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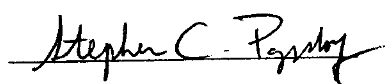

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Knowing One's Place in the Post-Millennial, South African

Novels of van Niekerk, Wicomb, and Matlwa

(TITLE)

BY

Stephen C. Poggendorf

THESIS

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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Abstract

The literature of post-apartheid South Africa suggests that the atrocities of the past still linger and continue to shape the mentality of the nation. Grace and hope often mix with resentment, bitterness, and vexation in the pages of contemporary South African novels. Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2004), Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), and Kopano Matlwa's *Spilt Milk* (2010), each reflects on intersections of race, space, and gender as they occur in specific locations. These novels all unfold in South Africa, and involve highly particularized settings that conjure up specific moments from the country's history; nevertheless, thematically these works resonate. Though written in distinct narrative styles, each novel addresses the convergence of race and geography that continues to impact present day South Africa. These narratives shift back and forth between the present and the past, and the multilayered texts each act as a palimpsest, as the replaying and revision of past events place different conceptions of the same stories on top of one another. Furthermore, I build on Rita Barnard's phrase, "knowing one's place," to discuss these representations of apartheid, a system that made it virtually impossible to define one's place in society with any sense of confidence. The authors criticize the Afrikaner myth of superiority and the instability of the National Party's resulting policy, yet suggest that all South Africans, regardless of race, must accept personal responsibility for their past actions before true progress can be made. As a result, South Africa's diverse population, a people supposedly defined by renewed sense of racial equality, remains unstable today.

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I also appreciate the work of my readers, Dr. Michael Loudon and Dr. Jeannie Ludlow, who both contributed revision ideas that kept my project moving forward toward completion. Dr. Loudon's expertise in South African history helped me speak pointedly about the theme of hope in the new South Africa. Likewise, Dr. Ludlow's writing exercises helped me uncover exactly how the palimpsest trope was operating in my earlier drafts, which led me toward a much more concise final draft.

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Introduction

Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2007), Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), and Kopano Matlwa's *Spilt Milk* (2010) each reflects on intersections of race, space, and gender as they occur in specific locations. These novels all unfold in South Africa, and they involve highly particularized settings that conjure up specific moments from the country's history; nevertheless, thematically, these works resonate among each other. Though written in distinct narrative styles, each novel addresses the convergence of race and geography that continues to impact present day South Africa. The policies of apartheid not only affected people on a basis of race, but also in regards to where they lived and worked. Rita Barnard's discussion of place and space unpacks the ways South Africans were racially defined and classified in legislation and the representations of the personal impact of these policies of segregation in literature. Barnard constructs a critical framework out of the multilayered phrase, "knowing one's place," a figure of speech that she asserts, "express[es] the oppressive conflation of the spatial and the political" (3). I am primarily interested in the conversation captured by these three writers as their central characters try to answer the question, "Where do I stand in this country?" The protagonists each discover that the answer depends almost entirely on geographic rather than concrete circumstances and that the answer might change in an instant. In varied narratives that contemplate interpenetrating messages regarding one's place in the world, these three authors open a window into a complex world where instability, as opposed to fixed attributes, characterizes identity.

These novels center on characters driven to find their place in the new South Africa, a country seemingly obsessed with, and subsequently stifled by, the past. Each author unearths history—both personal and national—in order to show the influences that previous generations still exert on modern-day South Africans. The literature of post-apartheid South Africa suggests that the atrocities of the past linger and continue to shape the mentality of the nation. Grace and hope often mix with resentment, bitterness, and vexation in the pages of contemporary South African novels. During the apartheid era, South Africans of all races lived under a system that made it virtually impossible to define one's place in society with any sense of confidence—the Afrikaner myth of superiority and the National Party's resulting policy was simply too unstable.[1] Thus, the country, and the relationships of its diverse population, remains unstable today.

Each novel operates as a palimpsest since these narratives, through the use of analepsis (flashing back) and prolepsis (flashing forward), reveal multilayered personal histories that often place one story on top of another story. The postcolonial term *palimpsest* suggests that we view history "not as a natural evolution or progress but as the history of colonial expansion, the violent erasure and superimposition of cultures, and defiant and subversive persistence" (Dillon 254). These three authors show how colonial forces attempted to erase native cultures in the region only to discover that these beliefs were temporarily pressed down; the past lives on and re-emerges through the memories of the colonized. Furthermore, these characters find that the supposedly "new" South

[1] The practice of racial segregation is not, of course, unique to the National Party and its construction of apartheid. For example, the United States upheld the "Jim Crow" laws during the late 1800's until approximately 1970. For the purposes of my thesis, I look at the resulting instability from the Afrikaner ideology of separate development, and do not attempt to draw on any other nation's legislative similarities.

Africa is a country marked by the layering of cosmopolitan ideals on top of an older colonial system. So, the old and the new exist at the same time and appear in constant opposition with one another. The novels investigate the interlacing of personal and historical atrocities, and suggest that in South Africa, or any place that has experienced the forces of colonization and subsequent decolonization, finding one's place requires a confrontation with the past.

Reconciliation materializes as a central theme for van Niekerk, Wicomb, and Matlwa. Each author shows that South Africans of all races must first take responsibility for their previous actions, prejudices, and ideological affiliations before they can find peace in the new South Africa. Along with any acceptance of personal accountability comes shame and regret, two concepts that each author investigates through her central characters. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, which began in 1996, served as the means for the beginning of personal and national forgiveness after the dissolution of apartheid. When asked if the TRC should have been more punishment-based, Professor Albie Sachs, who served as Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa from 1994-2009, responded, "How would our country move forward?" In striking contrast, South African novelist Gillian Slovo (whose activist mother, Ruth First, was killed by a security forces car bomb) responded to the same question, "I would prefer them to be in jail for the rest of their lives. They are murderers" (*Miracle Rising*). These contrasting views provide a clue to the dissention present in South Africa; some citizens appear ready to let go of the hatred and anger nurtured by the Afrikaner Nationalists while others seek stringent retribution. The imbalance between forgiveness and

resentment, portrayed through various interpersonal relationships, colors each of the three novels.

My first chapter, "Marlene van Niekerk's Post-Apartheid *Plaasroman: The Way of the Women* as Palimpsest," focuses on Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2007). As she did in her earlier novel, *Triomf* (2004), van Niekerk demonstrates that concepts of race in South Africa, as well as any tensions that arise from racial conflict, connect directly to the country's historical context. While van Niekerk sets her novels in contemporary South Africa, she calls attention to the ongoing impact of the past in the present. Van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (as does Wicomb's and Matlwa's novels) makes apparent that South Africans understand that historical truths, forged by the various colonizers of the region, merely sit on top of, and bury, actual experiences of the country's inhabitants. Her characters navigate a time frame that moves from the oppressive outset of the Apartheid Era in the 1950's, through its dissolution in the 1990's, and into post-apartheid South Africa. Her novel yields itself to postcolonial and feminist critique as she probes the ways in which South Africans of all races have been forced to define and redefine themselves since Jan van Riebeeck ushered in the colonial era in the country. Her narrative sets up the binaries of apartheid, yet troubles and subverts these categories by suggesting that racial definition relies on contingency and historical context. The author closely follows the evolution of racial identity, and she uncovers the tension that arises when those in power attempt to force people into fixed and hierarchized categories. Van Niekerk highlights the unstable and unsustainable nature of apartheid due to the National Party's reliance on a supposedly "fixed" racial hierarchy.

Van Niekerk's novel also examines the complicated relationship between master, master's wife, and servant during the turbulent years between 1950 and 1970 in South Africa. Van Niekerk challenges the long-standing hierarchy that defined these roles through her portrayal of the de Wet family and their servant, Agaat. As a result, she revises the distinctly South African *plaasroman* (farm novel) genre. Although Afrikaner success depended on farming in the middle of the twentieth century, van Niekerk shows that success clashing with the moral ambiguity of utilizing black African laborers, whom she brings vividly to life. Servants in South African literature are often depicted in fairly generic ways. For example, Anne McClintock criticizes South African "New Woman" author, Olive Schreiner, who, despite her searing assessment of gender roles and while aware of the relevance of the master and servant relationship, grants far too little power to black African characters. McClintock comments, "Schreiner gives her African characters no agency beyond the colonial narrative, The black servants are reflector figures, casting light or shadow on the white people, their imaginations wholly absorbed in the colonial drama, assisting the white's [sic] comings and goings, bearing witness to their scenes, but never acting in their own regard" (271). I argue that van Niekerk's more nuanced portrayal of this dynamic reveals the often hidden power struggle inherent in the master/servant binary. Van Niekerk's narrative palimpsest materializes as she layers Agaat's revised version of *Grootmoedersdrift's* history on top of Milla's.

Much like van Niekerk's work, Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) juxtaposes and interweaves the vestiges of the past with contemporary life in South Africa. My second chapter, "Reconciliation through Transportation in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*," focuses on Wicomb's protagonist, Marion, a travel agent who has

no desire to travel. Marion serves as an apt vehicle to discuss the development of historical palimpsest. As vestiges of her buried past emerge, she is forced to move literally and figuratively out of her comfort zone. She journeys from the city to the country, and then from South Africa to Europe, and in the process she uncovers the traces of past political abuses of the National Party. The movement from urban to rural, especially because of its correlation to Marion's enlightenment, indicates that the colonial history of rural South Africa shaped the ideologies of city dwellers in future generations. Although set primarily in the new millennium of urban South Africa, Wicomb's novel frequently flashes back to Marion's childhood memories of country life during the 1960's and 70's. While she hides behind a façade—one that suggests confidence in her white skin and place in a post-apartheid world—she cannot escape the ghosts of the past or her actual racial lineage, which ultimately destroy and reshape her concept of self.

Playing in the Light illuminates the complex domestic ramifications of apartheid. Much of the action of the narrative exists in flashback sequences which force past and present events into one uncomfortably close space. Wicomb points to the Population Registration Act of 1950 as the National Party's means of officially dividing the country on the basis of race, which drove families to desperate ends. The imposition of arbitrary, unstable racial categories on citizens forced people to either accept an assigned identity or, if their skin was light enough, adopt a white identity. Marion's "coloured" (in the peculiar South African sense of mixed-race identity) parents spend most of their lives passing as white South Africans as a means of evading apartheid restrictions on non-whites, and achieving some semblance of financial security. Wicomb's representation of passing continues the trope of the palimpsest, as the family finds that the adopted white

identity merely sits on top of their coloured identity, as opposed to replacing it. Despite the success of their adopted identities, the Campbells still cannot find a comfortable sense of place in their homeland. More importantly, though born "white," their daughter, Marion, inherits this sense of displacement and struggles throughout the narrative to make peace with her adoption of a new racial identity that acknowledges her so-called "coloured" roots.

Whereas van Niekerk and Wicomb have both lived the majority of their lives under National Party rule, Kopano Matlwa, the youngest of these writers, has grown up in post-apartheid South Africa. Still, she delves into her country's past as a means of understanding the state of the new nation. My final chapter, "*Spilt Milk*: A Supposed Clean Slate in the New South Africa," examines Matlwa's 2010 novel. A black South African in her twenties, and one of the few of her generation whose work has gained global recognition, she takes up millennial conceptions of race, in so far as apartheid exists as a memory, albeit a powerful one, for her two central characters. They have matured and found varying degrees of personal success in the so-called "Rainbow Nation." Nevertheless, the ramifications of the past emerge through their broken relationship, and they suggest that forgiveness only occurs after looking into the eyes of those who have caused pain.

Spilt Milk employs terminology of the postmodern world, and foregrounds the shaping forces of globalization. Matlwa incorporates Google, BlackBerry, and other technological touchstones of the "plugged-in" generation, into her commentary on the new South Africa. As her protagonist, Mohumagadi, armed with a self-adopted traditional African name, establishes a school for young black South Africans, she

obsesses over its appearance to the outside world. This African-managed establishment must exceed all expectations, and her ambition links directly to racial awareness. Matlwa shows that global success seems to require assimilation to Western hegemony. Her novel captures a palpable fear of South Africans—the disintegration and subsequent replacement of tribal culture. Her central character hopes that she can fuel a cultural revival of sorts, but she finds that the demands of the postmodern world promote sameness, not diversity. Though the plot unravels exclusively in an urbanized space, Mohumagadi's indigenous ancestry complicates her notion of success and progress.

These post-apartheid works, because of their reliance on historical events, also operate as allegories. The work of Fredric Jameson implies that first-world countries are afforded a view from the top, a place in the world where a collective past does not come into play. Members of the first-world are not haunted by history; instead, they hide in the fictional world of individualism and subjectivity, seemingly far away from some sense of a universal struggle for freedom. He argues,

> All of this is denied to third-world culture, which must be situational and materialist despite itself. And it is this, finally, which must account for the allegorical nature of third-world culture, where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself (85-86).

Aijaz Ahmad famously counters Jameson's assertion that *all* Third-World literature represents a national allegory, and remarks that, "If this 'third world' is constituted by the singular 'experience of colonialism and imperialism,' and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this

'experience'; in fact, there is nothing else to narrate" (8-9). I argue that to only interpret these novels in purely allegorical terms discredits the overall accomplishment of the authors, thus aligning my thesis more with Ahmad than Jameson. These authors *choose* to tell individual stories of South Africans; they are not forced into telling every South African's story due to their inauspicious "Third World writer" label (One could argue that van Niekerk is not a "Third World writer" due to her Afrikaner heritage). My thesis investigates the ways in which these novels work on a human level, uncovering such universal themes as reconciliation and shame, while simultaneously shining a light on the interwoven histories of their homeland.

"Marlene van Niekerk's Post-Apartheid *Plaasroman: The Way of the Women* as Palimpsest"

"Re-imagining and re-viewing history, the large tracts of history that were silenced by the small white interpretation of it during apartheid, that is an incredibly fertile aspect of writing at the moment" (Mengel, Borzaga, and Orantes 16)

Introduction

South African novelist Marlene van Niekerk's two novels—*Triomf* (1995) and *The Way of the Women*(2004)— have both gained critical praise for their ability to review and represent the personal trauma that was experienced by, and still reverberates among, South Africans as a result of apartheid. She has won multiple literary awards, including the Helgaard Steyn Prize in 2008 and the Noma award for Publishing in 1995, thus solidifying her place as an important South African author ("Author Focus"). Nevertheless, she views her own work modestly when she remarks that she is not in the same league with J.M. Coetzee, particularly because of his "relentless minimalist style" (Pienaar). While Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace* (1999), has become, arguably, the most-renowned post-apartheid work, I contend that van Niekerk's novel examines the turbulence in the new South Africa as profoundly as the work of her more famous counterpart. Her strengths as a writer are evident in her most recent work, *The Way of the Women,* in which she appropriates the peculiarly South African genre of the *plaasroman* as a vehicle for examining the incremental evolution of emotion that parallels wider

political change in a new nation founded on reconciliation.

Van Niekerk's most recent novel, published in South Africa under the title *Agaat* in her native Afrikaans, considers the interlacing of personal and historical atrocities, and demonstrates that in South Africa, or any country that has experienced the forces of colonization and subsequent decolonization, moving toward progress first requires an unearthing of the past.[2] The novel takes place not in the city, as does her earlier work, but on South Africa's rural Eastern Cape; her central characters are wealthy landowners as opposed to the abject whites who populated the Johannesburg suburb that provided her debut novel's name—*Triomf*. *The Way of the Women* guides the reader through the apartheid years as experienced on a farm and by two central characters—Milla, an Afrikaner farmer's wife, and Agaat, her coloured servant. The novel takes as its central theme the unrealized, impossible dream of white supremacy in South Africa governed by the National Party. Furthermore, van Niekerk's portrayal of Agaat allows the novel's allegorical impact to reach beyond the representation of the Afrikaner.

Several parallel narratives emerge as Milla, paralyzed and on her deathbed, listens to her own story, as recorded in her journal and read aloud by Agaat. Through this narration, the novel operates as a palimpsest, as Agaat's revised version of her life with the de Wets is *superimposed onto* Milla's original version. Van Niekerk sets her story on *Grootmoedersdrift*, a flourishing agricultural settlement established on land once cultivated by native Africans. The injustice of the past resides under the feet of the de

---

[2] Her writing style has evolved in subtlety and nuance when compared to the approach she employed in her debut novel. Her translator, Michiel Heyns, admits, "[*Triomf* is] a very urban novel with a very deliberately unelevated idiom—it's very crude, extremely crude" (Felman). Aside from being a much more raw and coarse novel, Triomf also differs in terms of its temporality, staying in the novel's now much more than her newest work, which shifts back and forth between the narrator's past and present.

Wets, an Afrikaner family trying to maintain the unstable hierarchy central to the white privilege of South African farm life. And the presence of Agaat, whose experiences rise to the top layer of the narrative, points to a regretful emotional response that all Afrikaners had to confront under apartheid. Revealed is a family's dysfunctional history, characterized by violent relationships between Milla and her husband Jak, and her son, Jakkie. Agaat, who has had to negotiate the contradictory roles of adopted daughter, servant, companion, and caregiver, reads the journal to her paralyzed mistress/mother, and, in her reading, forces attention on the intersection of her own story and the de Wets' family history. The narration takes two points of view and operates in various temporalities: first person narration through the eyes of Milla in present-day South Africa and second person narration in which Agaat retells events from Milla's diary. Van Niekerk also brackets the main narrative with the first person perspective of Jakkie, Milla's only son. Van Niekerk uses both analepsis and prolepsis which creates a complicated depiction of the family's history—we see their relationships evolve over the years, but not in chronological order.[3] Instead, the author jumps from specific moments in time, leaving gaps to be filled in as the narrative proceeds.

These varied vantage points reveal a family in turmoil—one under immense internal pressure, even during their prosperous years under apartheid. Furthermore, most of the narration is provisional and presented by an unreliable narrator who physically cannot speak. As a result, all "facts" in the history of the de Wets are impossible to validate, allowing van Niekerk's narrative to parallel the equally dubious South African policy during apartheid, a time in which Afrikaner propaganda of white supremacy

[3] I rely on Dino Felluga's "Terms Used by Narratology and Film Theory" to examine van Niekerk's treatment of the narrative's timeline.

dictated social "truths." Torn between the bitterness of losing complete control of *Grootmoedersdrift* and her regret regarding her mistreatment of Agaat, Milla's recollection of her life parallels that of many Afrikaner farmers whose familial solidarity, as well as agricultural success, depended on racially oppressive policies upheld by the National Party. Milla's review of past decisions also points to a similar process occurring in the new South Africa, a time in which Afrikaners must confront the long-lasting damage caused by these policies and accept a sense of personal responsibility. In the first chapter, the incapacitated Milla thinks about her inability to communicate with Agaat, even on the simplest levels: "That's my technique nowadays. Progress through misunderstanding" (11). On the surface, the example refers to Milla's desire to read a particular book, a message that Agaat does not understand. More importantly, however, the narration points to a lifetime of painful misunderstandings between the characters.

The narrative operates as a collaboration between Milla and Agaat, as the emotional impact of the story depends on the image of Agaat standing over her deteriorating mistress and reading select moments of their history. Due to an unnamed, crippling condition that has Milla "locked-in" and unable to communicate, her present-day narration often dissolves into a stream of consciousness that blends past and present memories together. Van Niekerk gives the reader access to Milla's thoughts that no character in the novel can know. Only Agaat seems able to read Milla's inert body and staring eye, and correctly interprets her desires. When Milla desires that Agaat read from her journal, Agaat switches between paraphrasing the entries and reading them word for word, thus, not only projecting her presence into Milla's story, but also withholding unmediated access to her own subjectivity. We see her in the room, we hear her voice,

yet the words issuing from her mouth are not her own. These narrative devices maintain the distance between her own experiences and that of her listener and transform herself and the de Wets into characters in a story, within the larger, "real" narrative.

With the exception of Jakkie's bracketed narrative, most of the novel seems to be presented from Milla's perspective, which led Mary Brodbin, a critic for the *Socialist Review* to critique *The Way of the Women* as a "one-sided account." Such a dismissal, however, misses the author's portrayal of agency in a character's ability or refusal to speak; Agaat's contribution to Milla's story, even when relayed in Milla's words, represents her empowerment. Indeed, van Niekerk allows time for each character to assert his or her agency, even though the vehicle for the agency is another person's words. Milla's voice resides at the center, but it is often colored with Agaat's tone. So, a type of revision occurs as Agaat recounts the lives of the De Wets. Hearing this family history revoiced, as it were, causes Milla to re-vision her past relationships afresh. Replaying the past in this way serves as a kind of purgatory as Milla comes to terms with her own mortality. In a recent interview, van Niekerk describes her protagonist: "Milla, remember, is busy negotiating for herself the psychologically most comfortable position from which to cross the threshold to death. So she needs hope, she needs a place of resolution in order to breathe her last in peace" (Pienaar). She seeks a sense of closure with her servant, and only companion, but cannot accomplish this reconciliation in her incapacitated condition. Van Niekerk highlights Milla's shame, as well as her stubbornness, as the former "master of her domain" loses complete control over her body, and, eventually, her place in the world.

The Dissolution of the Afrikaner Ideology: Van Niekerk's New *Plaasroman*

A number of classic pastoral South African novels, known as *plaasromans*, position the farm as the defining site for Afrikaner characters; their personal advancements or downfalls hinge on agricultural success. As J. M. Coetzee observes in *White Writing* (1988), "the Afrikaans novel concerns itself almost exclusively with the farm and *platteland* (rural) society, with the Afrikaner's painful transition from farmer to townsman" (63). The *plaasroman* captures the pride of the Afrikaner farmer, as well as his very real fear of losing control of his world. Coetzee continues, "Pastoral has been a prominent strain in their writing, and never more so than in the 1930's, when, fearing the end of a *boer-nasie* (nation of farmers), Afrikaans novelists elaborated models of the garden-farm as bastion of trusted feudal values" (4). The genre reflects the Afrikaner's imaginary sense of his rootedness in South Africa as a self-sufficient, rural inhabitant, whose success depends on domination over a piece of land. Nevertheless, *plaasromans* written during the crumbling and eventual disintegration of apartheid project the myth of Afrikaner stability, as opposed to an actual representation of a South African farmer's daily life.

Coetzee's *White Writing* critiques the same ideals that classic *plaasroman* authors celebrated. Commenting on the works of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, C.M. van den Heever, and Sarah Gertrude Millin, Coetzee shows that these authors follow generic conventions by portraying the connection between the Afrikaner and his or her plot of land; however, he shows how these authors each subverts the traditional *plaasroman* by converting the farm from a mere setting to a symbolic locale, an entity inseparable from

the actual farmer. Specifically, he notes that Smith's work centers on a need for social stability, while van den Heever focuses more on mythology of the Afrikaner farmer and the notion of generational ownership of land. Like many scholars, Coetzee criticizes Millin's novel, *God's Stepchildren* (1924), in which the insular farm setting creates prime conditions for miscegenation. Coetzee's novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), written under apartheid sanctions, provides one of the most studied works in the *plaasroman* genre. In it, Coetzee investigates the Immorality Act and the personal horror generated when a government criminalizes sexual relations between races and labels it miscegenation. Because of its central theme, which questioned the motives of the Immorality Act, the book pushed color lines during an era when Afrikaner ideas of unity and brotherhood became assimilated into the National Party's ideology of white supremacy (Wittenberg 135).

Van Niekerk builds on Coetzee's revision of the *plaasroman.* While she sets her story on a farm that has been in one Afrikaner's family for generations, she foregrounds the instability inherent to the Afrikaner's ideology of domination during apartheid. She implies that the *plaasroman* not only upholds assumptions of white supremacy, but that the genre also serves as a justification for the behaviors of those in power positions. In a clever nod to older *plaasromans*, van Niekerk references Milla's stack of books during the opening chapter. In her collection resides several well-known *plaasromans*, including Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, though Milla's narration points to her preference for Schreiner's more traditional storytelling over Coetzee's metafictional critique. The older entries in her collection, which Agaat often reads aloud to her mistress, contain the long-standing hierarchies of

the African farm, ideologies that endorsed Milla's family right to rule *Grootmoedersdrift* without challenge. One of the myths enacted in the *plaasroman* is that the white farmer's sheer will and muscle enables him to carve his farm out of scrubland and force it to yield its fertility, almost single-handedly, despite the historical reality of servant and slave labor.[4] Their work and domestic impact remains hidden in the classic form of the genre. Van Niekerk's revision of the *plaasroman*, however, calls attention to this historical omission when she ushers the often hidden black servant into the light.

Through Agaat's control of Milla's story, van Niekerk not only provides a servant's perspective during apartheid, but also stresses Agaat's influence over the farm and family. She chooses the entries to read, and the tone of voice by which she will present them to her mistress. Agaat's first recitation describes Milla and Jak's engagement, which Agaat chooses as the "starting point" for her re-telling of the de Wets's history. She states, "Then was different. Then you were a winner. Was there love? Enough for a start, you thought" (22). Agaat hints at the slow disintegration of Milla's domain that begins the moment that she meets Jak. Agaat highlights, even questions, the sanctimony of the de Wets's marriage. Van Niekerk's narrative palimpsest points to Agaat's empowerment, one that strengthens as Milla's ability to communicate dwindles. As Milla grows more incapacitated, Agaat's critical version of the story becomes clearer.

One of the elements of Agaat's agency manifests in her mothering of Jakkie, a relationship that blossoms in Agaat's eyes, but grows out of control according to his

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[4] Coetzee notes that Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883), even though it is considered an important feminist work, still upholds the patriarchal order of the *plaasroman*—the white Afrikaner male wields inherited, unrestrained dominion over all other inhabitants of the land. Most important to my discussion is his assumption that this power also dictates the lives of black servants, which "tend not to be visible" in Schreiner's novel (69).

parents, Milla and Jak. By the novel's completion, she assumes total control over the farm and her mistress. This move, sanctioned by Milla, coincides with the narrative's timeframe and represents van Niekerk's most striking revision to the genre. The novel works on an allegorical level as the de Wets's loss of control coincides with Agaat's inheritance of agency; the narrative operates as a reflection of the tensions felt in South Africa during the years leading up to Mandela's election. Furthermore, van Niekerk infuses a sense of shame into her *plaasroman* narrative, an emotion shared by white and black characters as they move into a new, ideally serene, era in their homeland. The novel holds a "privileged," yet tortured, Afrikaner at the heart of the story, which encourages the reader to abhor the Afrikaner belief of superiority while simultaneously sympathizing with damage that this mentality inflicts on the character.

Destabilizing Afrikaner Gender Roles: the *Volksmoeder* and *Baas*

The South African *plaasroman* traditionally focuses on the white Afrikaner farmer and the family that owns and develops a plot of land; van Niekerk's novel, on one level, fits this characteristic. The narrative centers on Milla, a woman who, after her marriage to an inexperienced farmer, inherits property passed down to her by her mother. The tract of land, significantly named *Grootmoedersdrift,* becomes the novel's symbolic locus. The property, which roughly translates to "grandmother's land," establishes an important theme—the passing of land from mother to daughter. Van Niekerk's choice to highlight the mother/daughter relationship, especially in regards to land ownership, initiates a departure from the system of patriarchy upheld in the classic *plaasroman.* The birth of Jak and Milla's only son, Jakkie, situates the family in a position to fulfill the

Afrikaner dream of securing ownership of the land for another generation. Ultimately, his birth serves as the primary source of conflict between the couple. As Jakkie enters manhood, he joins the South African Air Force but, eventually, becomes politically disaffected. Sick of the never ceasing feud between his parents, and with no desire to secure the Afrikaner dream of domination, he deserts the army and flees the country. We later see that his decision to repudiate Afrikaner nationalism, as well as his own family, has been shaped by Agaat.

The Way of the Women challenges *plaasroman* conventions by investigating the impact of apartheid policy on the African farm. Van Niekerk alludes to specific dates that shaped South Africa and frames her narrative within the particularly turbulent years between 1954 and 1996. During this time, the National Party's apartheid politics came under fire and, eventually, dissolved.[5] One date, in particular, lingers in the background of the novel—December 1947. The date signals the beginning of apartheid policy in the country, which intertwined the long-standing colonial reliance on white supremacy into legislation.[6] It also coincides with Milla and Jak's wedding day. By referencing this historical event in the center of the story, van Niekerk allows both apartheid and Milla's marriage to act as forces that shape *Grootmoedersdrift* through several decades. Milla must confront the significance of these events and does so at multiple points in her life. Van Niekerk tangles the political and the personal in her allegory as a means to

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[5] As she did in *Triomf*, van Niekerk folds essential South African dates into her fictional narrative. In her first novel, Lambert's fortieth birthday coincides with the 1994 election, which functions as an apocalyptic countdown for the family. The Benades fear the uncertainty of a desegregated, free South Africa on this date, and ultimately experience the downfall of their family as Lambert kills his father.

[6] *Triomf's* narrative builds to 1994 and tragically crescendos on that date.

investigate the overreaching effects of apartheid as it restructured the lives of all South Africans.

Van Niekerk looks at the unbalanced power dynamic that resides at the heart of the *plaasroman*, a genre that places the male Afrikaner farmer at the top of his farm's hierarchy. This positioning propagates the myth that the male farm owner should not only oversee all daily operations, but that his relationship to the land should also signify something deeper. This *baas* should take the plot of ground as his wife, which locks him into a life of agricultural dedication and honor (Coetzee 7). After his marriage to Milla, Jak de Wet comes to embody Prime Minister Daniel Francoiş Malan's assertion of white dominance in both agriculture and industry; Jak assumes the role of *baas*, and his identity thereafter draws its authority from this Afrikaner concept. Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography, notes the significance of the *baaskap*: "Their [the National Party] platform rested on the term *baaskap*, literally boss-ship, a freighted word that stood for white supremacy in all its harshness" (97). On *Grootmoedersdrift*, however, Jak finds that the expectations of the *baas* are difficult to fulfill, at least without continuous friction from both his family and servants.

Jak, a character defined in earlier chapters as self-conscious and unsure of his agricultural abilities, tries to comfortably inhabit this new, dominant position that apartheid ideology confers on its white males. Van Niekerk presents a man obsessed with his outward appearance, one focused on convincing his peers of his solid footing as master of *Grootmoedersdrift*. She also highlights his focus on materialism and superficial symbols of agricultural success. She writes, "Their eyelids fluttered at the sight of Jak's new cars and lorries and implements and innovations, his imported stud bulls and rams"

(95). Jak revolts against older, "uncivilized" notions of farming; his maneuver to utilize imported goods suggests a preference for Western technology, and it serves as a way for him to overwrite any previous native agricultural touchstones of the region. Van Niekerk departs from the *plaasroman baas* as Jak's superficial and materialistic motivations fail to encompass the mythical Afrikaner male and his unbreakable marriage to his *platteland.*[7] Van Niekerk points to Jak's misconceptions, and ultimate failure, concerning his role as master and husband; she begins to destabilize the tenets of the *plaasroman.* Since he supposedly represents the unshakable foundation of the farm, the complete disintegration, and later reestablishment, of *Grootmoedersdrift* makes sense.

If, in the novel, Jak embodies the figure of the *baas*, then Milla enacts the complementary role of *volksmoeder*—the mother of the nation. This label, created by Afrikaner men, marks a paradox for the Afrikaner woman. McClintock asserts, "On one hand, it recognizes the power of (white motherhood; on the other hand, it is a retrospective iconography of gender containment, containing women's mutinous power within an iconography of domestic service" (378). The *volksmoeder* must sacrifice her own happiness in order to fulfill successfully a role consisting of both national and domestic responsibilities. Van Niekerk provides a twist to the prevalent archetype of the docile housewife, however. Early in the novel, it becomes apparent that Milla not only knows more about farming than her husband, but that she also fights to preserve some

[7] Van Niekerk's description of the de Wet's dominion over Grootmoedersdrift parallels South African policy under Prime Minister D. F. Malan. Legislation such as the Population Registration Act (1950) and the Group Areas Act (1950) took hold and combined with the existing Land Act (1913) and Natives Urban Areas Act (1923) , thus laying the groundwork for the Apartheid Era (Beck 113, 127). These stringent laws carved up South African soil, and assured that Afrikaners would have the ability to mark and name the majority of locations in the region.

semblance of ecological balance. During a dinner party with local farm owners, Milla eloquently argues against newer methods of farming that do not rely upon the natural rhythms of nature. Upon their return home, a drunken Jak screams, "What gives you the idea that you can sit and preach to farmers on how to cultivate their lands? How am I supposed to show my face ever again at the fertilizer company?" (103). Throughout the novel, Jak revolts against her attempted domination. He views her strength, which ironically serves as an essential characteristic of the *volksmoeder*, as a threat to his influence over *Grootmoedersdrift*, which shapes their occasionally violent, and always cold, relationship.

Because of the contradictory nature of the *volksmoeder's* expectations, Milla fights pressures on all sides—the domestic expectation to be a faithful wife, a manager of her servants, and the mother of a nation. These duties weigh on Milla, and her inability to fully embody this role points to an inherent problem of the *volksmoeder* ideal—the impossibility of any woman living up to these responsibilities. Not only must she support the National Party, a group founded on white, patriarchal power, but she also has to submit to that same type of power, in the form of Jak, at home. According to the *volksmoeder* ideal, she must know her place and stand by her husband, a dutiful Afrikaner boer woman serving a system that will eventually lead to the culture's progress—albeit, for Afrikaners. The days leading up to Milla and Jak's wedding present a dilemma for the bride—instead of focusing on her "big day" and cherishing all of its ceremony, she must clean, organize, apply new coats of paint, and insure that every inch of *Grootmoedersdrift* meets Jak's standards of appearance. As Jak inspects his domain, however, he first lays hands on Milla violently. The trauma of Milla's induction into a

wife's subordinated status is retold as Agaat reads the journal, but she recounts the violence using the accusatory second person pronoun—"It happened. The day before the wedding. Dragged you by the hair across the back stoep of the homestead…Pushed and shoved you in the chest so that you fell on the cement. Left you lying just there and walked away" (42). Milla's stoic response to Jak's violence typifies the *volksmoeder*, as she quietly sews sleeves on her wedding dress to cover up the fresh bruises, the evidence of Jak's abuse. She learns early in their relationship that she must physically endure his anger and insecurity, yet she must stand strong in her Afrikaner role. Her existence, therefore, is one based on presumed sacrifice, and this event signifies the beginning of an unhappy, abusive marriage between the two. On the surface, Milla's submission appears to conform to the idealized behavior of the *volksmoeder* and follow the gender stereotypes reinforced in the classic *plaasroman* tradition, but her shifting position as the narrative unfolds shows van Niekerk's diversion from its conventions.

Although, at first glance, Van Niekerk's depiction of the wedding night seems to reiterate Milla's position as *volksmoeder*, who sacrifices herself in the name of national and domestic duty, this first sexual encounter is fraught with apprehension, discomfort, and disconnectedness. Although Milla feels the rush of passion when they begin intercourse, but Jak's roughness quickly makes her defensive. Agaat narrates, "You were dismayed. You thought, no, not like this, but you gathered yourself into yourself. From the inside you protected yourself while he drove home his will" (43). After they finish, Jak turns his back to his new bride and remarks, "You're a *boer* woman, aren't you? Now you're well broken-in. A little crash course. Don't be so namby pamby. What did your mother say? An Afrikaner woman makes her way in silence and forbearance" (43). Jak,

the *baas*, expresses his expectations in terms of a gender subordination that even Afrikaner women endorse, a subservience required in the face of this intimidation and physical domination. Milla's life, according to her husband, will be one of devoid of voice—a detail that van Niekerk highlights through her protagonist's eventual loss of speech.

Jakkie, the supposed successor to his father and next *baas* of *Grootmoedersdrift*, is conceived in this oft violent, unsettled environment. Van Niekerk appropriately selects 1960, a pivotal year for Jakkie's birth. During this time, Afrikaner nationalism was thriving under Hendrik Verwoerd, the so-called "chief architect" of apartheid, who successfully broke ties with Great Britain and established a republic based on racial segregation (Beck 146).[8] Jakkie's development as an individual rests primarily on two individuals, Milla and Agaat, though Agaat proves to be more of a mother than Milla almost from the time of his birth. Jak's influence as a parent appears minimal, especially during Jakkie's childhood years, so his conception of racial categories and their implications develops as he observes the inner workings of his parents' farm. He witnesses the interactions between black workers and his father, their *baas*. But his proximity to his mother and Agaat seems to determine Jakkie's conception of race, as his ideology aligns more closely with the ANC's than the Afrikaner-led National Party. Jakkie's relationship with his mother and Agaat appears straightforward on the surface—Milla occupies the position of the lady of the house, and Agaat is her servant. As the novel progresses, however, van Niekerk highlights the multilayered nature of their

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[8] Also at this time, Nelson Mandela, as well as other ANC members, formed the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation). The group created an underground army intended to counteract Verwoerd's increasingly violent maneuvers (Beck 144).

existence together. As they nurture a child that signifies the end of the patriarchal power structure on their land, one of the *plaasroman's* defining motifs falls apart.

In peeling back of the myth of the *baas* and *volksmoeder*, van Niekerk investigates the domestic complications that arise when a white child realizes the racial inequalities that exist in the home and, ultimately, in society. Though as a grown young man, Jakkie serves in the South African Air Force for several years, he returns home in 1985 seeming less like a Nationalist, and more like a dissident. After his father berates him for turning his back on his country, and subsequently blames Agaat for turning him into a weak traitor, Jakkie forfeits the authoritative role he stood to inherit. Agaat, not Milla, receives Jak's fury because she did, in fact, make him the man standing before his father. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* examines the formation of racial identity in the construct of the master-servant relationship. She pays attention to the rearing and development of children in the presence this power-based arrangement. During apartheid, color-based disparities became part of accepted national law. McClintock comments that, "White children—nursed, tended, caressed and punished by black maids and nurses—receive the memory of black women's power as an ambiguous heritage" (270). Her work points to the dissonance inherent in such child-rearing under a racist regime. In infancy, the child would have no choice but to bond with the woman who provides comfort and nourishment. Infants live in a world devoid of class-consciousness and racial awareness; such distinctions develop as children witness the behaviors of individuals within their social sphere. McClintock argues that these early experiences generate more than some temporary childhood fondness for the household help. Rather, the white child's identity

becomes predicated on the servant's subjugated presence in the home. Agaat proves to be more than an influence in the life of a young Afrikaner boy.

Van Niekerk's Elevation of Agaat: The Servant in the new *Plaasroman*

Van Niekerk pulls apart and realigns the role of black servant in ways similar to her treatment of the *baas* and *volksmoeder* categories. She briefly introduces characters that seem typical using *plaasroman* conventions, only to break them down in order to show the fallacies of their traditional representations and the ideologies that they typify. In the novel, Agaat is anything but a typical servant, in charge of tending to cooking, cleaning, and childcare; Agaat provides a center for a family with a cracked foundation. The *plaasroman* does not authentically portray the dynamics of farm domesticity because the servant's impact is hidden from the reader's view. Through Agaat's development, however, van Niekerk revises a genre upheld by the premise that only white characters need to be fleshed out. Coetzee writes, "Silence about the place of slave labour is common not only to Schreiner and Smith but, by and large, to the Afrikaans *plaasroman*, and represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll (or in Schreiner's case the anti-idyll) of African pastoralism" (71). Van Niekerk's work can be read as a response to Schreiner, whose black characters, when given space on a page, do little more than function as scenery (Coetzee 65). The construction of a servant's voice, especially one that rings louder than that of her mistress, points to the most striking evolution of van Niekerk's pastoral fiction.

Agaat's narrative presence creates a second perspective, as well as a reinterpretation, of the apartheid years and its effect on the daily lives of the de Wets. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) looks at the problem of representation for the black, colonized female. She writes, "In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege" (91). Spivak argues that Western scholars often construct the occluded consciousness of the subaltern woman, which blocks her ability to represent herself. Van Niekerk's narrative approach denies Agaat even the most rudimentary dialogue, yet Agaat's physical voice shapes the narrative. While Milla's journal provides most of the novel's plot points, Agaat's voice brings these scenes into the present, and her sadness, mixed with her mistress's regret, generates the novel's most heart-wrenching scenes. Their memories bring them together, as they both relive their experiences simultaneously through Agaat's reading, though the narrative, now *her* narrative, reveals a multilayered palimpsest. They both suffer through several of the same experiences, but each feels pain for different reasons. As Milla's life winds down, Agaat ensures that her revision of their life together stands as the definitive story.

Van Niekerk's approach differs from many classic South African novelists, specifically Schreiner and Smith, in that she not only provides a voice for a black character, but she eventually allows this character to move to the center of the story. Coetzee reveals the glaring problem of this missing perspective:

> The black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal. In more ways than one the logic of the

> pastoral mode itself thus makes the incorporation of the black man—that is, of the black serf, man, woman, or child—into the larger picture embarrassing and difficult. For how can the farm become the pastoral retreat of the black man when it was his pastoral home only a generation or two ago? (5)

This occlusion closely coincides with guilt; it is easier to move injustice to a dark corner, rather than allowing it to influence the primary narrative. Coetzee continues, "A hut on the white man's farm can be proposed as the just and proper place for the black man only as long as it can be argued that it is a step up from a hut in the wilderness" (5). The classic *plaasroman* provides an alibi of sorts for the oppression generated by apartheid—black characters are portrayed as living better lives under the National Party. Van Niekerk retains this aspect of the genre through Milla, as she rescues of Agaat, yet diverges from apartheid's blatant lie regarding the dream of separate development. Milla takes Agaat as her daughter in the years before Jakkie's birth, a bond that later dissolves.

The occluded servant in the classic *plaasroman* still tells a story; the character's silence calls attention to a missing aspect of the Afrikaner household. The farm cannot operate without unfair labor, so the servant exerts influence on both the industrial and social environment. Van Niekerk ends this occlusion.[9] Agaat's existence would have been limited to a shadowy presence had Milla not intervened. Her family's hut officially stands on *Grootmoedersdrift*, yet the de Wet's regard it as an undesirable necessity. Or, more to the point, the family does not regard the hut at all; it exists, but only as an entity

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[9] Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Formation of the Public Sphere* (1962) defines public and private spaces in a way that still relates to modern literary discussions on this topic. He observes the dynamic of the master and slave relationship: "The reproduction of life, the labor of the slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master's domination; birth and death took place in its shadow; and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere" (3).

that contributes to the farm. Milla plays a protective role in Agaat's life; she rescued her from the squalor of a filthy shack located on the outskirts of *Grootmoedersdrift*. She raises Agaat, and temporarily elevates her status to *daughter*—a move that causes much strain on the family later. As the narrative proceeds, however, the mother/daughter relationship dissolves, and it later reforms into something entirely new. Van Niekerk provides a situation in which the master and servant not only switch places, but also find themselves in a symbiotic relationship founded through salvation seemingly nonexistent in the classic South African novel.

Van Niekerk, albeit briefly, shines light on this previously hidden part of the South African farm. So, under the guise of protection, the colonizer protects natives, especially women. Spivak writes, "The protection of woman becomes a signifier for the establishment of a *good* society which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality, or equity of legal policy" (94). Although Spivak focuses on the colonial myth that the white male acts as the savior for non-white females, her point resonates in *The Way of the Women*. Van Niekerk substitutes a woman, Milla, as the protector in this case. Milla and Agaat's relationship was born in a moment of salvation, as Milla removes Agaat from a life of poverty and an abjectivity. Therefore, their bond was born of inequality—a fact that Agaat understands. Under the forces of colonization, even after Milla's intervention, Agaat's ability to speak, to represent herself, is stifled.

As the novel winds down, we see that regret and shame define van Niekerk's new *plaasroman*, two emotions spawned by Milla's bedside confrontation with Agaat. Again, narrative structure is key. By forcing Milla into the uncomfortable position of hearing the defining moments in her life in the voice of the person whom she hurt the most, Agaat's

revision of their history becomes the dominant narrative in this palimpsest. In one of her final lucid moments, Milla agonizes over her decisions regarding her lifelong companion. Although she spared Agaat a life of cruel poverty, she forced her into an unsettled existence, one without independence. She reflects,

> Oh, my little Agaat, my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I'd appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I'd unlocked her! Why did I not keep you as I found you? What made me abduct you over the pass? What made me steal you from beyond the rugged mountains? Why can I only be with you like this, in a fantasy of my own death? Why only now love you with this inexpressible regret? (485)

In a sense, Milla adopted Agaat as her own child, assimilating her into the ways of the Afrikaner farmer. While the classic *plaasroman* suggests that blacks are better off when whites interfere and intervene, van Niekerk highlights the intense regret that accompanies the oppressive assimilation process. It would be incorrect to argue that the majority of Afrikaners experienced this emotion—that assumption is impossible to prove. Rather, van Niekerk uncovers a buried sentiment, however small, that shaped Afrikaner households, especially ones in which black servants played a role. Milla understands that she rescued Agaat from a life of utter neglect, yet she still questions her approach to Agaat's socialization. Her role in Agaat's life overwrote Agaat's African heritage, as Milla did not simply act as a mother figure, but as a teacher, as well.

Milla also plays the role of missionary with Agaat, making the "natural" choice to baptize the young girl. Religious education, oftentimes through missionary work, represents a particularly shaping force in assimilation. Faith-based ideals reside at the

heart of culture; colonizers naturally emphasize the erasure and overwriting of these beliefs, in order to ensure the appearance of a dominant national religion. Milla's diary reads: "Now that the soul is awakening in her and she's outgrown the terrors of her origins, at least in body (weight and height normal for the first time now), it's time for Agaat to be baptized" (505). While Agaat's origins are unquestionably horrific, Milla's assumption that Agaat's soul can only flourish with the aid of the Dutch Reformed Church signifies the exact problem of missionary work—it can be an excellent vehicle for "saving" poverty-stricken natives, but the process also shatters an existing belief system. Agaat must now face a new terror—standing in front of a white minister to have her goodness verified. Van Niekerk's *plaasroman* unveils the pain and confusion of the black servant, an experience that classic pastoral writers might have masked under the guise of Agaat being "better off."

By taking the reader a few miles from *Grootmoedersdrift* and out of the private domain, van Niekerk highlights the new set of pressures that weigh on young Agaat. Her struggle to understand her place on the farm pales in comparison to her sense of belonging in the public domain. Her place in the world depends on when and where she stands at a given moment in time. Van Niekerk observes this slipperiness of identity, as Agaat must shift from daughter to servant and back again under the de Wets' roof. Barnard marks the distinction between place and space in *Apartheid and Beyond*, asserting that space is the "more inclusive and abstract term," and place "as the more particular and qualitive term, referring to geographically situated locales" (9). In the novel, Agaat often finds herself in places that leave her sense of self in limbo. The baptism scene, a moment that occurs inside of a public structure (a church) teaches young

Agaat that her dark skin separates her from the normalcy of South African life. The religious confirmation of a black servant most likely would not have occurred in the public sphere, so van Niekerk accurately depicts the ceremony as a private "favor" to Milla that is upheld by the church. A sense of wrongdoing pervades the entire ceremony, beginning with Agaat's own reaction to being saved. Milla records, "Nightmares and bedwetting last night. Agaat says she doesn't want to be baptized. I say she must, otherwise she'll burn in the devil's fiery hell. She asks who's the devil, does he have bellows, she says she knows fires, she'd rather burn, she's not scared" (506). Agaat fears this unknown afterlife, as well as the thought of standing in a white church where none of her family members would be allowed to enter. On some level, Milla's actions ring noble and sincere—she sees goodness in this human being regardless of racial implications and apartheid policy. Yet, Milla's own words carry on the ideology that fuels colonization as she plays the missionary who overwrites any native religious concepts with a "true," Christian foundation.

The nurturing, motherly attention that Agaat receives from Milla proves to be temporary, as Jakkie's birth starts a new era in the household. Milla's project to transform a native girl into a family member ends the second *Grootmoedersdrift* has a male heir. The de Wets groom little Jakkie with the same education that Agaat received, which seems all for naught as Agaat is demoted to a new role in the house. Though Milla spent years assimilating Agaat to the Afrikaner ways, even to the point where Agaat slept under the same roof as the *baas* and mistress, she refers to Agaat as her "brave little servant" (180) in her first journal entry after her delivery. During this flashback, van Niekerk's narrative approach allows the reader to picture Agaat standing over her now bedridden

mistress as this painful piece of their history replays. Spivak continues, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 83). Van Niekerk creates a context for Agaat, as Milla recollects and reconsiders the de Wets's history, especially those memories regarding Agaat's role in her life. I argue that Agaat speaks throughout the novel, though it is in the form of an interpretation of Milla's words and ideas. Agaat reminds Milla that she accepted her as a daughter and cruelly repelled her to her expected place as a servant, and the resulting discomfort points to Agaat's agency in the narrative. She exerts a tone on Milla's history, which generates a divergent narrative that forces Milla to confront her own life and its consequences for Agaat.

Agaat's reaction to being "put in her place" manifests as she asserts a motherly influence over Jakkie. Agaat's third-person narration closes the novel, and her intentions become clearer: "And he grew up on her breast and she washed him when he was dirty and gave him milk when he was thirsty and rubbed his tummy when he had winds and cooled his forehead when he had fever. I am a slave but You-are-mine, she always whispered in his ear before she handed him over to his mother" (619). Agaat's decision to take responsibility for the household chores expected of a servant, while tending to the emotional aspects of a mother, points to a carving out of her own place. Agaat responds to the slippage from daughter to servant by "stealing" Jakkie from Milla, an occurrence that on some level happened inevitably given the intimacy of the "nanny/child" relationship but was accelerated by Agaat's determination to bond with the child. Discomfort and discord color the closing pages of the novel—feelings that exist for the characters, as well as the reader. Agaat mothers her now dying mistress, to whom she

owes her life. And Milla must look helplessly into the eyes of her servant, whom she betrayed the moment she gave birth to the Jakkie, the male heir to the farm. We watch Agaat struggle to exist in a system that simply cannot function as a family. Yet, it is all that she knows.

Milla's guilt for this child-substitution surfaces on her deathbed. In her dying stream of consciousness, one final image remains: "in my overberg over the bent world brooding in my hand the hand of small agaat" (604). Milla writes off most of Agaat's struggles with assimilation and servitude as an unavoidable byproduct of being "saved" by the Afrikaner ways. But here we see that the image of Milla holding small Agaat's hand, clearly a flashback to their mother/daughter relationship, will serve as her final thought in her life. Van Niekerk does not use the terms guilt or regret here, but she does not have to. The rhetoric of the new South Africa presently magnifies the repressed shame of the oppressors. Cyril Ramaphosa, Chief Negotiator during the meetings between Mandela and de Klerk from 1991-1993, speaks about the damage to the Afrikaner during apartheid: "They also needed to be free from this prison that history had locked them into" (*Miracle Rising*). Milla's remembrance of the child Agaat serves as her release from the immense weight of these emotions. Van Niekerk uses her death as a healing force, a moment of final reflection, and a time for the two to move toward reconciliation. Her entitlement to land, to power over her servant, and to white privilege, finally fades, severing her final tie to the *volksmoeder* trope.

Jak's worst fears are fulfilled when Jakkie decides to pass the farm on to Agaat. This decision to surrender ownership of the land to a person of color revises the traditional *plaasroman*, as many of these novels focus on the land as patrimony, passing

down from white father to white son. The young man, raised by a mother entrenched in the old, Afrikaner ways, and a father obsessed with only superficial notions of his duties as *baas*, turns his back these racist and misogynistic myths. In the *plaasroman*, the farm functions as a place for white men to dominate through several generations; a plot of land provides the stage for their mythological superiority to exist. As the male heir to Milla's will, Jakkie makes the final decision regarding *Grootmoedersdrift* and its future. His decision to deed the farm to Agaat signals a changing mentality among some white, male land owners. He reflects,

> At least my will has been lodged with the attorney in Swellendam, the farm made over to Agaat. She can bequeath it one day to whomever she wants. Is man enough, will battle through the rest. She's part of the place, from the beginning. Calloused, salted, brayed, the lessons of the masters engraved in her like the law on the tablets of stone, deeper and clearer than I could ever preserve it. She knows the soil. She knows the language. *She knows her place* (emphasis added). (611)

One must wonder if Agaat does, in fact, know where she stands at the novel's conclusion. Her progression from adopted daughter, servant, nanny, mother, and now, *baas,* highlights an inherent problem of apartheid's goal—its unwavering focus on stability through categorization. The resulting family dynamic, it seems, instead exudes paranoia and instability. Now, Agaat inherits a place that should lead to her independence, but also serves as her burden. The very ground on which she stands, though now in her possession, has been groomed by generations of a system founded on racial exclusion. As Barnard argues, the ability of the colonized to tell new stories and carve out a place in society is particularly difficult because they must do so on ground cultivated and named

by the colonizer (4). Agaat's future success depends upon her ability to promote change in a place historically maintained through white privilege.

Van Niekerk reinvents the *plaasroman* to challenge classic South African gender roles, categories created with patriarchal control as the norm, with Milla and Agaat, two strong female characters who eventually control the daily functions of the farm, and, eventually, who determine its fate for future generations after Jak's death. His suicidal rage after Jakkie flees South Africa, as well as the daunting expectations of his father, signifies Jak's own failure as a father and husband, and, by extension, points to the futility in the National Party's apartheid politics in its attempt to promote stability through white, male dominance. Jak's violent car accident parallels the brutal upheaval that accompanied South Africa's transformation. Jakkie refuses to accept the lie of white supremacy, and he understands that the mentality represents an older, dying way of life in his homeland. Susan Hawthorne points to a historical male desire to maintain control in colonial situations, and to create and to maintain a cyclical apparatus of power. [10] Van Niekerk responds to this system by representing its implosion. Milla breaks out of the confines of the *volksmoeder* as the narrative develops; she not only outlives her husband, but her decision, one that Jak frequently tried to overturn, to adopt Agaat changes the landscape of *Grootmoedersdrift* in more dramatic ways than Jak could conceive. Jakkie bows out of his "ensured" authority as *baas* by the novel's conclusion, and he signs the rights to the farm over to Agaat, making the coloured servant her mistress's successor.

[10] Susan Hawthorne writes in *Wild Politics*, "Men have developed a culture which is self-sustaining and which is carefully passed on vertically and horizontally—across generations and across cultures—to other men" (105).

Conclusion

Van Niekerk's post-apartheid *plaasroman* shatters the Afrikaner dream of domination in South Africa that underwrote the more traditional renditions of this genre. Whereas the classic farm novel captures the fear of losing control over the land, her version focuses on the personal turmoil created when one regrets the past but still struggles with the loss of a previously established system of power. The protagonist seeks reconciliation before her death, but she does not have the verbal ability to ask for forgiveness. So, Milla's life ends without an official acknowledgement from Agaat, leaving their relationship at an unresolved conclusion. Yet, we see an evolution of the inhabitants of this piece of land. At the novel's conclusion, both Jak and Milla have died and Jakkie has abandoned *Grootmoedersdrift*. Any sense of patriarchal influence, the most powerful weapon of colonialism, fades away, leaving Agaat to control the destiny of the land. The focus on Agaat in the closing pages points to a slow dissolution of the old ways in South African literature. Agaat's newfound ownership of land—a symbol of apartheid's failure—does not suggest a smooth transition into a new era. Instead, Agaat faces an era of uncertainty, a time in which the personal and political depravities of the past must be confronted by those hoping to progress. Van Niekerk opts to avoid ending the novel with the comforting closure of reconciliation for Milla, but provides something more substantial than sentimentality as she layers Agaat's story on top of Milla's, and sets up a new beginning on Agaat's *Grootmoedersdrift*.

"Reconciliation through Transportation in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*"

"For me, growing up coloured meant knowing that I was not only white, but less than white: not only black, but better than black" (Adhikari 10).

Introduction

Apartheid forced South Africans into arbitrary, unnatural racial categories that determined practically every aspect of an individual's life: where one lived, career and educational opportunities, and even social acquaintances. Skin color became the determinate for social status and mobility; the lighter one's skin color, the better one's prospects; but, no matter how light-complexioned a person might be, one could not access the advantages of whiteness if one were not classified "white" according to the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962. As the epigraph suggests, in a hierarchy that attempts to classify the individual in terms of white and non-white, those who were categorized as "coloured" or "mixed-race," occupied a particularly precarious position. Their racial hybridity and subsequently diversified skin color ensured that coloured people found themselves both courted as natural allies and marginalized by the government. As Mohamed Adhikari comments, coloured citizens were "distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population" (2). In her novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006), Zoë Wicomb explores the personal trauma and political uncertainty that attended those light-skinned citizens who

chose to pass as white during apartheid (though not every coloured person who might have been able to pass as white chose to do so).

In a recent interview, Wicomb spoke of the domestic turbulence that accompanied the coloured experience under apartheid: "The newspapers were always full of stories about abandoned children found tied up or living under the bed because their families were ashamed of them on account of the colour of their skin" ("A Writer of Rare Brilliance"). Even within the walls of one's own home, the shame associated with the National Party's idea of racial "impurity" drove family members apart, both emotionally, and, on occasion, literally. Wicomb captures this familial tension in *Playing in the Light*, and she shows the sadness and regret generated when family members try to bury their heritage in order to gain access to the artificial, yet privileged, white category. These emotions, though they remain repressed for many years, surface as Wicomb's protagonist, Marion Campbell, tries to find her place in the "Rainbow Nation." The novel considers the ramifications of South African history, as Wicomb flashes back to her heroine's childhood years during apartheid, an era that may have ended in 1994, but still shapes the ways in which people of different races interact. Instead of interpersonal relations grounded in acceptance and camaraderie, Wicomb highlights the misunderstandings inherent to everyday interaction in contemporary South Africa. Decisions made years ago by her parents shape Marion's current stance on race, which parallels the ways in which apartheid's institutionalized racial inequality still influences the country's personal, as well as professional, relationships.

Along with her investigation of the damaged race relations, Wicomb's work ponders the ways in which one's place in the world is contingent on geography and

history. Barnard asserts, "History always *takes place*, as Said suggest, and nowhere is the question of land, of territory and power, as pertinent and contested as in the long and continuing history of imperialism" (5). Wicomb's writing reflects the tension spawned from the claiming, naming, and re-naming of land in South Africa. Born and raised in the desert region of Namaqualand, South Africa, and educated in Cape Town, Wicomb has also lived in Nottingham, England, and Glasgow, Scotland. Though she is known as a South African writer, she fled the country during the height of apartheid in the 1960's in order to escape the oppressive environment ("A Writer of Rare Brilliance"). For her, travel stemmed out of necessity, and opened opportunities to succeed as a writer and educator, that, as a coloured woman, she most likely would have been denied in her homeland. Her work reflects the interpenetration of race and place, as she points to the precariousness of a coloured person's existence somewhere in-between black and white.

Of the three novels on which this thesis focuses, Wicomb's contains the most movement by her characters. Van Niekerk's plot transpires almost entirely on the farm *Grootmoedersdrift*, and Kopano Matlwa's novel seems even more geographically constrained as it unfolds inside the walls of a private school. Although the wider world impinges in profound ways in *The Way of the Women* and *Spilt Milk*, the characters themselves are not particularly mobile. In contrast, travel and transportation, especially toward the conclusion of Wicomb's novel, take place literally and symbolically for the hitherto place-bound travel agent as she takes her first steps toward a personal revelation. Travel opens the door for Marion to confront various faces from her family's past, and shows that one must cross man-made borders in order make sense of one's place in a country where names on a map may change at any moment.

Travel as a metaphor for Marion's search for a repressed racial identity seems apt when we consider the complicated boundary lines that exist in the region. As Sarah Nuttall remarks, "South Africa can be characterised as a country born out of processes of mobility, the boundaries of which have constantly been reinvented over time, through war, dislocation and dispossession" (735). Wicomb pulls in specific events in South African history that illuminate Nutall's argument that the region has been defined by a constant struggle for land ownership and the drawing of boundaries in the name of political ideology. Violent military strategies such as the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, and the National Party's forced removal of non-white citizens, reverberate in the novel, even though the narrative takes place in the post- apartheid years. As Marion moves from place to place, she begins to assess the damage caused by apartheid, and she discovers that the key to finding her place connects to her ability to see, first-hand, the faces of people whose lives were destroyed by this vicious ideology.

Many characters in *Playing in the Light*, as is the case in Wicomb's other novels, discover that geographical movement can elevate or lower their place in South African society. Marion, for example, although a travel agent, deliberately anchors herself to Cape Town's urban comforts because the city represents the most stable environment for her financial well-being. Her carefully contrived stability, however, is disrupted as she embarks on a personal journey. In ever-increasing distances, Marion literally and figuratively moves out of her comfort zone. She travels first from her posh condominium in the wealthy suburb of Blouberg to the urban village of Observatory to visit her childhood home, a location full of unspoken questions and family secrets. She then stretches further and makes the foray into the coloured township of Wuppertal where she

begins her longer journey from Cape Town to the rural Eastern Cape Province, where she uncovers her parents' past. Eventually, the travel agent who never leaves home ventures to Europe, where she comes to realize that different places often generate specific meanings that dictate one's sense of self.

The slipperiness of apartheid's racial categories make Marion's journey toward self-realization difficult; Wicomb includes lines from the troubling Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962 as a context for understanding how her heroine's parents come to take on the white identity. After she casually stumbles across a *Cape Times* article featuring Patricia Williams, an ANC "terrorist" involved in one of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, she immediately thinks of Tokkie, her parent's servant (who eventually turns out to be Marion's maternal grandmother). The seemingly unrelated connection between a stranger and her parent's long-deceased servant baffles Marion, as she cannot figure out the connection. After her father's cagey reaction to her questions regarding Tokkie, she makes an uncanny realization—her parents have lied to her about their race. Tokkie, then, operates as residue from the elder Campbell's past decision to overturn their coloured identity; her face stands in for the identity they hoped to leave behind. The palimpsest trope continues in this novel as Wicomb characterizes racial identity as something that cannot be overwritten; the traces of Marion's coloured ancestors reappear as she reconsiders her childhood experiences and her current racial discomfort.

At the time that Marion's parents become "play whites," being white mostly hinged on the ability to *be accepted* as white. But this ability to pass believably comes at the cost of embracing an ideology that matches the identity. As Marion visits the National

Library in order to research the motives of so-called "play whites," she discovers that apartheid legislation established guidelines for defining people as "white" or "black": "A 'white person' is a person who (a) in appearance obviously is a white person and who is not generally accepted as a coloured person; or (b) is generally accepted as a white person and is not in appearance obviously not a white person (121). Wicomb shows how the federally-mandated racial categorization of people afforded the opportunity for some to *choose* a race. Invasive pieces of legislation such as the Population Registration Act (1950), the Group Areas Act (1950), the Land Act (1913) and the Natives Urban Areas Act (1923) dictated domestic relations and behaviors throughout the apartheid years.

The Population Registration Act supposedly set up a concrete system, one intended to segregate the nation in order to insure the success of the Afrikaner. Instead, from the onset of the legislation, the illogic at its core created an instability that could be arbitrarily imposed or exploited. On one hand, the Race Classification Board could assign people to categories that they had not been labeled previously, which resulted in an upheaval of their lives and sense of place (Beck 127). On the other hand, however, those already categorized as white, coloured, Indian, or black could apply for reclassification. As Wicomb makes apparent, for those light-skinned African or coloured citizens who sought to be white, the choice was not necessarily a ticket to unmitigated privilege; it required a sacrifice, a denial of one's native culture and often necessitated placing the next generation "in the dark" regarding racial heritage. In the post-apartheid era, the multi-generational damage from those laws persists.

Playing in the Light investigates the psychological effects, as well as the domestic ramifications, not only for individuals who appeared to be sufficiently white so as to

enable them to adopt an Afrikaner identity, but also for their children who have been in ignorance of their "mixed-race" heritage. As Nuttall explains, "these 'common sense' definitions [of race] were... fixed and bureaucratised by the state. They were also definitions which, once the apartheid straight jacket was broken, appear to have remained internalized" (Nuttall 735).[11] For Wicomb, the most lasting residue is a historically entrenched sense of shame.

In "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" (1998), Wicomb considers the interconnection of place, space, and body. She observes that the human body represents a place in which social meanings are constructed.[12] The racial category "coloured," when considered by the strict racial designation under apartheid, refers to having both white and black ancestry. Since the Calvinist Afrikaners considered that any racial mixing amounted to the "sin" of miscegenation, those descended from such immoral and illegal unions are inherently "tainted." The essay shares a common theme with *Playing in the Light*—that coloured identity, because it is a construct of the National Party, generates shame in distinctive ways. On one level, the Afrikaner experiences repressed shame for the immoral advantage gained on the basis of race. At

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[11] Sarah Nuttall's article focuses on specific instances in South Africa in which non-white people moved, or were forced to move. The Nationalists argued that this type of legislation would create a sense of stability and order.

[12] In her essay, Wicomb refers to the infamous treatment of Sarah "Saartje" Baartman, the so-called "Hottentot Venus." She writes, "Baartman, whose very name indicates her cultural hybridity, exemplifies the body as a site of shame, a body bound up with the politics of location" (1). Baartman spent the final five years of her life exhibited and prostituted in Europe, and even after her death her genitals were displayed in the Musee d' Homme. She *was* the exhibit, the site of observation and exploration. The western world's fixation on her body confirms Wicomb's argument—the observers regarded this "exhibit" with ambivalence. If she were black, she could have been shamelessly "othered," but Baartman was coloured, and represents a product of miscegenation since she shares white blood with her observers.

the same time, the coloured individual feels shame due to a problem of allegiance—with which race should he or she align politically and socially?

Wicomb further complicates the investigation of racial identity and inherent shame when she centers her novel on a coloured family that "played white" in order to escape the crippling effects of racist national policy. But as Nuttall indicates, denying one's own history and culture, both to oneself and one's children, only represses the past. In the experience of the Campbell family, Wicomb creates a kind of palimpsest in which their attempt to overwrite their coloured identity with a new narrative of their constructed whiteness is only partially successful. Their adopted white Afrikaner identity sits *on top of* their original racial identity, and, eventually, the layering falls apart. As the story progresses, John Campbell, the family's patriarch, becomes more reluctant to speak to Marion about her childhood; instead, he falls further into alcoholism and becomes a ghost of sorts by the novel's conclusion. Marion, however, can feel something just under the surface, some connection to her family's past that she must unearth before her personal and professional life have some sense of stability. The figure of the palimpsest surfaces in this novel, though not through narrative structure, as was the case in *The Way of the Women*, but through Wicomb's representation of the attempt of a coloured couple to erase their past and pass as whites. While passing as an Afrikaner may open up opportunities denied to other coloured people under apartheid, the knowledge of this attempted amputation of culture continues to tingle like a phantom limb, which revives the trauma time and time again.

The Shame of Playing White

The novel opens with a guinea fowl, ironically referred to as a bird "declassified by the ruffling of its black-and-white patterned plumage" (1), falling dead at Marion's feet. The image of the speckled guinea fowl, whose feathers defy fixed categories of blackness and whiteness, introduces the motif of conflated racial identity, though Marion has not yet pinpointed race as the source of her constant anxiety. As she tries to draw comfort from her pristine, white room in the fashionable Cape Town suburb of Blouberg, located across the bay from the picturesque geological landmark, Table Mountain, we get a sense of her meticulously constructed world. On the surface, she appears completely in control of her place in the New South Africa; she owns a beautiful home, drives a Mercedes, and has obtained a lucrative position as the owner of a travel agency. Yet, for all of her careful contrivance, she emanates a persistent sense that something is not right. Her carefully constructed existence reveals her ability to control only the most superficial elements of her life. Yet, a series of seemingly random events pushes her toward the truth and drives her to sift through her family's previous decisions, which, ultimately, allows her to reconcile her fractured identity.

As the novel progresses, Marion discovers that her uneasiness stems from the secrets of her parents' racial identity. Gradually, she pieces together their past. After John Campbell's prospective employer for the Traffic Department assumes that he is white, John and his wife Helen decide that passing may be their best option under apartheid. The ends to which they go to establish their family as white Afrikaners eventually isolate them from their coloured relatives. Most strikingly, John and Helen lie about the identity

of Tokkie, Marion's dark-skinned, maternal grandmother, as they pass her off as a coloured servant in their home. The memory of the beloved Tokkie's face haunts Marion and eventually becomes part of the impetus that prompts Marion to begin reexamining her parents' history. Because Marion's parents spent their entire married lives misleading their daughter in regards to their coloured heritage, Marion grows up in a protected, albeit false, environment. Through multiple flashbacks to her childhood, we see where fissures in her identity, as well as the identities of her parents, formed and how they contribute to her inability to be fully at home in her own skin.

The pressure to be accepted by white culture, or the desire to become white in particular cases, drives the plot, especially the flashback scenes involving John and Helen. In her depiction of Marion's parents, Wicomb highlights the shakiness of their marriage, not only to each other, but to their act. Fanon describes the psychological desire to become white in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), as he writes, "We understand now why the black man cannot take pleasure in his insularity. For him there is only one way out, and it leads into the white world" (51). These lines explore the tendency of the colonized to attach to the dominant culture using any and all means available. Fanon's quote occurs during his discussion of the feelings of inadequacies that haunt non-white individuals who live in colonized regions of the world. The first step toward white privilege and sanctuary for non-white people, according to Fanon, is the rejection of blackness. The historical criticism of miscegenation provides an important backdrop in Wicomb's construction of the Campbells. Fanon's words make sense of the Campbells' impulse to live as white South Africans, a deception that requires complete adherence to the mores of white, Europeanized culture. Commenting on his chapter's striking opening,

he admits, "It is no fallacy. For the anecdote renews a conflict that, active or dormant, is always real" (964). Fanon's assertion that the oppressed often feel a strong desire to adopt the oppressor's persona reverberates in John and Helen's sense of place and self-worth, which hinges on their constructed whiteness.

In depicting John Campbell's dedication to his adopted whiteness, Wicomb emphasizes his participation in, and reaction to, Apartheid Era politics. She alludes to the Sharpeville Massacre, thus bringing government-sponsored violence and its lasting effects on individuals to the forefront. Within the novel, places in South Africa become more than names on a map—they transform into symbols of political and social strife. John Campbell, Marion's now elderly, drunken father, remembers the struggle well, as it stands as a defining moment during the rise of the African National Congress (ANC) rebellion. In John's memory of Sharpeville, Wicomb provides a problematic voice for the Afrikaner perspective on the conflict, a viewpoint that renders the event a necessary moment of national defense, not a massacre.

John reflects on his service to his country, "Remember Sharpeville, remember the kaffirs here on our own doorstep in Langa? Well, I was one of those who volunteered as a reservist to defend South Africa against the blarry communists" (14). Susan Hawthorne provides insight to John's consideration of his military service: "In an international setting, violence is generally described as either terrorism (an illegal form of violence) or war (in its international legalized form). The distinction between war and terrorism is a vexed one and depends a great deal on the political alignments between the speakers and the actions" (70). The shootings, perpetrated against 5,000 non-violent protestors, 69 of which were shot in the back, were anything but defensive in nature (Beck 142). John uses

the event as a rallying point, a unifying scenario that pits “nationalists” against “terrorists.” He also justifies these killings by labeling the victims “communists,” thus making their deaths necessary in the name of national security. Sharpeville remains a place to which John attaches a meaning, though his skewed version of the truth prevents him from taking personal responsibility for his heinous actions.

Historically speaking, the massacre marked the beginning of an era, as it was the earliest event considered by the Truth and Reconciliation hearings (Beck 197). At this point in the narrative, Wicomb has not revealed John’s coloured lineage, so his support of the National Party seems natural to the reader. Nevertheless, as Wicomb discusses in “Shame and Identity,” even coloured people who never passed as white did, indeed, align themselves with Afrikaner interests rather than the ANC. She notes, “The death of apartheid and achievement of liberation from settler colonialism signals a condition of youthful postcoloniality. However, the shameful vote of Cape coloureds for the National Party in the first democratic elections throws such a label into question” (1). Even after Mandela’s 1994 victory, coloured voters still aligned themselves politically with Afrikaners. Their marginalization under apartheid, which stems from not being “white enough,” did not push them toward an allegiance with black Africans, in the hopes of forming a unified front against the Afrikaner oppressors. Instead, the coloured votes for the National Party indicate an ingrained confidence in the old socioeconomic infrastructure in the face of revolution (Wicomb, “Shame and Identity” 3). In *Playing in the Light*, Wicomb takes the reader back to a time when these allegiances took shape, a time when so many coloured citizens not only chose to support the National Party, but, in extreme cases, chose to conveniently forget the party’s self-serving agenda.

Wicomb dedicates the majority of the analeptic scenes to the domestic lives of the Campbells during Marion's childhood, and their house serves as a touchstone for her memories. In the *plaasroman* genre, the house of the white South African, much like the farm, represents a place where societal norms take shape. Rita Barnard writes in *Apartheid and Beyond*, "the domestic space, especially the white suburban home, functions as an ideological apparatus for the reproduction of racial and gendered subjectivities in South Africa" (10). Thus, the politics of the outside world do not necessarily shape the ideology of the citizens, at least not to the extent of particular values upheld within the walls of the home. Barnard goes on to suggest that the public street may be the place where history takes place, but the home of the Afrikaner, especially during the collapse of apartheid, signifies a place where racist and sexist ideas still flourish (10). In her novel, Wicomb explores the pressure exerted by Marion's parents to mold her into a "good" citizen, one who does not question the social and political structures that uphold their privileged status. Such evasion, however, comes at a price. As Marion begins to probe into her family's history, she must reevaluate her parents' lives and her place in the new South Africa.

John and Helen Campbell embody the historical intermingling of shame, identity, and political alignment among coloured individuals. Though born coloured, both characters rely on their ability to pass as white South Africans, but the novel shows that whiteness is not a homogenous category. John passes as a rural Afrikaner, an identity, which, at least on the surface, requires little adjustment in his way of speaking or acting. Wicomb's ostensible patriarch struggles with his constructed identity. Supposedly, the Afrikaner male should carve out a piece of land on which his family will prosper; this

land serves as his domain to rule. The formation of his identity is difficult to pin down, however, since his adoption of a white persona occurred *after* his family faced a very real outcome for non-white members of society—forced removal—which represents a traumatic severing of one's connection to a place. In one flashback sequence, Marion recalls the tumultuous move from the Campbells' farmland to a smaller plot in the Bergplaas area, a move necessitated by National Party legislation. John utters, "Bergplaas was just not a possibility, not amongst those raggedy hotnos. His little golden girl could not be exposed to that" (113). John's family faces a literal loss of place as the National Party's philosophy of prosperity through separate development forced non-white people to regulated districts. Yet, in the face of the government's shameful policy, John's regretful speech displays his repudiation of coloured people, his people. After the move, he absorbs the values of the oppressor, which results in his separating himself from his hitherto close-knit family. Thus, although white rural Afrikaner culture is not too much of a stretch for John in terms of tastes and manners, it still requires that he cut himself off from the relationships that shaped him.

John's wife, Helen, in contrast, completely reinvents herself when she latches on to white, middle-class characteristics. While John attaches himself to the simplicity of rural existence, his wife agonizes over social status and the flaunting of material possessions. Helen's self-transformation illuminates an economic rift that existed among white South Africans. Since the Great Depression of 1929, Afrikaners have struggled with poverty, a condition often referred to as 'poor whiteism," and their financial position as a group remains in peril today (Beck 184). For certain, one variable in life that creates a wedge between people, regardless of race, is financial success. For Helen, passing as a

white woman is not enough; her identity hinges on a conspicuous display of material goods as well as behaviors that she perceives as authentically white. Her socioeconomic awareness, obsession even, puts immense pressure on her husband and daughter to live up to a particular set of standards. Prior to Marion's childhood, John and Helen left the farm to live in the Cape Town suburbs—an essential step in establishing an acceptable Afrikaner persona. Marion remembers the tension in the household—"Helen's voice was that of a film star, husky and scornful. Campbell, you're no longer on the farm; this is the city… nowadays, here in town, you'll see smart, respectable women wearing slacks. What's the point of working hard, of building a new life, if your husband is determined to be backward, a poor white?" (10). Helen's frustration centers on her husband's reluctance to buy into a particular mentality, specifically that of the dominant culture. John's "dragging of feet" in terms of his enthusiasm stands as the primary conflict in their marriage; it also generates immense confusion for Marion as she tries to come to grips with racial identity.

Wicomb employs the image of a mermaid to portray the elder Campbells' diverging thoughts on their mixed racial heritage. The mermaid shows up in Marion's flashbacks, most notably when she recalls a trip to Sea Point with her parents. Her father calls Marion "his very own meermin (46)" and speaks of the beauty and elusiveness of these mythical creatures. The image becomes a thing of wonder for young Marion, as she ponders her father's fixation on such a strange creature, and what exactly mermaids have to do with her. Mermaids, of course, represent hybridity, an unnatural intermixture of woman and sea creature. They inspire wonder, yet they instill a sense of fear and danger, as well. After her father's description of the transformation from human to animal,

Marion begins to imitate—"Marion practiced walking like a mermaid, shuffling along with her legs pressed together, imagining her feet fused into a fin" (47). At an early age, John hints at Marion's coloured identity and identifies it with beauty, yet does so in such a cryptic manner that Marion cannot decipher his meaning until much later in life. Wicomb brings this distant memory into focus as Marion struggles with the face of Patricia Williams and its impact upon her, a seemingly successful Afrikaner woman who has, to her knowledge, lived a life far removed from the trauma of political upheaval.

Helen offers a disparate view of the mermaid, and she attempts to instill it in young Marion. As she listens to the conversation at Sea Point, she retorts, it is "No good being half woman and half fish, half this and half that; you have to be fully one thing or another, otherwise you're lost" (47). Helen associates hybridity with a loss of identity. The mermaid, though beautiful to John, certainly should not be held up as a model to her daughter. In Helen's eyes, one has to be committed to an accepted identity, or risk wandering through life in a constant state of confusion. Thus, Helen, through her own convoluted agency, is white—not light-skinned, not coloured. For her, being a combination of more than one identity, specifically a white identity, embodies weakness, while identifying with one constant thing equals solidity. Her perspective epitomizes that of the National Party during apartheid, and Wicomb shows that these emotions did not die in 1994. Helen and John's contrasting views on hybridity and identity provide the context for many of the novel's flashback sequences, moments that a grown version of Marion, now questioning her bloodline, must evaluate. As the product of two parents adhering to contradictory ideologies, Marion's allegiance to Helen's obsession with the privileges of whiteness makes sense. Yet, her uncanny connection to Tokkie, and a need

for an investigation of her heritage, springs from her father's romanticization of hybridity.

Faces from the Past: Reconciliation through Confrontation

Although the flashback sequences explain the formation of Marion's identity crisis, the novel's main trajectory occurs as Marion struggles to conquer her unceasing anxiety in the new South Africa. The politics of the country after 1994 suggested a reversal from a society divided by race to a nation founded on the acceptance of diversity. In order for this to occur, however, South Africans must either forget their experiences, which seems impossible, or accept the past and move forward. The latter process clearly takes time and requires a painful acceptance of personal responsibility, even for those individuals without literal blood on their hands. Wicomb captures this process through Marion, who clings to the belief that nothing traumatic had happened to her during the apartheid years. Marion internalizes the shame associated with white skin, which leads to her self-imposed isolation from the outside world. Fanon provides a psychological explanation for Marion's inability to find comfort in her affluent life: "Regardless of the area I have studied, one thing has struck me: The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (60). Colonization damages both parties involved, though his words certainly do not mean that the dominant culture suffers to the same extent as the colonized. Fanon's writing seems to reference a newly generated scenario of colonization, one in which each side struggles with the newness of it all. Wicomb, like van Niekerk, implies that this psychological damage does not evaporate with the passage of time; instead,

feelings of shame pass darkly from generation to generation but, eventually, come into the light.

Marion's neurosis is born from her struggle to acculturate as a white person in an era where whites, as a group, still tend to have easier access to economic and social advantages. The infrastructure of the country has remained relatively consistent due to a historical tendency for particular ethnic groups to fill certain types of occupations (Habib and Bentley 160). Jobs requiring specific training cannot be filled by an unskilled worker, even if that individual was denied an education under apartheid.[13] As Marion "suffers" in her affluence, she does so in the comfort and familiarity of whiteness. On the other hand, she knows that her father's increasing evasion of her questions must be confronted.

Her unease concerning her racial identity surfaces with an unknown face in the newspaper. As she peers into this stranger's eyes, her childhood memories ignite her recognition. Wicomb's third-person narration reads,

> For some reason, the face makes her think of Tokkie, the old coloured servant who indulged her as a child. But that was long ago, and Tokkie is dead; instead, something terrible has happened to the person whose troubles are reported in the *Times*, a coloured woman who had been an ANC terrorist. Nothing, in fact, has happened to Marion, who has never had anything to do with terrorists." (56)

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, beginning in1996, announced a time when citizens of all races were confronted with the notion of personal responsibility in the face of fifty years of apartheid oppression and ensuing rebellion. This pivotal historical juncture serves as the emotional stimulus that prompts Marion's search into her

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[13] As of 2006, white South Africans occupy 74 percent of the country's top management positions (Habib and Bentley 163).

background. The TRC hearings, overseen by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, provided a forum for those victims of apartheid to tell their stories and for the enforcers and perpetrators of racial violence to seek forgiveness and legal immunity. In addition to calling perpetrators to recount their actions, the TRC allowed for an unprecedented emotional catharsis as victims and their families saw the faces of those who committed crimes against loved ones, and they heard for the first time the rationale behind these politically motivated acts.

Wicomb's narrative highlights the palimpsest formed as this process, which placed the stories of the victims on the same level as the words of the perpetrators, drove even the most seemingly detached South Africans to examine their role in apartheid. Though Marion did not participate, first-hand, in violence against another human being, she subscribed to an ideology that directly perpetuated it. All South Africans have some connection to apartheid, its politics, its dissolution, and its attempted resolution during the TRC hearings. Wicomb illustrates this connection through her description of Marion's initial reaction to the article, specifically the line "nothing…has happened to Marion" (56). *Something* has certainly happened to Marion as a result of the TRC hearings; repressed shame for her support of the National Party emerges as she encounters the woman's countenance.

Marion's personal shame materializes as she lowers the newspaper; she is not the same Afrikaner woman who has hid previously behind her mask of confidence and comfort. Her reaction does not solely point to a guilty conscience, as guilt and shame inhabit two distinct realms of human psychology. As Antjie Krog, the Afrikaner journalist, poet, and memoirist, yields from her interview with psychologist Nomfundo

Walaza: "Guilt is such a useless thing. Guilt immobilizes you. 'I am guilty – so what can I do?' I prefer shame. Because when you feel shame about something, you really want to change it, because it's not comfortable to sit with shame" (213). Marion's unsettledness from the novel's outset points to one source of Afrikaner shame. Since these emotions emanate from an unfair advantage in society, then the individual needs to take action on a personal level to eradicate personal shame through social change. An unnamed colleague of Antjie Krog maintains, "Guilt is linked to violation; shame is linked to failure. Shame requires an audience. Guilt does not. And shame is more overwhelming and more isolating than guilt" (342). Marion cannot sit with her feelings of personal failure any longer—the anxiety that it has caused has become overwhelming. Wicomb uses the faces of Tokkie and Patricia Williams, symbols of South Africa's oppressive past, as agents of change in the life of her protagonist. Much like those involved in the TRC hearings, Marion must review her motives as she reconsiders her relationship to these countenances.

Early in the narrative, Marion lives as a middle-class white woman, accustomed to a somewhat luxurious life and armed with a sense of entitlement. She ponders a typical work day for the Afrikaner, in which just getting to and from work necessitates confronting those who have substantially less : "You can't go anywhere nowadays without a flock of unsavory people crowding around you, making demands, trying to make you feel guilty for being white and hardworking, earning your living" (28). Her defensiveness, an emotion spawned after years of avoiding the eyes of those who have been denied the opportunities that she takes for granted, intensifies as her acceptance of white privilege erodes. Wicomb provides insight into Marion's politics as an adult as a

way to provide some rationale for the typical Afrikaner voter. She writes, "Even though she voted for the Nationalists, she knew deep down that those policies were not viable. But what could one do, short of joining the hypocritical English voters and betraying your own?" (28). Like van Niekerk in her characterization of the white, Boer woman, Milla de Wet, Wicomb encourages empathy with her spoiled, entitled protagonist. She voted for the Nationalists because no other choice seemed feasible. And even if one did not support the National Party agenda, the benefits of being white were difficult to evade.[14]

Marion wrestles with her identity in a city landscape that is sterilized for whites—one still segregated in cases where citizens can afford to live in a gated community. Wicomb describes Marion's upscale neighborhood where policemen have been replaced by paid security guards, who watch for "questionable" activity, with a particularly watchful eye for those (i.e. non-white) who do not "belong" in certain part of town. Wicomb's narration points to her country's current preservation of segregation and racism, ideals now upheld by upper-class citizens who protect their privilege in the name of safety. Marion holds onto a shred of comfort in this isolated setting; to her, travel opens one to a scrutinizing world, one that aims to discover the traveler's secrets: "the business of being inspected by hoteliers, questioned about what you're up to, where you've come from, where you're going, makes her feel uncomfortable, as if she has no right doing what she does; or worse, as if there were another layer of meaning to what she

[14] *Broederbond* (Afrikaner Brotherhood) resides at the heart of the National Party's formation and development of apartheid in the 1930's. Formed by academics and religious scholars, the mentality infused the ideal that Afrikaners were favored by God to rule over the Southern part of Africa, and that native Africans were nothing more than heathens (Beck 111).

says and does, a meaning that others have a right to probe (40). Wicomb gives us a paranoid central character, one unsure of her place in the new South Africa. The other "layer of meaning" that Marion fears harks back to Dillon's palimpsest in that the repression of the truth only temporarily submerges it. Marion feels that her every move opens her up to criticism that she cannot control, so she relies on a self-imposed grounding to reduce her inner turmoil.

As she moves away from the city, a physical and psychological change of scenery accompanies Marion's identity transformation. She does not undertake this trip alone, however, as Brenda Mackay, her young, coloured employee, serves as her guide. Marion shares every clue of her apparent coloured background and every detail of her family's history with Brenda, though Wicomb never quite establishes their relationship as a friendship. Instead, Brenda, a light-hearted traveler with a passion for writing, provides another countenance that Marion must find a way to face with a clear conscience. Early in the novel, Marion finds Brenda's outgoing personality and unrestrained criticism of the National Party to be annoying. As they travel together, however, she begins to view Brenda as a means to access her own coloured heritage. They travel to the only location where Marion can truly confront her inherited racism, and the shame associated with white preference—the South African countryside.[15] She discovers that the country, not the city, provides a sense of place, although she spent most of her life avoiding this realization. Hawthorne uses the term "not seeing" to explain how the colonizer can rationalize the hijacking of another's entire world. She writes, " 'Not seeing' has been

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[15] As I discussed in the previous chapter, the colonization of the region originally occurred in a rural environment—no concept of urban South Africa existed before van Riebeeck. Thus, the countryside in South African literature remains symbolic of the site where cultural destruction occurred.

basic to colonization. It creates a vacuum of invisibility where previously there had been a people, a culture, a language, a cluster of traditions" (97). In order for the colonizer to deal comfortably with the truth of empowerment on a national level, those in power must bury the past. Wicomb shows that this blindness is not complete or everlasting; those associated with colonization cannot truly deny the injustices that accompany systematic oppression. Marion's decision to investigate her past helps her transcend the useless isolation that provides her sense of safety. Marion cannot erase the past or undo the trauma caused by apartheid, but she can look to herself to confront her cold treatment of non-white South Africans, a realization that has become necessary considering her "new" coloured identity. Wicomb suggests that this kind of introspection is part of the change that the nation must encourage in the post-apartheid years.

Wicomb stands as a striking foil to Gertrude Millin, a South African novelist I mentioned in my discussion of *The Way of the Women.* While Millin focused on the "taint" and "flaws" she considered inherent to the descendents of mixed-race unions, *Playing in the Light*'s pivotal moment, one that leads the protagonist to a better understanding of the world and herself than her childhood permitted, hinges on the acceptance of the coloured identity. This transformation accelerates when she meets Elsie, her father's fair-skinned sister. Though the siblings share a similar appearance, Elsie chose not only to accept her place as a coloured South African, but to embrace the culture. Marion immediately notices Elsie's somewhat shaky English. For Elsie, Afrikaans represents a link to the Nationalists, the architects of systematic oppression against her family. Her existence, in a sense, is the antithesis of her brother's life—she avoids any link to the dominant culture to which her light skin could have granted her

access. Elsie tells Marion, "I know you've been brought up Afrikaans, but you must excuse me. Speaking the language, that's where I put my foot down, and she stares for a while at her shoes, lost in thought" (166). Though Elsie grew up using Afrikaans, she now refuses to employ the language, thus detaching herself from a culture that she will not embrace. Elsie's sadness stems not only from her memories of apartheid's consequences, but also from her brother's decision to pass as an Afrikaner in spite of the National Party's attempted destruction of native cultures.

After Marion's excursion to the country side, a trip that finally breaks her ties to the city, she decides to venture even further from her home. Now exploring her identity as a coloured woman in post-apartheid South Africa, Marion wrestles with her future course of action. During Marion's trip to London, she faces the prospect of leaving an entire identity behind. At Brenda's recommendation, she throws herself into South African novels as a means to tap into the range of emotions generated in her motherland, emotions from which she had been shielded throughout childhood. Brenda, at this point, serves as Marion's guide into a coloured self-realization. Marion begins with Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* and struggles to make sense of the narrative. The story centers on a white businessman's internal conflict generated by maintaining a farm that is run by black servants. Later, the main character cannot escape the haunting face of a dead worker, much like Marion obsesses over the image of Patricia Williams. She fights the connection she feels to *The Conservationist*'s themes—"Is this what reading is, or should be: absorbing words that take root, that mate with your own thoughts and multiply? Is identification with a character inevitable, required perhaps?" (190). Wicomb highlights this intrinsic power of literature—its ability to force the reader to confront herself through

the narrative of fictional characters. Literature, as well as a change of scenery, provides a vehicle for Marion's transformation into her new and uncomfortable persona.

Marion need not look at fiction, however, to understand the trauma caused by the repression of shame; a singular memory from her childhood unearths this pain more effectively than any novel. As she fights sleep in a London hotel, her final stop on her self-realizing trek abroad, a headline materializes in her mind—"The Betrayal of Annie Boshoff." The Boshoffs, neighbors to Marion's family during her childhood, were caught in the middle of a scandal involving the white father and his affair with a young coloured woman. This example of miscegenation, though seemingly a private matter, made the headlines due to the then recently passed Immorality Act during the 1970's. According to the legislation, Mr. Boshoff's affair was illegal and a cause for family shame; yet, he stood by his actions, outing himself as a "play-white" who had done nothing wrong. In the midst of this controversy stands the friendship of Marion and Annie—two young coloured girls, one in the dark in regards to her race, and the other one forced into the light. Wicomb's most telling moment in this flashback materializes as the two friends say their goodbyes: "The children stood facing each other through the security gate. They wore identical pink nighties from Woolworths, with chains of white daisies embroidered on the yokes" (194). The author employs contradictory images of sameness and otherness. The nightgowns from the same department store suggest a similar place in society, but the security gate dominates the scene. They now live in two different worlds, Marion in the safe, white sector and Annie in the outskirts.

Wicomb's theme of confronting both personal and historical trauma as a means to move forward resurfaces as the novel winds down. In the same way that the TRC

hearings stick with Marion, she now faces the emotional weight of the betrayal of a friend. Marion had to separate from Annie due to the political repression of the time, or become an "orphan" in her own family, and that fact does not constitute wrongdoing on Marion's part. Wicomb complicates the matter through Marion's response to Annie's family shame. As Annie hands Marion a scrapbook containing the last shreds of their relationship, Marion waits for Annie to turn away and then disposes of the item in the nearest garbage can. Yes, her mother fuelled the change of heart, "Helen said to forget it—that the family would never live down the scandal, the shame of it all. The Campbells would have nothing to do with them" (194), but Marion, ultimately, bought into her mother's mentality that the bonds of friendship are weaker than the safety provided by whiteness. As she encounters the faces of Tokkie, Patricia Williams, and Annie, she finally associates personal responsibility with the pain, and long-standing resentment, that new South Africans must work out before the Rainbow Nation can truly take shape.

Conclusion

After Marion returns home, she finds that even though she has undergone a transformation, it represents one that is invisible to the outside world. So, her life carries on in much the same way that it did before she left. The novel's final scene, an unsettling disagreement between Marion and Brenda, reveals participants who harbor mistrust in the other, and their final moment closes the novel with a pervading sense of mistrust and the threat of irreconcilably different perspectives. Upon her return to work, Marion discovers that Brenda plans to write a novel based on John Campbell, Marion's father. Tension mounts as Brenda suggests that Marion really does not understand her father's struggle to

transform from a coloured to a white South African. Marion's response amplifies the atmosphere of discord—" How dare you! Why don't you write your own fucking story" (217). Wicomb investigates the notion of history and its deviating influence on various members of South Africa's population. She leaves the reader to ponder: Who is in the best position to tell the story of the Campbell family? Is it Marion, who lived the majority of her life as a privileged Afrikaner, or Brenda, whose coloured identity remained unchanged during the fall of apartheid and the rise of the new South Africa?

Marion accepts the identity, but has done so without having to live every day of her life under the restrictions of apartheid. She lives in a new version of the country, one in which her choice to live as a coloured woman does not carry the same weight as the label her parents escaped. Wicomb's final pages capture the current complexities of interpersonal relationships in her homeland; though the governmental structure completely changed in 1994, the damage done by the Nationalists, and their supporters, will not simply disappear, nor will it be entirely forgotten. Adam Habib and Kristina Bentley maintain, "The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996), which reflects the goal of a cosmopolitan society and an attempt to create a unity from diversity, is occurring in a world when other more prosperous nations are implicitly moving away from this tradition" (4). The term *diversity* continues to single out "the Other" on the basis of physical appearance. Though the country may stand as a hopeful example of a nation founded on strength through acceptance for the rest of the world, much of Habib and Bentley's work echoes Wicomb's final scene. It seems that hope and resentment constantly clash in the narrative, and Marion's journey to find some sense of inner peace is just beginning as the story closes. In order for the people of South Africa to

move toward a common national identity in which diversity honors actual individuality, hearts must change *along with legislation*, which requires time. Closure, for Wicomb's protagonist, and for her country, is in its infancy.

"*Spilt Milk*: A Supposed Clean Slate in the New South Africa"

"Yes, place does influence my writing, but it's more the change of place, rather than the place itself" ("Interview with Kopano Matlwa").

Introduction

The ideal of change, when coupled with hope, points a nation to a better place than that which previously constrained it. South Africa represents a site in the global imagination where significant transformations have occurred in the past twenty years. It has become a location, though still in the United States' periphery, associated with captivating stories of resistance to apartheid's repressive regime and, more recently, hope for a prosperous future. Not surprisingly, Kopano Matlwa's novels reflect the political upheaval and subsequent shifts in dominant ideologies that have impacted her homeland. Like van Niekerk and Wicomb, Matlwa's writings remind us that all has not been well since 1994; economic and political injustice persists and bitterness still seethes among those who have not yet reaped the fruits of the revolution. She inspects the ways in which supposedly old fashioned ideas in educational and religious institutions still exist and exert influence on the country. Her voice represents the post-apartheid literary movement, one that calls attention to past atrocities and the lingering racial prejudices as South Africans continue to move forward from a time when racial oppression crippled one's social mobility to a supposedly new South Africa founded on the progress of a diverse population.

By setting much of the action of her second novel, *Spilt Milk* (2010), within the walls of a school, the twenty-seven-year-old Matlwa focuses her attention on the future of South Africa. Her youthful, yet critically-acclaimed, post-apartheid fiction provides a glimpse into conflicts now faced by a generation that did not grow up under the National Party's rule, but still experience its legacies.[16] The students depicted in the novel live in a promising new country, one founded on the commitment to racial diversity and equality. Nevertheless, the Rainbow Nation has not produced all that has been hoped for. Bitterness, rather than optimism, stands out in the narrative, as Matlwa keeps apartheid's historical damage close at hand in a story driven by characters not only desperate to find some semblance of inner peace who must first come to terms with the past. We follow the lives of two figures in this new system—one determinedly dedicating her life to the education of young South Africans, and the other seemingly "putting in his time" in the school after sexual indiscretions that prompted his removal from the priesthood. While Matlwa does reveal viewpoints of the present-day South African youth, and implies that the present generation must take part the betterment of its homeland, she concentrates more on the issues that must be worked out by the previous generation before the country can truly resemble Nelson Mandela's vision in 1994.

Bittersweet Freedom—Growing Pains in the Wake of Decolonization

Spilt Milk opens with an epigraph of sorts; Matlwa captures the intermixture of ecstasy and discord among black South Africans after apartheid officially ends in 1994.

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[16] Matlwa has won the European Union Literary Award for Coconut (2007), recently graduated from the University of Cape Town, and is a 2010 Rhodes Scholar ("Kopano Matlwa Profile").

Matlwa describes a cathartic moment in the country, one that ushers in a new era, a time of rebirth. Matlwa provides a bird's eye view of this celebration, carefully omitting any reference to a particular character; instead, she begins her story with a view of the people: "After all the excitement, after the jubilation, after the celebrations, after they had finished with the laughing, the sweet tears of joy, after they had sobbed in pure gladness…after they had roared with triumph and screeched at the supremacy…" (1). She then marks a shift from these joyful signs following the election to the material and technological acquisitions and the superficial indicators of change:

> after the purchasing of German cars, after filling up the cabinet, after changing the neighborhood and the neighbors, after buying new wardrobes, after throwing out prima stoves for microwave ovens, after filling up leather purses with shiny gold and silver cards, after Blackberrys, electronic notebooks, and hands-free sets (2).

Matlwa observes the global influences which now shape the country's identity. The victors of South Africa's revolution—albeit, only a significant number of those in leadership roles and far from the majority of black South Africans—celebrate by spending money on the newest, trendiest technology, and project new identities as they drive luxury cars. These symbols of financial and political success in a newly emerging, but disproportionate, middle-class seem to have replaced the older, communally-oriented African culture that the National Party marginalized and stigmatized during their regime.

In these opening lines, Matlwa sets up the conflict for her protagonist: How does she create a space for herself, as well as for her students, in which the burdens of her country's history do not weigh her down? Matlwa continues, "Deceit was found in the pockets of heroes, rot in the rucksacks of warriors, treachery in the notepads of leaders...

even the Pale People realized that they needn't ever use the just-in case packed bags they kept underneath the staircase… because as it so happened, the Dark People became their own oppressors" (3-4). Political power, especially when racial difference separates the "haves and have nots," spawns disgrace, which points to one prevailing theme that runs through van Niekerk, Wicomb, and Matlwa. Whether one is a Nationalist Afrikaner during the height of apartheid, or a staunch ANC supporter in 1994, the perceived power over others ignites internal conflict and infighting among the dominant group.

Matlwa illuminates a lost sense of purpose among black South Africans in the post-apartheid era. She writes, "The perilous thing about being the victim is that you are never forced to hold the mirror up to yourself. No one ever asks you to evaluate your actions, your motives, your intent, and so you continue on with no points checked and no questions asked" (4). The battle, at least on a symbolic level, was won when Nelson Mandela became President. Matlwa, however, points out that some heroes of the revolution lose their vision and morals when they no longer have a clear enemy.[17] Her narrator simultaneously praises Mandela for his efforts, but she criticizes his contemporaries for not continuing his work. Thus, *Spilt Milk* begins with an awareness of a peoples' disappointment, as opposed to unmitigated jubilation.

These pangs of newly-acquired freedom go hand-in-hand with decolonization; revolution only marks the beginning of a new era in a country once governed by colonial

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[17] Adam Habib and Kristina Bentley note in *Racial Redress and Citizenship in South Africa* (2008) that "perhaps the greatest danger of this new ideology is its legitimization of all kinds of ethnic entrepreneurs who will begin to play the ethnic card when they don't get their own way" (10). They assert that the National Party gained power on a platform of white superiority, which results in a post-apartheid world naturally opposed to white preference. The problem, they argue, is the "politicization of ethnicity and political strife," (10) which provides an avenue for non-white South Africans to gain similar unfair advantages based on race.

forces. If, for a sustained period of time, one must conform to an unnatural, oppressive way of life, then the person can be expected to struggle when faced with prospective freedom. During colonization, an entire culture is submerged beneath the dominant one, and it is devalued on a national scale. Amilcar Cabral writes, "A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if…they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment" (56). Matlwa's novel initially places the reader in this key moment in 1994, one that serves as a turning point for South Africans of all races. Her words remind us that the misuse of political power persists into the new administration and is not a tendency limited to the European colonizer. Cabral contends that the years following a liberation movement must be dedicated to the development of a culture that adheres to the following developments: the concept of a popular, national culture, a sense of political awareness, scientific awareness, and a notion of universalism (64-65). Matlwa's protagonist, Mohumagadi, can be read in the light of Cabral's description of postcolonial cultural reestablishment—her school will nurture the newly-acquired independence of the post-apartheid era, and it will, she hopes, produce a new generation of black South Africans.

Mohumagadi surfaces, phoenix-like, out of a landscape tainted by corruption and superficiality. Matlwa introduces her protagonist with the simple phrase, "After it all was done, she came" (2). Mohumagadi is defined by her sense of civic responsibility to establish a place where a cultural rebirth will be fostered. She begins Sekolo sa Ditlhora, a private establishment that simultaneously reconnects young people with tribal African culture while preparing them for a fast-paced globalized world. Mohumagadi values

traditional African heritage; she ensures that tribal kings and queens make up part of the curriculum, and she employs traditional names for the individual rooms of the building. Part of her plan, it seems, is to ensure that the younger generation gains access to the cultural influences that colonization buried long ago. Although she commits the school to follow an Africanized curriculum, she understands that her school must produce students who can compete in a globalized world. Hence, Mohumagadi demands that her students undertake a classic Western education and that they master the English language. The school equips privileged students with the foundation that they need to advance in the world and does not serve as a place for students to relive the damage done by the Nationalists under apartheid. Mohumagadi hopes for "a place where History would not be a subject of chronicled post-independence dates of resentments, war and hatred" (5). As the narrative develops, however, her personal history with a new instructor, Father Bill Thomas, fuels her own feelings of betrayal that undermine her educational aspirations.

Whereas van Niekerk and Wicomb primarily concern themselves with the racial identity conflicts generated during apartheid, Matlwa turns to the same issues in the new, post-colonial South Africa. She shows in her fiction that the formerly colonized, in a sense, have been broken, and they must repair damages done by both the oppressors and one another. Linda Tuhiwai Smith makes a comparable point when she observes that decolonization comes at a price for those involved. Smith uses the term *fragmentation* to discuss the damage caused by a sudden access to independence and political agency. She explains that, "Fragmentation is not an indigenous project; it is something we are recovering from. While shifts are occurring in the ways in which we put ourselves back

together again, the greater project is about recentring indigenous identities on a larger scale" (100). Smith emphasizes that decolonization does not take place at the moment of political liberation. The process of undoing these damages is a slow one, and natives living in a newly-liberated land should not be expected to immediately reclaim an identity with which they have been disconnected for generations. A type of palimpsest materializes as the traces of resentment from the formerly colonized toward the colonizer stand in the way of reconciliation.

The Historical Gets Personal

Matlwa places a broken interpersonal relationship at the center of the narrative. The resulting tension between the headmistress and a visiting priest creates a general sense of uneasiness that impacts the entire school. Neither character trusts one another nor are they willing to confront their troubled history. As she comes face to face with the past in the person of her former lover, Father Bill Thomas, Mohumagadi realizes that past wounds, both public and personal, have not healed, and she must address them. As she first lays eyes on him in her school, the tension materializes: "Before she could think, or plan an escape of some sorts, or tell him privately that he was in fact no longer needed and that there had been a terrible mistake, a note was passed across the stage urging her to introduce the man so that the school could carry on with their assembly" (12). The past relationship of Father Bill and Mohumagadi symbolizes the pressures exerted on the country during the fall of apartheid, a time that was supposed to herald independence. While the end of apartheid did eradicate racist national policy, this new era presented the problem of reconciliation. A dilemma arises when Mohumagadi and Bill must look each

other in the eye, and, even though apartheid legislation no longer exists, they feel the same resentment that apartheid generated among people of different races. Each of these characters realize that in order to move toward contentment, as well as to establish a sense of place in life, one must first deal with traumatic past events. Matlwa shows that, while these wounds cannot necessarily be fully healed, they still must be brought into the light.

Matlwa provides separate narratives and provides internalized dialogue for her two central characters, which results in a different type of palimpsest than found in van Niekerk or Wicomb's work. Throughout the novel, Matlwa, often on the same page, shows their reaction to the same event, which creates *competing* narratives that, interestingly, point more to their similarities than their differences. Though Mohumagadi's point of view undoubtedly represents the primary narrative, Bill's memories, often voiced through his diary, also prove to be valid. Recalled in fragmentary flashbacks to their youth, Matlwa presents Mohumagadi and Bill's ill-fated romance as shadowed by the Immorality Acts. The laws, established in 1950 and abolished in 1987, fostered an environment in which mixed-race relationships developed in the dark, away from the public eye (Beck 177). Although the laws are no longer in effect by the time they meet, a public relationship between the two would still be frowned upon. Additionally, Matlwa establishes a difference in class between Mohumagadi, known then by her given name, Tshokolo, and Bill. His time at the church centered on his training to become a priest, while Mohumagadi worked as a servant. The asymmetrical power dynamic between the two clearly favors Bill. Nevertheless, both are punished when the heads of the institution discover their liaison.

Mohumagadi desperately tries to avoid, outrun, and even erase her own past, but she soon discovers that history—whether personal or national—cannot be completely erased or overwritten. And, in *Spilt Milk*, the past functions like a palimpsest. The postcolonial meaning of palimpsest relies on the idea that history can never be erased, only written over (Dillon 254), and the ideological stamp of those in power only temporarily cover up the histories of the oppressed. The repressed feelings of betrayal, especially when reconciliation is sought, re-emerge. The appearance of Father Bill, a degraded, white priest, into her contained, self-made world brings to the fore a conflict between present and past, black and white. The title of the novel evokes the pain caused by the past and, during the novel's climatic moment, Bill recites the classic phrase, "It's all just spilt milk now, Tshokolo; no point crying over it" (168). Matlwa proves the cliché's impossibility. Mohumagadi and Bill must face the tragic rift that they each thought they had put behind them, and now they must confront each other, as they try to succeed in their respective professions. For Mohumagadi, it seems that reconciliation comes in form of Bill taking responsibility for leaving her without an explanation, although Matlwa constructs a character so intent on projecting her strength that what she wants from Bill remains hidden from the reader. For Bill, however, any semblance of forgiveness begins internally, as he appears torn between natural desires and his duty as a priest. As the novel progresses, however, we see that neither character is in the frame of mind to seek reconciliation.

Much of the plot centers on Father Bill's placement at Sekolo sa Ditlhora—a church-sanctioned demotion that will supposedly lead to the moral strengthening of the school's more troubled students, as well as the priest, himself. After a group of

Mohumagadi's students are caught looking at one another's genitals on a bus, Mohumagadi creates a detention hall that Father Bill must supervise. He feels the irony of the situation since his placement at the school is the result of his own sexual misconduct. Furthermore, the students react to his racial otherness and tension between students and priest initially overshadows his inability to teach lessons prepared by Mohumagadi. She, too, feels uncomfortable with a white moral authority in an establishment intended to spearhead a cultural revival. She thinks, "How could they have said to the bishop, thanks, but no thanks, we were really only looking for black priests" (36). The residue of apartheid's forced segregation inflects her attempts to convince her students that Father Bill has a valuable place at the school; she simultaneously criticizes students for their racially-motivated misgivings, yet she wonders if they pose a valid point of view. Her ambivalence reveals the degree to which one's personal history continues to color his or her motives, even when the individual appears disconnected from traumatic events of the past. Her animosity, which stems from Bill's betrayal of her years ago, rises up and creates a palimpsest that illustrates the slow progression from bitterness to resolution.

Betrayal by Constructed Morality

The principal building block in the construction of the Afrikaner "brand" of whiteness is the ideology of the Dutch Reformed Church, a religious denomination heavily influenced by Calvinist thought. June Goodwin and Ben Schiff's work in *Heart of Whiteness* uncovers the distorted theology wielded by Afrikaners: "in pursuing God's commands, they [the Dutch Reformed] avoid and seek to prevent race mixing; and

…establish institutions of government that are, first and foremost, Christian in nature and action" (188). If God commands a people to institute segregation, it becomes assumed to be a divine command, not a human choice. This mentality, pawned off as a "good Christian" concept, allowed the National Party to carry out the inhumane process of segregation, while proclaiming its benefits to white *and* black South Africans. In the process, morality aligned with white culture, and non-white citizens and their respective cultural backgrounds denoted immorality. As a result, a deep-seated mistrust of religion formed in the country, and the mingling of religion and corruption during apartheid lives in the memory of those affected by these policies.

Although the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa supported and contributed central tenets to the ideology of apartheid, Matlwa avoids targeting the DRC specifically—Mohumagadi mistrusts *all* organized religion and Father Bill appears more likely to be Roman Catholic than Dutch Reformed. Given that Bill is a member of a priesthood that requires celibacy, one presumes that Father Bill is Catholic; however, Matlwa does not mention Catholicism directly and keeps the specifics of Father Bill's church affiliation opaque.[18] Although the abuses caused by the imposition of Western religion are evident, Matlwa's deliberate vagueness takes the focus off of a particular religion and places this emphasis on Mohumagadi and Bill's personal beliefs and past and present interactions. As Mohumagadi considers the nature of Sekolo sa Ditlhora, the narrative reveals her distaste for religious instruction: "God was not there when we were

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[18] Although Catholicism did not serve as the foundation of the National Party's ideology, as did the teachings of the Dutch Reformed Church, the promotion of segregation and separate development existed in Catholic communities. The tenets of separate development, eventually carried out through forced removals of non-white citizens, were ultimately adopted by white Catholics, even though these policies went against the morality of the church (Bate 2).

chained, when we were raped, when we were cheated and beaten for all those centuries past, so why only now does God want to involve Himself when it appears that we are winning" (7). Mohumagadi's disdain for Father Bill, a disgraced priest, embodies the tension still felt by black Africans toward *any* corrupt religious practices that equated white privilege with God's will. Furthermore, and more relevant to Matlwa's work, religion, in general, serves as one complicating factor in the interactions between South Africans of diverse racial backgrounds.

In *Spilt Milk*, Matlwa conveys the slight hope for a future that allows for true, color-blind love, but Bill's own memories emphasize the impossibility of this scenario. During a flashback, Bill recalls, "It was a time in the country when people were celebrating, when it was said to be the beginning of something new, something beautiful, something true…when others were coming together, they were being pulled apart" (78). The church's requirement of celibacy renders their relationship immoral and impossible, but Matlwa inflects their separation with the language of miscegenation: "They were not allowed to speak to each other. She was sent to her room in the servant's quarters and the mama's were told to keep her there. He was told to fetch his things" (79). Matlwa infuses the old mentality of the Immorality Acts into this scene, driving home her point that overnight changes may occur in legislation, but that these alterations do not immediately correlate with the behaviors of a country's people. Traces of these laws construct a palimpsest that not only reveals why Mohumagadi and Bill's relationship ended so abruptly, but also why they both retain a sense of shame that accompanied the accusation of miscegenation under apartheid.

These lines evoke a time in the country's history in which one could find his or herself in prison for an interracial affair, and a time when love was not allowed to cross color lines in the name of morality and racial preservation of "purity." As a result, those "unfortunate" enough to fall in love with someone of a different race almost certainly faced a painful dissolution of the relationship. Whereas Bill's punishment, because he is removed from his home, initially seems more severe than Mohumagadi's, he ascends to the priesthood; Mohumagadi is left behind and seemingly forgotten by the man she loves. Matlwa provides Bill's perspective on the church's punitive action: "As he left the place of his upbringing, he told himself that even if he had to force it, he would cry for her every day, for what they had, for what…had now been lost" (79). Matlwa's narration then shifts to Mohumagadi, now wounded by both Bill and the church that they serve. She receives words of comfort and advice from her teacher, Mama Twiggy, "All these Christian ones, they won't ever love you as much as they love their God and their church" (81). The message sparks Mohumagadi's disdain for institutional ideologies that place ceremony ahead of human emotion. Bill's dismissal leaves her angry at him for choosing religion over a life together, but she is even more outraged at religious institutions that leave no room for love to prosper. This sense of twofold betrayal follows her into maturity and motivates her educational mission to create a school based on performance, not faith. Matlwa provides a competing narrative, as we see that *both* Bill and Mohumagadi harbor resentment toward the church, and that Bill, in fact, did cherish their relationship.

The Not-So-New South Africa

The years following Mandela's victory forced the immediate political unification of whites and non-whites, so the specific populations kept apart through apartheid now carried the burden of coming together to make the country a functional entity. White colonizers, though they had controlled legislation in the country since the 17th century, represented the minority in terms of population. Even though the ANC eventually won political power, its leaders understood that the most skilled and highly-educated members of society were white. Additionally, some prominent National Party members still retained some legislative influence (Beck 191). In the same way that the persecution of miscegenation continued after the Immorality Act ended, those who gained access to power during an era defined by racial inequality remained significant in the new South Africa.

Matlwa captures this complex power dynamic. As principal of her school, Mohumagadi possesses authority over all operations and personnel, including Bill. This power indicates a complete reversal of their past lives at the church. And while Mohumagadi hoped that a priest might offset the scandal facing her school, she did not specifically invite Bill to counteract this disgrace. Ironically, the church assigned him to her school to stand as a figure of moral strength. Her sense of being betrayed by the church and Father Bill surface afresh and their exchanges contain undertones of resentment. Her feelings of inferiority in the presence of Bill also remain in her current life. Though she has achieved the title of *principal*, she remembers a time when she would not have had access to this profession. She cannot forget that Bill became a priest

as she scrubbed floors. Matlwa shows that professional titles may signify some boost in social status, but conventional conceptions of racial inferiority, along with the institutional upholding of this ideology, still complicate day-to-day interactions among South Africans.

The resentment between Mohumagadi and Bill occurs during a time of supposed emerging equality in the new South Africa. After Mandela's inauguration, the racial redress initiative in the country was created to establish a means of balancing opportunities among those oppressed by apartheid. Adam Habib and Kristina Bentley's *Racial Redress and Citizenship in South Africa* (2008) examines the efforts of the newly-established democracy and its attempts to gain recognition as a nation based on equal opportunity. They write:

> black businesspeople have been given a boost in their engagements with the market through both state loans on preferential terms and legislated diversity targets for particular sectors of the economy. This has in effect amounted to transforming pigmentation, gender, and disability status into valuable commodities. (21)

The redress movement signifies the first step in leveling the playing field in South African society, but it in no way indicates an overnight process in that those who can parlay their race, gender, and disability, into valuable commodities are relatively few in society as a whole. The statistics back up this assumption—black Africans make up approximately 77 percent of the country's population, yet only account for 30 percent of its earned income (Beck 205). The racial oppression that lasted for nearly fifty years, and impinged on the financial, political, and educational freedoms of non-white citizens,

cannot be quickly forgotten. These impositions, on one level, represent Matlwa's title, *Spilt Milk*. Furthermore, the positions, whether they exist in a lucrative corporation or an elite school, denied to non-white individuals cannot be immediately diversified without utter chaos in the country's infrastructure.

The school, specifically, marks a place where old infrastructure still exists in Matlwa's homeland. Mohumagadi faces an uphill battle at Sekolo sa Ditlhora, as she hopes that her lofty educational goals will triumph over decades of inequalities in the classroom. Although she has started a private academy, rather than a public school, lingering, if undesired, denial of basic education to the majority of non-white South Africans stands as one of apartheid's lingering effects. In any culture, and in any country, schoolchildren symbolize progress and mark the trajectory of the nation's future. Hope and equality stand as the tenets of education, yet most developed nations struggle to provide a balanced education to all. The new South Africa, with its foundation built on racial diversity, is currently addressing these discrepancies with limited success. Habib and Bentley note that, even in the face of new legislation written to provide a quality education to all children, "research demonstrating South Africa's harsh inequalities in the educational environment and its continuing raced, gendered and classed character, all show limited redress in the form of redistribution of wealth and educational outcomes" (231). Mohumagadi symbolizes the opposition to this still unbalanced system that continues to leave young black students behind.

Mlilo Graham, the novel's most fleshed-out student character, meets Father Bill with unrelenting interrogation and doubt. Like Mohumagadi, the young boy harbors a deep mistrust of white religious authority figures, though his youth allows him to speak

more candidly than his principal. Mlilo, a coloured boy, initially pleads to Mohumagadi, "A white man? A white priest? Since when did Sekolo sa Ditlhora start hiring white priests? What does he know about us? What value could he possibly add?" (36). Mlilo has embraced the school's mission statement to move forward through an educational reawakening based on previously-stifled African culture. His hatred of Father Bill, something generated from more than his betrayal of trust in the school's values, becomes apparent in their first exchange. Father Bill begins, "So, where are you from, Mlilo? You speak English so beautifully." The boy responds—"Fuck off…Where do *you* come from? What are you doing here? Are you aware that you are not wanted here" (84)? The student's words shock Father Bill, as the boy unleashes rage and resentment toward a white man that he barely knows.

Father Bill cannot defend himself against Mlilo's taunts—he understands the historical source of the student's mistrust, though he has done nothing to the boy. What Bill does not understand, however, is why he has been sent to the school at all. In one diary entry, he reflects, "These children are nothing like we were. They are filled with complexities, carry large loads, war against principles that they have no understanding of. Their hobbies are finding causes and ideologies, meanings to struggles that have long past" (146). Bill feels hopeless in the face of a job that requires his connection to students whose struggles he does not understand. Although he believes that these students latch onto political battles that have ended, Matlwa shows the extent to which the dissention connected to apartheid's creation and dissolution has been passed down to the current generation. Furthermore, he finds himself in the role of a moral authority *after* sexual indiscretions labeled immoral by his affiliated church. In the face of this disgrace, how is

he to lead others to a better moral foundation? Mlilo, of course, does not know this detail, but he senses the priest's discomfort and unpreparedness in the sea of dark faces. It is not until Father Bill agrees to Mlilo's desire to show a video that displays the stages of puberty to the class that Mlilo eventually lets his guard down. Mlilo takes Bill's concession as an act of trust, which, in turn, opens the door for a truce between the students and their instructor. Bill's decision to give the children the benefit of the doubt in the face of further professional ruination starts the group's path toward a mutual understanding, and his decision projects a sense of hope into the narrative.

Mohumagadi, not privy to the developing relationship between Father Bill and his students, has no context for understanding either his apparent permissiveness or the film's intended purpose. She vehemently attacks Bill for adding to the disgrace of her school. As he seeks her understanding, she retorts, "We don't need your help. We don't need your advice, your council, your anything, Bill. We are not some charitable organization, we do not need anything you have to offer…Why can you not see that? Is it because you don't think a black woman can help a white man" (179-180)? Bill finds himself the target of his former lover's multilayered anger. Her fury, which evokes the palimpsest trope, is generated only partially by what she perceives to be his misguided educational decision. Many of her phrases, in fact, hark back to their previous dissolved relationship. Matlwa elevates Mohumagadi's repressed anger as she projects it onto a seemingly unrelated moment in her present relationship with Bill. As she sees it, her interaction with him has, once again, led to the damage of her character. Worse, the church's decision to place him in her school as a moral authority reminds her that his whiteness, even in the post-apartheid years, still legitimizes his actions.

In this moment, the novel appears headed for a bitter, unresolved conclusion in which Mohumagadi cannot forgive Bill for his alliance with the church and caste that he evidently privileged over his relationship with her. She now detests him even more because she believes he has crippled her ability to instill forgiveness and cultural acceptance into her students. Mohumagadi's hostility is not surprising. After all, in a decade that saw a transition from a Nationalist system founded on institutional racial segregation to a constitutional democracy, the bitter residue of apartheid can be expected to still color interpersonal relationships (Habib 9). She seethes, "Spilt fucking milk. So that's what you good-for-nothings think? Every little thing you've put us through is spilt milk to you is it? 'Clean it up' you say? Fuck you Bill. You and your fucking ancestors" (169). Mohumagadi's tirade exposes her buried outrage at Bill's abandonment of her, as well as her current frustration at her inability to create a place exempt from the pressures of the past. Her school has failed at this point, a conclusion she reaches as Mlilo, now utterly lost, and devastated after Father Bill's removal, runs after him. Young Mlilo, who, earlier in the novel, begged Mohumagadi to turn the priest away, now sees her inability to bring to fruition the respected goals of her Africanized curriculum. If he is able to see goodness in Father Bill, why can his misguided principal not see it? Her refusal to come to terms with his place in her life proves to be an obstacle for her professional success, as well as her personal sense of contentment.

The final image of novel, however, provides a more hopeful segue into the next era in South Africa. Ironically, this glimmer of hope rises from the death of a child—an image that epitomizes educational failure. After Mlilo Graham is run over and killed by a truck after his verbal altercation with Mohumagadi, the school holds a memorial service.

At this moment, Mohumagadi and Bill find themselves in an uncomfortable place—mourning a former student. Their previous bitterness subsides in the face of sorrow and after a simultaneous recognition of their failure to usher this boy into a new era of independence. Mohumagadi's sense of betrayal does not fade away, but does subside, as Father Bill reads from Corinthians, "there are many enemies but we are never without a friend, and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed" (194). In this moment, the words, though quoted from the Bible, have a healing effect over Mohumagadi, not because of their connection to a specific Christian denomination, but because they come from the lips of a man who shares her present pain. He can now provide comfort at a time of great sorrow and during her realization of her initial failure to institute a system of education that the country can only benefit from embracing. Mlilo was able to move past his prejudices against Father Bill, but his revelation rings hollow—his death, now weighing on the consciences of both Mohumagadi and Bill, denies him the opportunity to live in the promised "Rainbow Nation." Matlwa leaves us with the two failed educators, one black and one white, joining hands and absorbing the hopeful message that resilience and reconciliation can only be sought through forgiveness.

Conclusion

Mohumagadi and Bill's relationship can operate on an allegorical level since their fraught personal history and their evasive, hostile interpersonal maneuvers seem characteristic of interpersonal relationships in present day South Africa. Nevertheless, as I contend with all three novels at the heart of my thesis, Matlwa's *Spilt Milk* is far too complex to write off as a clear-cut national allegory. To suggest that Mohumagadi simply

symbolizes the newly-independent black female perspective and Bill stands as the defeated white South African male does not give Matlwa enough credit. They have a rich history; their bond hinted at true romance, only to dissolve in the face of the religious establishment that they both served. Their story is not *every* South African's history—it is but one. Mohumagadi and Bill's intentions are noble, but, as Matlwa prompts, somewhat premature. Mohumagadi and Bill first must feel the belittlement in the face of Mlilo's death, which transcends Mohumagadi's inability to move past her resentment in order to fulfill her lofty educational goals, and Bill's detachment from a religion that has destroyed his sense of place. Matlwa uses the image of the now martyred Mlilo as a reminder that forgiveness leads the path toward professional and personal progress, and instills the hope that Mohumagadi will move forward with her school. The novel shows a slow progression toward understanding in South Africa, one that comes only after individuals watch ideologies, whether religious, educational, or political, break down and give way to the reestablishment of relationships focused on competence and trust.

Afterword

The Way of the Women, *Playing in the Light*, and *Spilt Milk* all elevate the stories of the past as a means to foreground narratives in the present. The resulting palimpsest found in these multilayered narratives reveals a non-linear timeline in the life of a nation. The memories of the past, whether traumatic or triumphant, never fade away; instead, they lie repressed and subsequently resurface. The final images of each novel, a dying Afrikaner woman realizing the significance of her relationship with her servant, a coloured woman wrestling with the ownership of a new identity, and the intertwined fingers of a black woman and white man, point to different levels of progress among South African citizens. While I argue that these authors point to the influence of the old ways of apartheid on current relationships, their novels provide a potentially hopeful future, as well. The authors criticize any ideology that fosters hatred and segregation, and they show that these damaging beliefs occur among people of all races, political affiliations, and religions.

The ideals behind Nelson Mandela's new South Africa have experienced a revival in the media due to his recent decline in health. Through this intensified coverage of the country, the world sees a glimpse of the slow progress toward equality and a national identity that van Niekerk, Wicomb, and Matlwa represent in their novels. The general misconception, especially in the western world, that Mandela's election in 1994 signified the reorganization of the country's infrastructure and immediately improved the lives of non-white citizens, has been revealed as a half-truth. His presidency marks the beginning

of a new era, but his legacy now depends upon the actions of a new generation, currently governed by President Jacob Zuma. More importantly, these novels remind us that the fruition of Mandela and Tutu's "Rainbow Nation" requires more than changes in legislation. True progress toward equality in the nation will occur only after the hearts of South Africans change, a process that these novels suggest occurs slowly and over several generations.

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