to truly suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death – in the face of it, they have no fear, because they are too tired to understand.[16]

The camp shows us figures who cannot be determined to be alive or dead, "always the same" and thereby beyond particularity. The divine spark is dead within them, they are reduced to the mud from before creation, reduced to sheer matter. The work of destruction performed by the Nazi's can be understood as a contra-creation, turning the camp into the chaos from before the creation of the world, "the Lager is the place of mud and the empty man."[17] In the penultimate chapter, Levi describes how the destruction is completed: "To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it wasn't easy, it wasn't quick, but you Germans have succeeded." [18]

The last chapter of his testimony narrates the story of the ten days between the evacuation and liberation of the camp. Because of approaching allied forces, the Germans evacuate the camp and flee, leaving behind the sick prisoners. Levi stays behind at the infirmary and, together with two Frenchmen, Charles and Arthur, takes care of the inmates who are more ill. After they had restored the living conditions in the barrack by repairing the broken window and the stove – it had been destroyed by Allied fire attacks – a Polish man, Towarowski, encourages the others to give a piece of their bread to the workers. What seemed to be impossible the day before happens now: bread is shared in the place where there was no space for gratitude, where the law dictates: eat your bread, and if possible, also that of your neighbour. "You could rightly say that the Lager was dead. This was the first human gesture that took place between us. I think that this could be said to be the beginning of the process in which we, who are not

16 Levi, *Complete I*, p. 85.

17 Anna Baldini, "Intertestualità biblica nell'opera di Primo Levi," *Allegoris* xv, no. 45 (September 2003): 52.

18 Levi, *Complete I p.* 143.

dead, from Häftlinge are slowly becoming men again."[19] The destructive force of the Nazi-regime had been halted and they are re-becoming human beings, the sharing of bread provokes a "resurrection" of man. The breaking and sharing of bread in reciprocity is a universally recognizable mark of reclaiming humanity and has resonance in many traditions, including Judaism and Christianity. As said, "If this is a man?" is called the first book of Levi, and this question floats through all his later works, trying to search for humanity after Auschwitz.

### 2.3 Reconstruction of humanity: the hybrid

*The Truce* (1963) is the story of Levi's returning to life after the liberation of Auschwitz. Just like *If this is a man*, this book is formed by a collection of stories around characters or episodes, by which he narrates chronologically his nine-month journey home from Auschwitz to Turin. In *The Truce* Levi refers to the chaos from Genesis to describe the situation after Auschwitz. Levi only at a later moment changed his title into *The Truce*; his initial idea was to name it *Vento Alto*, which means literally "high wind". This is a reference to the wind that was upon the earth before creation, from which we read in Genesis 1 verse 2. This *vento alto* is a motif from the third chapter of the book:

> In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements.[20]

According to Levi, irregularity and imperfection are an essential aspect of life on planet earth. There is always motion, influence, nothing is static. In addition, "chemistry, place of the mutation of matter, consolidates in Levi the image of nature as place of intertwining and hybridizations, in which the evolution plays the miraculous intersections that return in many of

19 Ibid., p. 139.

20 Ibid., p. 235.

his stories."[21] The rebirth of life comes in the shape of hybrid creatures, beings who represent the occurred boundary breakdown between man and non-man, and between man, plant, animal and machine, as we will in the stories he wrote in the science-fiction genre.

Levi did not only write about his experiences in and after Auschwitz, he also wrote many fantastic stories based on scientific discoveries and technological developments. When he started to publish these in the sixties, he began to call himself a centaur both scientist and writer, survivor and author, Italian and a Jew. Not all these different identities conflicted; Levi always tried to build bridges between his different professions and traditions. Being a chemist by day and a writer by night, science was a prime source for his writing, while he regarded literature as a tool to renew our imagination.[22]

In the story, "Quaestio de Centauris" a boy narrates the story about the origins of the centaur, told to him by the centaur Trachi, who his father kept in a stall. According to Trachi, the tradition of the centaur – just as the history of man – begins with a Noah-like figure named Cutnofeset, although there were no centaurs on his ark. Cutnofeset only saved the key species; "man but not the monkey; the horse but not the donkey."[23]

> How, then, did these species come about? Immediately afterward, legend says. When the waters retreated, a deep layer of warm mud covered the earth. Now, this mud, which harboured in its decay all the enzymes from what had perished in the flood, was extraordinarily fertile: as soon as it was touched by the sun, it was immediately covered in shoots from which grasses and plants of every type sprang forth; and even more, within its soft and moist bosom, it was host to the marriages of all the species saved in the ark. It was a time, never again repeated, of wild, ecstatic fecundity in

21 Mario Porro, *Letteratura come filosofia naturale* (Milano: Edizioni Medusa, 2009), p. 118.

22 See: Mario Porro, "La cultura ibrida di Primo Levi" in *Il valore letterario e culturale della memorialistica della deportazione*, ed. Fabio Uliana (Torino: Fondazione Istituto piemontese Antonio Gramsci – Aned, 2003), pp. 78–87.

23 Levi, *Complete I*, p. 511.

> which the entire universe felt love, so much so that it nearly returned to chaos. (…) This second creation was the true Creation.[24]

After the flood a new creation from the mud appears to be possible, resulting in a hybridization of species, a "festival of origins", a true creation. In addition, humans participated in this "panspermia", the first generation of centaurs originated from the profligate son Cam, who experienced a wild passion for a Thessalian horse.[25] In *La Tregua*, we also encounter a Noah, who represents the universal hope to find humanity again after the chaos.[26] He sees the signs of liberation as his opportunity to spread his life erotically around the earth.

> Noah wandered through the women's rooms like an oriental prince, wearing a varicoloured jacket with an arabesque design, covered with patches and braid. His love meetings were like hurricanes. He was the friend of all the men and the lover of all the women. The flood was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz Noah saw the rainbow shine, and the world was his, to repopulate.[27]

In the story "Disphylaxis" – meaning something like "not protected against infection" – Levi describes species born from any possible seed. "(…) Any seed – animal, vegetable, or human – that the wind or the water or some accident brought in contact with any ovum had a good possibility of causing the conception of a hybrid."[28] In these creative stories, Levi's great sense of humour is perfectly displayed. However "Disphylaxis" also shows the urgency for this new creation, however comically described: "Every year, every day, new species were born (…) Why not hope for the best? Why not trust in a new millenarian selection, in a new man, swift and strong as the tiger, long-lived as the cedar, prudent as the ant?"[29]It shows the need for a new creation, because the status of humanity and the world do not offer hope for the future.

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 512.

26 Baldini, "Intertestualità," p. 61.

27 Levi, *Complete I*, p. 231.

28 Levi, *Complete II*, p. 1436.

29 Ibid.

Also in the story, "The Brokers" the need for another kind of humanity is displayed, in order to face contemporary world problems. A man called S gets a visit by three strangers: a robust youth, a blond middle-aged woman, and a thin grey-haired man. They are earth specialists: is S ready to go there? What follows is an advertising talk to seduce S to go to the earth: "We've got to find remedies, and we need people like you."[30] It turns out that the earth is not the most attractive place to be, considering the inequality, wars, famine. Nevertheless, S is promised weapons with which to face these problems and offer a solution. "They are weapons that are both powerful and subtle: reason, pity, patience, courage. (…) You will be one of ours, called upon to complete the work begun billions of years ago, when a certain ball of fire exploded and the pendulum of time began to swing."[31] S replies, he will go. However, he does not want any preferential treatment: "I accept, but I want to be born randomly (…) I prefer to construct myself alone, and to work up the anger that I will need, if I'm able. If not, I will accept the fate of everyone. The path of humanity, helpless and blind, will be my path."[32]

The story combines a Biblical-inspired setting (three strangers visiting a man), the Big Bang theory to explain the beginnings of the earth (an exploding ball of fire) and pictures a very specific image of humanity: we live on a beautiful earth and have the weapons for peace, but our path is one of helpless and blind wandering around, trying to construct ourselves. In Levi's work, many voices intersect in describing the recreation of man: Darwinism, chaos theory, but also mythical and religious language. I already mentioned many examples in which the destruction in Auschwitz and the recreation afterwards evoke the language from Genesis, and many of the scientific discoveries in Levi's stories reawaken the mythical and religious past. Not only man himself, but also his language is hybrid. In his writings, Levi combines voices from the many traditions that shaped him his education as a scientist, his development as a writer, his Italian roots and Jewish ancestors and their tradition. There does not appear to be a strict separation between the secular and the sacred in Levi's work: religious

30 Levi, *Complete I*, 630.

31 Ibid., p. 632.

32 Ibid.

stories, concepts and language are referred to in different contexts and shapes and intersect with science. The combination of secular and sacred vocabularies by his Jewish ancestors, as I referred to at the start of this paper, is reflected in Levi's own hybrid language. Man is a centaur, as Levi describes it himself: "It is essential of the human condition to be swinging between the mud and the sky, between the nothing and the infinite."[33]

Summarizing, it was Fascism and the introduction of racial laws that introduced Levi to the dangerous idea that all must be the same. His imprisonment in Auschwitz showed him the destruction of human beings by taking all particularity from them – a name, hair, clothes, belongings – and turning them into an indistinguishable mass, "always the same". Auschwitz returned the world into the mud of before the creation of humanity. After the flood though, hybrid creatures could create themselves from this mud, in a fertile mixture of species. Levi presents this second creation as the true creation: identities constructed from multiple roots, a continuous and unpredictable process. For Levi hybridity is key in understanding humanity, without absolving particularity: he himself is the example of how science, literature, mythical and Biblical language, Italian and Jewish culture can fruitfully interact, enriching each other. His focus on the hybrid is a statement against Fascism and Nazism with their ideal of a pure and static race.

I have learned from my stay on the campus of Stellenbosch and reading Koopman, that it is specifically the diversity of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of students that provokes challenges. As Koopman describes it: "Even though apartheid laws were scrapped two decades ago, and although there is more inter-ethnic contact and exposure than during apartheid, millions of South Africans, many struggling economically, are still insulated from each other to a great extent."[34] For Koopman, a pedagogy of hybridity might help in dealing with the questions of the students provoked by the challenge of diversity and will contribute "to a life of dignity, justice and freedom on our campus and in broader society."[35]

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33 Primo Levi, *Opere* (*I,II*) (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p. 646. My translation.

34 Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 151.

35 Ibid.

In the following section, I will briefly introduce Koopman's thoughts on hybridity in order to search for possible links to the work of Levi.

## 3. Hybridity in South Africa: Nico Koopman and Primo Levi

Both the work of Levi and Koopman show that one cannot write about hybridity without reflecting on one's own hybrid identity. It is an existential matter[36]; it is about who we truly are. This means I have to reflect on my own, hybrid, identity as well. I am a white European woman in her late twenties, working at a protestant theological university in the Netherlands. I have travelled often to Italy to immerse myself in the context of Levi, but am aware that I will never fully grasp his Jewish Piedmontese identity. This also applies, even to a greater extent, to the context of South Africa. Having visited the country only once, I am unable to understand the complex situations and identities of its inhabitants. Furthermore, the colonial history of the Dutch must, most urgently, hold me back from telling others who or what they ought to be. Our conversations during the consultation though inspired me to search for links between the post-Auschwitz and post-apartheid contexts regarding hybridity, thereby guided by the work of South-African theologian Nico Koopman.

Koopman himself belongs to the ethnic group of the "coloured", which can be understood as the most hybrid group in South Africa: "coloured, brown, Khoi, Griqua, Hessequa, Outeniqua, or any category used to describe these brown groups in South Africa."[37] However, as Koopman states, "I am also more than that. My life in South Africa, which I shared with my Xhosa, white and Indian brothers and sisters did not leave me, unchanged. I also live with their lenses. I am more than coloured."[38] Koopman's pedagogy of hybridity is essentially about wearing the lenses and earphones of other's who differ from yourself[39] in order to overcome the "phobias" that alienate people from each other and causes injustice. A pedagogy of hybridity in

36 Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 155.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 156.

39 This includes other nationalities, ages, sexual orientation, socio-economic groups, or those who live with disabilities. Koopman also includes the natural world: plants, animals and the rest of the natural environment. See: Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 156.

service of reconciliation and justice consists at least of seven features: plurality, ambiguity, complexity, duality, paradox, proximity and absurdity. The common denominator of all these features is the need for the ability to live in liminal spaces, in the in-between, where different realities co-exist.

There is a large contextual difference between Levi and Koopman's work. Although for Levi personally the war was never over, he wrote his works in the relatively calm context of Italy, until 40 years after the liberation of Auschwitz. The students of Koopman though "originate from communities that still experience high levels of ethnic alienation": apartheid continues to be a daily reality in South Africa.[40] This explains the differences in genre and aim between Levi[41] and Koopman. Where Levi wrote a testimony and creative stories which (partly playfully) help to decipher what it means to be human in and after Auschwitz, Koopman is concerned with the daily challenges of campus life in Stellenbosch and presents a pedagogy that might "pave the way for the actualization of so-called thicker manifestations of reconciliation and justice."[42]

Koopman suggests using the notion of hybridity in three ways. Firstly, heuristically and playfully, in order to open up new imaginative possibilities while reflecting on unity, justice and reconciliation. Secondly it can be used rhetorically, in which it "acquires a public, theological, ethical and pedagogical function" while introducing Christian convictions in public discourses. "Existentially" is the third use of the concept. While both employ different uses of the notion of hybridity, their different aims causes that Levi mainly focuses on the existential, and Koopman on the heuristic and rhetoric use. Where Koopman wants to "guide students to practice hybridity, to wear the lenses of others,"[43] Levi narrates his own hybrid identity and the essential hybridity of life.

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40 Ibid., p. 151.

41 In Levi's work many differences in time, genre and aim can be distinguished. He has always been concerned with the post-war community and wrote many articles and stories for daily newspapers in which he reflected on topical issues in Italy and the world. I hope that my introduction of the notion of "hybridity" does justice to this differentiation in his work and can, in all its complexity, be compared to Koopman.

42 Ibid., p. 161.

43 Ibid., p. 157.

Philosopher Richard Kearney writes in his book *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* about the role of the stranger in our human effort to identify ourselves over and against each other.[44] He detects a human obsession with strangers, God and monsters, caused by the refusal to acknowledge ourselves to be other. He searches for interconnections between the poles of strangeness and sameness, to discover the "other in our self and our self in the other, without abjuring either."[45] His goal is "to make the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign."[46] In this, goal Koopman and Levi's use of hybridity come together. In a pedagogy of hybridity, we learn to wear the lenses of others, making the foreign more familiar to us. Additionally, a growing awareness of our own inner hybridity makes us more other to ourselves.

The comparison can be intensified by looking at the link between hybridity and justice. The students of the Stellenbosch campus are searching for constructive ways to deal with the past, which shows from a variety of questions:

> Can't we forget the past and just go on? Why do some want to forget the past as if it is not important? Can't we do away with categories like perpetrators, victims (or survivors) and beneficiaries because they cause division, and it is not that easy to say who belongs where? How do I succeed in forgetting the past in a morally acceptable way?[47]

The students' current feelings of connectedness and alienation are influenced by their shared history and their different conceptions of the past. They ask whether the recurrent reference to the past and the continuing use of the concepts of perpetrator, victim/survivor and beneficiaries withholds them from creating relationships in the present.[48] The feature of "absurdity"

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44 Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

45 Ibid., p. 10.

46 Ibid.

47 Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 152.

48 This category of questions link to other questions mentioned by Koopman, for example: "why do we keep on defining ourselves in terms of apartheid?"; "Can't we define ourselves in terms of the vision of a new society (...)?"; "For how long do we have to say sorry for wrongs that we did not commit ourselves but that our fore-parents committed?" Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 152.

seems to give the most direct response to this issue and links hybridity explicitly with justice. "For reconciliation and justice to materialize, we need forgiveness," described by Koopman as an absurd logic.[49] "We live with the hope and expectation that the wonder of a love that forgives will open the gates to a responding love that repents and repairs, a love that heals the brokenness and that rights the wrongs."[50] The justice that Koopman envisions "seeks the healing and restoration of both perpetrators and victims."[51] For this to happen South African's should no longer shout to each other across the abysses of distrust and alienation but, on the contrary, wear each other's lenses in order to move towards "just reconciliation and reconciliatory justice."[52] Koopman therefore understands this pedagogy of hybridity as a pedagogy of hope, which can support societies characterized by plurality and complexity to "journey away from a divided and oppressive past to a united and liberating future." [53]

Levi did not only testify with his written words, but was a public figure who spoke to students often during his life. These meetings with the "post" generation became harder for him over time: in the fifties and sixties, it was still the memory of their fathers, in the eighties it became the story of their grandparents: far away, shaded, old.

> For us it is becoming harder and harder to speak with young people. We see it as both a duty and a risk: the risk of appearing outdated, of not being listened to. We have to be listened to: (…) It happened once and it can happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say.[54]

Amongst the youngsters, he encountered stereotyping, and an unwillingness to accept ambiguity, while for Levi the ambiguity of humankind is key in understanding the complexity of the Auschwitz phenomenon. This

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49 Here resonates Derrida's description of forgiveness as an "impossible possibility". See: Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness", in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 27–60.

50 Koopman, "Hybridity," 161.

51 Ibid., p. 162.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 163.

54 Levi, *Complete III*, p. 2564.

is related to the question of the Stellenbosch students on victims and perpetrators: how to define these groups? In his final work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi describes how in Auschwitz the space between victim and perpetrator was not empty; it was a "grey zone" of collaboration, initiated by the Nazi regime. This is crucial lesson to learn if we want to understand what it means to be human, and if we want to protect ourselves when new tests face us. Levi's exploration of the complexity of the camp has consequences for the way we understand the ambiguity of human nature and the way political systems can corrupt people into collaboration and complicity. Most illuminative here is his well-known narration of the fate of Rumkowski. This sixty-year-old director of Jewish charitable institutions was assigned to become the president of the Nazi ghetto of Łódź and rapidly saw himself as an absolute but enlightened monarch who ruled over his tiny kingdom of Jews. He must have made himself believe to be the saviour of his people, a Messiah. This last fact shows the confused being he was, identifying with both the oppressor and the oppressed.

> In Rumkowski we are all reflected: his ambiguity is ours, that of hybrids kneaded of clay and spirit; his fever is ours, that of our Western civilization that "descends into hell with trumpets and drums"; and his wretched trappings are the distorted image of our symbols of social prestige. (…) Like Rumkowski, we, too, are so dazzled by power and money that we forget the fragility of our existence: we forget that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that outside the fence are the lords of death, and a little way off the train is waiting.[55]

Levi's core task is to testify and enhance our understanding of Auschwitz, with renewed urgency while times change. Levi's interpretation of the story of Rumkowski clearly shows the difference between Levi and Koopman in time and context. While Koopman's task is to guide his students onwards and to live peacefully in the current complex society, Levi wants his readers to look back, grow awareness of the complex relation between perpetrator and victim and understand the continuous threat of the human tendencies that led to Auschwitz. His work shows the importance of memory and

55 Ibid., p. 1415.

sharing stories of the past, in order to understand each other better and prevent the past from repeating itself. In his opinion, we need knowledge of history in order to work towards the future. The questions that occupy Koopman's students show that speaking about the past and working towards the future asks for careful balancing; "how do I succeed in forgetting the past in a morally acceptable way?"[56] For Levi forgetting the past was never acceptable, but the context of Stellenbosch shows that the continuous look backwards can prevent acts of reconciliation in the present. This observation leads to the crucial question what it means to simulate a conversation between two, in many ways, different contexts.

## 4. Evaluation

Some of Koopman's students explicitly ask what can be learned from other post-liberation contexts, including "post-Holocaust": "Would it not be helpful and illuminating and even energizing for current debates about the wrongs of apartheid to broaden our focus and discuss other collective wrongs (…)?"[57] Koopman discusses this under the feature "complexity" and thereby shows that the inter-contextual dialogue is part of a pedagogy of hybridity, "this broader focus renders the issues more complex and sheds additional light on our own struggle." Michael Rothberg in his book *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* shows that the collective memory of the Holocaust already in the 1950's and 60's took place in dialogue "with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism."[58] The Holocaust is often used as an analogy for other events and histories because it was a unique[59]

56 Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 152.

57 Ibid., p. 153.

58 Rothberg, *Memory*, p. 22.

59 Levi's first imperative was to testify of Auschwitz, which explains his recurrent protest against false comparisons of Auschwitz with other histories. In an article printed in a national newspaper he reacts to German voices who wanted to negate the uniqueness of the Nazi camps and tried to explain Hitler's actions as a preventive defense against an "Asian" invasion. By entitling this article "The Black Hole of Auschwitz" Levi tries, as a witness, to prevent the shocking memory of Auschwitz to disappear in the black hole of forgetfulness. (Levi, *Complete III*, pp. 2752–2756) When writing literary works, Levi is able to relate disasters; for example in the poem "The Girl of Pompeii", a sad testimony

form of political violence, and has influenced discussions concerning race, religion and citizenship around the globe.[60] Despite the many contextual differences, "hybridity" appears to be a helpful notion in speaking justly about humanity both after Auschwitz and after apartheid, in at least three ways: doing justice to our human complexity; recognizing affinity in the other; and accepting to live in uncertain and liminal spaces.

Both post-disaster contexts also ask for a rethinking of the role and task of theology, for which hybridity might also be a valuable concept. After the flood, it is time for a rebirth. For Koopman theology clearly has a public role and task in working towards justice and reconciliation on campus, in church and society. He also gives theological grounds for understanding the hybrid nature of human beings, in the paradox of being simultaneously sinners and justified ones.[61] In addition, Levi refers to a theological grounded paradox that defines our ambiguous nature: we are created from mud and divine breath, swinging between the nothing and the infinite. Levi's work is a testimony to hybridity itself in combining different genres, trades and vocabularies.

Levi and Koopman share the urgency to rethink what it means to be human in order to do justice to the stranger. Becoming aware of the hybridity of life, we learn to live with uncertainties, in in-between spaces. This might also be stretched towards the discipline of theology, becoming more and more aware of the fruitful intersections between the secular and the sacred that is shown in the work of Levi. His work is an example of how literary creations can help to envision what it means to be human, which is even more powerful since he has witnessed the destruction of humanity. His description of the hybrid shows us our shared fragility – complex, constructed, wandering beings – but is also a source of hope: we see glimpses of humanity recreated from the mud.

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to the suffering of a little girl in Pompeii, Anne Frank and the Hiroshima Schoolgirl. (Ibid., p. 1920)

60 Rothberg, *Memory*, pp. 11, 23.

61 Koopman, "Hybridity," p. 159.

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