Popular Spaces
Space, Race, and Gender in Four Post-Apartheid Novels

Nafeesa Tarajee Nichols

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
at the University of Bergen

Date of defense: 13.08.2019
Acknowledgements

What a journey this has been! There have been times when I have been on the brink of giving this whole endeavor up. There have been stops and starts, changing programs and moments of intense uncertainty. But the people on this page have lifted me up, given me love, guidance, support and shared their brilliance with me along the way, and over the years, and I cannot begin to express my gratitude. But I will try.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation supervisor Professor Željka Švrljuga whose tireless work, brilliance, meticulous attention to detail and whose unwavering demand for my best work meant that I grew as a writer, a scholar, an intellectual, a teacher and a person under her tutelage. It has been both an honor and a privilege to work with you Željka, and I wouldn’t wish for any other person to have in my corner.

I must also give my heartfelt thanks to my wonderful academic mentors here at the University of Bergen and along my journey toward the PhD. Kari Jegerstedt, Laura Sætveit Miles, Lene Johannessen, Karim Traore, Bhekizizwe Peterson, Diane Batts-Morrow, Teju Olaniyan, and Dean Makuluni. Thank you all for being an inspiration, for your encouragement, your scholarship, your genius and for your mentorship. I would not be the scholar I am today, with a PhD to submit, if it wasn’t for all of you.

I am so privileged to have the most amazing group of colleagues, friends and family. Thank you, Debra G. Nichols, Robert Dupree, Brian (Khalil) Dupree, Majubeen Dupree, Torill Bråstøyl, Ingolf Bråstøyl, Laila Bråstøyl, the late Wenche Bråstøyl, Imani Wilson, Shannan McCray, Derilene Marco, Siri Vevle, Yael Harlap, Christopher Ouma, Khwezi Mkhize, Nahum Welang, Anjali Mullick, Katasha Johnson, Carmen McCain, Nikki Dubose, Joy Harden, Lemuel LaRoche, Christin Anderson, Kumasi Lapponi, Marita Ådnanes Helleland, Renée Reynolds, Kimberly Smith, Victoria Fleary, Victoria Murphy, Sherley Adrien Jeanty, Lisa Williams-
Moise, Joelle Bonny, Veronica Lee Isaac, and Raquel Pinkney. Each one of you have given me emotional and intellectual support over the years that has meant the world to me and has carried me through to this point.

To the wonderful administrative staff that offered support in countless ways both administrative and personal: Victoria Jensen, Anne Hestnes, Jan Johansen and Arve Kjell Uthaug. I would have not gotten to this point without all of you.

To my ancestor, great uncle Charles Nichols, thank you for being the first of what apparently is a whole family of black intellectuals and Africana studies scholars. May we continue the tradition for generations to come.

To my children Nasir Aasmund Nichols-Bråstøyl and Inara Gry Nichols-Bråstøyl, thank you for putting up with mamma’s long hours and constant distraction. You two are my inspiration and my motivation every single day. Mamma loves you forever.

To my beloved husband Roger Bråstøyl, there aren’t enough words to thank you for the support, for being a single dad more times than I can count and for being my rock and my partner in all of this. I love you now and always.

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Jeffrey (Nasir) C. Nichols who continues to be one of the brightest lights in my world even from beyond this life. He and my beautiful mom are why I am who I am.
Abstract

This study investigates engagements with space, race and gender in the post-apartheid South African literature. It examines how Niq Mhlongo’s After Tears (2007), Kopano Matlwa’s Coconut (2007), Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207 (2006) and Zukiswa Wanner’s The Madams (2006) reflect upon and deconstruct national narratives of newness and freedom through ironic portrayals of the embeddedness of apartheid era structures of geographical containment and domination. Part of this embeddedness the project argues, is the rise of black patriarchal rule in South Africa and its ensuing gendering of space, both materially and discursively. In order to problematize and unpack gendered spaces, the project draws on black feminist geography as a means of thinking through home and intimacy as symbolic of the nation, racialized and gendered spaces, and urban spaces. Further, the dissertation argues that the four novels reveal an underlying tone of uncertainty with regard to the trope of newness and the formation of gendered subjectivities, which is partially rendered in the novels’ destabilization of fixed notions of interiority and exteriority. However, the novels also imagine and celebrate various alternative and oppositional means of moving through these geographies of containment and domination. Essential to those oppositions are ways that the novels aestheticize and lift the everyday through popular culture. The dissertation argues that popular culture becomes the means through which the authors carve out liberatory textual space as well as imagine such spaces for their characters. These spaces are often created through a trope of opacity in resistance to colonial era ideologies of transparency. Finally, I look to black feminist imaginaries in the two feminist novels as a means of exploring how popular culture and feminism potentially generate productive dialogue with regard to gendered space and opposition to white heteropatriarchy.
Contents

Introduction 1

Meditation on Space and Methodology 20

1. Critical Readings of Post-Apartheid Spaces: Geographies of Disillusionment, Mobility, and Blackness 27
   - Theoretical Underpinnings Regarding Space and Place 30
   - Geographies of Disillusionment 33
   - Containment and Mobility 50
   - Concealed Black Geographies 64

2. Creative Interrogations of Gender & Space in Post-Apartheid Fiction 76
   - Thinking Through Gender in the South African Context 77
   - Gendered Homes 82
   - The Space of the Subject 106
   - Black Feminist Geographies 126

3. Popular Culture in After Tears, Room 207 and Coconut 132
   - Theoretical Framing of the Popular 135
   - Language as Popular Culture 140
   - The Dialectic of Popular Culture 142
   - Popular Culture and Space 153
   - Aesthetics and Its Politics 162

4. “Stronger Together?” Navigating Feminism and Popular Culture in Coconut and The Madams 177
   - The NSAW, Aspiration and Consumerism 179
   - Generic Conventions, Popular Feminism and Gender Stereotypes 188
   - Building a Feminist Community 199

Conclusion: On Popular Spaces 207

Works Cited 211
**Introduction**

In the summer of 1999, as a twenty-two-year-old, newly-minted college graduate, I went on my first trip abroad. I had chosen to volunteer in Ulundi, Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa for seven weeks. Why South Africa? Because my father, who had passed away in 1994, during my last year of high school, told me that when I finally travelled outside of the United States to avoid Europe. He said that our ancestors came from the continent of Africa, that civilization began on the continent of Africa, that science, history and literature had a rich history on the continent of Africa, and that Europe had tried to rape the continent of its history, its resources, and its land. Therefore, my travels should start in Africa. After a friend from college came back from a summer abroad and couldn’t stop talking about South Africa, I went. I chose this volunteer trip as a cheap way to just get there. However, beyond my superficial knowledge of South Africa’s history, and childhood memories of attending the New York showing of *Sarafina!*, refusing to drink Coke products when I was thirteen and joining everyone else in joyful celebration of Nelson Mandela’s release in 1990, I came with very little knowledge of the nation or its black citizens with whom I specifically desired a connection.

One evening while on that trip, I was standing in the middle of a house party, listening for the first time to Brenda Fassie’s “Vulindlela,” watching people dance in a way that I was not familiar with, listening to a language around me that I didn’t understand, and the full force of my own ignorance hit me in the face. I was ashamed. How could I exist in the world, call myself educated, and have no knowledge of the diverse cultures, and the artistry existing all around the world? More importantly, how could I be so unaware of my own ignorance? How could I be so complicit in the geo-centrism that is the United States? How could I be so boringly monolingual, with the exception of my high school Spanish? How could I expect to feel connected with an entire nation that was so diverse, so complex, and of whose history, politics,
culture, languages and other various specificities I was so ignorant. I was simultaneously humbled and hungry for everything I could possibly learn about South Africa and subsequently the African continent. To be clear, I did not want to learn about South Africa as a curiosity or an object of study I knew that even then. I wanted to learn in resistance to the ignorance of American geo-centrism and out of respect for that space that I was in.

There was an energy there that made me feel grounded in ways that I do not in the U.S. Having grown up in a country where one is profoundly aware of one’s own raced and gendered disenfranchisement, marginalization and long history of being stereotyped and demonized, the energy I felt probably resulted from an innate love of the notion of revolutionary struggle. After all, at twenty-two everything was black and white: black South Africans had fought and won. Thus, I wanted to feel connected to this place I had fallen in love with. However, I didn’t want that connection to be based on the romantic, essentializing tendencies of American ignorance but on knowledge, similar histories and political and cultural solidarity. Indeed, my experience there also solidified a latent desire to join in the global struggle against the oppression and exploitation of black and brown people. I didn’t have the vocabulary to articulate this at the time, but I knew I had found my life’s passion and my life’s contribution to that struggle.

I tell this story firstly to position myself as subject in my reading and analysis of South African literature. As a black American middle-class woman, I am acutely aware of my dual position of privilege and oppression. As an American, I am someone who enjoys the privileges of a U.S. issued passport and the educational disadvantage of being raised and intellectually trained by the institutions of a white supremacist, capitalist, imperialist nation—within which I was supposed to believe that we, Americans, were the best, the brightest, and the freest in the world. This means that despite a lifetime of work to dismantle U.S. socialization and institutionalization, one’s subjectivity and subjective way of thinking about the world will inevitably be influenced by them.
As a black feminist, I also speak from the perspective of one who knows intimately the kinds of intersectional violence enacted upon black women’s bodies and the oppressive and containing forces of capitalist white hetero-patriarchy. Indeed, I was raised by black parents who were revolutionary in their consciousness and who made sure I understood that America was not built for me; that as a black girl, I had no ownership in this country aside from that which I carved for myself. Thus, I speak from a position of fierce political solidarity even though I will never be able to speak from a position of the kind of knowledge that comes from being born and raised in the context of which I speak. It is this aspect of my own politics and values that is at the heart of my dissertation topic.

Secondly, this story, like the dissertation, has everything to do with space. What I describe here is how acutely familiar I was with the position of outsider. I traveled outside of the U.S. because of feeling like an outsider, yet it took that trip and the ones that followed for me to fully understand the dynamism of space and transience of our own positionality in the world. The position of outsider is as fluid as anything else and shifts depending on the spaces one enters and exits. The texts that I read and interpret for this work explore and interrogate those shifts. They explore mobility and various geographies of oppression and containment and they deeply question the concept of home. Because home, is or should be, the very antithesis of being an outsider, it seems to me that many of our movements, our aspirations for literal and social mobility are in fact a search for home.

This dissertation in some ways is a reflection on these issues that I began to think about at twenty-two. I am referring partially to space and geography but also to a particular moment in South Africa’s history. When I arrived in South Africa in 1999 traces of the euphoria of liberation could still be found in the air; by the time I returned in 2001 one could sense the beginnings of disillusionment that liberation did not mean all that it could and should. These shifting dynamics coincide with the end of Mandela’s term as president and throughout Thabo Mbeki’s, his successor, tenure. It was under Mbeki’s leadership that South Africa moved definitively toward
neoliberal capitalism both domestically and internationally. While these changing attitudes cannot solely be blamed on Mbeki’s domestic policies, it is true that his presidency somehow marked the end of that euphoric period. It is this shift in dynamic that I am most interested in rather than an exploration of Mbeki’s term as president. Mbeki’s presidency is simply a convenient temporal delineator. Therefore, my dissertation investigates the literature from this period in South Africa that began the same year as my first trip to Ulundi: 1999-2009.

The alteration in the post-apartheid atmosphere can likely be attached to a variety of factors, including how the compromises reached during the negotiated settlement by the African National Congress (ANC), the National Party (NP), other stakeholders, and political parties during the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) left many Black South Africans feeling betrayed by those who were supposed to be leading the liberation movement and representing the disenfranchised majority. Moreover, those compromises contributed to the paradox of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—which offered a platform for victims of human rights violations to speak out about the violence they endured and simultaneously offered amnesty to the perpetrators of those violations. However, within the process, the TRC’s adherence to what Mahmood Mamdani calls the “legal fetishism of apartheid” brought about the erasure of the majority of the victims of apartheid’s policies (60-61), contributing to a continuing tension between those who

---

1 See Johannes Tsheola’s discussion of the neoliberal agenda found in Thabo Mbeki’s policies for Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) and New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) (790).

2 The negotiated settlement between the opposers to the apartheid government and the National Party during CODESA (CODESA 1 December 1991, CODESA 2 May 1992 which collapsed in June of 1992 and reconvened in September of 1992) came about as a result of a long and violent period of stops and starts of the negotiations. It resulted in several problematic compromises, including the negotiating parties’ decision to distance themselves from their constituents, rather than seeking consensus on the issues that were being negotiated (Hamber 241). However, one of most problematic concessions was the ANC’s capitulation to (mostly) Western influence in their decision to “abandon their commitment to socialism...[and] adopt free-market economics” (Hamber 243). The implications of this particular decision were far reaching because this gave the National Party greater pull at the negotiating table as it prevented an overhaul of a largely white-controlled economy and re-entrenched the economic divide between the white minority and the black majority (Hamber 243).
benefited from apartheid and those who were oppressed by it. Additionally, the amnesty process, which promised amnesty to perpetrators who were willing to speak truthfully about their actions and could prove that they were politically motivated, failed to offer restorative justice to the majority of South Africa’s population and thus grossly inhibited possibilities for true forgiveness. This feeling of betrayal may have also resulted from the implementation of Mbeki’s economic policies and what has been flippantly called “public relations disasters” by some international news outlets (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1296841.stm). These “public relations disasters,” which all occurred during his first two years in office had, in fact, important material consequences especially for the most marginalized in South African society. They included Mbeki’s controversial views on the connection between HIV and AIDS, his criticism of the controversial fast track to land-reform in Zimbabwe and most notably, his plan of “free market economics in order to attract foreign investment” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1296841.stm). In reaction to Mbeki’s economic

3 I am referring here to the fact that human rights violations and the notion of “benefitting” from apartheid were defined as those acts or as perpetrators who acted outside of the law (Mamdani 60). This policy thus ignored the fact that gross human rights violations occurred under the protection of legality, i.e. the forced removal of 3.5 million victims from their communities between 1960 and 1982 under the Group Areas Act (Mahmadi 59-60). This and other ways that the TRC failed to address the “forms of structural violence” perpetuated during the apartheid years meant that the TRC was increasingly seen to embrace, rather than condemn, the agents of apartheid (Ross 11).

4 I am thinking about forgiveness as being what Anthony Holiday describes as, “intensely personal and conceptually dependent on remorse” (45). As such we can imagine that the systematic and ritualized nature of the TRC hearings (Bozzoli qtd. in Ross 13) and the public performance of remorse and penitence are more reminiscent of spectacle than of the intimate personal interaction that is necessary for forgiveness. Moreover, the amnesty policy left many families with a sense of injustice that they were denied retribution through legal channels, such as criminal or civil prosecution (Holiday 47).

5 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1296841.stm . Further, Mbeki’s comments questioning the link between HIV and AIDS was especially unfortunate considering that in 2001 South Africa was facing a major HIV/AIDS crisis with 4.10 million living with HIV in 2001, a number that increased to 5.24 by 2010. While the BBC news report mentions the censure of the international community after his comments, it is also true that AIDS activists and medical personnel in South Africa were angered by his comment because of the ways it hindered their efforts at education, prevention and treatment (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jun/12/aids.chrismcgreal).

6 Domestically, Mbeki was lambasted for his critical stance toward Zimbabwe and accused of capitulating to Great Britain’s pressure to “protect white and colonial interests in Zimbabwe” (South African Press Association qtd. in https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/zimbabwe/ZimLand0302-05.htm). Considering South Africa’s softer approach to land restitution, Mbeki’s stance would have resonated a great deal in South Africa where at the time that the ANC came to power 87% of the land was owned by the white minority, while only 13% was owned by the black majority (Rumney 410).
policies, the left leaning members of the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) criticized it for cutting back on social services and creating the perpetually widening economic gap between a small rich elite and the poor majority
(https://ewn.co.za/2016/03/21/Mbeki-GEAR-programme-was-meant-to-save-SA-from-debt).

There is something about the complexities entailed in that shift in the energy of a nation that is also reflected in the literature of the period. To name a few examples, it is found in the artistry of Phaswane Mpe who, in his debut novel Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001), reflects upon the nuances of nation, belonging, and the perpetual tension of the palimpsestic quality of the urban space (Putter 154); or in K. Sello Duiker’s exploration of the psychological violence of emerging masculinities in The Quiet Violence of Dreams (2001) and Thirteen Cents (2000). It is found in the novels that question and think through the connections between the past and present, such as in Zakes Mda’s deep exploration of memory and transition in The Heart of Redness (2000), and Fred Khumalo’s reflections on love and violence in Bitches Brew (2006). It is also illustrated in Zoe Wicomb’s masterful deconstruction of emerging national narratives with regard to the struggle against the apartheid regime, the reliability of history and truth, and their intersections with gender and race in David’s Story.

However, four novels in particular add to these reflections on this decade in South Africa's history in new and valuable ways: Kopano Matlwa’s Coconut (2007), Zukiswa Wanner’s The Madams (2006), Niq Mhlongo’s After Tears (2007) and Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207 (2006). They recognize the centrality of both space, race and gender in thinking through the early years of the post-apartheid condition. Additionally, like much South African fiction, these texts are also very much novels of and about the city. However, this is not by itself overly exceptional. Artistic and scholarly work on urbanization and African cities has a long history, albeit at times through a skewed and cliched lens of modernization which situated “Africans as
fundamentally and even essentially rural creatures” and thus ignorant and naïve in the modern city (Mbembe and Nuttall 353). Contemporary renewed interest in urbanism suggests that along with the continued rise of the metropolis in the global south, is the rising trend of new and more nuanced readings of the African city (Mbembe and Nuttall 359). Authors such as Mhlongo and Moele illustrate critical arguments that fixed notions of the modern city, encased within both local and national borders are increasingly difficult to sustain (Prakash 4). Moreover, the urban has begun to encompass both the inner city and the “edge city” or the suburban area, such that, “as urban networks extend to fill the spaces between the city and the countryside, one can no longer speak of a strict divide between the two” (Prakash 3). Kopana Matlwa and Zukiswa Wanner interrogate the notion that the suburb is a quintessentially post-apartheid space where “the colour of one’s money rapidly replaces skin colour as currency of showy success … yet a relationship with the culture of township life is maintained” (Bremner qtd. Mbembe 359). Rather, they explore the ways in which the suburban space continues to be both racialized and gendered.

In their interrogations of conventional readings of the urban space, these authors extensively employ irony and satire as a method of commenting on some of the contradictions and paradoxes of post-apartheid black life, including notions of mobility and the nation as a gender progressive space. Irony is defined as “a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed” (Abrams and Harpham 186). Some suggest that irony is conveyed through mockery (Fontanier qtd. in Ngom 221). Linked to this is also the common use of satire which is defined as, “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation” (Abrams and Harpham 352). Irony and satire are both deployed in these texts as a strategy of articulating what is unspeakable. Irony and satire become the avenue through which Matlwa, for example, can express black frustration with white condescension; Moele can express a burgeoning sense of disillusionment and betrayal toward the ANC; Mhlongo can expose the vulgarity of misogynistic masculinity and Wanner can reveal the
ridiculousness of post-apartheid configurations of a new progressive post-apartheid woman. The four novels use these devices as a means to expose the broader irony of a political party that was voted into power in order to achieve political, economic and social liberation as it contrasts with the realities on the ground.

Moreover, these texts deploy, in exciting ways, popular culture as a means of celebrating and aestheticizing the everyday. The ways this is specifically done through the demotic is both innovative and constructive. In other words, the popular is often deployed as a mode of resistance. Thus, it is both a decisive link between the four texts’ and one of the central definers of the texts imagined spaces. While these possibilities are being engaged, popular culture is also occupying the imagined spaces in the texts in important and significant ways. Thus, I see them as “popular spaces” or spaces which are inflected with, and partially produced by, popular culture such as music, language, popular magazines etc.

My dissertation aims to reflect upon these novels’ particular portrayals of racialized and gendered city spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. In understanding the nature of the palimpsest and the continued embeddedness of apartheid era structures of social, economic and geographical containment, I am interested in thinking through how the novels’ deployment of the popular suggests alternative ways to move in these spaces, or more importantly, how it problematizes conventional means of reading or interpreting how oppressed and marginalized people move. I am thinking of movement in terms of literal ways of moving into, through, and out of urban spaces; however, I am also thinking of movement in terms of upward mobility and how quickly certain actions might be labeled deviant or criminal. These alternative ways of moving might also be said to be, what Katherine McKittrick calls, “oppositional geographies” a term I will unpack at great length in Chapter One. More specifically, I intend to interrogate whether and, if so, how popular culture, as it is deployed in the four novels, suggests or supports possibilities for “feminist geographies” in these spaces. Lastly, the project will seek to understand what may be behind the three main points of connection between the four novels and
what those connections say about the direction of South African literature. Before approaching these texts, however, one must attempt to not only think through the ways in which these and other texts that were published within the same period have been situated temporally and spatially, but also consider some of the broader tensions that they encapsulate.

The novels that this study examines were all published within a year of each other, during Mbeki’s tenure as president of The Republic of South Africa. They were published during what some call South Africa’s “transitional period” (Hemer 17), while others designate it “the post-transitional period” (Frenkel, Ronit and MacKenzie Craig 1-10), which means that they straddle what is already a blurry socio-historical and cultural line. Indeed, the term “transition” comes with multiple understandings and definitions dependent on various shifts in theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. I am most comfortable with a fairly broad understanding of the term which sees transition as any profound societal change, whether that be “economic liberalization or political radicalization, peaceful reform or violent revolution, or the subtler transformational effects of migration and other transnational flows” (Hemer 14).

With such a broad and fluid definition, how does one determine when a transitional period begins or ends? Establishing a concrete time period seems to be deeply subjective. The parameters through which some scholars separate transitional and post-transitional writing seems to swing between a temporal orientation converging around the tenure of the TRC (1996-1998) and conceptual shifts that don’t necessarily rely on concrete assertions of the end of apartheid era problems

7 See also Putter (151).

8 See also Samuelson (113-17), and Frenkel (25-44).

9 While Mbeki’s inauguration as President in 1999 does not factor in to the determination of the timing of the transitional period, it does coincide with the ending of the TRC in 1998 and a socio-political shift in the history of the new democracy.

10 See Samuelson, Meg (113).
(Frenkel 27). These scholars inevitably point to various trends within South African literary culture that mark the shift from the transitional to post-transitional period. These include moving from a transitional focus on revealing untold histories, heritages of resistance, identity and a new celebration of the everyday, to a post-transitional transnational frame which “encompasses diasporic South African writings (often examining issues of dislocation), proletarian disclosures, lyrical existential ruminations, memoir, satire, miracle narratives, and crime stories” (Frenkel 27).

For those that extend the transitional period beyond the TRC in their work, the start of the post-transitional period is even harder to pin down. As such, Oscar Hemer’s confidence in choosing his own cut-off date for the period of transition\(^\text{11}\) and Anne Putter’s lack of interest in temporality (60) speak to the fluidity and arbitrariness of these classifications and the subjective nature of history. Moreover, they reinforce Michael Chapman’s assertion that these are mere classificatory conveniences rather than strict or concrete temporal distinctions (2). Chapman’s point aligns with Putter, who is more interested in the characteristics of what Johan Geertsema calls “transitional fiction,” regardless of time of publication:

transitional fiction [is] a literature of passage, passing and the past. It makes explicit the struggle through the passage from an unjust system, through a difficult present, and into a new, uncertain future; often, it is a passing into death; these passages, finally are marked by the attempt to deal with and come to terms with the past (Geertsema qtd. in Putter 60).

Geertsema’s thoughts mirror in some ways my own reflections on the four novels that will be examined in this study. Despite fitting in some ways in both categories, each of them reflects the struggle to which Geertsema refers. Moreover, each of them reflects a resistance to what Ashraf Jamal sees as the “overdetermined [and]

---

\(^{11}\) Hemer’s argument that transitional periods are most reflected in the cultural and intellectual explosion that accompanies them rather than concrete dates for their beginning and ending seems to arbitrarily choose 2010 after the successful staging of the 2010 FIFA World Cup as a good cut-off point for South Africa’s transitional period (17).
teleological” logic, which attempts to generate what he calls a “cultural transparency” (11). What I mean is that Jamal problematizes the neat categories of “struggle,” “post-apartheid,” “transitional,” and “post-transitional,” literature, which contribute to the national narrative of the traumatic past and the promising future for South Africa. My analysis of the four novels will show that there is an ambivalence and uncertainty with regard to the tropes of emergence and re-imagination, of newness and forgiveness, and of freedom which undergirds these novels. These texts also refuse to conform to those very neat categories, nor am I interested in assigning them.

I would argue that the novels in this study resist precisely the “cultural transparency” that Jamal critiques. I am thinking of transparency in terms of Édouard Glissant’s understanding, which refers to colonial attempts to define and categorize the “other” according to European constructed parameters for humanity (Glissant 189-90). Transparency is thus required for not only social acceptance but also for political and economic participation on a global scale (Glissant 190). However, instead of conforming to colonial desires for transparency, these texts create defiantly opaque moments for readers who exist outside of black South African communities, and subsequently muddy the clarity of the national narrative of post-apartheid progression.

Moreover, these texts also expose the “entanglement” of time and humanity that Achille Mbembe describes in On the Postcolony (2001) and Nuttall describes in her 2009 study Entanglement (1). In what seems a jumble of contradiction and ambiguity, these texts attempt to reflect upon the structures of the past which continue to constrict and contain subjectivity, and haunt people’s everyday lives, coupled with the rhetoric of, and the desire to reimagine, the self and to conceive of a more agentic existence going forward. They simultaneously desire and question the possibilities for intimacy and rootedness in a nation that consisted of the extremes of panoptic surveillance coupled with forced separation from home and family. By

---

12 I discuss Glissant’s theories of transparency and opacity in more depth in Chapter Three of this study.
juxtaposing these different motifs, I am not suggesting that these texts expose what some designate as another kind of “South African contradiction” since Pumla Gqola has already noted what is problematic about such categorizations (6-7). Rather, the texts expose what Mbembe argues is a “time of entanglement” in which there are “discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another [and] interpenetrate one another” (Mbembe qtd. in Nuttall Entanglement 4). These are novels that invite us to think of time with regard to post-1994 South Africa not in terms of linearity but in terms of a series of interlocking periods in time. These various categories of philosophical resistance to and dismantling of the national narrative are uniquely and profoundly explored in the four novels that are written and published at the center of this period of growing disillusionment, burgeoning sense of betrayal, but also major change in South Africa.

The wealth of research on space, place, urbanization, apartheid geography and the like indicates the essential role that space plays in South Africa’s history of racial and gender exploitation, enslavement, and oppression. Geography became a means through which South Africa’s infamous apartheid regime implemented their insidious policy of racial separation and containment. Indeed, Rita Barnard reminds us that all the essential political features of South Africa’s “pigmentocratic industrialized state” were fundamentally space dependent:

- the classification of the population into distinct racial categories, the
- segregation of residential areas on the basis of race, the restriction of black urbanization, the system of migrant labor from rural areas to the towns, the

---

13 Gqola refers to what has been dubbed the “South African contradiction” – gender progressive constitution and rhetoric of gender equality in contrast to the high levels of gender-based violence and continued oppression of (especially) black women. She suggests that using the expression “South African contradiction” without problematizing it risks normalizing a phenomenon that points to the ways that patriarchal power is (being) seen in increasing levels of violence throughout the nation. Similarly, I would want to bring out attention to the “disjuncture” (Gqola 7) without participating in the normalization of the social and economic violence that results from an unrealized liberation movement.
emphasis on ethnicity and traditionalism and the formidable apparatus of state surveillance and control. (Barnard 6)

To say that it is “understandable” that South African literary output is often preoccupied with themes of space and spatiality along with corresponding themes of movement, displacement and containment would be a gross understatement. Additionally, while apartheid era laws were the most aggressively engineered, South African spaces have long been the sites of violent forms of geographical domination, containment and spatial control. Subsequently, South African literature too has a long history of spatial themes along with various forms of representation of contentious issues surrounding both rural and urban spaces and their connections with race, class, and gender.

Scholarly research on space and place in South African literature has become an increasingly popular area of study in the course of the last twenty-five years. In that short time, however, South African and international scholars have produced a wealth of knowledge and offered invaluable insight into the ways in which South African fiction, poetry and theatre reveal, contest, unpack, and shed light on the far-reaching effects of South Africa’s spatial and geographical politics.

14 Some of the apartheid era laws to which Barnard alludes include the following: the Population Registration Act of 1950, which led to the creation of a national registry in which every person’s race was officially recorded; The Group Areas Act of 1950 forced physical separation between races by creating different residential areas for different groups; Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act 1951 gave the Minister of Native Affairs the power to remove black South Africans from public or privately owned land and to establish resettlement camps to house those who were displaced; The Bantu Authorities Act provided for the establishment of black homelands and regional authorities; The Natives Act of 1952 required black South Africans to carry passes indicating their place and employment and containing a permit for residence in cities or spaces designated “white only”; the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 1953 which forced segregation in all public amenities, public buildings, and public transport; the Natives Resettlement Act 1954, the Group Areas Development Act 1955, and the Bantu Homeland Citizens Act 1970.

15 This may perhaps coincide with the “spatial turn in literary and cultural studies (if not the arts and sciences more generally)” (Tally 12), or what Foucault called the “epoch of space” (Foucault and Miskowiec 22). While Robert Tally Jr. refrains from identifying a specific date or moment when the spatial turn occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century, he notes that it definitely gave birth to “an increasingly spatial or geographical vocabulary in critical texts, with various forms of mapping or cartography being used to survey literary terrains, plot narrative trajectories, locate and explore sites, and project imaginary coordinates” (Tally 12).
Space in the South African literary context, but also in other post-colonial literatures, is often connected to contestations over territory and the “territorialization of power” (Barnard 5). This, on the one hand, pertains to land, land-ownership, identity, and the “colonizing psyche” (Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall 2), as well as land-theft, and indigenous people’s forced displacement and domination. On the other hand, spatially themed literature, thereby also motifs in literature, illuminates modern textual concerns with black and “coloured” experience of urban spaces and their geographical domination and containment, perhaps elucidating what Eski’a Mphahlele once called “the tyranny of place” (Mphahlele 54). Simultaneously, in the post-apartheid context, literature pre-occupied with space and spatiality also reinforces AbdouMaliq Simone’s argument that “researchers can learn a great deal about urban processes from the quotidian experience of people” who move within and around the city as well as rural spaces (qtd. in Barnard 152).

Earlier studies of South African literature and geography focus on the pastoral/urban dichotomy which very often also situates these studies along racial lines, even though the literature does not always fall into neat racial categories of pastoral as white versus urban as black. Early pastoral, or literature of the countryside, for example, is not about a benign “pure” or “innocent” experience of nature, since attitudes to nature are invariably influenced or even determined by relationships of power between individuals belonging to different cultural and political dispensations” (Gräbe 3). In as much as this is true, anti-pastoral novels such as, to some extent, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1888), Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974) and J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) were necessary interventions in a hegemonic pastoral narrative of the South African farm upon which so much of “boernasie” or Afrikaaner identity was based (Coetzee *White Writing* 4). Indeed, some scholars of space and literature in South Africa characterize the “relationship between space and identity as a symbiotic

---

16 I have placed the identifier coloured in quotation marks because following the demise of apartheid it has become a contested term of identity, with some rejecting it as a construction of a racist regime, while others self-identify as coloured and celebrate coloured identity and history.
relationship, a mutual dependency creating meaningfulness” (Viljoen and Van der Merwe, *Storyscapes* 12). Further, the “master narrative” (Barnard 70) of the pastoral was ensconced in various mythic notions connected to Afrikaner identity.

These are detailed in South African author J.M. Coetzee’s work on the pastoral and whiteness in South African writing. As such the pastoral “assert[s] ‘the virtues of the garden-simplicity, peace, immemorial usage” and the farm registers as a space of borders that mimics colonial society (Coetzee 4). Coetzee critiques Schreiner’s novel arguing that it reveals the ways *The Story of an African Farm* perpetuates some of these ideals and is complicit in white colonial placement of black labor’s contribution to the South African agricultural encomny under erasure (Coetzee 5). Thus, novels like *The Conservationist* help to illuminate what Rita Barnard in *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007) identifies as the “self-serving ways the apartheid government deployed pastoral ideologies and sentiments,” enacting forced removals and black dispossession (70).  

As Sarah Nuttall notes in “Flatness and Fantasy,” “land is once again a central subject, explored as a deposit of myths and memories, a topography invoked by Afrikaner nationalism and white masculinity to give their ruling ideas a ‘natural’ form” (219) in contemporary pastoral literature. Nuttall celebrates these contemporary works that reread the land as feminized subject to male/patriarchal domination, foregrounding gender as another means of deconstructing the apartheid era myths about the pastoral space. Her scholarly attention to the gendered nature of pastoral novels emphasizes the connections between the pastoral and other novels

---

17 Rita Barnard’s comment about “self-serving ways” alludes to the apartheid government’s use of mythic notions of the farm to justify the forced removal of South Africa’s black population to small rural homelands. These homelands are reminiscent of Native American reservations, which were set on some of the countries least arable land thereby reinforcing black poverty and dispossession and necessitating mass black men’s migration to South Africa’s cities looking for work.
that focus on urban spaces and under-discussed intersecting forms of spatial control with regard to race, gender and class.

Earlier works on primarily black South African depictions of the urban space suggest that black writing on the urban theme resulted from lack of interest in the rural landscape because of its familiarity. The urban landscape, however, ostensibly was unfamiliar territory and thus similarly required “conquer[ing]” (Gräbe 30). This argumentation reads apartheid era depictions of the urban space through a thinly veiled colonial lens in which the “jim comes to Joburg” narrative structure which illustrates a “transition from tribal customs that shaped rural life to novel patterns of behavior of behavior demanded by city life” is central to black navigations of space (Gräbe 30). Absent from Gräbe’s analysis is any sense of the alternative and oppositional ways Can Themba (her primary reference), Henry Nxumalo, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa or some of the other drum writers may have imagined those spaces. Can Themba, an award-winning contributor to Drum magazine, along with the other Drum writers, often captured the fast paced, glamour that comprised urban life for many black South Africans. However, they also captured the underlying physical and psychological struggles that ensue within an oppressive society. Moreover, South African literature has a long history of representation and engagement with township life including Ezekiel Mphahlele’s Down Second Avenue (1959) and Mongane Serote’s To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). These texts not only capture the pain, beauty and normal everyday life that is a part of all living, but also remind us of how much black South Africans belonged and had rights to these spaces.

---

16 Similarly, most scholarship on literature of the land focuses on white writers, despite a number of black writers who have explored rural settings like Lauretta Ngcobo And They Didn’t Die (1990), Zakes Mda The Heart of Redness (2000), Zoe Wicomb’s David’s Story (2000), Pamphilia Hlapa A Daughter’s Legacy (2006), and Zazah Khuzwayo’s Never Been at Home (2004) to name a few.
Indeed, black South African representations of the urban space carry much more complex and nuanced insights. Dorothy Driver’s essay “Drum Magazine (1951-59) and the Spatial Configurations of Gender” provides an excellent example of how attention to the transition from rural to urban spaces yields a more nuanced understanding of the way that “rural patriarchal structures were giving way to urban forms, as well as the ways in which women’s voices were silenced and a set of ‘feminine’ voices constructed in their place” (232). Similarly and perhaps more importantly, Rita Barnard’s chapter on Miriam Tlali’s Muriel at Metropolitan (1979) and Barbara Boswell’s 2016 article “Rewriting Apartheid South Africa: Race and Space in Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo’s novels” highlight the “critical spatial analysis” employed by Tlali and Ngcobo in order to “critique apartheid and its oppressive policies” (Boswell 1329).

From other perspectives, space is engaged temporally. Scholars frame their studies in terms of apartheid/post-apartheid timelines or select years of significance such as the two years of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Both Barnard and Boswell use these kinds of frames to examine the oppositional spaces that black South African women authors imagine through their language choice (Barnard 134) and clever deconstruction of apartheid ideology that attempted to depict blackness as the ultimate other and needing to be kept completely apart from whiteness (Boswell 1335). Scholars see creative representations of space in the apartheid period as centered on themes of “knowing one’s place” (Barnard 2), displacement (Graham 2), liminality (Boswell 1334), (Gunne 1), (Viljoen and Van der Merwe 1), and rupture (Graham 2). These are all themes and motifs which indicate the egregious consequences of the institution of apartheid and the long-lasting ways it continues to haunt South Africa’s literary output.

19 I use “black” according to Steve Biko’s black consciousness philosophy as an umbrella term which includes all South Africans who were not classified as white and experience the various oppressions at the hands of the apartheid regime.
Critical engagements with post-apartheid South African literature show increasing interest in the overwhelming amount of post-1994 fiction set within, representing, and conceptualizing the exigencies, antinomies and dynamics of the post-apartheid urban space. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe hypothesize that “during apartheid, the right of black people to live in the city was constantly threatened. They were to work in the city but not to live in it. This explains perhaps the force and power of attempts to conquer the right to be urban in the present” (282).

In the literature that closely followed the close of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings (TRC), Shane Graham observes, several recurring features are predominant that might characterize “post-apartheid” or at least transitional literature in South Africa. Similar to pre-1994 literature, these revolve around the various dynamics of space and spatiality including a rise in confessional forms, second-person forms of address, and “representational strategies utilizing displacement and condensation; recurring tropes involving mapping, archiving, and curating, the symbolic conflation of bodies and landscapes; excavations and holes; and palimpsest” (Graham 5). In the introduction of his book-length study of literature post-TRC, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (2009), Graham alludes to the many post-apartheid authors and other producers of culture who share an interest in representing and engaging the various new dimensions of the city space since the demise of apartheid. Indeed, “writers have used the city and its transformation as one of the key tropes through which to interrogate post-apartheid society” (Bremner qtd. in Putter 151). Mapping, for example, is essential to these projects because it establishes a cartography “of not only the built environments—the physical spaces—of the city but also layers of history as well as the sociocultural

---

20 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established during Nelson Mandela’s short term in office as President of South Africa. It was established as a means of bridging the gap between what was called at the time a racially “divided society”. The TRC was based on a two-tiered premise: truth-telling and forgiveness. Accordingly, reconciliation came about when victims of apartheid were firstly able to voice their pain and were offered some form of restorative restitution/justice. Simultaneously, the perpetrators needed to confess their actions and were only afforded amnesty if they could prove that their actions were politically motivated. The hearings ran between 1996 and 1998 and provided the basis for a huge archive documenting the atrocities committed and the experiences of apartheid’s various forms of oppression.
networks that bind together the people who occupy, use, move through and (re)produce those spaces” (Graham 116).

Mapping, in this sense, calls our attention to South African cities as palimpsests, another recurring trope in early post-apartheid literature. Indeed, the memory and the structures of apartheid continue to haunt and remain embedded in post-apartheid spaces, fueling the need to “understand South African cities as urban palimpsests, imperfectly and ephemerally marked by multiple histories” (Graham 90). Significantly, Graham argues, “the concept of the urban palimpsest or the footprint from the past has suggestive implications for the encoding of memory” (92), which has far reaching implications for both local and national memory in terms of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past. The recurrence of the trope of the palimpsest is reflective of Graham’s interest in issues of reconciliation and the narrative modes that arose out of the TRC hearings. However, other spatial tropes which have received a great deal of scholarly attention include issues of mobility, walking, spatial memory, continued forms of containment, and gendered spaces.

Walking—as most, if not all, of the scholarship on space and post-apartheid South African Literature has touched on—is seen in the vein of Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau: “reading walking the city as a mode of subversion and connection” (Jones 212). Walking is also connected to issues of “mobility and aspiration” (Jones) as well as to containment and gender issues. Indeed, recent research on gender and space in South African writing has focused on gender-based violence and what Sorcha Gunne characterizes as women writers who “rewrite apartheid spaces to include women, their lives, and experience” (Gunne 121). Within the scholarship that foregrounds gender and women’s voices, scholars gain more insight into how space, as produced by the forces of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, can be “conducive” to violence (Gunne 109).

21 The list of research studies that have engaged with the trope of walking in post-apartheid South African literature is extensive. These studies include, but are not limited to, Barnard (2007), Graham (2009), Nuttall (2004), Jones (2013), Putter (2012), Gunne (2014), Demir (2017), and Manase (2005).
While critical readings of space and South African literature has a long and significant history, there are gaps and silences which leave space for new and enriching work to be done. There is little scholarship for example on space and young black South African authors Kgebetli Moele, Kopano Matlwa, Niq Mhlongo or Zukiswa Wanner, even if Danyela Demir’s interesting work on Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207 is an exception. More significantly, no scholarly work to date explores the relationship between space and popular culture or the ways that popular culture adds to or affects the dynamics of space. There is also still much to be done on gender—both masculinity and femininity—and space. It is my hope that this dissertation will start the process of filling in some of these gaps or at least begin a conversation about them.

**Meditation on Space and Methodology**

It is through close reading that the texts’ preoccupation with race, gender, space and place become clear. I define place as spaces which are lived, and which take on particular identities at various times and through various occupants. Space is defined as a fluid, dynamic and complex entity that is produced by social relations of individuals and larger networks (Lefebvre 33). These definitions help in thinking through how the locations that play a central role in the novels’ setting are characterized by the atmosphere by way of dialogue, character movement and, on a broader scale, by South African history and politics. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre’s work proved useful in developing the foundation for my thinking about space.

For Lefebvre space must be further conceptualized as a social product, embodying the above-mentioned social relations (27). He argues, as does feminist geographer Doreen Massey, that it is neither static, transparent or opaque but

---

22 Here I am drawing on both Henri Lefebvre, which I explain in more detail below, and Doreen Massey, who defines places as a particular moment in the set of social relations that define and characterize space (5) Her central point in that place is no more fixed in time or bounded than space is.
complex and dynamic, produced “by the actions of subjects both individual and collective” (Lefebvre 33). Place, conventionally, invites a fairly fixed definition; it is a word which invokes images of stable, unchanging locations—identifiable on a map or through familiar landmarks and so on. Because Lefebvre does not actually use the term “place” in his work, it is more challenging to access his conceptualization of space. However, there seems to be some agreement amongst scholars that his notion of “concrete space” is in fact place. Nonetheless, I would caution against misunderstanding the word “concrete” as it does not seem to indicate fixedness or a lack of dynamism. For Lefebvre, concrete indicates that the space is subjective: it is “a space of subjects rather than of calculation … it has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardships, its achievements and its lacks (362). Therefore, if we accept this premise, then place can be defined as a “concrete space”; it is the user’s space and as such it is “lived” (Lefebvre 362).

Social space, according to the French sociologist, subsumes three categories: “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “representational spaces.” His “conceptual triad” clarifies some of the complex mechanisms of spatial power as they manifest themselves from the earlier social relations that produce space. The triad is essential to Lefebvre’s theory of social space because it avoids the reductive tendencies of the space/place binary, and consequently, “oppositions, contrasts or antagonisms” (Lefebvre 39). Rather the three elements exist in a dialectical relationship (Lefebvre 39). Elaborating on the terms Lefebvre uses may offer some clarity.

According to Lefebvre, spatial practice refers to space as it is perceived. It is the negotiation of a subject’s daily reality with the urban reality. It implies, to put it simply, the small spatial decisions one makes based on one’s daily work, reproduction, leisure and the realities of the physical space. These are also determined and shaped by society’s modes of production (Lefebvre 33). Lefebvre further sees

---

23 See John Agnew (2011) and Andrew Merrifield (1993), for example, agree that Lefebvre’s notion of concrete space is actually his way of conceptualizing place.
representations of space as conceptualized space. It is the product of knowledge—French savoir which semantically conjoins understanding and ideology. It is the space of “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” (Lefebvre 38). Representational spaces are lived spaces. They refer to the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ as well as artists and writers. This is what Lefebvre calls the “dominated space” or, perhaps more appropriately, the “passively-experienced space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (Lefebvre 39).

Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space is significant for literary studies because it enables a multilayered analysis of textual content. In as much as the reader looks for ways that character placement and dialogue may characterize the spaces in the texts, it is equally important to think about the symbolic meaning of various objects and structures that are portrayed in the novels. These collaboratively create the imagined spaces in the novels. If we adopt Lefebvre’s premise, the spaces in the four novels must also indicate how space contributes to the fashioning of various boundaries, products and human power dynamics. However, in Lefebvre’s work there is a lack of feminist and gender perspective to provide a more comprehensive analysis. His acknowledgment of the patriarchal hegemony inherent in representations of space does not sufficiently explore the ways in which space is gendered. It is true that his discussion of the dominant presence of the phallic, masculine brutality and the ways in which abstract space deny the sensual and sexual illustrate his awareness and criticism of the gendered nature and patriarchal domination of space. Yet it does not offer the in-depth analysis that the South African socio-political, historical and literary context calls for. Because of this gap I found Doreen Massey’s work useful, which builds upon Lefebvre’s conceptualizations.

Continuing with the Marxian concept of space as a product of social relations, she outlines how the discourse of both identity politics and spatial theory shares similar constructions, illustrating structural, academic and individual attempts at patriarchal control. This is critical to the dissertation as it is a prominent theme for all
of the primary texts. Moreover, while Lefebvre also shows some awareness of corporeality, he does not cogitate the reality of bodies in space or the connection between corporeality and its awareness and occupation of space and the implications of these in terms of crafting our subjectivity (Grosz 92). I’d like to briefly mention the work of Elizabeth Grosz as an example of what I mean here. If we consider Irigaray’s claims which inspire both Grosz and Massey in their discussions of space, we must think of bodies as sexed. Further, if we agree that “it is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space, and also as an object for others in space, that gives the subject a coherent identity and an ability to manipulate things, including its own body parts in space” then an exploration of “sexed corporealities” would indeed concretize the notion that space is gendered (Grosz 84). At the heart of the four primary texts’ uncertainty surrounding post-apartheid South African subjectivities, is the gendered nature of the various spaces that these characters move and live in.

Equally important, Lefebvre’s elucidation of how social relations are embodied within social space reminds us of his heavy reliance on Marxian readings of history and politics; which while problematized, Marxism still presupposes an economic basis for the analysis of issues of domination, oppression, and exploitation. I find this problematic with regard to the South African context where race and gender play such an important role in any effort to comprehend the specificities of the South African circumstances and/or literary tradition. Lefebvre does exhibit some awareness of the post-colonial perspective and of black feminist concepts such as intersectionality with regard to space. However, in terms of colonial and apartheid rule and, the heinousness of racial and gender oppression that the Black population of South Africa was subjected to, spatial dominance was achieved in very particular ways.24

24 These included forced displacement of black citizens into townships with the Group Areas Act of? 1950, the creation of homelands with the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 and the segregation laws such as the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953, among others.
Therefore, although Lefebvre’s theorization of the production of space serves as the foundation for my own thinking with regard to the understanding of space, its lack of critical awareness with regard to gender and racial issues means that its usefulness cannot extend beyond a basic foundation. Oppositional black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick’s work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) is most productive in terms of getting at the intersections of space, race, gender, and the various kinds of geographies that constitute our movements in, through, and around space. I discuss McKittrick’s work in detail in Chapter One as it helps to clarify my own thinking with regard to how our ways of reading and understanding space change dramatically when adding a black feminist oppositional lens. McKittrick’s work magnifies my own vocabulary, allowing me to articulate more clearly what I have been sensing in the four novels.

Methodologically, I use close textual analysis in this project, supplemented with an interdisciplinary mix of oppositional geography, black feminist theory and criticism, and postcolonial theories of popular culture as critical tools of analysis and discussion. I often find close reading a useful means of allowing the text to speak and reveal its tensions, contradictions and ambivalences rather than attempting to fit the text into either a preconceived or a fixed analytical category. Moreover, the bricolage that constitutes much of these novels means that there are several genres woven together in one text, making one analytical methodology both difficult and potentially open to gaps and erasure in my analysis. Nevertheless, close reading as a method of analysis means that recurring tropes or motifs may have been more difficult to apprehend, a challenge that may have been more productively met through narratology or Roland Barthes’s semiology. Ultimately, I found close reading the most effective means of unpacking some of the most important insights and significant moments in the texts. Through these methods, I divided my dissertation into four chapters that center around various themes and issues that arose in the course of my research. I foreground these in my chapter titles rather than the texts so that the issues carry the discussion rather than the novels themselves. Each chapter is divided in two three sections which vary, somewhat in length. These variations are
due to slight differences in time and space that are given to various themes such as gender, race, class and the issues that are raised surrounding those. In some ways these variations in section length reflect some of the inequities with which the texts engage.

In Chapter One, “Critical Readings of Post-Apartheid Spaces: Geographies of Disillusionment, Mobility and Blackness,” I argue that disillusionment is expressed in the sardonic tones of betrayal and perpetual containment within structures that have remained and continue to be embedded in the urban space from the apartheid era. Focusing on three of the four authors, I argue that they reveal the paradox of the post-apartheid condition, questioning whether the notion of freedom is an elusive falsehood that can only be glimpsed through alternative forms of mobility such as deviance or creative art forms. Lastly, this chapter points to the ways in which alternative forms of mobility are often achieved at the expense of black women’s bodies, highlighting how the hidden geographies of black women force us to rethink our sense of these spaces.

In Chapter Two, “Creative Interrogations of Gender & Space in Post-Apartheid Fiction,” I use the home or the domestic space as a case study in my interrogation of how the rise of black patriarchy engenders, or inhibits, South African needs for a sense of the nation, of home and intimacy. I further question how this contributes to various constricting forces which repress the formation of alternative masculine and feminine subjectivities and discuss how these questions are incredibly complex because of the various nuances which have an influence on gender identity formation. Lastly, I aim to foreground the novels’ imaginings of what a black feminist space might look and sound like, and how black feminist authors offer theorizations for an imagined progressive future of gender equality.

In Chapter Three, “Popular Culture in South African Literature,” I argue that there is an underlying ambivalence and uncertainty in the novels, deployment of popular culture and aestheticization of the everyday and the quotidian. I demonstrate how that is mitigated by the contributions popular culture makes to creating space for
historically marginalized identities both through its literal presence in space and through the authors’ politically oppositional aesthetics through language and music.

Finally, in Chapter Four, “‘Stronger Together?’: Navigating Feminism and Popular Culture in Coconut and The Madams,” I place the two novels in conversation with one another in order to interrogate how the popular and radical black feminist politics might work together. In this conversation, I consider the dialectic of popular culture and the tensions that it presents as a site of both complicity and struggle in relation to the hierarchy of white supremacist society. Further, I think through the way that popular culture allows us to learn from and celebrate everyday forms of feminism and the real difference they make in the spaces and the lives of women and girls.

It is my hope that this study will contribute both to the myriad of academic conversations that continue to take place surrounding gender, space, literature and liberation in South Africa. However, I also hope that, if not direct, it might have some indirect political impact on the global fight against anti-blackness, misogyny, misogynoir and the oppression of black and brown people globally.

*Amandla!*
*Uhuru!*
*Black Power!*
*Smash the Patriarchy!*
*Wathinta Abafazi Wathinta Imbokodo*
*Peace.*
1. Critical readings of Post-Apartheid Spaces: Geographies of Disillusionment, Mobility, and Blackness

Thematic and aesthetic engagements with space, place, mobility, urbanity, the pastoral, and various geographies of race, gender and class have a long history in South African literature. Several book-long studies (Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall 1996; Viljoen and Van der Merwe 2004; Barnard 2007; Graham 2009) offer various critical insights into the ways that South African literature has long been preoccupied with space. Indeed, the geographies of invasion and capture, dominance, containment and enslavement, as well as of resistance, struggle and freedom have been some of the foundational tenets of the nation.

Together these specific texts build an important critical foundation for this study. Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall and Viljoen and Van der Merwe’s work makes important observations about the colonial imaginary and space in South Africa and provide important insight into the pathologies of whiteness in South Africa along with historical nuance. Barnard’s work is also important in its critical focus on both central and marginal representations of space and in foregrounding the prominent role space and place had in the solidification of apartheid rule. Furthermore, Graham’s

---

25 I use “geographies” here and throughout the dissertation in line with Katherine McKittrick, who refers to geography as “space, space and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations” (x). McKittrick delineates the various kinds of geographies that she engages with in her work, including but not exclusive to creative, conceptual and material geographies. She further notes that “geography…materially and discursively extends to cover three-dimensional spaces and places, the physical landscape and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practice of mapping, exploring, and seeing, and social relations in and across space” (xiii).

study of spatial representations as they are connected to the space produced by the
demise of the apartheid regime and the subsequent establishment of the Truth and
Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provides a springboard for my own interest in the
period directly following the close of the twentieth century. The texts highlighted in
these works traverse a large range of language, cultural, and racial groups in South
Africa and together illustrate the ways these various geographies manifest themselves
in material ways but also metaphorically, psychologically, culturally etc.

In addition, despite limited educational and publishing opportunities for black
South African men and women during the colonial and apartheid years, black
engagements with space and spatiality also boast a long history.\(^\text{27}\) Barbara Boswell’s
recent study of space in Miriam Tlali’s 1975 autobiographical novel *Muriel at
Metropolitan* and Lauretta Ngcobo’s 1990 novel *And They Didn’t Die* is an example
of the work currently being done to illuminate that history. Boswell makes important
observations about that history and emphasizes the fact that black (women) authors
have long been using their creative work to indicate a racialized and gendered
national space in South Africa. I make this point to acknowledge that neither twenty-
first century nor earlier post-apartheid engagements with space are new. Rather, the
primary texts in this study build upon a rich legacy of black South African authors
who saw potential for sharper insights and deeper understandings of the condition of
the subaltern by looking through a geographical lens.

Among the three primary texts engaged in this chapter, there are several
important commonalities with regard to space and spatiality. The first and most
important is setting. The authors’ decisions to set the novels in South Africa and in
major cities such as Johannesburg and Tshwane (formerly Pretoria) are important
factors in each novel’s developing themes. These are, at the heart of it, urban novels
and the themes raised, the characters created, and the navigation of the various

\(^{27}\)In the context of this research the term “black” is used in alignment with the Black Consciousness
philosophies of Steve Biko, as outlined in *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*, which includes all
people of color who suffered from oppression at the hands of the apartheid regime (52).
challenges they face are all contingent upon an urban setting. Thus, their placement in the city is deliberate and crucial.

In addition, the specific locations upon which the novels focus are sites for interrogation of South Africa’s current dispensation and the state of a nation arguably still in transition. Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* (2007) and Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207* (2006), for example, engage the national rhetoric of reconciliation along with the rainbow nation and the “new South Africa” through the spatial dynamics of the street and the coffee shop. *Room 207, Coconut* and Niq Mhlongo’s *After Tears* (2007) focus on various kinds of spaces, indicating an important connection between race, gender and power, and how we understand space and how it is produced. For example, the coffee shop in *Coconut*, the street in *Room 207* and the taxi in *After Tears* are spaces not only of racial division and exclusion; they also hint at the memories of apartheid-era containment of black citizens and black bodies, which are embedded in those spaces and others. In his taxi scenes, Mhlongo places emphasis on how a cramped space such as a public taxi is emphasized through a hyper awareness of corporeality—smells and uncomfortable proximity to other bodies. This serves as a reminder of the centrality of bodies and their topographies to an understanding of space.

Foregrounding the three novels, this chapter argues that through various experimentations with irony the authors establish a sense of the paradox of liberation in South Africa. Irony is a common narrative strategy in all three texts, deployed to expose how the material, systemic and discursive structures that created various geographies of containment and oppression during the colonial and apartheid years in South Africa continue to be embedded in South African spaces. Moreover, the novels engage and attempt to explore the ontological paradox of being at once free and contained by revealing the invisible or imperceptible black geographies of navigation and alternative forms of mobility. The city of Johannesburg is a central locale, in the context of this chapter, as illustrative of the links between these oppressive geographies and the dynamics of race, gender and power within the city space.
Therefore, I argue that the tensions found within the novels inherently resist an unambiguous critique. These texts are in fact imbued with ambiguity, expressing an uncertainty with regard to what freedom means in a post-apartheid nation.

Theoretical underpinnings regarding space and place

At the center of my conceptualization of space is the premise that space is, among other things, both racialized and gendered. Studies of historical institutions and systems of oppression, like the transatlantic slave trade or the system of apartheid in South Africa for example, provide insight into, what Katherine McKittrick calls, the field of “traditional geography”. Traditional geography is based upon various geographies of racial and gender domination and oppression (McKittrick xiii). Such geographies are therefore grounded in “formulations that assume we can view, assess, and ethically organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, classed) vantage point” (xiii). This means that not only do racial and gender oppressions manifest themselves in materialist spatial terms, such as urban planning, plantation lay out, South African township placement and the like, but that dominant geographies and existing cartographies discursively naturalize hierarchy among human populations and throughout various locations. Within the discourse of geography, in other words, the inequities created by various geographies of

---

28 As discussed in the introduction to this study, the theoretical foundation for my thoughts with regard to space and place rests with Henri Lefebvre’s work on the production of space. However, for the kind of analysis required by the primary texts, I find McKittrick’s feminist geographical work more useful because of her insight into the intersections of race, gender and class when thinking about space.

29 South African scholar and activist Mamphela Ramphele documents the ways in which South African hostels and townships were geographically situated in order to limit Black mobility and maintain white supremacy in South Africa in her 1993 book length study, *A Bed Called Home: Life in the Migrant Labour Hostels of Cape Town*. Ramphele speaks to the location of migrant labour hostels in relation to the center of Cape Town as well as to the size of the hostels vs. the number of hostel dwellers and the spatial designations that limited resident uses of space. American historian Stephanie Camp illustrates in her 2004 study, *Closer to FREEDOM: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, the deliberate geographical planning that enabled the control and domination of black enslaved people during the ante-bellum slave period in the United States. Her work documents the significance of the placing of slave quarters, the design and architecture of the plantation, and the distribution of people in space in order to maintain that control (4).
dominance and containment are reified as part of the natural order of things. Human categories of identification such as gender, race and sexuality are consequently constructed and naturalized. As such, traditional geography discursively fixes these categories in both time and place. South Africa has a long, violent and documented history of colonial and imperial domination of space, including colonial invasion, land theft and the legislation of the socio-spatial conditions of black residents of the colonies that would later make up The Republic of South Africa. However, contemporary studies like those of Tembeka Ngucukaitobi and Gabeba Baderoon offer fresh insights into the impetus behind colonial era’s spatial codes and how they kept black bodies contained and controlled in both material and discursive ways. These early methods of control laid the groundwork for more insidious legislation during the apartheid period. In the apartheid era, for example, migrant hostel dwellers were “defin[ed]…as ‘migrant workers’” which had a direct effect on

---

30 “Geographies of domination” is understood as “displacement of difference” wherein “particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that form the category of ‘human being’” (Gilmore quoted in McKittrick xv). The term “geography of containment” was coined by Houston Baker in a verbal response to Michael Hanchard’s “Temporality, Transnationalism, and Afro-Modernity” a paper given at the “Reshaping Afro-American Studies” seminar at the Center for Study of Black Literature and Culture, University of Pennsylvania, 27 March 1997. (Camp 145)

31 I am thinking specifically of laws like the Squatters Act of 1895 that regulated black residence on white ‘owned’ land and the Natives Land Act of 1913 that prohibited black land ownership. These ensured that black disenfranchisement and disempowerment was entrenched in the legal system and that black landownership remained reduced to no more than 7% of the whole of South Africa’s land. Sol Plaatje’s ‘Native Life in South Africa (1916)’ is an important work by one of South Africa’s early black intellectuals that responds to and thinks critically about the Natives Land Act of 1913. It is a seminal text in being one of the first full length studies that engages black oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

32 Ngucubaitobi’s research on the first black lawyers in South Africa also conducts important work documenting how the majority of black occupied land in South Africa was lost and how systematic colonial era methods of black spatial control and containment were implemented. For example, these included how after defeating them in the 1853 war of Mlanjeni, the British military marched members of the Xhosa society in and out of their place of employment like prisoners in order to ensure that they would only occupy the colonial centers as workforce rather than residents or citizens.

33 Baderoon argues that the codes of sexual stereotypes and sexual violence which plague post-apartheid South Africa are rooted in colonial era sexualization of black women, muslim women slaves and the assumption of sexual ownership of their bodies (85-86). Justifications for this violence were rooted in a general belief in an innate proclivity toward sexual deviance in both men and women. The discourse argued that men had no control over their base desires and would rape any white woman at the opportunity and that woman were abandoned, overly sexual and therefore likened to prostitutes as available bodies for sexual satisfaction or reproductive use.
their ability to establish themselves as actual residents in the cities where they worked (Ramphele 3). Forced separation from their families, based on that definition, also had disastrous effects on domestic life and contributed to feelings of alienation and isolation in an already oppressive space (Ramphele 3). The example offered here from Mamphela Ramphele’s study of the migrant labor hostels in Cape Town also indicates the process of concealment enacted through these various oppressive geographies. Indeed, the lived spatial realities of, and alternative geographies acted out by, black men and women in South Africa were and continue to be invisible to large sections of the white population. This enables spatially marked stereotypes to remain fixed based on lack of encounter with the well-known “other” of Edward Said’s post-colonial scholarship and renders the subaltern “ungeographic”.34 Said, in fact, made this point almost forty years ago when delineating the almost fictional quality of early historical texts on the Middle East in his use of the term “imaginative geography,” which draws impenetrable boundaries between “us” and “them” within the discursive realms of white supremacist ideology (55).

Drawing on McKittrick’s concept of the “speakability” (ix) of space and place, and Doreen Massey’s argument that conceptualizations of place are dependent on the “notion of articulation” (8), I envision space as inextricably connected to creative processes involving language and literature. I use “speakability” here to mean the ways that “the material world is infused with sensations,” knowledge(s), ways of being, fluid boundaries and changing identities all of which suggests that space is “speakable” (McKittrick ix). In addition, following the examples provided by Carol Boyce Davies (1994), McKittrick, Mary Pat Brady (2004), Barbara Boswell (2016) and other feminists who saw the merit in literary analysis through a spatial lens, my work will look to black men and women’s alternative and oppositional geographies as

34 McKittrick uses this concept to indicate the ways in which black women and men are stereotyped and demonized thus reduced to objects without geography or mobility and the spaces that they move within, across and around invisible (xix).
articulated and staged in the four novels under study. For generations black men and women writers have been using their creative prowess as a means to articulate their lived spatial realities and the oppositional geographies created in order to form their own subjectivities, but also to theorize alternative ways of conceptualizing space. Through that articulation and by illustrating the speakability of space, their work renders visible what white supremacist spatial systems work to conceal. What both concepts indicate is the way that “literature thrives on the intersections between the shaping powers of language and the productive powers of space” (Brady 8).

**Geographies of Disillusionment**

Hillbrow, Johannesburg. Once considered the “Manhattan of Africa,” Hillbrow is known now for overcrowding, poverty, and crime. This monolithic characterization contains a great deal of truth, but also renders it difficult to apprehend the complexities and specificities that encompass the area. A study in contradiction, Hillbrow boasts a distinctly Pan-African aura, “as Africans from all over the continent arrive in large numbers, with pulsing music, popular in places like Lagos and Kinshasa emanating from the bars… nightclubs and apartment buildings” (Murray 163). Migrants from elsewhere on the continent contribute to both the formal and informal economy in Hillbrow and help to create the richly diverse cultural vibe of the neighborhood. Yet, this is a neighborhood where prostitution, drug abuse, poverty, violence and despair converge in what Noko, the narrator-protagonist of *Room 207*, calls “sad black stor[ies]” (Moele 40). Indeed, Hillbrow is where delicate constructions of Johannesburg as a wealthy, vibrant city come crashing down.

---

35 I employ McKittrick’s concepts “black geographies” (xi), black women’s geographies (x) and black feminist geographies as they are useful in the articulation of how black subjects negotiate the materiality of space and place as well as in capturing the wealth of black creative and intellectual output that reveals oppositional spatial perspectives, illustrates alternative ways in which geographies of domination were navigated, and offers alternative theorizations of space and its productions. For McKittrick, black geographies are “subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and site a terrain of struggle” (7); black women’s geographies refer to “their knowledges, negotiations and experiences” (x); and black feminist geographies imply “black women’s political, feminist, imaginary, and creative concerns that re-spatialize the geographic legacy of racism-sexism” (53).
Hillbrow has an overwhelming presence in Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207. Its symbolic power is that it represents so many of the paradoxes inherent in the geographies of Johannesburg and South Africa as a nation, which makes it an excellent starting point for this chapter.

Hillbrow might be read as a microcosm for much of what various writers seem to both celebrate and lament about Johannesburg. Johannesburg is a “dream city [where] dreams die each and every second, as each and every second dreams are born” (Moele 19). For Noko, Johannesburg is the site of edgy cosmopolitanism: “this is the land where the weak, the poor, the rich and the powerful—powerful enough that they can rob you of your own life—mingle and mend, excuse the cliché” (69). But this cosmopolitanism is filled with the dangers that come with abject poverty and desperation. As such, part of what Moele focuses on is what Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall argue is a necessary characteristic of a metropolis: “an beneath” (363). Johannesburg’s “beneath” finds its history in an exploitive and relentless mining industry that made a major contribution to the inequities and anti-black geographies of domination seen in the city today. The city, according to Murray, “has always traded in glamour and illusion, ephemeral traits that never cease to lure countless numbers of expectant newcomers into its captivating orbit” (144). His analysis highlights the illusory quality of the city or that which would make it easily reducible to nothing more than false glamour. However, part of the allure of Johannesburg is that it “comprises actual people, images and architectural forms, footprints and memories; the city is a place of manifold rhythms, a world of sounds, private freedom, pleasures and sensations” (Mbembe and Nuttall 360). Moele’s creative representations of Johannesburg thus register the cosmopolitan mix of various kinds of extremes in the South African city: danger, safety, wealth, poverty, pleasure, and suffering and a host of in-betweens.

South African cities are also interspersed with upper-middle-class suburbs, which developed partially a result of white-flight (both corporate and residential) after black citizens began to move to the cities in the 1970s when apartheid laws
started to become more difficult to enforce. These areas have historically been marketed as the pristine, isolated residential areas far away from the increasingly diverse city centers. *Coconut* satirizes the kind of advertising rhetoric which situates the suburb as “your rustic escape from the rat race” (Matlwa 74)—that reeks of privilege, wealth and the apartheid-esque illusion of separation from the other.\(^{37}\) Ostensibly very different from the inner city, suburban lifestyle is depicted as one of comfort, safety, affluence, cleanliness, superiority, conspicuous consumption, and class ascension. It is what characters like Fikile, the narrator-protagonist of the second half of *Coconut*, aspire to. Yet the rhetoric of stylish-chic and progressiveness that advertise many South African suburbs belies the sense of displacement expressed in novels like *Coconut*, where Ofilwe (a suburban resident) and her family are subjected to censorship by the other residents for certain indigenous cultural practices. Her affluence does not exempt her from ridicule for her African ‘accent’ or other micro-aggressive criticism of her heritage by her classmates (45,49,74).

Moele and Matlwa deliberately “use…the city and its transformation as one of the key tropes through which to interrogate post-apartheid society” (Bremner qtd. in Putter 60). The authors uphold and augment these interrogations through narrative structures that reveal an unmistakable spatial agenda. *Coconut’s* narrative is literally divided in to two with two narrator-protagonists, who tell their respective life stories. The novel is divided by a blank page in the middle as if to reinforce the separation between the two. However, this division evidences two parallel textual spaces. Joseph Kestner reminds us that parallelism in fiction functions as a means of foregrounding space rather than time whereas, W. J. T. Mitchell, who fundamentally disagrees with Kestner’s view that fiction is essentially a temporal genre, argues that spatiality is inherent in narrative structures especially those that are able to create a sense of

\(^{35}\) “White flight” is a colloquialism used to describe the departure of large numbers of white residents from a particular town or neighborhood. Usually this departure has to do with increased diversity in the area. For more on white flight in South Africa specifically, see http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/will-the-whites-return-to-johannesburg-1329691.html

\(^{37}\) Matlwa is in company here with a small niche of other contemporary writers who set their novels in the suburbs such as Zukiswa Wanner (2006), Kgebetli Moele (2009) and Angela Makholwa (2007), among others.
“simultaneity caught by the eye” (Mitchell 553). For Kemner and Mitchell the parallel structure like the one found in Coconut is central to the spatial construction of the novel. Significantly, parallelism is seen not only in the construction of the physical book but also in the very different but parallel lives that the protagonists lead, which converge in the text’s central location—the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop reinforcing the possibility for a “spatial apprehension of the work” (Mitchell 553).

In addition, the novel has a polyvocal quality, seen in the past and present voices of the protagonists. These voices not only remind us of the epistolary tradition in their off and on constructions as diary entries, but the italics which separate past and present reflections also provide a visual reminder that time and its perceived linearity do not work in this text. This reinforces the spatial agenda of the novel. Space similarly underpins the structure of Room 207. While the text seemingly follows a linear time sequence, the anecdotal quality of the chapters maintains a sense of disorientation and discontinuity as the reader is not privy to when in the storyline certain events take place. Rather, the novel creates a sensation of witnessing various scenes of a play—a structural accomplishment that reflects the narrator-protagonist’s screenwriting talent and ambition. Moele’s use of a visual “hocus-pocus” (83) reinforces the notion that rather than time, there is a shift in the space of the narrative similar to a scene change. Additionally, Moele adopts a second person form of address which serves the complex function of both pulling the reader into and pushes her out of the text. Because the addressee is decidedly a black male, some readers will be more aware of that push and pull than others. Very often this form of address is employed in passages that foreground a spatial perspective such as the mapping of the room 207, the mapping of Hillbrow and the representation of the university space.

The novels’ interrogation of South African urban spaces is foregrounded as their central preoccupation. As such, they also skillfully engage the now over-used rhetoric of newness, forgiveness and moving forward that colored the immediate period following the transition to democracy in 1994. The language of change and progression, deployed by the state and mainstream media both locally and
internationally, become fodder for mockery for Moele. He frequently adopts catch phrases such as the “rainbow nation” that became popular during this period, with an ironic twist, belying his contempt for lofty words that lack substance. Both texts, then, dismantle false narratives of transition, reconciliation, and forgiveness in order to set up broader contexts for the spaces in these texts. Thus, the spaces are depicted with multiple layers characterized by both broader national issues as well as local and social dynamics.

Room 207 is a story about Noko and his five friends—D’Nice, Sbusiso (Zuluboy), Malomo, Matome and Modishi—all struggling to “make it” in the ‘new’ South Africa. Noko, for example, struggles with the rhetoric of transformation that he too has ingested and the realities that he and his friends face. According to him, Johannesburg is where history, memory, and the past do not count, only the present and the future: “Johannesburg. It’s a city founded by some people. Who cares that they founded it here? The British had their time here and it passed. The Afrikaners had their time; they enjoyed it, and then it too passed by. Now Johannesburg is under the control of the black man, his time is here and, by the looks of things, his time will never pass” (69). Noko attempts here to de-legitimize, indeed to express contempt for South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past by asserting that the black man in general, or black patriarchal system, holds power in Johannesburg. Moele nonetheless contradicts the celebratory and quietly triumphant tone of this statement with the biting irony Noko and the other central characters use in their expression of disappointment with “this stormy rainbow nation” (143). The “rainbow nation” has become a convenient catch phrase after Desmond Tutu’s use of the rainbow metaphor to describe South Africa’s transition from violent racial separation to a nation that celebrates and embraces its diversity (Gqola 2016). With the qualifier “stormy”, Moele alludes to the darkness, precariousness and violence that more accurately reflect the dynamics of race, nationality and ethnicity in South Africa. It is a sardonic comment on the over-used metaphor of peace and togetherness, revealing the fragility of the image that South Africa tries to present to the world.
While Moele’s use of linguistic irony in Room 207 interrogates the rhetoric of the new South Africa, Matlwa’s Coconut tears down illusions of cosmopolitanism, diversity and progressivism which frame “New South African” images of modern, chic, semi-public, social spaces such as restaurants, coffee shops and cafés. Through Coconut’s fictional representation of Silver Spoon, Matlwa illustrates the ways in which South Africa’s suburbs carry their own history and geographies of power and oppression.

Coconut’s first half is narrated by Ofilwe Tlou, a young middle-class black woman, who lives in an upwardly mobile suburb called Little Valley in Tshwane and attends one of the newly racially integrated schools in her neighborhood. Fikile Twala (Fiks), narrating the second half, is also a young black woman of a similar age but Fikile occupies a different social class. She lives in Mphe Batho Township and desperately wants to escape a traumatic past of poverty, abuse, and neglect. Both women nonetheless struggle in some way to independently form their own subjectivities while battling objectifications that construct them in the eyes of others as “coconut,” the pejorative term for someone who is phenotypically black but adopts a white identity.

Silver Spoon reflects the complexities, contradictions and conflicts that have arisen and continue to arise after the transition from the apartheid government to the 1994 African National Congress (ANC) led regime. Set in a well-to-do suburb in what we assume to be Tshwane (formerly Pretoria), it is owned and run by a stereotypical racist white character that Matlwa has aptly named, “Miss Becky”, a name that has been used in popular culture to indicate the complex mix of privilege, racism, and condescension that makes up some white female identities. This character, as it happens, possesses all the qualities of a covertly racist upper-middle-class white woman. She tries to hide her discomfort with the presence of black middle-class patrons in her shop and privately speaks with condescension and superiority to her own black staff members, using insincere terms of endearment and sarcasm to make her points concerning her expectations from the staff.
Simultaneously, Fikile’s coworker Ayanda is the foil to Miss Becky’s attitude with his barely suppressed anger at the continued inequities, hierarchies and racism, which exist in the new South Africa and are daily played out in the coffee shop. His outburst toward a rude customer is heavily satirical in its over-exaggerated reaction to her comment that “if it wasn’t for us you wouldn’t be able to read” (150), with “fuck you ma’am fuck you!” (151). He goes on to generally indict South Africa’s white citizens, “they feel no guilt, nothing! Did anybody hear that? ’If it wasn’t for us you wouldn’t be able to read.’ Fuck her and her literacy: we’d be fucking better off without it, that’s for damn sure. Fucking create our own means if they’d given us half the chance” (151). Ayanda’s furious reaction is incongruous with the rest of the scene. As an employee of the coffee shop where he works, he would have never been allowed to speak to a customer in such a manner and maintain his job. Ayanda’s reaction is hyperbole in action: yelling, repetition of the various versions of the word “fuck” and calling for the attention of the other patrons and employees. In this way, Matlwa uses satire in order to point to a gross lack of communication across racial lines. Perhaps Matlwa suggests here that only in a completely fictionalized reality can these thoughts and frustrations be expressed. Symbolically, Ayanda serves as a voice of black discontent, indicting the general white population in South Africa, and criticizing a perceived lack of remorse and/or reparations offered as atonement for the atrocities committed by the apartheid regime. The comment to which he responded also illustrates condescending attitudes which see colonialism as beneficial to African populations by serving as ‘a civilizing force’, regardless of any wrongs committed in the process. Moreover, Matlwa’s use of satire reinforces the symbolic value of the coffee shop as a microcosm for the social and political issues faced by South Africa’s citizens.

In this way, Matlwa and Moele situate their specific thematization of the city space within a broader national context that contains undercurrents of dissatisfaction and a problematic reconciliation process. Moreover, because of the ANC’s failure to “radically transform the social relations of inequality and exploitation that form the basis of the country’s racial capitalism” (Peterson 216) the cynicism and rage
represented by these characters’ voices are rooted in the realities of continued injustice and marginalization. By offering this insight, Moele and Matlwa also suggest that one cannot understand the urban space and the things that transpire within it in a vacuum. Rather, national and international forces contribute to the production of those spaces.

With this broader context in mind it is logical, that post-apartheid cities like Johannesburg and Tshwane are layered with apartheid structures and colonial and apartheid history. Creative critiques of these cities highlight those layers as “palimpsests” (Putter 63), layers of history and structures which have a profound effect on black navigation and movement within and around those spaces. What is important about understanding these layers of history and embedded apartheid structures is the tensions that inevitably arise between the rhetoric of liberation and social equality and the perpetuation of various structures of violent racial inequality and virtual enslavement.

*Room 207* does not, at first glance, seem to be interested in directly engaging South Africa’s apartheid past. Moele’s critique, described in the novel as “black betrayal” (145), speaks to the ways in which the novel seems to situate the failures of the nation and the six characters’ destitution as a black problem, subsuming the mitigating factors of institutional racism, white privilege and embedded apartheid structures. However, I read the text similarly to Maria Milazzo who argues that Noko’s tone, with regard to the “deliberate silencing” of the word apartheid and its significance in these characters’ presence, is intentionally “sardonic” and
directs the readers’ attention towards locating the discursive presence of apartheid in the gaps that inform the narrative. Its omission can be interpreted both as a desire to symbolically obliterate, or rather exorcize, the legacies of

---

38 Anne Putter argues convincingly that *Room 207* specifically represents Johannesburg as a palimpsest. She is interested in the ways in which Moele records the layers of history and memory, as well as cultures and nationalities which characterize the city, thus creating an incredibly textured image of the city-scape (63).
apartheid from the post-1994 diegetic space and as an attempt to re-inscribe its presence. (41)

In addition to Milazzo’s observation, there is another layer of complexity here. By alluding to a notion of black betrayal—“he was the first president and he led this nation into a world of lies” (Moele 144)—and simultaneously re-inscribing the presence of apartheid, the novelist throws into sharp relief the paradox of a liberation that hinges upon the maintenance of pre-1994 structures of oppression. These tensions link to similar frictions with regard to reconciliation, nation building, and “the range of repressions that unity and forgiveness seem to be contingent on and how they, in effect, amount to new strategies of containment and the reproduction of abuse, poverty, injustice and alienation” (Peterson 214). Thus, the question of how to resist the ability of apartheid discourse, structures and history to overwhelm the diegetic space while simultaneously resisting the “culture of forgetfulness” which would erase it altogether becomes an important one for contemporary post-apartheid fiction. Indeed, these authors must figure out how to represent that paradox. Moele offers us one possibility. The novel opens with a telling description of the room where the six friends stay:

It used to be a hotel, back in the days of…you know, those days which the rulers of this land don’t want you to forget. Corner of Van der Merwe and Claim, there used to be a hotel. Once. Then. And it’s a residential. I stay there in room 207. We stay there, although we don’t really say we stay there: it’s been a temporary setting, since and until…I can’t tell. What I do know is that we have spent eleven years not really staying there. (13)

The first sentence of the paragraph indicates the ghost like presence that apartheid history and memory will have in the novel. The vague “you know” and the ellipses suggest that the legacy of apartheid and its impact are the unspoken reality for the residents of room 207. Moreover, it illustrates how black citizens in South Africa experience the continued presence of apartheid structures. The presence of historical buildings and unchanged street names all bring about the memory of the roles these
buildings used to play in the segregationist policies of the past and the ways in which those discourses and structures remain as a means of continued spatial domination.

The embedment of apartheid structures and discourses manifest themselves in ways that have material consequences for black citizens. Noko’s character, for example, tells the reader when exiting the apartment building where he and the other characters live: “pass through this once grand entrance. It used to be the only door here when apartheid was the greatest security guard to all white people, but not anymore. Democracy is here with its security gates, iron bars and security guards” (157). The discerning reader cannot miss the irony of the arrival of democracy coinciding with the arrival of increased security in order to keep out the very same population that apartheid era laws did. The 2005 film Tsotsi interrogates a similar irony in its juxtaposition of post-apartheid rhetoric, the realities of poverty and marginalization in township life, and the excessive security found in the suburbs of Johannesburg. Moele illustrates here that while those laws have been stricken from the constitution, the structures of exclusion and containment have only taken a more material form, under the guise of ‘security’.

Moreover, he alludes to the ways in which class becomes a surrogate for race in post-apartheid discourse. Because of the provisions of nonracialism in the new South African constitution, all forms of racial discrimination at the state and local level were outlawed. Thus, with the practice of institutionalized white supremacy eliminated from South African social structures, social inequalities and struggles are often attributed to class divides (Seekings 1). Discourse around aspiration, upward mobility, and the like now place class at the center of the struggle for “social democracy” (Emery 409). The implications of these developments are multiple. On the one hand, conversations about entrenched structures of systemic racism, sexism and racial and gender marginalization become difficult when those structures are no longer state sanctioned. Moreover, class becomes the euphemism for race and racial stereotypes. Thus, the arrival of increased security, described by Noko’s character, may euphemistically be based on class-based issues such as ‘low-income
neighborhoods’ and ‘crime prevention’ or the “‘the socially undesirable’ (the poor, the homeless, the marginal)” (Peterson “Dignity, Memory and the Future Under Siege” 219). However, the specter of race isn’t far from the surface. Thus, Moele’s use of irony reveals not only an alternative reading of this particular space and how he “walks” through it, but it communicates a tongue-in-cheek skepticism and sense of incredulity with regard to the notion of democracy and non-racialism in the city.

Yet apartheid structures are not just embedded in materialist terms. They also manifest themselves through social relationships and interpersonal dynamics. For example, Ofilwe’s character in Coconut is acutely aware of the feeling that she does not belong at Silver Spoon. Upon entering the coffee shop, she and her family are symbolically placed on the margins of the shop: “she shows us to the only remaining table, thoughtlessly placed threateningly close to the swinging kitchen doors” (Matlwa 19). The symbolism of her family’s placement cannot be lost on the perceptive reader. During the colonial and apartheid periods, black South Africans’ place in any suburban area was relegated to domestic service or unskilled labor. Earlier depictions of South Africa’s suburbs, for example, hold the memories of white suburban areas that simultaneously limited the mobility of black subjects and allowed white access to them at all hours. Pass laws, required for all black South Africans, controlled and monitored access to suburban areas limiting the mobility of black men and women such as “Jim” in Peter Abrahams’ autobiographical work, Tell Freedom, a spin on the “Jim comes to Joburg” caricature of black South African labor migrants found in earlier South African films (178). Inaugurated by the film African Jim (1949), iterations of this character can be found in Blanket Boy’s Moon (1953) and Cry the Beloved Country (1948) among others. Abrahams writes back at the caricature of the black migrants who entered in to South African cities ill equipped to handle the complexities and dangers of city life with a more nuanced account of someone who confronts the dehumanizing effects of apartheid on a daily basis. However, similar depictions of early apartheid era suburbs can also be found in texts like Tell Freedom and the mentioned films, testifying to the ways in which the
symbolism found in *Coconut* alludes to a particular aspect of South African suburban history.

Further, Sindiwe Magona’s autobiographical account of being woken by her employer in the middle of the night in order to re-clean an already spotless sink in *To My Children’s Children* speaks to the perilousness of white homes for black women. In these spaces white employers offered their black domestic workers no privacy or private space during the times that they were in the house (116). By entering the coffee shop as patrons rather than employees, the Tlous have apparently ‘forgotten’ and thus must be ‘reminded’ of their true place in the upmarket establishment. The threat of actual physical harm through the swinging kitchen doors only emphasizes the historical violence that accompanied these kinds of geographies.

Fikile narrates a similarly evocative scene in the second half of the novel. Despite her belief that she has achieved a certain status in the coffee shop, Fikile is also quickly and jarringly reminded of her place in *Silver Spoon*. Arriving at the coffee shop for work, she is confronted with the chaos caused by a local strike and Miss Becky’s angry and bossy daughter, Caroline. Fikile is horrified when, despite her “status” as a waitress, she is expected to “degrade herself” by working in the kitchen alongside the kitchen staff. It does not matter that Miss Becky comes in later and rectifies her daughter’s mistake. The message is already sent:

‘Do you people think we are just teasing?’ She looks around at all of us, daring us to respond. ‘There is no bread people! ... Because you people think it is OK to go on strikes whenever it tickles your fancy, there is no bread today in any store...’ ‘And you sweetie,’ this she directs at me, ‘I don’t want to see you standing around the shop looking like an imbecile, as if you do not know you have work to do. Get on an apron and...’ she waits for me to complete the sentence for her. ‘Bake bread,’ I say, humiliated ... I am mortified. (Matlwa 145)
Caroline’s anger and panic emphasize the ways in which the public-sector strikes threaten the illusion of the separateness and comfort of the suburbs. More importantly, however, her “misreading” of Fikile’s job title in the coffee shop and the condescending and chastising tone that she adopts reinforces the embedded memory of the apartheid regime which relegated any black woman’s presence in the suburbs to domestic servitude. If we read Caroline as representative of a white power structure, then Matlwa’s point is clear. She highlights the way those structures retain their place in the suburban geographies of the “new South Africa.” In this way, the novel insists on an alternative reading of post-1994 suburbs than the one offered by dominant images and discourses in the media, which imply that those embedded hierarchies and oppressive structures have been relegated to the past.39

We have established that represented within these fictional post-apartheid spaces are continued geographies of domination, which elicit varying degrees of disappointment, anger and disillusionment in the novels’ characters. Indeed, Matlwa and Moele creatively express some of the complex themes of disappointment and betrayal at the discovery of the perpetuation of these kinds of geographies in South African spaces. In addition, McKittrick argues that what is critical to understanding these geographies is how they are “underscored by the social production of space. Concealment, marginalization, boundaries are important social processes” (Demonic Grounds xi). What is significant about her argument is her refusal to accept these processes as given. Rather, the processes may ensue but are often unrealized because of oppositional black negotiations of these spaces. I would like to propose that these texts disrupt the process of concealment by shedding light on how black subjects experience the marginalizing and containing forces found in these dominant geographies. Additionally, the texts highlight various alternative navigations of those

39 Loren Kruger (2006) and Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004), among others, consistently describe the structural and geographic constructions of space which perpetuate and reproduce the social and economic inequalities and methods of containment created during the colonial and apartheid periods.
geographies and perhaps suggest ways to theorize what black geographies are in post-apartheid South Africa.

Moele uses the university space as an example of how black geographies are concealed and black subjects marginalized in South Africa. In some instances, the university is an important space of knowledge and creativity. Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is the novel most intertextually associated with *Room 207* because of the Hillbrow setting. In that novel, the university is directly connected to the protagonist’s intellectual and creative freedom. But in *Room 207* a different kind of insight is offered. The university is at the center of each of the main characters’ “sad black stories” (40). It features in the novel as a complex space of hope and opportunity for South Africa’s young black students who previously had no or extremely limited access to higher education. It is a central part of Johannesburg, “as everybody comes to dream city, hoping and dreaming” (34). Each of the characters is, indeed, drawn to Johannesburg for the same reason. “[They] came to the city to continue with [their] education” (Moele 34). However, as each character’s story is told, the University shifts from a space of hope to one of failure and frustration. Noko describes the typical journey for many young black students:

have you ever been to university? With two pairs of black shoes (the good pair and the other pair, in which your feet act as the sole—thank God your toes are still intact), two T-shirts, two round-neck skippers, one V-neck, one vest, two pairs of underwear (that should be written off), four pairs of jeans and four pairs of smart trousers. Not to forget about the pair of washed-every evening socks. You have absolutely no pocket money at all, and then there is the institution itself, which keeps reminding you that you need to pay your fees or you are out. As if you weren’t their student at all but were working. Four months pass with their share of peer pressure and stress. … It gets too deep inside, into the soul, and then you tart to lose a kilogram every two and a quarter days and now your well cared for clothing hangs on you like it was
never yours. … Have you ever been at a tertiary institution of education and witnessed what the black students are going through? (Moele 35)

The narrative voice here leaves one of its strongest impressions in this paragraph. Its slightly confrontational, subtly accusatory tone emphasizes the simultaneous sense of both inclusion and distance that the direct form of address creates. Moele seems to deliberately create a sense of ambiguity in terms of the imagined audience. In the longer paragraph, Noko might be speaking to a reader who can either imagine or relate to the scenario he lays out. By putting the addressee in the situation: “you have absolutely no pocket money”, “and then you start to lose a kilogram every two and a quarter days”, the addressee might be a fellow student able to commiserate in a shared struggle against poverty. However, the last sentence places a critical distance between the reader and the narrator. Suddenly, “you” is one who is complicit in a system that is ignorant of black spatial experiences. That ambiguity and the deliberate disorientation of the reader continues throughout the novel as a way to mirror the sense of disorientation felt by the characters but also as a means to forcing the reader to reflect on their own positionality with regard to the text.

The narrator-protagonist paints a clear picture that too many black students enter the university with little more than hopes and dreams; “if you’re lucky you have a grandparent or two with some pension money” (34). Precarious finances and various levels of familial, societal and academic pressure create a space that is psychologically damaging, “gets too deep, into the soul,”, and is clearly detrimental to a successful university career. Indeed, with the exception of D’Nice, the other five characters are university dropouts. The fact that the protagonist of After Tears, Bafana, is by extension another “sad black story,” having failed his law school exams, indicates how vital the issue of education and the university space is to an understanding of both dominant and subaltern navigations of space. Despite national rhetoric, which celebrates increased opportunities for students of color and encourages these very students to attend, university still continues to be guarded by
colonial-era gatekeepers: its exorbitant fees, English as the continued medium of education—despite South Africa boasting eleven official languages and English rarely featuring as the mother tongue of the majority of the population—and the continued reification of imperial figures and colonial-era discourses.

In this way, the South African University system serves as microcosm of the sense of betrayal felt within many of the various communities in the country.\textsuperscript{40} The “Fees Must Fall” campaign that began in 2015 and has continued into late 2017 evidences the extent to which the discontent, anger and sense of injustice have grown over the years since 1994.\textsuperscript{41} Room 207, although years before the Fees Must Fall movement, indicates how black students were and continue to be marginalized in the university space. Moele’s rhetorical question at the end of the above paragraph—“Have you ever been at the tertiary institution of education and witnessed what black students are going through?”—speaks to the ways that the university and the nation actively engage in the process that relegates black students to the margins and makes their struggles imperceptible. The novels’ protagonists’ forced departure from the university not only enforces a sense of not belonging or trespassing into a space that is not their own, but is also reminiscent of how Black citizens were subjected to countless violent forced removals from their homes and communities during the apartheid era.\textsuperscript{42} Because the university is seen as a complicit structure in the dominant geographies of the country, it is a prime example of situational irony—with its own unique spaces, rules of entry and access, and geographies of power—that belies its intended purpose.

In addition to Room 207, Coconut illustrates the ways that space is also produced through social relations and interactions. Hence, despite the importance of

\textsuperscript{40} See Pillay (2016) and Makoe (2014).


\textsuperscript{42} I am referring here to the well-known forced removal of Black South Africans from Sophiatown, Johannesburg in 1955 and from District Six in Cape Town in the 1970s.
recognizing how dominant geographies operate at the structural level, Matlwa suggests that we consider how marginalization and invisibility occur at a very interpersonal level as well. Ofilwe, in the first half of the novel, makes the following observation:

we are regulars here at Silver Spoon, but are not chummy with Miss Becky, the owner, like the other regulars are. I am familiar with most of the beaming faces in here today, but do not jump up excitedly when I see any of them enter nor do I blow darling kisses across tables as they often do when they see each other. (Matlwa 30)

Ofilwe’s awareness of the other patrons’ interaction with one another, of their sense of belonging and inclusion in the coffee shop, conversely underscores her cognizance of her own invisibility in the eyes of the white patrons. Her assertion that she is “familiar” with the faces speaks to the visible subjectivity of the white patrons. These are individuals with distinctive faces and voices while she and her family are not. Her use of irony when ostensibly placing the onus on her family underscores the erasure of this family’s presence in the upscale establishment: “it is our fault that after numerous breakfasts … we have not tried to assimilate ourselves into the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop family tree” (Matlwa 30). Irony operates at multiple levels here. It illustrates that the Tlous are marginalized in terms of their physical placement in the coffee shop. In addition, allusions to xenophobic rhetoric with regard to immigrant assimilation reinforces the sense that black upwardly mobile families living in previously whites only suburbs occupy the same position as an immigrant to the country. They, in other words, are encroaching on space owned, occupied and designed for the white South African minority and as such are expected to “assimilate” or conform to the status quo.

Fikile’s encounter with Miss Becky’s daughter Caroline can also be read as indicative of the ways in which black subjectivities, thus also black geographies, are rendered invisible (while objectified black bodies tend to be highly visible) within a colonial spatial structure. Fikile’s humiliation connects directly to her misguided
belief that her presence was “essential…to the functioning of Silver Spoon” (141). While the over-exaggeration follows Matlwa’s use of “grotesquely overwritten” lines for Fikile (in as much as she stands as the heavily satirical voice of white racism and its pathologies), it also illustrates the large gap between Fikile’s vision of herself and the realities of the outside world (Goodman 116). Fikile’s attempts to navigate the space of the coffee shop are made invisible to and by the white power structures represented in part by Caroline and Miss Becky. Thus, the coffee shop represents how “everyday places” also engage in “the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities, stories and lands” (McKittrick xi). These examples of erasure of black spatial experiences suggest the reasons why dominant conceptualizations of the city space, such as Henri Lefebvre’s, is filled with gaps and silences with regard to race and gender dynamics and how they contribute to the production of space.

What those gaps and silences don’t speak to is the evidence that space and particularly urban space is deeply based on intersectional geographies of racial, gender, and class domination.

**Containment and Mobility**

Within traditional geography, erasure often cohabitates with other social processes such as marginalization and boundaries. These are part and parcel of the structures of containment that would impede and control black mobility. Transcending the South African context, these kinds of efforts can be seen in multiple locations with slave and colonial histories. The case of the antebellum slave period in the United States of America, for example, reveals the intensive efforts made by the structures of white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy to create and maintain what Stephanie Camp calls a “geography of containment” (6).43 I have used this term earlier as part of a short overview of the various kinds of geographies and uses of space this chapter engages.

---

43 As stated earlier in the chapter, Camp borrows the term from Houston Baker’s verbal response to Hanchard’s “Temporality, Transnationalism, and Afro-Modernity.” Camp adopts Baker’s use of the term to illustrate how it operated as a central focus of the desire to maintain power and control over enslaved peoples.
As that concept and the concept of mobility are two sides of the same coin, a brief discussion of how term “geography of containment” applies to the fictional post-apartheid spaces under study follows.

Stephanie Camp’s enlightening research on women’s everyday resistance to slavery in the American South offers important insights into the ways in which space and spatial control centered upon slaveholders’ attempts to maintain power over enslaved peoples as well as a constant influx of free black labor. Slavery was more about “the strictest control of the physical and social mobility of enslaved people, as some of the institution’s most resonant accouterments—shackles, chains, passes, slave patrols, and hounds—suggest” than other kinds of control mechanisms (Camp 12). Slaveholders, lawmakers and politicians alike worked to limit and control slave movement both literally and metaphorically, ensuring that enslaved men and women were kept ‘in place’ on the plantation. However, spatial control was not simply about instruments of surveillance and/or discipline; it was also about landscaping, fencing, and the strict laws barring assembly and truancy which were passed in order to contain black mobility (Camp 6,13). It is not surprising that white supremacist ideology and policy operated in very similar ways in colonial and apartheid South Africa, indeed on a global scale. In fact, the engineer of apartheid Hendrik Verwoerd is considered to have fine-tuned the geography of separation and containment to extreme levels. Verwoerd socially engineered South African society with precise spatial planning: the creation of “bantustans” or homelands, townships placed on the far outskirts of South African cities, and migrant worker hostels constructed to “shape … individual family members’ identities in ‘apartheid-places,’” to mention a few (Elder 928). 44 These and a host of other spatial designs created a material geography of separation and containment in South Africa. In addition, the institution of apartheid shared similar accouterments of containment including pass laws and police patrols

---

44 Homelands were reserves of land that were parcelled out based on a racist notion of an ethnic homeland. The reserves were grouped into ten territories. “Each territory became a ‘homeland’ for a potential African ‘nation’” (Thompson 191). However, the homelands were desolate areas with little to no agricultural production and forced people to seek employment in the city in order to survive. This brought about the figure of the migrant worker.
and relied upon similar violent tactics for enforcement including torture, murder, imprisonment and forced removals.

Thus, in both the U.S. and in South Africa, the geography of containment functioned as a systematic and violent means of limiting black mobility in multifaceted ways. How then does black mobility continue to be contained but also imagined in post-1994 urban spaces? If the structures and discourses of the apartheid regime continue to be embedded in these spaces and places, then black mobility continues to resonate as a central issue in the four texts. I am interested here both in literal freedom of movement and metaphorical notions of staying in and moving out of ‘place.’ This is especially pertinent with regard to how the novels’ characters disrupt these geographies and find alternative means of mobility.

Two of the central themes that come up in this project are the feeling of being trapped and a desire to escape. In her work, Camp emphasizes a similar notion that geographies of containment were experienced as captivity or, as one slave narrative put it—imprisonment (12-13). This is raised in all three texts: in Bafana Kuzwayo’s desire to “escape the perpetual misery of township existence” (135) in After Tears; in the perpetual fantasy of the “out of Hillbrow party” in Room 207 (14); and Fikile’s “project infinity” in Coconut (119), which will take her away from her own township existence and her blackness. Bhekizizwe Peterson understands entrapment as the “frequency with which ghetto life and existence is seen as being analogous to one type of incarceration or another” (207). As such, escape manifests as both a physical or spatial and metaphorical desire. The desire for both physical and metaphorical escape can partially be seen in black South African aspirations for upward mobility and the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle (Kruger 2010).45 The various iterations of mobility as a theme illustrate how the geographies of containment that operate in these fictional spaces work to limit both the literal and metaphorical movement of

---

45 On a different level, the gendered implications with regard to mobility and the differences between the ability of black men and women to move through various spaces is raised. However, gender and mobility will be discussed in Chapter 2.
black bodies and how they mirror the realities of South African spatial politics. Simultaneously, the authors raise the question of anti-black discourse, its pathologies and its function in the containment of black bodies.

The theme of entrapment and escape is specifically central to *After Tears* and thus the novel is foregrounded in this section. Interestingly, in contrast to *Coconut* and *Room 207*, the form and style of *After Tears* does not as readily reflect its thematization of space. Rigidly linear, with chapters marked by exact dates and reminiscent of a diary in its first-person narrative, *After Tears* seems at times to attempt to contain itself within this temporal linearity. One might conjecture that Mhlongo’s narrative style is meant to counteract the characters’ deviance from the proverbial straight and narrow path. The effect is a kind of tension between the structure of the narrative and the themes of hustling as an alternative form of mobility. Despite this tension or perhaps because of it, the structure of the novel invites the reader to engage with the notion of containment at multiple levels.

*After Tears* and *Coconut* present township life through images of filth. Dirt, dust, pest infestation, animal excrement as well as blood are some of the images that come to characterize the township. Together these construct a picture of poverty, lack of opportunity, stasis and despair. Upon his return home from his failed law school education at the University of Cape Town, Bafana, narrator-protagonist in *After Tears*, describes the sights, sounds and smells of his family home in Chiawelo—the “dirty window” and “small dusty driveway” (Mhlongo 26), residents playing local lottery “fah-fee” as part of their own private dreams of escape (39), the “big rats” eating away at his Uncle Nyawana’s fruit and vegetable business (64), “cockroaches” (19), and the smell of “stale sweat” (82). By appealing to the senses, Mhlongo ostensibly conveys a tone of both despair and disgust toward the township space.

In these passages, however, Mhlongo also adopts a comedic tone. In one scene, for example, Nyawana rages at the rats that are copulating in his room: “‘Do you know how much I spent to buy this stock, you sons and daughters of bitches?’ he
ranted… ‘Who are you talking to, Uncle?’ I asked, leaning against the door. A puzzled expression jumped into his eyes. ‘I’m talking to these gatecrashers. They’ve been eating my business away. I didn’t sleep the whole night because they were having an orgy inside my vegetable boxes’’ (64). The image of Nyawana yelling at and chasing the copulating rats adds humor to what might have been a more simplistic scene that simply reminds the reader of the family’s poverty. Instead the use of humor adds an undertone of ridicule to the imagery of filth, suggesting that the reader see it as representative of the notion of entrapment as well as part of a larger critique. Humor lifts the text to a level of self-awareness, inasmuch as the imagery should not be taken as a literal representation of township spaces but as metaphorical. Filth (embodied in the rats, smells and roaches) serves as metaphor for the critique he is leveling at the post-apartheid regime. Consider how the image of filth in After Tears is reminiscent of Ayi Kwei Armah’s use of fecal matter to portray black disillusionment after Ghanaian independence in The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born (1968). The similarities highlight it as an effective metaphor in suggesting that the rhetoric of freedom and opportunity for all was the proverbial “load of crap.”

Through Fikile’s character, Coconut raises the stakes of the depiction of township life in After Tears by engaging anti-black white supremacist discourse that fixes the identity of place and normalizes stereotypical connections to race and place. Couched in irony, Fikile states boldly, “I want to be white” (135) and reflects only briefly on the internal shame and self-hate that fuels her desire to escape from her blackness. Her commute from her home in Mphe Batho township to her job at Silver Spoon coffee shop is filled with contempt for “the carriages [which] stink of laborer’s sweat and of urine and soaked sanitary towels that should have been changed days ago” (Matlwa 134). Where Fikile’s depiction of township sights and smells seems to differ from Bafana’s is in her blatant association of the filth of the township with blackness: “black people! Why must they always be so damn destructive? … just look at how scummy the townships are. Have you ever seen any white suburb looking so despicable? In some townships it is difficult to differentiate the yards from the garbage heaps. It really is a disgrace” (134-5). The irony in these lines can be
seen in the hyperbole and clichéd nature of the criticism, written to read as stereotypical white racist discourse. Irony highlights the “pathological nature of white discourse about black people” (Goodman 116), including its simplistic association of unkempt neighborhoods or underdeveloped urban areas with blackness. By drawing the reader’s attention to those pathologies, Matlwa also draws our attention to how anti blackness and class oppression link in order to maintain a system of black economic marginalization. This exposes the discourse surrounding class for the euphemism that it is and re-introduces race as a viable theme to the conversation.

This association and its stereotypical implications are broached in Room 207 as well in an argument between the six characters over the question of black self-love, when D’Nice asks rhetorically, “why do you think where we are living always turns into dirt?” (Moele 95). The prominence of the question of blackness and the state of neighborhoods in which black people are the majority of the residents speaks to what Katherine McKittrick calls the “spatialization of difference” (xv). In McKittrick’s formulation this spatialization is grounded in processes whereby:

The production of space is caught up in, but does not guarantee, long standing geographic frameworks that materially and philosophically arrange the planet according to a seemingly stable white, heterosexual, classed vantage point. If prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing “difference” … This is for the most part accomplished through economic, ideological, social and political processes that see and position the racial-sexual body within what seem like predetermined, or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical. (xv)

McKittrick articulates the way in which the objectification of black identity as a fixed set of stereotypes is directly tied to traditional geographic epistemology. Ultimately, what we see in these texts is not only how various kinds of filth and dirt imagery evoke both a sense of stasis and of being contained in space but also how they call the
reader’s attention to white pathological forms of discursive containment. Both remind us of the social processes enacted by the structures of dominant geographies. These explorations of both physical and discursive containment illustrate the significance of Mhlongo, Matlwa and Moele’s particular exploration of the post-apartheid urban space. In their novels the authors are able to deconstruct the hierarchies of the long-standing geographic frameworks to which McKittrick refers. In so doing they call into question not only the assumption of their commonsensical truth, but lay the groundwork for rethinking black movement through space and the unconventional or alternative means in which black citizens attain mobility. Thus, the exploration of mobility at various levels and its connection to a perpetual desire for escape is a crucial area for analysis.

Mobility operates in contradictory ways. It has been theorized by various scholars to function as a symbol of freedom, power, and resistance in literature. Yet, in the texts under discussion, it cannot be read so simply. Characters assert their mobility as a claim to their new sense of freedom and empowerment but often circumstances, people or various power structures curtail that ability to move. In the case of Room 207, Moele’s attempts to deconstruct the state and media constructions of post-apartheid South Africa occur through the ironic and disillusioned eyes of the urban pedestrian. This figure is viewed often as resembling Walter Benjamin’s well-known flâneur who at times walks in the likeness of Michel de Certeau’s empowered pedestrian and who creates liberatory spaces by drawing their own walking map of the city (132). However, the pedestrian in Room 207 also resembles Mbembe and Nuttall’s “migrant worker”, who moves through a city that is “a site of radical uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity” (364).

In crafting the figure of the pedestrian, Moele again illustrates the effectiveness of his chosen narrative voice and the form of address used in the novel. Like in the opening example, the narrative voice simultaneously draws the reader in with a feeling of inclusion and distances the reader with a sense of displacement. Often, the “you” who is spoken to is black and male— “brother you are home”
(Moele 15), which includes a significant demographic of Moele’s potential audience and excludes another. In addition, the “you” figure is cast as stranger to the area with a slightly judgmental attitude toward the realities of the Hillbrow streets: “looks dirty? Didn’t say that you should comment. Pause. Thank you.” (158). The “you” is created as if Hillbrow and its residents are objects of study. The “you” is the outsider who is allowed to visit. Generally, this form of address seems to represent an ongoing conversation with an unseen, anonymous character in the novel, who doubles as the reader. Within this conversation, Moele is able to ask the hard-unspoken questions and turn what would normally be a colonial gaze back on itself through disorientation and displacement. By addressing the reader in this way, the narrator displaces the reader, removing them from the comfort of outer-space of the novel and placing them in in the novel’s uncomfortable spaces: the colonial university space, the street in Hillbrow and so on. The displacement of the reader, through this voice, further mirrors the paradoxical experience of mobility, containment and displacement imagined in the text’s urban spaces.

This paradox is most keenly realized in the scene where the narrator-protagonist takes a walk through Hillbrow with the imagined reader. This section of the novel intertextually engages with Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001). Mpe maps thusly: “you cross Wolmarans and three rather obscure streets, Kapteijn, Ockerse and Pieterse, before you drive or walk past Esselen, Kotze and Pretoria Streets. You will then cross Van der Merwe and Goldreich Streets” (6). Moele similarly maps Hillbrow: “you are in Van der Merwe Street, walk to your right, cross Claim, cross Quarts, Twist, King George and a left turn into Klein. Please notice and observe. Pass Pretoria, Kotze and Esselen, then turn right, keep walking, notice, see and observe with me here” (157). Not only do they both employ the language of mapping at the start of two walking tours through the city, but they also begin at almost the same starting point. The significance of this approach has been documented by Megan Jones and Irikidzayi Manase especially with regard to “the figuration of the masculine as mobile” (Jones 212) and “the potential for inhabitants to redefine their alienating city spaces in accordance with their needs”
There are moments in the text when the pedestrian figure seems exactly that—an almost hypermasculine figure that re-inscribes the streets with his subjectivity.

In a different scene, Noko walks through the streets of Hillbrow in the middle of night, completely naked and unbothered. The narration is about masculine freedom and joy but also about male privilege: “I leave everything there feeling more than alive, feeling fully satisfied with this life. I just get up and walk out of the door butt naked, playing with my keys in my right hand. Freedom does not get freer than this” (Moele 100). With Noko’s claim that he walks “butt naked” through the streets of Hillbrow, Moele ignores and erases the reality of black women’s geographies. A woman would not be able to walk nude, without being targeted, in any city space. This reality is alluded to, for example, in Coconut when Fikile complains about the difficulties of walking through the urban space without young men trying to get her to stop and talk (140). Despite being slightly unrealistic in terms of the legalities of public exposure, Noko’s “naked” freedom hinges on his being male. Similarly, Moele’s ability to imagine such a scene as a fantasy of ultimate freedom is dependent on conceptualizing freedom through a lens of male privilege and the city as a male gendered space. This scene further emphasizes the gendered nature of the urban space and space in general in the sense that it is the male body that has the most potential for freedom of movement in the city. Noko’s nudity in the streets sets him up as a symbol of masculine liberation and empowerment. Nonetheless, his nudity also hints at vulnerability, which is further developed later in the novel on his second walk.

During his second walk through Hillbrow, Noko partially “writes” the city space in the manner described by de Certeau, “insinuate[ing] other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement” (132), but it is also here that his text deviates from Phaswane Mpe’s. In contrast to his walking in the nude, this time mobility is hindered and his movement through space is arrested by other forces. In the two instances where Noko is unable to move freely it is by representations of his
hometown from which he is also attempting escape (234). On the walk, Noko first encounters Moloko, whom Noko describes as “another sad story—a dropout of high school. He’s here in the city terrorizing city people and keeping the police working overtime. One thing I’m sure about is that I am going to pay him just for running into him. He’s going to make me pay” (159). The second encounter that stops his movement is with his very successful cousin who likes to brag about his success, “hand brake turn, walk faster. I don’t want to talk to that guy coming up the street and I hope he didn’t see me. Now he is calling me. That was because of you. Shit! He’s one of those people that I didn’t want to meet” (163). The fact that these two figures that inhibit his literal mobility on the streets of Hillbrow are from his hometown both foreshadows and symbolically represents his failure to be upwardly mobile and thus escape his rural home. They are, indeed, symbolic iterations of Noko’s character. The former represents the downward spiral he is taking as his living conditions gradually deteriorate, and the latter his failed aspirations. Thus, Noko’s grief at the end of the novel centers around the reality of returning home:

I admit it to myself. My venture, this adventure in Johannesburg, is a failure … the vow that I took with myself, of driving myself out of Johannesburg, has been broken. I’m still going out like I came in: taking a taxi out. I don’t know much of what I’m going to do at home. There is nothing much to do there. The last time I was there I spent my whole time with bomahlalela, locked in their own isolation rooms. (233)\textsuperscript{46}

For Noko’s character the sadness of having to return home is not just about failure, it is also about the stasis that home represents. His assertion that there is “nothing much to do” besides spend time “locked in” with other residents who are all unemployed indicates a form of inertia. For him, his return means immobility, lack of movement. Even the repetition of having taken a taxi when he moved to Johannesburg and returning home in another represents the lack of mobility in his life.

\textsuperscript{46} “Bomahlalela (Zulu): The unemployed brothers,” hlalela” literally means an observer” (Moele 237)
Moele, therefore, asks us to rethink the figure of the pedestrian in the context of the South African urban space, through the eyes of black South African subjects. Such perspective alerts us to the paradoxes of walking and movement in a city that is ostensibly liberated, run by a majority black democratic government and filled with wealth and opportunity. The pedestrian in this space is both an empowered figure enjoying the freedom to re-write the city and one whose mobility can be contained at any time. These structures of containment can vary. They can be found in familial pressure to succeed professionally and economically. This pressure is often rooted in a long history of educational stiltedness and economic marginalization but is moreover linked to a larger unspoken need to disprove anti-Black stereotypes. Those structures can also be found in the desperation and violence of black poverty or even in the security gates that are ostensibly designed to keep a certain class of people out; an ideology that is still rooted in racial undertones. In each of these cases mobility is inhibited both at the physical, aspirational, and psychological level.

And yet I would argue that part of what is so significant about these particular novels is that they tap into the reality that black subjects have been mobile in alternative ways for years. Thus, the characters of these novels find various informal, at times anti-social means to traverse the boundaries set by layers of colonial and apartheid era ideologies and structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Deploying very often the figure of the hustler, these writers foreground a rising symbol of survival and temporary escape from the realities of post-apartheid life in urban spaces. In so doing, they problematize stereotypical images and understandings of the notion of hustling, render visible black subjects experiences of dominant geography and ultimately suggest new ways to think about movement and mobility within the city space.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, much of these novels’ depictions of space and mobility have to do with feelings of entrapment, containment and the need or desire to escape. To reiterate an earlier mentioned point, as part of his discussion of the concept of entrapment in South Africa’s black ghetto communities, Peterson
argues that black subjects look to what he calls “flight, [which] involves a number of strategic routes that attempt to transcend the debilitations of ghetto life but that do not always imply escape or even desire to surpass the exigencies of the ghetto” (207). While, these novels rely more heavily on a trope of escape from township life than his description of “flight,” the strategies he outlines are similar to those of the novels’ protagonists. The hustler or the act of hustling, for Peterson then, is one particular strategic avenue for transcendence and flight. Hence, I read hustling, in the context of these novels, firstly as means of mobility: a figure that crosses boundaries, resisting the geography of containment in unconventional and strategic ways.47

The hustler, as a mobile figure, is introduced in a particularly significant space in *After Tears*. Mhlongo explores the tropes of entrapment and escape in a space also symbolic of the crossing of boundaries: the South African commuter taxi.48 The commuter taxi is a moving and transient space, a site of boundary crossing, moving out of the township and into the Johannesburg city center, constantly changing passengers and locations. Therefore, it must be read as an alternative form of geographical and social mobility. While the taxi does not have the same symbolic value as the car, it also means a completely different kind of movement in comparison to the pedestrian figures discussed above. Historically and currently, it represents a crossing of certain physical and socio-economic divides established by the apartheid government and a crossing between what Nsizwa Dlamini and Grace Khunou have identified as spaces where there are differences in “history, politics and culture, and language” (Mbembe et al. 500).

For passengers, who are for the most part South Africans of color, the taxi is a cheap form of transportation. It can also be a dangerous space because the

47 For the purposes of this section I will only briefly discuss the figure of the hustler. I am more interested in how it is introduced within a particular fictional space. The figure will be discussed on its own and in more detail in Concealed Black Geographies.

48 The commuter taxi is a minibus carrying 12 passengers—four people to a row. It means frequently being squished in with the other passengers in your row.
precariousness associated with walking in Room 207 can also be found in the taxi. Meshack M. Khosa, while historicizing the role that taxi drivers played during the struggle against the apartheid government—transporting passengers during “boycotts of white-owned buses” (237-38)—also focuses on the culture of violence and passenger exploitation. Ndumiso Ngcobo, in his irreverent but funny popular text *Some of My Best Friends Are White*, documents some of his, at times painful, at times extremely comedic memories of daily taxi rides, speaking of the tempers of taxi drivers, the loud blasting music, the raucous rides, the waiting, swearing and threats of or actual violence (67-78). For these reasons, the taxi is a particularly relevant space for unpacking the kinds of strategic and unconventional means by which mobility and boundary crossings are imagined.

The taxi is a complex space in *After Tears*, representing both the township geography of containment and the desire for escape. Highlighting the tightly packed space of the taxi with comedic emphasis on corporeal functions, the taxi’s internal space is one in which bodies are squished together with little to no room for movement or comfort.49 Bafana’s taxi rides frequently include descriptions of others’ bodily functions, emphasizing how close he must be to them to perceive them (46). The feeling of entrapment in the taxi, however, is best illustrated when, after getting severely intoxicated, Bafana takes a taxi home:

all the windows were shut to avoid the wind, but as the taxi sped along the smell of petrol became overwhelming and I started to suffocate. At the same time my bladder was pressing and I badly needed to urinate. Suddenly, I was seized by a terrible need to vomit, and as we passed Southgate Mall on the road to Bara hospital, I could no longer control my gut. A nurse, wearing her Bara Hospital uniform, was sitting right in front of me. I made a desperate vomiting motion and as she turned her face and looked toward the back, the vomit came straight out of my mouth. Three great heaves from my gut landed

49 The commuter taxi is a minibus carrying 12 passengers—four people to a row. It means frequently being squished in with the other passengers in your row.
on her. I could see small balls of undigested cheese stuck on her uniform and plaied hair (Mhlongo 142)

Bodily functions become the physical manifestations of the suffocating internal space of the taxi. Moreover, the number of passengers that are hit with Bafana’s vomit—“the lady sitting next to her,” “the pants of the guy that was sitting next to me” (143)—is a distasteful example of how tightly packed the passengers are in the taxi. Bafana himself is contained and cannot escape the other passengers’ wrath. He is subsequently beaten and thrown out of the taxi.

In contrast to Bafana’s containment within it, the taxi itself is frequently portrayed as a fast-moving vehicle whizzing past various township landmarks toward the city center such as when Zero, one of Bafana’s surrogate Uncles, “shifted gear and overtook a blue car by the Diepkloof Hostel next to Bara Hospital. I could hear the taxi tyres running over the cat’s eyes on the edge of the freeway as we passed another car” (127). It is also the means of escape, of moving past the degradation of township life: “‘this place,’ said Zero as we passed the golf course in Pimville, ‘at this place I used to forage for paper, plastic and aluminium at Goudkoppies and sell it to waste recycling companies here in Kliptown” (164). The taxi, in this case, literally provided Zero’s character with a means of escape from a life of foraging and homelessness. The contradictions of the taxi reflect the paradox of mobility and containment as both often exist within the same space in post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, that paradox reveals an underlying tension with regard to broader questions of freedom as experienced through mobility and how one characterizes the urban space generally. It also exposes tensions with regard to national mobility and South Africa’s ability to move forward from it apartheid past. It is within this paradoxical space that the figure of the hustler is introduced.

Capitalizing off of his newfound fame as a ‘graduate’ of the University of Cape Town, Bafana is frequently found in Zero’s taxi “[getting] a free ride without complaint” (78). His temporary escapes from Chiawelo Township are realized through these free trips into Johannesburg’s Central Business District. Intentionally
seeking out Zero’s taxi because he “didn’t want to pay the taxi fare, as usual” (78), emphasizes his strategic policy of movement out of the township whether he had the fare or not. What is important here is the vocalization of desire, or lack thereof, to participate in old apartheid structures of separation and containment, which placed black townships so far away from the city center and forced long commutes to and from domestic work in white homes or in the mines. Bafana’s strategy then is to “work the system” instead of participating in it.

Moele sets up a similar dynamic in *Room 207* when Noko arranges a meeting with a former professor in a suburb outside of Johannesburg. In a move screaming of white privilege, the professor gives Noko driving directions to get to the office. Noko, like Bafana, finds a way to surpass the limitations that would keep him in Hillbrow: “took a taxi to Alex. The truth: I asked for a lift to Alex. The trick: you stand at the side of Louis Botha Road and only stop the empty taxis, then you plead your poverty; one is bound to give you a lift and, as always, one did” (Moele 146). With the use of the word “trick,” Moele clues the reader into the fact that this is a hustle. Noko hustles to get where he needs to go without having the money to travel there. In both cases, the taxi functions as an alternative kind of mobility. It allows faster and more efficient movement than walking and does not require the kind of capital and social position needed in order to obtain a car. However, it also represents the necessity of hustling as both a strategy of survival, an alternative form of mobility, and a means of accessing formerly inaccessible spaces.

**Concealed Black Geographies**

Much of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees must fall movements of the past few years has centered on rendering black bodies visible in spaces where they have historically
been invisible, ignored, or intentionally placed under erasure. Protest marches, artistic staging, and strategic spatial positioning has put visibility at the forefront of the symbolism encased within this movements. This contemporary insistence on black visibility speaks to the egregious long-term material and psychological realities of what McKittrick calls, “concealed black geographies” (7). It is therefore essential that we address a glaring gap in this chapter. What has not been addressed or problematized yet is the fact that the textual space of this first chapter is dominated by the male authors featured in this project. The fact that most of this initial discussion of space and the post-apartheid urban novel centers around Niq Mhlongo and Kgebetli Moele carries its own implications and offers its own divulgences. While this chapter has generally been about space and anti-black geographies of domination and containment, it also inadvertently draws our attention to the antinomies found in many post-apartheid male authored texts and their own erasure of black women’s geographies. Thus, the section title “concealed black geographies” operates on multiple levels: in terms of how the texts highlight black characters’ alternative and invisible negotiations of space and how some texts themselves conceal black women’s geographies.

Central to our understanding of black geographies is its earlier mentioned definition which highlights “alternative” geographic patterns that “site a terrain of struggle” (McKittrick 7). What is important here is the notion of a “terrain” of political struggle as the space where space is produced through a interwoven dynamic of intersecting processes of marginalization and various responses to it and other forms of geographic domination. Moreover, they are specific locales that bring together black history, subjectivity, imagination and opposition (McKittrick 6). One such figure through which we can engage these hidden black geographies is the hustler.

---

50 Derilene Marco “The Aesthetics of Change, Rage, and Rainbows Gone Wrong: Post-apartheid South Africa and Reimaginations of Freedom and the Politics of Refusal and Pain”. Lecture Given at the University of Bergen 30, November 2018.
In the section on mobility I read hustling primarily as an act of mobility in *After Tears* and *Room 207*, but it also is what Bhekizizwe Peterson calls a “defensive space” (“Kwaito Dawgs” 208). The hustler, then, is the subject of that space, finding strategic ways to not only cross the boundaries of containment and separation and to create new geographies, but also to defend himself against the pressures and precariousness of family, society, culture, and poverty which also contribute to spatial realities. Peterson and Sarah Nuttall, among others, have written about the figure of the hustler in contemporary South African creative culture. However, their delineation of the significance of the figure differs greatly. Nuttall’s reading of the hustler in Niq Mhlongo’s first novel *Dog Eat Dog* reads as a thinly veiled moral criticism. She writes, “operating with energetic and often underhanded activity, turning others into suckers, luring less skillful players into competing against him in a game of chance, the hustler turns the codes, conventions and clichés of human rights culture to his advantage” (282). Nuttall’s reading casts the act of hustling as a game and the figure itself as a player, one who plays individuals off of each other as a means of besting or tricking those around him. She makes the mistake of serving as moral and political police, which Peterson warns against, forgetting that the hustler is immersed in the socio-political, historical and economic reality of what Peterson calls South Africa’s “ghettos” (197). Meanwhile, Peterson, in his discussion of hustling and kwaito music reminds us that hustling as a defensive strategy serves as an “armor” against a society that continues to perpetuate and rely on discourse which turns black men and women into pathologies of criminality, drug addiction and deviant behavior as an excuse for increased violent policing of black bodies (208).

While the male figures in *After Tears* almost all fit the characteristics of a hustler with Bafana’s marijuana selling Uncle Nyawana and his friends, Bafana remains the central embodiment of the hustler figure. His taxi rides back and forth between Chiawelo Township and Johannesburg’s CBD represent, among other things, the geography of his hustle. Bafana literally crosses the boundaries between the township and the city center at the same time as he pushes the boundaries of ethics and legality. When faced with having to admit his failure in law school,
Bafana embarks on a journey of lies, deception and fraud: He tells his mother that he owes the university 22 000 Rands (ZAR) and that they are holding his results until he pays his outstanding bill. With the money his mother borrows in order to pay the fake bill, Bafana obtains a forged degree and transcript, opens a fraudulent law practice, starts giving kickbacks to a court police officer in order to drum up clients and even agrees to marry his Zimbabwean friend Vee to help her gain legal residency in South Africa, for R15 000. Bafana’s character expresses little regret or moral ambivalence for his conduct other than guilt at deceiving and defrauding his family: “the guilt was increasing with each day that passed, and the urge to confess to Mama that I had failed was becoming irresistible” (90). The lack of guilt emphasizes Mhlongo’s project in both this and his first novel *Dog Eat Dog* in which the characters are products of, complicit in, and illustrative of a specific set of historical circumstances. Those circumstances illustrate a post-apartheid world that is trapped in a web of exploitation, political and economic betrayal, and violence. These are the legacies of apartheid, where deception was necessary for survival (Warnes 552). Similarly, in *After Tears*, the hustler figure, Bafana, makes choices in response to the constriction wrought by the oppressive structures of society, finding means of defense and escape from various geographies of domination. Much more than the pedestrian, the hustler traverses the post-apartheid landscape, re-writing the trajectories of success by pushing those boundaries of morality and legality.

Moele’s *Room 207* captures the same dynamic, with emphasis on the experience of tertiary education so closely following the 1994 transition. As Christopher Warnes points out, these characters would have been educated under Bantu Education laws and then expected to survive academically in what is still a colonial university system (549). Hustling is a way of life for the six characters that occupy room 207, operating from the motto that “Sometimes you have to do things, bad things, in order to get a peaceful end” (Moele 24). However, the figure of the hustler in this novel seems to be more an embodiment of the entrapment/flight dynamic delineated by Peterson. Noko and his friends dream of escape from Hillbrow, but their actions align with “flight,” which has much to do with the “desire
for recognition, legitimacy, status, wealth and ultimately, being allowed membership of mainstream society” (209). Significantly, during their time in Hillbrow these characters invoke flight through what Peterson calls “the politics of pleasure” and “consumption,” indulging in hedonistic weekends of sex and alcohol (209). Each of the characters, aside from Noko, eventually leaves behind their unpredictable life in Hillbrow to assimilate into the conventional role of husband and father in a neoliberal capitalist economy. This perhaps reveals a tension in Moele’s text between its function as an anti-neo-liberal critique and his own desire to be accepted into the folds of the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) gatekeepers of middle-class society.\(^{51}\)

The figure of the hustler is most decidedly masculine. It is hyper-masculine, leaving no room for the possibility of a female trickster in the context of these novels. It serves as a telling example of the erasure of black women’s geographies in Mhlongo and Moele’s novels. The means by which black women can and do creatively navigate post-apartheid spaces is largely absent. Instead, women are caricatured in stereotypical roles such as the overbearing mother or the angry black woman in After Tears, or serve as sexual objects, that are grouped under the tongue-in-cheek chapter name “Helen of Troy” (Moele 113) in Room 207. Most of us are familiar with the story of Helen of Troy in ancient Greek mythology: She is said to be the most beautiful woman in the world and the catalyst of the Trojan war between Sparta and the Trojans. This chapter title implies that the women in these characters’ lives, or women in general, are the downfall of men. This is a profound indication of the sexism that runs throughout the novel. It also alludes to the invisibility of

---

51 Now known as Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment, this term describes the political and economic policy of affirmative action whose aim was to assure that all formerly disenfranchised black citizens of South Africa had access to the same opportunities as the previously disproportionately advantaged white South Africans. It has come under heavy criticism for only benefitting a select few while the majority of the black population still lives below the poverty line in overcrowded, polluted townships that lack proper infrastructure and properly funded educational institutions.
women’s subjectivities in the novel, similar to the erasure of Helen’s subjectivity in the Greek myth.

The under-treatment or erasure of black women from male authored texts as indicated by the example above has a long history and has prompted a wealth of feminist art and scholarship that foregrounds women’s subjectivities, life experiences, histories and geographies.\textsuperscript{52} In the context of this study, Niq Mhlongo and Kgebetli Moele share similar thematic fixations in their attempts to capture the grim realities of post-apartheid South African life. Their attempts, it seems to me, have also extended to representing one kind of reality with regard to gender, power and the dynamics that ensue between young black men and women in South Africa’s transitional period. Thus, both authors contrive a gender reality featuring spaces that are heavily saturated in patriarchy and sexism, indicating that this too has not changed. To some extent, problematizing the realities that they portray can also teach us about the connections between urban spaces, gender and sexuality.

In line with some of the broader uncertainties that underpin their novels both Mhlongo and Moele attempt, to a very limited capacity, to problematize these saturations through their own narrator-protagonists. Bafana often distances himself, in \textit{After Tears}, from the sexist and misogynistic remarks made by the older male characters in the text exhibiting in his recognition of the “over-sexualized township world” the ways that hegemonic masculinities are mobilized in urban spaces (48). And Noko intermittently steps outside of his own misogyny in order to critique his friends’ bad treatment of the women in their lives (Moele 122). However, the blatant contradictions found in both characters illustrate the limitations and the kinds of textual constrictions found in androcentric fiction whereby the hegemony of

\textsuperscript{52} It would be impossible to try to cover an entire field of black feminist art and scholarship that confronts the politics of erasure but some of the key studies, scholarship include: Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson eds. (2001), Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith eds. (1982). Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) and Carole Boyce Davies (1994).
patriarchal ideology is the consistent thread running through it. As such, a thoroughly feminist problematization of these gendered spaces is virtually impossible.

These constrictions are clearly visible with a close reading of the two novels. Bafana, for example, speaks of women as the other (“female species”), as does Noko (Moele 25). Furthermore, the spaces and geographies represented in Room 207 and After Tears are male—male dominated spaces and the “black geographies” of men. Consider the street/national and university space in Room 207. Women are not present in either of those spaces. The people encountered on the street are male and the impoverished student described by Noko at the university is male. Despite the obvious presence of women, in this text, these are male spaces. Just as the nation, as mentioned earlier, is a male space. While women are present in all of the featured spaces and places in After Tears, their means of navigating these spaces are not featured nor is it indicated that they must also develop their own alternative and at times oppositional geographies. Bafana’s mother Rhea, for example, looks to Bafana to both speak and act for her when the sale of their family home in Chiawelo, Soweto is hindered due to the consequences of corruption and fraud (25, 74). In this sense, the two novels are complicit in the process of rendering the geographies and navigations of space by black women invisible. As part of that invisibility the urban space in these two novels is at the very least gendered male if not based upon what Grace Musila calls a “phallocratic aesthetic” (151).53 Such spatial representations render the novels complicit in the erasure of black women from them and as well as their stories. This is a process of erasure that is also rooted in white heteropatriarchal systems or McKittrick’s “traditional geography.” However, by reading these texts through a feminist lens as well as reading feminist novels such as Coconut and The Madams to speak to those geographies we can disrupt that process of erasure.

---

53 Grace Musila elucidates her conceptualization of a phallocratic aesthetic in her discussion of violence following the 2007 Kenyan elections. She suggests that such an aesthetic is rooted in the historic mobilization of hegemonic masculinities in the construction of state power and leadership (151).
It has been well documented in black feminist literature that black women’s bodies tend to be the site of intersectional forms of oppression where the structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity and gender prejudices converge. A feminist reading After Tears and Room 207 illustrates how black women’s bodies sit at the center of those intersections forming geographies in and of themselves. The authors reduce the women in the novels to their bodies, reflecting the patriarchal construction of the city in which women are “‘all body’—part and symbol of the spectacle and decadence of urban culture” (Collie 9). In After Tears Bafana’s opinions of the women in his life are expressed through judgmental commentary about their bodies. In one instance, when he sees his mother as both unnerved by and complicit in a history of deception and theft in his family she “suddenly looked haggard and sun-blackened” (74). In another, when his Zimbabwean friend Vee represents success and moral purity he notices her “wide sexy mouth” (106) and “beautiful legs” (106). However, when she asks him to illegally participate in a fake marriage in order to facilitate her South African residence permit, suddenly “[he] noticed, for the first time, that her small, sharp nose spoilt whatever beauty her face had” (187). In both cases discourse about women’s bodies reflect a larger problematic with female subjectivity in the urban space. As soon as a woman attempts to benefit from hustling and to act as a subject with agency in the urban space “the…female urban subject [becomes] a problem” (Collie 9) or an “interruption…a symptom of disorder” in the urban space (Collie 9).

Within this framework, disorder is rectified through violence to the body as seen in Room 207. Thus, a character such as Modishi’s eventual wife Lerato, who only functions in the text as a caricature of various stereotypes of black women, “must be put back in line” when she is “wayward” (206). Lerato’s crime, similar to the women in After Tears, is to step outside of Modishi’s expectation of her as the loyal and submissive girlfriend by summarily telling him “Fuck. You. Modishi” (206). Her playful verbalization of contempt for their relationship, while reflective of

the other male characters’ treatment of the women in their lives, is not to be allowed. Like Vee and Rea, Lerato will not be allowed to act as an agent of her own sexuality. Modishi’s actions therefore symbolize the mobilization of hegemonic masculinities of which Musila speaks in as much as violent masculinities are central to the consolidation and maintenance of both state and local power:

Modishi thrashed the hell out of her. He couldn’t touch the face or further down at that manly church, but everywhere in between got very badly bruised...if you could see what Modishi did to Lerato: one disjointed rib, one broken, as well as first-grade bruises, by his hands only. (206)

Noko’s detailed account illustrates how black women’s bodies serve as their own geography of cuts and bruises or cartographies of violence, hyper-masculinity and hetero-patriarchal ideology. The description of Lerato’s abuse is telling as her genitals are described as the “manly church,” a reduction of her beaten body to her sexual organs and reproductive ability. The juxtaposition of these scenes with the larger theme of poverty, class struggle and male emasculation also exposes Moele’s investment in the metaphor of colonial emasculation and problematic ideologies with regard to the “restoration of African manhood” as equivalent to the attainment of freedom (Musila 153). What is also important in these scenes of physical and discursive violence to black women’s bodies is the links they reveal between the domestic space, the city space and the nation as necessary aspects of the masculinist orientation of power in South African social imaginaries (Musila 152).

Especially problematic in Moele and Mhlongo’s representations of black women’s geographies is the reduction of those geographies to the corporeal. Rarely do we get to visualize the black woman as one that “initiates and reveals an intellectual history” that might contribute to theorizations of space and its production (McKittrick 223). However, through feminist texts, such as Kopano Matlwa’s Coconut, one can access alternative visualizations of black women’s bodies and subsequently richer and more nuanced understandings of what is meant by black geographies.
Ofilwe, the narrator-protagonist of the first half of *Coconut*, is compelled to study the black women around her from her dark-skinned mother whom she calls “beautiful” (51) to the “vintage jet-black lady” who sells *Maotana* (chicken feet) at an intersection in Pretoria (16). It is no mistake that both women are characterized in Matlwa’s writing as dark. This is a celebration of dark beauty in a country that for years normalized white skin. Moreover, their skin itself becomes a site of celebration. Further, Ofilwe sees the geography of the seller’s body as one of pride and self-awareness: “her leathery skin, folded into a hundred-and-two deep lines, make it difficult for one to read emotion off her face. Her bold bead-like eyes stare straight ahead, suggesting a mind preoccupied. Her chin is always slightly raised, her back strikingly straight for someone her age and her hands are always neatly placed in her lap. I secretly believe that Makhulu is of royal blood” (17). This passage depicts Makhulu not as an object, but as a subject with a story. By interpreting the lines of her face and the look in her eyes one of dignity and pride, Ofilwe and subsequently Matlwa imagine alternative feminist genealogies and geographies for women.

I would like to propose that this passage, among others, is crucial for a number of reasons. Firstly, it negates simplistic interpretations of Ofilwe’s character as inflexible in her occupation of various black and white classified spaces (Goodman 111). Rather, here is a sensitive young woman who reads the bodies of the black women around her as beautiful and commanding of respect. Moreover, here is a passage that suggests revolutionary ways of seeing black women in space. Matlwa juxtaposes Ofilwe’s interpretation of this woman with Fikile’s, who observes only “the revolting smell of the chicken feet which the peculiar, wrinkled old lady with the charcoal-black skin and an odd orange umbrella sells at the corner” (140). The difference in the way they interpret this woman’s presence is telling. Fikile, to me, represents the workings of traditional geography, which would see only an old woman selling food on the street, her story or her way of being in space imperceptible or invisible. For Ofilwe, the woman is perceptible; the set of her face and the carriage of her body tells a different story than her current spatial orientation suggests. Thus, Matlwa makes an important contribution to our understanding of black geographies.
in that she imagines various oppositional ways to apprehend space. *Coconut* attempts to think through ways to break not only the physical and metaphorical boundaries of material space but also the discursive boundaries that attempt to fix both the identity of place and black subjects.

There are similar moments in Zukiswa Wanner’s *The Madams*, the fourth text featured in this study. As this chapter ends and transitions to the next set of questions and arguments, it seems appropriate to introduce Wanner’s feminist novel, characterized as “chic-lit.” What is interesting about Wanner is that *The Madams* features characters that find imaginative and oppositional ways to navigate various spaces of patriarchal domination and containment. One particularly interesting scene occurs when the narrator-protagonist Thandi is out for a night of dancing with her two friends, and the novel’s other central characters in the text, Lauren and Nosizwe. While out, Lauren, a middle-class white lecturer at the local university, is gradually becoming inebriated and flirting shamelessly with a man that is not her husband. Thandi and Nosizwe converse about her behavior: “‘what do you think is wrong with her? I have never seen her like this before,’ I asked Siz. ‘I have no idea. Maybe she is having domestic issues like all of us. Maybe the marital bed has gone a little cold and she is exploring her sexuality. I can’t say I blame her,’ Siz answered” (Wanner 92).

What is important here is that despite the nightclub space—often characterized by stereotypes of the over-sexualized woman and sexist male beliefs in entitlement to women’s body—Lauren’s behavior is not depicted precisely in stereotypical terms. Instead, her friends cover a list of circumstances that could be mitigating her behavior. The dialogue here also alludes to various ways that women navigate the challenges of a domestic space that is often full of entrenched patriarchal attitudes and power dynamics. Some of those ways, if we read this scene closely, include not only the release of a night of dancing and flirting but also the non-judgmental bonds of friendship with other women. These are of course also the kinds of geographies

---

55 Chic-lit is a form of popular literature known to be lighthearted, slightly superficial and is often reduced to the cliché of not being interested in some of the deeper philosophical questions of conventional literature. It is also known as light reading targeting a primarily female audience.
that are invisible to the structures of patriarchy which reads women’s presence in clubs through a sexist lens.
2. Creative Interrogations of Gender & Space in Post-Apartheid Fiction

It is readily accepted within South African feminist scholarship that space, public culture, politics, and citizenship are all gendered concepts and infrastructures. The socio-political and statistical realities of a nation that continues to grapple with and strive for the ideals proposed in the new constitution evidence the ways that gender is entrenched in most, if not all aspects of society. Part of what the four primary texts in this study engage, with regard to gender, is the tension resulting from the unrealized promise of such a dramatic transition of power, which played out on the world stage. I am referring specifically to the legalities and political rhetoric of gender progressivism and freedom brought about by the change in regime and how they are undercut by continued heteropatriarchal control of South African urban and rural spaces, gender-based violence, and the perpetuation of heteronormative sexist constructions and stereotypes.

Further, the gendered realities of South African life continue to intersect with various other sites of oppression, including (but not limited to) race, class, sexuality, and nationality. However, part of the complexity of this tension is that despite knowledge of those realities, gender progressivists in South Africa hold on to the hope that the new gender-progressive constitution will elicit real feminist change in the country. Hope engenders and sustains the robust and rigorous efforts on the part of feminist activists, academics, and artists to see the new constitution manifest itself on the ground. That hope, and those efforts speak to other kinds of tensions resulting from attempts by both men and women to carve out new subjectivities of femininity and masculinity based on their newfound ‘freedom’ and entrenched mechanisms of

56 Gqola “How the ‘cult of femininity’” (111), Lewis (38), Narunsky-Laden (62).

57 Kimberlé Crenshaw (1241).
patriarchy and heteronormativity, which skew and hinder those attempts in various ways.

It is my view that each of these texts illustrates and engages all of these tensions, yes, but they also carry their own tensions and contradictions. They, in some ways, lament the continued boundaries set by apartheid-era patriarchy and test out new forward-thinking subjectivities in their respective fictional spaces yet *After Tears* and *Room 207*, in particular, simultaneously re-inscribe and are complicit in the discourses and geographies of hetero-patriarchal containment. This chapter will thus question how and to what extent these texts interrogate gender as a central component of space and spatiality. I am also interested in how these authors imagine and offer suggestions for possible new ways to think about masculinity and femininity and what creative devices are used to foreground these alternatives. Lastly, this chapter will explore what new epistemologies can be gleaned from the tensions both inscribed in and explored by these four novels.

**Thinking Through Gender in the South African Context**

In thinking through gender in the South African context, I would like to begin by briefly discussing the sexism and misogyny found in *After Tears* and *Room 207*. These two male-authored texts exemplify the challenge of working with and in what at times are violently masculinist textual spaces. One such challenge is how to apply feminist literary criticism in such spaces while simultaneously trying to stay open to the insights one might gain from these novels as the authors try to imagine what black South African masculinities might look be in the post-apartheid context. *Room 207* was summarily dismissed by prominent South African literary scholar Michael Titlestad for being an “unfinished work” (ShaunJohnson.co.za) and, among other reasons, for the “various characters that populate its pages are brutally misogynistic and live in a world where women are discussed and treated in the most demeaning ways” (ShaunJohnson.co.za). *After Tears* has not drawn the same criticism perhaps
because sexism is clearly critiqued in the novel; however, in more subtle ways it is just as problematic. It is critical to acknowledge the enormous amount of work that black feminist women authors and scholars have already done in speaking out against both the lack of space for African women authors within the institution of African literature and the stereotypical and reductive ways African woman have been portrayed in texts by African male writers (Nfah-Abbenyi 3-5). On the one hand, black women’s scholarship has shown how, in many cases, black women are “portrayed as passive, always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely dependent on their husbands” (Nfah-Abbenyi 4). On the other hand, as Florence Stratton argues, attempts to elevate the African woman in such cultural movements as negritude are fraught with ambiguity whereby she is “elevated and debased at the same time” and her experiences “trivialized and distorted” (5 qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi). Part of the importance of this acknowledgment is the links that can be made between what is called an “androcentric …literary tradition” (Nfah-Abbenyi 2) and the contemporary work of Mhlongo and Moele. In many ways, despite the changes that time may have wrought, echoes of earlier African male writers’ tendency to assume a “male articulation of the black experience” (Hull qtd in Nfah-Abbenyi 1) and therefore subsume or even erase black women’s voices can be found in Room 207 and After Tears.

Although both novels attempt to acknowledge if not blatantly critique the misogyny and sexism found in the South African urban space, they often fall back on worn out tropes of the whore/mother dichotomy in order to further their thematic or political agendas with regard to racial or national issues. This may seem an unfair critique with regard to Niq Mhlongo’s project because of the critical lens through

---

58 Negritude is a cultural movement that grew out of francophone Africa in the 1940’s. It characterized Senegal’s movement for independence and is defined as the affirmation or consciousness of the value of black or African culture. It was led primarily by poet Léopold Sédar Senghor.

59 S.S. Ibinga argues that the sexism and misogyny found in Room 207 reflects the authors acknowledgment of the stronghold patriarchy continues to have in South Africa and is part of Kgebeti Moele’s broader lament with regard to the “moral decay of his society” (64).
which he represents the sexist characters in the novel. However, as the discussion later in the chapter will show, the women in the novel are denied full agency and subtly censured for trying to carve out that agency. They are often thrown under the proverbial bus in an attempt to portray the “dog eat dog” world that his novels represent. Nonetheless, I would argue that the difference between Moele’s and Mhlongo’s text and early androcentric African literature is that the authors’ intention is one of critique. Where this is especially discernible is in their engagement with black South African masculinities, hyper-masculine constructions and the uncertainties and ambiguities that infect their characters’ attempts to understand what manhood might mean in the post-apartheid context. Therefore, my readings of these texts must walk a fine tightrope between understanding and voicing the authors’ failings with regard to their unsuccessful critique of misogyny and sexism and simultaneously engage the insights that can be gained from them. I argue that black feminist theory and criticism are essential in such an ambiguous and tension-filled arena and allow for a productive albeit contentious textual comparison between all four novels.

As mentioned above, South African feminist work is fueled by hope for a gender progressive nation as well as the often-violent realities of a nation still enmeshed in white hetero-patriarchal ideology. Following the demise of the apartheid regime, feminist activism and scholarship took on a new tenor as the newly developed constitution created space for women and men to imagine new subjectivities, new forms of agency (Motsemme 910), and to dismantle the ideological structures upon which notions of difference were built (McEwan 54). As such, certain theoretical tropes often appear in South African feminist scholarship and gender theory. These tropes indicate not only the theme of hope and continued struggle, they also illustrate some of the unique specificities of the South African context. Since these tropes are reflected in the primary texts and because I aim to avoid the all-too-common mistake of imposing western scholarship on a non-western
context, South African feminist scholarship, along with black feminist scholarship of the African diaspora, heavily inform my reading of the primary texts.

One of the tropes that I see repeated in South African feminist scholarship and in the primary texts is the above-mentioned notion of imagining new subjectivities. This is, at times, articulated in the sense of a historical moment: “27 April 1994 was an invitation to envision ourselves differently than we had up until that point” (Gqola, What is Slavery to Me? 2). It is also articulated as part of the conceptual innovations that erupt from such dramatic political and social change: “in expanding the conceptual tools to understand the workings of silences…this …reveals the invisible but agentic work of the imagination to reconfigure our social worlds” (Motsemme 910). Often, the process of imagination is couched as both a physical and ideological departure. On the one hand, this is a departure from “apartheid legislation [that] was unabashedly fixated on the regulation of bodies” so that, “in a democratic South Africa, the body had to be imagined anew: as free, mobile, flourishing, exploratory” (Gqola “A peculiar Place for a Feminist” 120). On the other hand, colonialism and apartheid were profoundly ideological projects that not only engineered a white supremacist state but also imposed apartheid era femininities and black masculinities that were imbued with white heteropatriarchal ideology and “appropriated…conservative heteropatriarchal African traditions” in order to justify the continued domination of black South Africans (Ratele “Contesting ‘Traditional’ Masculinity” 339). As such, a departure from the kinds of identities imposed by such a society must also be ideological. A post-apartheid feminist imagination then sees queer sexuality, for example, in its “disruptive and creative potential…within [the remaking] of tradition and culture” (Ratele “Contesting ‘Traditional’ Masculinities” 340) and an “agentic existence” for women in post-apartheid society.

---

60 Cheryl McEwan comments on the resentment that South Africans feel toward this tendency of imposing western theoretical and methodological models on the South African context (48).

61 For more on apartheid femininities see Gqola (2016)
Along with the possibilities for imagining oneself anew—or reconfiguration—comes inevitably a need for new “critical vocabularies” for, and theorizations of, “gender figurations” in the post-apartheid context (Gqola “Whirling worlds?” 5). The specificities of South African gender, race and sexuality politics mean that often western feminist and gender theories lack the vocabulary to articulate emerging gender subjectivities and the contexts from which they materialize. From new theorizations of hair and beauty politics (Erasmus 15) and critical re-theorizations of iconic South African symbols of gender stereotyping (Gqola *What is Slavery to Me?* 61, Magubane 816) to extrapolating critical concepts from other scholarship and creative work (Gqola “The Difficult Task” 61, Wicomb 5, Boswell 1), South African feminist scholars not only search for new critical vocabularies, but they also find it in local creativity and knowledge production.

While it also true that South African feminists have expanded their own politics and theorizations with womanist and feminist scholarship outside of South Africa, including African American, Caribbean and other African scholars, there remains a refreshing commitment to local knowledge and experience. What this means is that South African femininities and masculinities62 are conceptualized as multiple, fluid and ever-changing. They are changeable depending on a myriad of intersecting factors such as race, sexuality, class, location, age and the like. It means that despite the realities of continued forms of oppression of women, trans-gender people and non-conforming men and women, the notion of hegemonic masculinities and traditional masculinities must be continuously historicized, contested and problematized. It means that alternative and oppositional gender subjectivities that

---

62 For this discussion of masculinities as they are represented and imagined in the primary texts, I draw particularly on the work of leading masculinities scholar Kopano Ratele. Ratele employs the following conceptualization of masculinities in his research: “masculinities are culturally constructed…instead of one single masculinity there are plural masculinities, differing from place to place, historically changeable, located within intersecting social divisions, co-constituted with other social practices, and centrally defined by power. Masculinities are not biological, though the body is key in the expression of gender and sexualities. They are not a fixed set of role expectations, although society expects those identified as males and females to behave in particular ways. Even though men (and sometimes women) ‘identify with’ particular masculinities, masculinities are not simply identities. Primarily they are about discursive material relations characterized by power” (2014a: 332-3).
challenge those hegemonies emerge daily. Finally, it means that more and more artists and intellectuals interrogate the ways in which various spaces, like the domestic space, are gendered.

**Gendered Homes**

Conventionally, when we speak of home, we speak of an idealized space of safety, intimacy, and comfort. However, historically, black authors from Africa and the diaspora have deconstructed conventional interpretations of home and represented it as a “contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition [,] alienation,” and “displacement” (Davies 113). And in the work of black women authors specifically, the mythologized concept of home is deconstructed and replaced with the more complex realities of pain and healing, love, fear, and escape (Davies 21). In the South African context, home, prior to 1994, could be said to serve as a stage for the spectacular representations of oppression described by Njabulo Ndebele in “Rediscovery of the Ordinary” (1986). Home, in literature under apartheid, often meant transience, exile, lack of ownership, and a perilous existence. The notion of homelessness seems more common when thinking of home (and nation) under a colonial and apartheid regime.63

Thus, the concept required revisiting following the 1994 transition of power. Ndebele, in his own attempts to imagine the post-apartheid nation, placed the concept of home under interrogation just two years following the 1994 elections. At the center of his query was the question of what home could mean in a post-apartheid context when so many lost their homes under the former regime. And if by implication the newly established nation anchors the notion of home in nation, he asks, how can there be space for intimacy (1)? Carli Coetzee’s more recent work on similar problematics indicates that these questions have yet to be fully answered. With South Africa’s

---

majority citizens suddenly able to claim the nation as home but simultaneously unable to “point to a home that they associate with rootedness” (Ndebele 2), the implications of home in a post-apartheid world is a mass of fluid uncertainties. Black South Africans, especially, attempt to build new concepts of home even as they historicize what it meant in the past. Home, indeed, serves as a useful avenue through which to explore the broader issues of gender and space in South Africa.

The primary texts engage creatively with this conundrum, as home is a contested and shifting space. Playing several, often contradictory, roles home may be initially read as a subjective concept dependent on individual artistic preference. For the narrator-protagonist in Room 207, for example, the apartment is a “refuge,” a “safe haven during the lighted dark night of dream city” (Moele 13). However, the meaning of home differs for Fikile Twala in Coconut, who sees it as a “hole” where one dares not even sleep because, “you lose all control and are vulnerable to the many monsters of the night” (Matlwa 109). Home, for her character, is a dangerous space, where one’s safety is never guaranteed.

In several examples, home is also a transient space. This is an important allusion to apartheid history: when black South Africans faced forced removals and were not legally allowed to own their homes. Indeed, room 207 is home but not home. The six male protagonists imagine it as a temporary locale, impermanent until they can afford better: “We stay there, although we don’t really say we stay there: it’s been a temporary setting, since and until…I can’t tell. What I do know is that we have spent eleven years not really staying there. Matome always says, ‘It is our locker room away from home baba’” (Moele 13). Meanwhile, Fikile refuses to see the shack where she lives with her Uncle as more than a temporary residence until she leaves with no plans to return (Matlwa 116); the township houses where Bafana
currently “stays” in *After Tears* is a mere convenience-commodity, easily sold when there is a financial need (Mhlongo 26).\(^{64}\)

In opposition to these, *The Madams* (2006), a novel engaging with South Africa’s newly emergent black middle and upper-middle class, imagines a new kind of black South African home, one that in its description implies comfort, modern neoliberal values, and permanence. The narrator-protagonist, Thandi, describes her home as set in a middle class, increasingly diverse neighborhood (Wanner 12), complete with the “white girl” (Wanner xiii) who she intends to hire as a maid. Thandi’s home houses the “perfect family that we were” (Wanner 37), a tongue-in-cheek hyperbole foreshadowing the dismantling of illusions held about her domestic situation. Partially because of the irreverent, tongue-in-cheek tone and the satirical overtones, home remains a contested space—its meaning shifting throughout the novel.

Despite these seemingly discordant threads, a clearer picture of home as a cohesive, albeit fluid, contested and ambiguous trope emerges from the three texts that focus on the interior. Home functions predictably as a metaphor for the nation but somewhat unpredictably takes on gender as a major ‘domestic/national’ issue. Additionally, it is the site of complex questions with regard to intimacy and its possibilities, but invitations for intimacy are disrupted with strictly policed borders of heteropatriarchal structures and discourses. Problematic nationalistic attitudes are entangled with misogynistic views and broader interrogations of interior/exterior dichotomies play themselves out in and around the home. What stands out most keenly in these various representations of home is the pivotal role that gender plays in each of these stories. In these novels, we find interesting deviations from conventional representations of the domestic space—often gendered feminine at

---

\(^{64}\) *After Tears*’s representation of home has more of a focus on the exterior spaces that surround the township homes (i.e. Uncle Nyawana’s vegetable garden in the backyard and the social gatherings which occur in the front yard). I read this focus as Mhlongo’s interest in capturing the flavors and gender dynamics of the township as an urban space as a whole rather than the domestic space as such. Therefore, I will not foreground this novel in this section, but will give it more critical attention in the next section.
various levels: we find intentionally masculinist spaces, spaces which shift back and forth, and nuanced understandings of how the interior of the home itself is made up of bordered spaces whose meanings shift fluidly. In short, home is a gendered space, which has broader implications for the connections between the home and the nation, intimacy, as well as hope for gender progressivism in post-apartheid South Africa.

One compelling deviation from conventional representations of the home is the construction of, what Richard S. Phillips calls,” a masculinist geography” (591) in the domestic space. By representing the home as the space “where masculinities are mapped” (Phillips 591), Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207 moves the conversation about post-apartheid masculinities and South Africa as a nation in a slightly new direction. Conventionally, adventures into the wilderness (Phillips 591), venues of political struggle, the street, and other public places serve as the site for the construction of masculine subjectivities. Indeed, Mhlongo’s After Tears follows this convention more closely in that the narrator-protagonist’s confrontations with manhood occur outside of the home and often on the streets of the township. Room 207 enters into a wildly problematic territory with this fictionalized masculinist geography and risks heavy criticism, if not outright dismissal, for the sexism and misogyny in the text. However, it also offers important insights into some of the challenges and uncertainties surrounding post-apartheid emerging masculinities.

The narrator-protagonist, Noko, provides a cartographic description of room 207 as introduction to both the domestic space as well as to the novel. Noko invites the reader in:

Open the door. You are welcomed by a small passage with a white closet on your left, full of clothes and innumerable handwritten papers that are more valuable to us than our lives. Bags fill the rest of the space and on the top, there is a Chinese radio, a very expensive keyboard, a trumpet, two hotplates and about a thousand condoms. The floor is wooden, giving away the fact that this hotel was built when wood was the in-thing, fashionable. It needs help. A
door on your right leads into the bathroom. Open the door. The place is rotting. (13)

This passage is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, the repetition of the instruction to “open the door” places emphasis on entrances or the border between the exterior and the interior. In both cases Moele draws our attention to a notion of safety or privacy within an interior space and the ability to enter into that interior space. On the other hand, his deliberate use of cartographic language reconfigures room 207, similar to his mapping of Hillbrow (discussed in Chapter One) and the spatial dynamics therein. In both cases, remapping also means redefinition (Manase 89). Mapping the room emphasizes its smallness and provides physical evidence of the poverty and decay that characterize the space; however, it also inscribes a certain kind of ownership evidenced by the closet occupied by clothes and papers, and other spaces which are filled with “bags, a Chinese radio, keyboard, trumpet” etc. As such, the mapping of room 207 takes on a similar symbolism as mapping the neighborhood. In mapping the neighborhood, we see a new generation of black South Africans and Africans from elsewhere exhibiting a new kind of agency in their ability to “create the city space” (Putter 65). Likewise, Noko is able to create space in this former apartheid era hotel. The emphasis on established borders and the repeated language of mapping indicate, moreover, the close symbolic connection between the home and the nation.

That connection is emphasized when Noko welcomes the imagined reader: “come in, come in. This is the study cum dining room cum sitting room, you can sit on this single bed or that double bed, or you can just find a spot and make yourself comfortable anywhere you prefer, even on the floor. Brother, you are home” (Moele 15). It is common knowledge, in black communities, that the appellation “brother” indicates that the addressee shares the same race and/or ethnicity. One can cautiously assume that Noko is addressing another black male and that he comradely term of address coupled with “you are home” indicates that room 207 is a space, similar to the nation, dominated and controlled by black men (69). More importantly, by
applying gender to an anonymous reader, Moele suggests that the textual space along with the imagined space of the apartment is gendered male. This parallels Noko’s later edict that “now Johannesburg is under the control of the black man” (69) implying that like his home, the nation is a masculinist space. Or read another way, home is symbolically equivalent to the nation. This is a key equivocation to make in the South African context, as Njabulo Ndebele puts it shortly after the democratic transition: “perhaps home for us can only be some concept of belonging to some historic process; some sense of historic justice assuming, on the day of liberation, the physical space of a country…home became the experience of the reality of national boundaries” (1). Given South Africa’s history of enforced homelessness, disenfranchisement and complex mix of myth and reality with regard to violent black emasculation, Moele has accordingly imagined a masculinist space—where masculinities are mapped and cultivated.

Taking my cue from Ndebele and Coetzee’s interest in home and intimacy, I would like to draw on the concept of intimacy as a tool with which to interrogate the novel’s masculinist domestic space as well as the domestic spaces which follow in this section. In elucidating this concept, I rely on the geopolitical work of Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli (2014), which emphasizes the importance of a “ politicized understanding of intimacy” (344). As such, I am interested in the “ ambivalence of intimacy,” “ intimate violence,” and intimacy as a “ set of spatial relations … , a mode of interaction, and a set of practices” (Pain and Staeheli 344-5).

Thus, I would suggest that intimacy is closely linked in Room 207 to the past. In these fictionalized spaces, intimacy results from lack of personal space and overcrowding which, Sam Raditlhalo reminds us, “have been the bane of black South Africa for years, in single sex hostels and roughly constructed two-room township houses” (95). The tightly packed atmosphere in room 207, exemplified in the six characters’ sleeping arrangements—“ Matome and D’Nice were sharing the double bed with Modishi. I was on the sponge with Molamo and the Zulu-boy was on the single bed” (19)—thus alludes to that past. This allusion adds layers to the
construction of home as a post-apartheid literary trope. By linking contemporary living conditions to the past, Moele suggests that contemporary racial and gender dynamics within those spaces are also linked to the those of the past.

Moele’s grim description of the lack of personal space and overcrowded living conditions “reflects a society in transformation” (Radithalo 95). However, while I agree with Radithalo’s assessment, I propose that Moele’s allusion to the migrant labor hostel or a small township home also speaks to the effects of apartheid era spatial control and its gendered implication. It suggests that any understanding of both the domestic and national spaces, and the possibilities for intimacy in them, must take into consideration how the scars left by apartheid affect and color the way we understand intimacy in this context. In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics, a brief discussion of South Africa’s migrant labor hostels follows.

The migrant labor hostels are a central part of the legacy of apartheid in that they were crucial to the migrant labor economy and to the apartheid regime’s policies of strict racial segregation and domination (Ramphele 15). Hostels, a “euphemism in South Africa for single-sex labour compounds,” were implemented over time as part of government policy and through colonial laws passed between 1879 and 1935 (Ramphele 1). They were solidified by the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945, the Group Areas Act of 1966 and the Slums Act of 1934 (Ramphele 18). In accordance with these laws, the apartheid regime forcibly removed black South Africans and placed them on Native American style reservations called “Homelands” or “Bantustans.” These were usually desolate land in terms of farming or cattle raising and forced many men to return to the cities as migrants, looking for work as laborers in the mines in order to support themselves and their families. As mentioned

---

65 Ramphele’s description of these laws states that the Black Consolidation Act of 1945 “hampered the development of housing schemes with employer participation because the requirements of permanent residence were only met after ten years of uninterrupted service by individual aspirant house owners.” Also, the “Slums Act excluded African areas from its provisions meaning that specifications of the Housing Code such as provision of ceilings, proper flooring, damp-proof walls and internal doors are thus not binding” (18).
briefly in Chapter One, Ramphele found that the implications of the rise of migrant labor hostels were that black South African men who moved to the cities were refused permanent residence and thus were forced to live under the fixed identity of migrant and all that it connoted. Part of the implication of that fixed identity was that the hostels were neither considered permanent residences nor did South African authorities allow these men’s wives and children to leave their “homelands” and move to the cities with them. This enforced familial separation, a bachelor lifestyle, and accelerated the breakdown of many black South African families (Ramphele 4-5). Often hostel dwellers internalized the damage done socially, intellectually, and psychologically as a result of these circumstances and, up until the publication of Ramphele’s study in 1993, many struggled to see women as “belonging” in the urban environment, the hostel, or the township dwellings (Ramphele 111).

Physically the hostels were a picture of squalor and bleakness. Ramphele observes, “one is confronted by drab structures set in equally unattractive public spaces...There are no pavements, lawns or trees to be seen in the hostel environment...litter overflows from neglected bins, malnourished dogs sleep in minimal shade provided by car wrecks and other disused objects in need of urgent disposal” (19-20). Inside the hostels, accommodations were limited to what was called a “bedhold” (20): one bed allocated to each worker. This was for all intents and purposes the space that was allocated for various daily activities and thus the notion of home was relegated to nothing more than a single bed (Ramphele 20).

With the history of the migrant labor hostels and the gendered realities of those spaces underpinning Moele’s representation of home in Room 207, the fictionalized space is layered with the complexities of both history and contemporary attempts to construct black subjectivity in a newer and ostensibly freer South Africa. As such, possibilities for intimacy are also layered with a turbulent history and complex memories. These layers manifest in ambivalent and contradictory kinds of intimacy, perhaps most succinctly captured when Noko explains why he and his roommates curse each other: “when I think of cursing I think that it is simply people
connecting with each other. They have lost their personal space and when they share their personal space then cursing becomes a way out” (Moele 108). Thus, the loss of personal space brings about a form of connection that is also somehow about disassociation—”a way out.” The dual processes of simultaneously connecting and disassociating from one another suggests that the lack of privacy poses a barrier to conventional notions of intimacy such as emotional closeness and attachment.

Yet, further reading of the opening scene in Room 207 suggests that intimacy in the text means “exposure” (Bystrom 339). Exposure in this case has to do with what Bystrom calls “hospitality” (340). This can be seen in the clear welcome the reader receives at the outset of the novel. The narrator-protagonist’s welcome, the invitation to feel at home, implies a certain kind of openness, a willingness to explore the daily private lives of the six friends. In this way, Noko’s character is situated as an informant to the reader on the realities faced by these six young men, reinforcing this sense of exposure. What is exposed is the precarious place intimacy has in this space. To one extent, the novel draws our attention to the complexity of, what Helene Strauss calls, “homo-social intimacy” (81), as it is reflected in the bonds of friendship among the six central male characters. Indeed, the theme of homo-social intimacy can be found in several post-apartheid texts including Zukiswa Wanner’s The Madams, Mtutuzeli Nyoka’s I Speak to the Silent (2004), Angela Makholwa’s Red Ink (2007), Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001), and Futhi Ntshingila’s Shameless (2008). Its prominence evidences the significant role it must play in the restoration of a constructive sense of intimacy at the national level. Strauss describes the male friendships in her reading of masculinity in Mtutuzeli Nyoka’s I Speak to the Silent, for example, as “intermasculine friendship,” “emotionally intimate relationships,” a “compassionate bond,” and “supportive homo-socialities” (81). Her reading indicates the emotional closeness, feelings of safety and security, and a certain kind of freedom that results from the bonds of friendship.

The examples listed above are important for what they suggest about the possibilities for not only intimacy but also for thinking through gender identities
outside of sexuality. In the instance of Room 207, Noko and Matome are “best friends” (Moele 198), suggesting a strong emotional bond between the two. More significant is how intimacy is represented in the novel, including the “kangaroo court … [where], lies and half lies, truth and half-truth, observations and conclusions are all on the table” (Moele 109). One might infer that the novel’s intermasculine intimacy is fostered through both honest dialogue as well as the kind of posturing that is frequently attributed to hegemonic constructions of masculinity. The ambiguity of the passage reflects a similar ambiguity in unpacking how intimacy is cultivated as well as how gender identities work in these spaces. One must question whether intimacy is present because of these shared façades of hegemonic masculinity or through a knowledge and acknowledgment of the performance itself. Similarly, the reader is left to wonder about how masculinity works in these spaces and whether it is about the posturing itself or the vulnerability of shared knowledge of the “lies and half lies, truth and half-truth” (Moele 109).

Additionally, intimacy exists between the six men through the routines of everyday living in close proximity: sleeping (20), eating (172), partying, managing poverty (104) and going through the trials and tribulations of life together. The narrator-protagonist emphasizes those routines of daily existence requesting, “now please count, it’s now twenty-two eleven and at exactly twenty-two twenty-one we will start eating and Modishi, as always, will say a prayer over our food” (172). The accurate predictions with regard to time and the repetition of the phrase “as always” suggests the familiarity that comes from everyday living and the kind of intimacy that grows out of that familiarity. Moreover, Noko informs the reader that as part of the day-to-day these characters pool their resources in order to pay the rent and to buy food; they depend on each other for survival. This kind of dependence speaks to the intimacy brought about by shared struggled and trust. The novel exposes some of these threads of inter-masculine intimacy, inviting readers to reflect upon the various pathways to it outside of stereotypical assumptions about the oversexualized black male. Room 207 also imagines a home that is only for black men. This begs the
question as to why spaces of intimacy among men can only be achieved with the erasure, silencing, and dehumanization of black women.

It follows then, that exposure actually plays itself out in ambiguous ways because it also calls into question if and how other forms of intimacy can be achieved, i.e. inter-gender intimacy. This question is raised in Room 207 in highly sexualized scenarios where the characters have sex in front of and around each other, are unbothered by nudity, and trade sexual partners. In one scene, for instance, Noko describes waking “because Modishi is making love to Lerato. Or, [he is] woken by the track ‘Ooh! Aah!’ from the album Love Anthems, as D’Nice is fiddling with Miss Lebogang the best way he knows how. Not to mention the fact that Matome walks around this place naked every morning like Max the gorilla, applying lotion to his body and looking at himself in the mirror” (108). The presence of an audience during life’s most intimate moments indicates the impossibility of true intimacy in the apartment. Not only is it impossible because of the lack of privacy but attempts to construct a masculinist space—under the control of black men—further limits the possibilities here. At the center of this space are the ideals of hegemonic masculinities requiring various forms of performance from each of the characters along with various attempts at exerting patriarchal control over the women who attempt to enter and move within the space.

In one example, Modishi’s girlfriend Lerato attempts to move through the space without clothes (like Matome) commenting “there is nothing you don’t already know” (108). She is bluntly “put in her place” by Molamo who chastises, “‘you should stop doing that Lerato’ … ‘no don’t Molamo me. I’m not challenging you to an argument here. I’m telling you to stop getting naked in front of us all because we are all not Modishi and you are not my girlfriend” (Moele 108). Molamo’s censure signals three aspects of the gender dynamic in this space. First, it reinforces the attitude that despite her constant presence there and her witnessing the six male residents in intimate moments she does not belong in this space. It also signals how the structures of patriarchy work. There is nothing wrong with Lerato’s nudity while
the men witness her having sex with her boyfriend Modishi—which after all makes her a sexual object. However, for Lerato to expose her body in a non-sexual way, one that emphasizes her as a subject, is unacceptable. Finally, Moele’s word choice is significant in that Molamo’s character is very clear “I’m not challenging you to an argument... I am telling you” (108). His authoritarian tone reinforces not only the masculinist tenor of the space but is an example of the aforementioned echoes of earlier African literature and its stereotypical portrayal of women. Certainly, in this space, Lerato has no voice and is expected to capitulate to male dictation.

Thus, intimacy in room 207 is conditional upon one’s sex. Furthermore, the possibilities for the kind of intimacy imagined by Ndebele are curtailed by the spatial dynamics which deny the subjectivity of women. This is further emphasized when Noko discloses at the end of the novel that two out of the four characters who married physically abuse their wives (203, 209). If we continue to read room 207 as symbolic of the nation then these kinds of scenes, and the violence which follows them, illustrate what is problematic about a masculinist space both domestically and nationally. This means that, aside from issues of overcrowding, poverty, and violent histories of physical and psychological oppression, the innate need for dominance found within patriarchal systems and ideology is one of the greatest barriers to the intimacy of home both at the individual and national level. Moele’s project seems to be an attempt to simultaneously uphold the ideology of a ruling black patriarchy in South Africa and to offer a critique of the failure of that patriarchy to bring about real economic change in the nation. However, we see that in this attempt Room 207 inadvertently reveals the flaws in its own ideology.

While these barriers to intimacy are visible from the male perspective, the insights gained by foregrounding women’s voices inevitably complicate the conversation. As such, our understanding of various forms of intimacy, spatial dynamics and even the connotation of the concept of exposure become more fluid and complex by incorporating violent intimacies as well as intimacy brought about by honesty and emotional support. Moreover, home—as symbolic of the nation—is less
of a safe space as it is represented in Moele’s text and more a dangerous and precarious one.

Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* imagines both conventional and unconventional homes. However, in slight contrast to the black masculinist space imagined in *Room 207*, it represents the perils of a space entrenched in white heteropatriarchy. Although the connection between the domestic space and the nation is not made as clear as in Moele’s novel, there are significant moments in *Coconut* that suggest that the homes represented in the novel are just as symbolic of South Africa as a nation-state. A similar focus on the doorway or border between the exterior and interior of Ofilwe’s (71) and Fikile’s (111) homes and the significance of that border is one example of Matlwa’s interest in questioning long-held assumptions of home and nation. In Fikile’s case, the entrance to her and her uncle’s shack acts as the border between a relatively safe exterior world and the dangers of the interior (111). Meanwhile, for Ofilwe, it is the border between the white upper-middle class exterior world and her blackness (75). In neither case does entering into the interior of the home signify safety and comfort.

In interrogating the home and nation, and intersecting dynamics of race, gender, and class, Matlwa also suggests new ways of thinking about intimacy. There are several similarities between Matlwa and Moele’s projects regarding lack of space and privacy. This is evidenced in Fikile’s offhand comments that she sleeps on a cement floor without proper space for her belongings (117). Further, the two narrator-protagonists also invite the reader into the novel with their frequent deviations from the linear narrative through memories rendered in epistolary-style entries. Marked by italics, these journal entries, invite the reader into the characters’ thoughts, suggesting the kind of intimacy through hospitality and exposure found in *Room 207*. However, the meaning of exposure shifts unmasking the hidden or silenced truths of intimacy: intimate violence, sexualized violence, fear, and control.

In this vein, *Coconut* “exposes” oft-silenced patterns of patriarchal domination, gender-based violence, sexual molestation, and other realities for black
South African women and girls. The concept of ‘exposure’ takes on a political tenor reminiscent of Carol Hanisch’s now well-known feminist arguments that the “personal is political” (Hanisch http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html). Matlwa significantly argues that domestic spaces need not be overtly masculinist in order for the violence of white heteropatriarchy to ensue or to characterize that space. In Ofilwe’s more conventional home, for example, her mother, Gemina, seems to dominate the domestic space with her voice reverberating throughout the house (75-78) while Ofilwe’s father is symbolically most at home outside of the house:

through the window I see Daddy in the garden…Standing in the heart of it in his Sunday suit, where all the mazes lead and where a clay boy wees into a stream of stones and pebbles below…Oh, but how picturesque it looks, Daddy, at home in the garden, framed by the window’s silk curtains that are draped like ball gowns over the wrought iron rods. (79)

The symbolism of this image is two-fold. Because it directly follows Gemina’s dominance of the inside space, it establishes the dynamic of father’s place outside the home. However, by creating the image of a stereotypical upper-class English garden, complete with the statue of the boy peeing and the maze which are framed by the ballgown curtains, Matlwa suggests that it is Ofilwe’s father who is complicit in and subscribes to the aspirations of white heteropatriarchy. This juxtaposed with Ofilwe’s grandmother’s censure of her daughter Gemina’s grief and anger at her husband’s infidelity, “Divorce? You must never…Where do you think you will go if you leave John? Back home? Where, Gemina? Where do you have to go? What will become of all of you? Huh? Nothing. Without him, my girl, you is nothing” (13)—illustrates how patriarchal violence intersects. These intersections illustrate black patriarchal aspirations to assume hierarchical places in society, but also how society both silences and oppresses black women; reflected in Gemina’s mother’s reality check to her daughter: “without him... you is nothing.”

In the second half of *Coconut*, the reader is exposed to the intensity of the violence found in male dominated spaces. For Fikile, living with her discontented
Uncle has meant that she, similar to Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is the body upon which shame, racial oppression, and self-hatred are deposited. Fikile’s character embodies several intertextual references to Pecola Breedlove, a well-known symbol of “internalized racism” (Roye 215). Matlwa’s reference to Morrison’s novel is likewise seen in the two characters’ similarity in circumstances: their subjection to incestuous sexual abuse, and the shame and self-loathing that accompany it. Additionally, Matlwa alludes to Morrison’s use of blue eyes as a symbol of whiteness through Fikile’s use of “the dainty little emerald-green coloured lenses [and] lemon-light skin lightener cream” (117), both of which contribute to her transformation from the “naïve orphan child” to “the charming young waitress with pretty green eyes and soft, blow-in-the-wind, caramel-blond hair (pinned in perfectly to make it look real)” (117). Matlwa’s reference to Morrison’s novel emphasizes the intimacy of violence in the domestic space and the shame that accompanies it. In other words, this kind of violence is entangled with trust, confidence and is executed by those closest to its victims physically and emotionally. Moreover, it is ironically carried out in the most intimate space that is supposed to signify safety and comfort.

Home is a space of peril for Fikile’s character and has contributed to her alienation from her identity as a black woman. Consider a few excerpts, written in the above-mentioned italics, from her description of her molestation at the hands of her uncle:

*I’d be sitting on the kitchen floor still in my uniform writing out my mathematics or practicing my English readings when I would hear him dragging his feet through the dirt past the Tshabalala’s house to our one-bedroom hovel at the end of the Tshabalala’s garden...so I would close my books, clear the floor and stand facing the front door so I could see what kind of expression he had on his face when he walked in. And if it was that sorry look...that sorry, pathetic ‘Oh, woe is me’ look, then I would know that tonight would be one of those nights when it would happen.*
I would try to cheer him up with all my might...I would stretch my little arms up and onto his back and then march him around the room, away from the bedroom door, singing... I would push at his back, marching and stomping my little feet with all the stompingness that they had in them, throwing my tiny voice up into the heavens...

It was only a single bed, so when Uncle would turn his massive form to face me, I’d be stripped of the thin covers that were my only protection. Uncle would always begin with, ‘Oh, Fikile, why must life be so hard?’...I never did answer him and I don’t think he ever expected me to. Uncle would then take my little hands and gently slip it into the loose tracksuit pants he wore at night. (Matlwa 111-13; italics in original)

Through spatial orientation the reader is apprised of the shifting geographies of safety, fear, and uncertainty in the domestic space. In this passage, the dynamic of space changes so that the kitchen, normally a public space, is Fikile’s only opportunity for privacy whereas the bedroom, ostensibly a space of safety, is dangerous and to be avoided. Frequently, Fikile narrates that she sits in the kitchen when alone in the house and later that she dresses in the kitchen (118). Conversely, when describing her desperate attempts to avoid her Uncle’s sexual attention, she purposely “marches him away from the bedroom door” and later avoids the bedroom as long as she can in the hopes that her Uncle will fall asleep before she climbs into the bed they share. The comment that only “thin covers” (113) were her protection speaks to the perilousness of the bed and the absence of any recourse or protection from sexual violence.

The spatial details also illustrate the complexity with which spaces are produced by and reflect the psychological violence enacted by heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. This is further clarified in Matlwa’s rhetoric, which connects the spatial dynamics of the interior/exterior spatiality of the shack to Fikile’s rising tension and fear. The connection is illustrated in the description of the young character’s hyper-awareness of the sound of “him dragging his feet through the dirt”
and the tension of “wait[ing] in front of the door” (112) for her Uncle to come in and, once in the house the emphasis on movement and space as indications of heightened danger and fear (112).

Matlwa further employs repetition of certain phrases and formulations as a means of drawing the readers’ attention to layers of violence in this scene. Repetitions remind the reader that this is a memory from childhood—“all the stompingness”, “my little arms” “I would try to cheer him up. I would try to cheer him up with all my might” (112)—that emphasizes the child’s innocence, fear, and confusion. The wording reflects the size difference between Fikile and her uncle and signals age and gender as intersecting sites of vulnerability. It also signals the psychological impact of child molestation at the hands of a trusted family member. Simultaneously, the repetition of the phrase “the sorry pathetic look” implies, similar to Toni Morrison’s project in The Bluest Eye, a connection between sexual molestation and colonization and/or racial oppression. Fikile’s uncle himself is a product of apartheid era structures of oppression and white condescension. The “look” on his face reflects his failure to succeed at university and disappointments of his unrealized potential (127). In this sense, one might read sexual violence against women as a reaction to colonial and apartheid era emasculation and infantilization of black men.

However, while Matlwa’s text may fall in line with a long legacy of using the trope of gender-based violence as a means of implicating colonial/apartheid violence, I would also argue that Matlwa, similar to Grace Musila’s work, dismantles the problematic rhetoric of black emasculation. To reiterate our earlier discussion, the “emasculation thesis…reduc[es] colonial subjugation to a masculine castration anxiety” and links general freedom to the “restoration of African manhood” (153). This particular line of thinking permeates not only Coconut but Room 207 as well, serving as a justification for violence against women and a

---

disregard for black women’s experiences and subjectivities. Therefore, Matlwa’s choice of phrasing: “I hated that Uncle was such a sorry and pathetic and weak man and hated even more that I was the only one who was able to comfort him” (114) links castration anxiety with larger intersectional constructions of black women and girls as available receptacles of black male frustration, shame and anger as well as white supremacist and misogynistic discourses. These discourses equate black skin and especially black women with dirt, hyper-sexuality and moral degeneracy. The notion of comfort which implies, among other things, an ease or alleviation of personal feelings of grief or distress, implies that Fikile is a means of finding relief. She is, in this sense, made the vessel of everyone else’s shame and the “victim of her [black] femaleness” (Nfah-Abbenyi 68).

Nonetheless, I would caution against the hasty conclusions that are drawn with regard to Fikile’s character (Spencer 76). It is true that she disassociates from her identity as a black woman, insisting that in the future she will not be “black, dirty and poor” but “white, rich and happy” (Matlwa 118). It is also true that Fikile’s assumption that she is “dirty” directly correlates with common feelings of shame that follow sexual violence. However, this is a character who chose to live in a kind of exile in her own home, to move from the single bed that she shared with her uncle to the hard, cold cement floor in order put a stop to the sexual abuse (Matlwa 115). While her narrative reinforces the sense that home for black women is often one of pain, exile, and alienation, it also is about agency and choice and refusing to be a victim. Enough emphasis cannot be placed on the significance of that one act of defiance on the part of Fikile. It is reminiscent of the bravery of many who make the hard choice to leave an abusive home in order to survive. Moreover, Coconut reminds us, with the protagonist’s experiences of exile and alienation of the “resonant weight of ‘home’ as a metaphorical structure for thinking of the nation” (Samuelson 131).

67 Scott offers a contemporary reading of incest in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Her argument(ation) that Pecola’s character is a “depository for racist discourse that equates black skin with moral degeneracy” also resonates in Fikile’s case (88).
More importantly, if we think about Fikile’s character with more nuance then we can also see how Matlwa’s novel engages Desiree Lewis’s point that, in the context of the national space, “women’s citizenship is mediated by their subordination to men and their symbolic roles” (38). Fikile’s character adds to the growing cache of women’s voices that critique the national space when it comes to gender and gender-based violence. Because the pre-1994 conversations about oppression were often reduced to racial oppression and ‘required’ racial solidarity in order to successfully defeat the apartheid regime, gender-based violence and other forms of gendered oppressions were both silenced and erased from the national narrative (Gunne 2013). Moreover, as Lewis eloquently states, “the extent to which masculine ‘dignity’ (as power and control) may be predicated on women’s indignity and silence continues to be a disturbing element in South African gender politics” (43). Consequently, Matlwa’s text adds to a growing feminist project of not only exposure or a refusal to be silent, but also a refusal to buy into the rhetoric of black emasculation and the mobilization of violent masculinities as a necessary avenue to freedom: “yes, five years since that night I decided it was not my responsibility to lull Uncle to sleep by rubbing his dick” (Matlwa 116). This is a game-changing line because the disavowing of responsibility and refusal suddenly make the text not about being a South Africanized imitation of Morrison work, as important as that intertextual moment is, but a new and important position taken by Matlwa that speaks directly and defiantly to the increasing associations of dominant manhood with national sovereignty.

Part of the various feminist projects in the South African intellectual and creative milieu is the imagining of new kinds of feminist spaces or at least the possibility of feminist spaces. The Madams is one example of this endeavor, offering several representations of the domestic space. Within those representations, the novel proposes that in the face of patriarchal oppression and containment, feminist spaces can be found or created. The novel does not exhibit the clear connection between home and nation as Room 207 or even Coconut. However, the novels’ common engagement with the gendered nature of both spaces and the contextual significance
of home in South Africa means that at some level the concept resonates in all of these texts as a microcosm for the nation.

*The Madams* adds the nuance of black women’s experiences and geographies to the notion of home. Thandi, the narrator-protagonist, is ostensibly happy with her domestic life. While not rich, she and her husband are both educated and enjoy flourishing careers as a marketing executive and a physician respectively. She has the means to hire a maid and lives in a spacious house in a middle to upper-middle class neighborhood. The book opens boldly with Thandi remarking “I love my life. I love my cute, smart-ass-five-year-old son, Hintsa. I love his witty, beer-gut-lugging father and my significant other, Mandla” (Wanner ix). However, Thandi’s contentment is quickly qualified with a tongue-in-cheek reference to the well-known superwoman narrative that drives expectations of women in general and black women specifically: “I am tired of having to be Superslave at the office, a Supermom to my son and a Superslut to my man. I am tired of the fact that if I so much as indicate that I need ‘Me’ time, I have somehow fallen short of the high standards set for me as a modern woman” (Wanner ix). Thandi’s reference to the “coercive myth” of the superwoman, situates this text in conversation with both historical roles and post-1994 expectations of a “persona whose apparent energy, authority and defiance of conventional femininity excludes spaces for personal choices and is underpinned by overwhelming social obligations and exhausting demands” (Lewis 39). By entering that conversation, Wanner also indicates her engagement with the complexities of black women’s subjectivities in the broader South African context.

The novel is thus framed with the problematic of a complex combination of expectations and roles set for the historical superwoman persona and the newly configured New South African Woman (NSAW). Pumla Dineo Gqola explains that the NSAW emerged as one possibility among many for departure from “the intersections of post-apartheid class, gender, and race aspirations” (120). As such, it “signaled both a departure from hegemonic apartheid femininities and an attempt to imagine the kind of agentic existence women might aspire to in a free country” (120).
However, as Gqola intimates, the trope of the NSAW reveals an “ambivalent” figure: one who, on the one hand, disrupts hegemonic constructions of patriarchal discourse and, on the other hand, is simultaneously complicit in conventional gender roles and expectations. She is defined thusly:

The “New South African Woman” is a working, urban, upwardly mobile woman. She has a career, and she is ambitious and driven. She has smooth skin, straight shiny hair and “tastefully” manicured nails, and an arched brow...as an embodied, consuming, heterosexual subject, the NSAW lives in the suburbs, is a cisgendered heterosexual woman, aspires to reproductive marriage, two cars, and travel outside the continent for business and leisure. (Gqola 123)

Zukiswa Wanner thus wonders how the NSAW navigates those roles and expectations, coupled with the narrative of women’s liberation and empowerment in the new South Africa and her own individual needs and desires. These exist in clear tension with and, partially, as a result of the realities of continued patriarchal and heteronormative discourse and ideology.68

This tension is part of what plays itself out in the home throughout the novel. Thandi claims early on that Mandla is a “‘renaissance man’ who shares the housework and helps care for Hintsa” (Wanner x). However, gender progressivism is precarious, depending on who enters the domestic space. The narrator-protagonist relays this in her usual conversational tone: “unfortunately this is only true when none of his relatives or his macho, mooching friends from ekasi are visiting. When they are around, I have to play my ‘womanly role’ of cooking, cleaning, and going to buy beer for ‘the boyz’” (Wanner x). Wanner, similar to Mhlongo, seems to associate archaic sexist ideas with class. Her word choice is indicative as mooching indicates a

---

68 According to Gqola (2016), the envisioning of the post-apartheid body and civil society (the body-politic) was a gendered process. Gender progressivists were ambitious in their efforts to push through legislation that ensured a gender equal and gender-progressive nation (120). Earlier, however, Gqola (2011) discusses the “South African contradiction” which juxtaposes the strides made at the level of legislation juxtaposed with the realities of misogynistic violence and various forms of gender-oppression on the ground (6).
lack of money and thus a need to benefit from her and Mandla’s success. Moreover, class in this case is associated with location as Thandi points out that these men are from the township. Wanner’s direct style is in evidence here and one can be certain that the reader is meant to understand that Wanner is being deliberately provocative. Indeed, her witty ironic tone is never far from the surface as single quotation marks around “womanly role” indicate her impatience for previous gender constructions but also her determination to find humor in what she sees as men’s need to believe that they are in control. However, this is not to suggest that Wanner’s feminism is not to be taken seriously. Rather, I would argue that she uses humor to make it more palatable. Indeed, the novel, in similar tones, highlights and critiques the ways in which patriarchal ideology and discourse are passed on from one generation to the next as Mandla’s comments are solely directed at his son—“‘boy I told you not to pay attention to the senseless words of women’” (Wanner 32). This chauvinist caution suggests that Thandi’s domestic space is unstable and her agency and subjectivity in it dubious. At the same time, Thandi retains some control over her domestic space as she is able to remove herself from the forces of patriarchy as symbolized by her husband and his friends and enjoy a ‘room of her own’: “in a huff, I took Hintsa to our room and locked the door” (32).

Significantly, The Madams uses the stories of Thandi and her friends, Nosizwe and Lauren, to suggest that Mandla’s occasional chauvinism and Thandi’s occasional capitulation to it operate on a larger spectrum of patriarchal control within the domestic space. Wanner raises the subject of domestic abuse very differently than Matlwa. Rather than allowing the domestic abuse to be a secret kept behind closed doors, Wanner constructs it as a “spectacle” (120) on her friend Lauren’s front yard. As neighbors, Thandi and Lauren’s houses are separated yet also connected by a wall that serves as their meeting place for “gossip” and laughter (63). That connection is politicized in a scene in which Lauren’s husband Michael is violently beating his wife. Thandi’s visceral reaction to the sight of her friend being beaten is framed in feminist politics of empathy and solidarity (120). The scene turns even more spectacular as Thandi begins to beat Michael, initially to make him stop beating her
friend and then in a blind rage, as she becomes complicit in the violence of the spectacle (120). The connections between the two houses, embodied in the wall, is clear. This scene along with the growing visibility of Thandi’s domestic worker, Marita (a survivor of domestic abuse) suggest that violence operates on a variety of levels in the home. Wanner argues through these various connections that Mandla’s contemptuous comment about women’s senseless words and Lauren’s physical abuse sit on a long spectrum of patriarchal control and domination.

Moreover, Thandi is the voice of Wanner’s feminist politics with regard to domestic abuse. Her rage and fury—coupled with her feeling as if she were the target of the blows aimed at Lauren, and the realization that she was also “partaking in violence” (120)—reinforce important points with regard to women’s solidarity and resistance to violence and its perpetuation. The shift from concealing Lauren’s abuse behind closed doors to its exposure on the front lawn is not accidental. Here Wanner effectively envisions what it might look like if the lines between private and public were blurred and issues such as domestic abuse and gender-based violence were taken up in the public arena.

Notwithstanding these examples of the ongoing issues of patriarchal violence and control in both the home and the nation, Wanner successfully imagines constructive intimacy and subsequently feminist liberatory spaces in her novel. In fact, the intimacy of friendship is easily accessed in The Madams as Thandi makes clear early on that Nosizwe and Lauren are her “Girls” (xi) and part of her “family …on this side of Gauteng” (68). Moreover, the bond between the three women is at the forefront of the novel, giving textual space for the development of their relationship through fighting and making up and mutual support through emotionally traumatic times. Through the kind of homo-social intimacy described above, feminist spaces can be imagined. These manifest for example in “Saturday Brunch” at Thandi’s house. Not only can the three central characters eat drink and be merry during brunch, but they can also (albeit briefly) cultivate a feminist and feminine space in which they can speak and act out their subjectivities free from patriarchal
dominance. Saturday brunch is a “women’s world” from which Thandi’s husband Mandla knows to “tactfully excuse himself” and where the “girls” can discuss, among other things, “feminist and gender politics” (172). Thus, home, in The Madams, is a “nexus of intimacy” as the novel “explor[es] new terrains of connection and disavowal between women and women, and women and men within domestic structures both surprisingly consistent and newly configured” (Samuelson 134). However, even in this novel intimacy is fleeting and uncertain as those feminist spaces also reveal their own conflicts and oppressions, exemplified in the physical fight between Thandi, Nosizwe and Lauren (Wanner 45)

What becomes clear in these readings is that the home is a space of incongruities, contradictions, and tensions. Additionally, intimacy is a complex and uncertain process both in the South African home and in South Africa as a nation. These are highlighted especially when foregrounding the voices of women writers and women characters who imagine or describe various experiences of home and thus engage realities which have previously been silenced. The fictional representations of home examined in this section illustrate the kinds of tensions that arise when various forms and iterations of intimacy converge in one space. That tension raises questions about how intimacy can co-exist in a space where there is also alienation, displacement, and exile; how one space can claim liberation from the structures of control and dominance while it is connected to another that is gripped by those same structures; and whether or not exposure is a true conduit to intimacy. These questions are not only pertinent for discussions of the domestic space but remain relevant for the post-apartheid national space as well. The dominance of these spaces with violent mechanisms of control also raises the question of how women and men are able to carve out alternative subjectivities within them.
The Space of the Subject

In her eloquent piece “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” Audre Lorde asserts:

For each of us women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, “beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness” and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (37)

Several elements in the cited lines are significant for this next section, which is fundamentally interested in spatial politics and gender subjectivity. This section will discuss the various ways that the primary texts imagine and represent new gendered subjectivities within spaces that, the previous chapter illustrates, remain entrenched in apartheid era ideology, discourses, and structures of white heteropatriarchy. I have titled this section “The Space of the Subject,” borrowing the phrase from Kathleen Kirby’s theorization of subject formation, which is largely defined as the space produced by embodied subjects, which interpret the limitations and possibilities for the hegemonic spaces and places they occupy and move within (McKittrick 2, 68). What Kirby and Lorde recognize is that those interpretations are necessarily colored by the additional reality of our being racialized, sexualized, classed, sexual and imaginative bodies. Lorde claims, here and elsewhere, that there is a power which resides in our feelings, emotions, and creativity as women. She sees the existence of this power as having profound potential for harnessing and bringing about real political change. What I find prolific about her recognition of the power of what she elsewhere calls “the erotic” (53) is that this entire piece is rooted in spatiality at the
level of language. Her conceptualization of these “places of possibility” is that they exist deep within each female subject. In my reading, Lorde describes a space of subjectivity.

Thus, echoes of Lorde’s conceptualization of women’s internal power exist in Kathleen Kirby’s understanding of “the space of the subject” (11). Lorde’s spatial conceptualization of women’s deeply embedded resistance to, and power against the external structures of racial, gendered, and sexual oppression (Lorde 39) reminds us of Kirby’s meditation on subject formation. Indeed, for Kirby, subject formation is partially immersed in the overlapping, shifting, fluid, and contested spaces of interiority and exteriority. Kirby argues that hegemonic geographic structures “enclose” (33) and constrict us. They permit our everyday movements through and around space at the same time as they are violent in their containment (Kirby 33). As such, the internal power of which Lorde speaks, is forged because while spaces of interiority are forged through dominant racial, sexual and cultural forces, it is from that interior position that one is motivated to respond in oppositional ways to these ideologies (Kirby 33).

These formulations echo the interiority and exteriority dichotomy which seems to come up repeatedly in each novel. Perhaps this should be no surprise since the exploration and representation of interiority has been one of the aesthetic focuses for South African producers of culture after the demise of apartheid.69 This was especially a theme of note after Njabulo Ndebele’s seminal argument in “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary” (1986) that post-apartheid South African literature should depart from the aesthetics of the spectacle, which favored exteriority, and move toward the ordinary and the interior processes of everyday South Africans (149). What is important to note, however, is that each novel problematizes the dichotomy in various ways calling in to question assumptions about what classifies as interior or exterior and the implications of each. This manifests both at the level of

---

69 Gqola reminds us that the “focus on the common textures of people’s lives and interiority is the common ground of post-apartheid literature” (“Spectacular Masculinities” 62).
material spaces—as noted in the previous section—as well as at the level of the external, less tangible structures of whiteness and heteropatriarchy and black navigations of those forces in the process of subject formation. It is with these tensions in mind that I would like to draw on “the space of the subject” as a concept.

The four novels examine several common motifs which might be classified as external to subject formation. I am referring here to those structures which discursively inhabit the spaces we occupy and subsequently affect and contain black subjects. One example of such a constricting force can be found in Coconut in the recognition of the presence and the power of the malevolent white gaze in public spaces. The “white gaze” serves as a kind of synecdoche representative of the whole of white supremacist ideology which prejudices white views of black bodies. It is embodied in the oppressive knowledge that, when in public, one is being watched and judged by whiteness at any given time.

This gaze is, of course, powerfully represented in The Bluest Eye in Pecola’s experience of Mr. Yakobowski’s dehumanizing gaze (Morrison 36). What the black female characters in these texts perceive is the malevolence of the gaze and the ways that it will pathologize black women and simultaneously confirm white prejudices as part of their investment in whiteness. For Ofilwe’s character in Matlwa’s Coconut, the white gaze is a physical irritation:

their faithless eyes crawl on my skin, making it itch. I scratch my neck. Perhaps if I walk over to the topical creams section, they will ease off… I know it is only a matter of time until she slithers over to offer me her unasked-for assistance…I am in no mood to use the accent today. I hold my breath as I walk between the security sensors, and out of the pharmacy

---

70 Investment in whiteness refers to an investment into the economic, political and social benefits of hegemonic constructions of white identity. As Lipsitz reminds us, this conception of whiteness is a fiction but racial prejudice and the pathologization of black bodies etc. is all part and parcel of that investment in the retention of power, resources and opportunity (vii).
doors, daring them to ring wildly. Who knows, maybe I do have an innate proclivity for theft. (Matlwa 44)

The experience of the gaze, seen in the metaphorical “eyes crawl[ing]” and embodied in the store’s owner, emphasizes the controlling power it holds in space and place. In the context of this novel, the gaze represents the white racist views of black South Africans and their appraisal based on language and accent, and a host of other superficially external factors. A part of this gaze is Toni Morrison’s observations about the role of the Africanist persona (constructions of blackness) in white writing, which she states, is “an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside” in it (17). Morrison’s point here is that constructions of dehumanized and stereotypical blackness, embodied in the white gaze, are really reflections of white fears and white desires with regard to power and privilege. Although Morrison’s reflections speak more to the object of the white gaze, her insight is valuable as it reflects back at the gaze, deconstructing it. Nevertheless, Ofilwe’s last comment—“maybe I do have an innate proclivity for theft”—speaks to the link between the gaze, stereotypical constructions of blackness and the impact that they have on the development of the self.

Furthermore, the gaze is reverberant and often violent in its power as evidenced by the way the incident in the store calls forth a childhood memory of another encounter with it. This memory, far more damaging, mitigates her reaction to the store owner. The white gaze in this memory objectifies Ofilwe’s body in the way Fanon describes in *Black Skin White Masks.* While playing spin the bottle with school friends, Ofilwe is meant to kiss a young white man who erupts in protest, “’No ways! Her lips are too dark!’” (Matlwa 45). By combining an (fairly) innocent childhood exploration of sexuality with the objectification of Ofilwe’s lips, “pouted out” (45) for kissing, Matlwa demonstrates how the white gaze also holds black.

---

*71* Fanon discusses the violence of the white gaze with regard to race rather than gender. However, his now well-known description of being pinned by the white gaze in which he asks, “what else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?” (112) is almost a standard reference when discussing the gaze and other “self-negating” phenomena of anti-blackness.
women’s beauty and sexuality in contempt. She alludes, in fact, to a long legacy of white racist and sexist ideology whereby “blackness and femaleness have...been marked for inferiority” (Perry qtd. in Murray 96).

Ofilwe, who “has been exposed to Eurocentric ideals of beaut[y]” (Murray 94), is initially excited to enter the social circles of her newly integrated school. Her acceptance is, of course, dependent upon her ability to place her blackness under erasure as a form of acquiescence to those ideals (Murray 98). However, she is devastated by the incident as the repetition of the boy’s words demonstrates:

now with eyelids fastened tight (No ways! Her lips are too dark), I
shifted back to my ready spot (No ways! Her lips are too dark), unsure
of what to do next (No ways! Her lips are too dark), whispering the words
to myself (No ways! Her lips are too dark), not believe that they were spoken
words (No ways! Her lips are too dark); words that had been followed by an
explosion of general laughter (No ways! Her lips are too dark). (Matlwa 45)

As Ofilwe narrates, she must return to the outside of the circle of friends embarrassed and painfully reminded that she—her racial-sexual body—does not belong within this all-white space. The repetition follows the rhythm of perhaps a pounding heart, speaking to what was a barely concealed visceral reaction for Ofilwe—evidenced by the eyelids fastened tight, temporary paralysis, and needing to whisper the words again to herself. Matlwa illustrates not only the tangible presence of the white gaze in space but also, as McKittrick notes, the spaces of femininity, thus “unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, stereotype and socio-spatial marginalization” (61). In this scene, all three seem to converge in objectification of Ofilwe’s lips and the negation of her subjectivity.

Ofilwe’s experiences catalogue one aspect of white racist and sexist pathologies whereas Matlwa’s novel explores the other through Fikile’s character. These are seen in assumptions of white patriarchal ownership of the oversexualized black female. This is another aspect of the often invisible and unacknowledged ways that black
women navigate and interpret external spaces. Fikile, the second narrator-protagonist in *Coconut* is a salient example of this. Fikile’s desperate desire to escape her life of blackness and poverty means that she (purposely) misreads the attention of a white older male patron, Paul, as something other than the looks of, “the other men, [who] just were bored and horny” (Matlwa 171). Despite Paul’s obvious assumption of his rights over her black body with his unwanted physical attention (Matlwa 170), Fikile begins to fantasize about Paul as her means of real escape. Battling with her own contradictory values, or put in another way, battling between her own desperation and her sense of worth, Fikile questions herself and her decisions. Blatantly propositioning her, after his friends reveal that he is married, Paul offers, “‘Come with me. How much are they paying you here? I’ll give you what you make here in a year, today. I’ll even double it. Triple it. You don’t belong here.’” (Matlwa 175). Paul has a dual function in this passage. On the one hand, Paul represents spatial control of black bodies. His words have a dual meaning when he states, “you don’t belong here” implying that Fikile despite her aspirations to whiteness will never actually fit into this space. On the other hand, he implies that she belongs with him as a sexual object. The link between spatial control and sexual control of course has a long history, and Paul’s character is thus an important moment in drawing together the threads of Fikile’s narrative.

Yet, although Paul’s proposition screams of gender stereotypes about black women, white male beliefs in their proprietary ownership of the black body, and is personally insulting, Fikile hesitates, wondering if she can function as a commodity in Paul’s white patriarchal world. This scene emphasizes the perilousness of black women’s geographies, whereby the black female body is contained and, at times, violently kept in place by the white gaze and how that containment invades our consciousness. Moreover, it serves as a reminder of the hard choices that many black women have had to make for survival with regard to sexual assault in the work place. These have long been highlighted by black women authors such as Sindiwe Magona in her memoir, *To My Children’s Children* (1990), in which domestic workers were treated as if they the property of their white employers and thus subject to sexual
harassment and encroachment into their personal space.\textsuperscript{72}

The insidiousness of the white gaze, while external to black subjectivity, still affects and constricts black subjectivity in the ways in which it carries and deploys white supremacist discourse within the public space. Moreover, in both Ofilwe and Fikile’s case, it brings about an uncertainty, having a clear effect on the formation of black subjectivity. Kopano Matlwa thus uses her project to not only expose the workings of the white gaze in the South African context but also to celebrate the space of black women subjects who navigate and oppose it through the assertion of their own personhood. For Ofilwe and Fikile, memory functions as the site of revolutionary interiority and the means through which they navigate the external forces of white heteropatriarchy. The young women’s memories indeed disrupt the linearity of the novel’s narrative and the hegemonic spaces of the fictional Tshwane suburb, Little Valley.

Those interruptions offer insight into and affect our understanding of the dynamics of those spaces. Ofilwe, for example, in the opening of the novel observes a young black girl who is playing with her “braids: plastic, shiny, cheap synthetic strands of dreams-come-true make their way out of her underage head” (Matlwa 1). Immediately, Ofilwe lapses into the memory of Kate Jones, a white classmate at her school:

\begin{quote}
Kate Jones had the most beautiful hair I had ever seen in all my eight years of life. Burnt amber. Autumn leaves. The setting sun. \\
Kate was overfed and hoggish. Kate was spoilt and haughty. \\
Kate was rude and foul-mouthed. But with that hair, Kate was glorious. (Matlwa 1)
\end{quote}

The juxtaposition of this memory with Ofilwe’s observation of the young girl brings the image of Kate Jones into the church space and thus Eurocentric beauty standards.

\textsuperscript{72} Shireen Ally (75).
Ofilwe’s emphasis on the visual beauty of Kate’s hair compared to the ugliness of her personality illustrates the power and pervasiveness of ideals of whiteness. Already, in the opening of the book, Matlwa raises the issue of black women’s complex relationship with their hair. With regard to black hair, “[the European] ideal demands that hair be straight, long and shiny. Black women are thus exhorted, as Lisa Jones puts it, to keep their ‘kinks in the closet’” (Murray 92-3). What is important here, however, is how Ofilwe’s memory, rendered in a childlike tone, exists in tension with her more mature tone of awareness. As the first half of the novel develops, the reader understands the trajectory of her growing consciousness and politicization with regard to the discourse of white superiority and how it infiltrates various post-apartheid spaces. Central to Matlwa’s point is the presence of white ideology, in spaces where there may or may not be white people present. As such, memory changes our understanding of the church and school dynamics from seemingly innocuous to spaces which are also entrenched in white ideology. The scene and Ofilwe’s reflections also serve as a reminder to be both aware and able to articulate how it works in society.

For Fikile, memory not only plays an explanatory role nuancing her character but the structure of the narrative and where it are disrupted is significant. As one of two wait-staff at Silver Spoon Coffee Shop, Fikile must interact with the customers. She breezes from table to table, living out her fantasy of belonging:

‘George, this espresso is on me. You look like death. I’m guessing we had a big night last night?’ ‘Another waffle, Sheila? I know, I hate men too! I’m so sorry, Sheilz, but you’ll see, everything will be OK. It’s his loss, not yours.’ ‘Come, give Aunty Fiks a hug before you leave! Look what I found for you, my angels; lollipops! Now be good, don’t give your Daddy too much trouble. Bye, guys, see you next Sunday!’” (Matlwa 166)

This passage, which mimics dialogue, emphasizes the way that language and mode of interaction represent movement through space. Matlwa employs English idioms, nicknames and other familiarities as a means of indicating the character’s delusions
about her place within the world of Silver Spoon’s white patrons. The lack of narrated response, in truth reminiscent of a monologue, emphasizes the fact that Fikile’s sense of belonging is all but realistic.

Following this scene is Fikile’s memory of her obsession with fashion magazines, which “air-brushed” her mind (167), offering a vision of an alternative life-style to the one she was living at the time: “the more I read, the more assured I was that the life in those pages was the one I was born to live” (Matlwa 167). Thus, the insertion of this memory not only reinforces our understanding of Fikile’s attempts to adopt a white feminine identity in the coffee shop but also reminds the reader of the “insidiousness of the media’s construction of feminine role models that are worthy of emulation” (Murray 100). Structurally, by juxtaposing Fikile’s interaction with the customers at Silver Spoon coffee shop with her memories, the patrons are placed at the same level as the images of whiteness in the magazines: while whiteness is idealized, Fikile is the inferior other. These memories reveal a number of things about the interior processes of both young women. Yet they also problematize various spaces by revealing both the external forces and the feelings, memories, thoughts, which also contribute to black women’s interpretation, experience, and navigation of space. Additionally, they illustrate a spatial fluidity that is important. In these passages the space of memory intrudes on the space of the present and vis versa, an occurrence which defies any notions of static or dormant space. Ofilwe’s experience of her church space and her contemplation of the little girl are underpinned by her own memories of internalizing white standards of beauty. Likewise, Fikile’s memories of how the magazines became a desperate fantasy for escape from a life of abuse and neglect mediate our understanding of how she moves and negotiates the space of the coffee shop. Finally, the disruption of both Ofilwe and Fikile’s narrative encourage alternative ways of reading these spaces. In both cases they illustrate the presence of a broad spectrum of racist discourse and white supremacist ideology in various kinds of public spaces.
Also operating on a broad spectrum are the discourses and practices of hegemonic masculinities. These are represented and interrogated (especially) by the male authored texts in this study. Thus, the exterior spaces represented in *After Tears* and *Room 207* are interwoven with various discourses of sexism, cultural notions of masculinity, and a host of other factors. The white gaze, discussed above as part of an investment in whiteness, shifts to the heterosexual male gaze and can be found within black masculine spaces, emphasizing intersectional links between investment in whiteness and heterosexual male privilege. In both texts, the narrator-protagonist, on the one hand, navigates and interprets space differently than the other male characters around him, suggesting an attempt, on the part of the author, to create alternative masculinities for their central characters. This is often seen in the characters’ limited ruminations. On the other hand, however, the characters’ subjectivities are partially determined by the discourses and constructions of hegemonic masculinity(ies) embedded in the heteropatriarchal geographies of the urban space.

In *After Tears*, for example, Nq Mhlongo ostensibly launches a critique of the ways that hegemonic masculinity is complicit in the objectification, over-sexualization, and demonization of black women. Indeed, the older male characters (Pelepele, Dilika, Nyawana and Zero) featured in *After Tears* are sexist if not misogynist; they subscribe to the most demeaning stereotypes about black women and their interactions with the female characters are infused with hypermasculine posturing and attempts to silence or sexualize the women. These characters are meant to be the object of ridicule and contempt in the context of the narrative. According to Thabo Tsehloane, this novel employs the comedic form in order to “vulgarize

---

73 Hegemonic masculinity can be defined here as “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allows ... men’s dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic [is] distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity [is] not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it is certainly normative. It embodie[s] the global subordination of women to men. (Connell & Messerschmidt qtd. in Ratele, 118).

74 See the following examples of black feminist discourse in South Africa that engages with the issue of sexism and misogyny in South Africa. Yvette Abrahams (1997), Cheryl De la Rey (1996, 1997), Nthabiseng, Motsemme (2004), Marion Stevens (1997) and Cheryl Stobie (2007).
hegemonic masculinity” and “critique conventional hypocrisy” with regard to patriarchy (84). Thus, Mhlongo’s critique reveals itself mostly through exaggerated exclamations of sexual male prowess—“‘Yeah, I tell you, I’ve turned thousands of women’s stomach muscles to jelly with this,’ continued PP, pointing to between his thighs as if the greatest tool of creation ever known was concealed there” (102). These are comedically juxtaposed with metaphorical allusions to the four middle aged men and fecal matter—“PP, Dilika and my uncle were all asleep in their chairs, with flies buzzing around their mouths” (108). PP’s posturing partially demonstrates the ways that patriarchy objectifies black women, but it also clarifies the important links between women’s domination and hegemonic masculinities. Indeed, masculinity scholars have demonstrated how “notions of ‘successful’ masculinity prevailing in the streets were partially constituted through sexual relationships with girls and deployed in struggles for position and status” (Wood and Jewkes 319). Thus, hegemonic masculinities are at least partially dependent on the oppression of women.

Uncle Nyawana, Pelepele (PP), Dilika, and Zero engage in what black feminists such as Hortense Spillers and Carole Boyce Davies call “dismemberment” of black women’s bodies. Dismemberment refers to the metaphorical excision of black women’s genitals from the rest of their bodies, thereby denying them not only their subjectivity but also subjecting their bodies to metaphoric “mutilation […] and rupture” (Spillers 67; Boyce-Davies 187). Thus, for example, Zero insists that Bunju is “gifted with the reverse” (48) and that the next ‘object’ of his affection “is a complete system with surround sound and loudspeakers [...] and has serious consequences as well” (Mhlongo 198; emphasis in the original). Bafana’s Uncle Nyawana, on the other hand, while accusing Bafana of staring at Zinhle’s (another female character) buttocks, insists, “There’s nothing wrong with looking at Zinhle’s tight arse” with which PP agrees declaring, “Every man here ekasi is trying to get a nice fat slice of arse.” He laughed out loud. ‘Just look at her gents!’ He pointed at Sis Zinhle’s backside” (Mhlongo 96; emphasis mine). Aside from the fact that the language of capital(ism) here, as Christopher Warnes notes, “conflates the sexual
gaze with commodity fetishism” (556), the language of the gaze dissects the body into sexualized parts—the buttocks, the breasts, the thighs etc. The character tells us that every man wants a “slice” of “arse”. Even body language demonstrates dismemberment of Zinhle’s body and the erasure of her subjectivity, despite suggesting that the other men look at “her” PP only gestures to Zinhle’s backside. This implies that Zinhle is equivalent to her posterior. This excision can be read as equally violent as Ofilwe’s experience when told “No ways! Her lips are too dark.” It is telling that the same kinds of violence against black women occur in both white and black male spaces, revealing the pervasiveness as well as the normalization of racism and misogyny.

Room 207 differs in the narrative strategy used to represent the sexist attitudes of hegemonic masculinity, focusing less on the body and more on representing heavily misogynistic, stereotypical attitudes towards black women’s morality, oversexualization, and the like. Women are referred to as “the female species” (25), “whores” (47), “visiting females” (16), and, on a rare occasion, “sister” (132). These various signifiers indicate how woman is the “other,” an object of sexual gratification and, most importantly, has no agency within the masculinist spaces of the studio apartment. In room 207 women are the targets of blatant misogynistic discourse and patriarchal control. They are held in contempt and dismissed as hypersexual and morally loose; their voices are silenced, and their movements limited by the structures of patriarchy and misogyny—as represented by the six protagonists. Upon learning of his girlfriend’s abortions, Modishi is advised “to search for another Lerato” (57). Because, “however you think of whores, the structure is the same and the character matters but, in the end, they all serve the same purpose” (Moele 58).

In the case of both After Tears and Room 207 hyper-masculine posturing is not unproblematically experienced by the narrator-protagonists. Bafana’s embarrassment and feelings of vulnerability in the wake of his ‘uncles’ treatment of Zinhle (and the possibility of her overhearing their vulgarity) belies conflicting feelings about the “nasty little” sexist discourse (95-96) found in After Tears. Similarly, despite his
complicity in most of the misogynistic discourse in *Room 207*, Noko recognizes the contradiction in hegemonic prescriptions for emotional expression and the realities of human pain (57). These examples of ambivalent reactions to the external forces of heteropatriarchy signal, in part, possibilities for alternative masculinities but they also signal the internal pressure exerted by hegemonic masculinities.

That pressure results in the “complex (sexual) fears that males live with, for example, including the fears of heterosexual males that they do not measure up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity” (Ratele “Between ‘Ouens’” 116). This relationship between pressure and fear must therefore inform our reading of the posturing represented in the two novels. It is elucidated in both novels through the theme of expectations. Niq Mhlongo, for instance, effectively draws our attention to “the conflict between the desperate and unrealistic expectations of the family, on one hand, and the powerlessness of the hero to live up to the desired masculine ideal, on the other hand” (Tsehloane 81).

Through the fictionalized discourse of several central characters, *After Tears* indeed, represents the various kinds of pressure placed on black men to live up to a hegemonic standard of manhood. Bafana’s family’s expectations of him are represented by his uncle’s drunken exclamations “‘we’ll be fucking rich. You’ll be an advocate and together we’ll sue Transnet for my lost leg, my laatie’” (13). They are reinforced by his mother’s confidence in his earning ability “this house means nothing to the kind of money you’ll be earning once you’ve become an advocate. You can buy thousands of these houses in one year” (25). These center around what Tsehloane has called the “burden of masculinist messianic intervention” (85), whereby Bafana will come in and save his family from their life of poverty. Pressure also comes in the form of sexual conquest. When Bafana expresses disinterest in two young women his Uncle intimates are available sexually, Bafana’s sexuality is called into question (Mhlongo 92).

The image of masculinity that Bafana’s character is expected to emulate is clear—breadwinner, family savior, conquest, sexual posturing—and his lack of
compliance calls his sexuality, into question. Mhlongo makes an important link here between the various standards for black manhood and homophobia (Ratele “Hegemonic African Masculinities” 116). Those standards allude to the continued belief either in the existence or the possibility of a hegemonic African masculinity. However, as Ratele argues, “African hegemonic masculinity is something of an impossibility” (“Hegemonic African Masculinities” 118; emphasis in the original), due to the realities of historical and continued racial subordination, and economic and social oppression. Inasmuch as the oppression of black women and some black men at the hands of other African men is a reality, the other reality is that black masculinities in South Africa are both hegemonic and subordinate (Ratele “Hegemonic African Masculinities” 118). Consequently, homophobia, along with gender-based violence, displaces the potential shame and despair that results from being unable to attain traditional hegemonic masculinity (Ratele “Hegemonic African Masculinities” 118).

A significant difference between Mhlongo and Moele’s novels may be Room 207’s engagement with and problematization of what may be read as traditional masculinities represented by the older male characters and the hegemony of misogynism represented often by the six main characters or at times both.75 For Noko, the masculinity of his elders calls for independence, sexual prowess, and a tight reign over one’s emotions. His father, a peripheral character who exists only in Noko’s memory, refuses to give him money because Noko has an id, a driver’s license, a passport, has graduated from secondary school, and has had several girlfriends (73). Here Noko’s father, highlights his son’s multiple girlfriends as the defining evidence that makes him a man—an attitude complicit with hegemonic constructions that are reminiscent of the posturing seen in After Tears. Noko’s father’s attitude is symbolic of traditional constructions of manhood that also insists

---

75 Ratele cautions us against reducing “traditional masculinities” to a monolithic entity as well as erroneously equating “traditional masculinities” with hegemonic masculinities. He writes, “the main problematic is that ‘traditional masculinity’ is often used as a transparent, self-evident concept, as a result of what researchers may approach as a singular, static entity; as opposite of ‘modern’; as inherently negative and patriarchal; and, at times rather confusingly, as synonymous with hegemonic masculinity” (2017 5).
on a similar role impressed upon Bafana in *After Tears*. In this case, Noko is expected to “stand [] on his own two feet and fights his own wars” (74). Moele’s subtle reference to the warrior figure emphasizes the father’s symbolic role in the novel as the voice of traditional masculinities. The impossibility of those constructions in the material reality of post-apartheid South Africa creates an external paradox for black youth, who aspire for economic and social advancement and are simultaneously attempting to reimagine their gendered subjectivities in a post-apartheid world (Ratele 118).

That paradox is further clarified with the example of Noko’s father, whose characterizations of manhood are easily critiqued. However, they are also mediated by the intersecting geographies of oppression and containment that play themselves out in the novel. What I mean here relates to the material and psychological effects of colonialism and apartheid, the continued oppressive structures of a neo-liberal economy, and global capitalism which continues to operate in South Africa in spite of its extremely progressive constitution. Hence, Noko’s father also comments, “‘They make me very proud of you. That you have a passport means that you can go to lands far away and your father has never been far. I never had a passport. Have never been to any other country…He wipes away what I think is a joyful tear” (Moele 74). Noko’s passport represents the kind of mobility discussed in Chapter One that because of South Africa’s history, his father never could enjoy. The tear he wipes at the end of the paragraph speaks to the ways that the hegemonic constructions which stipulate that a man is not to cry, for example, are disrupted by human emotion and everyday realities. These small disruptions suggest that Moele offers a tentative critique of these constructions even as a large part of the novel reinforces them.

Finally, both novels remind their readers that the forces of hegemonic masculinity also manifest themselves in the form of physical violence. Toward the end of the novel Bafana is violently robbed while on his way home one evening, during which he is called a “bitch” and a “chizboy, bhujwa snob” (Mhlongo 144, 146). Thus, he is simultaneously emasculated by physical and verbal violence by
other more dominant men. Meanwhile, Noko’s natural grief over his father’s death is cut short by an uncle who “came to me, took my hand and squeezed it very hard so that I felt physical pain. ‘Who was in that casket?’ I looked at him and he squeezed harder. ‘Dad.’ ‘He is dead. Stop crying and be a man. Crying will not bring him back. You are on your own now. You’re on your own’” (Moele 57). Thus, the threat of violence is also used as a means to enforce various kinds of hegemonic expectations of masculinity. I see this as an important point because it illustrates not only the physical and psychological violence these constructions impose on men, women and gender-nonconforming folk, but the two incidents also speak to the broader issue of violence as an everyday aspect of society.

Our discussion of the exterior has traced various subtle ways in which the exterior is not always exterior. It is fluid, shifting between notions of exterior and interior spaces, both in terms of discourse and the characters’ subjectivities. Yet, it is equally important to examine how these characters’ individual qualities and realities are represented and how these enhance and nuance our understanding of black masculinities in the post-apartheid milieu.

*After Tears* and *Room 207*’s explorations of interiority operate in direct contrast to *Coconut*. It is true that the two male authors attempt to imagine characters who turn to interior spaces, inner voices, their own thoughts as a means to imagine and fashion alternatives to the hegemonic constructions found in the spaces in which they live and move. However, these are not represented through narrated reflections or extensive lapses into an interior space such as memory. Rather, they are manifested in other forms of exteriority whereas interiority is reduced to a fleeting inner voice. For instance, in response to the misogynistic attitudes expressed in the taxi in *After Tears* (48-49)—Bafana attempts to distance himself from Zero, who is speaking. This distance relates both to appearance and mentality. Bafana notes,

I was wearing an expensive white Polo T-shirt, a black leather jacket, black suede Carvela shoes and a pair of grey, five pocketed corduroy pants. Zero himself was wearing a black T-shirt with Tupac’s head printed on it, but the
smell that came from his left armpit was an unusually cruel punishment. It was like a rat had decomposed somewhere under his arm. (46)

Later he relates his mother’s attitude toward them telling the reader, “she told me they were notorious for undressing every member of the female species that they saw with their eyes. According to her, they lived in the over-sexualised township world (Mhlongo 47-8). By juxtaposing the two, Mhlongo implies that the misogynistic attitudes represented in Zero’s character are as disgusting as his smelly armpits. The allusion to his mother’s opinion encourages readers to pay attention to the feminist voices in South African society that call out heteropatriarchal ideology. It also suggests that internally Bafana is faced with both the influence of feminism and heteropatriarchy. Moreover, Mhlongo’s use of comedy here is similar to the humor in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s more recent novels Wizard of the Crow (2006). It is an interesting postcolonial aesthetic not often seen, in which humor is used to highlight the vulgarity of hegemonic masculinity as in the case of After Tears and the neocolonial dictator in the case of Wizard of the Crow. Thus, the novel illustrates how Bafana, despite his human flaws, represents young black males’ search for an alternative, more progressive image of manhood.

Similarly, Noko, whose character readily participates in the othering of black women, suddenly asserts to the reader “African women are not queens—a queen means servants, slaves and guards. They are women with bodies as big as Africa that can bear all with a smile” (176). Both analogies are problematic. Noko’s, because of the essentializing rhetoric which equates the African woman with her big body whom he imagines as receptacle that can “bear all. The view of black women as queens, while meant to be positive, also feeds into the superwoman narrative and denies them the freedom to be fully human with flaws and weaknesses. Nonetheless, Moele’s attempt to comment on the other more conventional essentializing discourse which puts black women on a pedestal indicates an internal awareness of these problematic

See Tsehloane 2010.
images, if not the feminist understanding to fully problematize them.

Additionally, Noko problematizes what he has been taught about masculinity when faced with life situations that call for an emotional interaction. Along with the dismissive attitudes expressed by Molamo and D’Nice at the news of Lerato’s abortions, Noko, seeing Modishi’s grief, grapples with uncertainty about how to engage with Modishi who, by openly displaying his grief has stepped outside the cultural conventions of masculinity (57). This scene illustrates two points which create their own tension: Noko’s confusion about how to comfort a man in emotional distress, when he is himself emotionally inaccessible, and the implied judgment that no proper man needs comfort. Indeed, Noko’s character frequently struggles to reconcile his understanding of manhood and the character of Modishi, who is unfailingly honest (47), has only one girlfriend (52), and cries freely in front of others (49). Upon Modishi’s acceptance of responsibility for Lerato’s abortion, Noko sees him as, “a three-and-a-half-year-old toddler in the body of a twenty-three-year-old man” (61). His comment suggests that Modishi’s exhibition of respect for Lerato’s reproductive rights and his honest expression of love is childish. Interestingly, Noko also admits that he envies Modishi’s ‘childishness,’ which further insinuates his uncertainty with regard to the image of manhood that he’s been raised to emulate. Like Mhlongo, Moele offers a tentative critique of hegemonic constructions of masculinities, a tone of uncertainty evoked in both novels. However, in both cases the authors’ tentative exploration of the possibilities for alternative masculinities is overshadowed by the larger signs of conformity.

Bafana and Noko are two narrator protagonists who are full of the natural contradictions that result from shifting back and forth between different constructions of masculinity. Even though Bafana’s distancing positions him as an alternative to Uncle Nyawana, PP, Dilika and Zero’s sexism and misogyny, his inner thoughts reveal his own complicity with the patriarchal system. Consequently, he is preoccupied with his friend Vee’s long legs, Zinhle’s waist, other young women’s breasts and stomachs, and even a random stranger’s backside does not escape his
notice (Mhlongo 70). Likewise, Noko’s character contradicts himself even in his own thoughts—“She had an abortion. These mothers of today who have rights. Who cares? It is their right and their life” (Moele 52)—and later on the same issue “If it had been me, I would have done her harm” (Moele 57). He additionally participates in the same kinds of sexist thinking that sets women up as no more than sexual objects “I de-stress and leave, because no girlfriend deserves to see my sleeping face and try to figure out what is on my mind” (Moele 84). The contradictions in the figuration of Noko and Bafana’s characters emphasize the difficulties of cultivating alternative gendered subjectivities when heteropatriarchy continues to be entrenched in urban spaces. It also suggests that at least for the time being, “men’s positive, but ambivalent and resistant, gender attitudes could indicate that men support equality in the abstract” (Ratele “Gender Equality in the Abstract” 510).

However, one of the most interesting moments with regard to interiority and alternative masculinities occurs almost as an aside in Room 207 and this relates to subtle homoerotic suggestions in the text. In one, Noko’s nudity, which is the norm for the men that live in room 207, clearly disturbs an outside character (102); in another, he reveals his genitals to a group of security guards telling them that he is “aroused” in a bid to get permission to go upstairs to see his girlfriend (103); and finally is the slight sexual interest Noko has in Matome. This is seen in his description of Matome’s morning greeting which, “Matome will tell you after he has pushed his sexy legs into some sandals and visited the bathroom” (112). As part of the narrative the reader can only interpret the modifier sexy as the voice of Noko. We might interpret his use of the word ironically if it wasn’t for the ambiguous display of affection between the two upon Motame’s departure from Hillbrow. While, Matome attributes the “butterfly kiss” (194) between he and Noko to brotherhood, Zuluboy’s contemptuous “Matome, I always knew you were a fag” (194) and Noko’s enigmatic “you should have control, even a kiss from a man makes you lose yourself” (194) suggests that there might be multiple possible interpretations of the scene. These nearly throw-away indications of homosexual interest suggest that in the development of black masculinities there is a great deal that is unexplored and subsumed within the
larger hegemonic discourse.

The question of alternative masculinities is addressed from another perspective in *Coconut*, which belies its feminist politics. Although we are not able to access Ofilwe’s brother, Tshepo’s internal ruminations it is important to place to texts in dialogue here. Because it adds a feminist, and, not feminine imaginary with regard to alternative masculinities. This is illustrated most profoundly in Tshepo’s subtle exploration of gender non-conformity, something that is completely absent from *Room 207*. In one scene, for example, in which Ofilwe describes Tshepo as having slowly disappeared from their family (83), she also gradually notices the “feminine look” to his clothing:

Tshepo holds a drum in his hands and is wearing a brightly coloured loose-fitting tunic, with wide elbow length sleeves and a square neck. It resembles the West African shirts they sell at the flea markets (82). It is only now that I recognise the shirt as one of Mama’s kaftans, presumably the white one that she once mentioned was too large. He must have dyed it (83). Now that I have his attention I resolve to say nothing about the kaftan which looks increasingly feminine and odd in clashing blue, yellow and orange fabric paints he must have used. I wonder if they will wash out. (84)

Ofilwe’s gradual, more focused awareness of the shirt may represent Tshepo’s own growth and development with regard to his gender subjectivity. Initially the shirt, like Tshepo, reflects a pan-African consciousness that some might call gender-neutral since both men and women wear the popular dashikis to which Ofilwe refers. However, the shirt gradually becomes more and more feminine until Ofilwe characterizes it as “feminine and odd.” Her decision to remain silent about the shirt instead of commenting it perhaps suggests her struggle but also simultaneous desire to accept the visual departure from the cis-gender/heteronormative expectations placed on Tshepo by South African society. A brief mention of Tshepo’s prowess in ballet which describes his movements and his body, “his slight frame, sustained arms and legs, deft chin, precise nose…easy shoulders and delicate manner” (Matlwa 65)
in what might be considered stereotypical feminine terms, reinforces a sense of
gender non-conformity. Yet, this aspect of Tshepo’s character is not fully explored in
the novel, which raises the question of what Matlwa was trying to articulate through
his character. Nevertheless, these brief scenes still open the possibility for a
conversation about gender identity and gender nonconforming citizens. Indeed,
carving out small spaces for oppositional and alternative subjectivities seems to be a
repeating trope in Coconut: from multiple language identity, various experiences and
kinds of blackness to nonconforming gender identity

The space of the subject allows an investigation of the interior/exterior
dichotomy engaged most overtly in Coconut. By exploring gender subjectivity
through a spatial lens, the subtleties of black men’s and women’s navigation of space
are accessed. Moreover, it becomes clear that internal and external spaces cannot be
reduced to a dichotomy, they are in fact in constant fluid interaction both affecting
and determining the other. The space of the subject as an avenue into the interior is
also a means to engage the contradictions and tension with regard to men’s
subjectivities and how they are affected by external forces of hetero-patriarchy and
misogyny. It helps to elucidate black women’s subjective interpretations of the
geographies of domination and containment detailed in the previous chapter. The next
section will therefore explore how Coconut and The Madams foreground and
politicide the intersectional ways that black women’s containment and oppression
occur, and various means used to carve out black feminist geographies.

**Black Feminist Geographies**

I’d like to return to Katherine McKittrick’s definition of black feminist geographies
which, she explains are “black women’s political, feminist, imaginary and creative
concerns that re-spatialize the geographic legacy of racism and sexism” (53). In this
sense both The Madams and Coconut are projects of black feminist geography. Both
texts fictionalize various conventional, well-known places as a means to interrogate
the traditional geographies of those spaces. These texts then foreground black women’s experiences and navigations of the domestic space, the public coffee shop, the store, the school, the nightclub, the hotel, and various other places. However, I would also argue that both writers imagine radical and revolutionary ways to call out and resist these geographies of domination, containment and racialized sexual violence.

One possibility is through the power of friendship and sisterhood. Zukiswa Wanner indeed attempts to theorize a radical kind of friendship in which both black and white women can establish homo-social intimacy through candid honesty about race and class and the ways that they are complicit in oppressive structures as well as through mutual support and shared experiences. Thandi, Nosizwe and Lauren’s friendship, though at times challenging, is one such example. In a candid letter to Lauren, Thandi admonishes her friend for her racist tendencies “Lauren: The way you treat MaRosie bothers me immensely (and I am sure I speak for Nosizwe too). While Siz and I are privileged black people, we still respect her by virtue of her age as our culture requires, and we hope you can show her the same respect as you accord Ma, not overlooking, of course, the fact that she is a paid employee” (Wanner 71). This kind of candidacy is a hopeful feminist theorization and invitation to white feminists to begin to recognize their own privilege and how that privilege at times makes them complicit in the very structures they pledge to dismantle.

More importantly, friendship for these women means that they can transform a space, embedded with the structures of patriarchy and framed by various histories and possibilities for sexual violence to one of radical feminist emancipation. When the three women leave their husbands and children at home for a ladies’ night out, the fun they have is all about celebrating their own femininity on their own terms--“we entered Spiro’s like the beautiful women that we were” (Wanner 90) --while easily handling any male attempts to encroach on the feminine space they have created A young man’s flattery, “Hey ladies. You are looking good today” receives Siz’s straightforward rejoinder: “And we know it.” (90-91). The sexual undertones of his
sweet talk are underscored by his gaze roaming their bodies, “checking out [their] cleavages” (91). But the three women outwit him by cleverly calling out his behavior. Nosizwe challenges him:

“Sipho? And aren’t you the gift, but we still don’t know what we can do for you – or is it something you can do for us?’…making the poor boy blush. ‘Dunno,’ he mumbled shyly, but gawking at her chest.

‘Just wanted to tell you all that you look so lovely and wanted to give you an invite to a party.’ And I teased, ‘So do you want one of them or both to come to the party? He gulped like a fish caught on a line… ‘She wants to know whether you want one or both of Thandi’s breasts to come to the party?’ said Lauren. (91)

The three friends play off each other, bantering back and forth with the unprepared young man. Wanner’s placing the young man’s verbal cues “mumbled shyly” in contrast with his non-verbal “but gawking at her chest” emphasizes the boldness of the male gaze and its objectification of women’s bodies. The scene suggests that one way to navigate the geographies that render women and their experiences marginal to the movement of men through a similar space is to rely on the support of one’s sister-friends in order to at least temporarily move through those spaces freely. Wanner suggests that women, in solidarity with one another, must actively and assertively call out patriarchy and sexism directly and refuse to remain silent in the face of male sexual aggression.

Matlwa contends that along with political confrontation and solidarity, feminist artists and intellectuals harness the power of words and further, the power of “militant rage” to bring about political change (Hooks 17, Cooper 1). In this vein, Coconut adopts creative prose, storytelling and poetry as a means to draw attention to black women’s experience of space. For example, Ofilwe views the earlier discussed malevolent white gaze with anger and irony:

They laugh nastily, Lord. You cannot hear it, but you see it in their eyes.
You feel the coldness of it in the air that you breathe. We are afraid,
Lord, that if we think non-analytical, imprecise, unsystematic, disorderly
thoughts, they will shackle us further, until our hearts are unable to beat
under the heavy chains. So we dare not use our minds.

We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups,
speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our mqombothi laughs.
They will scold us if we dare, not with their lips, Lord, because the laws
prevent them from doing so, but with their eyes. They will shout,
‘Stop acting black!’ ‘Stop acting black!’ is what they will shout.
And we will pause, perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are
we not black, Father? No, not in the malls, Lord. We may not be
black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools. Oh, how it nauseates
them if we even fantasise about being black, truly black. The old rules
remain and the old sentiments are unchanged. We know, Lord,
because those disapproving eyes scold us still; that crisp air of
hatred and disgust crawls into our wide-open nostrils. (Matlwa 31-2)

Ofilwe’s growing consciousness manifests itself in expressions of anger and disgust. Her repetitive incantory address to God, is perhaps another intertextual moment, reminiscent of Celie’s character in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982). The novels share an epistolary form as well as a thematicization of incestuous sexual abuse. The power of this passage lies in Matlwa’s rich metaphor and imagery. Raging against the continued power of the white gaze in a post-apartheid nation, she uses the imagery of shackles and chains to illustrate the feeling of containment and imprisonment which is brought about by it. The passage describes the gaze as cold, a palpable presence in black lives—“you feel the coldness of it in the air”—eloquent in its condemnation of white supremacy and antiblackness. Moreover, with the metaphor of mqombothi (traditional beer), representative of Zulu culture, she celebrates the richness and diversity of black culture; a celebration that emphasizes the tone of incredulity in the passage. Ofilwe finds it somewhat unbelievable that black people should not be able to be who they are in their humanity and their
diversity. The whole passage ultimately takes on a prayer-like tone as Ofilwe addresses God in frustration and anger. Perhaps this and other poetic passages in the novel can be read as Matlwa’s meta-perspective on the power of writing and creative expression. The passage, and Matlwa’s project generally, recall the earlier-mentioned passage by Audre Lorde who also insists that the feminine power she describes is manifested in poetry. Lorde argues that poetry is a conduit of “the most radical and daring of ideas” (37) that can be later translated into “meaningful action” (37).

Ofilwe’s prayer is not the only instance in the novel when creative prose takes the form of a prayer. In the second half of the novel, the same formulation is employed to express Fikile and her grandmother’s rage toward white heteropatriarchal oppression. While they are styled very differently, the compelling similarity between the two passages is the presence of a profound rage:

‘I do not know, Father...
I do not know, Father...
...where this new self may take me.
...where this new self may take me.
Suddenly I am filled with a rage that delights me.
Suddenly I am filled with a rage that delights me.
I do not know how much more I can swallow.
I do not know how much more I can swallow.
In my dreams I spit vengeance.
In my dreams I spit vengeance’ (Matlwa 159-160)

With a lyrical quality, reminiscent of the call-and-response style found in various poetic and musical forms, this prayer is all about black rage and frustration. It is important that this rage is expressed by the black women in the novel. This expression of unashamed rage demonstrates feminist possibilities for “full decolonized self-actualization” and the ability to “use [] it as a catalyst to develop critical consciousness” (hooks 16). Despite the recitation of the prayer in the voice of
her grandmother and Fikile’s childlike mimicry, it is easily read as an expression of both her and her grandmother’s rage. Her exact repetition of not only word but tone and movement (159) implies that the two women’s rage is shared. The notion that the two “spit vengeance” is reminiscent of bell hooks description of “killing rage” (11), an amalgamation of a day or even lifetime of confrontation with racist and misogynistic forms of physical and psychological violence. This rage, Matlwa suggests, carves out black feminist geographies in its political potential. Indeed, hooks, in her anti-racist scholarship, argues that militant black rage is a necessary part of decolonization, and that harnessing it in a constructive manner is both empowering, liberating and can lead to radical political action. Matlwa suggests the same for militant black feminist rage.

Matlwa’s representation of black women’s anger and its political potential is an interesting foil to what may initially seem a benign thematization of post-apartheid identity formation. At the end of the first half of the novel, Ofilwe shares a memory of her love of magazines, something she shares with her character’s counterpoint, Fikile. The magazines symbolize the insidiousness of the media and popular culture marketing of the ideals and standards of whiteness. Ofilwe shares that the conversation she had with her more politically aware brother is “a jumble. A jumble I can barely remember, except for the word ‘white’. White. White. There was not a single face of colour on the wall. I had not noticed. Honest” (92). The overwhelming presence of whiteness in Ofilwe’s life, however, evinces the anger that is expressed through the novel’s deviations into creative prose. Indeed, Ofilwe’s closing lamentation speaks to her growing political awareness and her determination to turn around the mentally-colonizing constructions of whiteness and white femininity from her subjectivity. It also raises the question of the complex spaces where whiteness plays a role, like popular culture.
3. Popular Culture in *After Tears, Room 207* and *Coconut*

In the context of black South African literature, popular culture has historically been a creative outlet as well as a conduit for various levels of representation. The *Drum* era, a period that is known for an explosion of black creative expression through the famous *Drum* magazine, is one such example. *Drum* is also known for establishing intimate links between literature and popular culture. Journalists, who worked for the magazine, kept their fingers on the pulse of an emerging urban black culture in South Africa during the 1950s, one that included the outgrowth of local black creativity and an influx of American popular forms such as Hollywood films and jazz music. Simultaneously, *Drum* became the publishing outlet for an entire generation of black writers whose work engaged with urban culture, black identity, and the socio-political realities of the newly formed apartheid regime. In their autobiographies, for example, *Drum* era artists like Bloke Modisane and Miriam Makeba deploy popular culture via Hollywood cinema as a means of “problematiz[ing] cultural memory” (Masemola 3). Others, such as Can Themba and Mboko Manqupu, were known to have drawn their writing style from the popular forms such as magazine and film dialogue (Chapman 206-8). More recently, texts like *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* use popular sports symbolically as a means to deconstruct South African authorities’ attempts to construct post-apartheid national narratives of the rainbow nation and the new South Africa. Thus, popular culture has long functioned within South African literature as a site from which to interrogate pertinent issues and contemporary themes.

What has not been as prevalent is the recognition of a kind of aesthetics of the popular in South African literature. I am thinking of aesthetics here as a “particular
modality of sensory perception” (Steingo *Kwai...’s Promise* 6), or as a “discourse of the body…of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surface” (Eagleton 327). In this way, popular aesthetics in literature would be those that are distinctive in their infusion of popular forms or formulations which characterize our sensory perception of a text: visual and aural. Although under-explored before the late twentieth century, it has been accepted that popular forms encompass their own aesthetic conventions, at times different from, but equally significant as, what is sometimes called elite or high culture. This might be everything from an aesthetics of emotional disruption in popular fiction (Fluck 50) to post-modern conventions such as pastiche and irony in urban popular music (Manuel 227). I am not suggesting that any one set of aesthetic conventions could be applied to popular culture as a whole. The vast and varied forms, institutions, activities etc. that constitute popular culture are far too wide-ranging to make such a claim. Nevertheless, I do argue that the three texts under focus—*Coconut*, *After Tears* and *Room 207*—adopt a kind of popular aesthetics connected to and emerging out of post-1994 black youth culture. That is, an underlying thread of what I call “*kwai...* aesthetics,” is the particular kind of popular aesthetics which infuses these texts. *Kwai...* aesthetics, simply put, refers to *kwai...* music and *kwai...* cultural aesthetics but it also has to do with a set of common tropes and narrative formulations.

Part of the implications of *kwai...* aesthetics is that the popular forms deployed in Mhlongo, Moele, and Matlwa’s projects contribute to the artistry of the three novels. Each text is enhanced by the ways in which popular forms, codes, and signifiers situate the novels in the urban space and amplify the novel’s interest in emerging South African identities and the politics of material and discursive containment. Among these texts for example, multilingualism functions at multiple levels. It underpins the thematization of socio-linguistic issues such as language choice and African language valorization and functions as a narrative tool. Multilingualism assures that, stylistically, these novels are representative of South

---

78 See Fluck (1988)
Africa’s polyglot society. Language, as it is represented in the novels, is intimately connected with *kwaito*, the popular music form that features in the novels, and it functions as an aspect of popular culture. Additionally, *kwaito* music adds a certain musicality to the texts. Popular magazines, in Matlwa’s project, are used to mitigate her thematic problematization of interior/exterior dualities with regard to post-apartheid identity. In these three novels, popular culture complicates South African race and gender dynamics, augments, and nuances critical engagements with urban spaces and aestheticizes the formations of various post-apartheid subjectivities represented in the novels.\(^{79}\)

Popular culture’s function in the novels is highly political. This raises questions with regard to aesthetics and politics and the ongoing debate with regard to what extent aesthetics is linked to or divorced from politics. Terry Eagleton sees aesthetics as an inherently political entity (330). Indeed, for Eagleton, this is because the experience and regulation of pleasure and beauty is directly tied to social hegemony. Eagleton sees aesthetics as the sister side of law in that it is coercion with regard to taste (330). What Eagleton’s theorization points to is the inherent power dynamics in designations of aesthetic preferences or canons. Eagleton’s Marxist and somewhat Gramscian perspective reflects, to a limited extent, the aesthetic agenda that Moele, Matlwa and Mhlongo endorse. However, his elucidation, like Henri Lefebvre’s on space, lacks the awareness of the intersections of race and gender that are necessary for the South African context. Engagement with, and the dismantling of, cultural hegemony is indeed at the heart of *kwaito* aesthetics. However, this cannot be fully unpacked without attention to how race and gender plays into those politics. To be clear, this is not an attempt to conflate politically important texts with aesthetic significance (Ziarek 51). Gavin Steingo’s book-length study of *kwaito* music, argues that *kwaito* is in fact very much an apolitical genre and thus aesthetically should be understood within earlier conceptual frameworks of music for music’s sake (Steingo

\(^{79}\) Zukiswa Wanner’s *The Madams*, while considered a form of “chic-lit” and thus a popular text in and of itself, is not discussed in this chapter, but will feature in Chapter Four, in the reading of how popular culture functions in feminist texts.
Yet despite both of these qualifications it is exactly the apolitical nature of the music and the way it is deployed in the novels that makes *kwaito* aesthetics both aesthetically significant and inherently political.

This chapter engages several central queries in its interest in and critical analysis of the notion of a popular aesthetic and the politics thereof in the three above-mentioned novels: Based on a post-colonial and feminist definition and conceptualization of the “popular” and “popular culture,” how is the inevitable dialectic (the tensions and contradictions) of popular culture represented in the three texts? More importantly, in texts where there seems to be a strong political impetus behind the popular aesthetic, how are those tensions and contradictions reconciled while continuing to put forth the authors’ political agendas? Additionally, what are the implications of popular culture, which has such a strong presence in urban spaces, for the very complicated spatial dynamics represented in the texts, especially with regard to gender and race? Lastly, how can we lift a cohesive understanding of the popular aesthetics envisioned by these authors from the devices, codes, and signifiers deployed within the three novels and, furthermore how do we then conceptualize *kwaito* aesthetics?

**Theoretical framing of the popular**

Theorizations of the popular exist across a variety of related fields including music, literature, area studies, and women’s studies. Because of the ways that race and gender are foregrounded in the novels, my understanding of the popular is framed by post-colonial and feminist theory and politics, which conceptualize the popular in connection with class, race and gender struggles. The popular is defined as the forms and activities, encompassed in popular practices and traditions, which are rooted in the social and material conditions of the marginalized and oppressed classes in South Africa (Hall “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular 235). With its Marxist undertones, this definition centers on the relation between South Africa’s youth culture and
hegemony (Hall 235). As such, popular culture can be conceptualized in terms of cultural forms such as kwaito music, local magazines, spoken word etc., existing in “continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture” (Hall “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” 235). The importance of popular culture is its potential to function as the site of cultural struggle. Here my thinking is aligned with Stuart Hall’s notion that popular culture (at least this conceptualization of it) is “polarized” around a “dialectic of cultural struggle” (233, 235). Within this dialectic, hegemonic cultural forces attempt to contain the oppositional and deconstructive ideas and forms of popular culture so as to remold them into something more acceptable to the dominant culture. Thus, there is a constant push and pull of antagonism and complicity, “resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation” (Hall 233).

Moreover, I am not interested in dichotomous notions of popular (of the people) as opposed to mass media culture (capitalist consumerism) because they tend to be reductive, implying a binary scenario of, as Iraqi feminist Ella Shohat puts it, “culture created by freedom-chanting people vs. culture consumed by couch-potato masses” (Shohat 23). Rather, I find a more nuanced understanding useful whereby popular culture’s signification is constantly under negotiation (Shohat 23). In my reading of the primary texts’ representations of popular culture, the authors illustrate the ways that the desires, experience and knowledge of historically situated cultural consumers are inextricably linked to the effects of dominant cultural production. In other words, the dialectic of cultural struggle is not simply a dialectic of class struggle, as might mistakenly be inferred by Hall’s work in the 1980s. It encompasses far more complex and contentious confrontations—which are determined by the intersectional categories of location, class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion and the like.

Very often, critical readings of popular culture cast it within a discourse of

---

80 Hall’s 1981 “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” a seminal contribution to cultural studies at the time, is heavily dependent on Marxist theory and politics and as such can be misread as silent on the question of race and gender with regard to popular culture.
spatiality. In trying to both conceptualize and politicize the relations between the various axes of political and cultural dominance, popular culture is read in of itself as a kind of space. It is “one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged…it is the arena of consent and resistance” (Hall 239; italics added). Popular culture, furthermore, takes on powerful spatial connotations with regard to how it functions in society; both Hall and Shohat, for example, speak of “movement[s] of containment and resistance” (Hall 229) and of the “diverse negotiations taking place between the multiple locations of production and reception” (Shohat 24), evidencing the spatial framework within which popular culture is often studied.

Furthermore, where popular culture operates, the various spaces in which it is produced and consumed are significant sources of insight. According to Dina Ligaga, these insights can be gained especially “by foregrounding aspects of culture often ignored in formal spaces” (2). These expose what underpins various social relationships in society along with the ideologies and forces that shape citizens’ material realities (Ligaga 2). To expand Ligaga’s point, the novels under study also reveal how the dynamics of these various spaces are affected and determined (to some extent) by popular culture. Therefore, popular culture reveals a great deal about the geographies that traverse various informal spaces and the production of space itself, along with “enable[ing] one to interrogate popular responses and attitudes toward particular political and social occurrences in society” (Ligaga 2).

Hence, it is logical that research on popular culture in Africa has also documented how it, “must be a central component of understanding emergent public spaces and citizenship practices in Africa’s present and future” (Dolby 31). Yet it is important to avoid essentialist or overarching categorizations of popular culture that read popular arts in Africa only as ways “to perform and participate in a statement of identity and defiance” (Barber 2). Even though well-known scholar of African popular culture, Karin Barber, has thoroughly documented the various expressions of popular culture in different parts of Africa, some of her more general statements
concerning popular culture reveal a kind of binary thinking that Shohat cautions against.

South African popular culture boasts a long history in which confrontations with the forces of colonialism and apartheid were possible. It was an important link to the outside world as the influx of American popular forms in the 1950s, for example, contributed to black South Africans’ fight to form alternative subjectivities to that imposed by the apartheid government. Additionally, it was used as a tool of resistance against the apartheid regime during the years of struggle leading up to the 1994 democratic elections. Recently, post-apartheid popular culture provides ways for South Africa’s citizens to navigate and enter into public dialogue with regard to the social, political, and economic realities of post-apartheid South Africa. South African popular culture is a means to explore and express racial identity (Dolby 2001), engage in what Sarah Nuttall calls “self-styling,” (Nuttall Entanglement 109) and speak to the realities of the new millennium. Kwaito music, for example, reveals young South Africans’ insistence on speaking to and engaging with their urban realities through a lens of pleasure, materialism, and freedom (Peterson 2003). However, these forms are also at times received ambivalently because of how black popular culture, specifically, continues to be commodified by an increasingly globalized market. One such scholar, Mpolokeng Bogatsu notes, for example, that it, “is now ‘cool’ to be able to communicate in tsotsi-taal (township slang); hang out ‘back home in the ghetto’ eating the ‘township burger’ or kota (bunny chow)” (Bogatsu 5).

The specific iterations of popular culture deployed in After Tears, Room 207 and

---


82 I use the term “black popular culture” with the awareness of Stuart Hall’s reminder that even while it may be true that something called “black popular culture” has engendered alternative forms of representation and discourse (109), it is also true that problematic essentialism is often the result of these over-generalized categories. As Hall so eloquently puts it, “the moment the signifier “black” is torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct” (Hall 111).
Coconut indicate the central role it plays in what Njabulo Ndebele theorizes as an aesthetics of the “day-to-day” (152). In his 1984 keynote address to the *New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change* conference titled, “Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,” Ndebele seeks to theorize an aesthetics that moves away from that of the spectacular. The aesthetics of the spectacular, he reminds us,

documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. (Ndebele 150)

Thus, an aesthetic of the everyday “breaks the tradition of the spectacle” (Ndebele 150). Among other things, it is concerned with interiority, the ordinary, and focuses on quotidian concerns all of which, Ndebele asserts, “constitute the very content of the struggle” (156).

Years after the publication of the keynote address and the subsequent book of a similar title: *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), Ndebele’s observations about and theorizations of this shift in South African literature continue to be deployed in South African literary and cultural criticism. Indeed, “the “ordinary” has been “rediscovered,” turned upside down, probed, circled and celebrated in various forms” (Gqola 62). This suggests that Ndebele’s “commentaries… offer critical vocabularies applicable beyond ‘protest art/literature’” (Gqola 61). The spectacular, for example, has been deployed to critique “spectacular masculinities” (Gqola 2009) in the political arena thereby broadening the scope of Ndebele’s observations about how the spectacular functions in South Africa.

Similarly, I would like to extrapolate Ndebele’s understanding of the “ordinary”
and the “day-to-day” to include the deployment of popular culture in Moele, Matlwa and Mhlongo’s novels inasmuch as this encompasses the political as well as the commonplace. The everyday functions as a significant feature in the way that popular culture is deployed in the primary texts, encompassing “both the overtly political and the banal” (Ligaga 2). The banal, then, signifies more than the trivial or that which is unworthy of notice but also the “significant everyday” (Ligaga 2). Lastly, if we agree with Hall, the definitions of marginalized peoples imposed by dominant cultural industries—through various iterations of popular culture—“occupy and rework the interior contradictions of feeling and perception in dominated classes” (Hall 233). The mechanisms of popular culture can, thus, be connected to the interior processes that Ndebele sees as (at least partially) defining the aesthetics of the ordinary.

Language as popular culture

In their commitment to the “local” (Warnes 548), Mhlongo, Moele, and Matlwa create characters whose dialogue shifts fluidly back and forth between English, Sesotho, IsiZulu, seTswana, sePedi and a form of township slang known as Tsotsitaal or isCamtho. However, because both of these labels have negative connotations, I have chosen to adopt the term used by sociolinguist Leketi Makalela, kasi-taal. Kasi-taal is most prevalent in Niq Mhlongo’s After Tears. Of course, Kgebetli Moele and Kopano Matlwa also at times weave proverbs, short expressions

---

83 I would like to borrow Ligaga’s conceptualization of the importance of the everyday without necessarily taking on the theoretical underpinnings of the use of the concept of the “banal.”

84 References to or the use of “township slang” in the novel often indicate that the characters have origins in the various apartheid era townships which pepper the South African landscape. These references and allusions to townships in Johannesburg or the larger Gauteng province are provided by various sources: because township slang is considered to be “informal” these sources must also be slightly informal at times. These may include social media https://www.facebook.com/TsotsiTaal/, glosses provided by the authors, and other internet sources http://sowetanslang.blogspot.no. It should also be noted that forms of slang move with its users.

85 Kasi-taal “evolved from both forms of Iscamtho and Flaitaal or Tsotsitaal in order to account for weakening boundaries between Sotho, Nguni, Afrikaans and English language forms and to understand how its speakers, who claim Kasi-taal as their home language, redefine their identities…” (Makalela 669).
and slang in with SePedi, Northern seSotho and isiZulu into the narrative voice and character dialogue; while their “experimentation” with multilingualism is not as extensive as Mhlongo’s, it is equally strategic in its deployment and thus equally significant (Radithlalo 2). The authors experiment with representing the rhythms of a polyglottic society; rich with code-switching, code-mixing, and local expressions of English as lingua franca. In so doing, they have created spaces for new linguistic conventions within an English language novel. Thus, their work is not “a frivolous exercise” but “self-conscious and programmatic, concerned with reflexivity and cultural struggle as these are encoded in black fiction” (Radithlalo 2).

Yet, while the multilingual nature of the three novels analyzed in this chapter plays several interconnected roles, the most prominent is how language functions as an aspect of popular culture. It is true that language situates the novels within a national and urban context. Indeed, they “warn an unwary reader…that the linguistic register used here is distinctly South African” (Radithlalo 1). However, the demotic style of the authors’ language choices, the connections between language and music, and the “cool” factor of much of the language deployed in the three novels designates language as a central marker of popular culture.

In my comments on popular culture above, I mentioned Bogatsu’s observation that it was “cool to be able to communicate in tsotsi-taal. Bogatsu’s broader argument, in fact, has to do with the performance of emergent post-apartheid youth culture or “loxion kulcha.” Loxion kulcha emphasizes a kind of pride in many black youth’s origins in the township otherwise known as “proudly township” (Bogatsu 5), to the extent that “one’s ghetto-credibility has become an unofficial measuring tool for one’s blackness” (Bogatsu 5). In this way, language is encompassed in a new performance of culture—finding representation as well in post-apartheid literature. Multilingualism as a technique, coupled with language as a theme, thus raises

---

86 As mentioned in previous chapters *After Tears* is primarily set Chiawelo township (Chi) in Soweto. *Coconut* is set both in a Tshwane suburb called Little Valley and in Mphe Batho Township in Northern Gauteng. *Room* 207 references several townships but of course the main characters have all ended up in Hillbrow from other parts of South Africa, including KwaZulu Natal, Tshwane and other areas.
complex questions surrounding culture and identity(ies), the politics of linguistic
hegemony and ambivalent attitudes around language choice in South Africa.
Subsequently, language reflects the tensions and contradictions seen in popular
culture.

The Dialectic of Popular Culture

When thinking of the flows of complicity, antagonism, acceptance, and resistance
that traverse the terrain of popular culture, I argue that it is most useful to think of the
dialectic of popular culture as an action. In this way, one can view the dialectic as
part of the “ever-changing network of movement” (Dolby 14) that is popular culture.
This dialectic has been engaged by various cultural critics in their awareness of how,
for example, popular black South African writing is often “produced, even
straightjacketed, by a publisher looking for certain kinds of stories” (Nuttall
Entanglement 95); or, how black working class “feminist attitudes emerge …through
fissures of patriarchal discourse” (Davis xi) in African American popular forms. My
point here is that this dialectic is a constant and ever-changing process of
contradiction, negotiation, concession, and covert and overt resistance to discursive
and material dominance. It is a perpetual push and pull between and among the
various creators and consumers of culture.

One of the ways that the dialectic of popular culture manifests itself in the
context of this project is through various levels of ambivalence. Ambivalence is most
strongly perceived in Niq Mhlongo’s After Tears. It is most prevalent in the tension
between Mhlongo’s heavily satirical style and his experimentation with language.
Indeed, this experimentation, coupled with his brief engagement with South Africa’s
language politics, might initially be perceived as a stance in the ongoing debate about
African literature and language.87 In turn, multilingualism might be interpreted as an

87 The issue of the African languages in the post-colonial context has of course been the subject of a long
debate of which Kenyan author and critic Ngugi wa Thiongo is at the center. He is one of the strongest voices
attempt to shift the texts away from a hierarchical English language aesthetic and enter a growing conversation about the use of African languages in the South African context (Mesthrie 2008). It might also suggest that Mhlongo attempts to resituate English as just another among possible mediums of expression, thus establishing legitimacy for any language choice made (Ndebele *Fine Lines from the Box* 151). However, I would suggest that the novel reflects an ambivalence that is revealed in the tensions between his thematic representation of the language debate, and the particular ways in which Mhlongo multilingual narrative style manifests in the text.

In a scene with Bafana and his mother, Rea, who disapproves of his new girlfriend for only speaking English, the linguistic and cultural debate surrounding language choice in South Africa is briefly touched on:

‘besides, even the so-called black intelligentsia speak English amongst themselves.’ ‘English my balls! Who’s going to preserve our culture if we don’t speak our own language?’ ‘But the only black people that are preserving their culture are those that find it difficult to rise above the yoke of poverty, Mama. They’re the ones selling fruit and vegetables in spaza shops and chicken feet on the pavements.’ ‘But how does that link to African languages?’ ‘You can’t think big in African languages, Mama, and you can’t move out of the township either.’ (Mhlongo 175).

Bafana's views reflect those of a growing number of young black South Africans that view the use of African Languages as stifling and unproductive because English is considered the language of money and power.⁸⁸ On the one hand, Mhlongo’s

---

⁸⁸ See Rajend Mesthrie (2008). I have also heard these issues debated personally during a speaking engagement given by Ngugi wa Thiongo during the Time of the Writer festival at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban in 2007.
extensive use of Kasi-Taal, isiZulu, and seSotho in the text indicates his position here along with a continued critical reading of Bafana’s character. On the other hand, the introduction of this issue seems incongruous with the other thematic preoccupations of the text: namely a ‘dog eat dog’ post-apartheid world, the tragi-comedy of ghetto-life, and masculinity. Language as an aspect of cultural struggle seems placed almost as a formulaic nod to the popular issues of the day.

Notwithstanding the incongruity of the scene, Mhlongo’s digression into the politics of language reminds us of how, despite the progressive constitution and new policies of racial equality and harmony, various institutions continue to perpetuate the “hegemonic dominance of whiteness that symbolised apartheid education” (Makoe 655). Because of the continued use of whiteness as the measuring rod for civilization, intelligence, and education, Bafana’s views are mitigated as more than just the ignorance or blind assimilation of the younger generation toward whiteness or Englishness. Rea’s point to Bafana mimics that of Ngugi wa Thiongo in its logic that culture is carried within language (wa Thiong’o 16). Here, Mhlongo captures the ambivalence that accompanies issues of language and identity formation in South Africa. This ambivalence, I argue, mirrors the tensions brought about by Mhlongo’s experimentation with multilingualism. Indeed, the tension between the white supremacist ideology that manifests itself in Bafana’s views and this experimentation is significant in that it reveals a deeper uncertainty about how South African society will resolve its own incongruities with regard to race, gender and nationality.

*After Tears* experiments with multilingualism through the voices of the four male supporting characters Uncle Nyawana (Jabulani), Pelepele (PP), Diliza and Zero who live in Chiawelo township. As discussed in the previous chapter, the four are vulgarized caricatures of hegemonic masculinity and situated as relics of the previous generation whereas Bafana represents the younger more progressive set. Language, unfortunately, seems to contribute to these caricatures. Uncle Nyawana, for example, shortly after seeing his nephew again, celebrates his assumed graduation from law school with dreams of material wealth, “I’ll buy you a house in the posh suburb of
Houghton because *ngiyak’ncanywa ntwana*. I love you, my *laitie*, and I want you to be Mandela’s neighbor and own a mansion with very high walls like all the rich people do” (Mhlongo 14; italics added). This is significantly different from the voice of Bafana as narrator: “everyone in the car laughed at my Uncle’s dreams, but Zero’s laughter was derisive” (Mhlongo 14). The contrast between the two characters is introduced here: Uncle Nyawana, using *kasi-taal*, is hyperbolic in his expectations of his nephew and the scene establishes the sense that this character is not to be taken seriously. Bafana, by contrast, narrates using standard English and is able to clearly articulate conversational nuances. *Kasi-taal* expressions like “*ngiyak’canywa*” (slang for ‘I love you’) and “*laaitie*” (Afrikaans derived slang: young person usually a male), all clearly situate these particular characters both literally and metaphorically in the post-apartheid township space. However, these expressions also function as a socio-linguistic code, identifying people as “other” to Bafana’s college educated achievements and social aspirations. This enables them to be objects of censure and laughter for the hyper-masculine posturing and over-sexualized views that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Herein lies the underlying tension in this novel. The tension in Mhlongo’s language experimentation is partially encapsulated in *Kasi-taal* itself. On the one hand, what is also known as *tsotsitaal*, is understood to be the language of *utsotsi* (a thug or a criminal), who is infamous in township spaces for violent crimes and a gangster lifestyle. On the other hand, however, Sizwe Satyo reminds us that historically *tsotsitaal* “emerged as a vibrant and imaginative response to white domination” (92). As a language that is steeped in ambiguity, *kasi-taal* thus potentially generates the very ambivalence seen in Mhlongo’s language use. Thus, while we acknowledge that Mhlongo’s experimentation with multilingualism is positive, even “brave” (Raditlhalo 2), we must also question why the only characters who serve as the voice for *kasi-taal* are also described by their foul smell (11), ignorant and vulgar statements (101), or their drunkenness (103). Part of what stands

---

89 These terms are glossed at the back of Mhlongo’s text (219).
out in the face of this contradiction is a certain uneasiness or ambivalence with regard to what Hall calls “overdetermination” (109) and the “politics of representation” (111). As such, Mhlongo struggles with representing one of many aspects of a shifting and ever-changing black township culture which has already been overdetermined by the conditions it inherited (Hall 109): the insidious presence of whiteness in all its forms and the effects of that presence and the resulting “rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, ways of walking, standing and talking” (Hall 109). In the South African context, these manifest for example through apartheid era militarized police presence, white media, white standards of beauty and the like. Body stylization can be seen, for instance, in the walk, talk, and “swag”\(^90\) of the tsotsi, in various attempts to achieve a sense of community and solidarity.

Moreover, Mhlongo is aware of having been dubbed the “voice of the kwaiso generation” (Donadio 5), a moniker that speaks to his ability to capture the polyglottic sounds of South Africa’s newly ‘freed’ young black population.\(^91\) As a result of this public recognition, Mhlongo seems apprehensive of the constrictive potential of the moniker. Or as he puts it, “this sometimes is a bit harmful to my performance, because I always have to behave a certain way, or write in a certain way that is associated with this generation” (qtd. in Donadio 5). I see Mhlongo’s ambivalence as part of a certain uneasiness with character representation and the lines between blunt truth-telling, comedic exaggeration, and the perpetuation of certain stereotypes about township residents. Furthermore, Mhlongo wrestles with the expectations of profit-driven publishing companies, those of a critical and at times fickle audience, along with the complex realities of artistic representation. All of these forces influence, determine and are reflected in that representation. This means

\(^{90}\) A colloquial expression to indicate a certain charisma found amongst young people.

\(^{91}\) This may in other arenas be known as “the Y generation” (Bogatsu 2), or South Africa’s black urban youth. The label “Y generation” may be more inclusive of other racial groups within South Africa but has its basis in the newly emergent “self-stylisation” with which Sarah Nuttall characterizes South Africa’s black youth culture (“Self and Text in Y Magazine” 235).
that beyond the reality that representation can never be read as reality or sought out for some false notion of authenticity, stereotyped and demonized cultures also grapple with various kinds of interference: commodification, appropriation, over-determination, stereotype, and so on. After all, as Hall reminds us:

Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base. Thus, they must always be heard, not simply as the recovery of a lost dialogue bearing clues for the production of new musics…but as what they are—adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture. (110)

Thus, to reiterate, Mhlongo relies on overblown caricatures, satire and comedy as his chosen conduit for his use of language in the novel—the underlying uneasiness with his role as the embodiment of the “voice” of a generation depicted in the text.

The notion of Mhlongo as the “voice of the kwaito generation” (Donadio 5) also reminds us of the strong presence of South African musical genre kwaito in both After Tears and Room 207, which draws our attention to the important links between kwaito music, kasi-taal and what Satyo calls, “kwaito-speak” (92). More importantly, kwaito is another aspect of the trope of ambivalence and ambiguity. Kwaito music claims roots in a variety of older South African musical genres including mbaqanga (jive), kwela, mapantsula, bubblegum, township jazz, Afro-pop

---

92 Kwaito music is considered an important contribution to Black South African culture in that it rose to prominence during the transitional period between the apartheid regime and the first democratic election in 1994. Kwaito is said to be the first genre of music to boast black artists, black producers and black distributors after decades of apartheid controlled all white recording and production companies. The rise of kwaito was partially made possible because of decreased production costs and increased access to the kind of technology that was used to produce the music.
and western genres including R&B, jungle, house, ragga (reggae), and hip hop. *Kwaito* DJs used synthesizers to sophisticate bubblegum music by adding an amalgam of these South African and international beats and sounds and slowing down house tracks to create the *kwaito* sound (Peterson 199). They then overlaid the new slower track with rap. Usually *kwaito* MCs rap in a mix of African languages and/or *kasi-taal*.

Characterized as an output of nineties youth culture, *kwaito* is in part the result of local DJs who were responding to black township residents’ need to express their sense of celebration and release at the dissolution of the apartheid government and the ushering in of a new democracy in South Africa. The genre has been labeled “apolitical” (Steingo 7), “hedonistic” (Impey 44), sensual (Peterson 198), “violen[t]” (Niaah 38), and “misogynistic” (Impey 44) by its celebrators and detractors alike.93 Indeed, few scholars, notable exceptions being Bhekisizwe Peterson (2003) and Sonja Stanley Niaah (2008), manage to reach beyond tendencies of moral, academic, and political gatekeeping and, as Peterson suggests, “reconfigure our grasp of the complex, quilt-work of personal and social instances that feed into the making and reception of popular culture” (203). With that said, *kwaito* music too “generates multiple meanings” (Bosch 98) and inhabits the dialectic space of cultural struggle.

This thus contributes to the ambivalence found in *After Tears* and indeed an ambiguousness in *Room 207*. The strong presence of a popular form which carries its own tension does contribute to a certain ambivalence in both texts, but it also manifests itself in more specific ways, thereby increasing a general sense of tension, contradiction, and contestation in the novels. One brief example can be drawn from the club scene in Moele’s *Room 207*. This is a scene that is already complex: fraught with problematic gender dynamics, it also represents an important moment of hustler-like escape for Noko and Molamo’s characters as well as it symbolizes some of the

---

93 For more on *kwaito* music see Peterson (2003), Bosch (2006), Steingo (2007), Niaah (2008), Swartz (2008).
oppositional ways the characters move through space (175). The two attend this club largely out of a desire to see popular kwai... space will be discussed in the next section “Popular Culture and Space.”

The notion of “hustler-like escape” references the discussion of containment and mobility found in Chapter 1. The oppositional ways of moving through space will be discussed in the next section “Popular Culture and Space.”
objectification of these women. Additionally, it speaks to the question of representation generally and whether empowerment still functions under the weight of the patriarchal gaze, as is the case here.

The ambiguousness discussed above indicates one way in which the dialectic of popular culture operates in the novels. Another is more in line with the theory of the dialectic as movement and action. It can be found in the currents of complacency, critique and resistance that flow between texts. As the texts are placed in conversation with one another, these flows offer important insights into questions surrounding gender, space, and cultural identity. Consider the function of imagery such as popular figures in Coconut and Room 207. In both novels, the bedroom/studio wall becomes a canvas on which the protagonists place their images of “inspiration” (Moele 16). Both walls are covered with pictures of various popular figures, cut from magazines in the case of Coconut, while in the case of Room 207 it is not clear. However, this is where their similarity ends.

The popular figures in Coconut have no names, as they do in Room 207. Instead they are a nebulous sea of white:

*The rest that followed was a jumble. A jumble I can barely remember, except for the word ‘white.’ White. White. White. There was not a single face of colour on the wall. I had not noticed. Honest. It was only after he pointed it out that I saw it too. I mean, why on earth would I do something like that intentionally? What did it matter anyway? It was purely a coincidence; perhaps there were no black faces I liked in the magazines I cut out from.* (Matlwa 92)

Ofilwe’s narration of this childhood memory invokes one of the central components of how popular culture “reworks our interior processes” (Hall 233), how various forms of media—specifically mass media—builds and constructs stereotypes which are then attributed to race, gender and class: the power of the image. Matlwa’s repetition of the word “white,” as it is related to the array of faces on the wall,
illustrates the way in which whiteness as a construct has been ingrained in Ofilwe’s character even at a young age. It illustrates the pervasiveness of white standards of beauty as they are constructed and displayed through popular forms such as popular magazines. These are specifically fashion magazines directed at young white women like, for example, *Girlfriend* the Australian teen magazine mentioned in the novel (Matlwa 132).

Research on magazines, with various different target audiences, consistently demonstrates two characteristics which can be attributed to this particular medium. The first is the power that imaging, especially in advertisements, potentially has on readers and conversely, the kind of insight magazines, “may well provide… into the workings of a culture than” other kinds of print media (Rauwerda 394). Indeed, scholarly research consistently demonstrates that magazines have incredible power with regard to cultural influence and identity construction (Sanger 276). The second is that advertising in magazines is more often than not encoded with white supremacist, patriarchal, and heteronormative standards and ideologies (Sanger 276). As such, Maltwa’s engagement with popular culture in *Coconut* is not directed toward its emancipatory potential but rather to another aspect of the dialectic discussed by Stuart Hall: the negative ways it can rework our interior processes (Hall 238). Matlwa uses the magazine as a symbol of how popular culture can also be a tool that, through structures of the dominant culture, reinforces the hegemony of whiteness.

*Room 207*, by contrast, seems to offer an alternative to the images of hetero-patriarchal whiteness and blackness perpetuated by some South African media. There is a scene in the novel in which Noko gives his imagined guest a tour of the apartment where he and his six friends live. In this scene Noko and the “you” guest stop in front of the wall that is filled with pictures of famous figures who have been popularized by marginalized groups either because of their revolutionary work or their monetary success.
This, as you can see, is the wall of inspiration. To us, to me, they are not role models at all but people just like you and me, who, in their very own ways and byways, made it to the top. We put them up on the wall so that when one of us is down he can look at them, because some of them have lived through this Hillbrow, lived it to get out of it. You know these faces, that’s Boom Shaka…That’s the brother Herman Mashaba. This, the second Jesus, Che… This one has a place in this heart. This is the African warrior. The Masai warrior. Standing tall and comfortable on one leg. I guess he is looking at… Well, he is enjoying whatever he is looking at. These are Molamo’s stickers. This one is a quote from a great man of the soil, Ali Mazrui: “We are the people of the day before yesterday.” (Moele 17-19)

These positive images of blackness and brownness act in opposition to the self-negating effect of the images propagated by the magazines featured in Coconut. Moele’s decision to place them in the novel may be read as a strategic method of situating the novel within a certain pro-black, “conscious,” intellectual space. Simultaneously, the “wall of inspiration” refutes the negative effects of Ofilwe’s wall, suggesting that popular culture can also be about generating images from within, ones that uplift and inspire.

We must be cautious not to fall into the trap of reducing these representations of popular culture to a set of binary oppositions. While it is true, for example, that the wall in Room 207 inspires, it also perpetuates the masculinist space discussed in the previous chapter. The presence of Boom Shaka on the wall seems to have little to do with inspiration and more with their sexual appeal (17). The similarity between Noko’s wall and the representation of magazines in Coconut resides in the patriarchal ideology that is perpetuated in both cases, black women are placed as the over-sexualized, demonized objects in a variety of popular forms, including ostensibly positive black popular art. Even in magazines targeting black audiences like Drum magazine, the ideology of whiteness as pure, clean, intelligent and powerful is transferred through marketing and various kinds of imagery (Rauwerda 394).
Coconut reinforces this point with the example of Fikile’s character. The ideals of white femininity propagated in her magazines directly reflect her association of blackness with dirt, filth, and shame and undergirds her magazine “airbrushed” mind and her judgment of her friends as “dirty” and “smelling” (Matlwa 167). Fikile’s judgmental observations of her classmates illustrate the ways in which the images and stereotypes perpetuated in the magazines she reads are rooted in “heteropatriarchal racist foundations…reinforc[ing] imaginary binaries of gender (woman/man), race (black/white) and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual)” (Sanger 275). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Fikile’s view of blackness actually speaks to her personal feelings of shame and impurity as a survivor of sexual abuse. Therefore, the discourse of whiteness found in and represented by popular magazines reinforces her own self-hatred, reminding us of how the external has an effect on the internal. The contrasts between these two engagements with popular imagery illustrate the perpetual tension in popular culture between hegemonic and resistant discourses. It also indicates the varying ways that popular culture can operate within and affect space.

**Popular Culture and Space**

I find it fruitful to begin a discussion of popular culture and space with a reading of Kopano Matlwa’s thematization of post-apartheid language politics in Coconut. Ofilwe is both dismayed by, and ashamed of, her lack of fluency in sePedi as she enters into young womanhood. Indeed, she mourns not only her own lack of proficiency but what she (and perhaps Matlwa) views as the state of African languages, especially for an emerging post-apartheid black middle class:

> in every classroom children are dying. It is a parasitic disease, seizing the mind for its own usage. Using the mind for its own survival. So that it might grow, divide multiply and infect others. Burnt sienna washing out DNA coding for white greed, blond vanity and blue-eyed
malevolence. IsiZulu forgotten. Tshivenda a distant memory. (Matlwa 93)

There is a tone of regret and outrage in this passage that politicizes the theme of African languages in the novel. Ofilwe’s attitude toward language is markedly different from that of her less mature self, “it is because I am smart and speak perfect English. That is why people treat me differently. I knew from a very young age that Sepedi would not take me far” (Matlwa 54; italics in the original). Like Bafana’s character, Ofilwe’s character alludes to the reality that in both the South African context and on the global scale English has currency. As a lingua franca, English has currency with regard to business and international educational opportunities but, more importantly, English is powerful in its associations with the elite and with whiteness (Spencer 69).

Part of Ofilwe’s subjective and political growth is embodied in the development of her views with regard to language. Thus, English shifts from, “the one that spoke of sweet success” (54), to a “parasitic disease” (93). This is markedly different from Fikile’s transition into young womanhood where language becomes part of her entrance into whiteness: “But for me, my whole life has become about the way I speak, about what sounds the words make as they fall on the listener’s ear” (Matlwa 154; italics in the original). However, together they have larger implications in terms of Matlwa’s project. Firstly, the dynamic of language fictionalized in the novel illustrates the complex ways in which young black South African women come into their various racialized and gendered subjectivities in the post-apartheid period. Secondly, it offers valuable insight into the politics of language, popular culture, and space in this fairly new democracy.

Contextualizing the two young women’s developing positions with regard to language may emphasize my point with regard to space. Ofilwe’s conflict arises not only from feeling like an outsider in her own culture but also from the colonial-era pressures placed on her by the white figures in her life with regard to standard English pronunciation and vocabulary, “‘say ’uh-vin’ Fifi. You bake a cake in an ‘uh-vin’, not ‘oh-vin’, ‘uh-vin’” (Matlwa 49). When Ofilwe attempts to resist her white
friend Belinda’s policing of her accent, she is quickly reminded of how white hegemony is reinforced through humiliation, “*Do you want to be laughed at again? Come now. Say ‘uh-vin’*” (49).

Matlwa’s detailed exploration of some of the inner conflicts faced by these characters serves as a means for her to engage issues of language and the contradictions and nuances of both language and blackness. Moreover, it illustrates the “identity crisis” that multi or bilingual speakers experience in “monoglossic school environments” as well of the sense of “shrinking spaces to express multiple identities” in the post-apartheid context (Makalela 677-78). This notion of shrinking spaces speaks to a general spatial dynamic with regard to language as it is connected to race and gender subjectivities. Despite the fact that South Africa boasts eleven official languages, it is still true that with regard to social mobility and economic and political power, the society is anything but multilingual. Ofilwe’s experience with Belinda and the others who previously laughed at her accent illustrates precisely how space for the expression of multiple subjectivities is, in fact, either shrinking or is non-existent. Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* similarly implies that there is no room in South African literary spaces for a multiplicity of creative expressions—exemplified in a short story within the main narrative frame whereby a young woman tries to write a novel in Sepedi which is rejected by South African publishing houses because of language (Mpe 58). Thus, it is precisely Matlwa’s representation of those “shrinking spaces” linguistically that provides the basis for the ensuing discussion of popular culture and space because it profoundly reflects each of the authors’ broader concerns with containment, mobility and constricting spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. Moreover, Matlwa uses language as one avenue through which to carve out alternative or oppositional spaces for black subjectivities.

Considering how certain popular forms contribute to various geographies of containment and domination, the three novels nonetheless theorize ways that popular culture generates and expands space. One of the most important ways that popular culture functions in Matlwa, Mhlongo and Moele’s novels is to carve out those spaces
that are lacking or to expand those spaces that dominant social structures attempt to constrict. The novels’ use of dialects and idiolects is to one extent a linguistic code, marking the texts a distinctly South African and connecting them to a more specific place—a specific township or city. However, it is not the connection to place that is most important here. Rather, unapologetic celebration of multiple linguistic and geographic identities that is important and the insistence that the township, and the rural village both have a place in urban cosmopolitan spaces such as Johannesburg or Cape Town. And they have a place in whatever makes up the intellectual, creative space called South African literature—not as a site of oppression, an object of pity, or as a spectacle of violence, crime and poverty; but as a site of knowledge, history, and creativity.

Thus, throughout Room 207, Moele switches to Northern SeSotho very often when the protagonist needs to engage or represent an intense emotion, a difficult or, contentious issue, or to allude to culturally specific mode of thinking or way of being, whereas Matlwa interjects sePedi when making spiritual or cultural references. Even Mhlongo’s ambivalence fails to negate the beauty of linguistic innovation when he or Moele and Matlwa record turns of phrase in isiZulu, Kasi-taal or South African inflected English. Indeed, what is called the “linguistic virtuosity of [Moele’s] novel” (Milazzo 41) speaks to not only his but all the creative uses of English as well as the multilingual natures of the texts. Reflected in these choices is a deliberate use of language to indicate that despite structures of containment and dominance, culture, history, and the pains and pleasures of everyday life are also embedded in these urban spaces.

In the case of Room 207, those above-mentioned moments of engagement are often related to manhood and masculinity. Noko, the novel’s protagonist for example, offers a proverb in Northern seSotho in an attempt to express and capture the awkwardness of trying to comfort Modishi’s character after he learns that his girlfriend Lerato has had two abortions. The proverb speaks to gendered expectations with regard to masculinity and grief, “Monna ke nku o llela teng, that’s how we’re
supposed to be, how we were” (56; italics added). What is significant about this moment is the uncertainty and ambiguity expressed during this particular scene. The *seSotho* proverb adds a layer of linguistic and thematic complexity because, as I read it, the proverb indicates how ingrained notions of masculinity are in the character’s culture. This results in conflicting inclinations when Noko is faced with the grief and anger of a close friend, Noko asks: “how do you comfort a man? It’s not there in *komeng*, there is no lesson for comforting darkie brothers” (Moele 57; italics added).

Thus, Moele deploys language in such a way that it mitigates our understanding of the novel’s characters and demands space in the post-apartheid context for multiple identities. Rather than a reductive reading of Moele and his friends as contemptible misogynists, language indicates how ingrained certain ideologies with regard to manhood are. Furthermore, the use of *seSotho* also implies that these characters, their understanding of life and themselves must be expressed in a language other than English. Linguistically, the novel makes the important assertion, similar to Refentse’s claim in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, that the fictional Tiragalong is always present even in the urban Hillbrow. Moele basically makes the same point linguistically that Mpe makes thematically: despite their urban veneer, Moele’s characters embody the world-views of their home cultures. Thus, urbanity is both Hillbrow and the home from which these characters have moved.

Similarly, the township is also foregrounded as an ordinary space through the normalization of township slang in the texts. In contrast to the exaggerated comedy which characterized Mhlongo’s use of slang, Moele and Matlwa integrate *Kasi-taal* into dialogue and narrative in arbitrary and everyday frames. Code switching, as it is deployed in the texts, very often captures the effortlessness and creativity of spoken language. Noko, for example, begins a story stating, “Debra, as one of my uncles

---

95 Translation provided in the back of the book: “*Monna ke nku o llela teng*: A man is a sheep, he cries inside” (238).

96 Translation provided in the back of the book: “*komeng*: Northern Sotho: initiation school” (238)
always observed of most of the girls who grew up in Mamelodi \(^97\) was a true lelaenara, \(^98\) and that night she proved him very right” (Moele 26; italics added). Later, he narrates how he met one of the other central characters D’Nice, “To make it seem even more harmless they were sharing the cigarette and a seven-fifty lengolongolo” \(^99\) (Moele 34; italics added). By code switching between English and kasi-taal in Noko’s narrative voice, Moele asserts the normality of both kaasi-taal and the linguistic act of code switching and simultaneously raises kaasi-taal to the level of the literary idiom. He claims their place as part of South African national identity and culture.

Matlwa is similarly able to represent the multilingual nature of everyday dialogue in the township. Fikile (Fiks), for example, commute is described by a fellow passenger on the train as “you know, those abo mabhebeza\(^100\) who are always wishing to be something that they ain’t never gonna be.” (Matlwa 133; italics in the original). The gentleman in question is one of the male figures in the novel, representing positive black masculinity and fatherhood so that his use of slang is cast, unlike that of Mhlongo’s characters, in a positive light. Matlwa and Moele’s use of slang is therefore significant for several reasons. It sets out to normalize township slang. It thus demands a place for kasi-taal in mainstream South African society and, subsequently, rejects the pathologization of black ghettos and black poverty. Perhaps, their use of the demotic for both dialogue and narration even suggests that these authors are attempting to carve out a space for not only everyday themes and concerns but for an aesthetic of the everyday and subsequently the popular.

The various linguistic choices made in After Tears, Room 207 and Coconut are closely linked to their deployment of kwaito. These links concretize the various ways their authors attempt to highlight established oppositional geographies as they were seen during the colonial and apartheid period. Additionally, and more importantly,

\(^{97}\) Mamelodi is a township in northeast Tshwane (formerly Pretoria).
\(^{98}\) Translation provided in the back of the book: “lelaenara (slang) A streetwise person” (237).
\(^{99}\) Translation provided in the back of the book: “lengolongolo (slang): a 750 ml bottle of beer.
\(^{100}\) Abo mabhebeza: “refers to a girl” (http://sowetanslang.blogspot.no/2008/06/m.html)
they attempt to imagine new possibilities for occupying and reworking space, as well as for creating space that encompasses and allows for a multiplicity of emerging post-apartheid subjectivities—seen for example in characters like Ofilwe, Noko and Bafana. They navigate familial pressure, an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan world, the continued hegemony of whiteness and patriarchy along with their own sense of themselves. As such, 

kwaito, like the demotic, serves as an avenue through which we can unpack those oppositional geographies and think through new possibilities for occupying space.

As a “new iteration of youth culture” (Niaah 39), 

kwaito quite literally occupies space. The image of “kwaito pump[ing] out of minibus taxis, clubs, shebeens and street parties[and] permeating popular television programmes and advertisements, films, websites, magazines, radio waves, and fashion” (Niaah 40; italics added) illustrates the ways in which the genre both occupies and produces space. Its presence in all of these popular, everyday places means that it alters the dynamic in them—creating a party-like feel, enhancing an atmosphere of pleasure, sensuality, and fun. With such a strong spatial presence in reality, 

kwaito is then a useful tool for thinking through space at the level of fiction.

There are two scenes in the novels which I suggest are especially indicative of the spatial potentialities of 

kwaito. In After Tears, Mhlongo constructs a dramatic New Year’s Eve scene with a popular 

kwaito song is playing in the background and this has the same implications as the earlier discussed club scene in Room 207. Boom Shaka’s performance at a club. The two scenes signal different but equally important features of the spatial possibilities of the genre. In the former, 

kwaito music is being blasted on the streets of the Chiawelo township where Bafana’s character lives, which is also the setting for most of the narrative.

at exactly twelve midnight the street was full of people and most of them were dancing excitedly to the 
kwaito song that came from Jobe’s place. It was one of the hottest songs of the moment by Mdu called “Mazola”.

Baba kaNomsa. (Nomsa’s father.)
The whole of Soweto had been reduced to one big party (122).

Mhlongo’s street party has several important elements: the street is “full of people,” who are “dancing excitedly,” to music that was coming from “Jobe’s place.” What he represents spatially is politically and historically relevant. The geographical structures that were put in place by the apartheid government aimed to spatially contain South Africa’s Black residents. Laws which required permits and passes to live in the township areas prevented occupation of public land, prohibited gatherings in public places (if deemed unsafe by the Minister of Justice), and generally attempted to prevent black mobility. Thus, what Mhlongo describes here is an explicitly political re-occupation and decolonization of space. The occupation of the street as a space of entertainment and celebration speaks to the ways that popular music contributes to the liberation of various spaces of domination. This scene celebrates the history of how “policed spaces… were appropriated for performance” (Niaah 42), which illustrates the political significance of even an ostensibly ‘apolitical form.’ Kwaito participates in these kinds of spatial appropriations through its large-scale occupation of streets, public taxis, the radio stations, and nightclubs.

However, kwaito does not just occupy space, it facilitates oppositional movements within space. In other words, everyday pursuits of pleasure also constitute everyday forms of resistance. The club scene in Room 207 offers important insight into the kind of resistant ways that black subjects can and do create oppositional ways of moving in and around space. As mentioned earlier, Noko’s character and secondary protagonist Molamo attend a live performance of Boom Shaka. Despite the problematic patriarchal gaze present in this scene, the sensuality and carnality of the space takes on a different significance here. Hedonism takes

---

101 I am referring here to the Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956, which outlawed gatherings in public places (at the discretion of the Minister of Justice).
center stage with regard to money, alcohol, and sex. The two characters put on a display of materialistic wealth both in their dress, their dance prowess and their ostentatious posturing with wads of artificial cash (Moele 174-76). The carnality of anonymous sex with two nameless women sets up the paradox of the public space and the most intimate of acts. The women’s names, histories, or identities are of no consequence, only the sexual act “and he holds a used condom in my face and says, ‘You see? Smell it.’ Putting it in my face. ‘This is how she smells after all the deodorants and colognes. This is her God-given smell— as individual as her fingerprints” (Moele 183). Intimacy is of course an impossibility here by virtue of the public viewing of the condom, but pleasure—corporeal release in the space of the nightclub is not.

It is accurate to say that the club scene in Moele’s novel echoes what Swartz’s and other critics observe about the “materialism of kwaito culture” (Swartz 16), the accusations of “vulgarity”, and the “stubbornness with which [it] has remained music that is fixated with the pleasures of the body (be it the thrills of dance or carnality)” (Peterson 198). These aspects are on prominent display in this scene. However, I am more interested in what Sonjah Stanley Niaah has termed a “politics of enjoyment” or “decolonial notions of enjoyment” and how it operates in these spaces (45). Niaah argues convincingly that the spaces in which kwaito is performed and consumed are also spaces black subjects form radical oppositional narratives with regard to politics, space and culture. Therefore, these moments of pleasure defiantly resist the forces of oppression which attempt to pervade those same spaces, thereby rendering those spaces infused with political power (Niaah 45). This is significant both in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and for the subjects who do the pursuing.

The reference to people “dancing excitedly” (Mhlongo 122) in After Tears, boosted by the narrator’s hyperbolic statement that the “whole of Soweto had been reduced to one big party” (Mhlongo 122), offers another level of spatial significance. Even the hyperbole is revealing as it divulges the emancipatory potential of the politics of enjoyment in this space. The image of the entire township of South
Western Townships (Soweto) dancing and partying implies a sort of liberation from a long history of political struggle, oppressive violence and, social strife. Likewise, the blatant enjoyment of anonymous sex momentarily emphasizes the liberatory power of pleasure; enjoyed despite state-contrived oppressive and constricting spaces. While Soweto may have been built based on a geography of containment and oppression, Moele and Mhlongo imagine it, and poverty-stricken Hillbrow, as a revolutionary space defiant in its pleasure.

**Aesthetics and its Politics**

Emerging black post-apartheid youth culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s garnered a good deal of attention from cultural, literary and music critics. Seemingly interchangeable labels such as the “Y culture,” “Loxion kulcha” and the “kwai-to-hip-hop generation” pop up in critical texts in critics’ various attempts to articulate and understand the political and cultural shifts that were and are happening. Despite the different labels, a fairly cohesive picture of this generation emerges. Post-apartheid youth culture, according to its critics, seeks to establish an identity separate from the struggle identity of the previous generation. This new generation is described as “self-styling” (Nuttall 2009), “aspirational” (Swartz 2008), urban, “socio-economically hybrid” (Bogatsu 2002), and not only proudly South African but proudly township (Bogatsu 5), embracing the demotic and the quotidian. Also associated with kwai-to music and subsequently youth culture are tendencies toward a politics of pleasure and enjoyment—an attempt to disengage from the suffering and struggles of the past and look to a future free of the atmosphere of political struggle,

---

102 *Loxion* refers to location and *kulcha* is the hip-hop inflected spelling of culture. Location is a slang term for the township.

103 Sarah Nuttall (2009) and Mpolokeng Bogatsu (2002) are two of the notable scholars who deploy and adopt these labels in their discussions of post-apartheid South African black youth culture

104 This “generation” refers to those who were born after or were still children during the transition to democracy in 1994. They are the “first to experience desegregated schooling on an extensive scale” (Bogatsu 1) and are more enmeshed in the global flows of culture and capitalism.
poverty, violence, and oppression (Peterson 200). These aspects of Y culture are, of course, visible in various cultural forms, such as music, art, literature, and fashion. As such, it is also true that post-apartheid youth culture is accompanied by a variety of stylistic characteristics which make up a kind of cultural aesthetic. While not completely divorced from previous aesthetic traditions, it brings innovations to the table. It is my contention that the aesthetics of Y culture is closely associated with the above listed characteristics and directly links to the popular aesthetics of the primary texts of this study.

It is commonly asked if kwaito is the South African version of hip hop due to its very obvious technical similarities (sampling, rapping over a beat, street origins) but also because of their thematic and political links (Swartz 2008). It is decidedly not, but there are certain critical strides that have been made in the analysis of what Brittney Cooper calls “hip-hop aesthetics” that provide a critical and analytical map for unpacking what might be called kwaito aesthetics. It should be clear that I have not seen “kwaito aesthetics” used in exactly the same way as it is intended here: a descriptor of the tropes, formulations and linguistic choices made by these authors. However, kwaito also follows certain musical aesthetics such as its reliance on a long musical heritage, sampling, dance beats, and so on that illustrate a clean break from the live band aesthetics of jazz or other popular musical forms in South Africa (Peterson 204). The aesthetics of kwaito lyrics are best “conveyed through performance: irony, allusions, puns, accent on words and the accent of the singer’s voice” (Peterson “Kwaidawgs” 205). Additionally, recurring tropes within kwaito music include the hustler, machismo, sexual exploits and exploitation of women, and the desire for material goods along with the angst that follows inability to obtain those goods (Peterson “Kwaidawgs” 207). Steingo, on the other hand, mentions the “dance-oriented aesthetic of kwaito” (27). These and other critical discussions of the genre suggest that, like hip-hop aesthetics, kwaito aesthetics are grounded in the temporal and spatial contexts out of which they arose and reflect a generational desire to move beyond South Africa’s apartheid history at a variety of levels.
In her elucidation of Hip-hop aesthetics, Cooper also remarks that they take the form of three socio-political tropes: “social alchemy that transforms lack into substance…a dialectic of deviance and defiance [, and] street consciousness and cultural literacy” (Cooper 56). Driving those tropes are musical/literary devices, “the break” and “sampling as an intertextual practice” (Cooper 57, 64). What is useful about Cooper’s methodology is the deployment of hip-hop musical aesthetics as a tool of critical analysis of “lit hop” or “ghetto lit”—a particular literary genre that emerged in the first decade of the new millennium. What Cooper illustrates is the way that aesthetics permeate hip-hop culture in general rather than just hip-hop music. I propose to adopt a similar methodology here in relation to *kwai to*.

In the introduction to *Some of My Best Friends are White: Subversive Thoughts from an Urban Zulu Warrior*, Ndumiso Ngcobo calls his collection of essays “literary kwai to” a “kwaibook” (17) because of its “in-your-face writing, self-deprecating ‘think pieces’ which rework cultural models, as kwai to does” (Nuttall 94; italics added). I would further argue that kwai to aesthetics, as they feature in the music and culture as well as in *After Tears, Room 207* and *Coconut*, generate from the political aftermath of the struggle against apartheid and as a product of the township and its socio-spatial realities. Not only are they reflected in the presence of kwai to language and music, but the broader stylistic and formulaic choices made by Mhlongo, Matlwa and Moele also reflect kwai to culture and style.

Kopano Matlwa and Niq Mhlongo’s literary bricolage mirrors, for example, the eclectic musical mix that produces the kwai to sound. *Coconut* defies linearity and conventional writing styles with an eclectic mix of epistolary, poetic, and oral forms added to her more conventional prose. This eclecticism reflects kwai to’s celebratory mix of house, reggae, bubblegum and other kinds of music and its clear break with the musical conventions of the past. Meanwhile, *After Tears* sticks to the conventions of linearity but embraces a variety of stylistic features in order to further the narrative including song lyrics, multilingualism, and dialogue along with conventional prose. In addition, Mhlongo, who seems most invested in capturing kwai to culture in his
text, like Ngcobo, also relies on an unapologetic “in your face” style in terms realities that it represents and the blunt self-critique it offers. This is also true for Moele’s style which, similarly has a “tell it like it is” approach in *Room 207*. However, Moele, like Matlwa, has no interest in linearity. His narrative is fragmentary in its flow, constantly disrupted with anecdotes about a character or an incident in the six characters’ lives. The result is therefore similar to *kwaito* in the novel’s defiance of not only narrative conventions but those of style and grammar as well.

In addition to these general trends in the three novels, four central tropes that form part of *kwaito* aesthetics have emerged in the course of this study. They are the hustler figure (as elucidated in Chapter One); the trope of newness as in the new South Africa, new South African woman and so on; aspiration and consumption; and opacity which this section will discuss. These tropes are realized through a variety of literary devices explored throughout this study: verbal and structural irony, foreshadowing, symbolism and extended metaphor. However, the most compelling device deployed in these texts is in the use of local linguistic inflection and poetics: the demotic and its links to “*kwaito*-speak”—the multilingualism of *kwaito* lyrics (Satyo 91), along with actual *kwaito* song titles and lyrics. Together these create musicality in the texts, capturing certain rhythms through speech, song lyrics, and dance.

The extent to which these texts employ code-switching and use *kasi-taal* as a means of representing everyday speech in black urban spaces and places is a large part of what makes them so compelling as multi-lingual experimentations. Code switching is a fluid shift from one language to another with little disruption with regard to flow—what Makalela calls “translanguaging” (668). Translanguaging is a term used to indicate the ways in which black South African subjects who come from multilingual backgrounds employ multiple languages when communicating in either verbal or written forms as a means of performing the various subjectivities they form and inhabit during a variety of spatio-temporalities (Makalela 668). As the term connotes, both the more technical socio-linguistic traits and the broader political
implications—translanguaging—will be used for the remainder of this chapter.

The representation of these linguistic practices is also part of what links the novels stylistically to the linguistic aesthetics of kwaito. What Satyo calls “kwaito-speak” is for other critics simply kasi-taal. Because the two and kwaito music “share similar structures and large-scale aesthetics” (Satyo 93), they capture a certain pulse in both dialogue and narration that establishes “the sound” of the text. Indeed, the flow of sentences change: “I have two Christian friends who swore to me that they never had sex in their lives, but now koloi ya Eliya is calling them” (Mhlongo 106). Shifts occur between sentence like the English-isiZulu code switching in After Tears: “‘This is PP, the real Pelepele. Ngishisa bhe! I’m very hot!’” (Mhlongo 103; italics in original), or within a sentence such as English-seSotho translanguaging in Room 207: “he has been a friend of mine since long ago, during that time when we were staying at Kgole’setswadi” (Moele 102). In each case, the rhythm of the sentence changes due to the shift in the sound of the different languages, including the elongation of the penultimate vowel in Nguni languages, the presence of clicks, and the tonal quality of the language. Stylistically the sentence shifts with the verbal flows back and forth between languages, as well as the richness of kwaito sound found in the metaphor in koloi ya Eliya and kgole’setswadi, and the onomatopoeia in ngishisa bhe. Indeed, kwaito lyrics, like Mhlongo’s dialogue, reflect the profoundly lyrical and figurative nature of African languages. Thus, the metaphor of “Prophet Elija’s wagon” to indicate the terminality of HIV/AIDS and the onomatopoeia of “ngishisa” which, when articulated, resembles the sound of sizzling, illustrate how that richness is found in everyday black verbal expression.

Matlwa uses a similar technique in Coconut in which her narrator-protagonist,

---

105 It is important to emphasize the element of representation here: these texts are not meant to be read as accurate or even realistic depictions of the linguistic register of township life because there is too much English.

106 “Translates directly as “Prophet Elija’s wagon”; in township slang, it means the person is about to die of AIDS” (Mhlongo 220).

107 “I’m very hot” (Mhlongo 221)

108 “Northern Sotho: Literally “Far away from parents” (Moele 237).

109 See Satyo (94) for a listing of the various stylistic devices found in kwaito-speak.
Ofilwe, code switches: “at nuptial and burial ceremonies, at thanksgiving days ge re phasa Badimo, I stand in reverence, out of everybody’s way” (8). However, Matlwa’s text does not provide translations of the sePedi or slang expressions and we cannot necessarily access the language in the same way. Matlwa’s refraining from translation reflects the trope of “opacity” (Glissant 115) that is found in kwaito music. The untranslated passages may be read, as Swartz reads the use of kwaito, as a form of exclusion and resistance in this musical genre, whereby artists rap and sing in indigenous South African languages… revers[ing] the “cultural hegemony of English,” advising white South Africans to begin learning indigenous languages if they want to participate in South Africa’s emerging youth culture (Swartz 21). However, Edouard Glissant’s theorization of opacity suggests that untranslated text makes a more profound argument for several levels of textual and cultural opacity (115).

According to Glissant, opacity dismantles and deconstructs colonizing attempts to make the other “transparent” (114). Transparency is the euphemism for colonial tendencies to stereotype, demonize, exoticize and reduce the “other” to one dimensional categories. It sets the measuring rod for comprehension of the “other” according to European world views and standards, which also renders the world apprehensible and easily conquered or controlled (114). Moreover, transparency is profoundly about black acceptance in white dominated societies:

If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. (Glissant 190)

Opacity, on the other hand, is the messy impenetrable, indecipherable reality which is true for all individuals as well as cultures and ethnicities. The opaque is “that which cannot be reduced” (Glissant 191) and thus it does away completely with the notion of the “other” because the categories with which to comprehend and render someone
“other” are meaningless. Within the literary milieu, opacity operates at the level of the text and the writer. Glissant proposes that while we as individuals are opaque, as soon as our thoughts are translated into words, another layer of opacity is added. Thus, one concrete way to think about opacity is through the indecipherability of language. To claim opacity linguistically in a literary text means that the text opposes the notion that hegemonic languages have the ability to speak to the perspective, realities and ontology of another culture. It also claims the right to another level of textual opacity beyond the author and the reality of the text itself. The refusal to translate further indicates a refusal to participate in the ideology of transparency. Ultimately, it is a deeply political literary strategy.

*After Tears* experiments with opacity through two un-translated passages of prayers in isizulu. These passages contrast notably with the ambivalent tenor of Mhlongo’s use of isizulu and Kasi-taal in other parts of the novel. These examples of what Ashcroft et al. call “selective lexical fidelity” (64) are placed at a telling moment in the text. “After tears” is an expression that describes the gathering held after a funeral (Mhlongo 206). Thus, the novel’s title “ostensibly refers to the partying that goes on after the death of a family member [or] friend but might also be a metaphor for post-apartheid South Africa” (Raditlhalo 2). The after tears event follows the death of Bafana’s uncle Nyawana, one of the important figures in the text. Thus, we can infer that this is a central point in the novel and provides important context for our reading of the two prayers from the funeral scene:

… Priest Mthembu opened the service with a short Zulu prayer

*Nkosi, Jesu Kristo, ngokulala kwakho izinsuku ezintathu ehtuneni wacwebisa amathuna abo bonke abakholwa kuwe…Nakuba imizimba yabo ilele emihlabathini sinethemba kodwa lokuthi bayovumka. Sengathi umzalwane wethu lona angalala aphumule ngoxolo kulelithuna kuze kufike loluSuku oyomvusa ngalo, umngenise ekukhanyeni kwasezulwini.* (Mhlongo 198)

Here too, like in kwaiTo, language renders the text ostentatiously almost defiantly
opaque. Even though Glissant tells us that all written texts operate with multiple layers of opacity, untranslated passages in an English text add a layer that in truth alludes to and reflects back to the other layers. It reinforces and reminds the reader of the opacity of the text as whole, calling into question our interpretations and highlighting the subjectivity of our readings. As such, I have chosen not to translate the above text for both practical and political reasons. If we agree that part of Mhlongo’s project was to claim a right to opacity then I stand in solidarity with that right. Furthermore, I recognize how the act of translation may invite a certain colonial gaze. It, I would like to suggest, turns a literary analysis into an ethnographic analysis in which Zulu culture is to be “apprehended” through a fictional text, rendering it transparent by the standards of Anglo-European culture. For cultural-political reasons I refrain from this kind of scholarship.

In addition to the political ramifications of the untranslated passages, a shift in grammar and speech sounds, briefly upends the linguistic conventions of the novel. Rather than a monolithic English language aesthetic, this novel insists on a different kind of “creol[e]” aesthetic (Satyo 2008), also reminiscent of kwaiito music. Therefore, the untranslated text allows a shift in the balance of power between the colonial gaze of the reader and the text as object. Mhlongo’s contradictory tone with regard to language also inserts an interesting tension in the novel. Before the two prayers, not only were there clear linguistic lines drawn between the characters in terms of class and masculinity, but all non-English words and expressions were translated. Perhaps this shift is part of the trope of ambivalence and ambiguity found

---

110 In order to understand the linguistic shift that occurs in the text, it is important to understand how isiZulu differs from English in a variety of ways. It is a part of the Niger-Congo languages which is the biggest language family in sub-Saharan Africa (Web and Sure 33). Within the Niger-Congo language family isiZulu is part of a subgroup known as Bantu languages, a group of languages that can mostly be heard in central and southern Africa and further classified as one of the four Nguni languages (comprising isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, and isiNdebele) (Webb and Sure 35). Linguistically these classifications are important as they indicate the common linguistic characteristic shared within Nguni and Bantu languages. For example, 15% of the lexical items within Nguni languages contain clicks borrowed from the Khoi and San languages. Further, Bantu languages contain noun classes, within which nouns must be subdivided into classes, which are marked by a word prefix called a morpheme. These noun classes also require verb agreement. Additionally, isiZulu phonology contains a stress on the penultimate vowel in a word and it is a tonal language. These features all contribute to what some call a musical quality to the language, especially the spoken word.
in the novel that reflects the push and pull of the dialectic between resistance and complicity found in popular culture. In the funeral scene at least, Mhlongo suggests a decolonization of the conventional South African novel written in English, dismantling what Makalela would call, the “symbolic violence of monoglossic ideologies” (668).

Inasmuch, as these shifts are activated through language, they are also creating a different kind of musicality in each novel. The black South African literary tradition boasts a rich heritage of musicality, namely a jazz aesthetic. The talented writers of the Drum age and the Staffrider generation, like Bloke Modisane and Mongane Wally Serote for example, employed both American and South African jazz sounds and motifs as a means to reflect and resist the violent forms of oppression they were experiencing (Titlestad 2005). Musicality in these texts is often manifested in the guise of descriptions of musical sound, meditations on jazz performances, literary improvisation, and so forth (Titlestad 2003). Departing from that tradition, these novels create musicality rooted in the self-styling ideals of post-1994 youth culture. As such, musicality is found in the links between language and kwaito song titles and lyrics, and in the description of dance moves that accompany the beat.

In order to elucidate what I mean by the notion of musicality in the texts, I would like to tentatively draw on Titlestad’s argument with regard to “considering acoustic signification” in literature. Titlestad was more interested in “Drum decade” authors such as Bloke Modisane and Mongane Serote’s textual descriptions of non-verbal music such as jazz, blues and penny-whistle music and the ways in which, “postcolonial literature generally and post-apartheid literature in particular is deeply indebted to musicality in reaching towards imagined alternatives to the effects of colonial oppression” (Titlestad 579). I would, in turn, argue that in the cases of Mhlongo’s, Moele’s and Matlwa’s work, the combination of song titles, song lyrics and language creates, an aural quality in the texts. However, it must be noted that aurality is only perceptible to readers who are familiar with local popular forms, adding another layer of opacity to the novels. Within a text, what Titlestad calls
“soundscapes” are dynamic and fluid qualities compared to static visual cartographies (578). This fluidity and “evanescence,” he argues, open texts to alternative epistemologies and extend imaginative possibilities of post-apartheid ontologies. Moreover, Sheila Whiteley et al. argue that music has a vital function in terms of the “narrativization of place” (2). Both in terms of its creativity and how it is consumed by its listeners, music contributes to how people conceptualize their relationship to their daily surroundings (Whiteley et al. 2)

One of the ways that the musicality of the three texts is established is through “intertextual sampling” of kwai to songs (Cooper 64). The lyrics from South African recording artists Bongo Maffin, a group known for their spiritual, Afro-centric, and socially conscious lyrics, reproduced in After Tears, is one example. These lyrics taken from popular song Thati s’gubu is quoted in an amusing scene with Bafana and his mother Rea:

mama burst into a personal rendition of a kwai to song by Bongo M[a]ffin that was coming from my Uncle’s radio.

Thati’s sgubu usfak’ezozweni (Take the drum and put it in the shack.)
Ufak’amaspeks uzobuzwa (Put on your glasses and you’ll feel…) Ubumnandi obulapho (The joy that is there)

I laughed inside my room as I imagined the meaning of the song and my overweight mother singing it” (Mhlongo 20).

The song, of course, is originally in Zulu and then translated into English. A close reading of the song lyrics highlights the comedy of the moment. Without explaining what he means, the narrator tells the reader that the song has an alternative meaning to the literal one seen in the translation. We can infer that it is sensual or sexual,

111 Sampling is a technical process whereby a portion of an older song is “sampled” or used and refashioned to make a new one. Samples are frequently found in hip-hop and kwai to music.
salacious in some way, as the thought of his mother obliviously singing the song is the source of the character’s amusement. A more significant effect of Mhlongo’s “sampling” is the link that it establishes between kwaito lyrics and language in the novel. The second line, for example is a combination of isiZulu (Ufak’, uzobuzwa) and Kasi-taal (amaspeks or glasses), mirroring the translangauging found in Mhlongo’s dialogue. Due to the popularity of this particular song, the lyrics, for the local reader may also call to mind the sound of the song since, as Peterson has established, the beat in kwaito is often more important than the lyrics (204).

The insertions of various song titles cannot add musicality alone, yet in combination with language and lyrics they certainly contribute to the creation of a “soundscape.” This soundscape is indeed rendered in a scene at the conclusion of Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207. In this scene, the narrator-protagonist Noko is at a public taxi rank preparing to leave Johannesburg for good. Unlike the other protagonists in the novel who go on to enter into the conventions of a middle-class lifestyle in Johannesburg, Noko was unable to realize his dream of becoming a screenwriter and must return to his home village because he no longer has the financial ability to live in the city. Kwaito music plays either in the area where Noko is standing or in his own head: “but the day I am leaving Johannesburg is a sad day for me. There is a kwaito song playing in my ears: “The Way Kungakhona.” I’m going home and that is the way it is” (Moele 233). “The Way Kungakhona” is a song from the album Bongolution (2002) also by Bongo Maffin. The song lyrically combines at least four languages (Shona, isiXhosa, seSotho, and English) and is a blending of local sounds and electronic beats. It loosely has to do with departure, a return home and a plea to family for help. The chorus sung by the group’s only female member Thandiswa Mazwai, invokes feelings of determination and courage.112

112 Adding the words “good” and “just” to convey tone, the narrative voice communicates a decisive attitude in a challenging situation. The expression “ndibhingele phezulu” or “tighten my belt” conveys to the listener that the singer “means business” and is “buckling up, getting ready for action,” signaling a situation that is challenging (Mali personal conversation).
The Way kungakhona

Ndinengqondo zowuthath’ iinto zam ndigoduke
I’ve got a [good] mind to
[just] take my things and go home

Ndinengqondo zowubekel’ usana lwam ndibhingele
I’ve got a [good] mind to
[just] carry my
baby on my back,
tighten my belt and go home.¹¹³

phezulu ndigoduke

However, it is the bridge of the song, rapped by vocalist Stoan, that is most significant: “And the way it is, that’s the way it is. And it’s like that y’all. It’s like that y’all” (Bongomaffin). Moele recreates the sound and musicality of the song for his own text by cleverly embedding the lyrics into Noko’s narrative, another form of sampling. Here, a reader familiar with the song might hear Noko’s “I’m going home and that’s the way it is” as if superimposed over Stoan’s refrain, and thus the beat and music of the song in the background.

Moreover, this particular kwaiito song seems to be the catalyst that releases the character’s barely withheld emotions. The theme is similar to what is happening in the narrative that the reasons for the author’s song choice are clear. The lyrics complement the song’s syncopated beat, plaintive piano melody, and jazzy trumpet solo which lend a sense of poignancy to the music. In addition, the song “embraces both township jive and contemporary electronic rhythms” (http://www.music.org.za/artist.asp?id=62). The song thus augments the narrative theme of disappointed hopes and unrealized ambitions.

One of the most creative ways that the kwaiito beat is captured is through the representation of dance during the now much discussed club scene in Room 207,

¹¹³ Translation by linguist Zoliswa Mali PhD, personal conversation 23.2.2017.
where the ritual of flirtation is captured in a dance between Molamo and the woman he desires. However, the dance is represented in a lyrical exchange between the two: “as they dance he touches there and there, then, likewise, she touches there and there, and slowly they mend into one” (Moele 181). The slower, syncopated rhythm of kwai to is mimicked in the written description of the dance, reminiscent of how Noko’s words captured the beat of “The Way Kungakhona.” This short scene illustrates the most important difference between the musicality of the earlier literature that Titlestad wrote about. Literature that is imbued with kwai to aesthetics, is mostly interested in capturing the beat, rather than a melody or refrain. In addition to the soundscape that is created in these scenes, they also amplify various tropes of pleasure, enjoyment, aspiration, and new identities that occupy these novels and link them to immerse them in kwai to culture.

Where the texts deviate from a kwai to aesthetic is in the trope of the interior. While kwai to may or may not be political, it very rarely invites or represents inward reflection or the problematizing of the exterior/interior binary. Yet, all of the texts, to greater or lesser degrees, offer some insight into the protagonists’ inner ruminations. It can be found in Noko’s reflections on manhood (Moele 56), Bafana’s flashes of guilt over his deception (90), but is no doubt central in Coconut. Matlwa’s project foregrounds interiority from the use of the coconut metaphor as a title, to the juxtaposition of the quintessential popular symbol of the exterior (magazines) with Fikile, a character who is imprisoned by her feelings of shame, self-hate, and pain. The fashion magazines, with which Fikile is obsessed, extol the exterior trappings of whiteness as the key to her happiness “from who supermodel Christine Pau was dating, to what perfume Gabrielle was wearing to the Grammys, I knew it all. At the age of fifteen I could even advise you what to pack when spending a weekend away in the Bahamas” (167). Despite her naïve and perhaps desperate belief in the superficial world of magazines, Fikile frequently disassociates herself from what is going on around her, becoming trapped in her own memories and reflections to the extent that her employer becomes increasingly frustrated by her lack of attention (Matlwa 171-73). The tension that is created with the juxtaposition of the magazines and Fikile’s
inability to escape her inner troubles enhances the thematic problematization of the interior/exterior binary that engenders assumptions about the other. Those who encounter both protagonists assume that a superficial analysis based on exterior qualities is enough to unpack them; however, the tension Matlwa creates deconstructs those assumptions.

Interestingly, even in cases where *kwaito* music and culture aren’t foregrounded, like in *Coconut*, they are present, albeit in company with various other popular devices. Kwaito music adds a lyrical quality to the scene in which it is featured, through poetic devices commonly found in popular music such as repetition and rhythmic lines. Kwaito music’s peripheral role in this text may have to do with the way it is often “under the sway of an urbanite, male point of view, and one that is often accused of objectifying and demeaning women in its explicit lyrical content” (Peterson 199). In short, *kwaito* music doesn’t fit with a text that foregrounds the voices of young black women and presents itself as a feminist project. But Kopano Matlwa, as well as her characters, participates and moves within the spaces of the Y generation, both creating and consuming cultural forms such as *kwaito* music, *loxion kulcha* fashion and new urban chic magazines. Therefore, *kwaito* aesthetics necessarily has a presence in her novel. It may be, in some senses, as ambivalent as Mhlongo’s.

Consider for example, a scene where Tshepo (Ofilwe’s brother) is employed at a fast food restaurant. Most of his coworkers are members of the black working class. Outside of his comfort zone, he briefly experiences an example of the everyday of the working class: mindless work coupled with blasting *kwaito* music that helps ease the monotony of the day. The radio plays the *kwaito* song “Ndihamba Nawe” of which he seems somewhat familiar. Repetition of the song’s chorus follows, adding to the lyricism of the passage:

*I hear them before I see them. The group of men and women, singing
Mafikizolo’s “We bhuti, ndihamba nawe” … “I too stand above the deep
buckets of fierce oil: plucking, washing, stuffing, spicing, basting, turning one
naked chicken after the other, but not managing to sing ‘ndihamba nawe’ simultaneously, like the rest of the staff … the chorus comes to an abrupt halt, just as we were getting to “We bhuti!” (26-27)

The song’s title is also the song’s chorus, and thus its repetition mimics the chorus of the real song. Tshepo’s list of tasks—a continuous stream of two syllable words—mimics the beat of the song adding to the rhythm of the passage. The absence of kwaito music in the rest of the novel makes its sudden appearance here significant. Tshepo’s unsuccessful attempt at participation in singing with everyone else is a subtle indication of the dangers of black assimilation into white middle-class structures that potentially isolate black subjects from urban youth culture. This coupled with the rhythm and lyricism that is added to the passage both indicates importance of kwaito music and culture in young black South African identity formation. At the same time, its marked absence in the novel, suggests that the sexism found in the music is incongruous with Matlwa’s feminist project. Both Kopano Matlwa and Zukiswa Wanner’s projects present for examination the tensions and contradictions that arise when pairing popular culture with feminism. We must question whether and to what extent the marriage of feminism and popular culture survives the realities of capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.
4. “Stronger Together?”: Navigating Feminism and Popular Culture in Coconut and The Madams

Taken from a chapter title in The Madams, “Stronger Together” refers to the narrator-protagonist’s skepticism as to whether a complicated romantic partnership will actually work. It reflects my interest in the contradictions, paradoxes and complications that result from a partnership between popular culture and feminism, as seen in The Madams and Coconut. In their novels, Kopano Matlwa and Zukiswa Wanner deploy popular culture in profoundly different ways. Matlwa engages and deploys the popular in her fiction as a means to interrogate the dialectic of South African popular culture as well as to celebrate the everyday linguistic innovations and other black urban forms of “self-stylization” (Nuttall 108). Indeed, Matlwa, Mhlongo, and Moele deployed popular forms such as kasi-taal and kwaito as the aesthetics of the everyday. For Matlwa, however, popular culture is only one of the various features that enrich her project. There is also well-placed irony, intertextuality, and different aspects of symbolism. Indeed, Matlwa’s relationship to popular culture seems more ambiguous, more tenuous than what we find in the other texts. Wanner, on the other hand, writes within an emerging popular genre in South Africa: chick lit. As such, her novel also operates within a certain everyday aesthetic in its partial conformity to the formulaic conventions of the genre.\textsuperscript{114} However, this also means that Wanner’s text adheres to theseformulaic conventions while simultaneously putting forth a self-identified feminist agenda (Wanner 47). Because of the popular frame within which Wanner carries forth her feminism, I see her novel as an example

\textsuperscript{114} Spencer aligns the preoccupation of romance fiction and subsequently chick-lit with the “mundane” to Njabulo Ndebele’s theory of the ordinary, suggesting that romance fiction and chick-lit in Africa invite readers to think through questions of interiority and everyday aspects of women’s experiences (76).
of what in other media is called popular feminism; or as Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer put it, “feminism has become popular culture” (884).115

It is important to acknowledge the differences between *The Madams* and *Coconut* as they belong to very different genres of fiction and have different relationships with popular culture. Nonetheless, despite those differences both of these authors clearly write their texts from a feminist perspective, interrogating various intersectional forms of patriarchal violence and the spaces in which they occur. Both texts further celebrate black women’s oppositional geographies and ability to carve out liberatory spaces for themselves in the face of the constricting structures of white heteronormative patriarchy. It is with those similarities in mind that I find it useful to place the two texts in conversation with one another, despite their differences or perhaps exactly because of their differences. This conversation provides a means of both problematizing the promotion of a feminist agenda through a popular framework and garnering further insights into how and why the two might actually be stronger together.

This chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How do popular culture and feminism function in these texts? In what ways can we navigate the pitfalls of popular feminism and the juxtaposition of popular culture and feminism? More specifically, what insights can be gained through popular means of interrogating post-apartheid gender roles? How do the authors engage with the recurring post-apartheid trope of aspiration and consumerism that features in popular culture? And finally, how do black South African women authors revisit and rearticulate the trope of the New South African Woman as a popular configuration?

115 My comment with regard to feminism becoming popular culture refers to the explosion of popular feminism in recent years among celebrities such as Beyoncé, Taylor Swift and Emma Watson as well as in popular fiction, blogs and television advertisements. I will elaborate on this phenomenon and its implications below.
The NSAW, Aspiration and Consumerism

Post-apartheid preoccupations with class aspiration and material goods consumption are visible in various popular and mass media forms including, but not limited to, magazines, television, advertising, popular music and popular fiction such as chick lit. Important interventions into the discourse surrounding these cultural phenomena reminds us to avoid reductive readings that dismiss specifically black aspiration and consumerism as an emulation of western neoliberal consumer patterns (Laden 127). Rather, scholars point out several interconnected threads of state, media, cultural, and historical development that contribute to a larger cultural turn toward capitalist paradigms for urban living. Instead of a case of emulation, aspiration and consumerism may be read as a specific outgrowth of the impetus toward a reimagining of the self, or what Nuttall calls “self-styling” (Entanglement 108). Laden argues convincingly that “we should be attentive to the transformative power and local reworkings… of consumer culture and patterns of consumption, and their impact(s) on people’s senses of social membership and individual selfhood (128).

Importantly this argument links current consumer patterns in South Africa to the broader cultural phenomenon of an emergence out of a period of serious socio-political conflict. Indeed, the rhetoric of the “African Renaissance” (another expression of new identity for South Africa and the entire continent), employed during Thabo Mbeki’s tenure as president, ushered in his neoliberal economic policies such as GEAR\(^{116}\) and Nepad.\(^{117}\) These were sources of disillusionment for a

---

\(^{116}\) GEAR stands for Growth Employment and Redistribution and was a budget plan introduced during Thabo Mbeki’s tenure as president of the Republic of South Africa in an effort to “ensure that the country did not fall into the dept trap that would force the government to seek help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)” (http://ewn.co.za/2016/03/21/Mbeki-GEAR-programme-was-meant-to-save-SA-from-debt).

\(^{117}\) Nepad stands for New Partnership for Africa’s Development. It is an economic development program formed and entered into by the African Union. This program and its implementation were spearheaded by former South African president Thabo Mbeki, former Nigerian president Olusegan Obasanjo, and President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria. It was formed in 2001. It is referred to by Civil Society scholar and activist Patrick Bond as the “globalization of apartheid” because the increasing economic divide the program creates in civil society and the power the program will give to large-scale corporations rather than state government.
large demographic of South Africa’s citizenry. This aligns with a common observation that South African state and media enterprises often “conflate the capacity to consume with a rhetoric of national prosperity” (Kruger 75). Moreover, Laden’s comprehensive research of black South African consumer magazines further illustrates a long history of the growth of black urban consumerism and fashioning of alternative subjectivities within the confines of a repressive apartheid regime, thereby debunking broader notions of a passive downtrodden society (193).

For black South African women, consumerism is partially tied to configurations of the New South African Woman (NSAW), discussed in Chapter Two. Gqola illustrates how the NSAW is a highly corporatized, monetized, and embodied figure (120,121). The construction of the NSAW is “linked to the growth of women’s entry into public and politically powerful spaces… to women’s and Black Economic Empowerment to make financially independent decisions and also to grow their consumer status” (Gqola “A Peculiar Place for a Feminist” 120-21). These aspirations often coincided with contradictory constructions of a new black South African femininity that at once deviated from and re-inscribed patriarchal ideology (Gqola 120). This emerging construction then plays itself out on the body of the black South African woman and “her physical attributes communicate through the body a specific location within the global economy” (Gqola 123). These constructions are ushered in through various popular forms and celebrity figures but are also often simultaneously interrogated and contested through the fissures found within dominant discourses and structures (Gqola 129). What Gqola illustrates in her analysis of these constructions and their international links with other emerging femininities is not only the gendered nature of an evolving urban South African cultural ethos but also the place these societal developments have within a normalizing global context. This

---

118 Here I am referring to Mbeki’s speech “The African Renaissance: South Africa and the World”, which captured both a sense of a society emerging from a traumatic past and a nation situating itself as the an economic power on the continent. See Thabo Mbeki’s Speech presented at United Nations University 1998 http://archive.unu.edu/unupress/mbeki.html

119 See also Jones “Conspicuous Destruction” (209).
contextualization then warns against reductive readings that reinforce tendencies to pathologize (female) blackness and Africanness as somehow inherently drawn to highly sexualized consumerist culture. With that said, because of the ways that popular forms, various discourses of liberation and newness contribute to this configuration in the popular imagination, the NSAW seems a fitting conceptual starting point to begin thinking through how feminism functions within a popular frame.

Indeed, the NSAW sits at the nexus between post-apartheid South African preoccupations with aspiration and consumerism and the popular fictional genre chick lit. Chick lit emerged in the 1990s in western countries such as the United States and England and as what some claim, is a new iteration of the popular romance novel of the 70s and 80s (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 488). The genre was pioneered by such texts as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones Diary* (1996) and Candace Bush’s *Sex and the City* (1997), and has since become one of the highest selling genres of popular women’s reading.¹²⁰ In the past twenty years chick lit has been the subject of intense debate, especially among feminist media scholars and cultural theorists, regarding its characterization as a subset of western romantic fiction and its complex and contradictory relationship with feminist and post-feminist political ideologies. Critics of the genre are numerous including feminist scholars as well as women writers of other genres, journalists and other members of the literary community. The central argument of their critique is that chick lit is a superficial meaningless genre that embodies post-feminist ideals of neoliberal consumer individualism, unhealthy body policing, a rejection of working woman paradigms, normative heterosexual feminine subjectivities and a problematic entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Gill and Herdiekerhoff 487).

These critiques are often rendered through the centrality of individualism and consumption as aspects of contemporary western femininity, which reinforces the

¹²⁰ For comprehensive discussions of the genre see Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), Salinas-Moniz (2011), Harzewski (2001), and Spencer (2014).
centrality of the NSAW in our discussion here. Stephanie Harzewski attributes this rendering partially to a desire to “attain a lifestyle inspired by celebrity culture” (10). Indeed, the blurring of the boundaries between the fantasy created by western obsession with celebrity culture is further illustrated in this genre when one considers the slightly exaggerated claim that “the chick lit protagonist can only experience romance, desire, or self-esteem only through commodities” (Harzewski 12). Sympathizers of the genre explain this as understood hyperbole and grandiosity within a larger framework of a shared community and an escape from everyday life (Spencer 74). Simultaneously, its defenders argue that chick lit garners active reading and generates important psychological processes that allow women to momentarily escape into a community of other women with shared experiences and desires (Spencer 74).

However, I find Lynda Spencer’s proposition that we read chick lit in Africa through a critical race and transnational framework illuminating (86). By situating South African chick lit within the broader context of South African popular culture and by acknowledging the critical deviations from the conventions of western chick lit that are found within African women’s writing, one can read the genre through a lens nuanced by local themes, styles, and specificities (Spencer 86). Moreover, not only do South African versions of the genre tackle more locally relevant themes and issues, as seen above, seemingly conventional tropes of the genre, such as consumption and aspiration, become historically and socially contextualized.

Indeed, it is often through the genre chick lit that South African women writers can engage Gqola’s theorization of the NSAW and the expectations this configuration places on black South African women (Spencer 78). For one, black South African women are embracing chick lit as one means of emerging from apartheid structures which suppressed creativity and offered limited publishing opportunities. But more importantly, chick lit has conventionally been complicit in western consumer and aspirational culture and thus far has been a medium through which South African authors engage local specificities with regard to it. The genre also provides a popular
platform for black South African women to explore themes of race, gender roles, sexuality, class and a growing demographic of the newly formed black middle class and the implications of that formation. However, it must be emphasized that while chick lit is an accessible avenue through which to explore this configuration and its implications, it is not the only medium that engages the NSAW. *Coconut*, for example, explores many NSAW constructions through its two protagonists. In this way, *Coconut* and *The Madams* both offer an important opportunity to unpack representations of consumerism, aspiration, and femininity vis-à-vis the NSAW.

Reading the two novels in conversation with one another keenly illustrates the paradox of the burgeoning culture of aspiration, consumerism, and the NSAW. Both authors aim to explore and articulate the realities of black South African class aspiration and emphasis on material consumption in their novels. However, the texts interrogate different sides of the same classed, racialized, and gendered coin. This paradox is seen in the increasing class divide that renders the attainment or realization of this new feminine configuration impossible for a large demographic of black South Africa women. It is also seen in the perpetual presence of white heteropatriarchy that is neither satisfied with visual evidence of black social mobility or with the material consequences of black poverty. Finally, it is seen in the reality of the configuration as it contains and rejects subjective expressions of black femininity. Matlwa, for example, illustrates these complexities through the parallel material desires of Ofilwe and Fikile’s characters.

Not only is the stark contrast between the objects of the two characters’ desire telling, the circumstances around their attainment is significant. For Fikile, her decision to steal a pair of black jeans in order to keep her new position as a waitress of Silver Spoon cafe is predicated upon her white boss’s complete ignorance and dismissal of the realities of poverty in South Africa and subsequently the crucial importance of the job to Fikille.

*Had she said loved me? Miss Becky loved me? They loved me? Her tone had changed and I was getting a little frightened...The last comment made her*
laugh, a strange and awkward laugh. I did not laugh with her, although I probably should have. I was too busy frantically trying to figure out where this conversation was going and what the most appropriate response would be ...

‘You have until tomorrow, sweetie. Make a plan. Gosh, it’s a fucking pair of jeans, not a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes. And that hair, dear, do something about it, anything, just don't come to work looking like that. (Matlwa 121; italics in original)

Fikile’s incredulity and overreaction to her employer’s compliment, belies her hunger for not only the job but it also indicates how desperately she wants to fit into a white middle class feminine framework. Miss Becky’s manic tone change from condescending affection to vulgar anger then elicits real panic and reveals the true power dynamic between the two characters. Moreover, Miss Becky’s allusion to luxury shoe label Jimmy Choo reinforces the fantasy world of consumption induced by the fashion magazines Fikile obsessively reads, and subsequently, the unlikelihood that she would ever be able to obtain them since she was forced to steal a pair of jeans (Matlwa 166).

On the other hand, Ofiwe’s desire to show off her father’s year-long-awaited Mercedes Benz is presented as a normal desire to show off the rewards of hard work and financial planning, until her enjoyment is curtailed:

*Although I have never liked Stuart very much, I wave bye to him so he can see me climbing into the most captivating car on the school grounds. As I open the boot to put my bag in, Stuart walks over and says something like “Nice wheels, Ofiwe, who did your father hijack this one from? I want to smash his skull in with the cricket bat he is holding in his hand and watch the red blood trickle*

---

121In her work, Deborah James discusses the lessons that middle-class black South Africans aim to teach their children surrounding education, hard work, financial planning, and class mobility (6). Her research elucidates the emerging mentality for black South African consumption and aspiration.
down his freckled face. Instead, I slam the boot shut, fling the silver-grey front door open, and scream at Daddy for picking me up late. (Matlwa 16)

Stuart’s comment taps into prevailing stereotypes which cannot reconcile the idea of black wealth, and therefore, any black person driving a luxury car is reduced to the stereotype of carjacker. This perpetuates the criminalization of the black body and has material consequences in reality for black citizens who are racially profiled by the South African police force. Ofilwe’s violent fantasy of retaliation reflects militant black rage based not only on his comment but also a long history of violence against black bodies. Perhaps Ofilwe’s rage can be likened to the impotent rage of black citizens who failed to receive restorative justice after the transition of government and the TRC process. In this way, rage that has no outlet is taken out on those closest. Ultimately, Miss Becky and Stuart’s characters are symbolic of the white racist pathology which does not want to welcome black South African citizens into a space that has historically been reserved for white South Africans: purchasing power in the global economy.

By contrast, The Madams is not especially interested in white racist pathology. Rather, Wanner over-exaggerates the neoliberal consumerism found in other chick lit novels with Nosizwe’s character so that her excess can be read as an ironic take on upper middle-class consumption: “Siz is a shopaholic and her wardrobe hangs like the who’s who of Milan Fashion Week. This girl will travel to Paris just to buy clothes. She never takes heed when I tell her that clothes don’t maketh the woman” (5). However, despite her tongue in cheek narrative style, I don’t read The Madams as simply an attempt to poke fun at post-apartheid cultural emphasis on consumption and fashion. Beneath the satire is a more serious exploration of the pressures and expectations placed on South African women to perform the role of the NSAW:

Sure, unlike me, that woman did not have have a choice about whether to be a professional or a housewife, but that choice enslaves my generation because we are still expected to play the traditional roles to perfection… It is a sad reality that in South Africa my ‘womanity’ is still defined by how well I cook
and clean and there is still a high-held belief that, should I choose to leave my job, I could do ‘other things’ (never mind that I am paying half the mortgage!” (Wanner x)

Wanner’s rare digression into broader commentary on contemporary South African gender politics, or more importantly her shift to a more direct and less humorous or ironic tone are significant. Phrases like, “that choice enslaves”, “it is a sad reality” are a notable deviation from the novel’s lighthearted, facetious tone. Here, the reader is meant to pause and reflect on the NSAW construction and how much truth is encased in Wanner’s wit. Therefore, Wanner establishes one of the novel’s central preoccupations in the prologue, offering a critical feminist perspective that mirrors everyday conversation and the feminist knowledge gained from our mothers, sisters, and friends. The serious undertone framing the novel already suggests the lens through which we should read the rest of the text.

What The Madams suggests, then, in an important addition to Coconut’s interrogation of the racial discourses that surround and affect black South African economic aspirations, is that the current construction of the NSAW is not just one thing. It is not only an outgrowth of the end of a system that oppressed women through “violent intersectionalities of white supremacy, patriarchy and class oppression, the latter often used interchangeably with economic alienation” (Gqola 120). Instead, Wanner points out its complexities and contradictions, in part, through the image of the NSAW as a “highly corporatised and monetized figure” (Gqola 121), or what Thandi facetiously calls “plastic power” (Wanner 93). Thandi’s self-contradiction with regard to fashion, for example, illustrates the pressures of competition that result from commodity-based frameworks of self-worth and attractiveness. On the one hand, Thandi asserts, “I don’t walk around with a price tag out, so why buy one outfit for four grand when I can buy twenty for the same amount at Mr. Price?” (5) but on the other, she constantly compares herself unfavorably to her friend Nosizwe (24,37). In a significant departure from conventional western chick lit (Harzewski 12), Thandi focuses on the brand names sported by Nosizwe
rather than her own clothes (24, 37) and frequently feels “dowdy” in the face of Nosizwe and her husband Vuyo’s glamour (37). What the comparison illustrates is how commodity driven constructions of post-apartheid femininity act as a containing force to even slightly alternative performances of womanhood.

There is however, a tone of fun and celebration in the scene with the three friends shopping and preparing to go out together “As we stepped out, feeling ten years younger and with no commitments, we all sang along to Temptations’ ‘My Girl.’ there is nothing that is as much fun as shopping with the girls, particularly if you have the cash” (89). Thandi’s qualifying statement “particularly if you have the cash” alludes to the satisfaction that comes with purchasing power, but it also alludes to the fun that girlfriends have when simply hanging out together. A celebratory moment such as this nuances the lack of fulfilment that truly characterizes Nosizwe’s shopping addiction (Spencer 101), suggesting that we don't take ourselves too seriously. As such, the paradox of the NSAW is seen in the conflicting and contradictory ideologies entangled in this configuration. While the NSAW is seen as having agency and freedom of choice, she is also constrained by the patriarchal ideology which configures her as a both consumer and commodity, and that constrains her subjectivity.

This paradox is best exemplified in Wanner’s exploration of the domestic space and the gender roles that play out within that space, where it becomes clear that despite their attempts to conform to the new imagined idea of liberated womanhood, the three friends have been contained by the patriarchal ideology underpinning the NSAW. Despite her attempts to exhibit the behaviour of a liberated woman, who has her husband trained to look after her children while she enjoys time with her girlfriends (Wanner 54), we discover that Lauren is actually the victim of long-term domestic violence (Wanner 122). Nosizwe’s belief that she enjoys an unconventional relationship as the main breadwinner of the house is dismantled when we discover that her husband Vuyo asserts his heteronormative masculinity through adultery. Ultimately, this is most exemplified in Thandi and Mandla’s relationship because of
Thandi’s misguided belief that by checking all the boxes of the NSAW, she lived a successful life and had a successful marriage (Wanner 37). Rather, in spite of her efforts, her husband still manages to justify his adultery by finding fault with her (186).

Interestingly, Wanner’s project seems to assert that in order for South African women to truly move away from white heteropatriarchal structures that characterized the apartheid period, they will need to embrace certain aspects of the aspirational and consumer figure. This is evident in the fact that the three are able to change the structures of their relationship or leave oppressive relationships because of their financial independence from the men in their lives (189). Wanner’s complex way of addressing the issues of aspiration and consumption sheds light on the nuances that alternative versions of chick lit provide.

**Generic Conventions, Popular Feminism and Gender Stereotypes**

Critical readings of western chick-lit suggest that, despite the presence of female counterparts in the novels, women are still portrayed as devious and untrustworthy. They are characterized as competition rather than a support system for their friends (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 495). Wanner’s novel, by contrast, along with other examples of South African and Ugandan chick lit (Spencer 87), celebrates intimate friendships between women as confidantes and comrades within a perpetually racist and patriarchal society. Moreover, while complicit in some neoliberal consumerism and individual indulgence, Wanner’s text is also loudly feminist. Thus, South African chick lit fits more into the category of what Stephanie Newell and Lynda Spencer in their respective analyses of romantic fiction and chick lit call “uprising genres”:

> when a genre is put into operation by writers who are situated geographically and economically outside the centres of mass production, then the gender conservatism commonly associated with the genre is detached: when authors who are neither mainstream nor canonical take on the romance, it becomes an
Newell’s argument prioritizes the spatial and economic materialities for these writers and the role that those materialities play in how they embrace the genre of romance fiction, or in this case, chick lit. Moreover, in the context of South Africa where race played and continues to play a defining role in the construction of society, black South African women exist on several material peripheries. As such, it is not unexpected that South African chick lit would deviate on several levels from that written by women writers in the west.

I contend that rather than a solely post-feminist sensibility, The Madams—with its specifically South African tenor and its (at times) unapologetic feminism—is in fact a complex combination of post-feminism and popular feminism. Popular feminism is the term that has been coined to mark the way that feminism in its various guises has become a part of popular culture. It can be seen in the self-identified feminism of various American celebrities, in the recent celebration of the Dora Milaje (women warriors) of Black Panther, which grossed over 1.96 billion dollars in 2018, as well as in teen blogs, magazine articles and the popularization of certain feminists like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and South African poet Lebogang Mashile. However, popular feminism can also be recognized in the popular fiction of authors such as Zukiswa Wanner, who offers her readers what some may call a less nuanced version of feminism to make it more palatable for mainstream society (Fischer 898). Feminist reactions to this phenomenon range from celebration to important critique. Some feminists celebrate popular figures’ attempts to find language that articulates the power dynamics they encounter in their daily lives (http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/05/20/on-bell-beyonce-and-bullshit/),

---

122 Fischer’s critique of popular feminism suggests that popular feminist discourse lacks the nuance and depth of more radical feminist discourse. This chapter does not necessarily align with her view but acknowledges the relevancy of her point.
and argue for an acceptance of various levels of feminism (http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2014/05/20/on-bell-beyonce-and-bullshit/).

Others critique the ways in which popular feminism is predicated upon hyper visibility and marketability (Banet-Weiser in Banet-Weiser and Stacer 885) and the dangers of tokenism. Often tokenism functions in the popular arena when various media outlets seek commentary on issues of gender and sexuality from popular figures who are not truly informed on those issues (Fischer 898). Besides acknowledging that popular feminism is not sufficient to “structurally challenge patriarchy,” Tisha Dejmanee points out how western neoliberal capitalist culture assumes that much of popular feminism is transient and thus not worthy of serious critical engagement (8). In reference to popular texts such as The Madams and popular culture in Coconut, I see a specific endeavor on the part of both Wanner and Matlwa to navigate a set of interrelated and contradictory phenomenon. Embracing popular culture in their work is also about embracing the everyday, it is about embracing and celebrating the homegrown feminism that develops outside of the academy and manifests in small everyday acts of resistance and solidarity among women; also, it is about imagining new possibilities for women’s and girls’ subjectivity in a post-apartheid milieu. This is not to suggest that popular feminism is not problematic, as my reading of the two texts will demonstrate, but to point out that similar to other aspects of these texts, space needs to be made for the particular kind of feminism that they put forth. It is reminiscent of that found in Angela Davis’s study of blues women Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and Billie Holiday; or in Tricia Rose’s study of hip-hop’s female rappers in her seminal book Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America. More importantly, in the South African context, this kind of feminism can be linked to Pumla Dineo Gqola’s analysis of Lebogang Mashile and the popularization of feminist politics in her column in True Love magazine. In each case, the popular black women that these authors study are constantly navigating between their feminist politics and worldviews and the parameters within which popular culture operates.
These parameters are often determined by various media’s investment in and perpetuation of white heteronormative patriarchy, white beauty standards, and antiblackness/black womanhood. What each study also illustrates is a long history of feminism in popular culture and the various tensions and contradictions inhabited within it. The act of navigating feminism and popular culture seems to be the common aspect of various popular incarnations of feminism. In these, they are adopted and immersed in the dialectic of popular culture fluidly, shifting between resistance to and perpetuation of patriarchal ideology.

This navigation, it seems to me, has been a concern amongst women authors for generations. Nineteenth century author George Elliot worried even in 1856 that the conventions of women’s writing would directly influence the construction of the negative stereotypes that have followed women in to the post-modern era. Harzewski writes, “Elliot fears that whimsicality, part of these novels’ infectious quality and commercial appeal, will be seized on by men to perpetuate negative gender stereotypes, specifically, that women are dreamy, artificial and silly” (1). However, what Elliot’s concerns raise for me is the association of the conventions of romance novels and chick-lit with the feminine. Aside from the obvious fact that women authors and texts target an audience of women, there is an underlying assumption that the characteristics of these texts reveal inherent aspects of feminine culture. In this way, Tania Modleski’s defense of romance novels is dependent upon her argumentation that criticism of the genre is based primarily on the demonization of the feminine (14), revealing her assumption that novels that deal with emotion, fashion, domestic relationships and so on fall under the label of the feminine. Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that commercial sales of the genre indicate that it caters to the entertainment preferences for millions of women.

Although the link between the formulaic conventions of chick lit and gender stereotyping may appear intuitively obvious—commodity culture, negative body image, heternormativity, male savior figure etc.—curiously, women authors and readers continue to buy and sell the novels that adhere to these formulas. This raises
the question of how one draws the line between patriarchal discourse that crafts reductive stereotyped configurations of what femininity is and expressions of the complex human experiences that speak to such a large demographic of women. It also means that deviations from these conventions in marginalized literary spaces, such as the South African case, must be closely attended. This is clear not only in terms of drawing together both popular feminist and post-feminist ideology, but also with regard to genre. After all, if the generic conventions of chick lit are inextricably connected to gender stereotypes, then how does Zukiswa Wanner navigate the tensions brought about by her feminist politics as they exist within the parameters of the genre?

For *The Madams*, that navigation occurs firstly at the level of genre and form. The generic conventions of chick lit call for authors to write according to certain formula of plot and style. These include the confessional tone of a first-person narrator, a linear straightforward plot line, and a happily ever after ending, which includes a heterosexual romance and a male savior figure (Gill and Heredieckerhoff 495). *The Madams* is in line formulaically with many of the characteristics listed above. The novel begins with Thandi’s conversational ‘girlfriend confiding’ tone “I love my life. I love my cute, smart-ass, five-year old son, Hintsa” (ix) and follows the linear plot line focusing on the everyday life of the narrator-protagonist and her middle to upper-middle class girlfriends. Where the novel deviates is in the resolutions to its conflicts residing in the hands of the male savior figure. Rather, the savior figures in *The Madams* are the female characters. This is a significant deviation in that the women in this novel exhibit solidarity across race, age and class. While the three girlfriends represent a community of women in friendship, that community is extended by a ‘tough as nails’ mother figure (129) and a wise and thoughtful domestic worker who quickly becomes an integral member of the family (76). By shifting the focus of the novel’s resolution to the women in the novel, Wanner makes a feminist statement about the importance of such a community of women who offer support, solidarity and shared experiences in a male dominated society.
Wanner’s heavily satirical tone throughout the novel means that *The Madams* both encompasses the “lightly ironic” tone of chick lit (Harzewski 4) and simultaneously pokes fun at some of the genre’s more problematic conventions. The author’s “tongue firmly in cheek” (back cover) style mirrors Harzewski’s assessment of chick-lit novels published in the United States and the UK. However, Wanner’s somewhat exaggerated style might be read as a meta-commentary on the genre’s access to, but lack of full use of, a critical tool such as irony. In other words, irony, or witticisms, is an established trope within the genre but it is never used to level a social critique or to reflect on the problematic aspects of the genre with regard to gender and sexuality. Wanner, on the other hand, does exactly that. Thandi’s use of hyperbole, for example, when describing her relationship with her husband Mandla, pokes fun at western chick lit’s happily ever after model, “in *my* mind, the perfect couple” (37), and the ‘holy grail of marriage’ trope.

Nonetheless, within the chick lit framework, *The Madams*’s approach often reveals the everyday ambiguity of subscribing to progressive feminist politics and ideals, and the realities of living in proximity to whiteness and white capitalist heteropatriarchy. In exploring this tension, the novel is in and of itself filled with ambiguities, simultaneously mocking the structures of containment that permeate the majority of patriarchal societies and, at times, failing to adequately address the violent and intersectional ways that women are oppressed in post-apartheid South Africa. These ambiguities can be found especially in the well-established tropes of western chick lit. Wanner’s narrator-protagonist frequently worries about her weight and she and her friends seek out a weight-loss spa in an attempt to force their bodies back into thinner versions of themselves. Especially telling in this scene is Nosizwe’s immediate assumption that weight gain is the cause of her husband’s neglect (4) because it confirms women’s acquiescence to unrealistic patriarchal expectations with regard to appearance. Wanner comically counters the violence of this kind of body policing represented by the spa, however, with the hasty departure of Thandi and her two friends:
“Ladies, let me lead you to a table full of food guaranteed to get rid of those love handles,” said a smarmy looking waiter. We were taken aback. I, for one, had a peek at myself in the glass door to see just how big those love handles were. Then he went on to dump three plates full of leaves— with no consolation of dressing— in front of us. We all looked at each other and, as one, said, ‘HELL NO’… We only waited for Lauren to go and take Zunaid’s number… before we sneaked out, scared some spa Nazi would come and force us back inside. As soon as we hit the freeway we all burst out laughing. We felt like Two Fat Ladies and one Charlie’s Angel making a run for it. (87-88)

Wanner throws weight loss and body worries into comic relief by crafting an exaggerated image of the weight loss spa as overzealous and militant and the three friends’ departure as an escape. Their collective refusal to participate in the ridiculous diet, along with their collective laughter, allows the reader to laugh along with the characters and to agree with the unspoken point that body policing to this extent is ridiculous.

Yet, in her attempts to emphasize moments of solidarity like the above example, Wanner misses an opportunity to unpack various nuances of violence, even those predicated by other black women, which the novel either silences or barely engages. Class is an especially pertinent theme, but the maid/madam dynamic is never fully explored. It is rather exploited as Nosizwe (who cannot have children) uses her money and position to coerce her maid Pertunia into giving her newborn child (conceived with Nosizwe’s husband, Vuyo) after a short-lived extramarital affair—to Nosizwe and Vuyo to raise (150). Thandi’s reaction to Nosizwe’s actions is lukewarm, “Tsho. It looks like the rich will always triumph over the poor” (150). Despite the class commentary ingrained in the comment, Thandi, perhaps in another attempt at solidarity, seems to immediately backtrack and justify Nosizwe’s actions. She frames Nosizwe’s coercion as the perfect revenge against Pertunia for having an affair with her husband (150), casting the maid as a stereotypical whore/man stealer and Vuyo as the ‘only human’ man who simply made a mistake. This scene presented
the author with an opportunity to further interrogate the representation of class hierarchy embedded in the novel and to unpack some of the problematic developments that have evolved from the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) supported rise of a small, select black elite. Her failure to engage indicates the absence of an intersectional awareness in the *The Madam’s* brand of feminism and raises the question of whether this silence can be attributed to genre or to Wanner’s attempt to adhere to conventional or popular attitudes of the time with regard to infidelity. Or, can it be blamed on a plot-directed need to allow Nosizwe, as one iteration of the NSAW, to have it all despite the possible damage to others?

Wanner’s novel is a constant negotiation between feminist and anti-feminist politics. Her awareness of, but lack of attention to the problematic class dynamics in the text is mitigated by her close attention to the gender dynamic in Thandi’s home. Without repeating the discussion of Thandi’s domestic life that I offer in Chapter Two, I’d like to point out another aspect of how Wanner exposes and condemns the various levels of patriarchal domination and violence that occur within the domestic space and to exploring women’s attempts to carve out feminist spaces for themselves. Thus, Thandi’s reaction to her husband Mandla’s infidelity is in line with her self-proclaimed feminist politics. In opposition to patriarchy’s double standards with regard to sexuality, Thandi rebels against the role she is expected to play of the forgiving wife, takes a secret trip to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, and enjoys “primal … passionate, beautiful, guiltless, sex” with an African American stranger (194). Wanner uses Thandi’s character here to reflect on the “politics of pleasure”\(^{123}\) and the right of women to take control of their own sexuality.

The politics of pleasure can be read as contemporary revision within black feminist thought of what was, at one time, an important intervention that identified “black female sexuality as a site of intersecting oppression [but which also reified it] as pathologized, alternatively invisible and hypervisible” (Morgan 37). This revision

\(^{123}\) Morgan (44). In relation to theorizations surrounding black women’s sexuality also see Hammonds (1993) and Carolyn Cooper (1993).
strives to articulate black female sexuality in terms of the politics of pleasure whereby female desire and sexual agency are foregrounded and pleasure is “not only [a] desireable goal and a social and political imperative, but also as an under-theorized resistance strategy for black women” (Morgan 44). With the acknowledgement that Joan Morgan’s research is primarily directed at black women in the United States and the Caribbean, we can still read its potential relevance for a similar articulation in the South African context. Thandi’s guiltless sex is not simply about revenge: had it been it would have lacked the beauty and the genuine passion that she describes. Rather, this is a moment of sexual agency, in which she claims erotic pleasure for herself as an embodied subject. Wanner’s brief celebration of lesbian desire elsewhere in the novel (158), reinforces the compatibility of Morgan’s thinking which resists the erasure of queer and trans-gender sexuality. Moreover, after her sexual experience, Thandi’s decision to separate from Mandla further refutes the patriarchal paradigms of heterosexual relationship roles.

Ultimately, Zukiswa Wanner seems to take a systematic approach to the ways in which The Madams attempts to undermine the reductive gender stereotypes perpetuated by a genre such as chick lit. By employing satire, irony and upending the formulaic plot, Wanner pushes back at each of the genre’s conventions. However, because of the limitations of the genre, her work does not necessarily capture all of the nuances of white heteropatriarchal violence and spatial containment. Rather, Wanner chooses to attempt to dismantle the genre from within. It seems both fitting and important to enter Kopano Matlwa’s Coconut, published a year after The Madams, into the discussion here. In its critique of women’s magazines, Coconut questions the potential for empowerment within popular genres that mass produce discourses of feminine stereotyping. This has clear implications for a genre such as chick lit, despite the differences between the two media. When comparing Matlwa’s project with Wanner’s, one might argue that more can be accomplished for feminism without the constrictions of the conventions of popular culture.
As discussed in chapter three, *Coconut* offers a biting critique of white women’s lifestyle magazines, a popular medium that engages similar themes as chick lit: aspiration and consumer culture, body policing and cisgender and heterosexual partnerships. With this critique, the novel illustrates that, despite oft-seen feminist content in popular magazines (Budgeon and Currie 1995), the juxtaposition of feminism and popular culture is problematic when race becomes a factor of analysis. Indeed, studies confirm that white women’s lifestyle magazines either place black women under erasure or exoticize them, thus perpetuating white hegemony and normativity (Ogden and Russell 1594). *Coconut* furthermore seems to illustrate that more nuanced possibilities for gender-progressive representation can also be successfully juxtaposed with the deployment of the popular as a conduit of everyday feminism.

Part of Maltwa’s method for this deployment was to reflect the dialectic of and the tensions found within popular culture. It is the novel’s internalization of that dialectic that makes Matlwa’s juxtaposition of popular forms and feminism successful. Thus, *Coconut*’s critique of the anti-black misogyny present in lifestyle magazines and their negative influences on Ofilwe and Fikile’s developing subjectivities is mitigated by her use of black popular forms. South African language politics are thematized and then stylized in the novel as a means of creating space for the developing subjectivities of the two narrator-protagonists. However, the choices Matlwa makes in her deployment of popular music is most illustrative of the space within the author’s chosen genre for juxtaposing feminism and popular culture.

Compared to a novel like *After Tears*, which provides the reader with a veritable soundtrack of popular *kwai*to songs from the late 1990s and the early 2000s, *Coconut*’s mention of two popular songs seems negligible. However, both songs are significant in terms of song choice and placement in the text. Ofilwe’s brother Tshepo is at the center of the introduction of *kwai*to in the novel. While in the previous chapter this scene was discussed in terms of its musicality, it is also important with regard to the gender politics that *kwai*to represents: heavily patriarchal discourse,
heterosexual relationships, the hyper-sexualization of women, and the politics of pleasure and enjoyment. Predictably kwaito tends to generally be silent on alternative gender subjectivities like Tshepo’s as discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, Tshepo’s somewhat failed attempt to join his fellow employees at the fast food restaurant, where he is temporarily employed before beginning university, in singing Mafikizolo’s “Ndihamba Nawe,” speaks not only to the implications of class and racial identity but also to how the discourse within and surrounding popular forms exists in tension with one’s own developing gender subjectivity. As such, Matlwa’s song choice is significant. The chorus to the song states “We bhuti mina ndihamba nawe” literally translating to “Hey my brother, I am going with you” but it also signifies on the expression’s implied romantic choice, “I choose you.” When Mafikizolo sings the song, Nlanhla Nciza—the duo’s female vocalist—sings the chorus, placing the choice in the hands of women, thus proposing a clear reversal of conventional gender dating roles. Despite its fun romantic theme and normative heterosexual relationship, the song manages to express a non-stereotypical gender dynamic. The tension between the slight shift in roles in the song and kwaito’s complicity with patriarchal ideology mirrors the tension found in the scene in the novel as Tshepo attempts but is not able to sing “simultaneously” (26) with his coworkers at the fast food restaurant where he works. Indeed, being out of sync with the song, suggests that Tsehpo is out of sync with his coworkers in intersectional ways: class, racial identity and gender identity, and yet his attempt to sing along reflects his desire to belong. This is indeed a powerful scene in the novel for the subtle ways it addresses much of the novel’s thematic focus but also because of the thoughtful and nuanced way that Matlwa deploys popular culture. Instead of glossing over the tensions found within the genres, she exploits them in order to reflect upon the tensions and contradictions found within society as a whole.

Similarly, the one popular song mentioned in the second half of the novel is equally significant. Fikile’s troubling recount of her domestic life—including her abuse at the hands of her uncle, her poverty and her own feeling of exile in a violent and oppressive space—ends both with her departure from her shack and the playing
of Tracy Chapman’s “Fast Car” on the radio. Chapman, known for her unique style and her thoughtful, and socially conscious lyrics was catapulted into fame by “Fast Car” which was released in 1986 (http://www.about-tracy-chapman.net/tracy-chapman-fast-car-meaning-fast-car-lyrics-fast-car-videos/). It is one of her most popular songs because of its poignant insight into marginalized people’s desire for a better life and the various ways that they attempt to achieve that life. However, the song also interrogates how social and class marginalization contributes to health and wellness issues, and how the abuse and oppression of women is perpetuated across generations. Mostly, it is about the desire to escape an impossible situation. Therefore, Fikile’s reaction to the song—“it makes me feel funny, sort of scared and excited at the same time… ‘New beginnings’ huh, DJ Tinky? ‘Another shot?’ Well, let’s hope you are right”—emphasizes its significance for her character and at this moment in the novel (Matlwa 128). “Fast car” augments Fikile’s desperate desire to escape, a theme that permeates the second half of the novel. It also situates her story in a broader context of black desire to escape poverty, violence, and oppression. Essentially, Matlwa points to alternative popular genres, which are rooted in black musical innovation and black experience, as a means to explore how popular culture and feminism might work together to articulate and navigate the hegemony of patriarchal society.

**Building a Feminist Community**

While it is important to problematize the ‘popularization’ of feminism especially with regard to Wanner’s novel, I argue that it is equally important to think through some the ways that both novels actually begin to theorize the possibility for a multiplicity of feminist agendas, polyvocal feminist dialogue, and various entryways into feminism. I stated earlier that much of what we read in *The Madams* celebrates the feminism born out of marginalized communities in everyday ways rather than the feminism of the ivory tower, filled with over-inflated academic jargon and theoretical explanations. What this also implies, if we agree that feminist thought is not only
generated in the halls of the academy, is that productive and generative dialogue within and across various feminist communities is not only possible but necessary. Moreover, understanding how and where those communities overlap, for example popular culture (feminists) and academic feminism (radical activist) is an important step to creating space for those conversations to be had. What has been coined as “hip-hop feminism” (Weidhase 130), and the study of “celebrity feminism” (Hobson 999) is particularly useful in terms of thinking through and unpacking how the popular can actually be an important site of feminist discourse and ideology.

Within the discourse of hip-hop feminism, feminism is “move[d] beyond the walls of academia through the privileging of popular culture as a ‘space for a new generation of feminist theorizing’” (Durham qtd in Weidhase 130). Within this framework proponents of hip-hop feminism theorize the demise of problematic respectability politics, celebrate sexual agency and insist on “living with contradictions” (Durham qt. in Weidhase 130). Moreover, what Janell Hobson argues with regard to celebrity feminism is just as compelling when thinking about popular feminism more generally:

There is a massive consciousness-raising underway concerning women’s potential empowerment and the gender inequities that still inhibit their rise to collective power. These messages exist in our commercial and alternative music, films and art and have the potential to complement, not replace, the feminist manifestos, academic monographs, policy briefs, and grassroots missions that have come to represent feminist theorizing and practice. (Hobson 1000)

This wave of consciousness-raising, to which Hobson refers, seems to coincide with what Durham describes in her discussion of hip-hop feminism; thus, both scholars speak to and reflect upon what seems to be a fairly large-scale increase in feminist awareness, politics and the vocalization of feminist ideals within popular culture. It gained momentum years after the publication of The Madams and Coconut; however, I would suggest that these early post-apartheid texts prolifically marked this
particular shift in their unapologetic feminist agenda, especially in the case of *The Madams*.

It is with these theoretical insights that we can recognize the importance of placing a popular text like *The Madams* and *Coconut* in conversation with one another. Through her celebration of what is commonly called our “sister-friends,” the narrative style she employs and her intertextual references, Wanner imagines ways in which feminism and popular culture can enable a larger feminist community to grow and foster dialogue that is accessible to a non-academic demographic. Her interest in feminist solidarity is demonstrated most powerfully through the representation of Thandi’s “Girlfriends” (Wanner xi). The capitalization of the word girlfriends is significant as it demonstrates how important the three characters are to each other and the role the representation of their friendship plays in the novel. This is of course in direct contrast with *Coconut*, in which Matlwa emphasizes how Ofilwe finds genuine friendship with her white school-friend Belinda impossible and Fikile’s self-hatred results in her self-imposed isolation from the “dull and dirty” (Matlwa 167) young women in her community.

*Coconut* in fact suggests that, despite the presence of a strong emotional bond, friendship between white and black women is not yet possible because of the way in which white women have long participated in South Africa’s history of white capitalist hetero-patriarchal violence against black men and women (Lockward and Dullay 11). Indeed, throughout history even white women’s investment in the women’s movement has been mitigated by their parallel investment in white privilege and antiblackness (Lorde 68-69). In her reflections about the dismantling of her friendship with Belinda, for example, Ofilwe states:

I feel sorry for Belinda, I feel sorry for me…I think at heart she is a good person. But I am a good person too. She meant well. But we were different. And somewhere between grades three and ten that became a bad thing. It hurts hurting your friends. But she hurt me. You miss the laughs, the delirious things you’d do and the madness you shared. But after a while it’s agony playing a
role you would never dream of auditioning for...Even if Felicity, the only other girl of African descent in your grade, and the three other brown kids in the younger years, treat you like the scum they believe they are, at least you are all the same. At least they don’t stare or question or misunderstand. (48-9)

This passage captures the conflicting emotions and inclinations that encompass an attempted bond between two young women across a racial boundary. Matlwa uses semantic parallelism in order to set Ofilwe and Belinda as mirrors to each other both the object of Ofilwe’s pity, both hurt, both good people, until Ofilwe must acknowledge the ways that Belinda has forcibly reminded her that they are different, that she is other. Their failed friendship then serves as analogy of what some of the hindrances are to feminist solidarity in broader circles.

In The Madams by contrast, Wanner proposes a hopeful alternative to rejecting the possibilities of interracial friendship. She imagines what an empowered feminist community might look like: from the momentary feminist spaces and honest dialogue about how the intersections of race and class affect our feminism to amusing anecdotes about outwitting “the patriarchy,” feminist solidarity in this novel is fun, empowering, candid and quick-witted.¹²⁴ However, the novel in truth foregrounds the incomparability of the emotional and psychological support that is needed while trying to navigate the violence of an intensely misogynistic society. Whether making sure Nosizwe is apprised of her husband’s infidelity and embracing her while she cried after she discovers it (99) or making sure that Lauren is able to fully walk away from an abusive relationship (126-127), the women in this novel offer the kind of support that is healing, rejuvenating, and dependable. Thandi says it best:

Technically it was none of my business, as Mandla had already stated. But hell, Siz is my sister. We have been through thick and thin together. I also knew that, should the same thing ever happen to me, Siz would tell me

¹²⁴ I am referring here to scenes discussed in chapters two and three of this study. However, I deliberately use what has become a pop-culture term for patriarchal society. This is found frequently in the expression “smash the patriarchy” and others like it.
that’s what sisterhood is all about, no? We had been through too much to keep something of this import from each other. (69)

Ultimately, Thandi’s words capture the most essential components of her relationship with her two friends: sisterhood, honesty, and support. Indeed, through the deeper friendship forged between Thandi, Nosizwe and Lauren, Wanner “interprets chick lit differently” (Spencer 93). She suggests that in the South African context chick lit is truly about building and establishing a feminine and feminist community that is transformative, healing and empowering. This novel tells the stories of women grappling with issues of race, gender, class and sexuality together, rather than in competition with each other. At the end of the novel, Thandi reflects “I need my crazy friends Siz and Lauren to keep me grounded” (207), reminding the reader that it is the women in this novel who play a savior role, who are needed and without whom our narrator-protagonist cannot survive.

It is telling that both Wanner and Matlwa attempt to situate themselves within a larger feminist literary community. This is established through intertextual allusions to other feminist authors that both novels rely on in order to locate their projects within a larger feminist discourse. Wanner’s reference to Waiting to Exhale (1992), Terri MacMillan’s popular novel about four professional African American women looking for love in 1990s America, suggests links on a global scale. While it is not clear whether Wanner refers to the novel or the film adaptation, she directly references one of the most iconic scenes from them, with Thandi’s particular flare:

On arrival at Siz’s place more drama awaited. She went into her bedroom and came out dragging the mattress and the bedding. We watched silently – not quite sure whether to help or not – as she proceeded to take anything else that reminded her of Vuyo; the lingerie he had bought her, the cards he had given her for all their anniversaries. Siz, in a Waiting to Exhale moment, proceeded to set it all on fire … “Besides they are mine to burn because I am sure in some roundabout way he used my money to buy them” … After that all I could was stay out of this sister’s way and hum “Burn baby burn” to myself. (105-06)
This scene of Nosizwe expressing her rage and grief at Vuyo’s infidelity is, as Thandi informs the reader, an intertextual reference to the feminine rage exhibited by Bernadine’s character after her husband leaves her for a white woman. The image of Bernadine burning her husband’s clothes in his expensive car, while smoking a cigarette is made iconic by African American actress Angela Basset’s interpretation of the character in the film adaptation:

yeah, I was your white woman for 11 years! Couldn’t have started that damn company without me! Hell, I worked my ass off. I mean, I got a Master’s degree in business… and there I was his secretary, his office manager and his computer! “No, Bernadine you can’t start your catering business this year. Why don’t you wait a few year’s huh? … I need you to be the fucking background to my foreground … Get your shit! Get your shit! And get out! (https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=waiting-to-exhale)

Bernadine expresses the rage, sense of betrayal and the pains of living within the containing and oppressive structures of black patriarchy. Fire, therefore, in both cases not only symbolizes that rage and grief but also release from the patriarchal expectations placed on the two characters.

However, while the scene in Waiting to Exhale (both the novel and the film) is an intensely dramatic moment, it is rendered somewhat satirically in Wanner’s revision of it. Her mention of the novel/film implies that Nosizwe’s behavior is overly dramatic and adds humor to the scene. This juxtaposed with Thandi’s overall tone of amusement indicates that this is a slightly facetious intertextual reference. In other words, it acknowledges the two texts’ shared engagement with issues of patriarchy and gendered domestic spaces but does not completely subscribe to what

125 Lorde’s essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (2007) is helpful here despite the focus on race in its elucidation of the inevitable presence and importance of black women’s anger. See also bell hooks Killing Rage: Ending Racism (1995).
may be stereotypical constructions of the “angry black woman.” In this way, Wanner is able to establish feminist solidarity within a popular framework while simultaneously offering a subtle but constructive critique.

Kopano Matlwa achieves a similar effect in *Coconut* with her intertextual references to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. She creates a character that presents as a kind of literary homage to one of the contemporary masters of American fiction. Fikile’s use of “the dainty little emerald-green coloured lenses that float gracefully in the sapphire blue contact-lens solution are [, for her,] a reminder of how far [she] ha[s] come” (117). The image of the green contact lenses surrounded by the vivid blue solution is a rather obvious allusion to Morrison’s novel while simultaneously alerting the reader to what will be subtle differences. Like Pecola’s longing for blue eyes (Morrison 46)—Fikile’s determination to be white cannot simply be reduced to internalized self-hatred. Rather, these protagonists reflect a desperate longing for escape from poverty, abuse, and neglect. While Pecola wishes to see differently, Fikile’s aspires to achieve mobility, to move beyond her world. Her intention is firm, “I will not be living in this dingy old township forever, so why build relationships with people I have no intention of ever seeing again? I want nothing to do with this dirt”, a determination to re-spatialize herself that is repeated often throughout the novel (130). This is also reflective of the novel’s broader interrogations of aspiration and mobility and black desire to escape these geographies of domination and containment.

I read this as an intertextual moment of feminist solidarity, an acknowledgment of experiences of racist and sexist violence shared across international borders and a powerfully symbolic moment for *Coconut*. These are indeed established to create connections between literary works and to document and reference shared political ideology and oppositional strategies. Most importantly,

---

126 *Waiting to Exhale* was heavily critiqued for its complicity with discourse that demonizes black womanhood and insists that popular depictions of black gender and relationship dynamics are reduced to their most simplistic stereotypes (hooks 53-54).
with her allusion to *The Bluest Eye*, Matlwa builds upon the knowledge and insight offered in Morrison’s text and adds her own defiant take on the issue of black emasculation and the mobilization of violent masculinities. Like Wanner’s, Matlwa’s is a masterful use of intertextuality as a literary device in that both authors engage in a subtle, layered conversation with their predecessors at the same time as they salute them.

Placing these two texts in dialogue with one another is another way to establish that black feminist community and the conversations that are had within them. While the frame that is employed to engage and thematize issues of gender and space, black women’s geographies, violent masculinities and various feminist responses is different, these differences allow for important discussions to occur. What is at the center of a dialogue between these novels is the important ways that popular culture and feminism can play a productive role in cultural and intellectual responses to the realities of post-apartheid South Africa. In order for feminist activism and theory to persist in its resistance to white heteropatriarchy, to enter into a constantly developing global technological environment, to remain relevant and revise themselves by entering into dialogue surrounding contemporary issues, popular culture has to continue playing an important role in feminist work in South Africa. Similarly, popular culture is inevitably going to have to engage feminist politics because of the growing presence they have in contemporary conversations about current events, politics and gender, race and class struggles. With these considerations, it may not be accurate to claim that feminism and popular culture are stronger together, but rather that they both provide intellectuals and artists with opportunities to imagine moments of agency, start generative and productive discussions, and create space across and within very diverse communities.
Conclusion: On Popular Spaces

This study has shown how the selected primary texts illustrate and reflect upon post-apartheid urban and suburban spaces and the ways that these spaces have been and continue to be racialized, gendered, and imbued with the containing and constricting forces of apartheid era’s white supremacist patriarchy. The embeddedness of apartheid era structures has had an effect not only on movement and mobility but also on how gender subjectivity is lived and formed in these various spaces. The uncertainty and overall sense of irony that play out in these texts cogently reflect the general tone in the political and cultural environment throughout the nation. The novels expose how these structures render black women’s geographies invisible or at the very least ignored in these spaces. Yet, this project has also illustrated the everyday ways that black feminist geographies are lived and imagined, and how alternative and oppositional means of moving through these spaces are envisioned. At the center of these oppositions are the authors’ representations of popular spaces and the possibilities they unlock for black South Africans moving forward.

Ultimately, “Popular Spaces” urges that we begin to reevaluate the possibilities and implications for and of popular culture in space. This reevaluation centers various kinds of spaces including domestic, public, urban and, most importantly, the literary space. Popular culture is framed here as functioning within and contributing to the production of various lived spaces as well as to rendering visible geographies that under political, cultural and economic hegemony are erased. The scholarship on popular culture which examines it as a dialectic and a terrain of struggle is important and insightful; yet, it often relegates popular culture to its social and political significance and ignores the ways in which it is capable of functioning as a kind of aesthetic tool that lifts the quotidian and the demotic to the level of art. Popular culture, in this postulation, is then the avenue through which local and
everyday creativity and knowledge are valorized in new and exciting ways, and the literary space is reexamined.

Beyond its function as a site of tension in its resistance to, and complicity with, the dominant culture, this project has asked what happens if we read the deployment of popular culture in the literary space as an aesthetic trope. Reading popular culture in this way means thinking differently about the meaning and implications of popular forms in literature and looking at the textual spaces in which popular forms are present through a different lens. Rather than accepting the presence of popular forms as an authorial appeal to the masses, an attempt to simplistically speak with the “voice of a generation” or a navigation between stereotype and authenticity, conceptualizing an aesthetic of the popular means thinking about the ways that the literary text is able to uncover and advance the artistic innovations of the working class and the marginalized. In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, an aesthetic of the popular becomes a central mechanism through which authors are able to engage and reflect upon the connections and disconnections between the apartheid past and an uncertain future as well as to play out and explore those uncertainties through experimentation with language, rhythm, poetic forms, and intertextuality. Most importantly, the literary space becomes one of potential opposition, where popular forms that have conventionally been dismissed as such are lifted to the level of the literary. This also means that the lines between so-called “high” and “low” art, a dichotomy rooted in colonial histories and western aesthetic hierarchies, are blurred.

This reoccupation of the literary space is inextricably linked to the ways that literature can and does pinpoint how popular culture functions in other spaces and what the implications of its occupation of those spaces are. Within the imagined spaces of literature, popular culture takes on multiple dimensions in which the tensions and dialectic of various popular forms in and of themselves destabilize the identities of spaces and places that various hegemonic forces attempted to reduce or fix. Moreover, within the literary imagination, the apolitical becomes profoundly political and space is made for the uncertainty and precariousness of the post-
apartheid condition. For black South African authors this means radical ways in which the overarching narrative of newness and the rainbow post-apartheid nation can be both deconstructed and hoped for. It means that popular forms that were of and for the ghetto are recast as carrying local knowledge, heritage, traditions and forms of resistance, but also that their occupation of various spaces is emancipatory and oppositional rather than deviant and criminal.

This project has also argued that popular spaces are nonetheless not only spaces that are infused with, or occupied by, popular culture. Rather, space is also partially produced by and determined by a popular aesthetic. In the black South African popular spaces of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this aesthetic is repeatedly centered around tropes of self-styling, youth culture, a politics of pleasure, and the demotic. More importantly, a black South African aesthetic of popular culture, rooted in Edouard Glissant’s theory of opacity, inherently resists a colonial or neo-colonial gaze that would reduce, classify, or render transparent black culture or communities. Opacity, as an underlying force behind these tropes, initiates a shift in how theses spaces are conceived, produced and apprehended. Frequently, spaces of the margins, or spaces where marginalized people live and move, are rendered either invisible or highly visible within reductive colonial constructions. What opacity does is to essentially close ranks and simultaneously insist on visibility on the terms of the marginalized. It defamiliarizes these spaces to the outside gaze and thus shifts the dynamic of the space. In this way an aesthetic of popular culture is able to contribute to how space is produced and simultaneously interact with the intersecting forces of white capitalist heteropatriarchy and a host of other dynamics brought about by various levels of social relations.

It must be acknowledged that the analysis conducted within this project, however, is limited by time and space. Therefore, there are gaps in this research that hopefully will be filled by research yet to come. As we approach the close of the second decade of the new millennium, we might ask how this popular aesthetic has changed. How do we think about the anger and frustration expressed in the Rhodes
Must Fall Movement at the University of Cape Town and the Fees Must Fall Movement on university campuses throughout the country since that level of rage was not present in 2006 and 2007 when the discussed novels were published? What does an aesthetic of popular culture look like now and does it continue to enter into literary spaces? Moreover, what are the future implications of the way that the popular or the everyday has been elevated in these texts?

Opening up this avenue of inquiry, is another important aspect of this project. Critique of much of the literature published in the first decade of the twenty-first century lamented a lack of polish and a lack of innovation in form among new black South African authors. In response, their defenders applauded the authors’ ability to represent the grittiness of the urban space and the continued conditions of poverty, disenfranchisement, and marginalization that many black South Africans were still facing. Some celebrated select authors’ linguistic experimentation and the establishment of a new young urban voice among South Africa’s literati. Yet, all too often, the sort of shift in thinking required to perceive innovations in form and style, rather than simply unpacking how these writers were thinking about and reflecting on space, race, gender, and the everyday, was not being done. An aesthetics of popular culture, within this context, is after all an aestheticization of the everyday. Therefore, this project works to achieve but also to promote that conceptual shift. It seeks out and celebrates the authors’ ability to imagine everyday means of navigating the complexities and contradictions of a post-apartheid world. Finding and amplifying those everyday cultural and intellectual contributions is one of the essential keys to a larger struggle for freedom throughout marginalized communities in South Africa and around the world.
Works Cited


Camp, Stephanie M.H. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday*


Gill, Rosalind, and Elena Herdieckerhoff. “Rewriting the Romance: New


---. “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular.’” People’s History and Socialist Theory


---. Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies. Routledge, 1996.

Hull, Gloria T, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith eds. All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies. Feminist Press, 1982.


Mhlambi, Thokozani. “‘Kwaitofabulous’: The Study of a South African Urban


Niaah, Sonjah Stanley. “A Common Space: Dancehall, Kwaito and the Mapping of


---. “Currents Against Gender Transformation of South African Men: Relocating Marginality to the Centre of Research and Theory of Masculinities.” *NORMA*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 30-44.


*Tsotsi*. Directed by Gavin Hood, Performances by Presely Chweneyagae, Mothusi Magano, and Israel Makoe, The UK Film and TV Production Company PLC, 2005.


Ziarek, Ewa Plonowska. “Mimesis in Black and White: Feminist Aesthetics,

Informal Online Sources


Lyric transcription and translations


Discography


