The Beloved and Other Monsters:
Biopolitics and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation in Post-1994 South African Literature

by

Veronica A. Blackbourn

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the use of inter-racial relationships as emblems of political reconciliation in South African fiction from and about the transition from apartheid to democracy. Positive representations of the relationships that apartheid prohibited would seem to constitute a rejection of apartheid itself, but through an analysis of novels by Lewis DeSoto, Elleke Boehmer, Zoë Wicomb, Marlene van Niekerk, Ivan Vladislavić, and J.M. Coetzee, I argue that the trope of the redemptive inter-racial relationship in fact reinscribes what Foucault would designate a biopolitical obsession with race as a foundational construct of the nation.

Chapter 2 examines an attempt to write against the legacy of apartheid by repurposing the quintessentially South African genre of the *plaasroman*, but Lewis DeSoto’s *A Blade of Grass* (2003) fails to reverse the narrative effects created by the *plaasroman* structure, implicated as the *plaasroman* is and has been in a biopolitical framework.

Chapter 3 examines Elleke Boehmer’s rewriting of South African history to insist on the genealogical “truth” of the racial mixing of the country and its inhabitants, but *Bloodlines* (2000) yet retains the obsession with racial constructs that it seeks to dispute. Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (2006), meanwhile, invokes genealogical “truth” as a corrective to apartheid constructions of race, but ultimately disallows the possibility of genealogical and historical narratives as correctives rather than continuations of apartheid.

Chapter 4 discusses the structure of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (published in Afrikaans in 1994; English translation 1999) as a collage of Afrikaner nationalist narratives, narratives of trauma, and narratives of inter-racial reconciliation that is able to put powerful local tropes on display while simultaneously preventing their reinscription.
Chapter 5 argues for a turn away from the bonds of affect symbolized by the inter-racial relationship as the basis of the nation in favour of an attention to justice. Readings of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) substitute for the romance of the inter-racial relationship the exigencies of the South African philosophy of *ubuntu* and of the duty to justice posed by the figure of the monstrous neighbour.
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Chapter 1
Post-1994 South Africa and the apartheid imagination

Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination?

Albie Sachs

When the National Party (NP), the political party responsible for the establishment of apartheid in South Africa, was elected to power in 1948, the first law they enacted was the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949). The NP would continue to develop the formal foundations of apartheid through such legislation as the Immorality Act, the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act, the Suppression of Communism Act and other laws that created both conceptual and physical boundaries between the country’s strenuously defined “races,” but it is unsurprising that the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act should have inaugurated the ruling “white” minority’s grand project of creating and enforcing “apartness.” The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was one of the first attempts by the apartheid government to create a decisive biological break in the population of South Africa as a whole, and in its—and, soon after, the Immorality Act’s—focus on sexuality, it neatly encapsulates what, following Foucault, I designate the biopolitical foundations of apartheid: a determination to “make live” the “white”—especially Afrikaner—population while “letting

1“Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (19).
2 Briefly, the function of each law was as follows: the Immorality Act criminalized sexual relationships between “white” and “non-white” people, the Group Areas Act designated the areas in which people of different races were permitted to live, the Population Registration Act inaugurated legal categories of racial classification, and the Suppression of Communism Act outlawed any significant challenge—communist or not—to the government. Later legislation becomes an even better example of Orwellian “Newspeak” in action: the Abolition of Passes requires that all “non-white” South Africans carry identity documents at all times on pain of immediate arrest, the Bantu Education Act implements a policy of under-educating “non-white” South Africans in order to ensure their availability as cheap labour, and so on. While any general history of South Africa should outline the main pieces of apartheid legislation, South Africa History Online (SAHO) offers particularly detailed historical timelines on apartheid legislation, anti-“Indian” legislation, education, the women’s struggle, and more: (http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/chronology.htm).
die” the various “black,” “coloured” or mixed-race, “Indian” and other populations (Foucault “Society” 241).³

For Foucault, it is this distinction between “making live” and “letting die” that defines “State racism,” the primary “technique of power” of the modern state—a technique of power clearly evident in the apartheid obsession with race and with normalizing sexual behaviour (258). As Foucault’s biographer and translator, David Macey, observes in a 2009 article, “Although Foucault's analyses of power, subjectivity, governmentality and biopolitics have been applied in groundbreaking studies of race and racism, there are many who do not associate his work with the problem of race,” and yet, as I shall show, the lens of biopolitics provides an essential framework through which to understand both the logic of the apartheid state and the persistence of that logic beyond South Africa’s transition to democracy (186). I will discuss Foucault’s conception of biopolitics in detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, but an understanding of State racism’s involvement in making live and letting die its populations is central to my concern with the representation of inter-racial relationships in South African fiction, and so I will also take a moment to elaborate some of these central concepts here.

Foucault’s engagement with racism may seem to be fleeting and indirect in his books—even in The History of Sexuality, the published work where the concept of biopolitics is first articulated—but Ann Laura Stoler has taken pains to demonstrate that “references to racism in The History of Sexuality are neither incidental nor perfunctory” (21).⁴ Though The

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³ Although I do not wish to affirm apartheid divisions of “races,” each apartheid racial category was associated with a particular set of rights, and these divisions have continuing legacies of social and material effects, so that the history and experience of a “coloured” South African differs from the history and experience of a “black” South African. I use apartheid labels, then, always in quotation marks and only in order to invoke these particular histories and legacies.

⁴ Stoler asserts in Race and the Education of Desire (1995) that “While references to racism appear in virtually every chapter [of The History of Sexuality], few of Foucault’s interlocutors have considered them for comment or
History of Sexuality is “not...a book about racism,” its elaboration of biopolitics shows “how a discourse of sexuality articulates and eventually incorporates a racist logic” (22). In his 1975-1976 lectures at the Collège de France, delivered while the first volume of The History of Sexuality was in press, and posthumously collected and published as “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault makes the link between biopolitics and racism much more explicit. He traces the emergence of what he designates “a biological-social racism,” a racism “which is absolutely new and which will make discourse function very differently” because it envisions the struggle for life not as “a clash between two distinct races” or a clash between nations, but as “a binary rift within society” (61). This is to say that the clash between races becomes internalized in the state so that the sovereign right to “take life or let live,” associated with the disciplining and normalization of society, becomes overlaid with the regularizing power to “take control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species” (241, 246-247). In addition to the right to kill, the state takes on the power to foster life through attention to “the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population” and through “eliminating accidents, the random element” and illnesses (243, 248). The function of the state becomes to negotiate, “in apparently peaceful forms,” the perpetual war for health played out by the nation’s “superrace” and its “subrace” (88, 61). The elimination of the subrace—the elimination of the deviant, the dangerous, the different—fosters the superrace so that society is strengthened and purified, but since this elimination can never fully be accomplished, it also structures society as a perpetual war against internal agents of degeneration.

Foucault locates this societal shift in the early nineteenth century, and it is at this point, as he remarks, that “we have all those biological-racist discourses of degeneracy, but

(review) (Race 19). Stoler’s book was the first critical work in English to read The History of Sexuality in concert with the then-unpublished 1975-1976 Collège de France lectures, and I examine it in more detail in Chapter 2.
also all those institutions within the social body which make the discourse of race struggle function as a principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society” (61). This is where the account of sexuality as a locus of regulatory power in *The History of Sexuality* meets the concern with racism, because as Foucault observes, “sexuality represents the precise point where the disciplinary and the regulatory, the body and the population, are articulated,” not least because “it is the source of individual diseases and…it is the nucleus of degeneracy” (“Society” 252). In normalizing sexuality, the state can not only control what kind of life it will foster, but supposedly it can root out diseases both physical and social. “As a result,” Foucault concludes, “the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point,” and such “biopolitical mechanisms” are not only a feature of many modern states, but the state becomes modern only once it is structured by biopolitics—that is, the modern state is inevitably defined by biopolitics (“Society” 254).

Since a major role of the modern state is to wield biopolitical power to foster life and ward off degeneracy, the apartheid state and legislation such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act exemplify par excellence the underlying regulatory mechanisms of the modern state. But Foucault’s emphasis on the ubiquity of State racism as an organizing mechanism of the modern state does not imply that the more naked expressions of this racism go unopposed—indeed biopolitical techniques of power are precisely a way of quelling this opposition. Foucault makes explicit reference to Nazism and Stalinism as two examples of murderous states which used a racist rhetoric of degeneracy to

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5 See J. M. Coetzee’s “The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)” for a sustained commentary on the imagery apartheid ideologue Geoffrey Cronjé uses to depict the evils of degeneration. Coetzee’s analysis uncovers in Cronjé’s writing an underlying logic of contamination and contagion which would seem to demonstrate the connections Foucault makes between racism and the rhetoric of health and purification.
justify their elimination of those who opposed their rule (82-83), and, similarly, apartheid rhetoric of degeneracy mobilized State racism to silence dissent and to consolidate control.⁶

If apartheid was erected on the basis of prohibiting inter-racial sexual contact and limiting affectionate inter-racial social contact in general—J. M. Coetzee describes apartheid as “a counter-attack on desire” (“Cronjé” 18)—it is unsurprising that the figure of the inter-racial couple should emerge so prominently in anti-apartheid art and literature as a biopolitical emblem of opposition to apartheid laws.⁷ It seems only logical to counter the prohibition of inter-racial relationships with a celebration of them, understood as a rejection of apartheid thought and practices, and so the trope of the inter-racial relationship features in much anti-apartheid literature, and also emerges in South African literature written during or about the transition to democracy, as an emblem of political reconciliation.

The problem with the reversal the positive representation of these relationships attempts to perform is that, in opposing apartheid on its own terms, i.e. the obsession with race, such an emblem ironically affirms that obsession. In reversing apartheid mores, oppositional anti-apartheid cultural production nevertheless implicitly accepts their biopolitical grounding, affirming in its celebration of inter-raciality the foundational salience of the concept and construction of race. Similarly, inter-racial relationships as emblems of political reconciliation again build on the same ground as apartheid literature in that they accept categories of race as a starting point even as they attempt to oppose, and to signal a break from, apartheid legislation and practices.

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⁶ In saying this, I don’t mean to suggest that racism—including colonial racism in various official and unofficial guises—in South Africa does not predate 1948, but rather that apartheid legislation made these underlying biopolitics obvious in a much more calculated form than previously.

⁷ I use the term “inter-racial” rather than, say, “transracial” in order to emphasize the grounding of these ideas in an apartheid ideology of separateness: while “transracial” suggests that race is a continuum, “inter-racial” preserves, linguistically, a binary conception of race which is germane to my argument that even the apparent conjunction of races in the “inter-racial” encodes the biological caesura that defines the biopolitical.
This dissertation therefore investigates the representation of inter-racial love and friendship as an emblem of political reconciliation as it appears in several examples of what I will call “the literature of the transition”—that is, literature written immediately before and after the first democratic elections of 1994 and/or set specifically during that period. I argue that the trope not only stands in as a foundational national allegory, but, on a larger scale, encodes the biopolitics of the modern state. Moreover, these relationships tend to be depicted as not only conciliatory, but also redemptive: they represent more than a political rapprochement in that their emphasis on either the innate goodness, or the transformation, of the “white” character tends to obviate the need for a more thoroughgoing reckoning of “white” responsibility for past injustice and future reparations. For this reason, the trope tends to appear most often in work by “white” writers, and the bulk of the writers I will discuss are “white.” Rather than an investigation of post-1994 “white” writing, however, it is the broad cultural currency of the redemptive inter-racial relationship that anchors my project—it would also be strange, after all, to frame a critique of the biopolitics of post-1994 fiction primarily in terms of the racial identity of its authors. In reading several iterations of the trope, I hope to tease apart both the raced and gendered assumptions anchoring it; the underpinnings of the trope in turn reveal some of the raced and gendered assumptions anchoring the construction of the nation itself.

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8 A full survey of the trope of the inter-racial relationship in South African fiction would be a dissertation in its own right, and I do not purport to offer such a survey. Nevertheless, the trope can be located in the work of dissident writers Nadine Gordimer and André Brink, in the short stories of Can Themba, especially “Crepuscule,” in Dan Sleigh’s Islands (2004), Jann Turner’s Heartland (1997), Anne Landsman’s The Devil’s Chimney (1997), Achmat Dangor’s Kafka’s Curse (1997), in K. Sello Duiker’s The Quiet Violence of Dreams (2002), Stephen Gray’s fiction, Shamim Sharif’s The World Unseen (2001), Prabha Moodley’s The Heart Knows No Colour (2003), and Gillian Slovo’s Red Dust (2000). Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull (1998) features an affair between the narrator and an unnamed person whose race is not mentioned, but the film adaptation makes this person an African American man. Zoë Wicomb, J. M. Coetzee and others invoke and respond critically to the trope. See also Peter Blair’s “‘That ‘Ugly Word’: Miscegenation and the Novel in Prepartheid South Africa” for his account of the representation of racial mixing in fiction written prior to 1948.
The self-conscious construction of the nation is an on-going process in South Africa. The country now may be considered by many to be a “post-apartheid” state: the unbanning of anti-apartheid political parties, most notably the African National Congress (ANC), in the early 1990s was followed by the country’s first democratic elections in 1994. The transition to democracy also entailed a concerted effort to come to terms with South Africa’s past in the form of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on gross violations of human rights under apartheid. And yet, post-1994, not only do the physical structures of apartheid persist in the form of the historic divisions and allocation of space and resources such as water, proper sewage systems and electricity, but also the conceptual structures of apartheid—in the form of social constructions of race, the nation, and of reconciliation itself—continue to exert their influence. For this reason, I will refer throughout this thesis to “post-1994” writing rather than using the term “post-apartheid.”

On a deeper level, though, a reticence to use the term “post-apartheid” is not the result of pessimism, but of an awareness of its incongruity with the reality of continuing biopolitical social and political production, both in South Africa and, as Foucault suggests, in modern states in general. In this sense, not only is South Africa merely “post-1994,” but the developed world as a whole is merely “post-1994”: since the modern biopolitical state, of which apartheid South Africa was a particularly infamous example, continues to define itself

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9 In her article “Black Atlantics, White Indians and Jews: Locations, Locutions and Syncretic Identities in the Fiction of Achmat Dangor and Others,” Loren Kruger similarly refuses to use the term “post-apartheid” to avoid its potentially prematurely celebratory ring. Instead, she favours the term “post-antiapartheid” to describe writing that post-dates the Struggle. As she explains, “The current situation is post-antiapartheid rather than postapartheid because the consequences of the enforced poverty and displacement of the majority are pressing, while the moral conviction and commitment of antiapartheid solidarity have waned, and in their place has come postcolonial uneven development, which has created a new black elite but not eased the lives of the black majority” (113). Though Kruger seems to use her term to refer to a primarily chronological relationship, it retains the ambiguity addressed in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s question “Is the ‘Post’ in ‘Post-Colonial’ the ‘Post’ in ‘Postmodern’?” Since I am arguing that anti-apartheid and post-1994 writing have more in common than not, I prefer to keep my terminology chronological, and therefore more conceptually open, by connecting the “post” to a specific date.
against its biological others, I contend that in this larger sense we have yet to enter a post-apartheid era.

An investigation of the trope of the redemptive inter-racial relationship gives insight into why this should be so. During and after the transition to democracy in South Africa, initiatives like the TRC gave considerable prominence to the concept of reconciliation as an inter-racial, inter-personal and political process. The mandate of the TRC, particularly its focus on hearing testimony rather than on prosecuting crimes, suggested that only by facing its tragic past could South Africa move forward. In contrast to the enforced racial divisions of apartheid, the “New South Africa” would be a “rainbow nation” in which harmony between the races prevailed. This phrase, coined by TRC Chairman Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was taken up by the newly elected President Mandela in one of his speeches and not only became widely repeated in news and other media, but also emerged as a prominent image in much fiction of the transition. Again not surprisingly, the inter-racial relationship was pressed into service as an emblem for both the “rainbow nation” and for political reconciliation. In novels, stories and films celebrating the redemptive power of inter-racial romances and friendships, political reconciliation became concretized in the bodies of the protagonists and, in the case of inter-racial heterosexual romances, in their potential for offspring. Moreover, far from merely being a product of the political transition, the conception of the inter-racial relationship as a token of the “new” or of the “post-

10 Although technically established by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act as a “juristic person,” (Chapter 2, section 1) the TRC was not primarily a judicial or legislative body; rather, one of its main goals was to narrate the country’s past in order to signal a break from the culture and structures of apartheid and its thought. The TRC was in fact comprised of several different committees. The role of most of these groups was to make recommendations to the government based on their respective findings. The Amnesty Committee, on the other hand, could grant or deny amnesty to perpetrators of human rights abuses. If amnesty was denied, the perpetrator’s case could be tried in court. Thus, even in instances in which the TRC’s powers were considerable, the Commission was never intended to act in the stead of the courts or of the government. Indeed, though the failure of the government to implement most of the TRC Report’s recommendations has led to complaints that the Commission’s work as a whole has amounted to little, the TRC cannot reasonably be expected to act outside of its mandate, and so these complaints are misguided.
apartheid” in South Africa continues to hold currency: even a critic as prominent and as culturally conscious as Sarah Nuttall seems to uphold the assumption that the inter-racial relationship is a mark of progress when she writes, in Entanglement (2009), of Ivan Vladislavić’s Portrait with Keys (2006) that “what is surprising” in it “is the lack of cross-racial friendship” (93).11

My goals in this dissertation are two-fold. In its first half, I examine examples of what I designate “conventional reconciliation narratives” which hinge on the development of inter-racial friendships and relationships to attempt to bring about political reconciliation and the closure of apartheid wounds. Such attempts, I argue, are doomed to failure because they evade rather than embrace the responsibilities of reparations and because they continue to reinscribe racial stereotypes and divisions. Nevertheless, conventional reconciliation narratives and the racial divisions they encode exert great influence because of their grounding in the “common sense”—read ideology—of biopolitics. In its second half, then, this dissertation examines several attempts to disrupt the apparent naturalness of biopolitical ideology, and ultimately I argue for a rejection of the “closure” of reconciliation in favour of an ethics of reparations, in which repeated attempts to make good replace the desire for a final resolution—or rather dismissal—of conflict. Rather than seeking a “solution” to past

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11 Nuttall goes on to suggest, as she has elsewhere, that the problem is generational: though Vladislavić has for some time stood in for the “new” in South Africa, this is the product of the slowness of the academic machine, where often ten years or more lie between the publication of a text and the publication of criticism about it: in fact, she observes, Vladislavić is not of the “new” generation of writers, but is the product of an older one. This point may have some validity in that at the time of writing Vladislavić is middle-aged and has been writing for decades, so that the persistent characterization of him as a “new” writer must relate more to the slowness of his discovery outside of South Africa than to his relative youth or newness of career. On the other hand, Nuttall’s comment about the lack of inter-racial relationships in Portrait with Keys still conflates Vladislavić-the-narrator with Vladislavić-the-author, a conflation made even more apparent—and puzzling—when she remarks that Liz, “the friend who is not white, seems almost an authorial invention” (93). To comment that a figure in a book, even one as apparently autobiographical as Portrait with Keys, “seems almost an authorial invention” is a peculiar criticism. Wherein lies the critique? Does Nuttall suggest that Vladislavić-the-author, having no friends who are not “white,” has made one up? If so, and if Vladislavić-the-author has invented a cross-racial friendship to put into his book, how does this relate to her criticism that the book does not depict a cross-racial friendship? Is the problem that Vladislavić-the-author himself has no cross-racial friendships or that he does not depict any such relationships in his book as central ones?
trauma that in fact re-ensconces the status quo, on-going acts of reparations become a quotidian practice in which social relationships can truly begin to change.

1.1 National allegories and foundational fictions

In his defence of Jameson’s essay on “Third World” literature as national allegory, Neil Lazarus remarks that “if this hypothesis had not been postulated, we would have had to invent it” (58). For Lazarus, the persistent recurrence of national allegory in “Third World” or post-colonial texts demands a theoretical frame like Jameson’s within which to understand it, and he observes that the problem is not in seeing national allegories in “Third World” texts, but in predetermining that all “Third World” texts will be read only as national allegories (58).

If we cease to read Jameson’s essay as an unforgivable homogenization of “Third World” literature, seeing it instead as a description of the “national allegory”—that is, as an understanding that in the context of national political struggles, the individuals described in novels stand in for political forces, and even allegorize the country as a whole—we can begin to better understand the debates about the political functions of literature which occupied public space at the time of South Africa’s transition to democracy.\footnote{Some readers may object that South Africa, being one of the most developed countries in Africa, is not, in fact, a “Third World” country, but certainly the lack of universal political enfranchisement that defined apartheid enconced a colonial, rather than a capitalist, political order. Whether this order has significantly changed since the transition to democracy is debatable since the gap between rich and poor has only increased since 1994, so that the majority of the “black” population remains in all practical terms disempowered.}

One of the most prominent of these was the debate provoked by ANC policymaker Albie Sachs’ position paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom.”

Written in 1989 as part of the African National Congress’ planning process for South Africa’s transition to democracy, “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” envisions a post-apartheid artistic practice—or at least it proscribes the continuity of certain elements of anti-
apartheid literature and visual art. Most famously, Sachs proposes that ANC members, and perhaps artists in general, “should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle” for “a period of, say, five years” (19). The fact that Sachs proposes a timeline for the ban suggests that he has tongue firmly in cheek, but nevertheless his in-house seminar caused a national stir. Twenty years later, Sachs’ concerns continue to resonate as questions about literature and other forms of art as accurate or desirable representations of South African life and politics—or at least of South African aspirations to change South African life and politics—continue to dominate much engagement with the country’s contemporary cultural production.

*Spring is Rebellious* (1990) collects both Sachs’ original paper and twenty-two of the responses which emerged in the four months after “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” was excerpted in the *Weekly Mail* of February 2, 1990 (De Kok 9, Meintjes 30). Many of the respondents observe that much of Sachs’ analysis is not particularly new in that the relationship—both actual and ideal—between art and politics has long been a subject of debate, particularly in South Africa. What is new in this debate is what Tony Morphet calls the location of its voice. As Morphet and others—even Sachs himself—observe, Sachs is not a literary critic or cultural worker, but a lawyer, an activist, and a policy maker. Sachs played a large part in the drafting of South Africa’s interim constitution of 1993 and in the drafting of the new constitution signed into law in 1997. Following the transition to democracy, he continued to shape the “new” South Africa directly in his role as a constitutional court judge. As Morphet observes of Sachs’ position paper, “the point

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13 Although Morphet begins his piece with the disclaimer “I am neither a literary scholar nor an artist,” his early training was in fact literary and he began his career teaching English at the University of Natal. Morphet’s academic literary training makes him an exception in the group of respondents collected by De Kok and Press, most of whom are writers and cultural workers. In this way, *Spring is Rebellious* offers a unique snapshot of grassroots and political responses to questions of artistic practice in South Africa—if the two can properly be separated, it offers the perspectives of practitioners rather than the perspectives of theorists.
cannot be overlooked that these comments gained their salience precisely from the fact that it was Sachs who was speaking, and not some unregistered and unauthorized voice. The energy of the responses derives less from the argument than from the location of the voice” (139). Moreover, much of the debate that Sachs provoked took place in the public eye, in the pages of national newspapers and at political meetings, rather than tucked away in literary journals. Though some of the arguments collected in Spring is Rebellious may seem to rehearse older, more developed literary analyses (as several respondents note, citing the literary criticism of Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, N. P. van Wyk Louw and others), Sachs’ paper and its ensuing debate point to the ongoing currency of the idea that literature, liberation and identity politics, and nation-building are—and even should be—crucially involved in each other. Indeed, in 1990, in the midst of the confusion, violence, and hope of the political transition from apartheid to democracy, the Sachs debate did not just rehearse this idea, but enacted it on a national stage. As Lindiwe Mabuza remarked at the original ANC conference at which the polemic was read, “Comrade Albie contradicts himself—his very paper is an instrument of the struggle” (quoted in Sachs “Pear” 147).

This iteration of the debate on the political function of fiction in South Africa encapsulates many important strains of that debate. The first such strain is the assumption that narration is a primary tool of nation-building projects. Certainly the drafting of the new constitution and the proceedings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) seem to represent attempts to change the country’s narrative frames—both those

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14 Frank Meintjies makes a similar observation about Sachs’ positioning: “Perhaps what he says is unique because it is from the pen of a political leader, or because he addresses himself so frankly to political organisations” (33).

15 At the time of the debate, Mabuza, who also has a background in literary studies, was the ANC’s Chief Representative to the USA. After the transition, she became a member of parliament, and she is currently South Africa’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. Who’s Who South Africa (http://www.whoswhosa.co.za/user/4608)
dealing with the future as defined by the constitution and with the past as uncovered by the TRC—in order to constructively change the realities lived by the country’s citizens. The second strain is the proscription of what Sachs calls “instrumentalism.” Though Sachs uses the term to describe art which is narrowly politically utilitarian in focus, I argue that Sachs’ polemic, and much other anti-apartheid writing, is instrumentalist in a far wider sense of the term, and one which shows the extent to which anti-apartheid work as an oppositional practice is grounded, ironically, in apartheid ideology. One contention of this dissertation is that, in failing to escape the binary and the (literally) categorical thinking of which apartheid was so prominent an example, much anti-apartheid writing continues apartheid patterns.

In fact, Sachs sees binarism as the defining element of instrumentalism in the fictions he criticizes. He observes that at the core of an instrumentalist approach to artistic practice is a tendency to “line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other, occasionally permitting someone to pass from one column to the other, but never acknowledging that there is bad in the good, and even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad” (20). For Sachs, “a purely instrumental and non-dialectical

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16 The preamble to the constitution makes explicit this imagined break from an unjust past in favour of a (liberal humanist) vision of the future:
“We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.
We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to

- Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

May God protect our people.
Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso.
God seën Suid-Afrika. God bless South Africa.
Mudzimu hatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika.”
view of culture,” such as the paradigm implied by the equation of art with weapons of the struggle, is “damaging...to artistic creation” and “impoverishes the struggle itself” (22). But Sachs’ argument does not then endorse the idea of art for art’s sake. Plainly Sachs still sees culture as a weapon of the struggle after all, but he is arguing for a deeper complexity of artistic practice, observing that “the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions—hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus” (20). The problem, in the nut-shell, is not the desire to use art as a political tool, but low standards of artistic practice in art used as a political tool.

The concept of instrumentalism as a form of thought structured by categorization, and policed by judgements of value based on utility, is one to which I will return, but for the moment what interests me here is Sachs’ description of anti-apartheid art. For Sachs, a facile binarism and a fatal solemnity dominates anti-apartheid literature and visual art. He not only decries what he sees in these media, but notes what is lacking. “And what about love?,” he wonders, asserting that the number of anthologies and journals of poems and stories that deal with love “do not make the fingers of a hand” (20-21). Sachs argues that post-apartheid artistic practice must make space for love, because the struggle against apartheid is also the struggle for “the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world” (21). In his focus on love as an antidote to art that encodes instructions “about how to win a strike or blow up a petrol dump,” Sachs’ criticism of anti-apartheid art seems to remain focused largely on content—of theme and of message (21). Despite the fact that Sachs uses terms that relate to the criticism of structure and genre, his real target in “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” is solidarity criticism—i.e. the endorsement of art based on its
political, rather than its aesthetic, value—and not the conventional construction of anti-apartheid fiction.¹⁷

Moreover, in his appeal for love, Sachs constructs his own binary, in which the oversimplification characteristic of instrumentalist paradigms—the tendency to use art as a weapon, the tendency to construct characters who represent whole categories of people and plots that chart political movements—is countered by “love and tenderness,” by a complexity of character and plot, and by the return to prominence of the aesthetic as a primary determinant of value. In Sachs’ vision of post-apartheid artistic practice, the urgency of a story’s political message, the utility of a work’s imagery, will no longer outweigh clunkiness of plot, stiffness of character, and the recycling of clichés. Instead, the oppositional mode crucial to the struggle can now give way to the full complexity of human experience, but as Morphet observes, in Sachs’ account of it, post-apartheid fiction remains redemptive. In his comparison of Sachs’ and of Ndebele’s essays against solidarity criticism,¹⁸ Morphet notes that “both founder on the issue of closure. Both appeal to the notion of incorporative irony for the sake of greater range, flexibility, complexity and openness, but neither is able to relinquish the fixed point of closure in the framework of social action to which they have committed themselves” (142). That is, underlying both

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¹⁷ Sachs targets solidarity criticism even more strongly in the afterword to Spring is Rebellious, in which he recounts attending an art exhibition in Sweden and shocking his audience by speaking directly about the harm done by endorsing art because of the correctness of its political content rather than the excellence of its execution. Now that the struggle against apartheid is reaching its close, he suggests, the time has come to raise the bar for aesthetic standards. Implicit in this call for the increased stringency of aesthetic judgement is an assumption of international, or even universal, artistic standards and values. The end of apartheid in South Africa will mean the end of its pariah status, and, as well as resuming its place in global trade and international sporting competition, it will rejoin the worlds of international art and literature.

¹⁸ Morphet is discussing Ndebele’s “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” in which Ndebele argues against the kind of prescriptive stories in which heroic protagonists make dramatic choices and win (or sometimes, tragically, lose) against impossible odds. Instead of this literature of the “spectacular,” Ndebele argues for work which focuses on the complexities of the “ordinary” and quotidian. Such work not only resists overdramatizing the already-dramatic excesses of the apartheid system, but also restores to the oppressed the humanity that apartheid denies. For more, see Ndebele’s essays collected as South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary.
Sachs’ and Ndebele’s essays is an assumption that, properly written, fiction is, precisely, an instrument of the struggle, albeit one more sophisticated than the “missile-firing apparatus” that Sachs condemns.

But, as a goal, an account of “love” is as prescriptive as an account of “freedom,” especially when love and freedom become equated; furthermore, Sachs is not alone in seeing love as the answer to an historical legacy of racial divisions and rifts. In *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer attempts to describe the dynamics of an “erotic rhetoric….in which national projects [were] coupled with productive heterosexual desire” in nineteenth-century Latin American novels (2). Sommer’s work focuses on the novels of a different time and place, but many of her observations about the conjunction of nationalism and sexuality usefully can be applied to recent South African fiction which attempts to reconcile the racial divisions of the apartheid past.

Sommer grounds the theoretical framework of her project in the intersection of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault takes for granted the investment of the state in the production and control of (hetero)sexuality, and Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, in which Anderson observes of the constructedness of a “natural” nationalism, that “‘in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has a gender’” (quoted in Sommer 40). Anderson does not reflect at any length upon the constructedness of that gender, but by locating her own work in the intersection between these two foundational constructions of compulsory heterosexuality (to appropriate Adrienne Rich’s term) and naturalized nationalism, Sommer reveals a primary connection between the public realm of the state and the private realm of the family—or rather she identifies a site at which these realms are revealed to be falsely constructed as separate and distinct. As Foucault’s conception of biopolitics emphasizes, this connection between national and sexual identity
has become naturalized not only in Latin American fiction, but in modern nation-states in general.

Briefly, Sommer argues that in the body of literature she has delineated, “‘natural’ heterosexual love and…marriages…provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at midcentury” (6), and that furthermore these national romances “developed a narrative formula for resolving continuing conflicts, a postepic conciliatory genre that consolidated survivors by recognizing former enemies as allies” (12). Although the work of Foucault and of Anderson together insists that neither sexual nor national identity is rooted in a stable truth, or even in an historically consistent discourse, Latin American nationalist sentimental fictions are not concerned with any possible inconsistencies in these constructions because they

know themselves to be performing and seducing. Their object is to win at love and politics, not to anchor the narrative or to reckon the cost of winning. Content to construct personal and public discourses ‘upon each other in a circle without end’, as Pascal had described his own mundane allegorizing, with no stable philosophical ground to either violate or desire, foundational novels are precisely those fictions that try to pass for truth and to become the ground for political association. (45)

Though this may not seem to be a particularly astonishing or sophisticated sleight-of-hand on the part of the authors in question, Sommer emphasizes that nuance is beside the point:

One might say that modernizing romances…are written backward, progressing like religious or mythical discourse from a sacred given and reconstructing a trajectory towards it. The narrative begins conceptually from a resolution of conflict, whether that resolution is realized or not, and serves as a vehicle for love and country that seem, after the fact, to have preexisted the writing. (49)

The project of national consolidation which these novels seek to effect is not merely one of uniting different political factions within the same ethnic group and social stratum, but of achieving national unification across racial and class lines. Indeed, Sommer notes that rather than these couplings being threatened by issues of personality or compatibility, “Erotic
interest in these novels owes its intensity to the...prohibitions against the lovers’ union across racial or regional lines. And political conciliation, or deals, are transparently urgent because the lovers ‘naturally’ desire the kind of state that would unite them” (47). In this way, the novels Sommer describes literally and figuratively engender the new nation, rendering heterosexual desire natural and foundational.

While Sommer locates the emergence of the Latin American national romance at the founding of the new state, as I’ve already suggested, the genealogy of this kind of narrative is quite different in the South African context, where the depiction of conciliatory inter-racial romances first emerges in anti-apartheid narratives. Writing of “post-apartheid” fiction, critic Michiel Heyns makes the connection between anti-apartheid and post-1994 inter-racial romances by invoking “Nadine Gordimer’s phrase and title, a ‘Sport of Nature,’” to describe “the white person who miraculously escapes complicity and heroically opposes the regime, often through union, sexual or otherwise, with a black protagonist” (48). In many ways, Sport of Nature (1987) may be understood as a model anti-apartheid novel both in its racial and its heterosexualised gender politics. Though the novel’s protagonist Hillela models an attractive strength of character and open-mindedness, in many ways she also sleeps her way into political consciousness.

To be sure, some invocations of the trope, such as William Plomer’s Turbott Wolfe (1926), precede the election of the National Party to power in 1948, and thus precede the set of policies that formed apartheid proper, but I would consider Turbott Wolfe, for example, to be anti-apartheid in the sense that it decries “white” bigotry in South Africa. The novels that Sommer investigates may be anti-racist, but they are so largely as an anti-colonial strategy—i.e. they write against Spanish rule by embracing the local mixture of races. In South Africa, Afrikaner opposition to British rule constituted an anti-colonial movement, but not necessarily an anti-racist one.

I use A Sport of Nature as a model here for the sake of convenience, and in doing so I do the work something of a disservice. A full analysis of the novel would of course make its complexity clear, but such an analysis lies beyond the scope of the current argument. Instead I offer only a few brief comments on the romance of political enlightenment the novel depicts.

In many ways, Gordimer’s heroine Hillela can be considered a model anti-apartheid protagonist, since her opposition to apartheid develops “naturally” from her instincts and from her self-interest in personal freedom, a freedom which, she comes to realize through following her own desires, is fully bound up in the freedom of others. As Hillela’s cousin observes, Hillela “learn[s] through [her] skin,” and so her progress from
The emphasis on the connection between Hillela’s sexual freedom and her political defiance is typical of the liberatory inter-racial romance: Sommer also comments on the elements of the national romance which threaten conventional sex and gender roles, including “heroes who were remarkably feminized” and “remarkably principled and resourceful romantic heroines who stand up to the police, conspire to escape oppression and rescue their refined heroes,” but she seems to see these elements as accidental by-products of the narrative, by-products which perforce trouble sex and gender roles by simultaneously insisting that the lovers are representative of their sex and station and also defiant of the strictures upon which these identities are based (16).

In this way, sexual repression is identified with racial oppression in that individuals are inevitably constrained in their desires, understood to be innate, by their conventional social roles. Such an understanding of the nature of individuality as essential rather than constructed of course substitutes one narrative of “natural” racial and gender divisions with an oppositional narrative in which the dictates of desire determine the content of the “natural.” If heterosexual desire is natural and healthy, then prohibitions of that desire must be unnatural. Progressive politics then hardly seem to be politics at all, but rather respect for the natural translated into the political realm by well-adjusted individuals, while repressive politics in contrast become the aggregate of neurotic individuals’ attempts to quiet their fears and self-doubt.

rebellious teenager to exiled political is negotiated largely through her romantic and sexual relationships, first with “white” men, and later with “black” revolutionaries. While some might find the means of Hillela’s political enlightenment (i.e. heterosexual sex) to be anti-feminist, Hillela is nevertheless a “sport of nature” not only in her freedom from political prejudices but also in her freedom from the constrictions of conventional femininity. Hillela’s sexuality may be relentlessly heterosexual, and perhaps even hypersexual, but her sexual jouissance nevertheless places her outside the norms of “proper” womanhood and perhaps even in the realm of Rousseau’s state of nature. Characters in the novel observe of Hillela that she is strangely “innocent” of political instincts (56) and that she is a blank slate since there is nothing she knows without experiencing it for herself (160). The emphasis on Hillela’s natural political enlightenment means that A Sport of Nature cannot be read cynically as the tale of a woman sleeping her way up the chain of power in the world of anti-apartheid exiles, but rather as a parable in which national and erotic freedom become identified with each other.
The trope of the inter-racial relationship thus not only encodes heterosexual desire as a site of the (re)production of the nation, but also functions as a marker of psychological health. Though Sommer does not focus on this aspect of her foundational fictions, the use of the Freudian family romance as the pattern for the conflicts and successful resolutions of conventional reconciliation narratives casts these narratives as models of psychological healing as well as political reconciliation. Put another way, political reconciliation becomes associated with psychological healing and vice versa, and the conjunction of the idealized image of the nation and the rhetoric of health once more returns us to its opposite: the spectre of disease and degeneration that motivates and justifies biopolitics. The nationalist concern with sexual and, of course, social hygiene once more reveals the connection of these concerns with the goals and strategies of eugenics.

This dissertation begins with an account of just such an attempt to replace the rhetoric of “politics” with the rhetoric of the “natural.” In Chapter 2, I examine an attempt to rewrite the nation by repurposing the quintessentially South African genre of the *plaasroman*, but rather than achieving the attempted substitution of (racist) “politics” for (non-racist) “nature,” Lewis DeSoto’s *A Blade of Grass* (2003) ends up merely suggesting that the true origins of apartheid lie only in sexual jealousy and not in a racist and colonial political history. Furthermore, the novel, despite its apparent opposition to Afrikaner nationalist ideology, fails to reverse the narrative effects created by the *plaasroman* structure, implicated as the *plaasroman* is and has been in a biopolitical framework. The *plaasroman* is so deeply structured by the biopolitical that any attempts to recuperate it as a national, but not narrowly Afrikaner nationalist, genre cannot succeed.

This effort to engage the valences of the biopolitical by reversing them is followed in Chapter 3 by an examination of another such attempt. Elleke Boehmer tries to counter
apartheid narratives of racial separation through a rewriting of South African history which insists on the genealogical “truth” of the country and its inhabitants: South Africa is a country of racial mixing, and it is from anxiety about this fact that the historical policing of racial boundaries stems. But in attempting to rewrite history through an ameliorative genealogy, Bloodlines (2000) yet retains the obsession with the genetic and racial constructs that it seeks to dispute. Zoë Wicomb’s Playing in the Light (2006), meanwhile, invokes genealogical “truth” as a corrective to apartheid constructions of race, but ultimately Wicomb disallows the possibility of genealogy and history as a corrective to, rather than a continuation of, apartheid. She instead suggests—but also partially forecloses—an imaginative identification with others along the lines of the J. M. Coetzee character Elizabeth Costello’s “sympathetic imagination” as a potentially redemptive and reconciliatory practice. In effect, Wicomb turns from a concern, visible in the Sachs debate and elsewhere, with constructing the “right” narrative to produce reconciliation, to a concern with cultivating receptivity to others.

Chapter 4 builds on this insight that, as a precondition for beginning to recognize and disrupt historical injustices, practices of reception hold more promise than do those of production. It discusses the structure of Marlene van Niekerk’s Triomf (1994; English translation 1999) as a collage of Afrikaner nationalist narratives, narratives of trauma, and narratives of inter-racial reconciliation. In the transfer of the technique of collage from the realm of the visual to the realm of the literary, Van Niekerk is able to put powerful local narratives on display while simultaneously preventing their reinscription. Rather than seeking the “right” narrative to promote healing, moreover, Van Niekerk insists on the monstrousness of her family of protagonists and suggests that their inclusion in the body of
the nation is a necessary precondition of any state that would reject biopolitical boundaries of inclusion and exclusion as its grounding.

This turn away from the idealized image of the nation is taken up in Chapter 5, which argues for a turn away from bonds of affect as the basis of the nation in favour of an attention to justice. Readings of Ivan Vladislavić’s The Restless Supermarket (2001) and J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace (1999) substitute for the romance of the inter-racial relationship the exigencies of the South African philosophy of ubuntu and of the duty to justice posed by the figure of the monstrous neighbour. As with the monstrous protagonists of Triomf, the difficulty of accepting the dislikeable main characters of these novels emulates the rejection of the desire for the final closure of reconciliation in the form of love in favour of an ethics of reparations which demands constant effort. In asking for such an effort, these novels again replace the desire to construct the “right” national narrative to heal all—to say the right thing, as it were—with the duty to listen and respond to others.

Though this dissertation does not purport to suggest an alternative structure of the nation as revealed through post-1994 fiction, it does hope to argue against “love” and desire as the imagined bases of political bonds. By revealing the limitations of the inter-racial relationship trope, I assert that “love” in these novels actually stands for the digestion of difference and thus cannot serve as the basis of any nation that is to reject the deep internal divisions of the biopolitical—a state to which the “New” South Africa has aspired in its rhetoric surrounding the dismantling of apartheid. If authors are to move past the biopolitical in imagining a new South Africa, they must leave aside as a basis for the nation depictions of a “natural” love for the other that purport to erase conflicts. Although it is a commonplace to present interpersonal relations as templates for national ones, I argue that an anti-biopolitical model for the nation is to be found not in the resolution of conflict, but
in its acceptance. I therefore examine relations with the neighbour, in which potential
conflict is never really subsumed, as the basis for a state that accepts radical difference as its
starting-point. Justice, ironically, may not be possible through the eyes of a beloved, or of a
friend, but rather only through the eyes of a monster.
Chapter 2

“As jy aan my simbole vat, vat jy aan my”: sex, space and biopolitics in *A Blade of Grass*

Dina, the first “indigenous flower” of the month for the new Afrikaner porn magazine *Loslyf* (first issue June 1995), poses barebreasted in front of the Voortrekker monument. Her leopard-print shorts and mane of hair suggest her “wildness,” and her sultry frown and open man’s bush jacket challenge the image of the prim Boer woman. But Dina is not merely an Afrikaner; she is the descendent of Andries Hendrik Potgieter, a hero of the Great Trek\(^1\) which the monument commemorates—indeed, his statue is visible on the side of the monument just behind Dina’s head. In the upper right corner of the photo is a short biographical caption about Dina, which explains that she is a 24-year-old nurse and that her great-great-grandfather Potgieter is her hero because “he was the sort of man who inspired people to trek barefoot over the Drakensberg Mountains so that we Boere could be free” (translated and quoted in Coombes 40). In reference to debates over monuments such as the one behind her, Dina continues, “All the people who are so eager to punish the Afrikaner volk by demolishing and desecrating our monuments are playing with fire. They should know: if you interfere with my symbols, you interfere with me” (Coombes 43).\(^2\)

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1 The “Great Trek” of 1835-40 refers to the colonization of the interior of what is now South Africa by the Afrikaners. Roughly speaking, Afrikaner colonies on the coast of the country had come under control of the British, whose rule was felt by the Boere as an intolerable yoke (among other things, slavery was now illegal in British territories, which disrupted Afrikaner farming). Taking matters into their own hands, several groups of Boere, now known as Voortrekkers (Afrikaans for “pioneers”), decided to travel inland by ox-wagon in order to claim new territory outside of British control. This journey entailed military confrontations with the indigenous people whose territory the Voortrekkers wished to claim. The Voortrekkers’ guns enabled them to withstand battles with many groups who outnumbered them, most notably the Zulu and the Matabele, and this survival against the odds became part of the mythology of the Boer claim to the land. Ultimately, the Voortrekkers established settlements and carved out farms, but the later discovery of gold and diamonds brought the British into this land within a generation, again strengthening the idea of the beleaguered Boere withstandning unjust government. For more on this history, see Leonard Thompson’s *A History of South Africa*, 52ff.

2 The full caption in Afrikaans, visible in Coombes’ reproduction of the centrefold, reads: “Dina, LOSLYF se heel eerste inheemse blom, is ‘n Boeremieisie in murg en been. ‘My groot-groot-grootjie, Hendrik Potgieter, is van kleins af my held. Hy was die soort man wat mense aangespoor het om kaalvoet oor die Drakensberge te trek sodat ons Boere vry en vrede hier in die Transvaal kan woon. As ons maar net vandag ’n leier van sy kaliber kon hé,’ sug sy. Die 24-jarige verpleegster van Pretoria draai nie doekies om as sy
In a chapter devoted to exploring the possibilities of rehabilitating apartheid monuments in a post-1994 South Africa, art historian Annie E. Coombes reads the Losljf spread as “a critique of the most oppressive version of Afrikaner ethnic absolutism” (40). She concedes that the “disrespect for the boundaries between sacred and profane,” such as the juxtaposition of the sexually available Dina and the fortress-like monument to “white civilization” in South Africa, is a pornographic convention, but insists that, in the context of South Africa’s political and cultural transition to a non-racial democracy, the photographs offer a “strategic intervention” in the debate over apartheid monuments and national myths, and also in the realm of censorship.

While I find convincing Coombes’ reading of the magazine in the context of the political transition, I see in the spread more than an attempt to satirize the “sacred” myths of Afrikaner nationalism and to pillory efforts to exert continued interpretive control over relics of the apartheid past. Dina’s assertion that “if you interfere with my symbols, you interfere with me” resonates as more than a clumsy double entendre—instead the quotation, in the context of her suggestive posing, offers an invitation: “interfere with my symbols” (the very thing being enacted in the photograph), and in doing so, “interfere with me.” In fact, Dina’s

oor haar liefde vir Afrikaans en die Afrikaner kultuur praat nie. ‘Al die mense wat nou so graag die Afrikanervolk wil straf deur hulle monumente om te stamp en te ontheilig, speel met vuur. Hulle moet weet: as jy aan my simbole vat, vat jy aan my.’” (Coombes figure 14).

Historically the ANC has considered itself a non-racial, as opposed to a pan- or multi-racial, party. This makes especial sense in light of apartheid “multiculturalism” rhetoric, which often presented itself as a form of sensitivity to racial and cultural difference, a cynical invocation of cultural relativism used as a ploy to grant some rights to some and deny the same rights to others. In contrast, “non-racial” rejects altogether racial difference as an organizing principle and recalls anti-apartheid ideals.

Apartheid control over media and public expression of ideas not only covered political writing, art, music, and film, but also pornography. Widespread media censorship meant that television did not come to South Africa until the mid 1970s, since apartheid ideologues saw in the medium “the downfall of civilizations” and Verwoerd asserted that “TV would cause absolute chaos to South African life” (quoted in Nixon “Apollo11”). As Coombes notes, Losljf appeared “at the same time that the Constitutional Court was deciding an important test case on the legality of pornography” in which the Christian Lawyers’ Association argued against pornography on the grounds that it promotes violence against women (48). The adoption of what was originally a radical feminist argument against pornography by the “moral” right seems to me to constitute a familiar displacement in which the protection of women’s freedoms becomes the pretext for patriarchal control of multiple realms of expression and representation. Moreover, concern with “protecting” women’s sexual agency is entirely consonant with maintaining a biopolitical social order by normalizing female sexuality.
choice of word here, “vat,” connected as it is to the adjective “vatterig,” meaning “fond of touching/fondling (a woman against her wish),”

stress not only the sexualization of the debate, but also its potentially violent context. In this way, the photo spread doesn’t merely juxtapose “sacred” Afrikaner identity with profane concupiscence, but rather it excavates the monument’s underlying biopolitics.

In referencing Foucault’s concept of the biopolitical, I hope to establish the underlying instrumentalism which I argue has structured, and continues to structure, a predominant stream of the South African social imaginary. Specifically, this chapter examines a novelistic attempt to “interfere” with Afrikaner symbols in the post-apartheid context, an attempt which is ultimately instructive primarily because, in its failure, it demonstrates its own limits. In *A Blade of Grass*, Lewis DeSoto attempts to rewrite the *plaasroman*, a genre associated with Afrikaner nationalism in general and, as J. M. Coetzee has shown, with attempts to claim Afrikaners’ “natural” right to territory in South Africa. While the *plaasroman*, like the Voortrekker Monument, encodes a claim to Afrikaners’ divine imperative through heterosexual (re)production, De Soto attempts to de-racialize, and to some extent, de-(hetero)sexualize the genre. This attempt not only reveals the extent to which sexuality, and especially female sexuality, is integral to nationalist myths, but also the extent of the underlying instrumentalist understanding of sexuality within nationalist discourse. Furthermore, the vision of the productively heterosexual nation not only calls to mind Foucault’s observation that “the first function of racism” is “to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower” (“Society” 255), but also reveals the structure of sexual marginality. In the novel, same-sex sexuality, specifically

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5 As defined by the *Pharos Afrikaans-Engels Skoolwoordeboek*
lesbianism, is literally unimaginable since, as a (putatively) non-reproductive sexuality, it cannot be incorporated into the biopolitical economy which structures the nation.  

2.1 Biopolitics and the Voortrekker Monument

Although the term has since been taken up by other theorists, Foucault’s original concept of biopolitics, especially as elaborated in his Collège de France lectures, emphasizes the conjunction of state power and of racism so neatly encapsulated in the Voortrekker monument. The monument has always been a concrete expression of Afrikaner nationalism, and because the NP government sold the structure and its surrounding park to a private group just before the 1994 elections (Coombes 33), the monument continues to function as a symbolic stronghold of “white” power, a massive placemaker of the “caesura” between Afrikaner culture and what the monument’s website copy refers to as a “foreign onslaught”—i.e. the indigenous peoples of southern Africa.

The monument was intended to function as a symbolic Afrikaner rallying-point from its inception. The laying of its cornerstone was an important element of the ceremonies surrounding the re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938. For this centenary celebration of the Trek, ox-wagons set out from Cape Town and travelled throughout the country, met by crowds of Afrikaners in Voortrekker dress. Of course, this symbolic Trek and its attendant ceremonies functioned not just as the commemoration of past events, but as an insistently  

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6 I say “putatively non-reproductive” here because, certainly at the time that Foucault was giving his Collège de France lectures, non-heterosexual sexualities were conventionally understood to preclude child-bearing. The queer baby boom, or “gayby boom,” is a relatively recent phenomenon, and despite what Lisa Duggan has called the “homonormativity” and David Eng the “queer liberalism” it often is seen to entail—that is, an assurance that queer families can assimilate very well into a “white,” middle-class, socially and politically conservative domesticity—the extent to which queerness is still portrayed by some as a form of degeneracy is evident in the hysterical biopolitical rhetoric (i.e. queerness as a threat to the family, etc.) of those who oppose same-sex marriage and other rights for sexual minorities in Canada and especially in the U.S. at the time of writing.

7 Most notably in Hardt and Negri’s Empire, but Giorgio Agamben also works with this concept extensively in his Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.
public consolidation of cultural myth and identity. In the midst of the invocation of Afrikaner dress and customs in the form of the re-enactment of the Trek, the cornerstone of the monument was laid on December 16, known to Afrikaners as “the Day of the Vow,” the anniversary of the Zulu chief Dingane’s defeat at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. In that battle, a band of approximately 500 Voortrekkers and 200 “non-white” servants, with muskets and two cannon, held off between 10 000 and 20 000 Zulu impis armed with assegai (spears). Prior to the battle the Afrikaners had made a vow to God that if God protected them from their enemies they would build a church and keep the anniversary of that day in perpetuity as a holy day. At the end of that day, 3000 Zulu warriors were dead, but only 3 Trekkers wounded. This victory was subsequently mythologized as evidence of the Boers’ divine right to South African land, and this mythology permeates the monument, from the friezes depicting the battle, to the stone cenotaph which sits on the ground floor in the monument, representing those Boers fallen for their country. As the monument’s website explains, “it is through an opening in the arch [of the Hall of Heroes] that the sun shines at twelve o’clock on 16 December each year on the middle of the Cenotaph and the words ‘We for thee, South Africa.’ The ray of sunshine symbolises God’s blessing on the lives and endeavours of the Voortrekkers.”

Despite its history and its intended function as symbolic bastion of “white” “civilization” in South Africa, some attempts have been made post-apartheid to soften the rhetoric in which the monument is explained. The monument’s current website makes very little mention of the battles between the Voortrekkers and the “black” peoples they encountered on the Trek, simply giving thanks for God’s apparent blessing on the Trekkers’ “lives and endeavours”—bland phrasing which hides Afrikaner nationalist interference in,

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8 Coombes notes that “There is a nice irony here in that the shaft of light no longer hits its intended target due to the idiosyncrasies of planetary activity.” (footnote 22, 305)
and curtailment of, the lives and endeavours of “black” South Africans. Post-apartheid, the Day of the Vow has been re-christened the Day of Reconciliation, but it is unclear how convincing the message of reconciliation may be on a day which still marks the defeat of a Zulu chief.⁹ In the monument’s museum, explanatory panels now make a disingenuous attempt to reframe the Trek as migration rather than colonization. As Meskell writes in her analysis of the panels, “the display reiterates the narrative that European settlers arrived at the Cape at much the same time as other African groups were entering South Africa from the north. In fact, there were so many ethnic migrations that the European entry was simply one of many. These texts couch the invasion of the country in the language of migration—a harmless movement of people from one place to another” (172-173). Not only does the portrayal of the Trek as a migration rather than an invasion soften its image, but the implication that other groups, specifically “black” African groups, were also migrating into what is now South Africa at roughly the same time implicitly questions these groups’ right to the land, purporting to give Africans and European colonists an equal historic claim.

But the competition between “white” people and “black” people for land in Southern Africa is not only present in the monument as a “war-type” confrontation. Coombes notes features of the design of the monument which refer to fertility and sexuality, elements of nationalism that Foucault frames as a “biological-type” confrontation (“Society” 255),¹⁰ the most obvious of which is the statue of the Boer woman and children that stands

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⁹Mindful of the cultural resonance of the day, the ANC chose the 16th of December, 1961, to launch Umkhonto we Sizwe (“The Spear of the Nation”), the armed wing of the ANC, with a series of bombings of government buildings and electric substations in three major cities (Boehmer Mandela 46). The day also seems to continue to resonate as significant across cultural groups in South Africa in more recent times: the new Congress of the People party, mostly composed of defectors from the ANC, chose December 16, 2008 as the date of its official launch (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7785021.stm).

¹⁰As Foucault notes, racism makes simultaneously possible both war-type relationships and biological-type relationships with the other: “racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship…..the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the
before the monument and is flanked by retreating wildebeest, symbols of African darkness. Coombes also quotes the official monument guidebook on the detail of the “ornamental zigzag motif above the large windows” which is “borrowed from cuneiform writing to indicate water and fertility, with a reference to the importance of procreation for the Voortrekkers” (37). The attention the monument pays to the fertility of the Voortrekker women not only calls to mind the cliché of the “mother of the nation” or volksmoeder, but also celebrates what Foucault designates the modern state’s power to “make live” (“Society” 254).

While Foucault’s contention that sexuality becomes “a field of vital strategic importance in the nineteenth century” (“Society” 251) has become a familiar one—a thesis most fully elaborated in his History of Sexuality—his lectures to the Collège de France, now collected under the title “Society Must Be Defended,” argue that racism is not only an element in the state project of “making live,” but that “racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States” (254). In this way, as Ann Laura Stoler argues in Race and the Education of Desire, Foucault’s concern with the regularization of sexuality is intimately bound up in his thinking on war and racism. The term “biopower” occurs first in the last section of The History of Sexuality, but its conceptual function of explaining modern State racism seems not to have been evident to many of Foucault’s readers until the publication of the Collège de France lectures. As Stoler notes:

Ethienne Balibar is one of the few to note Foucault’s central concern [in Volume 1 of The History of Sexuality] with racism as ‘the most revealing concrete effort’ of a biopolitics that bore on the species and its reproduction. In Balibar’s reading, racism was the ‘crucial phenomenon’ that biopolities set out to explain. John Rajchman similarly has remarked on Foucault’s focus on the ‘scientific’ notion of abnormal] is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (255). The Voortrekker monument encodes in its imagery both types of confrontation.
‘degeneracy’ as a category racially inflected through the technologies of sex. (Race 21)\textsuperscript{11}

For Foucault, sexuality “exists at the point where body and population meet;” sexuality is “inscribed, takes effect, in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population” (“Society” 252). Sexuality is a key point at which the state may take control not only over the behaviour of the individual, but also over the workings of, and the survival of, the population itself. However, this unwieldy “population” must be imagined as a manageable group, and so racism intervenes to demarcate the group itself. The technique of the regularization of sexuality here is pressed into service to explain the reliance of the modern state on racism. So intimate is the relationship between modernity and racism that Foucault goes so far as to say that “a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (History 143). In this formulation, modernity itself is predicated on the biopolitical strategy of racism, and for Foucault, no modern state is free of this taint.

Although for him the Nazi state serves as the example of “an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous State, and an absolutely suicidal State” and thus as an example of “where this mechanism inscribed in the workings of the modern State leads,” Foucault also insists that “this play is in fact inscribed in the workings of all States….the socialist State, socialism, is as marked by racism as the workings of the modern State, of the capitalist State” (“Society” 260-261). In this framework, differences in political philosophy then become

\textsuperscript{11} Balibar notes, as does Stoler, that in the original conception of the series, Volume 6 of The History of Sexuality was to be entitled Population et races, and further observes that racism is “l’indice majeur de la profondeur à laquelle, dans le régime contemporain de savoir-pouvoir…sont ancrées des notions comme celles de ‘dégénérescence’ et d’ ‘eugénisme’, dans lesquelles il faudrait voir le type même de la formation de compromis entre la symbolique du sang et l’analytique de la sexualité” (58).
window-dressing, because the structure of the state, and of modernity itself, remains the same:

Socialism has made no critique of the theme of biopower…it has in fact taken it up, developed, reimplemented, and modified it in certain respects, but it has certainly not reexamined its basis or its modes of working. Ultimately, the idea that the essential function of society or the State, or whatever it is that must replace the State, is to take control of life, to manage it, to compensate for its aleatory nature, to explore and reduce biological accidents and possibilities…it seems to me that socialism takes this over wholesale. And the result is that we immediately find ourselves in a socialist State which must exercise the right to kill or the right to eliminate, or the right to disqualify. And so, quite naturally, we find that racism—not a truly ethnic racism, but racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism—is fully operational in the way socialist States…deal with the mentally ill, criminals, political adversaries, and so on. So much for the State. (“Society” 261-262)

And so much for the novel, for if Foucault is right to locate a deep, unquestioned similitude between modern fascist states and modern socialist states, then I argue that a structural similarity also exists between the apparent opposites of the Afrikaner nationalist and the anti-apartheid novel—or at least that this similarity exists as long as the instrumentalist understanding of social relationships characteristic of the modern state remains unquestioned in them.

If it is indeed inevitable that the modern state be a racist state, the model of biopolitics shows us why without suggesting any alternatives, calling to mind a familiar criticism that Foucauldian frameworks describe the mechanisms of repression without giving the same attention to the productive potential of power. In the case of biopower and racism, Stoler cites the suggestion of one of Foucault’s “close associates” that he was “deadlocked” in his thoughts about race, and she规格ulates that this is the reason that the discussion of race disappears from his 1977-1978 lectures, now published as The Birth of Biopolitics (Race 25). In any case Foucault’s “so much for the State” ends up being his final comment on State racism and it implies, perhaps because Foucault’s thinking on race could not go further, that biopolitics cannot be recuperated. Henry Giroux calls for a “progressive biopolitics” to
Chapter 2

counter the “politics of disposability” that he associates with neoliberalism, but what a “progressive biopolitics” might mean is unclear, especially in light of Foucault’s warning here that socialist states, too, take on the structures of racism in their adoption of biopolitics (612, 587).

I will return to both my discussion of Giroux’s article and to the limitations of the biopolitical paradigm in the conclusion of this dissertation, but for now I wish to draw attention to Foucault’s insistence that racism is the inevitable effect of biopolitics: this is the reason that the racism of biopolitics cannot simply be undone through a reversal of tropes; its powers cannot simply be used for “good” instead of “evil,” as DeSoto’s attempt to do just this in *A Blade of Grass* demonstrates.

### 2.2 *A Blade of Grass* and the biopolitics of the *plaasroman*

Lewis DeSoto’s 2003 novel *A Blade of Grass* tells the tale of a friendship which develops on an isolated South African farm between a “white” farmer’s wife and her “black” housekeeper. DeSoto says of the farm he has created in the novel that it is “no stretch of the imagination to think of that small house as a symbol for the country, for the continent, for the world” (“Why I Am Not a Zulu”). In so saying, he makes the intended allegorical function of his text clear. Much as he may attempt to flesh out his characters with digressions into their pasts and insights into their present desires, DeSoto still insists that the interactions between Märit, his apolitical “white” housewife, and Tembi, his bookish “black” servant, represent South African—and indeed, world—race relations in all of their potential and limitations.

DeSoto can perhaps best be described as a “South African-Canadian writer” and visual artist (Melville). He was born in Bloemfontein, but left South Africa for Canada while
in his teens (Scott). Published by HarperCollins, *A Blade of Grass* has garnered more attention in Canada, Britain and Europe than in South Africa. Indeed, the reviews of the novel excerpted on the Powell’s Books website are taken from newspapers like *The Globe and Mail, The Montreal Gazette, The Ottawa Citizen, The Vancouver Sun* and *The New York Times*. Alec Scott, writing in *Toronto Life*, goes so far as to classify the novel as an example of what he calls “elsewhere literature,” a genre which he identifies as uniquely Canadian in its multicultural vision. According to Scott, “DeSoto… has invented a calm space inside a political storm. Depictions of a fragile idyll, a brief escape from the nightmare of history, a sanctuary, have become our [Canadian writers’] métier.” Despite Scott’s assertion that the novel is primarily Canadian in its aesthetics (and in its politics), DeSoto himself links the novel to his memories of growing up in South Africa (Scott), and, as I will discuss momentarily, structures the book according to Afrikaner generic tradition.

In *A Blade of Grass*, DeSoto’s vision of the country, the continent, the world, is profoundly biopolitical, though he might not recognize it as such. Throughout his novel, DeSoto implicitly constructs a binary of the “natural order” and the “political order” to frame the racialized and gendered interactions between his characters, but ultimately DeSoto’s characters are not so much caught between the opposing constructs of natural and political as they are the hinge binding these apparent oppositions together. Ultimately DeSoto privileges sexual repression and jealousy, and de-emphasizes land and labour conflicts, as the underpinnings of apartheid, but an understanding of the biopolitical framework of the novel reveals that these apparently distinct conflicts are, as Foucault demonstrates, in fact aspects of the same problem.

Many post-1994 reconciliation narratives not only depend on an imagined binary which opposes the personal to the political instead of recognizing these concepts as
ineluctably intersected, but, as I have already suggested, they also attempt to use personal relationships as templates for political ones. A consequence of this, which DeSoto’s novel illustrates, is that the narrative then consistently construes political concerns and relationships as merely personal ones. Responses to political problems are then refigured as individual choices, and so collective political action is disregarded and its possible effectiveness undermined. Rather than transforming post-1994 thought, moreover, conventional reconciliation narratives continue the literary tropes of apartheid and anti-apartheid fiction, especially through their essentialist use of inter-racial relationships as symbols of South African social relations.

In particular, *A Blade of Grass* invokes the South African genre of the *plaasroman*, or farm novel, which, as J. M. Coetzee observes in *White Writing*, similarly resorts to a discourse of the “natural” in its validation of “white” settlers’ claims to South African land (see especially Chapter 4, “The Farm Novels of C.M. van den Heever” 82ff). While the centrality of procreation and productivity are mostly implied in Coetzee’s discussion of the *plaasroman*, however, *A Blade of Grass* is obsessed with the sexuality, figured as a productive heterosexuality, of the farm. In consequence, the novel reveals the deep biopolitical

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12 i.e. If the personal is political—to invoke the second wave feminist slogan—then here the converse is also true: the political is (merely) personal. This is, of course, also a definition of neoliberalism. As Giroux observes, “Fundamental to the construction of the neoliberal subject is the acceptance of this official set of orthodoxies: the public sphere, if not the very notion of the social, is a pathology; consumerism is the most important form of citizenship; freedom is an utterly privatized affair that legitimates the primacy of property rights over public priorities; the social state is bad; all public difficulties are individually determined; and all social problems, now individualised, can be redressed by private solutions” (591). The conjunction of a neoliberal paradigm and a biopolitical social structure replaces cooperative political organizing with an apparent accommodation of individual desire (modeled, as Giroux suggests, on consumerism). As an example of this phenomenon at work in South Africa, Rosemary Jane Jolly observes a neoliberal rationality at work in criticisms that the TRC, in not operating according to individualistic notions of retributive justice, travesties justice entirely, but she argues that the public ritual of the hearings resists the commodification of human rights (“Desiring” 693). I will return to Jolly’s argument in the conclusion of this dissertation.

13 Coetzee does take up the issue of sexuality in his discussion of the counter-pastoral, such as Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm*, in which the landscape does not speak to the farmer, but is figured as an unproductive absence. This sterile space he sees as a failure of historical imagination, however, because the authors in question are unable to imagine a fertile, peopled, landscape and thereby perpetuate the colonial stereotype of *Terra Nullius*. See Chapter 3, “Farm Novel and Plaasroman”, 63ff.
structure of nationalist myths of relationships to the land, and, in the chaos which ends the novel, plots the limitations of this instrumentalist imagination.

The place and time of *A Blade of Grass* are intentionally vague: the farm is near “the border” and armed conflict between Afrikaner state forces and “black” guerrillas forms a backdrop to much of the novel’s action, but though this suggests the South African border wars of 1966-1989, no specific reference is made to Angola or to any real-life political groups such as SWAPO\(^\text{14}\) or the MK\(^\text{15}\)—even the SADF\(^\text{16}\) is never explicitly named, though characters in the novel who are in “the military” would presumably be members of this organization. Unfettered by any specific political or historical context, the narrative is, as DeSoto explains, “written out of memory, not the facts of history but the emotions caused by history” (“Why I Am Not a Zulu”). DeSoto’s claim that emotions, rather than facts, matter most again asserts his narrative’s place in a symbolic register, but sometimes criticism of the novel seems to overlook this fact, reading *A Blade of Grass* as, in the words of Alan Cheuse of the *Chicago Tribune*, “fiction that forces readers to face up to the great toll of internal national conflicts” (quoted on Powell’s website). There is an assumption here that fiction dealing with South Africa and written in a realist style necessarily confronts, rather than reinscribes, the social and political legacies of the apartheid past, an assumption which points to an instrumentalist strain in criticism as well as in literature.

The novel is largely focalized through the eyes of Märit, who is, as the narration tells us, “recently orphaned, recently married, recently mistress of this farm in the remote African countryside” (7). Märit is a typical Afrikaner who is “used to assuming a superior role when talking to a black person” because “it is the way things are done in this country” (10).

\(^{14}\) South West African People’s Organization, the Namibian faction allied with the MPLA—the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola—and supported by communist countries such as Cuba.

\(^{15}\) Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress.

\(^{16}\) South African Defence Force, the army of the apartheid government.
Though she may think for a moment of inviting her housekeeper to drink tea with her, she knows that “that sort of thing is not done. It would break all the rules,” and DeSoto uses the passive voice in these passages to assert the insidiousness of apartheid social conditioning and to foreclose the possibility of agency on Mārit’s part (11).

The farm belongs to Mārit’s husband Ben, an immigrant who spent his childhood in the industrial north of England dreaming of farming. The farm is populated with stereotypical “black” workers of various kinds, including Joshua, the foreman, who is full of “cunning servility” (342); Grace, the middle-aged housekeeper who runs the place with a firm and judicious hand; and her daughter Tembi, whose education has set her apart from the other girls on the farm because “it is not possible to talk to the other girls of the thoughts in her head” (80). When Grace must walk to town early one morning to take care of a sick cousin, she is run over on the road by a pair of drunken “white” farmers who mistake her for an antelope (44). Tembi is called into the house to take her mother’s place as housekeeper, and it is not long before tragedy strikes the farm again: driving back from town one afternoon, Ben glimpses a herd of impala in the veldt and follows them in his truck, turning onto the little-used access road to the radio tower, where two men from “across the border” have planted a landmine (86). Ben and the truck are blown up, and in her grief and loneliness Mārit turns to Tembi for comfort, begging her to move into the house and even asking her to share a bed so that Mārit need not sleep alone.

In this way, the first part of the pattern of the conventional reconciliation narrative is enacted: a “white” person and a “black” person, both understood as representative of—but also somehow set apart from—their formal racial categories, begin to become friends across racial and cultural barriers, and despite their own socialization. In the face of major obstacles, their relationship grows in intimacy and strength and therefore they confirm in
their interactions a “human” value which transcends racial classification. Their friendship and love stand for the possibility of a larger national reconciliation since it substitutes intimacy, vulnerability, self-sacrifice and trust for the presumably more cynical, self-motivated machinations of political power.

In *A Blade of Grass*, Mārit and Tembi, initially brought together by their shared isolation and grief, become “like sisters” as they withstand various trials (159). The first of these is their snubbing by the Afrikaner community, who disapprove of Mārit’s decision to remain on the farm without a husband, and then reject Mārit outright when she “goes native” by cutting off her hair and dressing in a sarong and copper bracelets. Tembi similarly endures the sneers of the dairy maids, and the two women stand united when sly Joshua attempts to take over the farm. When the town is deserted and the farm workers flee because of the escalating border conflict, the two women remain, growing their own food and holding their ground during visits from the state military forces and from freedom fighters. The women also manage the house in the face of such disasters as the failure of the water pump, a plague of hungry locusts, and a troop of marauding baboons. Though Mārit ultimately dies as the result of injuries inflicted by Joshua, who returns to the farm having joined the freedom fighters, she and Tembi have by this time forged a deep spiritual bond, so that in the end Tembi will not live out her time on the farm alone, but in the company of Mārit’s palpable absence.

As this summary of the novel suggests, much of the plot is structured by Mārit and Tembi’s attempt to remove themselves from the conflict between “black” people and “white” people over the question of land ownership. They do this by refusing to engage with the politics of the people around them. After Ben’s death, Mārit refuses to talk to her “white” neighbours and later, when she has adopted the dress of a “black” woman, she is
surprised to be denied service at a shop in town. When a “black” insurgent arrives on the
farm and tries to blend in with the workers, Märit and Tembi neither really protect him nor
betray him to the state forces who arrive to apprehend him.\textsuperscript{17} When the state forces later
return and use the farm as a resting post between skirmishes with the freedom fighters,
Märit and Tembi must accommodate them, and they similarly accommodate the freedom
fighters who later descend on the farm like the locusts who preceded them.\textsuperscript{18} The farm is
figured as a non-political space which is nevertheless taken over by political conflict, and in
his recourse to a construct of the “natural,” DeSoto replaces political conflict with a natural
order as a way of assessing land claims, a strategy which is continuous with that of the
\textit{plaasroman}. Indeed, \textit{plaasroman} conventions explicitly structure \textit{A Blade of Grass}.

These conventions are obvious from the novel’s beginning, in which Tembi plants
five seeds of an unnamed fruit behind a hill, away from the other workers on the farm. The
fruit was a gift from her father who is now working in the mines as the result of a
“Relocation” which has split up the family (3). In planting her secret garden, Tembi not only
imagines bringing forth a “sweetness from the earth, so that when her father returns from
the mines he will have this taste to wash away the bitterness of the gold dust,” but she also
conforms to the \textit{plaasroman} pattern of claiming land through cultivation (4). In his analysis of
the Afrikaner \textit{plaasroman} of the 1930s, J. M. Coetzee notes that “[i]n the myth of natural
right…the founding fathers pay for the farm in blood, sweat, and tears, not in money; they
hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against barbarians, they leave their bones behind

\textsuperscript{17} Specifically, Märit does not name him as someone who is not a regular employee of the farm, but neither
does she hide him. The man is then killed by the state forces (208).

\textsuperscript{18} The juxtaposition of the two visits from combatants provides a good example of the novel’s underlying
racism: the state forces are cold but polite; they take what they need, but reimburse the women and leave
everything in good order. The freedom fighters threaten Märit and Tembi much more overtly; they steal
everything they can lay their hands on and smash everything else; they force Märit to dance for them and they
strip her—they humiliate her as Tembi was not humiliated by the state forces; they are undisciplined and
Joshua, who attempts to rape Tembi, is one of them.
in its soil” (*White Writing* 85). Similarly, as she plants her seeds, Tembi finds that “her heart is beating, with pleasure, with her secret knowledge, with anticipation” for “this now is her own acre of the world, her garden, her farm, her country” (15). In hacking her own garden out of the earth, tending to it at considerable effort, and defending it from various animals, Tembi too becomes a “founding father,” if only of a small space.

Tembi’s secret garden becomes one of the most belaboured of the novel’s symbols. Since it is hidden far from the rest of the farm, Tembi must bring the plants water by bucket each day. She camouflages the seedlings and fashions a sort of thorn fence to keep grazing animals at bay. When Grace dies, Tembi realizes at the funeral that, with this connection gone, she will never see her father again, but the fact that she no longer conceives of the fruit as a gift to her father does not lessen her devotion to the garden. On the contrary, when the farm is visited by the swarm of locusts, Tembi runs to protect the seedlings before securing the doors to the granary which holds the farm’s main food supply. Ultimately, Mārit, delirious from her infected wounds and dehydrated from chasing baboons, finds and eats the fruit, leaving only five seeds in the muddy patch which was once the garden. Tembi replants, indicating that she is the good steward of the farm. As Coetzee notes, in the *plaasroman* “[g]ood stewardship is the fullest utilization of one’s energies and talents…for ends that transcend material gain” (86), and Tembi’s gardening is prompted by her feeling of connection to the earth rather than by any other, more practical, motivation (86).

Although Tembi is “black,” in the *plaasroman* as described by Coetzee the cultivator is, of course, inevitably “white.” Moreover, as Coetzee notes, the *plaasroman* inevitably erases the “white” cultivator’s reliance on “black” labour (81). But *A Blade of Grass* does not simply

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19 When Tembi replants the garden, DeSoto repeats his earlier formulation of her thoughts: “Here she will grow that which does not as yet grow. In this small acre of the world. From here the sweetness will come. A gift.” Notice that the garden becomes a part of “the world” rather than just a part of South Africa.
perform a reversal of *plaasroman* conventions by emphasizing a “black,” rather than a “white,” character’s connection to the earth: DeSoto emphasizes Ben’s feeling for his land and his knowledge of his adopted country as well. Ben is “an immigrant” who learns “the languages…the climate and the geography and the history” of South Africa (23). Ben changes the spelling of his last name “from Lawrence to Laurens, to an Afrikaans spelling…as a commitment to a new life” (23). By connecting the Afrikaans spelling with Ben’s mastery of “the languages” and other aspects of South Africa, DeSoto normalizes Afrikaner presence in the country. Moreover, by insisting on Ben’s exemplary adaptation to his adopted country, DeSoto once again relativizes claims to land based on indigeneity. As DeSoto explains in his essay “Why I Am Not a Zulu” (no date),

> My family have been in South Africa for generations, which makes us part of the Afrikaaner (sic) tribe. But before that we came from Europe. Which makes us French, or Dutch, or Spanish, or German. And before that? Gauls? Goths? And before that? Who knows? To reason backwards in this way is absurd. I am no longer part of any tribe. Instead, to use Bishop Desmond Tutu’s phrase, I am part of the Rainbow Nation. 20 That’s the tribe to which we all belong.

Thus, when DeSoto explains that Ben “came to this country because he heard that there was land available, that there were farms to purchase, that the government wanted farmers, especially on the border” (23), he deflects objections to the implicit support of apartheid constituted by Ben’s actions, figuring Ben as just another immigrant in a country built on immigration. This very strongly echoes the explanatory panels at the Voortrekker Monument mentioned earlier in this chapter; DeSoto too seems to refigure the European colonization of southern Africa as merely another migration. The description of Ben’s adaptation to South Africa claims Afrikaners as indigenous, since it is through changing his name to the Afrikaans spelling that Ben makes his claim of belonging, and nothing in the

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20 Actually, the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu is not a bishop, but rather was Archbishop of Cape Town, and is now an archbishop emeritus.
novel would seem to counter this logic. At the same time, in his essay DeSoto relativizes cultural origins to the point of absurdity, moving from the contemporary identities of French, Dutch, Spanish and German to the ancient ethnicities of Gaul and Goth. In so doing, he makes the false analogy that, since claiming land by descent from Gals and Goths would be ridiculous and untenable, any land claims based on descent are similarly ridiculous and untenable—even if the colonization occurred as recently as 1838, with the Great Trek, rather than in 58 BCE, the date of Caesar's Gallic Wars. Even more strangely still, DeSoto then wishes to reject the idea of nationhood altogether, declaring himself part of the Rainbow Nation “to which we all belong.” By quoting Tutu (and by extension Mandela, who picked up Tutu’s phrase in his own inauguration address), DeSoto invokes a post-national world, a world of global immigration, but this grand ideal elides the extreme lopsidedness of the economics of immigration and also jars with the attention to ethnic origins and identities evidenced by Ben’s conversion to Afrikaner/Africanness.

While buying a farm in South Africa at the high point of apartheid seems a politically and morally dubious proposition, DeSoto makes Ben the good “Baas,” or employer, who

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21 While Tutu’s original use of the phrase was also biblical, invoking the Noah’s Ark story as a post-apartheid reconciliation as between God and humanity, Mandela used the phrase in his inaugural address as an expression of indigeneity. Having assured his “compatriots” that “each one of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld,” the newly-minted president enjoined South Africans to “enter into a covenant” to build “a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world” (Mandela; cf. Tutu 262). The irony of this image is that the jacaranda, though now associated with the province of Gauteng and with Pretoria and Johannesburg in particular, is originally a South American tree, and it is so water-thirsty that it wreaks ecological havoc on its adopted environment, a vegetative echo of human colonization. Indeed, the preservation of indigenous plants, including the fynbos of the Cape, has become a major concern as plants introduced by European colonists crowd them out, causing extinction, soil erosion and other problems (Singer).

22 DeSoto seems to be reading “the rainbow nation” through an idealized model of Canadian multiculturalism, one in which the difficult question of racial and cultural difference is “politely” ignored by the mainstream—largely because the indigenous peoples of North America are so outnumbered by settlers from elsewhere that the political concerns of aboriginal people are ignored and the historic treaties signed with the colonizers, now represented by the Canadian government, continue to be violated. What South Africa brings to a discussion of “multiculturalism,” though, is an example of the cynical ends to which such apparent cultural sensitivity can be bent: in official discourse, apartheid was an attempt to “save” African tribes from cultural assimilation by graciously rounding them up into specially-created “homelands.” An awareness of South African “multiculturalism” under apartheid must surely raise questions about the discourse of multiculturalism worldwide.
alleviates rather than exacerbates conditions for “black” people by being nice to his workers. DeSoto’s unproblematized use of the word “Baas” to refer to Ben underscores the questionable depiction of relationships between “black” and “white” people in the novel. DeSoto seems to use the word disingenuously, as only a term for the boss or employer, ignoring the racialized hierarchy which it typically implies. Of Ben’s awareness of his own place in the hierarchy of the country, DeSoto writes that Ben “is not naïve” and that he knows that “there are many who look upon him with envy, perhaps with hate,” but that “he believes that if he is fair, if he is just, if he is generous, then he will be understood, not resented, even respected” (52). The identities of the “many” who look askance at Ben are not specified, and the reasons for their potential hate and envy are not explained in this passage. The persistent use of the passive voice in this passage disguises its racial dynamics by refusing to name any agents. Ben just hopes to be “respected” and “not resented” by everyone, and in this way he presumably sees himself as removed from politics. The implication is that through Ben’s model of fair dealings with the unnamed “many” around him, “one day the ways of the country will change, and fair, just men who can farm well will be appreciated, even desired” (52).

The possibility of ironic distancing from Ben and his apolitical—or rather, anti-political—ideals seems to be foreclosed by the persistent idealization of him in passages like this in the narrative. There is no critical voice against Ben and his position on the land, and, in *A Blade of Grass*, those associated with nature are legitimized. This is why Ben’s death is represented as a tragedy. Just before spotting the impala which will lead him to his death, Ben breathes in the scent of the countryside of the veldt of Africa, his home….It is in him, in his clothes, on his hands and hair, embedded in the very pores of his skin. He knows this smell in the morning when the earth is wet from dew, he knows it after the rain, when the dust has been
washed from the air and a slight mist hangs on the ground and the earth is newly washed. (108)

This idealization of a spiritual connection to the land is a staple of the *plaasroman*, in which, as Coetzee observes, “the marriage between farmer and farm” is “a blood-marriage too deep for words,” a claim of natural ownership (88). Ben follows the impala because it is his instinct to do so, and his death is caused not by his connection to the animals, but by the intrusion of political struggle into the natural sphere in the form of “the device” planted by the two men who “paused in the dawn” (110).

In this opposition of the “natural” and the “political,” Märit remains a complicated figure: she has an ambivalent relationship to nature. In contrast to Ben, she knows very little about farming, and, despite having been born in the country, she knows very little about South Africa itself. The narration describes the farm and surrounding area as “a wild country with a history that Märit does not understand” (26), and as she walks the farm Märit “feels like a trespasser” and feels “as if she has no right to be here” despite the fact that “[h]er money and Ben’s has paid for her right to walk here” (28). This passage invokes the *plaasroman* blood-marriage between the farmer and the land by emphasizing that Märit’s money does not give her true ownership of the farm. Unlike Ben, Märit is awkward in the presence of the “black” men whose labour runs the farm, and when the workers leave, she must learn everything about stewardship and survival from Tembi.

Thanks to Tembi, Märit does become a competent worker, but her relationship with nature continues to be troubled. At the beginning of the novel, when Märit encounters a kudu at the borders of the farm, she “lowers herself to her knees and folds her hands before her chest, in a gesture of prayer, of worship,” but Märit’s delight in feeling that she sees the kudu’s soul in this moment is mitigated by her knowledge that “her own soul is tarnished and flawed in comparison, compromised in some manner that she fears will never be
purified” (37). Similarly, when Märit faces the troop of baboons at the end of the novel, the moment is not one of union with nature, but of her rejection by the baboons as representatives of the natural order. Märit fantasizes that the head baboon has exhorted her to follow him, and she imagines living together with the troop, but at the edge of the baboons’ territory the lead baboon charges. Märit reflects that “[f]or the first time in her life a creature from the other side of life has touched her. And he has slapped her” (382). Next, Märit finds and eats Tembi’s fruits, once again reinforcing her lack of connection to her surroundings: she consumes rather than plants, and Märit’s death thus indicates her inability to integrate with the order of the farm, especially when read in the context of Tembi’s replanting. Indeed, the sentence from which the title of the novel is taken emphasizes Märit’s place outside of both the natural and the political orders. As Märit walks across the farm, “it seems she floats above the earth, not a part of it, her passage hardly disturbing a blade of grass,” suggesting that her presence on the farm is and should be transient (22).

Märit’s uncertain relationship to the farm reveals a further ambivalence about whether connection to the land is earned through work or if it is an essential quality. While Märit’s work ultimately does not seem to earn her the right to stay alive on the farm and Ben’s death seems to have been the result of the intrusion of “politics” into the space of the farm, “black” characters in the novel are usually connected to the earth, and frequently even equated with it. This pattern is established very early on in the novel when Tembi is planting her seeds: as she fills a bucket with water for the garden, “she wiggles her toes into the cool, wet soil, and her skin is the same dark color as the African soil when it is wet after the rain” (5). Not only does DeSoto emphasize her connection to the soil, but he essentializes it as “African soil.” Märit continues this essentialism later when she reflects that Tembi “is made from the soil, she is this land” while she, Märit “could fade into the pale light” because she is
“made from something insubstantial” (247). Although DeSoto attempts to reverse the conventional valuation of earth and of light, his equation here of “black” people with earth and of “white” people with light nevertheless recalls historical stereotypes of “Darkest Africa,” which purported that “black” people behave in animalistic ways, and which insisted that Europeans would bring “the light of civilization” to the continent.

Moreover, this essentialization of “white” and “black” behaviour is sexualized: when Mārit remembers her adolescent encounter with Dollar, the pool boy, she remembers that “the smell of him was sweet, like the earth in the garden” (102), and this eroticism is later paralleled when she and Tembi swim naked and talk about sex on the riverbank. Mārit scrutinizes Tembi’s body:

She has never seen Tembi naked, or any black woman. How much a part of the rocks and the sun Tembi seems, her breasts and stomach as smooth and rounded as the stone, the pubic patch of tight curls only a tone or two darker than the surrounding skin. Mārit touches her own hair, which is growing out unevenly, and looks down at her light-coloured body, so pale, so naked, the triangle between her thighs so visible and obvious. I look better clothed, she thinks, and Tembi is better naked. (253)

The stereotypical connection between “black” sexuality and the natural, which is not countered by anything else in the novel, renders the meaning of Mārit’s observations ambiguous. Does Mārit look better clothed rather than naked on her own terms, or does Mārit, clothed, look better than Tembi, clothed, while Tembi’s nakedness is more sexually charged than Mārit’s? The sexuality of this passage—its obsessive focus on evaluating breasts and genitalia—clearly reflects the anxiety and the stereotype that “black” people are comparatively more naturally sexual than are “white” people. This anxiety is related both to self-consciousness and a fear of inadequacy (because Mārit recognizes that Tembi is more attractive than is she, Mārit) and to the fearful realization on the part of the “white” characters that they are attracted to “black” characters.
Interestingly, although the novel repeatedly emphasizes the attraction of “white”
characters to “black” ones, no inter-racial sexual congress actually occurs in it. Mārit and
Tembi’s emphatically de-sexualised friendship is the only strong inter-racial relationship
which is allowed to develop, and it is very much threatened by the (hetero)sexual tension and
jealousy in the novel. I have suggested that, in contrast to the novel’s insistence on
associating—indeed equating—“black” characters with the earth, one reason that Mārit
cannot become a part of the farm is her ignorance of farming, but much of Mārit’s
“outsiderness” actually stems from a more significant source: her ambivalence about inter-
racial sex. Although Tembi and Mārit’s friendship structures the novel as a whole, this
friendship is rife with sexual tension and jealousy, and through it DeSoto constructs yet
another discourse of “nature” in which essentialized gender roles and assumed
heterosexuality trump race and culture as motivations for political and social behaviour. The
narrative attempts to present racial identity as a construct by normalizing heterosexual
gendering. In the process, cultural and political conflicts are refigured as sexual competition,
but although this would seem to reveal as a fiction the idea of race as the “real” origin of
conflict in South Africa, it simultaneously entrenches racial constructs since it emphasizes
anxiety about inter-racial desire and sexual competition as the “real” source of inter-racial
conflict in the first-place. That is, the suggestion that racial conflict is “really” sexual conflict
still depends on an understanding of sexual conflict as rooted in pre-existing anxiety about
sexual competition between “white” people and “black” people. In this competition,
according to “white” stereotypes, the more “naturally sexual” “black” people have an unfair
advantage, and so “white” racism and apartheid have been understood—at least in this
novel—as a partial solution to the “unfair advantage” of “black” people, since attempting to
limit the possibilities of inter-racial sex (i.e. apartheid as enforced endogamy) is a strategy to allay “white” anxiety.

What this aspect of the novel reveals is the biopolitical framework of the conflict in the novel. Rather than opposing political relationships to sexual ones, the sexually-fraught relationships in the novel are the transfer point at which the biological control of the population, the “making live” of biopower, meets political sovereignty, the “letting die” of those beyond the pale.23 Though the novel attempts to rewrite the *plaasroman* by insisting on the presence—indeed, the primacy—of “black” labour, rather than by challenging the politics of the genre, *A Blade of Grass* instead affirms the biopolitics of the *plaasroman*. Because the novel reinscribes the sexual politics of apartheid, it cannot counter apartheid’s racial politics, and *A Blade of Grass* cannot move beyond stereotype in its depiction of “black” characters despite its ostensible efforts to challenge the apartheid imaginary. Indeed, the depiction of inter-racial desire in the novel not only invokes, but also entrenches racist sexual anxieties.

Märit’s formative sexual experience is with Dollar, a “black” pool boy who worked for her schoolmate Sondra, with whom Märit stayed for a summer as a 15 year-old. It is this memory of inter-racial desire which structures her anxiety that “black” bodies are more desirable than “white” ones. Märit’s memory of her encounter with Dollar “surfaces” as she swims naked in the river near the farm, having had Ben defer her advances that morning in favour of farm business. As she sits by the side of the river, “she remembers water, her skin wet and naked, and that other skin—black skin and white skin, naked together. She remembers the rules being broken” (99). Märit’s desire for Ben is thus underlaid with her

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23 The pale in England’s colonization of Ireland—and indeed fences and fortresses of all kinds, from the palisades of the New World to the Wall or “security fence” of Israel/Palestine—provide a literalization of the caesura in the biological continuum.
desire for Dollar, and the reference to “the rules” in the context of this scene, in which Mārit is communing with the natural environment, emphasizes the “unnaturalness” of apartheid sexual taboos. Indeed, like the rest of the novel, Mārit’s memory of Dollar hinges on essentialized descriptions of their gendered interaction. Dollar and Mārit play in the pool, and when they wrestle together Mārit becomes “suddenly aware of him as a boy, a man, and of her own body, her breasts on his chest, the warmth of his skin under her hands, and the firmness of his body against the juncture of her thighs” (102). This realization is followed by the associations with nature which we must now have come to expect: Dollar’s smell is “like the earth, like the garden, like the mimosa in the garden” (102).

Mārit and Dollar are interrupted by Sondra, who shames Mārit for “‘playing with the garden boy,’” a shame which Mārit accepts, causing her to avoid Dollar and Sondra thereafter (102). Then, on the day before her departure from Sondra’s house, she notices a hose left running which draws her over to the cabana where she hears “a muffled mewing sound” which she investigates because it sounds to her like kittens. Instead she sees Sondra and Dollar together, and Mārit’s world is turned upside down as she realizes the true nature of her desire:

The jealousy burned in her face. She hated Dollar and Sondra. As she ran blindly from the cabana, shaking her head from side to side to banish the image of what she had seen, she knew that she could not—because she wanted to be there, with Dollar, in place of Sondra. (104)

In this passage, Sondra’s previous chastisement of Mārit is revealed to be a ploy to keep Dollar for herself rather than a policing of inter-racial propriety. Moreover, Dollar’s indiscriminate sexual behaviour in sleeping with Sondra despite his apparent connection with Mārit recalls the stereotype of the hypersexualized “black” man.24

24 Fanon writes extensively of this stereotype from a psychoanalytic perspective in Black Skin, White Masks. While Foucault’s biopolitics seems to me a more workable theoretical framework for questions of national
When the would-be freedom fighter Khoza arrives on the farm toward the end of the novel, Mārit’s desire for him once again recalls both her desire for Dollar and Dollar’s equation with the hypersexual “black” male. Though Mārit and Tembi have by this point weathered many storms together, their competition for Khoza’s attention immediately drives a wedge between them. From the first, Mārit is suspicious of Khoza, seeing him as “insolent” (272), menacing (273), and “sly” (279). Tembi accepts Khoza as a charming and helpful stranger, but the passages introducing Khoza are all narrated from Mārit’s perspective, and she reflects as she watches Khoza and Tembi talk that she “can almost see his smile, the insolent smile when directed at her, but now charming when he turns to Tembi” (278). This characterization of Khoza as insolent and devious is entirely consistent with “white” stereotypes of “black” men, and Mārit’s emphasis on his ability to charm makes him the bearer of a dangerous sexuality.

Although Mārit tries to push Khoza away from the farm, Tembi welcomes his help, and soon all three of them are living at Kudufontein together. One afternoon while hoeing the garden, Mārit realizes that the dynamics of farm life have changed: “Everything centers on him [Khoza] now, Mārit realizes. His presence is at the core of their awareness. He stands, seemingly unaware of them, in the heart of the white haze of heat” (286). Not only identity than does psychoanalysis, which takes the individual as its subject, Fanon’s comments on the sexual roots of negrophobia do not seem inconsistent with biopolitics. For example, when Fanon asks “Still on the genital level, when a white man hates black men, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority?” (159), it seems to me that a biopolitical understanding reveals the origins of this anxiety: racialized sexual jealousy becomes a mode for enforcing and policing the biopolitical “caesura” between races. While Fanon’s work has multiple connections to Foucault’s conception of biopolitics, the comparatively recent interest in Foucault’s, as opposed to Hardt and Negri’s or Agamben’s, biopolitics means that a taxonomy of these connections is yet to be described: Achille Mbembe’s On the Postcolony (2001) makes use of both Foucauldian frameworks (though not the concept of biopower specifically) and of Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, and David Scott also seeks to bring together Foucauldian notions of governmentality and Fanon’s understanding of colonial subjectivity in his Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality (1999), but as yet no one has offered a sustained analysis of biopower in reference to Black Skin, White Masks.

25 Although the novel is written from the third person limited omniscient perspective which floats around and attaches itself to various characters at various times, most often it attaches itself to Mārit. The amount of time that the narrative takes her perspective makes Mārit the de facto heroine, despite the technical possibility that both she and Tembi equally function as the protagonists.
is Khoza now “naturally” the centre of everything, but this fact is so naturalized that he takes no special note of the dynamics that bring it about. The attention paid to him is only his due as a man, and indeed Märit is unable to resist his sexual pull: “She sees him in the abstract, not as Khoza, but only as a man, his body bared, the thin gleam of moisture trickling down his spine, shining on the brown skin. She forgets who he is and sees only a man, and he is beautiful to her, a thing of beauty” (286).

Not only does DeSoto insist on the inevitability of Märit’s desire for Khoza, but he equates this desire with her desire for Dollar, therefore implying that the two “black” bodies are interchangeable—at least for Märit. Looking at Khoza, Märit’s vision blurs and “she sees the dark shape of the young man standing in the center of the world with his skin shining. The same way that Dollar’s skin glistened when he came out of the pool, when she was a girl, when she touched his skin and he smelled of mimosa” (286). Märit, despite her dislike of Khoza as a person, finds him irresistible as a sexual object, and this once again reinforces the stereotype of the hypersexual “black” man. Furthermore, Märit notices that “Tembi too is gazing at Khoza as if mesmerized,” and “Something unspoken passes between the two women—a knowledge of themselves as women, defined by their relation to the man” (286). Here again DeSoto insists that Tembi and Märit’s competition for Khoza is “natural.” They are women, and as such they are necessarily “defined by their relation to the man.” This discourse of gender in turn becomes defined by its relation to an assumed heterosexuality: Märit and Tembi are unable to resist the man who has so quickly and effortlessly become the “center” of their world. If, up to this point, their shared femaleness has trumped their racial and cultural differences and brought them together to face the challenges of farm life, now Khoza exploits their differences and his “natural” power as a man to play each woman off of the other to his own benefit, and the women’s friendship quickly deteriorates to the point
that Märit calls Tembi a “kaffir bitch” and Tembi, along with Khoza, throws Märit out of the house (318).

Although this is the most dramatic incident of jealous rivalry between the women, when Tembi accidentally reveals “a glimpse of smooth belly and the roundness of one breast” to Khoza and Märit one morning (283), it recalls a moment at the beginning of the novel when Tembi drops a tray while cleaning up at dinner, and she and Ben crouch to retrieve it at the same time:

In the action of squatting, Tembi’s dress rides up her thighs, revealing the shadowed declivity there, and at the same moment Ben, in reaching for the tray, brushes her knee with his hand….But in the moment before Ben rises, Märit has seen another expression on his face, in that moment when his hand brushed Tembi’s knee and his eyes dropped for a split second to the shadow between her partly open thighs. An expression of fleeting swiftness, disappearing in the instant that he turns to Märit with his abashed grin. But she has seen it, and she recognizes the look, for it has been on Ben’s face before, when he has looked at her as she rises from the bath, or as she sits on the edge of the bed to put on nylon stockings, and his eyes drop with that almost glazed look to the juncture of her thighs. She has never minded, for it is proof of his maleness, and proof of her allure. (83)

Now suddenly Märit notices Tembi’s bare feet, “clean but somehow very naked, and she sees the way the thin cotton dress moves across the buttocks and rests on the full breasts, rounder than her own. As Tembi leans across the table, Märit smells the faint female perfume of her body” (83). Märit responds to this by getting sandals and a housedress for Tembi to wear while serving, but there is an “unspoken admission” between Märit and Ben that “he has looked with lust at Tembi” and that “she [Marit] saw this” (85).

Within DeSoto’s heterocentrist vision, Märit and Tembi’s friendship must vacillate wildly between “sisterhood” and sexual jealousy. They are both women, both interpellated by the men’s gaze, a fact so inevitable that in the preceding passage this very direct connection is made by Märit herself. Dollar, Khoza and Tembi are hypersexualised in Märit’s gaze, which reinscribes stereotypes of “black” people’s sexual potency, while Märit
herself struggles against sexual repression: when Ben tells Märit that they have no time for
sex before the workday begins on the farm, she contemplates masturbation but refrains
because “she has never been able to do that, to herself, it seems wrong somehow” (89).
Female sexual pleasure is therefore controlled solely by men in the novel, and women’s
sexual agency is always only reactive. In this way, the characters in the novel—and especially
the female characters—are, to a large extent, victims of sexual desire and jealousy, and the
social relations affected by this overwhelming “natural” force are beyond their control.

Though the lack of female sexual agency in the novel may be simple evidence of
sexist stereotypes, I argue that the insistent foreclosure of this agency, and in particular of
homoerotic desire between the two women, again betokens an entrenchment of the
biopolitical framework. Though the two women live closely together throughout the novel
to the point of sleeping in the same bed and bathing together, any eroticism in their
relationship is silenced in the insistence that the women are “like sisters” (159). When Märit
talks sex with Tembi after they have swum naked in the river together, Märit attributes the
pleasure of sex to difference: “A man’s body is like your own in so many ways, but where he
is different his body is something wonderful. And the difference gives you pleasure,” she
explains to the inexperienced Tembi (252). Such strenuous foreclosure of homoeroticism
suggests more than heterocentrism. Within the novel, homosexuality is not forbidden but is,
rather, unimaginable—literally unthinkable. The biopolitical framework embedded in the
nationalist plaasroman revolves around the productivity of the farm, and so in this framework
lesbianism is uninterpretable because such relationships lie outside of the heteroproductive
instrumentalist economy. Within this economy, only two possibilities exist: heterosexual
stability or heterosexual competition, and it is because this sexual competition is presented as
inevitable that Märit and Tembi’s friendship is unsustainable.
Under Khoza’s sexual thrall, Tembi goes so far as to follow his suggestion to rename the farm and thus imaginatively lay claim to it. Standing at the farm’s gates, Khoza tells Tembi that “All of this is ours,” and she thinks “The house and farm belong to Märit. But if they did not?” (312). She then envisions herself as mistress of the farm, driving around and being served in shops: “But who else will live on the farm? Where is Märit in this picture? Where is Khoza? This part of the picture is hazy. And what does Khoza mean when he says this land is ‘ours’? Does he mean the country, or does he mean the farm? Does he mean it is his?” (312). Tembi goes from imagining herself taking Märit’s place in the previous hierarchy and being called ‘Missus’ by the shopkeepers to becoming confused by Märit’s absence from the hierarchy. From a moment of imaginative liberation, Tembi descends back to suspicion of Khoza and of his motives. This movement in the text thus casts doubt on the idea of land redistribution—is it not perhaps just an excuse for people like Khoza to take that for which they have not worked? Within the plasroman scheme of ownership which DeSoto’s account of Märit and Tembi’s labour has entrenched, Khoza’s argument that South Africa belongs historically and primarily to “black” people is not only brought into question, but refigured as greed. Moreover, Khoza’s ability to sway Tembi has been framed as strong sexual influence rather than sound logical argument.

When Tembi paints over Märit’s name for the farm with her own, Ezulwini, “‘The Valley of Heaven,’” she “writes the letters with wonder, claiming the world by her own hand” (313), but surely in light of the suspiciousness of Khoza’s motives, and in light of the discussion in the same section of the novel of previous names for the farm, a discussion that emphasizes the impermanence of the act of naming, the effectiveness of this action is already cast into doubt. This brings us back to the question of whether anyone can ever really own the land, and it reinforces the sense that Tembi’s actions here violate her
relationship with Märit and violate Märit’s trust of her. Left to her own devices, Tembi presumably would have continued to be Märit’s friend and helpmeet, but when Khoza appears, in this scenario more or less the last man on earth, Märit and Tembi “naturally” begin to compete for him. Khoza uses this to his advantage in meeting his personal, rather than political, ends, and Tembi’s actions here are less informed by her reaction to the political realities that have shaped her life than they are by sexual jealousy.

As I suggested earlier, the primary implication of *A Blade of Grass* as an allegory of South African social relations is that what seems to be racial conflict is in fact sexual competition. While this insistence on the primacy of gender de-emphasizes race as a category of identity, in this version of sexual competition, essentialized constructs of gender and sexuality underscore the interchangeability of the characters. In particular, women become interchangeable because they are all essentially the same, and it is in this economy of substitution that Tembi sees potential and Märit sees her own ruin. Indeed, the depth of Märit’s fear is evident when, early in the novel, Märit arrives home unexpectedly and finds Tembi trying on a dress from Märit’s closet. Märit immediately assumes that Tembi and Ben have been having sex, and she punishes Tembi even when she sees that nothing has happened between Ben and Tembi. By wearing Märit’s dress and lying on her bed, Tembi seems to signal an intended usurpation of Märit’s place, and she also signals the interracial sex which is Märit’s secret desire. When Tembi puts on the dress, she “wonders if it is only clothes that make a difference between her and Märit” (95), and as she stands naked in front of the mirror while changing she reflects that “If Märit stood here now they would be the same” (96). Later, when Märit is passed out drunk after Ben’s death, Tembi cleans her up “the way one would minister to a child” and sees “a white woman naked” for the first time: “Despite the differences in the color of the skin, and the color of the hair, and in the
different curves of the body, Tembi sees only a woman. Only a woman, she thinks. Like me” (132). While the narrative seems to imply that this moment is one of psychic liberation for Tembi, Märit’s fear suggests a “knowledge” that it is actually the “black” body that is most inherently appealing, and it is this interpretation which seems to stand as Märit continues to compare her own body with Tembi’s throughout the course of the novel, finding her own body less full, less strong, less attractive. All of the novel’s rhetoric of “black” bodies being connected to the earth feeds into and reinforces the stereotype that “black” people are more “natural” and more sexual than “white” people. Despite the ostensibly positive valuation of “black” bodies in this scheme, this exoticization in no way disrupts, but rather entrenches, colonialist stereotypes. If DeSoto has refigured the plaasroman, it has been by hypersexualizing it, ultimately perpetuating rather than deconstructing the essentialized racial, gendered and sexual identities upon which apartheid was predicated. Meanwhile, the novel’s focus on individual sexualities and responses to oppression again brings any potential critical dimension of the book away from the realm of the political and into the “collective unconscious,” so that solutions to apartheid must also be primarily individual and personal rather than cooperative and political.

Ultimately, the narrative of Märit’s death and Tembi’s survival replaces the “political” order with a “natural” one. As Alec Scott observes of A Blade of Grass, Märit and Tembi “react to one another, not like adults shaped by apartheid but like unschooled children, evaluating each other’s essential traits in a manner devoid of prejudice, shorn of conventional politics,” and his comments reveal the problematics of the novel. Within the biopolitical framework of apartheid, the women are infantilized, their attempts to work together reduced to the untenable fantasies of “unschooled children” who oppose “politics” with relationships. Since these relationships are also unsustainable because of the intrusions
of the political order, “nature” emerges as the only recourse in the rejection of apartheid. The fantasy of this novel is of a return to the wild, and the politics of the book are that perhaps the land “belongs only to the animals” (26). In the end, it is the kudu, the baboon and the locust who truly own the farm. In this way, *A Blade of Grass* renders “white” and “black” claims to the land equally untenable, a move which seems politically and morally suspect. Rather than imagining a true political reconciliation between “black” and “white” people, Mārit and Tembi’s friendship determines and legitimizes a constructed “natural” order, one which, despite its apparent challenge to apartheid conventions, is ultimately continuous with it.

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26 This is especially true in light of the tendency for the ecological/environmental movement to be primarily “white” and first world, and prone to dictating, from a position of privilege, sound ecological practices to those with few choices. Nadine Gordimer’s novel *The Conservationist* offers a good example of this dynamic in the South African context.
Chapter 3

Genealogy and access to history in *Bloodlines* and *Playing in the Light*

In “Krotoä remembered” (1998), Carli Coetzee discusses how the representation of Krotoä, the Khoi woman who bore children to an early Dutch colonist and from whom many Afrikaner families are descended, has changed since the end of apartheid. Whereas Krotoä herself was imprisoned on Robben Island and her children taken from her, and whereas her memory was reviled in apartheid history, Coetzee notes that “[h]er ‘blood’ is now claimed by those whose ancestors denied any relation with her ancestors” (114).

Coetzee elaborates:

The Heeses, a father-and-son-team of historians doing genealogical work, have done remarkable archival work showing the ancestry of Afrikaner families. When, in the early 1970s, they published their findings that present-day Afrikaners had a high percentage of Khoi and slave ancestry, their work was dismissed, angrily, by many Afrikaner intellectuals and political leaders. Now, in the mid-1990s, a largely Afrikaans-speaking audience sits and hears Krotoä described as ‘our mother’. And in amateur genealogical circles, white people compete to discover that they are descended from Krotoä, the ‘stammoeder’ (founding mother) of the Afrikaner. (119)

At stake in the reclamation of Krotoä, as Coetzee argues, is the renegotiation of the Afrikaner’s place in post-apartheid South Africa: “By reclaiming as their foremother the Khoi woman Krotoä, these South Africans can gain what seems like legitimate access to the new rainbow family” (115). The reclamation of Krotoä thus serves as a model for many other post-apartheid genealogical investigations: this “newly uncovered” history both justifies and redeems through its apparent challenge to apartheid ideology. But this “radical” genealogy can also be seen to reinscribe apartheid obsessions. Attempts to correct apartheid-era narratives of national history by insisting not only on the occurrence, but also on the centrality, of racial mixing ironically perpetuate eugenic thought by assigning a genetic origin to South African culture: biological reproduction is substituted for cultural production.
Chapter 3

This chapter focuses on two novels which take the form of genealogical investigations set against the backdrop of political transition in South Africa. Like the reinscription of Krotoë as *stammoeder*, both novels re-examine and rewrite apartheid conceptions of race through their representations of a “coloured” family’s history.¹ Despite this similar focus and despite their shared emphasis on the effects of political context on family history, a crucial difference lies in each novel’s representation of historiography and its claims. While Elleke Boehmer’s *Bloodlines* in many ways endorses a redemptive potential in historical narrative—especially in the novel’s representation of writing and of the construction of narrative—Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* is more suspicious of the uses to which historical narrative can be put, and is sceptical of the liberatory potential of writing. *Bloodlines* locates potential healing in the writing of a South African history which emphasizes the complexity of the relations and relationships which have formed the country, but *Playing in the Light* in many ways eschews a focus on writing, seeming to suggest instead an ethical imperative to read. It may seem nonsensical to so firmly separate the acts of reading and of writing, especially when my argument addresses *Playing in the Light*, a novel written about reading. But one takes a different relation to the world in the act of writing, understood as an act of creation, than one does in the act of reading, understood as a condition of receptivity. An emphasis on writing the “right story” to facilitate political reconciliation assumes a position of mastery and also betrays a desire for closure which must be politically suspect, because the desire for a final closure of the wounds of apartheid also implies a desire to put an end to responsibility for the injustices of the past. A condition of receptivity, on the other hand, is predicated on a recognition of the subjectivity of the other rather than

¹ As noted in the Introduction, I invoke apartheid racial categories not to affirm them, but because each classification group was allotted—and denied—very specific sets of rights. In repeating apartheid terminology, then, I refer to a specific political and historical context.
an assumption of the centrality of the self. Receptivity is necessarily reciprocal, so that the fantasy of remaking the world according to one’s wishes is rendered impossible. A comparison of Bloodlines and Playing in the Light reveals the relations to history inherent in the practices of reading and writing, underscoring, and in Wicomb’s case challenging, the narrative structures of instrumentalism.

3.1 History and genealogy in Bloodlines

As a literary theorist, Elleke Boehmer, as she says of herself, has “played a role in the making of early 1990s gender-and-nation studies” (Stories of Women 4). Since the publication of her dissertation as the book Mothers of Africa, much of Boehmer’s critical work has focused on correcting male-authored theories of nationalism which either fail to discuss the relation between gender and the nation, or which uncritically accept nationalist narratives that figure women as the nation itself (i.e. the passive land as mother and lover), and men as the actors in the nation’s shaping (i.e. the active force).

Given that the gendering of national narratives so preoccupies Boehmer’s criticism, it is no surprise that this concern is also a major theme of her fiction. Bloodlines, her third novel, is set during South Africa’s transition to democracy, making the nation-building overtones of the novel especially evident. As I’ve already suggested above, in Bloodlines, part of Boehmer’s task is to rewrite conventional histories of South Africa and of the Anglo-Boer war in particular, paying special attention to the complexities of the interactions between nations, races, and genders. Her multivalent narrative combines numerous narrative perspectives, including narrators of different races and genders and of differing historical locations.
Chapter 3

The novel’s main action begins with a bombing. A young “coloured” man named Joseph Makken plants a bomb in a Durban supermarket and is unable to phone in a warning in time to prevent the deaths of several “white” patrons. One of those killed is Duncan Ferguson, the boyfriend of Anthea Hardy, a newly-minted newspaper reporter, and it is Anthea’s attempt to understand her own loss which leads her to attend Makken’s trial, and, eventually, to befriend his mother Dora. Anthea’s growing friendship with Dora exposes the limitations of Anthea’s “white” liberalism and reveals the complexities of Dora and Joseph’s embodied histories. When Anthea and Dora start researching Dora’s family history together, the closeness of their relationship across racial lines echoes the inter-racial relations from which the family history emerges, and the emphasis on the continuity of inter-racial intimacies in South Africa explicitly challenges apartheid histories that would gloss over or erase the evidence of these movements among and within social categories.

Boehmer brings complexity to her story by building into it unexpected details: as a city, Durban is more generally associated with Zulu nationalism and the Inkatha Freedom Party than with “coloured” activism and the African National Congress. Furthermore, the timing of the bombing, set against the background of transitional talks, disrupts the conventional oppositions of oppression and the struggle. Some reviewers of the novel attempt to determine which real-life bombing is most likely to have inspired the novel’s action, Annie Gagiano of Die Burger seeing “many clear parallels with the Robert McBride case” of 1986. It is this transposition of historical events from the state of emergency to the transition to democracy that presumably causes Brenda Atkinson of the Mail and Guardian to

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2 “Boehmer se verhaal het baie duidelike parallelle met die Robert McBride-geval.” (Gagiano 7, my translation). Robert McBride was a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe and was convicted for the bombing of Magoo’s Bar in Durban. He was subsequently granted amnesty for this action by the TRC. To my mind, the Amanzimtoti bombing of 1985 more strongly resembles the incidents of the novel. MK cadre Andrew Zondo was convicted and hanged for this action, and a recent campaign argues for the clearing of his name and a valorization of his actions as a part of the liberation struggle.
dismiss the novel’s framework as a “weirdly anachronistic choice of political topic and historical setting” (5), a charge to which an unnamed reviewer for the NELM News responds “one need only remember the parallel murder of Chris Hani at Easter in 1992” (3).³

Whether or not the novel is anachronistic, it is the effect of the setting which is important. Boehmer not only writes against various stereotypes of the struggle and the transition, but also disrupts multiple sets of binaries, writing within a post-modern framework in which oppositions of all kinds—not just racial ones—are invoked only to be deconstructed. Indeed, as Michiel Heyns comments, while “[a] realist critique of Bloodlines would founder on the sheer unlikeliness of it all,” he suggests that the novel redeems itself through “the thoughtful conceptual framework, the careful patterning” of its narrative structure (“Sermonising” 18).

But there are limits to the effects of Boehmer’s disruption of binaries. Like the representation of Krotoä, the “coloured” family history seems to provide a ready metonym for the racial mixing which characterizes so much South African history, and which apartheid ideology so desired to erase. Boehmer acknowledges this history through her character Gertie Maritz, a “coloured” man whose extemporaneous speech to Anthea on the “coloured” condition as he sees it emphasizes the connections between race, genealogy, and nation:

We Coloureds more than most, we know history isn’t straight, we carry this mixed-up country inside of us. Where’s our tribe, our language? We claim whatever we can find. Hand-me-downs, off-cuts of this and that, bits of taal, other people’s words. Unlawful mating as they say, it’s in our skin, our names betray it….The Boers our enemies were our friends sometimes, must’ve been. At dead of night. They warred with us, made love with us, those white Boers that us brown men like Joseph Makken fight. (103)

³ Chris Hani was in fact assassinated on April 10th, 1993, and his killer was a far-right activist intent on derailing transitional negotiations rather than an MK cadre protesting oppression. Despite these problems with the analogy, however, it is true that, despite the political progress and promise of the time, violence still characterized the transition period.
Gertie’s speech invokes the post-colonial theoretical idea(l)s of hybridity and ambivalence as answers to false constructs of racial purity and separation. Gertie not only suggests, but emphasizes, that the “coloured” body serves as a living metaphor for a history of mixing and interaction between “races.” On the one hand, he refers to the shame of the “coloured,” upon whose body “unlawful mating” is recorded, but his frank discussion of this history also rejects the notion of shame. Instead, Gertie uses history to highlight the inevitable connections between races in the country, and he uses these connections and troubled relations as a metaphor for the country as a whole: for Gertie, the proper symbol of South Africa is not the “black” man in conflict with the “white” man, but rather the “brown” man “like Joseph Makken” who embodies both, and who, ironically, fights himself in the form of the struggle of “brown” against “white.” This image internalizes the struggle and postulates it as psychological as well as political.

Boehmer makes much of Makken’s embodied racial ambivalence. He is committed to the struggle, but he is also aware of—and hates—the “half-white skin wrapped around [him]” (263). As Wicomb observes in her essay “Shame and the Case of the Coloured” (1998), this kind of metaphorizing of “coloured” existence connects to larger post-colonial theorizations of hybridity which rely, “after all, on the biological” (102). Critiquing Bhabha, Wicomb notes that as an embodiment of disruptive ambivalence, the “coloured” person is

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4 Although these terms have long histories, recently they have both been strongly associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha. “Hybridity” has historically been a biological construct, but Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain that, for Bhabha, hybridity is the result of the inevitable cultural interactions which make “the claim to a hierarchical ‘purity’ of cultures untenable” (118). Because colonial relationships inevitably create hybrid cultural spaces, they also generate ambivalence, “the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized” and that “suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relationship within the colonial subject” (12-13). Crucially, “ambivalence disrupts the clear-cut authority of colonial domination” and therefore this ambivalent relationship “generates the seeds of its own destruction” (13).

Bhabha’s conception of the subversive potential of hybridity, though influential to the extent that the hybrid is almost a cliché in postcolonial analyses of texts, has also provoked its share of criticism. Robert Young’s Colonial Desire traces the history of the concept to reveal its complicity with colonial projects and its roots in precisely the hierarchical understandings of biology that Bhabha insists it disrupts. Zoë Wicomb, like Young, also sees problems with the biologization of the metaphor, as I will show shortly.

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made to concretize a set of theoretical issues, an exigency which produces “echoes of the tragic mode where lived experience is displaced by an aesthetics of theory. How, one is tempted to ask, do people who live in communities inhabit, spookily and precariously, a rim of inbetween reality?” (101). The question, then, is whether Boehmer does more with her characterization of Joseph Makken and his family history than just invoke the “not-this, not-that” dilemma. To what extent does she explore the complexities of “coloured” identity rooted in apartheid clichés and essentialisms, and to what extent does she replicate them?

This is a complicated question. In many ways, Boehmer’s narrative resists biological essentialism in its representation of characters coming together through circumstance and proximity. The bomb is the event that happens to bring Anthea and Dora together, and it just so happens that Anthea, through her job at the newspaper, has the will and the resources to help Dora investigate her family’s past. The death of Duncan brings Anthea close to the Makken family, and this in turn causes Anthea to rethink other relationships in her life, eventually bringing her to a romantic relationship with Arthur Naidoo, a South African Indian journalist with whom she has been covering the bombing.

In the parts of the narrative set in the past, too, Boehmer emphasizes the random connections which bring the characters together. Joseph Macken, the Irish brigadier come to South Africa to fight with the Boer against the British, happens upon the farm where Dollie is working, and the inhabitants of the farm all happen to be pro-Boer, or at least anti-British. Through the inter-racial romance between Dora’s ancestors, Joseph Macken and Dollie, Boehmer makes the connection between Irish anti-imperialism and Boer anti-imperialism. As Sue Kossew observes of this element of the novel, Boehmer in this way emphasizes “the ‘horizontal contexts’ of nationalist movements and the concept of ‘cross-border interdiscursivity’ that linked Ireland and the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War” (139).
Kossew further notes that this emphasis resists “the notion of margin and centre as a model for international contact” (139), and presumably in making these kinds of connections Boehmer troubles the hierarchies which the margin-centre model assumes, basing her novel instead around historical political relations which, in light of the dominance of the British perspective on this history, today seem unexpected—or perhaps all-too-expected from a postcolonial revisionist perspective. Continuing in this vein of unconventional historicization, Boehmer depicts the concentration camps in which the British imprisoned Afrikaner men, women and children en masse in a way which neither dismisses nor romanticises Boer suffering, and it is through Dollie’s internment in a camp that she meets the Irish nurse Kathleen Gort, whose letters and journals are serendipitously discovered by Dora and Anthea, and the contents of which provide crucial information about Dora’s family.

To this series of coincidences around which the narrative is structured, Boehmer adds the appearance of several key historical figures such as Gandhi, Maud Gonne, W. B. Yeats, and President Mandela. While this strategy may be partially ascribed to the coy playfulness in fashion in much post-modern fiction, it also re-emphasizes the connections between various anti-imperial movements (Ireland, South Africa, India) and reframes history as the outcome of encounters between both recognizable and unknown figures. There is no reason why the historical figures who pop up in the novel could not have appeared where they did or met the fictional characters that they do (had these fictional

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5 Kathleen happens to work in the same camp as a “Gujerati lawyer who works...as a stretcher-bearer” and apparently spends some time expounding to her on the concept of satyagraha (98), Maud Gonne writes a letter to Dollie (188ff), Yeats writes a letter to “Mrs Shakespear” about the war (22-23), and Dora glimpses “the Old Man himself” outside of Parliament in Cape Town (239).

6 Robert Young’s Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction also takes this tack, correcting more conventional histories which tacitly assume a predominant European centre through which all colonial histories are mediated.
characters existed), and perhaps in this way Boehmer constructs a genealogy of coincidence and chance.

But, as the title *Bloodlines* reminds us, the genealogy in the novel is also literal. Anthea and Dora’s project is to trace the family history in the hopes of refiguring Joseph as an Irish national and the latest in a long line of freedom fighters. As Gertie explains to Dora on Anthea’s behalf, “If it’s true what this girl has found out...it might get his [Joseph’s] sentence changed, commuted, he’s declared a proper prisoner of war, an Irish-origin soldier. Your history can save him, if you can manage to piece it together” (145). Anthea unearths references to Dora and Joseph’s family in the *Reports of the Native Commission* and also uncovers the Irish nurse Kathleen Gort’s journal of her time in the Anglo-Boer war (132). The journal describes Kathleen’s friendship with Dollie and refers to a wooden *kas*, or chest, which Dora immediately recognizes as the family heirloom that sits on her porch. Dora then discovers more of Kathleen Gort’s letters in the *kas*, seeing this discovery as “History shaping into a circle, making good” (196). Indeed, the story that Anthea and Dora uncover seems valuable enough to Anthea’s newspaper that it pays to support their work, apparently in hope of eventually publishing it.

The family history may be potentially redemptive both as legal evidence and as cultural capital, but the process through which it is uncovered depends not only on chance, but also on a literalization of biological connections: while Dora and Anthea are able to find some archival material to support their story, they also fill in its many gaps through an imaginative process in which Dora channels her grandmother’s story and Anthea types it. When Dora finds the letters in the *kas*, “something” is “fixed” for her: “I’m sure now what to do, I want to think about Dollie’s voice...I need to sit and feel her voice inside” (197). Although this imaginative writing process may feature in the narrative to counteract the
biological essentialism of the focus on genealogy, the process in fact depends on some kind of mystical genetic connection between Dora and Dollie. Dora can channel Dollie’s history because they are related, and although Dora never finds much written or concrete information about Dollie, Dora is able to intuit Dollie’s life story by visiting the places where Dollie spent her time. While Kossew seems to take this writing process at face value as an act which “brings together the older Coloured and young white woman in the emerging new South Africa, allowing each to gain an understanding of the other,” (143) Margaret Daymond observes that:

because all of these documents and other mementoes appear providentially at the moment they are most needed to guide the progress of the characters’ research, their effect is to invite us to believe that when the right purposes arise then the truth about the past will reveal itself and that the revisioning will be redemptive...

(29)

Boehmer seems to want to offer writing as a redemptive act, but an acceptance of this idea in the context of this plot not only strains credulity (how could the outcome of this channelling process become legal evidence?), but depends on an instrumentalist understanding of fiction as a modelling of the political and social world: in Bloodlines, the right story will heal all wounds. This leaves little space, despite the novel’s own post-modern framework, for the stories which are not stories of a conventional pattern, and for the narratives which cannot be told. In short, despite its depiction of violence and warfare past and present, the rupture of trauma itself cannot be expressed in this novel—rather, in Bloodlines, narrative is unproblematically construed to heal trauma and eliminate rupture.

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7 Boehmer herself, in her acknowledgements, credits “the imagined but nonetheless keenly imagined ‘hands’ of WB Yeats, and Maud Gonne” and pronounces herself “grateful” for “the presence, throughout [the book], of Bessie Head.” This gesture seems to put her in the same position as Dora, as a channeller, but in Boehmer’s case the connection is imaginative—or perhaps even intellectual—rather than genetic. It is also a claim to cultural capital: I have been an instrument of Yeats, Gonne and Head.
Indeed, when the channelling process begins to weigh on Dora because, in her words, “Patching together a history doesn’t improve much, I sometimes think, elastoplasting a family doesn’t heal the past,” she asks Anthea if the newspaper can’t… find money for me to go off somewhere? These things happen, fact-finding missions, isn’t that what they call it? I mean it. As part of writing up our story, let me travel somewhere. You could even join me, after a while. Why don’t I, say, go somewhere Dollie or Kathleen Gort might’ve gone, turn up more details for our work? Let me be alone with Dollie, Anthea, prove I can do it. I think this is what I need. (232-233)

Dora speaks of the process of “feeling” the story, and also of the work of “patching together a history,” so that writing is represented as a connection to the past but also a potential intervention in it. This calls attention to the process of writing: the lines between creative writing and historiography are blurred, perhaps as a deliberate comment on the “truth” of fiction, but then again, in framing her trip as a “fact-finding mission,” Dora makes a claim for the legitimacy of her channelling as evidence, and there seems to be no room in this to doubt the purposes and effects of narrative or even to recognize their ambiguity. In asking to “be alone with Dollie,” Dora imagines that she will reach some resolution for Dollie’s story and thus for Dollie’s pain. After a trip to Cape Town, Dora does indeed generate a final letter from Kathleen to Dollie, which Anthea reads “swept by waves of relief, shock, hope.” As Anthea exclaims, “Dora’s done it! This isn’t a scrapbook piece at all, it’s an end for Dollie’s story. What we’ve done eventually returns us to ourselves, she said. She somehow got there, like she said she would. She’s sewn in the loose threads, she’s done it” (274). Because Dora has found “an end for Dollie’s story,” she has “sewn in the loose threads” and created closure for Dollie and for herself, Anthea, and Joseph. The image of the return “to ourselves” and of threads being sewn together replaces the gaps, the wounds, the unknown elements of the family history—and by extension, of the national history—with a seamless narrative which progresses toward the state of reconciliation embodied by
the characters in the novel who have forged such sustaining relationships across the racial divides constructed by apartheid.

Dora’s channelling process also literalizes the conventional understanding of the psychoanalytic process: the (familial) past is investigated and uncovered, and this frees the patient to heal and move forward. The conventional psychoanalytic process, in this conception of it, is about uncovering and composing an explanatory narrative, of completing a narrative from which key pieces of information were missing. It is the completion of the narrative which prompts healing, and in this respect, *Bloodlines*, despite its complexity, reiterates a deeply conventional plotline, one generated by what Holocaust theorist Eric Santner would describe as “narrative fetishism,” which is “a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness” (144).  

Indeed, though the novel is in many ways self-consciously post-modern, its primary plot structure further reinforces the instrumentalism inherent in the idea of genealogical investigation. In particular, Anthea’s journey from liberal racism to true friendship with

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8 Santner defines narrative fetishism in opposition to the work of mourning:

By narrative fetishism I mean the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place. The use of narrative as fetish may be contrasted with that rather different mode of symbolic behavior that Freud called Trauerarbeit or the “work of mourning.” Both narrative fetishism and mourning are responses to loss, to a past that refuses to go away due to its traumatic impact. The work of mourning is a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses; it is a process of translating, troping, and figuring loss and, as Dominick LaCapra has noted in his chapter, may encompass “a relation between language and silence that is in some sense ritualized.” Narrative fetishism, by contrast, is the way an inability or refusal to mourn emploits traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. Narrative fetishism releases one from the burden of having to reconstitute one’s self-identity under “posttraumatic” conditions; in narrative fetishism, the “post” is indefinitely postponed. (144)

Dominick LaCapra further observes of the concept that “such narration tends to repeat the processes of avoidance, denial, and willed ignorance through which bystanders could remain indifferent to—or somehow able to live with—persecution and genocide” (50). LaCapra offers as an example of narrative fetishism the film *Schindler’s List*, which hinges on such a strong identification with “Schindler’s Jews” and their eventual survival that it disavows their connection to the Jews not under Schindler’s protection—the audience presumably feels relief when “Schindler’s Jews” are rescued from Auschwitz, for example, but that relief is only possible if one forecloses recognition of the suffering of those who will take their place in the camp. In becoming a triumphalist narrative of survival, then, the film glosses over the larger trauma of the Holocaust as a whole.
Dora, and her eventual engagement to Arthur, fits into an instrumentalist narrative of progression where history is envisioned as forward progress. As the novel’s dominant protagonist, Anthea’s narrative arc makes this progress by taking the familiar pattern of Freytag’s pyramid, from its rising action (in which Anthea confronts her own racism), to its climax (of inter-racial emotional connection between Anthea and Dora, and between Anthea and Arthur) and its denouement and resolution (formed by Anthea’s new-found sensitivity and anti-racism).

Although of course Freytag was primarily interested in describing ancient Greek and Shakespearian dramatic narrative structure, his analysis of plot has been adopted as a description of the basic plot of short stories and novels, creating the assumption that narratives naturally seek to describe a resolution of conflict or a change of state.\(^9\) This assumption is often further conflated with the idea that narratives seek to effect the resolution of conflict, and in the South African context this gives rise to a strain of instrumentalist fiction where the goal is not to describe the ruptures and wounds of apartheid, but to gloss over them with naïve narratives of healing. Rather than elucidating the complexities of apartheid’s legacies, these narratives of healing oversimplify the issues and, moreover, continue rather than disrupt categorical thinking where people are their classifications, and narratives are worthwhile because they are “useful” in forcing a certain vision of change.

The idealization of inter-racial relationships is an anti-apartheid cliché, a struggle literature chestnut which continues to appear in multiple post-1994 novels, especially those by “white” authors. So, too, despite its attempts to avoid using the “coloured” body as a

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\(^9\) For Freytag’s description of the pyramid structure, see *Freytag’s Technique of the Drama*, 114ff. The use of Freytag’s pyramid as a tool to explain plot structure in secondary school English classes is a familiar pedagogical strategy—in high school, I myself was taught that all plots were shaped like pyramids. Pedagogy articles such as Carol Jago’s “Stop Pretending and Think About Plot” offer an example of this strategy in use. The popularity of the strategy, along with the fact that English classes are mandatory in secondary school, in turn means that the pyramid plot structure shapes the conventional idea of what a good story “should be.”
cipher or symbol, does *Bloodlines* inevitably biologize the resolution of historical and political wrongs and inequalities. Anthea’s “progress” occurs through her bodily engagement with the other characters in the novel, but this process both disrupts and replicates the stereotypes of the apartheid imagination.

When Anthea first gives Dora a ride in her car, her minute examination of Dora’s body reveals Anthea’s underlying racism and class positioning:

> And still she can’t stop looking, checking Dora’s face, her skin, the grain of her colour. Before, of course, she’d have tried to see Dora free of race, this was what she believed in. She’d have worked to strip away her colour, see her as some kind of inner self or core person. But because of the bomb—the black bomber versus his white victims—this has become impossible. Dora’s race is vividly visible, indelible, and Anthea wants to see it, confront it…(69)

If Anthea is the classic “white” liberal, then what we see in this passage is the unmasking of “acceptance”: beneath the doctrine to which Anthea professes her political devotion, racism structures Anthea’s responses and her preoccupation with Dora’s body. Her liberal politics have been largely theoretical, and this is the first time that a “black” person has been in her car and been so close to her. Formerly, Anthea would have stripped away Dora’s colour and seen her “core person,” and this shows the assumptions of a certain kind of liberalism, that all people are really the “same,” a sameness which is constructed here as whiteness, as an absence of difference, since dark skin, its outer index, must be stripped away to reveal it. The “core person” is the “white” person, and notions of equality are therefore predicated on the normalized “white” subject deciding what “equality” and what “normality” should mean. The bombing has made this assumption impossible because it insists on, and exposes, the constructs of racial difference which the liberal fantasy elides: as Anthea reflects, Joseph has bombed the store because he is “black;” Duncan has died because he is “white.”

Because Anthea cannot imaginatively penetrate Dora’s core as she would a “white” person’s, she reflects that “[t]his white-person ignorance about dark skin…must offer a mask,
a smooth oily mask, a protection against strain” (70). Anthea assumes that blackness offers a “mask” because for her blackness is illegible, and so it either covers up interiority or even precludes it altogether. As with Fanon’s “epidermalization of...inferiority,” “black” people are not seen as individuals (11), and even in this passage Anthea’s elaboration of the details of Dora’s body figures those details only as examples of what a “black” person is like. Moreover, the several references in this passage to Dora’s oiliness further de-personalize her by arousing “white” middle-class notions of disgust. Disgust is a seemingly instinctive reaction which circumvents intellectual responses and precludes identification and acceptance, and in this way Boehmer’s invocation of Anthea’s “shuddery fascination” with the thought that Dora might leave an oily stain on the headrest of the car seat exposes the contradiction between liberal ideals and internalized racism. However, the fact that Dora continues to be described as fat and greasy throughout the novel—even after Anthea has come to love her—risks entrenching rather than critiquing this response. Indeed, later in the novel Anthea’s scrutiny of Dora is repeated:

If Anthea reached out she could touch the back of Dora’s neck, the one mole there. Her glossy skin, her glossy tightly curled hair. A pink comb had worked itself loose from Dora’s bun. She saw the coiled knot of a fatty fingerprint on the plastic rim. The glimpse of that ordinary, medium-sized fingerprint was sharply moving. She thought of Dora rushing to get ready in the morning just as she herself rushed, hurriedly doing her hair while making a cup of tea. (183, italics in the original)

Here, the image of Dora’s “fatty fingerprint” becomes a sign of Anthea’s imagined intimacy with Dora, a counterpoint to the continued impenetrability of her glossy skin and hair. In fact, throughout the novel, Boehmer pays close attention to the physicality of her characters, and has Dora, Anthea, and Joseph all describe each other’s bodies in detail. Though these

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10 See Winfried Menninghaus’ *Disgust* and William Ian Miller’s *The Anatomy of Disgust* for a full analysis of the role of disgust in policing social hierarchies.

11 Heyns remarks that Dora is also “ infantilised by an addiction to biscuits and cool drinks” (“Sermonising” 18).
kinds of details might be included to concretize the bodies in question, in this case it seems that the descriptions run close to stereotype.

In a similar vein, the depiction of Anthea’s relationship with Arthur, which is meant to counter racial divides, instead recasts the relationship in psychoanalytic terms. Rather than revealing, from Anthea’s perspective, that Arthur’s “difference” is a construction, their physical relationship reproduces a racialized Self/Other dichotomy:

They were holding hands, watching their fingers, their own, the other’s, interlinking. Not indistinguishable, Anthea thought, not like holding hands with Duncan. Your fingers or mine? they’d say, now you see me, now you don’t. This stubborn fact of skin, skin difference, her skin lightening, Arthur’s darkening by contrast. Getting used to the fact of skin these past months had meant gradually getting closer in, to Dora, to Arthur, like this. Winding herself deeper in, Arthur’s fingers between her fingers, skin on skin. Knitting into him even while thinking, not thinking Duncan’s skin. Duncan’s torn-up, fragile skin. (192)

This passage makes explicit the idea that Anthea is working through her racism by “getting closer in” to Dora, and her attraction to Arthur is proof of this fact. Through Arthur, she sees her own whiteness in the lightening of her skin against his, and there is a suggestion that her engagement with racial difference here is a form of enlightenment, that her previous engagement with Duncan was at least tinged with narcissism since their hands were “indistinguishable.” This racialized narcissism suggests in Anthea’s racially endogamous relationship with Duncan a kind of melding into undifferentiation which is evocative of the psychoanalytic conceit of the desire to return to the mother. This immature fantasy is rendered impossible by Arthur’s darker skin, which emphasizes difference, so that this relationship is a mature version of congress which does not desire to dissolve boundaries. The “maturity” of this sexual relationship then parallels a “maturity” of non-racialized vision, so that Anthea later is able to “look twice” and read in Joseph “the lines and sensations in blackness,” to see beyond “the traditions that separate us, woman and man, white woman, black man” (266).
Before his meeting with Anthea, Dora insists to Joseph that the fact that Anthea has a “dark Indian” lover means that she’s “all right.” Joseph counters with the sarcastic question: “The black lover shows open-mindedness? A nice reward for all her sweet sympathy?” (263). Despite the self-awareness of the text here, this pattern in the book of idealizing inter-racial relationships is not undone.\(^{12}\) In one section of the novel, Arthur jealously speculates that Anthea and Joseph will forge a romantic relationship as a strategy to win an appeal, “an ideal fail-safe in any appeal against his sentence. See, the bomber has a partner, and what a partner. How tightly this wouldn’t knot you into the Makken story” (194). Though Arthur is playing the jealous lover at this moment, his comment nevertheless enforces the idea that a romantic liaison between Anthea and Joseph would constitute proof of anti-racist enlightenment.

Indeed, though Anthea and Joseph only grudgingly become friendly with each other for Dora’s sake, Anthea’s interest in his case is still presented as evidence of a greater potential cultural shift. The problem is not necessarily that the novel wishes to depict such a shift, but that the shift is continuously personalized and sexualised. Gertie Maritz’s earlier comment, that “The Boers our enemies were our friends sometimes,” in the same way glosses over the possibility—indeed probability—of rape and sexual assault as a prominent origin of “coloured” history. Even Gertie’s reference to “unlawful mating” suggests that this congress did not take place on an equal playing field, and historically the reality of these

\(^{12}\) While the desire for reconciliation and closure that this kind patterning in the plot reveals is understandable as a fantasy (“wouldn’t it be nice if we could heal the wounds of the past?”), it is, in my view, peculiar that such a noted post-colonialist as Boehmer would structure her work around such a naïve plotline. One possible explanation is that the novel is precisely, as Michiel Heyns suggests, a “postcolonial fantasia rather than a realist novel” in which is indulged the wish for a “solution” to ongoing strife (“Sermonising 18). On the other hand, some of Boehmer’s assertions in *Stories of Women* betray the idealization of the effects of narrative that I have been critiquing in *Bloodlines*. I am thinking particularly of her notion that Bessie Head and other writers “recuperate or transfigure the native/colonised body by way of the ‘talking cure’ of narrative,” a notion that clearly betrays a narrative fetishist understanding of the “uses” of narrative (16). In an article about J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, too, Boehmer affirms the characterization of the TRC as “a collective talking cure through public testimony” (“Sorry” 345). Since *Bloodlines* is meant to imaginatively heal the wounds of the past, Boehmer’s criticism and her fiction meet here in this search for closure.
biological metaphors of race relations has been the rape of female slaves and servants by “white” masters. Although it is possible that Gertie, as a character, simply would not think in these terms, the novel nevertheless hides this history on a larger scale by having its inter-racial sexual relationships remain atypically mutual and respectful. Dollie is willingly seduced by Joseph Macken, who is an adventurer, but not an abuser. Meanwhile, Anthea and Arthur’s relationship relies on the “white” woman/“non-white” man trope to insist on a kind of “equality” impossible between a “white” man and “non-white” woman, because the inequality of the gender hierarchy is supposedly balanced by the inequality of the racial hierarchy, so that both partners can be understood as equally, though differently, disadvantaged. Joseph Makken’s genealogy uncovers a history of freedom fighting that is liberatory rather than revelatory of a history of rape and abuse. The fact that this history will somehow become legal evidence in his appeal shows a desire to equate genealogical

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13 This strategy differs from the use of inter-racial sexual relationships in anti-apartheid literature. As an anti-apartheid cliché, the inter-racial relationship is generally depicted as novel and ahistorical, an innovation. What Boehmer is doing is insisting on the historical continuities of inter-racial relationships in South Africa, but taking them out of their violent contexts.

Rosemary Jane Jolly, in contrast, has shown that the use by “white” writers of inter-racial relationships as a metaphor for inter-racial politics is suspect even in the work of a dissident writer such as André Brink. Jolly’s reading of Brink’s A Chain of Voices locates the trope firmly within the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, arguing that “the Afrikaner dissident depends upon the fiction that the recognition of himself as both master and tyrant, [sic] will take place at the moment of sexual access to the body of the other” (30). Jolly describes the Afrikaner dissident’s apparent desire for the other in this context as in fact “the desire to save oneself from becoming/remaining one of the tribe,” a desire which is at once sadistic and masochistic since the dissident uses the sexual relationship to assert both mastery and guilt (30). In Brink’s novel, while “white” men’s sexual relations with “black” women are rooted in colonial violence, the “black” male slave’s relations with his “white” mistress are potentially liberatory. Jolly argues that when the “white” mistress intervenes to curtail the beating of a “black” slave by the “white” master, the part that the woman plays “exemplifies two consistent characteristics of the fiction’s portrayal of the master-slave relationship. The first is that the slave does not (or cannot?) engineer his own liberation without assistance; and the second is that this assistance is provided by ‘his woman,’ who turns out, in the climactic scene of the novel, ideally to be white and the former woman ‘of’ the (or in practice, a) master” (38). In its appropriations of otherness in the service of the liberation of the “white” man from mastery and guilt, the text can be read as “a white liberal fantasy” (52).

Essentially, if the inter-racial sexual configuration is “white” man, “black” woman, we’re rehearsing the violent power imbalance of colonial rape. If the configuration is “black” man, “white” woman, then we need to look for the pattern that Jolly has identified in A Chain of Voices, and recognize the pattern as an attempted reversal of colonial violence. Fanon marks the relationship as a form of violent appropriation of “white” male power in his discussion of relationships between “black” men and “white” women: “When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine” (63). Note that, as Jolly observes with Brink, the relation which Fanon depicts is fundamentally an encounter between the “black” man and the “white” man in which the “white” woman’s body literally becomes the ground on which the two meet.
knowledge and access to history with reconciliation. Ultimately, in Bloodlines, the blending of South African destinies, while attributed by some elements of the novel to chance connections such as that between Anthea and Dora, is also envisioned as a biological outcome, the creation of mixed-race people, which reaffirms rather than challenges apartheid ideology by reproducing apartheid obsessions with race and genealogy.

3.2 Unredemptive discovery in Playing in the Light

Like Boehmer’s Bloodlines, Zoë Wicomb’s third major fiction, Playing in the Light,¹⁴ is about the discovery of a “coloured” family history, but in this novel historical knowledge does not lead to redemption, and though racial categories are exploded for the major characters, these characters do not transcend their categorizations in the refiguring of their racial positions.

The plot of the novel revolves around Marion Campbell, a successful Cape Town businesswoman. Marion owns a small travel agency, but has a theory that “there is no need to travel” since people who have been overseas have “no more to tell her than what she has read in brochures” (42). Marion’s tendency to keep people, like the world itself, at arm’s length is evidenced by her dutiful but distant relationship with her father John, her ambivalent feelings for her boyfriend Geoff, and by her general lack of close friends. Her new four-poster bed, “a bower for an egte fairy princess”¹⁵ and “a marker of her success,” concretizes Marion’s isolation by creating a space in which she can literally cut herself off from the world (2). As the novel opens, Marion’s equilibrium has been disturbed: she has

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¹⁴ I use this term rather than “novel” because Wicomb’s breakthrough work You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town is technically a short story cycle.

¹⁵ Playing in the Light frequently includes untranslated, unitalicized Afrikaans words and even stanzas of poetry, and many reviewers note that despite the fact that it is written in English, the novel has an Afrikaans rhythm and sensibility. Wicomb’s choice not to italicize Afrikaans, as Bloodlines, by contrast, does, further enhances the unremarked acceptance of otherness, the lack of clearly demarcated categories of culture and speech.
recently, under the new affirmative action laws, hired a young “coloured” woman named Brenda to work at her firm, and Marion is annoyed by what she sees as Brenda’s cheekiness. Furthermore, Marion has been suffering from panic attacks, in particular in her four-poster bed, where she “seems to gag on metres of muslin, ensnared in the fabric that wraps itself round and round her into a shroud from which she struggles to escape” (2).

As the plot of the novel develops, this image of suffocating whiteness becomes an emblem for Marion’s family’s past: through a series of coincidences, Marion discovers that her parents, Helen and John, were “play-whites,” very light-skinned “coloured” people who were able to pass for “white” under apartheid classifications and who thus enjoyed the benefits the government accorded to “white” people. As in Bloodlines, Marion’s discovery of the past is set into motion through her “inter-racial” engagement with Brenda, although in this case the cross-classification relationship turns out not to be inter-racial at all, but rather endogamously “coloured.” Moreover, as Louise Viljoen notes, though the first section of the book echoes a detective story in which clues lead to the revelation of Marion’s family secret, “the novel is not addressed to this unravelling, but actually focuses on the complex set of circumstances that drove Marion’s parents to the decision to be reclassified” (5). In Playing in the Light, the discovery of “coloured” history is the occasion, but not the teleology, of the plot. Rather than having the Campbells’ family history redeem them from an oppressive past, Wicomb insists on the continuities of the characters’ situations and psychologies.

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16 “Die eerste deel van die boek funksioneer byna soos ’n speurverhaal waarin die lesers reeds vóór Marion begin vermoed wat die familieheem is. Aanvanlik word die leesproses dus gedryf deur die nuuskierigheid om te weet wanneer en hoe Marion die ware toedrag van sake gaan uitvind. Dit is egter tot Wicomb se krediet dat die roman nie gery is op hierdie ontkoping nie, maar eintlik fokus op die komplekse stel oorsake wat Marion se ouers gedryf het tot die besluit om hulle te laat herklassifiseer, alles wat hulle in die proses moes prysgee en die uitwerking wat dit op Marion het wanneer sy met hierdie gegewens gekonfronteer word” (Viljoen 5, my translation above).
There remain several parallels between the two novels. Like Boehmer’s novel, *Playing in the Light* takes multiple narrative perspectives, switching between various focalizers and various historical periods. As in *Bloodlines*, Wicomb uses elements of chance and coincidence to bring characters together. The most notable of these is the photograph which sparks Marion’s quest to learn more of her childhood “servant,” Tokkie: it is “a large colour photograph of a young woman” on the front page of the *Cape Times*, left in the office lunch room by Brenda (48). Despite the fact that the photograph illustrates “another TRC story,” a phenomenon in which Marion has no interest, Marion finds the face of the woman, Patricia Williams, “arresting,” and on impulse tucks the paper into her bag, later claiming not to have seen it when Brenda asks about its absence (49). That evening, contemplating Williams’ picture and her story of having been tortured by security police somehow triggers Marion’s memories of Tokkie, and Marion deduces that Tokkie must have come from the Clanwilliam district, where Marion’s mother was born. Coincidentally, Brenda has just asked Marion for a day off work to take advantage of an opportunity to travel to Clanwilliam, and so Marion approaches Brenda and her family for their help in uncovering Tokkie’s story. Marion’s racist assumption is that, since Tokkie was “coloured,” and since Brenda’s family is “coloured,” they must have known each other (70). Ultimately this assumption, despite Brenda’s negative reaction to it, turns out to hold water, and Marion and Brenda travel to Clanwilliam together, where Marion’s conversation with an acquaintance of Tokkie’s reveals that Tokkie was in fact Marion’s grandmother rather than her servant (97).

Meanwhile, Marion “ventures into a world she has never known, never wished to explore” and begins to watch the coverage of the TRC hearings because “somehow it is the least that she can do for the demanding stranger, for Patricia Williams, whose face is that of beloved Tokkie” (74). When Marion rediscovers her aunt Elsie, Elsie mentions Marion’s
long-lost cousin Patricia Williams in the course of describing Marion’s family tree (172).

Though the manner in which these coincidences bear fruit may parallel the convenience with which Anthea and Dora’s discoveries are made in Bloodlines, the outcomes of their respective investigations differ significantly. Genealogical discovery in Bloodlines shores up the truth of an historical narrative, but in Playing in the Light Marion’s understanding of her family past remains riddled with gaps and lacunae, and she continues to misinterpret her parents’ motives and actions.

Moreover, Marion’s discovery of her “true” racial identity does not fully “undo” her whiteness. Indeed, one of the most radical elements of the novel is Wicomb’s de-biologization of racial classification through her examination of the Campbells’ whiteness as a set of social practices. This strategy is introduced immediately in the opening of the novel, in which Marion, occupying the liminal space of the balcony, is startled by a guinea fowl which “comes flying at a dangerous angle, just missing the wall, and falls dead with a thud at Marion’s feet” (1). The guinea fowl, itself a conspicuous symbol of South Africa, is “declassified by the ruffling of its black-and-white patterned plumage,” defying apartheid divisions of “black” and “white” and calling attention to the arbitrariness of classification. The bird may embody a contradictory binary, but it is Marion’s attitude towards the disposal of its corpse that introduces the connection between race and class: she cannot throw the corpse off the balcony for fear that the neighbours will see and make their disapproval known; instead she leaves a note for “the girl” to take it away, rationalizing that “One never knows what uses such people might have for a dead guinea fowl” (1). Middle-class whiteness is circumscribed by surveillance—an attention to property values and to privacy—
while blackness is to Marion an unknown: she does not know who her “girl” really is, and the “girl’s” labour and her presence are invisible to Marion.\(^\text{17}\)

Wicomb’s focus on whiteness as potential upward class mobility does not merely challenge the conventional thinking of apartheid, but makes plain the biopolitical workings of the racist state. Race is the pretext rather than the reason for class-segregated social hierarchies, and *Playing in the Light* depicts characters who do not so much seek to escape their racial classifications as press their opportunities for social mobility. It is Marion’s mother Helen who sees the potential of exploiting the mistake of the traffic superintendent, “a plattelander himself,” who hears John Campbell’s “rough, rolling r’s as the language of a white farmer” (127). When John unwittingly applies for—and gets—the job of traffic cop, a job reserved for “whites” only, Helen sees it as an opportunity to build “new selves,“ and she is also aware that “Building a new life means doing so from scratch, keeping a pristine house, without clutter, without objects that clamour to tell of a past, without the eloquence—no, the garrulousness—of history” (152). Helen literally rewrites history by anglicising her name from “Karelse” to “Charles,” ridding it of “the nasty possessive” (i.e. the “se” of “Karelse,” Karel being the Afrikaans version of Charles) and thus “claiming her liberty” from her ancestors’ enslavement or servitude (128). History in *Bloodlines* is

\(^\text{17}\) This is a colonial trope in itself. J.M. Coetzee writes about the erasure of “black” labour in “white” South African writing and, referencing Coetzee’s *White Writing* explicitly, Mary Louise Pratt notes the same as a feature of travel and exploration literature. Pratt connects the erasure of “black” labour to the more general erasure or marginalization of “black” presence from the South African landscape. In exploration literature of the 1780s which documents the natural environment of the Cape without remarking much upon its human inhabitants, she says, “Out of the corner of the landscape scanning eye, Khoikhoi servants move in and out on the edges of the story….Referred to simply as ‘a/the/my Hottentot(s)’ (or not at all, as in the eternal ‘our baggage arrived the next day’), all are interchangeable; none is distinguished from another by a name or any other feature; and their presence, their disposition, and subaltern status are now taken for granted” (52). Similarly, Marion’s “girl” hovers at the edge of Marion’s consciousness, characterized primarily in Marion’s mind by her availability to remove inconvenient objects from the flat. Pratt goes on to make clear the ideological implications of this erasure: “contemporary readers can scarcely fail to link this creation of a speechless, denuded, biologized body with a deracinated, dispossessed, disposable work force European colonialists so ruthlessly and tirelessly fought to create” (53). The invisibility and unknowability of Marion’s servant offers a more recent example of this kind of erasure at work.
redemptive, but Helen sees it as a threat since it will reveal the “truth” of her and John’s identities. Through Helen, Wicomb constructs whiteness as a blank, an ahistorical space. Blankness is an in-between state, a disembodiment of history only fully possible in the abstract and only achievable, for a time, through supreme effort of will. For Helen and John, whiteness is achieved through the erasure of the body and the erasure of the tell-tale details which so subtly indicate class and race. Whiteness is like Marion’s four-poster bed, cut off from everything else, and this severing of connections is what they must literalize in order to pass.

While Bloodlines seems to accept biology as a starting-point for racial definitions, in Playing in the Light, the relationship between classification and biology is more complicated, and class pretensions are foregrounded as a key element of whiteness. Helen grasps firmly the significance of middle-class mores as a token of whiteness: she works in a linen shop, and this “had alerted her to the many shades of whiteness, and there was no need to settle for anything other than the brightest” (128). Wicomb nuances the understanding of categories, noting “the many shades of whiteness” rather than building up monolithic categories and inflexible binaries. Helen is not content to be simply “white,” but rather tries for middle-class English whiteness, refining her accent by mimicking the SABC announcers and joining the Anglican church (125).

When John’s sister Elsie comes to tea, light-skinned and well-dressed, Helen is upset by her manners, which are “not up to scratch.” Elsie laughs too loudly and slurps her tea, she is unashamed by fallen crumbs, she is “vulgar” and, as Helen thinks, “beyond the pale.” Helen is concerned that if Elsie drops by when they have other visitors, she will give them away as “play-whites,” and John protests:

...who are these people who would mind her enthusiastic manners? They had no friends, no visitors, could not have anyone come to the house until they had
acquired decent things, from decent furniture to decent teaspoons, although, no sooner would they get a coveted object than it would be superseded by something even more desirable, more decent. Decency, it transpired, was an endlessly deferred, unachievable goal. (167)

“White” middle-class “decency” explicitly follows the logic of middle-class consumption. It can never truly achieve its goal, and so to be middle-class is to keep up with the neighbours perpetually and to work to consume conspicuously. Class is surveillance not just in appearances, but also in manners, gestures, and consumption. Whiteness is apparently unmarked not only by blackness, or by race in general, but also by any other kind of ethnicity (other than the “invisible” ethnicity of the English), local custom, tradition, or manners. Helen’s thought that Elsie is “beyond the pale” carries the double-entendre of both the paleness/whiteness that Elsie has not fully achieved, and the sense of being outside of polite society. The fact that the expression derives from the pale in English-occupied Ireland, the physical boundary erected between the English colonies and Irish land, neatly calls to mind the importance of the control of physical space in colonial projects, a key feature of apartheid legislation such as the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and the pass laws, the inauguration of which forms the historical backdrop of the novel.

If Wicomb emphasizes the socially constructed dimensions of whiteness, she does not ignore its biological aspects, but for the characters in the novel, even biological indicators of race can be mutable. Helen and John’s nervousness about having a child points to the element of chance or of “luck” in determining the child’s apparent racial features: will she have “good,” straight, hair, or curly hair which raises suspicions? Will her skin be dark or light? Further than this anxiety, the folk remedies which Tokkie brings for Helen during her pregnancy indicate a belief in an intentional influence on the expression of genes:

When Helen fell pregnant, her mother brought cuttings of lavender and wilde als. It was important to keep her nerve, Mamma said, patting the wood of the bench, just keep calm and steady and all will come right, she soothed. They sipped
lavender infusion at the kitchen table. The wilde als was for nausea. Mamma had had such a time of it carrying her other child; without als tea she didn't think she would have survived. Which quite undid the benefit of the lavender, as Helen thought anxiously of her brother's dark skin. (133)

Helen and Tokkie's attempt to control the outcome of the pregnancy through herbal teas emphasizes the idea that race—or at least its physical expression—is pliant and unstable, and, though Helen is concerned about the baby’s skin, she and Tokkie still see themselves as able to exert some control over it. The fact that this is a folk-remedy signals that this is not an idea peculiar to Helen and to Tokkie, but is wide-spread, revealing that the scale of valuation (the lighter the child, the better) and the assumption of some measure of control are both general cultural values. Race and the classification system are already called into question, already seen not as monolithic powers, but as ideas to be used and manipulated.

This perspective on racial classification as mutable re-envisions conventional histories of apartheid by revealing not only the measure of control in the apartheid government’s hands, but also the measure of what was beyond that control, namely the governing “white” elite’s anxiety about disorder and racial ambiguity. Wicomb reverses conventional representations of the enactment of apartheid laws when she has Helen think that “History was on their side. It was the Population Registration Act that allowed them brand new lives” (131). In attempting to solidify racial categories, the apartheid government gives people capable of passing an opportunity to document themselves as “white.” Wicomb destabilizes the representation of the power relations at work by focusing on the inventiveness of Marion’s parents’ strategies to pass and to exploit the apartheid system. Though ultimately the system must take its toll on the lives and energies of Marion’s parents and, of course, all other South Africans, in its attempts to impose order, an essentially impossible task, apartheid creates its own contradictions and its own means of undoing itself.
This is not to suggest, however, a Bhabhaian faith in the essential instability, and therefore inevitable demise, of colonial categories and systems of control. Wicomb emphasizes the cost of Marion’s parents’ attempts to pass: not only must Helen trade sexual favours for documentation of her “whiteness,” but she and John must cut most of their social and familial ties. Furthermore, though the novel dwells at length on images and ideas of hybridity, it is also careful to ascribe only a limited destabilizing potential to them. The most prominent image of hybridity in the novel is that of Marion as mermaid, an image which recalls the tale of the little mermaid who made her choice to trade her tail for legs in order to live on land with her prince. Rather than being a creature at home in two elements, the mermaid as embodied by Marion is a creature at home nowhere, suggesting that though categories may be unstable constructs, they yet exert harmful psychological and material effects and demand merciless choices.

Though the mermaid’s willingness to trade her underwater home for the delights of land offers an obvious parallel to the “play-whites” desire to pass, Wicomb clearly references the Hans Christian Andersen version of the tale in her treatment of it. What the Andersen story, as opposed to the Disneyfied version of it, emphasizes is the cost of the mermaid’s choice. Having fallen in love with the prince, the mermaid surrenders her voice to the sea witch so that she may walk on land and be a fit consort for him. Since merpeople have no immortal souls, if the mermaid can cause the prince to love her, then his soul will extend to her upon marriage, and in this way she will gain a soul. But the sea witch warns her that the cost of losing her tail will be that “at every step you take it will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives, and that blood must flow,” and if the prince should marry another, the mermaid will die immediately, soulless (no page). When the mermaid does get her legs, she finds that though the prince “loved her as he would a little child,” his heart
belongs to the human woman who first found him on the beach where the mermaid pulled him ashore (no page). Unable to recognize the mermaid as his true saviour, the prince marries his “rescuer” and the mermaid, though granted the possibility of a last-minute reprieve if she will kill the prince, throws herself into the sea and drowns. The salve at the ending of Andersen’s tale is the assertion that through her sacrifice the mermaid earns the possibility of attaining an immortal soul. She becomes a daughter of the air, which enables her to fly around approving the conduct of good children, but receiving additional years of penance for each “naughty or wicked child” encountered (no page).

Since the mermaid’s rewards for sacrifice are always deferred, the overwhelming emphasis of the tale is on what is lost in desiring to be other than what one is. Indeed, since the mermaid desires to be human because of her love for the prince, the story can be read as a distinctly conservative warning not to desire beyond one’s station. Wicomb’s novel retains the ambivalence of the original fairy tale and references this explicitly through Marion’s identity as mermaid, to which, for example, Marion’s former boyfriend Johan attributes her cold-bloodedness, implying that her attachment to her father’s nickname for her of “his meermin, his little mermaid” betokens some sort of unresolved Electra complex (22).

More important for the account of hybridity in the novel, though, is the recurring image of Helen’s feet, which as a young “coloured child” she toughens by walking shoeless in the village and as a “white woman” tames and trims to fit into shoes. As a symbol of the secrets kept in the family, the feet become the subject of Marion’s primal scene, in which she hears Helen cry out and rushes into her parents’ bedroom. In the course of giving his wife a pedicure, the only act of intimacy which they share since their decision to “try for white,” John has accidentally cut Helen’s foot and blood “black as bile” oozes from it. On the floor lies “a basin of water with the whiff of cologne that the child hated” and beside it “a vicious-
looking knife and a hideous heap of skin” (149). Years later, when the “radical” Anglican priest chooses Helen’s feet to wash ceremonially in church, she has, through “daily scrubbing and grating” defeated the “memory of skin” that would have betrayed her race, so that, as she sits next to Councillor Carter, the administrator to whose sexual advances she has submitted in order to procure “white” identity cards, her sins are washed away, “her very feet tamed and certificated by God” (160-161). By taking feet as an indicator of race, Wicomb avoids the post-colonial—and apartheid—cliché of tell-tale hair. Moreover, she once again de-biolizes markers of race, since the toughened feet are the result of the poverty of rural “coloured” folk, and their obliteration a signal of upward mobility. As in the Andersen tale, hybrid states can be transcended, but these choices entail severe consequences and only ambivalently “happy” endings at best. Like the mermaid, Helen suffers the physical pain of adopting her new identity, and like the mermaid, the cost of her decision is high, since the strain of the masquerade results in coldness in her relationships with her husband and daughter.

Wicomb carries this ambivalence and irony into the process of Marion’s research into her family history. While in *Bloodlines* research solidifies a “coloured” history in the form of a stable family line, in *Playing in the Light* Marion’s attempts to learn more about “play-whites” call attention to the instability of categories, and of social relationships and culture in general. Her inquiry about “play-whites” at the National Library leads only to dead-ends, including the complete absence of “whiteness” as a category of investigation. Ultimately the closest she can come to the topic is the definition of whiteness in the Population Registration Act of 1950 and its 1962 Amendment, a definition that hinges on

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18 During the apartheid government’s attempts to establish firm indicators of racial identity, they resorted to such ludicrous methods as the “pencil test” in which a pencil would be twined in the person in question’s hair. If the pencil fell out, then the presumably straight, smooth, hair was an indicator of whiteness, whereas a pencil which remained entangled was alleged to indicate “colouredness.”
the concept of “colouredness” since people can only be accepted as white if they do not look, or admit to being, “coloured.” Even in the legislation, whiteness is absent as a signifier, and can only be defined by contrast.19

The depiction of Aunt Elsie’s portraits of her parents (Marion’s grandparents) further encapsulates the ambiguity of relations to history. The portraits, painted posthumously from the photographs on their subjects’ identity cards, have been “whitened”—their skin lightened and their noses sharpened—by the painter in accordance with his ideals of beauty. Elsie concedes that “they look strange,” and jokes that “they ought to have framed the paintings with the [identity] cards inserted in the corner, now such a before-and-after look would have been a good representation of the folly of the past” (173-174). But Elsie does not want “further tampering. They are my own Ma and Pa; they are not for display” (174). Such an exhibition of the portraits as symbols would risk the re-objectification of those who have historically already been rendered objects in apartheid discourse.20 Emphasizing her personal relationship with the past, Elsie rejects its

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19 The Amendment reads: “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, but does not include any person who for the purposes of classification under this Act, freely and voluntarily admits that he is by descent a native or a coloured person unless it is proved that the admission is not based on fact” (in Playing in the Light 121).

20 Elsie’s reaction here recalls reactions to other recent attempts to re-present the past in South Africa. For example, Pippa Skotnes’ 1996 “Miscast” exhibition at the South African National Gallery sought to disrupt stereotypical depictions of the Khoisan people by juxtaposing historical ethnographic literature with pieces of casts from the notorious “Bushmen” dioramas at the South African Museum, displays of archival and taxonomic apparati, and with Paul Weinberg’s photos of daily Khoisan life, taken “with the cooperation of Khoisan peoples from Botswana, Namibia, and the southern Kalahari” (Coombes 233). Though the exhibition was well-received by the art community, art historian Annie E. Coombes cites anthropologist Steven Robins’ cataloguing of South African reactions to “Miscast” as evidence of the risk of re-objectification: Michael, whom Robins describes as ‘a 24-year old colored student of history at the University of the Western Cape,’ was adamant that most visitors would simply have their prejudices reinforced of the Khoisan as an exotic and primitive people. He found the display of archive boxes, labeled with both historical incidents and taxonomic categories, ‘disgusting’ rather than seeing them as a critique of museological and scientific practice. Sally, described as ‘a white woman in her twenties,’ thought that Skotnes had exhibited the resin casts to ‘make the Bushmen look more human so that we would know how these people looked and that they actually existed.’ Other visitors failed to grasp the critique of what Skotnes and others believe is a paternalistic and essentialist view of the Bushmen as a primordial people carrying on a way of life close to nature and untouched by modernity and colonialism....At the other extreme, many of the Khoisan representatives who spoke the day after the
symbolization: family history is not necessarily public property. Although Elsie notes an historical connection to apartheid categorization, she also insists that her family has a private history, privileging her affective relationship with it.

In this way, Elsie’s reading of the portraits remains unresolved in its multiple meanings, whereas the family history of *Bloodlines* bolsters Joseph’s court case, and seems to be valuable primarily in terms of the effects it has the potential to produce, such as a narrative of the political histories of, and connections between, anti-colonial movements. For this reason, in contrast to *Bloodlines*, if there is hope in *Playing in the Light*, it comes not from the creation of a solid and coherent past, but from the acceptance and even exploitation of the ever-unstable present: the refusal to set and calcify relationships means that there is always potential for them to change, perhaps even for the better, though this of course is by no means certain.

Wicomb insists on the irresolution of conflict in the novel in other ways as well, most significantly in her frustration of redemptive readings of inter-racial relationships. Although Wicomb ascribes a certain significance to these relationships, she forecloses any attempts to read them as symbols of political reconciliation. Unlike Anthea, Marion does not fully unlearn her racism, nor does she overcome her psychological remove. Marion does break up with Geoff (who then begins seeing Brenda) and start dating Vumi, a successful “black” businessman, but although the relationship seems promising, its success is not cemented by a betrothal in the same way that Anthea and Arthur’s relationship is made to signify a permanent change. More importantly, while Marion and Brenda do become friends of a sort, their friendship is still precarious—and may even end at the end of the novel.

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opening saw the exhibition as a ‘dehumanising portrayal’ of their people and an insensitive means of absolving white South Africans of their complicity in the history. (Coombes 238)
The novel closes with Marion and Brenda arguing about Brenda’s desire to write Marion’s father’s story. In part, Marion objects to Brenda’s glamorization of the story: Brenda feels that no one will want to read about people like Brenda herself, but says of John’s story that it is “the story I wanted to write, the story that should be written” (217). Marion objects to Brenda’s use of the phrase “should be,” and accuses her friend of exploiting her father: “‘So in the guise of a do-gooder, you went back to prise more out of a lonely, senile old man who was grateful for your visits? Sis. How dare you! Why don’t you write your own fucking story?’” (217). Marion’s reaction again raises the question of the politics of voice, of who has the right to speak and to tell the tales of a “new” South Africa. Marion’s claim that she knows her father’s story prompts Brenda to respond “‘I suspect you don’t,’” and since it is Brenda who has spent time listening to John’s reminiscences, their exchange points to the conflict between claims to knowledge based on shared identity and experience, and claims to knowledge based on research.

The novel ends with Marion ejecting Brenda from her car, and as Brenda gets out, “her thumb flicks at the lock before she shuts the door with a quiet click” (218). As a final image, the locked door suggests, but does not necessarily confirm, the end of their friendship and the limit of Marion’s “growth.” While Dora and Anthea’s friendship in Bloodlines is cemented by the channelling of the final piece of Dollie’s story, in Playing in the Light, writing remains a contentious act. Far from offering redemption and healing, writing is figured as a potential violation of those who have already been violated. Rather than offering the closure of a completed narrative arc, writing may misrepresent, and interventions in the apartheid past may reopen old wounds rather than heal them.

If the critique of writing in Playing in the Light seems to suggest that writing is a dead end as a path to deep political and cultural change, another dimension of the novel suggests
a potentially more productive approach to narrative in its focus on reading. As my account of Sachs' polemic in the introduction of this dissertation suggests, the debates around the politics of representation have had particular prominence in South Africa, and the idea that art is a political weapon has become a commonplace. In “An Author’s Agenda (1)” (1990), Wicomb deconstructs the clichéd opposition between writing which privileges politics and writing which privileges aesthetics. She argues that political and aesthetic prescriptions about writing are “redundant” because

All writing whether it deals directly with the revolution or not, occupies a political position, just as the injunction to write well is, as I have argued elsewhere, nonsensical since no one perversely sets out to write badly. Revolutionaries surely recognize the aesthetics/politics opposition as itself a construct that puts readers in a menial relation to writers. The fixing of any agenda then seems to ignore a crucial fact about writing—that as an act of communication it is of no consequence without a reader. (24)

In emphasizing the necessity of the reader, Wicomb overturns the structure of power which assumes the primacy of the author and the passivity of the reader, a structure which the depiction of writing in Bloodlines endorses. In Bloodlines, writing heals because writing makes and remakes the world. In Playing in the Light, as Marion’s frequently-stymied research and her fight with Brenda suggest, the effects of writing are ambiguous. Rather than imagining a writing process or a discovery of history which fills in the gaps and wounds of the past, Wicomb underlines the potential agency of the “creative reader.” As Wicomb notes in “An Author’s Agenda,” it was not the “questionable values” of the “great men” of the Western canon that slowed her own politicization, but rather “veneration of the author” (24). In place of a focus on constructing and discovering texts with the correct political agenda which can then be slotted into the conventional hierarchical relationship of writer and reader for the reader to “imbibe,” Wicomb argues for “revolutionary reading” in which the values of a text can be sifted through according to the reader’s needs. “As resistant readers,” she
notes, “we do not have to accept the values promoted in the work of authors whether canonised or not” (24). In place of the “writer’s agenda,” Wicomb envisions “a more learner-centred democratic education system” (24). In such a system, the reader does not risk being disempowered by the “wrong” story, and therefore Playing in the Light focuses on the potential of reading rather than writing, rejecting the instrumentalism implicit in Bloodlines’ approach to narrative.

It is in the context of Marion’s lack of real friendships that Brenda “harangues” Marion “about reading,” arguing that Marion does not “understand human relations” because she does not “read good novels or poetry.” Marion objects that reading may not be worth the effort if the novel turns out “to be no good” (162-163). Brenda defends literature as productive in its capacity to teach about human relationships, but an instrumentalist attitude underlies both Brenda and Marion’s comments about reading. While Marion seems to place herself in the position of passive consumer of text, dependent on the author to provide her with the “right” narrative to help her with her problems, Brenda’s idealistic endorsement of reading as a source of insight into human relations also has the potential to reduce literature to a set of inter-personal instruction manuals. Bloodlines to a large extent depicts the discovery, construction and redemptiveness of the kind of “right” narrative which Marion assumes qualifies a book as “good,” but in Playing in the Light Brenda’s more expansive view of the potential of literature prevails, and Marion’s visit to Clarke’s Bookshop in Cape Town, where she is recommended Nadine Gordimer’s The Conservationist and J. M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country before heading to Europe on her first-ever voyage abroad, becomes as much of a turning-point as the voyage abroad itself.

Marion’s time in the U.K. is spent reading the South African novels acquired at Clarke’s and, though Marion fails to reform completely her approach to relationships of
various kinds, nonetheless her consciousness shows the potential to be refigured through 
this imaginative engagement. In imaginatively inhabiting the realities of people both like and 
unlike her, Marion demonstrates and develops the potential to think beyond her own 
positioning. Rather than Marion’s friendship with Brenda, or her relationship with Vumi, 
forming the emotional crux of the novel, it is the reading of *The Conservationist* in her rented 
garret in London which begins to transform her.

Marion’s first reaction to the text is confusion. She “often…can’t tell who the 
characters are, who is present in this scene, whether it is her misreading, her own delusions, 
or Mehring who is delusional” (190). Despite the potential alienation effects of Gordimer’s 
narrative techniques, though, Marion’s emotional reaction to the novel is strong, and “At the 
end she is wracked with sobs,” especially for the “anonymous girl.” It is not surprising, 
given her recent discoveries about her own background, that Marion reacts most strongly to 
the final scene in which Gordimer’s protagonist picks up a woman in his car and the cues are 
that the woman is “coloured.” But it is also because Marion is self-centered that she takes it 
personally that “the woman at Clarke’s” has given her this book. Marion wonders if the 
woman “recognized Marion as Mehring’s girl,” which may be taken as a sign of an increased 
racial awareness, but she follows this thought by wondering “how many versions of herself 
exist in the world” (190). In many ways, Marion is used to reading the world around her as 
being about her, so to some extent this scene is about Marion’s self-centeredness, but it is 
also about the expansion of her character too, because Marion begins to imaginatively 
inhabit the space of that girl. My reading of Wicomb suggests that “the hole in her chest,” 
and the difficulty Marion has always had in relating to other people, is the result of Marion’s 
missing imaginative engagement with her world and with her country. In the beginning of 
the novel, Marion’s boyfriend Geoff has been psychoanalyzing her, telling her that the root
of her troubles is her relationship with her father, but here Wicomb suggests that the real root of the problem is Marion’s narrow engagement with her surroundings, and that what she needs is not a conventional psychotherapeutic intervention, but a broader experience of South Africa, of her country.

Wicomb is quite deliberate about situating *Playing in the Light* as a transition narrative, and she links the novel explicitly to the TRC process. The novel and its comments about reading join a variety of other nationalist discourses, including those discourses of therapy and of national healing. Rather than embracing the instrumentalism of some discourses of therapy or of the therapeutic, Wicomb postulates an imaginative solution. In place of an emphasis on individual or collective healing, there is an expansion of potential identification with others. Marion may gain self-knowledge through her discovery of her “true roots” as a “play-white,” but it is more important that she starts to be able to engage imaginatively with the people around her. Even though *Playing in the Light* ends with Marion’s suspicion about Brenda’s writing, and thus gestures at the limits—and perhaps even the failure—of Marion’s transformation, through reading, Marion begins to imagine herself in other positions, which is something that she was unable to do before.

Indeed, the process in which Marion seems to be beginning to engage in this passage strongly recalls J. M. Coetzee’s concept of the sympathetic imagination as expounded by his fictional character Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* (1999). As Costello observes, “There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and

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21 Wicomb makes the therapeutic an explicit framework of the novel from its very beginning, in which Marion dismisses the idea of seeking therapy to help with her panic attacks: “Why spend money and time to discover the obvious: that as the only issue of older parents, she had a peculiar childhood; that her parents loathed each other; that her mother, like all mothers, was responsible for her insecurity?” (3). The therapy that Marion envisions seems very much patterned on conventional notions of therapy bent on uncovering the reasons for Marion’s emotional state rather than working to change Marion’s patterns of thought and thus her emotional state.
there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it” (35). For Costello, it is this latter category of people which raises the question of the connection between sympathy and ethics. As she argues earlier in the talk, the horror of the Holocaust is that “the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everybody else” (34). Since Costello maintains that “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another,” the refusal to do so seems to her to be a deliberate hardening of the heart, a calculated abdication of moral responsibility for others. Given the predominance of guilty liberal protagonists in his fiction, Coetzee himself may be more reserved in his own convictions, but nonetheless the enjoinder to put one’s self into the shoes of the other is a fairly conventional one. While Wicomb seems to endorse the potential of sympathetic identification with others, she also continues to emphasize not only the hierarchical relations within which this process is enacted, but also the potential for the development of agency—the possibility of redirecting power—inherent in this hierarchical relation.

How does this imaginative engagement differ from the depiction of an imaginative engagement in Bloodlines? To give that novel its due, Anthea and Dora imaginatively engage with the past in the form of Dora’s family history. But there is a difference between an imaginative writing process and an imaginative reading process. As I’ve argued, part of this difference lies in the insistence that Dora channels Dollie’s words and also that the channelling is possible because of their blood relationship. While writing for Dora and Anthea is redemptive, reading for Marion is both expansive and troubling, and if writing is depicted explicitly as a tool of redemption, then there is an instrumentalist underpinning to Bloodlines’ understanding of writing. For Marion, on the other hand, reading is only the beginning of an expansive process. She does start her reflections on The Conservationist with an identification with the “play-white” girl, but at the same time she registers her difference.
from the girl because she doesn’t see herself and the girl as the same kind of “play-white”: Marion passes in a way that the girl does not pass. Marion does not identify with the girl simply because she identifies with “colouredness;” rather, Marion identifies with the girl despite their differences.

More surprising, though, is Marion’s identification with Mehring. The plot of The Conservationist revolves largely around wealthy Mehring’s management of the hobby-farm he has purchased as a tax break and as a place to bring women. A lonely, unlikeable character, at the close of the novel Mehring comes to an uncertain end of some sort when he offers a young woman a ride and takes her to “a stretch of waste ground” for sex (259). Mehring’s thoughts during this encounter focus on the tawdriness of his surroundings and of the woman, who he describes with a racist attention to her “fake” clean hairline, her “muddy and coarse” complexion, and her “dark-skinned” knees and elbows (260-261). When some men emerge from the brush, Mehring thinks it may be “the miscegenation squad,” but then wonders, too, if the men are there to rob him (262). Despite the fact that he is unsure if the woman is their accomplice or their potential victim, Mehring runs away from the men and the woman, rationalizing that “She’ll be all right. They survive everything. Coloured or poor-white, whichever she is, their brothers or fathers take their virginity good and early” (264). By dismissing the woman as cheap goods like the sandwich she eats and the scrub land she takes him to, Mehring “justifies” his potential betrayal of the woman through a racist and misogynist invocation of the hierarchies of power in which some lives are valuable and some valueless.

What Marion sees in the ending of Gordimer’s novel is her own betrayal of her only childhood friend, Annie Boshoff. When Annie’s father falls in love with a “coloured” woman and reveals that he himself is “coloured,” this is the scandal of the neighbourhood,
and Helen demands that Marion cease her friendship with Annie. Despite the fact that Marion and Annie “were more than sisters,” when Annie comes to see Marion a final time to give her the scrapbook that the two girls had shared, Marion tips the book into the rubbish rather than keeping this memento of their friendship (194-195). Though Marion was only eight at the time, in her memory of the incident she still insists on her own agency, and so in retrospect she identifies with Mehring and postulates her own complicity with the apartheid classification system. Wicomb highlights the indoctrination of thinking in terms of classifications, but also insists on agency and on the potential to make choices. Marion could certainly have kept the scrapbook, but she does not, and indeed she blocks the whole incident from her mind. Although this may be the result of her education and training, and of her mother’s influence, it does not release her from responsibility. This agency is highlighted in her continuing difficulty in understanding friendship, and especially in being friends with Brenda. Marion has difficulty with intimacy not because she is a victim of her early training, but because she fails to make the effort to connect imaginatively with Brenda. This further connects to Wicomb’s refusal to use their friendship as a symbol for reconciliation.

Although Wicomb herself strenuously resists wholly symbolic readings of “colouredness,” in her reading of The Conservationist, Marion becomes aware of the positioning of the “coloured” as symbolic. Part of what happens to Mehring in the course of the novel is that he realizes that he cannot hold himself apart from the “black” workers on his farm. The body of a “black” worker found and buried on his land continues to resurface and be reburied in the soggy soil: the corpse can’t be held down in its grave, and in the same way Mehring’s privilege is exploded and his fiction of his own superior positioning is exposed as spurious. This is the “secret” that lies at the heart of much anti-apartheid
I am suggesting, then, that the potential of an emphasis on reception as opposed to an emphasis on production goes even further than offering a way of imagining other lives and realities. It also re-envisions the therapeutic process, especially that assumed by some TRC discourse, by turning away from a preoccupation with uncovering hidden truths in favour of a strategy of changing the interpretive framework of present realities. While a conventional therapeutic approach to trauma based on filling in the gaps of an historical narrative would be deterministic and merely explanatory—“you are this way because these events made you so”—Wicomb’s emphasis on the agency of the reader not only empowers the reader as a creator of meaning, but also creates the potential for the cultivation of compassion through imaginative identification. It is difficult to see how a therapeutic framework can be applied to a nation, but an emphasis on reading and on education as a response to past national trauma offers the potential to change the explanatory frameworks
(i.e. national narratives) in which history is interpreted rather than relying on a redemptive rewriting of the past.

One might respond to all of this that Marion is not reformed as an outcome of her reading. We may observe in her at best the awakening of a yet-to-be-developed capacity to identify with people unlike her; she is not yet a good model of post-1994 change. Imaginative identification has its limitations, but the real problem to which Wicomb draws attention with her unlikeable protagonist is not the flaw in creative reading, but the deeply engrained habits of passive reading which make us seek the “right story” in the first place: it is this passivity which prompts readers to seek in the protagonist of a novel a model of good conduct to promote healing. Bloodlines not only provides a smooth narrative fetishist arc as a panacea for political strife, but also models an array of characters who learn to heal their own wounds and the wounds of others. Having discovered the right purposes for their energies, these characters stand in a masterful relation to their fictional worlds.

Playing in the Light, in its refusal to cater to narrative fetishism, asserts that narrative is not therapy and protagonists are not models. Rather than being encouraged to emulate Marion, we are put in the more active position of responding to her story without the reward of closure that her reformation would bring—rather than reading about someone who “learns to love,” we are forced to learn to accept Marion as she is, and as she more or less remains, throughout the novel. Ultimately, it is the beginnings of imaginative identification in the reader, rather than in the protagonist, that matters.
Chapter 4
Collage as critique in Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*

What is the most noble conquest of collage? It is the irrational.

Max Ernst

In the introduction to the essay collection *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, editors Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss elaborate the political underpinnings of Surrealism, arguing that the “academic myopia” of Anglophone scholars especially has encouraged them to understand Surrealism as only an aesthetic, rather than a political, movement (6-7). But at stake in Surrealist practices of automatism and strategies of juxtaposition is a rejection of “rationality,” which the Surrealists saw as “an arbitrary model…which encouraged a thoroughly pragmatic approach to life,” one linked to bourgeois complacency and conservatism (6). Amanda Stansell, in another essay in the volume, observes that the Surrealist critique of reason, “their most central theoretical position,” targets more than bourgeois values in that early Surrealist writings “propose that the binary oppositions (or ‘old antinomies,’ in the Surrealists’ terminology) that seemed foundational to Western thinking are simply false constructions of the rational mind” (112, 113). In this rejection of binary logic, a clear line of influence runs through French thought from Surrealism to May 1968 and beyond, to the present academic moment.

Despite the fact that “direct discussion of ‘race’ in Surrealism has generally been avoided” (presumably because of the dominant assumption that Surrealism is “aesthetic” as opposed to “political,” an assumption itself demonstrative of the “old antinomies” still at work), Stansell goes on to argue that the critique of “reason” is tied to the Surrealists’ anti-racism and anti-colonialism (111). In other words, not only have the links between the

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1 Quoted in Stansell, 114.
Surrealist movement and the anti-colonial movement been underexplored, as Stansell shows, but Surrealist strategies, especially the strategy of the juxtaposition of the apparent opposites foundational to imperialist culture, have political as well as aesthetic and philosophical ramifications.²

It is at this point that Stansell’s argument connects with my own concerns. What, after all, is eugenics, that most extreme form of biopolitics, but the application of the “rational,” or, rather, as philosopher Val Plumwood would call it, rationalism, to the problem of “making live” (Plumwood 18)?³ I have been arguing that conventional reconciliation narratives encode the logic of the biopolitical that they purport to oppose, offering not a rejoinder to the vision of national belonging as a racial and genetic project, but simply an alternate genetic code. The persistence of biopolitical logic as an expression of rationalism suggests that it occupies the space of “common sense,” that repository of ideology that, as Žižek remarks, is so normalized that it seems unworthy of investigation.⁴

How, then, to counter the rationalism of the biopolitical if not by opposing it?

In this chapter, I argue that Surrealist practices, with their deliberate attack on rationalism, suggest alternatives to a merely oppositional approach. This is not to say that

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² A full account of the links between Surrealism and post-colonialism is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Surrealism, politics and culture (eds. Spiteri and LaCoss, 2003) begins to address this lacuna in Anglophone studies of Surrealism, as does Surrealism and Its Others (eds. Conley and Taminaux, 2006). Jean-Claude Michel’s The Black Surrealists gestures to another vein of study with its focus on Césaire and Senghor, among other Négritude writers, who he argues use Surrealist strategies.

³ Plumwood’s critique of rationalism, though it takes contemporary conceptions of ecology as its object, is nevertheless part of a broader philosophical tradition, and should not therefore be dismissed as relevant only to environmental studies. Drawing on the insights of feminism, post-colonialism, environmentalism and globalization studies, Plumwood argues that “concepts of rationality have been corrupted by systems of power into hegemonic forms that establish, naturalise and reinforce privilege” (17). Distorted by these systems of power, “reason” ceases to be a tool of thought and becomes the ideology of rationalism. Plumwood warns that “rationalism is not the same as reason, just as scientism is not the same as science,” and clarifies further that “rationalism is a doctrine about reason, its place at the apex of human life, and the practice of oppositional construction in relation to its ‘others’” (18).

⁴ Specifically, in the essay entitled “It’s Ideology, Stupid!,” Žižek observes that “On account of its all-pervasiveness, ideology appears as its own opposite, as non-ideology, as the core of our human identity underneath all the ideological labels” (First As Tragedy, Then As Farce 39).
my goal is to argue for, or to locate, Surrealism in the South African literary context. To prove or disprove the Surrealist sympathies of South African authors is beside the point; rather, I seek to examine the effects of techniques used by the Surrealists, particularly that of juxtaposition in the practice of collage, as a response to the problem posed by the prevailing biopolitical imaginary: how to address the “common sense” of the biopolitical directly without inevitably adopting and therefore reconfirming its premises.

Though I do not necessarily seek to claim Marlene van Niekerk as a Surrealist, then, I do argue that, like some Surrealist practices, the narrative structure of her novel *Triomf* counters through a strategy of excess the rationalist instrumentalism of conventional reconciliation narratives. Not only does the novel feature a parody (in Linda Hutcheon’s sense of “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text”) of a conventional narrative of reconciliation that dramatizes its own failure; this narrative is juxtaposed with other narrative structures, including an episodic narrative and a cyclical narrative of trauma (Hutcheon 6). A closer examination of each strand of the novel’s triple narrative structure will demonstrate the ways in which each strand competes with, and begins to undo the ideological work of, the others. In short, in its juxtaposition of competing narrative structures, *Triomf* transfers the techniques of Surrealist collage from the visual to the literary realm, and in doing so it invokes, in order to disrupt, the underlying biopolitics of much conventional apartheid and anti-apartheid literature.

Before discussing the novel’s collage of narrative structures, it is necessary to examine *Triomf’s* reception, because the extreme reactions that the novel has provoked are in fact a response to its narrative techniques: *Triomf* is so long and unwieldy that a coherent and comprehensive discussion of the text is difficult to organize, and so readings of the text tend
to focus largely on its satirical allegory. *Triomf* has been widely recognized as one of the most influential post-apartheid South African novels since its publication in Afrikaans in 1994, and it not only won the M-Net Book Prize and the CNA Literary Award in 1995, but in the same year became the first Afrikaans-language novel to win the prestigious Noma Award for African Literature (Sholtz “Digter” 31). Its translation into English by Leon de Kock in 1999 has increased the novel’s impact. The novel is overwhelming in its subject matter, style and sheer length: in a nutshell, *Triomf* recounts, in third-person narration alternately focalized by each of the four main characters, the lives of the “poor white” Benade family. Mol, Pop and Treppie are siblings, and Lambert is their son—which brother is his father no one knows, but Mol and Pop present themselves to Lambert as his parents, pretending that Pop is not a blood relative and even fabricating an elaborate account of Mol and Pop’s wedding, one of many fictional “family stories” that Lambert loves to hear. While Mol and Pop seek a quiet life of television and Coke laced with Klipdrift brandy, Treppie diagnoses the evils of the world from his throne in the bathroom, and Lambert attempts to fix old cars and appliances until they give him trouble, at which point he embarks on violent and destructive rages.

In the course of its several hundred pages, *Triomf* describes numerous incidents of incest and domestic violence; recounts racist, sexist, homophobic and anti-Semitic jokes; and

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5 Established by the Japanese publishing house Kodansha in 1979 to promote African literature and publishing, the Noma award has become a major literary prize, and its list of past winners and honourable mentions reads as a “Who’s Who” of African literature. See http://www.nomaaward.org/winners.shtml [“Die Noma-toekenning vir publikasie in Afrika is in 1979 ingestel deur wyle Shoichi Noma, in lewe president van die Japanse uitgewerreus Kodansha. Dit word geadministreer deur The African Book Publishing Record. *Triomf* is die eerste Afrikaanse boek in die geskiedenis van die toekenning—toegeken in verskillende kategorieë—om die prys te ontvang” (Scholtz “Digter” 31).]

6 De Kock’s translation was released in two separate editions, a South African version which retains much of the Afrikaans original’s untranslatable slang, and an international edition written entirely in standard English. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be working with the more fully translated international edition and citing the Afrikaans text in footnotes. Although it is never fully satisfactory to work from a translated text, it should be noted that Leon de Kock’s English version of the novel has been widely acclaimed and awarded, and was developed in close collaboration with Van Nickerk: De Kock not only stayed with Van Nickerk for some time while translating the text, but Van Nickerk actually wrote some sections of the book into English herself.
mocks the sacred cows of Afrikaner myth, politics and religion, prompting one reviewer to write that “This book has won various literary prizes, but that does not make it an enjoyable or easy read. The language is repetitively foul and unimaginative and the central characters are not pleasant people” (Ellis 9). Another columnist complains: “It's supposed to be humourous [sic]… but frankly the horror of the ‘family’ overwhelmed any impulse to laugh” (O'Hara 8), and one of the advance copies of the Afrikaans edition of the novel was returned anonymously to Van Niekerk in shreds, inscribed with a note from “the Benades” protesting: “Ons is nie so nie”—we’re not like that—presumably an objection to the novel’s unflattering depiction of an Afrikaner family (De Jager 8).  

But in delving into taboo actions, thoughts, and language in the way that it does, *Triomf* does more than court controversy or sensationalize apartheid ideology. At the heart of what critic Ina Gräbe has called *Triomf*’s “brutalization of cultural and universal values” is an attack on purity as a concept integral to biopolitical structures of categorization, and this attack is not mounted merely through a bathetic reversal, or travesty, of apartheid cultural values, but also through a narrative technique of fragmentation and layering.

The disgust with the novel, and the shocked reactions it provokes, may in part be ascribed to its “unseemly” subject matter or its scatological language, but its frustration of any readers’ desires for the redemption of its characters or resolution of its conflicts is also a factor in its reception. Reading the novel through the model of collage, however, emphasizes that *Triomf* is not merely perverse. As a work proceeding from an aesthetic

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7 “Marlene ontvang ’n eksemplaar oor die pos, aan flarde geskeur, met ’n nota: ‘Ons is nie so nie.’ Geteken: ‘Die Benades’” (De Jager 8).

8 This is the title of Gräbe’s article, and her premise is that, in reading *Triomf*, “the reader is led to discover hidden universal values, which may even be seen to be realized more sincerely amongst untouchables from a lower class than is the case amongst the so-called intellectually advanced, culturally refined or morally elevated representatives from economically more privileged classes in society” (Gräbe “Brutalization” 109). While I accept her view that the novel’s apparent attack on already-marginalized people ultimately indict society as a whole, I hesitate to support her claim that the novel therefore advances a coherent set of “universal values.”
strategy of parody, of juxtaposition and of proliferation—even of monstrousness, both in the novel’s “gargantuan” length and in the “gargantuan” family it describes—Triomf, like the monsters of Surrealist collage, “suspends and neutralizes oppositions rather than resolving them” (Adamowicz 96). The perpetual critical focus on decoding the satire of the novel, obvious as that satire is, has pre-empted sustained critical attention to the complexity of its parodic structure and to the multiple effects parody creates within the novel.

Not only is it necessary to cease to collapse the distinctions between satire (as message) and parody (as medium) in readings of Triomf, but it is crucial to recognize the way in which the novel’s collage structure extends the effects of its multiple parodies in insisting on their irresolution as narratives. This irresolution is crucial because, though the narrative structures in the novel cannot escape the biopolitical conventions to which they are bound, their juxtaposition does allow them to exceed and contradict the limits of these conventions. Unlike conventional reconciliation narratives, which seek closure and in doing so gloss over the wounds of the past, Triomf, in collaging together its multiple narratives, effectively draws attention to those narratives as engines of a biopolitical paradigm and emphasizes the contradictions between them so that the seamlessness of rationalism is revealed to be farcical: Triomf puts ideology on display.

4.1 Cycles of trauma

In its very title, Triomf invokes the biopolitical history of South Africa. Triomf is the name of the Johannesburg neighbourhood in which the Benade family lives—once home to Van Niekerk herself. This “white” area was built on the rubble of the vibrant mixed-race community of Sophiatown, one of the most visible targets of apartheid policies of forced
removal and spatial segregation. As a setting for the novel, Triomf does not simply refer to a place, but invokes the notorious injustices of apartheid policy; in this way the novel immediately introduces, and is grounded in, the traumatic cycle of colonial invasion and displacement that structures South Africa’s violent history. This unresolved cycle of trauma, like the technique of collage, works against any facile narratives of closure.

Sophiatown had been synonymous with musical and literary culture, the home of the clubs where artists such as Abdullah Ibrahim, Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Dorothy Masuka, and Dolly Rathebe performed, and the stomping grounds of the writers of the *Drum* generation, including Can Themba, Es’kia Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, and Don Mattera. In contrast, and despite its name, Triomf was anything but a triumph for the Department of Community Development, which had set the area aside to build houses for “less privileged whites.” Though apartheid policy had succeeded in literalizing, through urban planning, a break between the “white” population it supported and the “non-white” population it in many ways sought to destroy—or at least to “let die”—its attempt to provide good conditions for the reproduction of its own replaced a space of (“non-white”) cultural productivity with a space of (“white”) cultural sterility. Moreover, despite the leg up offered by the government, most of the “white” people living in Triomf—many of whom were the “poor whites” and the descendents of the “poor whites” who lost their farms in the 1930s—remained poor.

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9 Post-1994, the suburb has, of course, been desegregated, and it has also reverted to the name of Sophiatown.
10 The music and culture of Sophiatown has been written about extensively, and it is also the subject of a BBC Four documentary called “Sophiatown” by Pascale Lamche. Lamche has said of the film that she hopes it may help the artists to be rediscovered. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/storyville/sophiatown.shtml.
11 Reviewer Pierre Lepape makes the irony of the “poor white” problem clear in his designation of the “white” inhabitants of Triomf as “the waste products of prosperity”: the “poor white” problem is a by-product of a process of “white” economic growth. “[Triomf, c’est le nom, pompeux à souhait, que les dernières autorités de l’apartheid ont donné à une misérable banlieue blanche de Johannesburg, tant bien que mal érigée sur les ruines de Sophiatown, un quartier noir que l’on a rasé pour y installer les ‘déchets’ blancs de la prospérité: paysans chassés de leurs terres, chômeurs, assistés sociaux” (Lepape 30).]
If the destruction of Sophiatown is the event to which the Benades’ fortunes seem most obviously to be tied, this is not to suggest that the historical trauma depicted in the novel belongs only to another people. Instead, the rubble of Sophiatown is not only literal (the material traces of the forced removal of a “non-white” neighbourhood) or even symbolic (the return of the repressed), but it also betokens the complexity of historical relationships. Van Niekerk remarks in an interview that “the idea for the book came to her while she was trying to create a cabbage patch in her garden. ‘I kept on digging up remnants of Sophiatown—crushed pieces of crockery, marbles…”’ This tangible connection to the apartheid past in turn led Van Niekerk to a series of other ideas: “By writing the book, she wanted to show how poor whites were also victims of the apartheid ideology, and how they were cast out by all forms of society. ‘They were supposed to benefit from the system, but became victims of it, trying to make sense of their lives while being brainwashed by ideologues” (Van Niekerk cited in Sorour-Morris 135). In light of this, the literal rubbish formed by the Sophiatown rubble serves as a concrete reminder of the multiple histories of marginalization that result from an instrumentalist society in which people who are not deemed “useful” are categorized as rubbish. Furthermore, the multiple uses of rubbish as a symbolic motif disrupt any attempts to construct a mythic past.

The opening pages of *Triomf* immediately signal a preoccupation with these larger patterns: Mol stares at the pile of rubbish which Lambert has dug out of the earth “for his collection” (1), and this in turn causes her to remember the violent removal of Sophiatown’s residents, during which “the kaffirs must’ve gotten the hell out of here so fast” that “they didn’t even take their dogs with them” (2). 12 It is one of these abandoned dogs which the Benades find “under a rusted old piece of zinc” and keep, naming her Gerty after the street.

12 “Die kaffirs moes daai slag so vinnig hier padgee lat hulle nie eers tyd gehad het om hulle honde saam te vanie” (1).
on which they discovered her (6). In her article on the function of the dogs in *Disgrace* and *Triomf*, Wendy Woodward argues that

> The dogs in *Triomf* serve to ‘humanise’ their people, but only to a limited extent. These same dogs also function as what Gordon calls ‘mobile metaphors’ for understanding, in this instance, the racialised constructions of poorwhiteness. Thus the original Gerty represents the only possible connection the Benades could have with Sophiatown. (98)

Woodward is right to see in Gerty a link to Sophiatown, but in fact, rather than this link being a tenuous one across the colour line, an awareness of the connections between historical events draws attention to the Benades’ own flight from their farm, which, though not forced by government policy, was nonetheless beyond their control. That is, Gerty, and the dogs in the novel in general, not only constitute an affective link between the Benades and their others, towards whom they otherwise feel no sympathy, but Gerty’s provenance also draws a parallel between the dispossession of the Benades and the dispossession of Sophiatown’s residents. Of course a parallel is not an equivalent, and the losses of land, though presumably deeply felt by both “poor whites” and the victims of forced removals, do not occupy the same moral sphere. Indeed, the “poor white” problem served as an excuse for apartheid policies of forced removal, so that, while dispossessed “black” and “coloured” people remain only victims in this particular history, the Benades’ move to *Triomf* actually marks them as both the detritus and the beneficiaries of apartheid government policies. The cycle of “white” expropriation of “black” land was the result of the failure of “white” landowners to support themselves and each other despite the biopolitical imperatives to do so structured into Afrikaner nationalist ideology. Nevertheless, these parallel events call attention to the trauma of loss, a commonality of feeling which can provoke empathy. In this episode of digging, Mol can empathize with the former residents of Sophiatown’s loss of their dogs because she can imagine her own grief at the possibility of losing Gerty. This is
not to suggest that the experiences of the beneficiaries of apartheid and of its victims are equivalent, but to say that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that, in the case of “poor whites,” the boundaries between victim and beneficiary may not be so firm.

Attention to the historical echoes of dispossession set into motion by the choice of setting of the text also connects to the repeated attempts of Afrikaner nationalists to construct a mythic past. In addition to the shabby irony of the apartheid government’s depiction of the razing of places like Sophiatown as a “triumph,” the building of Triomf immediately enacted a reversal of the foundational Afrikaner myth of the Great Trek. Rather than heroically going forth to the “wilderness” to escape oppression, “poor whites” fled to the city to avoid starvation. Rather than mastering the environment and making it, and themselves, fruitful, those former farmers who flocked to places like Triomf had been bested by the land (and, more to the point, by the economic realities of farming), and henceforth survived on government programs designed to address the “poor white” problem, including railway jobs (a stereotypical marker of “poor white” identity), social assistance, and designated housing. As Shaun Irlam remarks, in locating her novel in Triomf, “Van Niekerk narrates an antidynastic history that contests the heroic and mythic version of history with which Afrikaner nationalism had nourished itself. Recounted here is the history of ‘draad trek’ (vulgar slang for ‘masturbation’)…rather than the Great Trek” (705).  

Irlam’s comment is insightful because it reveals the bathetic strategies of the novel: the “great” historical events of the country become reduced to the topics of the petty bickering of an inbred family in a crumbling house. But, although masturbation is appropriate as a metaphor for the apartheid focus on self-gratification, and for the cultural

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13 A draadtrekker is literally a “wire-puller,” though the Great Trek is the name of the Boer’s colonization of the interior, here too trek literally refers to the hauling of the Afrikaners’ ox-wagons inland. Draadtrekker has the secondary meaning of a schemer or plotter, so that the Afrikaans saying “‘n Boer maak ‘n plan,” (a Boer makes a plan) quoted incessantly by Lambert and meant to refer to the supposedly inherent Afrikaner quality of self-sufficiency, could also, by way of draadtrekker (of which Lambert is an example) refer to Afrikaner narcissism.
narcissism that made possible the attempted destruction of South Africa’s original inhabitants—and although there are certainly repeated references to masturbation in *Triomf*—it is incest that is the dominant image of the novel, linking the cycle of historical violence to a cycle of sexual violence. Throughout *Triomf*, the Benades comfort themselves in the face of various disasters with the thought that “at least they have each other,” and as numerous critics have observed, in making this the Benades’ catchphrase, Van Niekerk sends up the rhetoric of *eie*, which Eve Bertelson defines as a “sacred Afrikaner notion” of “own culture, volk, and family,” a romanticization of looking after one’s kith and kin. Bertelson continues, “[b]y literally acting out its precepts, the Benades push *eie* to absurdity: they are decisively self-propagating, self-sufficient and self-destructive” (12). This link between Afrikaner cultural values and incest suggests that historical and sexual violence cannot be separated from each other in the novel, once again revealing a biopolitical grounding: women, and Mol specifically, are subject to such violence because, as feminist scholars such as Elleke Boehmer, Ann Laura Stoler and Jenny Sharpe have argued, it is on the control of women’s bodies that the nation is predicated.14

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14 See Boehmer’s *Mothers of Africa* and *Stories of Women* for more on this. Among others, Meg Samuelson, Dorothy Driver, Margaret Daymond, Sue Kossew and Zoë Wicomb have all written extensively about gender and nationalism in the South African context. See also Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* for her argument that, in European colonies, the “need” to protect European women from the sexual urges of colonized men sanctioned violence and heightened control over the indigenous population, while simultaneously European women were blamed for provoking the desire of colonized men in the first place, justifying the restriction of European women’s freedoms. In “The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency,” Sharpe argues that fantasies of the rape of “white” women not only justified colonial violence during the Indian Mutiny, but confirmed the supposed moral superiority of British men gone mad over the violation of their women. A contemporary example of this same dynamic is the rhetoric surrounding the war on the Taliban, in which the West purports to be motivated primarily by a moral imperative to liberate Afghan, or more generally Muslim, women. In Canada, the proposed Bill 94 will deny public services to women wearing the niqab on the pretext of saving them from the oppression that the face veil is thought to indicate. It is difficult to see how denying women access to health care and adult education will liberate them from anything—if anything, women who wear the niqab will become further isolated and have fewer resources at their disposal—but then clearly the whole issue betokens not a concern for women’s rights but a struggle between patriarchies.
In its grounding in the cycles of historical and sexual violence, the novel points to their continuing operation, and in this way it denies closure; this in turn mimics on a narrative level the structure of trauma itself. As Cathy Caruth remarks in her landmark study *Unclaimed Experience*, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4); throughout the novel the Benades are haunted not only by Lambert’s recurring violence, but also by the historical violence which is in many ways the raison d’être of their current circumstances. Specifically, the juxtaposition of the rubble of Sophiatown which continually works its way up to the surface of Triomf, and of Lambert’s violent rages which inevitably end with him breaking and burning household items, comes to function as a traumatic memory perpetually replaying itself. Unable to heal the originary rupture or to work through it, the inhabitants of the Benade house repeatedly re-enact the razing of Sophiatown and its shoddy resurrection as Triomf, and each time the end result of this process is shakier than the last.

Gerty and her lineage also evoke the cycle of sexual violence which underpins the novel. Like Mol, the dogs Old Gerty, her daughter Small Gerty, and Small Gerty’s daughter Gerty are forcibly bred, and Gerty, who like Mol is elderly at the time of the events of the novel, is subject to the sexual aggression of her son Toby, the product of Gerty’s violent encounter with a policeman’s Alsatian on Toby street. In addition to providing an obvious echo of Lambert, Treppie and Pop’s ongoing sexual abuse of Mol, the forced sexual activity to which the lineage of female dogs is subject recalls the circumstances in which the incest in
the novel arises. Like Gerty, whose life and sexual activity is shaped by forced removal and poverty (the Benades cannot afford to get their dogs neutered and spayed), the incestuous activity of the Benade siblings is a response to their material conditions upon moving to the city from the farm.

When the original Benades—Old Mol, Old Pop, Mol, Treppie and Pop—come to Johannesburg, they imagine a life of material ease only to find themselves living in squalor in a house with four other families; rather than the move to the city resolving the trauma of their loss of the farm, they remain enmeshed in the cycle of poverty they sought to escape. Not only are the Benades themselves poor, but the other families steal what little food they have, and living in one room the children see “everything the grown-ups did,” including “the shadows on the sheet [the inadequate screen between children and adults in their shared room] when Old Pop climbed on top of Old Mol and began riding her wildly, until she started crying and calling out the Lord’s name” (136, 138). When the children begin to stay away from school because they lack adequate clothing and because “[s]chool was shit,” they stay in bed and kill time “by rubbing Little Pop’s dick” because it “took away the hunger” (139-140). In this way, the incest of the siblings is not simply an indication of a lack of moral fibre, but an imitative response to their parents’ abusive relationship (Old Pop also beat Old Mol regularly) and a defensive response to their impoverished and marginalized position. As Treppie remembers:

They were allowed to have their morning bread only once Pop had come three times; otherwise they’d get hungry for their afternoon bread too soon. And

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15 A further parallel between Mol and her dog is that Mol’s full name is Martha, and the Benades live at 127 Martha street. Like the dogs’ names, Mol’s name denotes a location in Triomf (though in her case after the fact, since she was not born there). The street name in turn recalls European imperialist practices of naming, since the original investor in Sophiatown named the township after his wife and the streets after his children.

16 "Oumol het…’n laken opgehang tussen haar en Oupop se bed en hulle kinders se deel van die kamer, maar hulle kon tog alles hoor en sien. Die skaduwes van hulle pa en ma se lywe wat die kersvlam teen die laken gooi as hulle pa op hulle ma klim en woes op haar te ry, totlat sy begin huil en die Here se naam roep.” (117)
if that got eaten, they stayed hungry all day, until their mother came home from the
factory at night.

Hungry time, time that you feel in your stomach, is a terrible thing. But
what’s worse is how time feels when you see the same things happening over and
over again. Like things that get broken and then get fixed again. Over and over
again, fucken broken and fixed again. And nothing ever gets fixed properly. (140)

Rather than beginning as pleasure-seeking, the siblings’ sexual relationships with each other
are hunger-staving—they indicate an effort at self-control in an environment in which they
lack agency, in which even time is subsumed by hunger and want. Treppie reflects that
worse than hunger is the experience of seeing “goeters wat oor en oor gebeur,” the small
little things that happen over and over, and the emphasis in the Afrikaans on the smallness
of the events (“goeters”), like the pilfering of bread between impoverished families,
emphasizes the crucial connection between quotidian experience and larger political events.

Caruth observes that “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also,
fundamentally, an enigma of survival;” the fact that the Benades’ most damaging behaviour
stems from a survival strategy underscores this paradox (58). The demoralizing effect of the
small things that happen over and over again also connects Treppie’s memory of the family’s
eyears in Johannesburg to a larger traumatic cycle of want and abuse—and of survival—
in which things “get broken” and “nothing ever gets fixed properly.” Broken things are
emblematic of the Benades’ environment—indeed, of the Benades’ lives—and this perpetual
cycle of damage includes not only the fridges that they fail to repair, the rubble on which
their house is built, and the dilapidated house itself, but also the full range of their personal
and political histories. This depiction of the Benades encapsulates the larger failures of the

17 “Kleinpop se voël kon toe al lekker styf staan, en hy’t vir hom wat Treppie is en vir Molletjie gewys hoe hulle
dit moet vrywe. Daai oggende het hulle so verbygekry met Kleinpop se voël vrywe. Dit het hongerte verdryf.
Hulle mag hulle oggend se brood net geëet het as Pop drie keer gedraai het. Anders was hulle te gou honger
vir hulle middag se brood. En as dit op was, was hulle heeldag honger tot hulle ma laat saans van die fabriek af
gekom het.

Honger tyd, tyd wat jy aan jou maag voel, is baie erg. Maar nog erger is die tyd wat jy voel aan goeters
wat oor en oor gebeur. Soos goed wat gebreek word en goed wat reggemaak word. Oor en oor ge-fokken-
breek en reggemaak word, sonder lat hulle ooit héétemal reg is” (118).
society to which they belong, and the cycles of violence which gave rise to that society—cycles which that society is doomed to repeat unless it can abandon the premises on which it operates.

Holocaust theorist Saul Friedländer writes of the imperative to break cycles of historical trauma through a process of “working through.” This is not constituted by a linear process of achieving closure and moving on, but rather by a series of attempts to approach the unexamined wound, the gap in conscious memory and experience that denotes trauma. Following Freud, Friedländer remarks that such a process necessitates an awareness of both the protective numbness and the strong emotional impact that attend it. He notes that historians—and any people who would attempt to represent trauma—must also negotiate this gap in experience, guided by “the imperative of rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimony will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure. Closure in this case would represent an obvious avoidance of what remains indeterminate, elusive and opaque” (italics in the original, 261). That is, in order to attempt to faithfully depict traumatic experience, trauma must be acknowledged to be unrepresentable as a coherent narrative. Trauma cannot be fully healed by narrative without in some way being false to the impact of its experience, but the technique of collage can, precisely, capture that which is “indeterminate, elusive and opaque,” and so Van Niekerk’s refusal to provide closure for the novel, or rehabilitation for the Benades, becomes an ethical gesture.

4. 2 *Triomf’s* linear narrative and the parody of the biopolitical

In its depiction of the Benade family as incestuous, *Triomf* takes the endogamous logic of apartheid—and of biopolitical thought in general—to its extreme. This strategy not only connects the Benades’s story to the cycles of sexual violence, the mythic, and the
historical, but also anchors the novel’s linear plot, in which Lambert anticipates receiving the services of a sex worker for his birthday. There is a self-conscious poetic justice in *Triomf*’s depiction of the ugliness of apartheid in the form of a debased and inbred “white” family, so it is unsurprising that many critical readings focus on this allegorical element of the novel as its salient point. While it may be valid to emphasize *Triomf*’s satire of Afrikaner myths and self-conceptions, this focus tends to imply that the novel’s philosophical targets are confined to apartheid’s ideology. However, Lambert’s fantasy of exogamous sex as a route to maturity and self-knowledge also invokes the staple anti-apartheid and post-apartheid literary trope of the liberatory inter-racial sexual relationship.

The linear narrative of *Triomf* follows the lives of the Benades in the months leading up to South Africa’s first democratic elections of April 27th, 1994. This historic day also happens to be Lambert’s fortieth birthday, and so the allegorical connection between the inbred Benades and the apartheid government is established immediately. Lambert has only ever had sex with his mother Mol (she has been forced to submit to this as a way of pacifying him), and so when Treppie tells him that he will be given a woman on the eve of the election—his first woman outside of the family—as a birthday present, Lambert latches on to this as a sign of his (belated) coming of age. Lambert soon convinces himself that the sex worker will fall in love with him and that together they will flee the country, re-enacting the Great Trek north, “when the shit hits the fan” and the National Party government falls (439).

The national allegory of the novel constituted by this linear plot is clear: from the very beginning of *Triomf* and throughout its course, the importance of Lambert’s upcoming birthday present and of the preparations for the trek north is emphasized as Lambert not only insists that he get his “present,” but also that the entire family make ready for her arrival
by fixing up the house and its complement of defunct appliances, and by getting the
clapped-out cars to run and hoarding petrol in wine-box liners for the trip. This long-term
planning structures the linear plot of the novel, and its conjunction of incest, the election,
the Great Trek, and the promise of exogamous sex mocks, with a gleefully heavy hand, the
“white” Afrikaner fantasy of itself as both a pure race and a pure political entity set apart
from others. It also foreshadows the end of that fantasy entailed in the inevitable transition
from apartheid to democracy, since even within the novel, the enfranchisement of “black”
voters is understood to foretell the election of a “black” government and therefore Afrikaner
nationalists’ loss of political control of the country.

Readings of Triomf which focus largely on decoding its allegory fail to get to the root
of the problem it implicitly identifies since the novel satirizes not only the content of
Lambert’s fantasy of liberation, but also parodies, and then forecloses, its structure. It is not
that Lambert is the butt of a joke because his sexual encounter comes to naught, or even
that Lambert-as-Afrikaner is unable to realize his dream of (sexual) conquest, but that
narratives which locate self-knowledge in the body of the other are doomed to failure—it is
the fantasy itself, and not just the person who dreams it, that is bankrupt. Lambert’s fantasy
shares with more sophisticated narratives of reconciliation a linear structure in which past
trauma and present complexity are, if not subsumed, at least “tamed” in the narrative of
development and its neat progression from beginning to middle to end. As my analysis of A
Blade of Grass and especially of Bloodlines has shown, narratives of reconciliation which follow
a protagonist’s rise from racist ignorance to a climax of new social awareness often hinge on
the development of an inter-racial relationship which leads to a denouement of political
reconciliation and personal healing. This focus on individuals as symbols of abstracted
political realities attempts to contain ongoing large-scale problems in specious forms of
individual, inter-personal closure; *Triomf* parodies such plotting on a structural level in order to dramatize the limitations inherent in this instrumentalism.

In saying this, I follow Linda Hutcheon’s distinction between parody and satire. Hutcheon argues that parody as a genre has been misunderstood because of assumptions that its intent always is to mock or ridicule. In her study *A Theory of Parody*, she shows that, historically, parody has actually denoted an imitation of form shaped by a range of possible authorial intentions, from mockery to homage (the latter especially in architecture). Her definition of parody is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (Hutcheon 6). Unlike quotation, allusion, or pastiche, all of which mark a similarity between texts, parody is “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon 6). For Hutcheon, parody is a strategy, and its effects, such as irony and transgression, are nevertheless “intramural”—that is, they are revelatory of the genres being parodied, making clear the deeper ideological implications of genres as genres, such as the innate conservatism of the romantic comedy, and so forth. Satire, on the other hand, is “extramural” in “its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction” (Hutcheon 43). Hutcheon’s distinction between the “targets” of satire and of parody is useful because it clarifies that rather than debasing the Benade family to satirize the Afrikaners they represent, the novel draws attention to the multiple ways in which apartheid narratives have contributed to the family’s debasement. Rather than making fun of the

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18 Hutcheon continues this line of reasoning to separate entirely, in “modern parody,” the ameliorative intent of satire from the structural irony of parody: Satire frequently uses parodic art forms for either expository or aggressive purposes…. Both satire and parody imply critical distancing and therefore value judgements, but satire generally uses that distance to make a negative statement about that which is satirized—“to distort, to belittle, to wound”…. In modern parody, however, we have found that no such negative judgement is necessarily suggested in the ironic contrasting of texts. Parodic art both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material. Any real attack would be self-destructive. (44)
Benades to propagate its own corrective to apartheid ideology in the form of repudiation of everything the Benades may be seen to represent, *Triomf* acts as a locus for the conjunction of several parodies of conventional apartheid plots, and the legibility of these plots draws attention to the effects of the ideologies they parody.

For example, the Benades are very self-conscious of their places in nationalist myths, and so the characters at times invoke *plaasroman* tropes such as stewardship and the blood relationship to the land. But in contrast to the image of the Afrikaner tilling the soil, the Benades are the proprietors of a defunct fridge-repair business—which in practical terms means that broken fridges litter their lawn—and so Lambert’s rite of passage is a fridge repair exam which, if he passes, will result in his inheritance of his uncle (father?) Treppie’s tools. This inheritance is crucial, because Lambert has decided that the broken fridges must all be fixed in time for his “girl’s” arrival. Although the anticipation of Lambert’s birthday ostensibly structures the rising action of the plot of *Triomf*, so far very little criticism has examined this strand of the novel at length, and the characters themselves seem to forget that the anticipation of this event is organizing their daily lives.

Treppie, the novel’s mordant self-taught philosopher and literary critic, is ever aware of the ambivalent power of the conventional narratives he designates “wallpaper,” such as the sentimental stories with which Mol and Pop attempt, as Van Niekerk puts it, “to pad their own existences sufficiently for them to survive the cruelties of life” (quoted in De Waal “Tour” 23). In order to undercut overtones of sacred lineal descent, a trope of the Afrikaner *plaasroman*, he dresses as a clown when he asks, as the final question in the fridge

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19 Van Niekerk’s consciousness of genre also emerges in her assertion that the Benades are all artists: “They all have ways of interpreting or trying to make sense of their lives. Lambert has an obsession with order—he wants things to work. Treppie has a huge problem with nominalism and realism—‘What’s in a name?’…‘It’s all in the mind,’” she quotes a favoured Treppie saying from the book. ‘Pop and Mol, one could say, are the chocolate-box story-fabricators who want to pad their own existences sufficiently for them to survive the cruelties of life. I think we all do that. I do. You negotiate a certain narrative that helps solve the problems you experience now” (Van Niekerk quoted in De Waal “tour” 23).
exam, what the worst thing that could happen to the Benade family would be. It is only
after much prompting that Lambert is able to produce this response:

The biggest Balls Up of all Balls Ups that is the Worst and the End of our Story… that
certain people, and then in brackets, (with red noses), wouldn’t give him his birthday
present [i.e. “his girl”] that they promised him. To hell with them in advance. (385)

Like Treppie’s clown nose, Lambert’s answer violates the norms of the patrilineal descent of
knowledge. Rather than being the solemn and humble recipient of sacred duties and
privileges, Lambert threatens his family to get his way; the Afrikaans edition retains this
threat more clearly than the English in the phrase “Hulle moer by voorbaat,” where the
convention of thanking people in advance becomes beating them up in advance. But what is
really telling about this moment in the text is that though this answer is presented as obvious,
and despite the fact that he has repeatedly threatened mayhem if he does not get his “girl,”
Lambert nevertheless requires extensive clarification of the question, and indeed Lambert’s
meeting with the sex worker, “Mary,” which is not only symbolically rich but also ostensibly
the climax of the linear plot of the novel, requires more critical attention than has typically
been paid to it.

In fact, Van Niekerk denies the book a “climax” both literally and figuratively, since
Lambert is unable to consummate his encounter with the sex worker “Mary.” Instead, he
shows her the mural of South African and personal history which he has executed in car
paint on the wall of his den, in which Jan van Riebeeck and Harry the Strandloper are
mixing Klipdrift and Coke (182) while Mol is trapped in a fridge just as she was on Guy

20 “Die Gat Slog van alle Gat Slae wat die Ergste is en Einde van ons storie…lat sekere mense, en toe hakkies, (met rooi
neuse) sy verjaarsdagpresent wat hulle hom belowe het, nie vir hom gaan gee nie. Hulle moer by voorbaat” (328).
21 “Mary” is presumably the sex worker’s nom de commerce.
22 Jan van Riebeeck was regarded by many as the founder of South Africa since it is he who established the first
settlement of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) at the Cape. Harry the Strandloper (“Harry the
Beachcomber”) is more properly known as Autshumao, a Khoikhoi leader who had been taken to England by
the British and learned English and Dutch as a result. Autshumao worked as an interpreter for the VOC and
the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape until he led an unsuccessful rebellion against the Dutch, who had stolen
some Khoikhoi cattle. For this, Van Riebeeck imprisoned Autshumao on Robben Island, but Autshumao later
escaped in a rowboat. Krotoa/Eva, mentioned in Chapter 3, was Autshumao’s niece.
Fawkes Day 1970—the day that Lambert’s Guy Fawkes braai for the customers of “Triomf Appliances” failed to attract a single guest, so that, in a rage, Lambert shut Mol into one of the fridges with some of the live fireworks which he had planned to set off for the party’s finale, and then set fire to the other fridges before subsiding in an epileptic fit. On the map of South Africa, Lambert has marked out their route north, and he shows “Mary” the painting of himself in the car with his fantasy “girl,” a blonde and naked mermaid, on the roof-rack.

The painting is a metonym of the novel’s structure since it pillories conventional historical narrative, recounts the Benades’ personal history, shows Lambert’s skewed vision of South Africa, and depicts his idealized escape route, but of course this jumble of narratives bewilders “Mary,” who can make no sense of its proliferation of detail. When Lambert sees that she “doesn’t look like she’s making the connections” (439) between his painting and her presence, he asks “Mary” about the election instead, since “it’s a turning point in the history of our country” (446). Mary responds that Lambert needs “to find [his] own bladdy turning point,” but Lambert continues to attempt small-talk and movie romance until he finally realizes that Mary is “coloured” (446). When he attempts to compliment Mary by saying that she “can actually pass for white any time” (448), she calls him “useless fucken white trash” (448) and escapes his rage by pulling his pants around his ankles so that he trips while she flees the house. Lambert reacts to the death of his fantasy by setting fire to his newly fixed fridges once again, but since this tantrum recapitulates not only the Guy Fawkes fire but also an earlier incident in the novel in which Lambert burns the trash in his den, the tantrum effectively continues the pattern of the narrative rather than providing it

23 “Sy lyk nie vir hom of sy die connections maak nie.” (375)
24 In the Afrikaans original, all conversation between “Mary” and Lambert is in English, and so I omit references to the Afrikaans text in these cases.
with a “turning point.” Neither the promise of exogamy nor the knowledge it is purported to bring has been fulfilled, and Lambert’s violent behaviour has not changed, but rather become even more deeply entrenched.

The fact that Lambert was unable to consummate the encounter emphasizes that it is not Lambert himself who is being mocked, but rather the linear interracial relationship plot that is being parodied and foreclosed: Lambert does not have sex with “Mary,” but this is because the encounter always meant more to Lambert than just sexual conquest (if indeed exchanging payment for sex can be considered “conquest”). In fact what Lambert wants most out of the encounter is romance, or even love, and this is why he continues to try to show “Mary” his painting and his hole in the floor full of wine-box liners; this is why, confronted by “Mary” taking a condom out of her purse, he asks her to dance to the cheesy music playing on the Highveld Stereo (446). “Mary” repeatedly makes it clear that she is willing to hold up her end of the contract—with its allotted time period, of course—but she steadfastly refuses to collaborate with Lambert’s “seduction,” ultimately using his own romantic lingo against him by telling him that he is “not exactly [her] type” as she escapes from the house (456).25 The emphasis on Lambert’s desire to win “Mary” over by aping the “unknown hero” in films makes clear that the encounter, and the portrayals of inter-racial relationships it imitates, is in fact more an attempt to confirm or enact a certain kind of self-image than to relate to an other (434).

Following his rejection by “Mary” and the tantrum it provokes, Lambert finds the identity papers and letters that reveal that his parents are actually siblings. Perhaps because Lambert’s big birthday present should have been the climax of the linear narrative and yet is

25 Mary’s “Sorry, man, ma’ dij’s ok nie eintlik my type nie,” with its deviations from standard orthography, seems to mark her Afrikaans as accented, a fact that may presumably have indicated her racial status to Lambert earlier had they not been speaking English (389).
no climax at all, Michiel Heyns locates “some kind of anagnorisis” for Lambert in the discovery of the documents. Heyns observes that

instead of bringing about insight and maturity in the protagonist, the discovery produces only catastrophe in that Lambert kills Pop by accident, wounds his mother and sometime sexual partner with a knife, breaks all of Treppie’s fingers, and breaks his own leg in kicking at the dog—all this on the day that their house is painted a glorious and pristine white through a misunderstanding of the marketing methods of the paint company. (61)²⁶

But this scene is more ambiguous than Heyns suggests: despite its allusion to Oedipus Rex, it is not clear that it is Lambert who kills his parent (Pop’s post-mortem reveals heart attack as well as a fractured skull), and Lambert does not cripple himself out of the realization that he has defiled himself and his family, but because he falls over. It is debatable what insight Lambert gains into his origins because he still does not know which brother is his real father (no one knows, after all—though Mol theorizes it may be Treppie because both Treppie and Lambert “have the devil in them”), and the tantrum recreates Lambert’s previous tantrums so exactly that it makes a poor climax. The knowledge that his parents are siblings, although hidden from Lambert until this point, has been much discussed by Mol, Pop and Treppie in the course of the novel—indeed, Treppie delights in poking at the family wound with double entendres, and so it is no shock to the reader and really should have been no shock to Lambert had he been forty years quicker on the uptake. Instead of changing his behaviour, this “new-found knowledge” causes Lambert to revert once more to type, and even though Pop’s death and Lambert’s injury may indicate a change in immediate circumstances, yet there is no evolution of character associated with this new state of affairs.

²⁶ As Heyns’ summary of this moment reveals, Triomf not only piles episode upon episode and plot upon plot, but also incident upon incident. This is one of the challenges of discussing the novel: one can either produce a bland summary of the moment (“Lambert has a tantrum”), or one can attempt to capture the various details of the moment, as Heyns has here, and as I do in my account of the novel. Since the details of the incidents all register on various symbolic levels, it seems useful to err on the side of completeness in the summaries, but this also runs the risk of bogging down the argument in excessive detail.
Rather than a version of the conventional reconciliation narrative, *Triomf* offers a parody in that its refusal to depict the characters’ reformation, or to attempt to enact in fiction the resolution of on-going conflict, constitutes the “critical distance” that Hutcheon argues distinguishes parody from imitation. Van Niekerk remarks that at the time of its publication in Afrikaans, her editor said “‘this book is not well-made because it doesn’t end with a bang. I said I refuse to make it end with a bang—it will just go simmer, simmer out, because it’s not the kind of book that can have a catastrophe at the end. It’s a running catastrophe throughout’” (De Waal “Tour,” 23). In this way Van Niekerk denies the possibility of catharsis as well as redemption—since the novel just simmers out, as a reading experience it proves exhausting rather than immediately enlightening. The text does not purport to heal the past or suggest a way into the future; rather, its parody fragments conventional reconciliation narratives while simultaneously invoking them, and this is where the effects of parody meet the effects of collage, as we shall see shortly.

Meanwhile, as for the Benades, if there is any future, it is not one of movement or of growth but of their resignation to their conditions. The final chapter of the novel is called “Noordeloos,” translated in the English edition as both “north no more” and “no more north” (524). The ambiguity retained in the Afrikaans suggests not only an end to Lambert’s escape fantasy—a decision to dream no more about the north as a perfect place, and as an answer to all problems—but also the absence of the fantasy itself. The Benades have become “northless,” and with that abstraction removed, they will remain in Triomf, presumably paying off their paint bill and fighting with the neighbours in perpetuity. Van Niekerk closes the novel by closing down the possibility, exemplified in Lambert’s idealistic planning, of imposing a single grand scheme of reconciliation. What hope remains at the end of the novel exists only in the abandonment of Lambert’s plan for the future, which
after all was only a reworking of the Great Trek and of colonial “solutions” of the past. With no more north to which to escape, no more land in which to build a “white man’s haven” (and I use the term literally), the Benades may at least put aside these worn-out ideas and thereby open to the possibility, however slight, of adopting new terms of thought and experience.

This, at least, is as far as the linear narrative can take us, and in this Triomf is like Playing in the Light: the most positive outcome that can come of desiring protagonists to emulate is a foreclosure of that desire. While potential for positive change may exist, the foreclosed linear narrative of Triomf does not indulge in the fantasy of redemption through love. Instead, as the next section of this chapter argues, the collage structure of Triomf renders the linear narrative one narrative among many, and this exceeding of the instrumentalism of the redemptive linear narrative puts it into question.

4.3 Collage and the episodic as para-space

As Elza Adamowicz argues in her study of surrealist collage, “Collage operates at the periphery of signifying systems….The overt staging of breaks and seams resists retrieval” and “a sense of pleasure in parts…replaces a nostalgia for the whole” (193). Not only does the staging of fragmentation resist the (re)construction of totalizing narratives, but

Grounded in excentricity and excess, collage is fundamentally transgressive, exploiting categories that question or collapse boundaries, by working at the edges or margins of linguistic, literary or art-historical codes, thumbing a nose at these codes rather than turning its back on them, and thereby disturbing unified identity, coherent systems or cohesive frames. (193)

Whereas Hutcheon suggests that parody, in its imitation of familiar structures, ultimately reinscribes the norms it cites and thus, even when it is the vehicle of a satiric attack, risks a validation of those norms—particularly in cases where parody with a satiric intent is
(mis)read as “straight”— collage sufficiently defamiliarizes the symbolic landscape to forge, as Adamowicz postulates, “a frontier- or ‘para-’ space, at the very margins of linguistic, rhetorical or pictorial codes, rather than the counter-space of opposition or the unified space of dialectical resolution” (193). Parody, as the importation and invocation of cultural readymades, is the raw material of collage, and in collage the ironic effects of parody are extended through the juxtaposition of forms. As Adamowicz observes, “Conventions—the familiar pays—are exploited and subverted in the dépaysement of collage, as was seen for example in…strategies of rhetorical dis-figuring or anatomical dis-memberment.” In collage, familiar tropes are invoked not just to oppose them, but because “[r]ecognition of the familiar landmarks (of literary or pictorial conventions) is the necessary prerequisite for dis-orientation” (Adamowicz 193).

Lambert’s painting offers an example of these valences of collage in Triomf. In its juxtaposition of images and their registers (historical, personal, religious, political, practical, fantastical), the painting simultaneously offers recognizable ideological landmarks while defamiliarizing them, and it also suggests underlying connections between multiple strands of thought. In this way, as I suggested earlier, the painting stands in for the structure of Triomf itself: the novel lays episode upon episode and plot upon plot as it progresses, and throughout its course this layering of episodes and plots begins to transform the potential meanings of each strand of the novel. Triomf’s juxtaposition of narratives, in concert with the novel’s grounding in cyclical narratives of trauma, forces these narratives to begin to “undo” each other, and the novel’s profusion of episodes only heightens this effect.

Appropriately enough, the painting originally starts as an outline of South Africa, copied “from his history book” onto the wall (179). Next Lambert draws in arrows to represent the movements of the colonization of the country, including “big thick arrows in
black to show how the kaffirs swooped down on the country from above” (a recapitulation of the Afrikaner nationalist doctrine that South Africa’s interior was also occupied by “black” “immigrants,” who were no more indigenous than the Afrikaners themselves) and big yellow arrows to represent the Great Trek (179-180). This account of the origins of Lambert’s painting offers a clear parody of the Afrikaner nationalist story of Afrikaners’ own origins in the sense that Lambert is merely copying the illustrations of his history book, but the changed context of the illustration, from an educational textbook to a wall in a crumbling house in a “poor white” suburb, also emphasizes the gap between the official ideology and its failure to produce the social, cultural and material wealth that it promises. This gap is invoked even more clearly by the fact that on top of apartheid’s official foundational historical narrative, Lambert draws in 127 Martha Street and its inhabitants as well as his plans for the escape north. In this way the defamiliarization caused by the painting’s references to episodes is made more acute: many of the episodes to which the painting refers reflect the Benades’ private history; even the potentially more legible national history has been overlaid with the details of the Benades’ lives. Jan van Riebeeck, for example, wears a sash emblazoned with the slogan “MAN ABOUT TOWN,” a reference to the label on the jeans Lambert dons on the few occasions when he wears more than boxers and a t-shirt (182).

Furthermore, as Lambert keeps painting, the images keep evolving. Thus the arrows representing the movements of colonization become “piss-pipes” and “shit-pipes” under

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27 “Die buitelyne is groen. Dis al amper heeltemal uitgefade, kokipenne fade maar so. Die rooi puntjies vir die Kaapse berge, en boontoe vir die Drakensberge, is bietjie groter en hulle kan ’n mens beter sien. Molshopies, molshopies, molshopies. En die Oranjierivier en die Vaalrivier en die Visrivier en die andere riviere het hy toe ok ingeteken, in blou. Die beste was die dik, swart pyle om te wys hoe die kaffers van bo af toegesak het op die land. En die groot, geel pyle om te wys hoe die Voortrekkers onder uit die Kaap uit ingetrek het in die land” (152). Note that the Lambert’s painting recapitulates the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*—at first all he can think to paint is mountains and rivers, rendering his imaginary South Africa “baie leer en boring” (152). Then he adds settlers, and finally his own house. See Chapter 2’s discussion of the Voortrekker Monument for more on the conventional representation of this chapter of South African history.
127 Martha street, and this can perhaps be seen as a wry comment on Afrikaner nationalist interpretations of South African history, because as Treppie says of Lambert’s painting, “when you get people you get shit and crap by the pipeful” (180, translation modified). Mol’s portrait ends up with a tennis ball in its mouth because “She was already there when [Lambert] wanted to paint a ball for the DOG” (181), and so we see the violence of her constant de-humanization at his hands, which is reinforced by a rendering of her housecoat (the only garment Mol ever wears, greasy with constant use), “like a piece of slaughtered human skin,” hanging from the horn of Africa, and by the painting of her in the fridge on Guy Fawkes day (182). The fact that the individual elements of the painting are labelled means that the attempt to guide interpretation is inevitably exceeded by its own image—the labels are so laconic as to be deadpan, and their proliferation must ultimately be confusing rather than enlightening if one imagines the space they must take up—for example, LAMBERT, the VOLKSWAGEN in the CARPORT, the GIRL and her NIPPLE CAPS and the jaunty DIAMOND LADY flag on the car must all crowd into the same small area of the painting, so that the labels all must be mixed together, and the viewer of the painting must make an active effort to begin to decode its multiple meanings.

Stansell emphasizes the political potential of the activity demanded of the viewer of Surrealist collage. She anchors her theorization of the effects of collage in a reading of Péret’s 1929 Collage, in which the artist stages the potential of Surrealist commentary on colonialism: the work depicts a photo of a large white man with his whip curled around the

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28 De Kock translates this as “where you get people you get shit and crap going down the pipes,” but the original Afrikaans emphasizes the volume of “shit and crap” rather than the mode of its disposal, thus suggesting a stronger parallel to ideology: “[Trep]pie wou weet watse pyle is dit dan dié. En toe hy vir hom sê dis van die kaffers en die Voortrekkers van die geskiednis, toe sê hy dit lyk vir hom meer na pis- en kakpype onder die grond. Kak van diékant en pis van daaikant. Toe sê hy same difference, want waar jy mens kry, kry jy kak en strunt hy die pype vol” (153, my emphasis).

29 “Eenkat aan die horing van Afrika hang sy ma se HOUSE COAT. Dit lyk nie soos ‘n housecoat nie. Dit lyk soos ‘n stuk afgeslagte mensvel. Dis hoekom hy daar geskryf het HOUSE COAT. Met in hakkies agteraan (MOL VEL)” (154).
neck of a smaller image of a “black” woman, an engraving of the so-called “Hottentot Venus.”30 Both figures stand in a hall which seems to recall Classical or neo-Classical architecture. Adamowicz interprets the collage as a critique of colonialism since it links brutality with the “glories” of Western civilization. As Adamowicz argues,

In Péret’s collage…the habitually seamless representations of the doxa are rent apart by the cutting and pasting process which reassembles its elements to foreground its codes. The collage machinery lays bare the discourse of the doxa, by exposing the usually implicit, and often repressed, links between the actors of the social or colonial drama. The parodic charge of such collages is the result of the perverse and often crudely articulated syntactic links which have been established between these signifiers. (72)

Here Adamowicz uses the term “parodic” to mean “critical” as well as to describe the collage’s structure, but the effect of the parody’s evocation of the familiar stereotypes by which colonialism functions is the excavation of their repressed meanings: this casts the process of reading collage in a psychoanalytic frame in which the subconscious becomes conscious through the work of the viewer.

Such active participation of the viewer recalls the active process of imagining otherness which underpins Wicomb’s description of Marion’s reading in *Playing in the Light*; furthermore Stansell notes that in disallowing the presentation of “racial categories as fixed and natural,” collage encourages the spectator “to confront a dialectic of differences without synthesis, rather than to accept or deny a particular rational statement” (114). In the case of Péret’s *Collage*

rather than simply presenting new images of race, which could then eventually become fixed stereotypes, Péret keeps hierarchical racial categories in play and thus encourages the spectator to reconsider their complex cultural meanings. Such artwork reaches toward a racial politics that avoids the limitations of both a

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30 This woman is properly known as Saartjie Baartman, a Khoi woman who was exhibited in Europe particularly in reference to her steatopygia and the morphology of her genitals, hence the prurient moniker “the Hottentot Venus.” Baartman’s remains were displayed in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974. The remains became a symbol of Khoi identity, gender-based violence, and the violence of European colonialism, and post-1994 the many calls to repatriate her body and give it proper burial eventually led to her return to South Africa in 2002.
humanist liberalism based on universal similarity, and a separatist essentialism based on unbridgeable alterity. This dialectic of difference encourages a continually unsettling movement between identity categories, since it foregrounds relationships among groups of people, while acknowledging that cultural constructions have material social effects that cannot be dismissed simply through a representational synthesis. (115)

In other words, Péret makes strange the hierarchies of race that colonialism seeks to naturalize just as Van Niekerk makes strange the hierarchies of class and race in her novel. In layering familiar images and narratives normally taken for granted, cultural codes are not only disrupted, but their synthesis or resolution is actively prevented. This, as Adamowicz notes, makes impossible a “nostalgia for the whole” (193). Instead, meaning becomes an ongoing process rather than a fixed product, and the “stability” of literally categorical thinking, including the “stability” of categories of race and class, is revealed as fiction. This is why I argue that the effects of collage depend upon, but also necessarily extend, the effects of parody.

What this means for *Triomf* is that, in its collage of narrative structures, the novel can invoke directly the familiar tropes of apartheid and anti-apartheid literature—which, as I have shown, in opposing each other accept the same first premises—without merely attempting to reverse the biopolitical grounding of both literatures, a stance which would, as must now be clear, once more encode the biopolitical as its starting place. At the same time, the impossibility of imposing a single coherent narrative on a collage, which by definition continually signals its own composite nature, endlessly resists simplistic closure and monological narrative. In short, collage allows for multiple complex effects that are not possible in a mere satire.

In fact, the jumble of episodes which overlay the linear and cyclical narratives reveals an irony produced by the novel’s structure: while the cyclical narratives insist on the Benades’ place in the traumatic histories of the country, thus emphasizing the limitations of
their agency as individuals, and while the linear narrative ultimately forecloses any real character progression in the Benades, some of the episodes reveal a potential for growth of character even while, taken together as a narrative structure, the series of episodes forms a plotline that suggests little growth. When taken together, the various episodes create a push-pull effect in which the Benades vacillate between better and worse selves, and this in turn begins to create a sense of compassion for the protagonists, monstrous though they may be.

The account of Pop’s lucky day offers a good example of this push-pull dynamic: it follows an episode in which Lambert attempts to kill Treppie because Treppie has told him the truth about one of the family’s cherished “memories.” Lambert has grown up believing Mol’s story that on the day South Africa became a republic and left the Commonwealth in 1961, the Benade family made a killing from selling blue, orange and white posies (the colours of the South African flag of the time) at the Voortrekker Monument, and that seven-year-old Lambert performed a star turn by pretending to be an ambassador-patient from the HF Verwoerd Institute for the Mentally Retarded—Treppie’s invention—collecting donations. In fact, Treppie tells Lambert, this was the occasion of Lambert’s first epileptic fit, during which he “shat and pissed and vomited all at the same time, right on top of the whole business [the posies],” and so Pop buried the trays of corsages in the backyard, and “no one went to Pretoria that day, and no one made six hundred rand, and you [Lambert] didn’t charm anyone out of their paper money there by acting crazy with your donation list” (72). Fittingly, the Benades’ “memory” of Republic Day as an

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31 See chapter 2 of this dissertation for a discussion of this monument.
32 Treppie connects Lambert’s fit to his incestuous provenance, though perhaps his use of the English phrase “genetic cul-de-sac” makes this difficult for Lambert to decode: “niemand het daai dag Pretoria toe gegaan nie, en niemand het seshonderd rand gemaak nie, en jy’t niemand uit hulle papiergeld uit gecharm met jou mal met jou donasiepapier nie. Want jy was nie daar nie. Dis wat. Pop het daai skinkborde vol ruikers, bekak en bekots soos hulle was, net so gevatt en hulle hier agter in die jaar begrawe. Lindjies en al. Al die moiete en die geld, ons geld van die yskaste, moer toe in one go, oorlat Baba Benade, die lam van ons lendene, oorlat
entrepreneurial highlight in lives otherwise characterized by failure is as false as the country’s so-called foundational success in declaring its independence. Moreover, Lambert’s “memory” of his own past success—and thus of a part of his self-image—is demolished in Treppie’s revelation; this sends Lambert into a rage, and he drags Treppie around the house by the neck before slamming his “uncle’s” head in to the wall, ripping down the pelmet in the living room, kicking their postbox to the ground, and throwing it onto the neighbours’ roof (72-73).

That such violence and abuse, both physical and psychic, is immediately followed by a prolonged episode of grace challenges readings of the novel that focus only on the Benades’ worst behaviour as the truth about them. Pop’s lucky day starts with an unusually peaceful family breakfast, during which Lambert offers Pop a cup of coffee and a sandwich and then asks how Pop slept. “Can you believe it?” Pop thinks, “Someone’s asking him if he slept all right,” and so it is apparent that these little gestures of caring are generally absent from the family’s daily interactions (76). This departure from Lambert’s usual behaviour in turn puts Pop in an expansive frame of mind, which leads to a series of small kindnesses between Pop and other people, culminating in Pop winning money on scratch tickets at a street stall and then taking the family out to a restaurant to celebrate, where they win a set of six meal tickets worth fifty rand each—a small fortune for them. The events of the day not only provide a relief from the customary violence and tension of the Benades’ lives, but also suggest that small changes can lead to larger ones: because Lambert has shown kindness to Pop, Pop makes an effort to help Lambert fix the postbox, and because Treppie wants to

Lambertus die derde, oorlat hy toe—surprise, surprise!—’n genetic cul-de-sac is. Maar dis te moeilik vir jou, so dink maar liever aan ’n bulldozer in ’n sinkgat” (61).
33 “Hoe’t pop geslaap?” vra Lambert.
Kan nie wees nie.
‘Huh?’
‘Ek sé, het Pop lekker geslaap?’
Ja, wraggies. Daar word gevra of hy lekker geslaap het” (65).
know what surprise Pop has in store for the family, he refrains from baiting Lambert, and because Treppie and Lambert are on their best behaviour, Mol is encouraged to speak her mind more freely than she usually can, and for once the men in the family tease rather than abuse her.

This episode serves to humanize the Benades, but not by removing their monstrous qualities or by reducing them to sameness; followed as it is by another violent evening in which Lambert forces Mol to mow the lawn in the dark in order to annoy the neighbours braaing next door, the incident instead serves to keep sharp the impact of the cycles of abuse. The constant vacillation in the text between episodes of violence and of calm also disrupts any narratives of reformation, since moments of grace or of graciousness on the part of the characters, such as when Lambert is “suddenly all polite” to Mol on their night out (91), are then undone by subsequent moments such as Lambert’s reflection that Mol will cut the grass “till she falls over” if he threatens her because “She’s nicely broken in” and “That’s the way it should be” (115). Lambert’s treatment of his mother in the episode of the lawn-mowing emphasizes the extent to which the violence and sexual abuse to which she has been subject has transformed her from the spirited woman she is capable of being, as the Benades’ night out demonstrated. Lambert’s thought that his power to threaten Mol is as it “should be” once more links Mol’s experience to a broader culture of gender-based violence and sexual violence. In short, the alternation of episodes reveals the links between culture and habitual violence, emphasizes social conditioning, and also emphasizes the Benades’ humanity and potential for change even though that change cannot be realized in the context of the conditions that prevail in the novel.

34 “Sy wys met haar hande hy moenie slaan nie, sy sal sny, tot sy omval sal sy sny. Goed mak. Ok reg so. Darem een wat doen wat hy sê in hierie huis” (98).
But what is most interesting about these episodes of grace, especially in light of the linear narrative’s foreclosure of narratives of growth predicated on inter-racial contact, is that, precisely like these narratives, most of the episodes progress from a moment of friendly contact with a “black” person. In the case of the episode of Pop’s lucky day, his scratch ticket comes from the Ithuba stand of a “black” woman who “smiles a big smile at him. Never in Triomf has he seen a black woman smile at him like this” (78). Despite the Benades’ habitual racism, Pop is genuinely won over by the woman’s friendliness, and after he wins three times in a row, he wishes luck to a “black” man behind him in line and “the feeling in his flesh runs like warm syrup through his bones and into his marrow, right down to his feet” (79). Moments before this, Pop is approached by someone asking for money for the blind, and then by a beggar who has only one leg, and he gives twenty cents to each of them. When Pop tells the story of his luck to his family, he frames his acts of charity as almost causal in the chain of events: he talked to “a blind man, and a one-legged kaffir. And then I played the scratch-cards and I won” (86).

In a similar positive episode, the Benades walk “smack-bang into peace” by happening upon a peaceful demonstration while looking for furniture for Lambert’s den in preparation for his “girl’s” arrival (331). Pulled out of their car by the joyful crowd, Mol finds herself holding hands with a “black” girl and an old man in the crowd “even though

35 “Sy glimlag so breed vir hom soos hy nog nooit ‘n swart vrou vir hom sien glimlag het in Triomf nie” (67-68). “Ithuba” translates literally from Zulu as “opportunity.” This scratch-card lottery, run by Games Africa in support of the Ithuba Trust, offers low-cost tickets and pays out fifty percent of its revenue on prizes (the rest of the money goes to a number of social development initiatives), making it very accessible and attractive to poor people. For more about this and other lotteries, see http://www.mg.co.za/article/1994-09-23-scratching-to-make-a-living.
36 “‘I wish you luck,’ sé Pop en hy smile vir die swart man en die gevoel in sy vleise loop soos warm stroop in sy bene se murge af tot in sy voete” (68).
37 “it was my lucky day: een mango, een blinde man, een eenbeenkaffer. En toe wen ek met die scratchcards. Vier en sewentig rand” (74).
she’d never touched a black hand before” (333). The Benades end up dancing with the rest of the crowd and, still under the influence of this extraordinary event, continue their day with a family picnic by the Westdene dam. Once again, positive contact with others has led to a sustained truce—even an extended period of caring—within the family, but again this episode is followed by the Benades’ relapse into bickering and fighting at Christmas.

Though moments of inter-racial contact in the novel point to potential change, then, these moments are always the product of proximity and of chance, and the kindness they produce does not last. A further inter-racial episode in which a “black” man saves Lambert from being run over by a truck at the dump, where Lambert had gone looking for wine-box liners, for example, ends with the man selling Lambert a gun with which Lambert begins to patrol the streets of Triomf at night, shining his torch into “black” people’s eyes as he passes them. Lambert’s friendly moment with “Sonnyboy” at the dump does not prompt Lambert to reconsider his prejudices, so that while it constructs multiple moments of potential, the novel does not reproduce the conventional reconciliation narrative’s insistence that an intentional relationship across colour lines brings about a consistent and thoroughgoing transformation.

This vacillation should not be read as a pessimistic gesture, however, because the overall effect of this doing and undoing of positive change is to suggest possibilities and potentials without buying into the false closure they offer. This strategy rejects narrative fetishist tactics which attempt to model political change by glossing over the cultural and

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38 “Toe sê so ’n opgeskote klimmeid vir haar, een met so ’n Chicken Lickenkepsie op die kroese: ‘Peace be with you, Ma,’ en sy smile vir haar en steek vir haar ’n lighbloetjie op ’n helderblou speldjie. Toe sien sy eers maar almal het lintjies en deifies op en almal hou hande vas. Dis toe al die tyd vrede waroor dit gaan. En die hele tyd druk-druk die klimmeid haar hand en smile vir haar met blink oë. Sy’ geruik na Chicken Licken en haar hand was ’n bietjie vetterig. Maar toe druk sy maar terug, al het sy nog nooit eers aan ’n swart hand, skoon of vuil, gevat nie. En diékant van haar is daar ’n outa met net een been op krukke. Hy knyp sy een kruk onder sy arm vas en vat haar ander hand. Sy hand was baie koud en vellerig met los beentjies in. Maar hy’t mooi styf vasgehou” (284).
material realities that make the work involved in bringing about change so overwhelming. Rather than imaginatively eradicating difference and difficulty through a love-story and liberal humanist fantasy that all people are really the same, the paratactical structure of the episodic echoes the paratactical structure of collage, so that both positive and negative episodes remain in play. Indeed, *Triomf*’s most significant effect is not its pillorying of apartheid ideology and Afrikaner nationalist myth but the compassion that it creates for the Benades—not because they are victims, but because they are human. Ultimately the novel suggests that we cannot take seriously any claims for human rights unless they address all forms of dehumanization, just as we cannot take seriously any calls for tolerance that qualify who is included in that tolerance. For real change to take place in post-1994 South Africa, the Benades, warts and all, must be included in the future of the country, not vilified as embodiments of all that is unsavoury about the past.

What *Triomf* offers that is new, then, is not the satire of Afrikaner myths, but the undecidability of collage as a simultaneous citation and disruption of colonial tropes. In collaging together various powerful local narratives, *Triomf* is able to account for their power while preventing their reinscription. Adamowicz argues of surrealist narrative modes that they “parody familiar fictional mechanisms, juggle with stereotypical topoi, favouring the casual over the causal, local epiphanies over sustained diegetic development” (98). *Triomf*, too, favours the casual over the causal, foreclosing the emblematization of the inter-racial relationship with an insistence on proximity, not affect, as potentially transformative.
Chapter 5
Smashing the rainbow in the face

...you want to be religious?  OK, prove it here, in the ‘works of love,’ in the way you relate to your neighbors.

Slavoj Žižek

In “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence,” Slavoj Žižek reconsiders the Biblical injunction to “love thy neighbour.” In contrast to conventional interpretations of the injunction that emphasize the humanity (popularly understood as the goodness, to the exclusion of the badness) of the neighbour, thus basically reducing the neighbour to a version of the self, Žižek stresses the fundamental otherness of the neighbour, his or her “monstrosity.” Without understanding the neighbour as a monstrous other, Žižek asserts, truly ethical action towards this figure is not possible—indeed, without the monstrous neighbour as irreducible other, ethical action is not possible in any arena. For a Levinasian focus on the face of the other Žižek substitutes “a faceless monster” because, as Žižek explains, “in order to arrive at the ‘neighbor’ we have to love, we must pass through the ‘dead’ letter of the Law, which cleanses the neighbor of all imaginary lure, of the ‘inner wealth of a person’ displayed through his or her face, reducing him or her to a pure subject” (Žižek 185, italics in the original). Žižek’s formulation of neighbour-love thus reveals love to be a stringent moral duty rather than a mere overflow of pleasant feeling. Indeed, Žižek strenuously opposes the duty of justice to the feeling of love when he remarks that “In contrast to love, justice begins when I remember the faceless many left in shadow in this

1 “The Neighbour and Other Monsters” 141.
2 I do argue in the previous chapter that Marlene van Niekerk has insisted upon the humanity of the Benades, but I hope I have made it clear that this vision of humanity comprises both moments of compassion and episodes of monstrousness. While many of Triomf’s critics seem to want to dismiss the Benades entirely as personifications of a debased and corrupt political system and culture, I have argued that the text itself works equally against the wholesale repudiation, idealization and justification of people and their actions.
privileging of the One. Justice and love are thus structurally incompatible: justice, not love, has to be blind; it must disregard the privileged One whom I ‘really understand’” (Žižek 182).

Despite the apparent transgressiveness of the inter-racial relationships they depict, conventional reconciliation narratives of post-1994 South Africa model the nation precisely on a regard for “the privileged One whom I ‘really understand.’” Their versions of love, as Žižek shows us, lay the foundation for injustice because they not only fail to disrupt, but in fact reinscribe, the biopolitics of apartheid, since the vision of the nation built on affect (and desire) lets stand, though it may move, the boundary between the loved and unloved, between those to “make live” and those to “let die.” In contrast, neighbour-love, the ethical obligation toward the unloved, toward the monstrous other, is profoundly anti-biopolitical. In neighbour-love, difference remains undigested: it may be difficult, or even impossible, to “relate” to the other, to the neighbour, but nonetheless a truce must hold; more than that, a hand must be extended to the neighbour in spite of his or her inexorable difference.

Žižek’s essay is structured by the binary of what he calls “Jewish Law” (which he connects to Levinasian philosophy), and Christian ethics, but in South Africa the injunction to neighbour-love has an analogue in the concept of ubuntu in that both ethical imperatives are anchored in rigorous responsibility towards the other. Mark Sanders defines ubuntu

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3 In fact Žižek’s essay is an extended engagement with Levinasian philosophy and with its recent resurgence as the “ethical turn” in philosophy and literary studies, for example in the later work of Derrida and Butler. A Levinasian conception of responsibility has also become an important framework in much recent South African literary criticism, most notably in Derek Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), in which Attridge connects the receptivity of reading to Levinasian passivity in the face of the other, and in Mike Marais’ reading of *Disgrace*. While there is much to admire in much of the criticism grounded in Levinasian ethics, I prefer to anchor my discussion here in Žižek’s essay both because his focus on monstrosity dramatizes the otherness of the other (a recognition of otherness which I argue disappears in readings of *Disgrace* that follow Marais’ lead in reading from a Levinasian framework but nevertheless insist on Lurie’s “learning to love,” as we shall see later in this chapter) and because he locates the sphere of the spiritual firmly in the banality of the mundane.

4 In presenting ubuntu as an analogue to Judeo-Christian traditions, I do not wish to suggest that ubuntu is simply an African version of said traditions, nor do I wish to imply that Christianity or Judaism properly should be considered “foreign” to South Africa. On the contrary, the myriad South African versions of Christianity in particular must be recognized as traditions which have become indigenous.
“provisionally, as a notion of reciprocity: a human being is a human being through other
human beings,” and cautions against misunderstanding *ubuntu* as “a prescription of the
precedence of the collective” (24, 27). Following Desmond Tutu’s explanations of *ubuntu* in
his Truth and Reconciliation Commission memoir *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Sanders
emphasizes that a proper understanding of *ubuntu* as radically re-imagines the nature of the
subject as Žižek radically re-imagines the nature of the neighbour-as-other. As Sanders
argues, *ubuntu* destroys the notion of the subject as primarily an individual, because the
subject only becomes the subject within the processes of relating to the other: “Once one
engages *ubuntu*, there is no going back to a more ‘fundamental sense,’ which would ground
the subject of rights and responsibilities in prescribed duties and responsibilities, let alone do
so within a predetermined communal hierarchy” (27). The idea of a subject inaugurated in
relation to the other may recall Lacan or seem to suggest the process of interpellation, but as
we shall see, the subject imagined through *ubuntu* is formed by relations to people and not by
relations to people-as-power—that is, rather than imagining a primary scene, or scenes, of
the inauguration of the subject by power, *ubuntu* highlights the contingency of the subject on
on-going relations with its others; *ubuntu* understands the subject to be always in the process
of becoming, and asserts that this becoming necessarily takes place in relation to other
people.

Until this point, I have been largely concerned with describing what I have come to
term the conventional reconciliation narrative, with detailing its underlying assumptions and
consequences, and with offering examples of novels that actively invoke and follow its
pattern in order to disrupt it. In this chapter, I wish to turn from disruption of the
reconciliation narrative to construction of alternatives to it; specifically, I wish to turn away
from desire, and from passionate attachment, to neighbour-love and *ubuntu* as modes
through which to imagine and relate to post-1994 South Africa. An investigation of neighbour-love and *ubuntu* may not seem to counter Albie Sachs’ appeal for “love and tenderness” as a feature of post-apartheid artistic practice (Sachs 21); the ethics of *ubuntu* and neighbour-love may not seem to be so far removed from the ethics of the reconciliation narratives I have described, but through readings of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, I will show how the demands of neighbour-love and *ubuntu* necessitate a turn away from a desire for redemption through reconciliation in favour of an ethics of on-going reparations. As Sanders remarks, “Reparations will never be adequate, can never be made, yet they must be made,” but while, as I have argued, reconciliation seeks a final closure, the making of reparations, like *ubuntu* and neighbour-love, is a strenuous process, the outcome of which is inevitably deferred (146). Rather than seeking a solution to the problem of the inevitable tendency of an imagined “reconciliation” to reinscribe the status quo, these novels, I argue, insist on the responsibilities of reparations, and engagement with the ethics of reparations marks them on a structural level.

In contrast to the idealization of “learning to love” in reconciliation narratives, these novels refuse to reconcile impossible relationships, fail to resolve egregious violence, and leave unreformed unlikeable characters. Not only do *The Restless Supermarket*’s Aubrey Tearle and *Disgrace*’s David Lurie fail to learn to love, they also fail to learn to listen, and there is more to this failure on the part of should-be expert communicators—Lurie is a lecturer in communications and Tearle is a proofreader and amateur linguist—than a mere clever irony. Instead, the construction of these narratives from the perspectives of characters whose engagement with those around them is monological and judgemental disrupts reading practices that seek in the novels’ central characters a model to emulate. While the conventional reconciliation narrative, with its focus on the redemption of the “white”
character, re-ensconces the emotional development of “white” people as a central concern, *The Restless Supermarket* and *Disgrace*, as depictions of failed reciprocity, invite questioning of their protagonists’ assumptions of their own centrality and authority. In doing so, the novels allow for the rejection of judgement as a primary political paradigm; the authors do not seek to be found innocent of past wrongs or to be forgiven for them, but rather they seek to make good. Rather than solving the problem of the other by digesting its difference, *The Restless Supermarket* and *Disgrace* as reparations narratives insist that though difference is obdurate, it is in the attempt to relate to this difference, to Žižek’s “faceless monster,” that a response to biopolitical imaginings may lie.

### 5.1 Ubuntu and the neighbour

Although the concept of *ubuntu* exists in various forms, and under various names, throughout the African continent, in recent history it has become familiar to “white” South Africans and, to a lesser extent, to the Western world, primarily through Desmond Tutu’s use of the term as Chairman of the TRC. The isiZulu phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (usually translated as ‘people are people through other people’) is one of the most prevalent formulations of *ubuntu*, perhaps largely because it is the phrase cited in the “Concepts and Principles” section of the TRC’s final report, though, as Sanders and others have observed, the adoption of the isiZulu expression as paradigmatic brings with it both problems of its translation into English and other languages, and the danger of homogenizing other indigenous South African versions of the concept (TRC Report Volume 1, Chapter 5, 127; the formal discussion of *ubuntu* and/as restorative justice extends from pages 125-128).

Indeed, despite the fact that it has been so widely referenced—or perhaps because of it—Rob Gaylard remarks that *ubuntu* “has in fact become a protean term: it has been promoted
or invoked in such diverse fields as religion, education, ethics, jurisprudence and business management” (272), and Antjie Krog contends that “the over-use and exploitation of the word ubuntu makes it nearly unusable” (355). If *ubuntu* is a familiar concept, then, this is not to imply that there is consensus on what it means and how it is to be used.

Despite the lack of accord in the various interpretations of *ubuntu*, however, there is danger in not giving the concept its due. Though it may not be possible to account for the many different versions of *ubuntu* on the African continent, a lack of general understanding of the term renders unintelligible significant currents in South African culture, and Krog emphasizes in particular the importance of not adopting the dismissive tone of some critics of the TRC who fail to recognize its role. While she acknowledges that “political and other factors” played a major role in the transition to democracy, she argues that the “peaceful acceptance” of the work of the TRC is difficult to understand if only a political or legal interpretive framework is brought to bear on its process. As Krog observes, “the way in which concepts such as amnesty, reconciliation and forgiveness were innovatively used and understood, is indicative of something broader and deeper than some of the TRC critics would allow,” and Krog asserts that this “something broader and deeper” is to be found in the deep-rooted ethics of *ubuntu* (354). While some critics may give lip-service to the importance of *ubuntu*, they nevertheless turn to the critical tools with which they are most familiar, with the result that “Although they mention the word ubuntu, it plays hardly a role

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5 A prominent Afrikaans-language poet and South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) broadcaster, Antjie Krog reported on the hearings of the TRC and subsequently published the memoir *Country of My Skull*. The book is a blend of testimony, personal reflection, philosophy, reportage and poetry, and its importance as a response to the TRC cannot be overemphasized—indeed, the TRC Final Report includes excerpts from the book. Given the association between Tutu, *ubuntu* and the TRC, Krog’s comments on *ubuntu* thus carry considerable weight.

I should also note that Krog does not italicize the term “ubuntu” in her writing, perhaps because she does not wish to set it apart as a foreign concept. It is tempting to follow her lead in this, so that *ubuntu* is not unduly exoticized, but on the whole my argument is that *ubuntu* is not sufficiently part of the analysis of post-1994 texts, so perhaps a gesture towards its difference for Western readers is appropriate.
in the formulation of their critique” (Krog 354). Krog’s solution to the misconstrual of **ubuntu** is to develop her own English term for the concept, namely interconnectedness-towards-wholeness. In this term, Krog renders both interconnectedness and wholeness relational rather than fixed states. For Krog, “Wholeness is thus not a passive state of nirvana, but a process of becoming in which everybody and everything is moving towards its fullest self, building itself; one can only reach that fullest self though, through and with others which include ancestors and universe” (355).

Rather than rendering Krog’s definition idiosyncratic, Tutu’s comments on **ubuntu** also emphasize its performative nature:

**Ubuntu** is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu’; ‘Hey, so-and-so has umbuntu.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’ A person with **ubuntu** is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured and oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *sumnum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts, that undermines this sought-after good, is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good. To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me. It gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them. (Tutu 31)

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6 Sanders also examines this passage in Tutu’s memoir, emphasizing that conventional translations of **ubuntu** into English tend to fall short because of difficulty in understanding the relationship between self and community that the concept implies: “We need to take seriously what [Tutu] says about the difficulty of rendering **ubuntu** into a Western language. The reciprocity of **ubuntu** is radical. There is, in **ubuntu**, no opposition, strictly speaking, between altruism—living for the other (*autrui*)—and self-interest…. [W]hen **ubuntu** is phrased, as it is in Zulu (one of the Nguni languages), as *umuntu ngumuntu nabantu*, both *umuntu* (human being) and *abuntu* (human beings) undergo a dispropriation. The human-being (*umuntu*) of the singular (*umuntu*) depends on the plural (*abuntu*), but the plural itself would have no sense apart from the pole of singularity. This, I argue, makes it possible to read **ubuntu** against the grain of one-sided communitarian interpretations. The nature of the community depends on what its members do—whether it be acts of mourning and condolence, or of forgiveness or reparation” (96). In stressing that the community is “what its members do,” Sanders
Though Tutu assigns many qualities to the person who has *ubuntu*, such as generosity, friendliness, compassion, and caring, he also emphasizes the actions required to develop and maintain *ubuntu*: one must participate, one must share, one must affirm others and refrain from jealousy, one must avoid those actions that corrode the social good. Tutu also stresses the difference between Western conceptions of the individual who thinks, and therefore is, and the person who has *ubuntu*, who not only “belongs” to something larger than him- or herself, but sees altruism as “the best form of self-interest.” This latter point can scarcely be over-emphasized, because it invokes the conventional idea of altruism only to challenge it to the core: for Tutu, altruism is not self-sacrifice for the benefit of the other, but rather an understanding that what benefits the other also benefits the self; conversely, the misapprehension that generosity is extended to the other only at expense to the self diminishes both self and other, creating a false divide between their needs. In her discussion of *ubuntu*, legal scholar Drucilla Cornell goes so far as to deny that altruism is at all a valid term to use in its description, asserting that “[t]he relationship is not altruistic, but it is certainly one that denies that there is an ontologically based contradiction between selfishness and altruism” (48). Moreover, though Tutu’s language of “mine” and “yours” reconfigures the supposed binary between the individual and the community, this is not to say that emphasis on the community eradicates the individual. Gaylard remarks that though *ubuntu* challenges conventional conceptions of the individual, “The difference is perhaps a matter of emphasis. While post-Enlightenment thinkers tend to emphasise the autonomy of the individual, African thinkers place the stress on his or her communal responsibilities and obligations” (269).

asserts, as do Krog and Tutu, that *ubuntu* is something to be practiced, not just a quality to be possessed. He also resists the idealization of the community because it, rather than merely being some abstracted positive force, can have a good or a bad character.
I quote Tutu at such length not only because he, more than any other recent figure, has shaped understandings of *ubuntu*, but also because his position as TRC Chairman draws attention to the operation of *ubuntu* as a condition of justice in South Africa. While Žižek asserts that love and justice are antithetical terms, *ubuntu* would seem to allow for a justice less defined by Žižek’s vision of the violence of the demands of the ethical; such an understanding misses the stringency of the ethical obligations *ubuntu* demands and upon which Žižek insists with his characterization of the ethical as violent: *ubuntu* is much more than an ethic of being nice to people and of accepting difference as long as it is bland. Some international observers of the TRC process have, as Krog suggests, dismissed the proceedings, particularly the amnesty hearings, as a failure of justice, but many legal scholars have argued that the justice imagined by the TRC was deeply informed by the principles of *ubuntu*, and its hearings therefore have been misunderstood by those not sufficiently conversant with the concept. In contrast to the Western courts’ focus on the punishment of offenders, *ubuntu* privileges the reintegration of the offender and the participation of the community in reparations between perpetrators and victims.

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Some further examples may be helpful to illustrate the difference in approach between a sense of justice based on retribution and a sense of justice based on restoration. Drucilla Cornell offers this example from South Africa:

In the winter of 2004, I worked as a Sangoma’s [traditional healer’s] assistant; and I will use an example of how she solved a particular conflict, leaving aside the question of whether a Sangoma should be considered part of the law. The Sangoma had caught a young man who had stolen a television from an elderly neighbour. She and the young man returned the television to the neighbour. But, the young man was further ordered to work for his neighbour for the next 6 months. The young man was an AIDS orphan, and therefore had not been taught the important ethical commitment and obligations that lie at the heart of the living customary law. For the Sangoma, the only way for this young man to learn uBuntu was to do uBuntu. The young man accepted the order that he should work for his elderly neighbour and, indeed, the story has a happy ending in that they actually lived together until the young man graduated from Khayamandi High School. (Cornell 46)

Had this young man committed the same kind of crime in Canada, he would presumably have been punished for his behaviour by being sentenced to a juvenile detention centre. If the sentence was lenient, perhaps he would be remanded to a group home. In either case, though the young man’s background might be considered unfortunate, the emphasis would be on reformation through punishment, and certainly it is hard to imagine that any attempt would be made to build a relationship between the young man and his victim.

Elechi, Morris and Schauer offer this example from Nigeria:
In the context of the TRC, *ubuntu* produced some of the extraordinary scenes of forgiveness for which the Commission became known, and which also came to symbolize the “miracle” of South Africa’s relatively peaceful transition to democracy. Krog cites the words of Cynthia Ngewu (mother of one of the activists known as the Gugulethu Seven, who had been murdered by the South African police) upon meeting with her son’s killer: “‘This thing called reconciliation ...if I am understanding it correctly ... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all’” (quoted in Krog 356). As Krog remarks, Ngewu’s comments show a marked departure from the attitudes that characterize retributive justice: she understands her son’s killer not as someone who is inherently inhuman, but as someone who has lost his humanity in the act of killing, and can begin to regain it through his contrition and her forgiveness. She also understands that her own humanity hangs in the balance of her ability to forgive. If she remains locked in her own anger, she is diminished as well as he, so that her self-interest and her desire to be whole are bound up in the possibility of the perpetrator becoming human again, or at least in the possibility of his being offered a return to his humanity. Sanders

The case in question involved a 25-year-old man who was caught stealing yams from a community member’s farm. The defendant admitted to the yam theft allegation leveled against him. He was ordered to return the yams to the owner and also pay a fine to the community for theft. He returned the yams to the owner and apologized to him and to the community for his bad behavior. However, he said he had no means of paying the fine that the village tribunal imposed on him. He appealed to the community for their understanding on the grounds that he had no job and had no hope of securing one in the near future. During the community’s deliberation, it was learned that the individual in question lost his parents at a very young age; thus, he had no education and transferable skills he could use to secure a job. The tribunal members decided that the defendant’s uncle, who they believed had sufficient resources to send the young man to school or assist him in learning a trade he could use in securing a job, should be held responsible for the young man’s fine. The defendant’s uncle under the threat of a hefty fine was also ordered to assist the defendant to either attend school or learn a trade. Appeal was also made to other community members to assist in finding a job for the young man. (Elechi, Morris and Schauer 78-79)

In this example, not only does the man make restitution to his victim directly rather than through the proxy of the court, but the community accepts responsibility in the case. Rather than understand the judgment charging the man’s uncle with his care to be unfair, we should appreciate its orientation towards the restoration of community harmony. In fact, the tribunal points out that the uncle, and the community at large, have failed to support the man, and they must now make good by helping him to acquire employable skills.
observes of the definition of the human upon which ubuntu hinges that, within its context, forgiveness is not simply an option that a person can choose; it is the essence of humanity itself:

Without something like forgiveness there would not be any human-being, or human beings between whom forgiveness could take place. There would be biological entities beset by anger and lust for revenge. There would be aggression and violent conflict, but this would not, in any meaningful sense, be human life. (96-97)

I have spent so much time attempting to explain ubuntu because, as Krog remarks of certain TRC critics, the concept seems to remain opaque for so many, and I do not wish for ubuntu to be mistaken for what Žižek calls the “New Age attitude which ultimately reduces my Other/Neighbor to my mirror-image or to the means in the path of my self-realization” (140). As I have already suggested, Žižek’s comments on the neighbour as other, though they insist on a rejection of affect that may seem to be at odds with popular conceptions of ubuntu, have in common with ubuntu two major points. The first is the attention to the finite in Žižek’s “Jewish Law” and ubuntu. In ubuntu, the ethical sphere is the community, and justice, reparations and forgiveness are practical strategies for the healthy functioning of that community. Similarly, Žižek locates in the ethical obligations to the neighbour an acceptance of difficulty and of lack of closure. This, for him, constitutes the major difference between “Jewish Law” and “Christianity”:

In contrast to this admission [in Jewish Law] of terrestrial life as the very terrain of our ethical activity, Christianity simultaneously goes too far and not far enough: it believes that it is possible to overcome this horizon of finitude, to enter collectively a blessed state, to ‘move mountains by faith’ and realize a utopia; and it immediately transposes the place of this blessed state into an Elsewhere, which then propels it to declare our terrestrial life of ultimately secondary importance and to reach a compromise with the masters of this world, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. The link between spiritual salvation and worldly justice is cut short. (150)

If the ethical sphere is geared towards the infinite, towards a divine and final judgement, then ethical action is deferred; the crucial relationship is between God and humanity, not
between people and those around them. In this way, both “Jewish Law” and ubuntu are grounded in a politics of making do: of accepting, while not necessarily endorsing, human and other shortcomings.

Furthermore, Žižek’s conception of “Jewish Law,” along with ubuntu, does not separate the spiritual from the mundane. Although, as already discussed, Žižek asserts that Levinasian ethics do not go far enough in their understanding of the neighbour as monster, he does acknowledge that the focus on the other, rather than on God, as the locus of ethical action is the more spiritual position of the two options. This leads to the second point of contact between ubuntu and Žižek’s “Jewish Law”:

What one should fully acknowledge and endorse is that this stance of Levinas is radically antibiopolitical. Levinasian ethics is the absolute opposite of today’s biopolitics, with its emphasis on regulating life and deploying its potentials. For Levinas, ethics is not about life, but about something more than life. It is at this level that Levinas locates the gap that separates Judaism and Christianity—Judaism’s fundamental ethical task is that of ‘to be without being a murderer.’ (149-150)

Žižek goes on to cite Levinas’ question “What is the individual, if not a usurper?” (150). The individual is, fundamentally, a monster because it is not possible to live a life not predicated on the death of others. Rather than take the approach of the biopolitical, though, and insert the biological caesura between those who may live and those who must die, rather than place one’s faith in the final categorizations of the Rapture and the apocalyptic closure of Dies Irae, Levinas points to the responsibility of “attention to others and, consequently, the possibility of counting myself among them, of judging myself” (quoted in Žižek 150). Žižek takes this responsibility to its limit in recognizing the other, and hence the self, as monster; the ethical responsibility to do justice to the monster represents a turn as far away as possible from the biopolitical obsession with fostering sameness at the expense of difference. Ubuntu, with its insistence on relational humanity, also turns from sameness to difference, and its version of community is not one predicated on opposition to other communities, but rather on
proximity and on finitude: people relate to other people not because of their desire or choice to do so, but because they must share the same space. A recognition of the humanity of the self through the humanity of others must also entail a recognition of the monstrosity of the self in the actions of others. Rather than a final healing of rifts and an elimination of divisions, then, the focus is on the constant effort required and the continual deferral of closure in human life, and in this I see a potential for a re-figuring of post-1994 South African fiction.

5.2 The Restless Supermarket and the ethics of ubuntu

Written in 2001, The Restless Supermarket is set in the years of South Africa’s political transition, but its plot, largely concerning the attempts of retired proofreader Aubrey Tearle to correct the creeping lexical error he associates with the end of apartheid, has not been read in the context of the TRC nor of ubuntu. There is perhaps good reason for this: Ingrid de Kok dubs Vladislavić “one of South Africa’s few significant satiric writers,” and perhaps a focus on the satire of his novels, much like the focus on decoding satire that has side-tracked criticism of Triompf, has precluded an attention to other theoretical concerns (125). As Mike Marais remarks, “Vladislavić collapses the distinction between his protagonist’s linguistic proofreading and his social proofreading,” so that Tearle’s attempts to correct the signage around him, and his obsession with collecting “corrigenda” from which to fashion a proofreading test he calls The Proofreader’s Derby, connect clearly the apartheid obsession with boundaries and with the violent enforcement of a racialized social order; Tearle is therefore no model of reconciliation—or even of basic tolerance, so perhaps ubuntu does not seem the most obvious concept to bring to bear on such a character (Marais “Against Race” 283, italics in original).
Moreover, Vladislavić’s reputation as a post-modern stylist has resulted in much of his work being analyzed in conventionally Western critical terms, in which his engagement with South Africa is assumed to be incidental rather than central to his projects. Though his earlier writing, especially, can be experimental in style, this does not mitigate the importance of South African issues in his work as either a writer or an editor—indeed, he has edited some of post-1994 South Africa’s most crucial texts, including Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*, and *The Free Diary of Albie Sachs* (Graham 74). As *The Restless Supermarket* shows, Vladislavić’s writing is deeply rooted in its South African context, including the concept of *ubuntu*, with which he is certainly familiar from editing Krog’s book. The novel, despite its lack of explicit reference to the term, must be read through the lens of *ubuntu* in order to grasp its full implications.

Though the novel engages with the ethics of *ubuntu*, it is not in its protagonist that these ethics are to be found. Vladislavić begins the novel with Tearle’s memory of seeing a dead body lying in the weeds:

> I saw it from the window of my own flat, where I stood with a carton of long-life milk in my hand, and I could almost smell the pungent scent of the kakiebos crushed by its fall. It lay among the rusted pipes, blackened bricks and outcrops of old foundations that mark every bit of empty land in this city, as if a reef of disorder lay just below the surface, or a civilization had gone to ruin here before we ever arrived.

> What do I mean by ‘we’? Don’t make me laugh. (6-7)

In a later passage, Tearle remembers that the corpse had looked black, but the newspaper had reported that it was in fact the body of a “white” man who had been burned. Rather than acknowledge directly the horror of this person’s death, Tearle immediately converts the corpse to a sign of civilization under threat, a symptom of the political transition betokened by the reference to the “we” who, in Tearle’s mind, brought order and meaning to the continent. Later, in the text of Tearle’s Proofreader’s Derby, the image of a floating corpse...
once again betokens absolute confusion and disarray, and Tearle’s alter-ego Fluxman pushes the “bobber,” half human and half rubber dinghy, back into the water from whence it came, thinking that it is “beyond repair”: no longer human, but rather “[a] cacophony of categories, a jumble of kinds, an elemental disorder, wanton and fatal” (209-210). The final image of the novel seems to reinforce rather than contradict this paradigm as Tearle once again stands at his window and views the city:

The lights of [the] motor town lay before me, the highways coiled like cables on the matt [sic] black of the mining wasteland, and beyond them the southern suburbs, the buffer zones, filling up with informal settlements, and the townships. Movements were afoot in those dark spaces that would never be reflected in the telephone directories. Languages were spoken there that I would never put to proof. As if they were aware of it themselves, the lights were not twinkling, as lights are supposed to do, they were squirming and wriggling and writhing, like maggots battening on the foul proof of the world. (338-339)

I will say more momentarily about the ambiguity of the novel’s ending, but certainly this passage must frustrate any attempt to read into Tearle’s character the apparently thorough transformation demanded by reconciliation narratives. Not only is Tearle’s physical position of what Mary Louise Pratt would call colonial surveillance unchanged, but the image of the battening maggots recalls clearly the dead body of the first passage. The panorama of

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8 Having lost my first edition of *The Restless Supermarket*, I am working from the second edition in this chapter. J.C. Peters has observed that, despite the fact that both editions of the novel were published by the same company, and despite the fact that the typography of the first edition was almost error-free, the second edition is riddled with typos, some of which are apparent in the passage quoted above. According to Peters, “[t]hough Vladislavić has not admitted publicly to having revised the 2006 edition, the errors are clearly deliberate” (46). Peters therefore argues that the typos of the novel not only create an ironic alignment with Tearle because they force the reader into the position of proofreader, but they also “point to a utopian space that breaks through the various forms of linguistic and colonial authority” (55). Though these observations are peripheral to my argument here, Peters’ article offers a fresh take on the novel and a convincing explanation for the seeming sloppiness of the second edition.

9 Pratt also refers to this kind of scene as the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” genre, and argues that the “white” man’s panoramic view from the promontory is crucial to exploration, and now tourism, narratives (201). As Pratt observes, the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene “would seem to involve particularly explicit interaction between esthetics and ideology, in what one might call a rhetoric of presence….the esthetic qualities of the landscape constitute the social and material value of the discovery to the explorer’s home culture, at the same time as its esthetic deficiencies suggest a need for social and material intervention by the home culture” (205). Though Tearle is a South African, he makes it clear repeatedly that he considers himself to be European in culture, and so his “home country” would be formed by the mish-mash of (Western) European high culture that so typifies colonial idealization of the metropole as the apex of civilization.
disorder is equally overwhelming and threatening—indeed the final image is arguably more terrifying than the first since the Manichean opposition of light and dark evident in the “blackened” detritus of decayed civilization in the first passage has given way in the final passage to the conversion of even the lights to harbingers of ruin.

The lack of definitive positive change in Tearle poses a problem for readers wishing to see a certain kind of “development” in the protagonist, and this is evident in reviewers’ descriptions of him. Charlotte Bauer calls Tearle “a hard man to like,” and Ingrid de Kok labels him a “crank” (Bauer no page, de Kok 125). Lionel Abrahams sees Tearle as a “curmudgeon” and Beverley Roos Muller observes that his “emotionally chilly, prejudiced personality has little to offer in the way of coping” with the changes afoot in South Africa (10). Bauer goes further and suggests a relation between Tearle and “white” South Africans upset by the changes associated with the political transition, asserting that “we cannot love him, but we know him,” and declaring that when things go wrong for Tearle near the end of the novel, “we almost feel sorry for him.” Here, Bauer’s “almost” forecloses the possibility of reader/reviewer identification with, and thus recognition of potential similarity to, Tearle. Although Bauer relates that Vladislavić “is sensitive to the criticism that the novel lacks heart because Tearle is so unsympathetic,” her own assessment of Tearle as a character still rests on his relative likeability and on an apparent desire to assert an essential difference between herself and Tearle.

But it is precisely in the difficulty and discomfort of identifying with Tearle that we begin to see the dynamics of ubuntu. In response to her characterization of Tearle’s “lack of sympathy” as a flaw, Bauer quotes Vladislavić’s comment that “I can see that most readers are looking for a point of identification with the narrator—which may or may not be the same as liking him.” By rejecting “liking” as the primary basis of identification, Vladislavić
invokes an ethical paradigm implicitly aligned with *ubuntu*. In an interview with Mike Marais and Carita Backström, Vladislavić elaborates on what is at stake in his characterization of Tearle:

I would not have chosen such a difficult and, in a sense, dislikeable character as Tearle... if I wasn’t dealing with questions of judgement. This seems to be one of the keys to unlocking the South African dilemma. How do people who aren’t like each other, and who therefore don’t like one another, live together? Very often, South African art, in general, has been tilting at the easy targets and making judgements too simple for the reader or viewer. (122)

In insisting that those who do not like each other must nonetheless live together, Vladislavić reverses the assumption that liking is established by common ground. His comment that South African art has been “tilting at easy targets” recalls the Sachs debate outlined in the introduction to this dissertation in which Sachs decries the crude binaries of anti-apartheid art in which “good” characters are politically progressive and “bad” characters violently undemocratic, and in which readers are expected to identify with, and model themselves after, the “good.” Rather than providing readers with an heroic individual to imitate, *The Restless Supermarket* offers the greater challenge of recognizing an uncomfortable identification with a relatively unlikeable protagonist. Such a recognition actually forces the reader to begin to “do” *ubuntu* in a way that emulating a protagonist does not: the challenge is not to mimic Tearle, but to accept him.

If there is a model to follow in the book, it is to be found not in Tearle, but in the other characters’ reactions to him. What structures the progress of the novel is not the development of Tearle’s character, but the increasing revelation of the gap between his version of his relations with others and their recollections of his treatment of them. The novel begins in the present of the negotiation between political parties of the transition to democracy, but for Tearle this present signifies the collapse of order rather than its transformation. Tearle sees signs of decay everywhere in his neighbourhood of Hillbrow,
and not least in the impending closure of the Café Europa, the only social space to which he
has ventured since his retirement. 10 Tearle sees in the Café a microcosm of the changes
afoot in the rest of the country: at first a “whites-only” space replete with would-be
European “ambience”—including a full-time piano player—the Café gradually introduces
one-armed bandits, pool tables, televisions, new management, and “black” patrons. When
Tearle’s only remaining social contact from the old days of the Café, M.T.—with his typically
disparaging wit, Tearle calls him “Empty”—Wessels, begins planning a party to reunite the
“old faces” on the Café’s last night, the night before New Year’s, Tearle remembers, in
flashbacks that account for much of the first section of the novel, his half-fledged
friendships with the former Europa patrons, and also the ends of those friendships (24). He
also decides to revive his old project, the Proofreader’s Derby, to act as the centrepiece of
the closing party; the second section of the novel is the (corrected) text of the derby, an
idealist fantasy in which the valiant editing and record-keeping of Fluxman and his team of
proofreaders restore the imaginary city of Alibia from literal disintegration and destruction to
stability and order—indeed, the heroic proofreaders not only “make good” for Alibia, but
they make Alibia better than it ever was before.

The third section of *The Restless Supermarket* depicts the Goodbye Bash, and it is here
that Tearle’s account of the past is corrected by the Europa’s patrons: Tearle’s perceptions
are literally reversed as he is subjected to an impromptu trial reminiscent of a mini-TRC
amnesty hearing. As Vladislavić’s fellow Hillbrow novelist Phaswane Mpe observes, Tearle
“finds it difficult to comprehend his situation because it is what he thinks of as his former
friends, the white, former regulars to Café Europa—this café in which the regulars and

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10 Tearle claims that he was driven to the Café by the lack of public social spaces in his neighbourhood in
which the “whites-only” benches had been replaced by “no benches at all to discourage loitering” and the only
park features “a reniform paddling pool that attracted the wrong sort of toddler” (17). Tearle’s comments
here and throughout the novel offer a familiar kind of coded complaint in which the increasing desegregation
of space in South Africa is voiced as concern for community standards.
newcomers are so mixed as to be indistinguishable—that prove to be his utmost enemies” (Mpe 195). As Mpe asserts, the “white” patrons with whom Tearle assumes he has had the strongest bonds deal out the harshest criticism. Tearle discovers that his friend Spilkin, a fellow cryptic crossword puzzler and word game enthusiast, never saw himself as having much in common with the retired proofreader but instead believes that they were always “worlds apart as people” (288). Spilkin goes on to criticize Tearle openly, remarking to him that “You think people need correcting. Your obsession with raising us up to your level shows exactly how little you think of us. It’s a measure of your disdain” (288).

Spilkin’s accusation unleashes an “inquisition” from the past and present patrons of the Café Europa, in which Tearle’s account of events in the first section of the novel is corrected by the patrons. It is revealed, for example, that Tearle’s insistence, for reasons of hygiene, that certain patrons of the Café be served on separate crockery, referred not to Merle’s dog, but to “black” patrons; the former server whom Tearle called “Eveready” was in fact named Evaristus, and hated the nickname, and Spilkin’s mixed-race partner Darlene whom Tearle insisted Spilkin had found “in a bordello” in fact had been a supermarket cashier (290). It is Darlene who then asserts that, in proofreading the Johannesburg telephone directory during the apartheid years, Tearle had collaborated with the regime. This thought causes Tearle to see “where this crooked line of reasoning was leading” and remember, once again, “looking down on the plot in Prospect Road, where something [i.e. the corpse Tearle observed from his window] lay with sheets of newspaper fluttering around it like flames” (291). Because Tearle cannot see the connection between his actions—from his “harmless” jokes to what he sees as the noble work of proofreading—and their larger effects in the context of apartheid, the image of the corpse as a token of the destruction of civilization returns to his mind in this moment. But in insisting on the effects of Tearle’s
actions on the larger collective, Darlene’s accusation flouts Tearle’s conceptions of rationalism and individualism as the bases of “civilization,” seeming to Tearle to undermine all social order and stability, which he has always seen as rooted in the predictable behaviour of “civil” individuals. As Tearle reflects several times throughout the narrative, “Habit maketh the manners and all the rest that maketh the man. Predictable behaviour is what makes people tolerable, and obviates a risky reliance on goodwill and other misnomers” (52).

Instead of the end of civilization in the Café Europa as the patrons demand that Tearle take responsibility for his past actions and words, however, Darlene changes the mood of the room by announcing that “in spite of everything … everything … we forgive you” (292). The moment recalls those miraculous moments of forgiveness for which the TRC hearings became known, but the forgiveness of an irascible telephone directory proofreader should not be seen to mock the TRC because within the context of the novel, the moment is sincere:

Now a chorus of drunken voices rose up, a chorus of forgiveness just as vehement and unreasonable as the chorus of condemnation it had displaced, and broke over my head. Some of them were close to tears, some on the verge of laughter, yet others irate or indignant. We forgive you. There was clearly no room for argument. Yes, Mr T! Stop pulling faces. You are forgiven. We forgive you. I was relieved and grateful. It would have been uncharitable to feel otherwise. But I couldn’t see what this was all about. Why the blazes were they behaving like this? (292)

I argue that this is a moment of *ubuntu* because Tearle is called upon to acknowledge his shoddy treatment of others—his lack of *ubuntu*—and simultaneously he is shown the largesse that he himself cannot muster. Tearle, unable to relinquish his imagined position of authoritative judgement, sees the crowd’s condemnation and its forgiveness as equally “unreasonable,” but nonetheless he is “relieved and grateful” for the acceptance he is shown.

Moreover, the moment has concrete effects: though Tearle has intentions to “excise” Spilkin from his life “like a swollen appendix” (297), he is interrupted by a “mob” of New
Year’s revellers who, in carnival tradition, come in from the street to blacken with boot polish the faces of the Europa’s patrons. When Tearle reacts by shouting at the “invaders” and reaching, to illustrate a point, for the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* which he always carries around in his breast pocket like a Bible, he realizes this action might seem like he is reaching for a weapon, and so instead he reaches for a “black” patron’s treasured custom pool cue, “his Helmsstetter,” intending to “screw it apart, to present them with Helm and Stetter, to screw it back together again. Not with the arrogant ease of its owner, but with authority” (305). Rather than illustrating Tearle’s authority and chastening the “invaders” with their ignorance of language and order, Tearle is seen to threaten attack with the cue and thus provokes a brawl. An “invader” attempts to stab Tearle in the heart, but the blow is stopped by the *Pocket*, and the “black” patron Floyd, who has only ever been subject to Tearle’s racist disapproval, nevertheless comes to the old man’s aid, unfortunately stabbing himself in the head in the process (307). Tearle is bewildered by Floyd’s actions: “It made no sense to me that he should have leapt to my defence after what had happened. But it seemed crystal clear to them. Errol, dusting a confetti of shiny glass from his padded shoulders, said: ‘You a puss, Churl—but you one of our boys. Leave it or lump it’” (309). While Tearle assumes that his own inability to like the “black” patrons of the café will be reflected back to him in the form of their indifference, their acceptance of Tearle as “one of the boys” despite his churlishness demonstrates the radical acceptance of *ubuntu*. While a reading of *The Restless Supermarket* that ignores the secondary characters in favour of a constant focus on Tearle results primarily in a rejection of Tearle, here Vladislavić models through Floyd and Errol’s actions a form of neighbour-love that accepts the difference, even the monstrousness, of the other without attempting to digest it into sameness.
The fact that Tearle cannot understand the “black” patrons’ generosity towards him indicates that his criteria for liking remain narcissistic reflections of the qualities he believes to be his own. The beginning of the novel sees Tearle reflecting that he should make an effort with the “black” patrons of the café, but failing in this attempt because they fail to live up to his “standards” of literacy. As he watches one of the patrons sign the cast on Wessels’ leg, his short-lived attempt comes to naught:

I should try to like them, I thought, despite their broken English. In fact, I should try to like them for that, I should find a place for them, not a soft spot, not in my heart, but a well-worn, callused spot, something pachydermatous and scarred, where their shrillness, their abrasiveness, their rough edges might be accommodated without tearing any tissue. I made resolutions to that effect. But they came to nothing, watching the girl Nomsa, a deracinated Xhosa as I recall, crouched over Wessels’s plaster cast, with his stubby toes wriggling like newborn puppies, blindly delighted to be alive. The way she held the pen! It was worse than Wessels himself. You would have thought it was a vegetable peeler. (44-45)

It is typical of Tearle that he wants to find in his heart not a soft spot, but a hard one for those he considers shrill, abrasive and rough. He wants to “accommodate” them while remaining closed to them, so that his accommodation leaves his imagined hierarchy, in which he occupies the top rung, in place. Similarly, though Tearle is convinced that he should accompany the wounded Floyd to the hospital because his heart goes out to “the improvable girl” who pleads Floyd’s case, he still refuses to take responsibility for himself to the extent that he wonders only “dimly” if he “had played some part in this fiasco” (311).

Nevertheless, Tearle does ride with “the improvable girl” and Floyd in the ambulance to the hospital, where he ably takes charge of the paperwork and is even moved to name himself as Floyd’s guardian. This is a literalization of the reciprocity of ubuntu: Floyd guards Tearle’s life, and in turn Tearle signs a form saying that he is responsible for Floyd’s medical care.

Tearle’s subsequent walk from the hospital back to the café with the “improvable girl” Shirlaine suggests a continued potential for Tearle’s social development, and many
critics of the novel have noted in Tearle’s interaction with her a self-consciousness absent from his other conversations. While Caitlin Charos detects in the encounter a new-found “openness to possibility” for Tearle, however, Helene Strauss argues that though Tearle “briefly realises that he has been dominating their conversation,” he manages nevertheless “to turn even this rare moment of self-criticism into an opportunity to establish his superiority over the girl” (Charos 36, Strauss 39). When Shirlaine invites Tearle to count the number of “e”s in the text of a cigarette package to test his acuity, he sees that “she was extending the hand of friendship” and Tearle grasps it, “symbolically speaking,” by offering to teach Shirlaine some proofreading techniques (329). As Strauss observes, “Tearle wishes to engage in an exchange with the girl, but on his terms, and thereby fails to facilitate the possibility of an ethical exchange and of self-translation” (39). In fact, despite whatever potential she might represent, and despite Tearle’s expectation of an awkward goodbye at their parting, at the site of the remains of the Europa Shirlaine “had disappeared,” says Tearle, “as if I didn’t exist” (335).

Although Tearle may have fantasized about taking Shirlaine under his wing, ultimately the trope of the transformative inter-racial friendship is foreclosed in the novel. One part of this may be attributed to Tearle’s slowness to change—when he and Shirlaine share a breakfast of chicken and she invites him to pull the wishbone, he wins, wishing that he “could pass this entire city through the eye of the proofreader’s needle” (332). But Tearle’s peculiar phrasing in saying that Shirlaine disappears “as if I didn’t exist” rather than “as if she didn’t exist” also emphasizes Shirlaine’s lack of interest in forging a relationship with Tearle. Although their walk together has been friendly enough, Tearle and his potential for positive growth may be, after all, irrelevant. Novels focused on the reformation of their “white” protagonists and their reconciliation with “black” people still maintain the centrality
of the “white” protagonist: the point of the reconciliation narrative is that the “white”
character is accepted as a central part of the new order, and the successful reconciliation
confirms that ultimately the new order will look much like the old one. For Shirlaine,
however, Tearle neither is, nor represents, any major concern. Her lack of interest in
becoming Tearle’s protégé is only important if we take on Tearle’s belief in his own
centrality, and the novel repeatedly calls attention to the folly of doing just this.

Nonetheless, the end of the walk with Shirlaine returns us to the question of Tearle’s
possible reformation at the end of the novel. Critical opinion on this is divided, with Peters
asserting that “[h]is reformation is not a great or obvious one, though he may have learned
something through his ordeal” (59), and Charos seeing in Tearle’s recent experience “a
personal journey from intransigency to growing tolerance” (36). Strauss, on the other hand,
asserts that “Tearle’s voice remains unchanged by his experiences” (39), and Marais and
Backström characterize the final image of the novel, with Tearle looking down on the lights
of the city, as “bleak” (125). Vladislavić himself responds to Marais and Backström by
noting that Tearle is “not quite in the same place he was in before” (125), but then goes on
to observe that, especially in post-1994 South Africa, “processes that seem transformative
are, in fact, processes of substitution or replacement, where one fairly closed set of functions
or closed circle of people is replaced by another” (127). Vladislavić seems to suggest that a
change has happened for Tearle, but at the same time he resists both the triumphal
apocalyptic narrative of post-1994 political and social transformation and the closure
ostensibly offered by inter-racial love and friendship.

If reading each of Vladislavić’s comments against one another fails to resolve the
question of Tearle’s possible reformation, it also replaces this question with a more
interesting concern, namely that of closure. I have been arguing throughout this dissertation
that linear narratives depicting the teleology of crisis encode the desire for a final political reconciliation, a “transformation” that, as Vladislavić warns, may instead enact the substitution of one social structure with a very similar one. Rather than envisioning a definitive change, then, the ambiguous ending of *The Restless Supermarket* refuses to endorse redemptive narratives which, after all, echo the Afrikaner narratives of suffering and delivery from harm underpinning, for example, nationalist representations of the Great Trek—or even of the electoral victory of the National Party which inaugurated apartheid itself.

Although the potential for Tearle to widen his horizons is suggested by his interactions with Floyd and Shirllaine, the final image of the novel forecloses any definitive conversion, just as the ending of *Playing in the Light*, as I argued in Chapter 3, interrupts the reading of Marion and Brenda’s friendship as evidence that prickly Marion has “learned to love.”

Rather than trying to solve the problem of whether or not Tearle has “learned to love” by the end of the novel, then, I argue that it is the irresolution of Tearle’s story that is crucial. Charos observes that in the novel’s final passage, “Vladislavić moves from the absolute past tense—‘were afoot’—to the past progressive—‘were twinkling’—and lastly, to the present progressive tense—‘battening’” (37). While she sees in this movement an emphasis on discomfort and instability that she argues “gestures to the potential for growth, cultural exchange, and fruitful communion, even in the midst of restless transition,” I read Tearle’s return to his customary way of seeing perhaps less optimistically, as a reminder of the instability of *ubuntu* (Charos 37). *Ubuntu* must involve active effort: it can be won and lost, and therefore it must be represented by the cyclical movement in text and by resistance to a final closure. Marais, in arguing that Tearle’s interpretive activity is “determined by colonialist discourse,” also contends that the “violent, totalising nature” of the ordering impulse points to the question of ethics which he argues is central to the novel: “If the
ethical is understood to consist in a respect for the radical difference of the other person…the gesture of ordering would seem to preclude the very possibility of ethics,” but “the novel also stages discourse’s ultimate inability to enclose totally that which is disorderly and open by performing its own incompleteness and thereby exposing the flawed nature of closure” (Marais “Visions of Excess” 103). If the ethical question is the respect for the radical difference of the other, both the ubuntu shown by the patrons of the Café Europa in their treatment of Tearle and Tearle’s inability to retain the relatively open spirit of his walk with Shirlaine point not only to the impossibility of closure that Marais observes, but to the danger of wanting it—and the violence of attempting to impose it. Finally, an ethics of ubuntu must reject the fantasy of closure and of stability, instead emphasizing difficulty, instability, and relationality.

5.3 Disgrace and the ethics of proximity

Towards the end of J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace David Lurie’s daughter Lucy confronts him about his self-centredness: “You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor” (198). Lucy’s accusation that Lurie divides people into major and minor characters encapsulates not only Lurie’s narcissism, but also the kinds of reading practices that focus only on the development of the protagonist as the interpretive key to a novel. Like The Restless Supermarket, though, Disgrace cannot be properly understood if the protagonist and his reformation, or lack thereof, is to be its only point. Rather, despite the fact that it is Lurie through whom the narrative is focalized, we must take seriously what
Lucy says and not dismiss the novel’s other characters as peripheral to its philosophical concerns.\footnote{While the preponderance of essays about Disgrace focus on Lurie, Spivak observes that the cues for an active reading, of the type for which I am arguing, are structured into the novel’s focalization: “Disgrace is relentless in keeping the focalization confined to David Lurie. Indeed, this is the vehicle of the sympathetic portrayal of David Lurie. When Lucy is resolutely denied focalization, the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer’s inability to ‘read’ Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize” (22).}

As I have argued with The Restless Supermarket, an attention to the “minor” characters in this novel—and in Disgrace—reveals the limited perspectives of the characters through whose eyes each narration proceeds, and chief among these limitations is their assumption of their own centrality, which is called vociferously into question by those around them. This parallel between the two novels not only indicates their shared rejection of the ethics of conventional reconciliation narratives, but is a constitutive element of it: in addition to the foreclosure of inter-racial love and forgiveness upon which each novel turns, there is an insistence on the repositioning of its protagonist, and in this repositioning we begin to find an ethics of reparations. In contrast to reconciliation narratives which, with their focus on the development and forgiveness of “white” character, reinscribe them as central, Vladislavić and Coetzee’s questioning of their protagonists suggests the need for grounding any hopeful future in an active engagement rather than a false closure.

Mark Sanders begins his discussion of the concepts of reparation and reparations by citing the reaction to President Thabo Mbeki’s announcement, following the submission of the final two volumes of the TRC report, that victims or surviving family members who had testified before the Commission would receive a once-off grant as compensation (115). Predictably, the amount offered, 30 000 rand, was widely criticized as insufficient, and therefore, as Sanders observes, “we are faced with an aporia: on the one hand, no monetary price can be attached to the suffering of victims; on the other hand, there must be reparation...
in acknowledgement of those who have suffered and who continue to suffer‖ (115). 12

Though this contradiction cannot be resolved, Sanders suggests that a first step in confronting the state of affairs it represents is to distinguish between reparation as a goal and reparations as a process: “This distinction is of major importance since, in the process of remembering apartheid, everything hinges on whether matters of the past can be resolved through specific material acts (reparations) designed to archive what may be an impossible ‘symbolic’ goal (reparation)” (116). Though Sanders at first defines “reparations” as “specific material acts,” he also asserts that their function is to “archive” the attempt at reparation, so that reparations comprise a range of acts that gesture toward the symbolic.

Observing the distinction between reparation and reparations reveals that the problem with Mbeki’s once-off grant was not merely its small amount. Rather, because of its associations with crass notions of value and with the repayment of debts, it is particularly difficult for money to accomplish symbolic reparation. Sanders notes that, “Once a payment of money is ‘symbolic,’ or is so perceived, it is unlikely ever to be adequate to its object: either it is excessive or it is derisory” (119). Moreover, symbolic processes are not “once-off” events; remembrance, mourning and reparations all need to be repeated or on-going to have continued effect—in other words, these processes must be allowed to run their respective courses, however long that may take. Sanders argues throughout Ambiguities of Witnessing that the TRC’s assistance in the performance of funeral rites for victims’ families inaugurates, rather than completes, the process of mourning, and this again reveals the

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12 R 30 000 is equivalent to $4119.73 Canadian dollars at the time of writing. To put this figure further into perspective, I cite Francis Wilson’s statistics on the median household incomes for 1995, by racial group: Black R12 400, Coloured R19 400, Indian R40 500, White R60 000 (178). While the grants were the equivalent to two years’ income for the typical “black” household, then, they were only equivalent to half a year’s income for a typical “white” household, demonstrating the racialized gap in incomes which has only widened in the past 15 years.
distinction between reparation and reparations, showing that it is not necessarily a difference of kind, but of duration:

…a ‘symbolic’ process, once set in motion… is not something that is thought ever to be over (even if ceremonies of various kinds are conventionally held to bring things to term). The idea of a ‘once-off grant,’ on the other hand, tells one that a debt has been paid and paid off, that things are and can be over, that one ought to think of them as over—yet it leaves recipients and their advocates with the impression that insufficient has been done. At worst it restarts the cycle of historical wrong. (119)

Sanders’ comments here reveal that the attempt at monetary reparation founders on the issue of closure. While money can be a very real good, especially for those whose lives have been disrupted by violence and its ensuing physical or psychological harm—or by lack of educational opportunities, or by poverty—it cannot accomplish closure. Furthermore, money implies none of the reciprocity of ubuntu: one is given a grant and essentially told to heal oneself while the one who has paid out the money seems to wash his or her hands of the matter: rather than restoring or reconfiguring community relations, money severs relations between individuals, or between individuals and community.

If reparation is marked by a contradiction that cannot be resolved, if reparation must be made but can never be made, then it would seem that the very grounding of restorative justice must be deeply compromised. Recalling Žižek’s comments on “Jewish Law,” we must recognize that in this finite world cycles of historical wrong never are, nor can be, resolved if we reject apocalyptic notions of justice. Rather, the practice of justice comprises not just ceremonies, events and symbolic payments, but an attention to the quotidian and the proximate. Sanders identifies this contradiction in the TRC Report:

The problem lies at the heart of the conception of restorative justice that informs the commission’s ‘Concepts and Principles’ section. If, for instance, the notion of restoring human dignity is linked to ubuntu, as it is in the report, we have an ethics where, because it continually marks and re-marks a loss of humanity, and of human dignity, all acts of responsibility—including mourning and condolence—will fall short, must fall short, of perfectly repairing or restoring it. As an ethical model,
restorative justice, as ubuntu or in any other form, resides in a perpetual remarking of default. (119-120)

The connection between restorative justice and ubuntu, between reparations and ubuntu, is, as Sanders suggests, the instability and inherent lack of finality in both concepts. As long as our idea of justice assumes a final restitution, as does the notion of reconciliation, such justice will elude us. But, I argue, the “perpetual remarking of default” need not be read as a marking of inevitable failure; it should be seen to incite the incessant pursuit of justice and of ubuntu, which themselves are constituted by the active effort they continually demand.

In this notion of reparations and of ubuntu, we return to the figure of the neighbour-as-monster. As an incarnation of undigestible difference, the neighbour-as-monster marks perpetually the difficulty of ubuntu and of justice. In seeking reparation, we resort to strategies of reparations, and these strategies, in their inadequacy and imperfection, remind us constantly of our own inadequacy and imperfection. Moreover, the neighbour-as-monster stubbornly refuses both to offer us redemption and to be redeemed by our actions. Instead the inadequacy of reparations demands that we renew our efforts perpetually, and in this perpetual effort resides the radical reciprocity of ubuntu. We do not strive for ubuntu because of love, but because of necessity, and in this way the neighbour-as-monster requires us to replace an ethics based on “love” with an ethics based on proximity.

In the course of its plot, J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace makes the same substitution of “love” (i.e. self-seeking sameness) for the accommodation demanded by proximity. The novel is focalized through the character of David Lurie, a lecturer in communications at the fictional Cape Technical University. Divorced and aging, Lurie lives alone, and seems to have no real friends. He can no longer relate to his students, who seem to him “Post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate, they might have been hatched from eggs yesterday,” a dismissal which both brings into focus the overarching narratives which guide Lurie’s own
experience of the world and highlights his tendency to judge rather than listen (32). Though he could once “count on a certain degree of magnetism,” he has found at fifty-two that all of his sexual “powers” have fled, and now when he wants a woman he has to pursue her, and “often, in one way or another, to buy her” (7). As the result of his belief that they share a special connection, Lurie scares away the sex worker with whom he has “solved the problem of sex” (1). Lurie then recklessly pursues one of his students, apparently believing his own “smooth words” that she “does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself” (16). Driven as much by his belief that he has been struck by a “strange love...from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves” as by his own desire, Lurie surprises his student into sex which is “undesired to the core” (25). When his student lodges a complaint against him, Lurie accepts “whatever Ms Isaacs alleges” (50) as the truth of the situation although he will not hear her version of events, perhaps because he knows that it will conflict with his own explanation to the committee of inquiry that he “became a servant of Eros” (52).

From this initial concern with love, or at least lust, the novel then seems poised to explore the politics of exile. Dismissed from his position, Lurie retreats to his daughter Lucy’s smallholding and dog kennel near Grahamstown, determined not to appeal the decision of the committee, but rather to accept that one must “buckle down and live out one’s life. Serve one’s time” (67). Lurie’s melodramatic assertion of his figurative imprisonment is contrasted with literal imprisonment when three strange men arrive at the farm, lock him in the bathroom, set him alight with methylated spirits, rape Lucy, and shoot all of the dogs. Lurie fails in his repeated attempts to elicit his daughter’s story when she resolutely refuses to talk to him about it, and so he learns to occupy himself by helping Lucy’s friend Bev at the local animal shelter. The work of the shelter, in this rural environment, consists largely of euthanizing unwanted dogs, and when Lurie is not
performing his duties as the “dog man,” he writes an opera that he knows will never be performed. The end of the novel sees him “giving up” the three-legged dog with whom he has bonded (220), and so the plot seems to trace the trajectory of a man who learns to live, as Lucy remarks, “With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (205).

Lurie’s positioning changes dramatically in the course of the novel, and this element of the narrative arc occupies much critical attention. The ambiguity of Lurie’s act of euthanizing the three-legged dog, in particular, draws discussion, with Mike Marais, for example, interpreting it as a sacrifice and as evidence that Lurie has moved away from “the violence of monadic individuality” and learned to love (“Possibility” 57, 62), and Sue Kossew arguing that Lurie has begun to “put the animals’ feelings before his own” (“Redemption” 157). 13 But readings of the final scene as redemptive not only privilege human thought over animal being, but are caught up in precisely the kind of reading pattern against which I have been arguing, one that attempts to locate in the reformation of the individual a vision of wider political change. Rita Barnard, in contrast, reminds us that “it is essential that we do not, as it were, try to beat [the ending of Disgrace] into convenient shape with a critical shovel,” by attempting to interpret away the ambiguity of the novel’s conclusion (Barnard “Pastoral” 223). 14 Rather than seeking to create a closure that the text does not offer by deciding finally whether Lurie has been reformed, a reading that retains the

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13 Similarly, Tom Herron refers, after his description of the euthanization, to “David Lurie’s expanded sympathies” (488), and Spivak writes that Lurie “learns to love dogs and finally learns to give up the dog that he loves to the stipulated death” (20). Elizabeth Anker, on the other hand, comments that “Disgrace refuses to ally Lurie’s final gesture…with either the ethical or the unscrupulous” (260).

14 Barnard no doubt here refers to Lurie’s self-imposed duty as “dog man” to load personally each corpse into the town incinerator for disposal. At first Lurie had left this task to the workmen running the incinerator, but after rigor mortis had stiffened the dogs’ legs, making the corpses difficult to handle, the crew “began to beat the bags with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs” and Lurie took over the job (Coetzee144-145). As Barnard implies, to interpret Lurie’s new role as a kindly angel of death as a positive transformation merely is to perpetuate a cycle of violence by leaving unquestioned the assumptions and expectations that the multiple ambiguities of Disgrace seek to disrupt.
ambiguity of the ending invites us to step away from our concern with Lurie and instead examine our own reading practices.

Not only must we take seriously the injunction to resist the desire for closure, but I would argue in concert with Kenneth Reinhard that we must also resist the desire to read *Disgrace* while paying attention primarily to Lurie and his development as a character. I have argued that readings of *The Restless Supermarket* that focus solely on Tearle’s development—or lack thereof—run the risk of overlooking the dynamics of *ubuntu* that inform the other characters’ treatment of him, and similarly, Reinhard questions the assumption that Lurie’s potential redemption should be of central importance. In response to Bill McDonald’s assertion that Lurie increases his self-understanding as the novel progresses, Reinhard asks: “even if his self-reflection has indeed transformed his sense of himself, should we care? Is Coetzee and the novel really very interested in David Lurie’s personal transformation or lack thereof?” (Reinhard 97). Elaborating a strategy similar to Said’s contrapuntal reading, Reinhard is right to question the assumption that Lurie as focalizer must be the main concern of the novel. Indeed, *Disgrace* reports on Lurie’s interior monologue, and yet since Lurie is merely the focalizer and not the narrator, the text itself constantly draws attention to Lurie’s positioning and perspective by describing him in the third person: he thinks, he says, he feels. If we accept that Lurie’s perspective, and any change thereof, is the point of the novel, then resulting readings of the text maintain the prominence, the centrality, of Lurie as

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15 See “Jane Austen and Empire” in his *Culture and Imperialism*.

16 This is not quite the same as the post-colonial concept of reading the gaps and silences, which Coetzee in fact critiques in *White Writing*: “Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence. We have been brought up on the music of Webern: substantial silence structured by tracings of sound. Our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities…. It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn.” If all “our craft” is exercised in reading what is not there, perhaps we will no longer feel the need to hear what is there. Instead we will merely gesture at these gaps as placemarkers of the other in the West’s monologue about itself. As Coetzee continues, “Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or have heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?” (81). In *Disgrace*, reading against Lurie as focalizer is not the same as reading absence—rather, it is a reading of marginality.
“white” man, as liberal humanist, as judge, and this does nothing to change the balance of power. In attending so closely to Lurie, we continue the lack of reciprocity, the inability to listen to others, that he embodies.

If on the other hand, in reading *Disgrace*, we put aside Lurie’s feelings about his actions, we are left with the effects, or lack thereof, of the actions themselves. Sanders observes in *Disgrace* a failed reparative movement, arguing that Lurie, “in his hopelessly confused way...attempts to make good” for his violation of Melanie and for the historical cycle of wrong of which it is part, but suggesting that this attempt is not, in itself, enough (180). After the attack at the farm, Lurie acknowledges that “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (160). Lurie’s thought that he could “be the men” is followed by the question: “does he have it in him to be the woman?” but even in these attempts at identification, it is Lurie whose consciousness will fill the men or, perhaps, the woman, and not the other way around; fundamentally Lurie is unable to imagine giving up his own position and truly being other than himself (160).

Moreover, this failure repeats itself in all of his attempts to make good: his visit to Melanie’s family to apologize ends in the tenor of intrusion as he blunders into the room where Melanie’s mother and sister sit together and “touches his forehead to the floor,” leaving them “frozen” and filling himself with desire for Melanie’s younger sister, who is still a child (173). His visit to Melanie’s play to look for some sign that she has “come through” prompts the desire for a vision of her naked body and the desire to claim her as “Mine!” (191). Even his work with the dogs, which at first he scornfully dismisses as “suspiciously like community service,” leads to a brief affair with Bev, who is precisely the kind of “plain, ordinary woman” who he is unsure that he is able to love (77, 182). Indeed, his opera,
though he changes its focus from Byron in Italy to a middle-aged, suspiciously Bev-like Teresa, Byron’s abandoned lover, lacks “development” as its protagonist endlessly stalks about the stage, sighing and grieving: Lurie hasn’t the “resources” to imagine any other dimensions to her (214). In short, the problem with Lurie’s repeated attempts at reparation is that he still attempts to make good through the bodies of women. That the female body in question has aged by the end of the novel does not disrupt this pattern.

Meanwhile, in this flurry of what Sanders calls his “manic reparation as symbolic alibi against retributive punishment for colonial crimes” (182), Lurie cannot come to terms with Petrus. Once Lucy’s assistant, Petrus has become in the new dispensation “a man of substance”: he is building up his land and building a house (77). He has two wives and at the end of the novel is poised to take Lucy as his third, if only in name and if only as part of a bargain to secure her protection—and her land. Though he comes to acknowledge that the best word for Petrus is “neighbour,” Lurie cannot understand his own place in the balance of power that has made this so. Indeed, it seems, Lurie can little understand the term “neighbour” in the first place: when Bill Shaw comes to fetch him at the hospital after the attack, Lurie is bemused by the gesture and the assumption of a relationship that it encodes:

Bill Shaw believes that if he, Bill Shaw, had been hit over the head and set on fire, then he, David Lurie, would have driven to the hospital and sat waiting, without so much as a newspaper to read, to fetch him home. Bill Shaw believes that, because

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17 Numerous critics observe this parallel: for example, DeKoven observes that “Bev Shaw is powerfully present throughout this description of Teresa (‘dumpy,’ with ‘her heavy bust, her stocky trunk, her abbreviated legs’),” and McDonald sees in Lurie’s characterization of Teresa a movement from obsession with Melanie to empathy with Bev (DeKoven 868, McDonald 77).

18 Barnard teases out the full implications of this choice of word in the South African context: “the word is derived from the Old English word neah (near) and bur (dwell, farm), and its etymology implies something quite revolutionary in the South African context: the fact that a “black” man may also be a boer—en wat naby boer (one who farms nearby)—and not the boer’s antagonist and other” (212). Reinhold also notes the potential of the term, but emphasizes that it is also fraught: “In the post-apartheid South Africa of Disgrace, the relationship that best describes the situation of blacks and whites is that of neighbors, with all its complex ambivalence, and all its sense of ethical or political imperative. Already before the rape, the relationship between Lucy and Petrus was complicated; certainly not one of master and servant, nor exactly one of friendship” (Reinhard 100-101).
he and David Lurie once had a cup of tea together, David Lurie is his friend, and the two of them have obligations to each other. Is Bill Shaw wrong or right? Has Bill Shaw, who was born in Hankey, not two hundred kilometres away, and works in a hardware shop, seen so little of the world that he does not know there are men who do not readily make friends, whose attitude toward friendships between men is corroded with scepticism? Modern English friend from Old English freond, from freon, to love. Does the drinking of tea seal a love-bond, in the eyes of Bill Shaw? Yet but for Bill and Bev Shaw, but for old Ettinger, but for bonds of some kind, where would he be now? On the ruined farm with the broken telephone amid dead dogs. (102)

Lurie’s thoughts here recall Tearle’s reaction to Floyd’s unthinking defence of him, and they also call attention to his own self-image as a man who does not “readily make friends,” who believes that he stands apart from the others who surround him and is not bound to them in any reciprocal obligations.

If Lurie finds it difficult to accept the friendly gesture of Bill Shaw, he is still less equipped to deal with Petrus as a neighbour. Even after the attack, Lurie finds it “fishy that he [Petrus] should disappear at precisely [the] time” that the men appeared (114); when he realizes that Pollux, one of the rapists, is staying at Petrus’ house as his relative, Lurie confronts his neighbour in a familiar pattern in which “he reverts, linguistically, to the time when white farmers knew how to ‘have...it out’ with servants” (Barnard 213). Not only does he fail to acknowledge Petrus’ proper social standing, but he is also unable to hear what Petrus has to say about the attack. Though Petrus’ argument in defence of his relative may seem unjust from the perspective of retributive justice, it is true that arresting the boy Pollux, who, after all, has “something wrong with him” (200), and who did not steal David’s car (for which, in any case, insurance will reimburse him), and who is too young for jail, would do nothing to restore harmonious relations, or to heal Lucy’s wounds. Petrus’ solution, though David is suspicious of it, is based on Petrus himself assuming the role of mediator by taking responsibility for the boy and for Lucy. Though Lurie sees her as naïve, Lucy insists that it is
better for her to take Petrus’ protection, and Bev Shaw also asserts that Lucy can “depend” on Petrus (140).

If we accept Lurie’s theory that Petrus has orchestrated the whole attack in order to take over Lucy’s land, and that he protects Pollux out of contempt for Lucy and Lurie’s right to justice, then we ignore the fact that as readers we do not have direct access to Lucy’s (or Petrus’) thoughts on the matter, and we ignore the fact that Lurie refuses to listen to anyone else’s response to the attack. This is not to say that Petrus’ scheme poses no further potential difficulties for Lucy; as Lurie observes, Petrus’ solution is a thoroughly patriarchal one. On the other hand, patriarchal attitudes inform both Lurie’s view of the situation and his dismissal of Lucy’s logic in accepting Petrus’ offer. Though Lucy’s acceptance of Petrus’ proposal cannot be freely given in view of the fact that Lucy has come to realize that she cannot exist as a woman alone on her farm, nonetheless Petrus recognizes that he must ask for her consent; Lurie, on the other hand, implies that Lucy is not qualified to make a decision with which he disagrees, suggesting that in his eyes she lacks the right to make her own choices, however constrained the decision-making process may be.

We are left with the monstrous neighbour, though it is hard to say whether the monster is Lurie, who will not attempt to make good with his neighbours, or Petrus, who will—at least to a limited extent. Whether Lurie would be able to understand it or not, a reading of Disgrace that focuses on the events that occur on the smallholding traces the evolution of contingent relations between neighbours.19 In a movement which echoes

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19 Reinhard elaborates the contingency of neighbourliness and its consequences: “The relationship of neighbors is bound more by unwritten and tacit agreements than by written law or explicit rules. Its rules are local rather than universal, and are constantly evolving, constantly reformulated, for the sake of maintaining equilibrium and a certain possibility of openness between worlds that allows for the inhabitation of any particular world. The situation of the neighbor is singular and contingent: one does not usually settle in a place because of one’s neighbors, nor does one usually leave simply to escape particular neighbors. When violations of the unwritten agreements that regulate neighborhoods become intolerable, the level of aggressivity tends to escalate, since there is no clear path to outside adjudication. But the neighbor is also the object of an injunction
Lurie’s drift from the social centre that is his position of authority in Cape Town to his position of marginality in Grahamstown, Lurie’s judgements are replaced by the text with a politics of making do. Just as readings of *The Restless Supermarket* that hope primarily for Tearle’s change of heart will miss the dynamics of the *ubuntu* that he is shown, so readings of *Disgrace* that desire Lurie’s transformation will miss the ethics of proximity elaborated by the other characters.

Reparations are attempted in both *The Restless Supermarket* and *Disgrace*, but in each novel it is not the protagonist’s efforts—Tearle’s proofreading and Lurie’s attempted engagement with women—that offer a way forward from conventional reconciliation narratives. Though we can say that these novels reject reconciliation narratives, can we yet consider them to be reparations narratives? In both *The Restless Supermarket* and *Disgrace* we are confronted by an unreformed protagonist and by a lack of closure. Each novel, in its structure, seems to invoke an incomplete cycle through the repeated actions of its protagonist and through the ultimate irrelevance of those actions. Each novel offers a protagonist who fundamentally fails to understand those around him because he is incapable of listening to them, and in the novels’ rejection of closure and articulation of radical otherness I argue that we see an ethics of reparations. It is not that the characters themselves make reparations that we as readers can then emulate, but rather that the texts themselves enact the need for reparations by disrupting the assumptions of conventional reconciliation narratives and by radically repositioning their protagonists and their protagonists’ general relevance. Žižek reminds us that the neighbour is not a cipher for our own self-understanding, but an intractably other entity, and in the models of failure offered in Judaism and Christianity, to *love your neighbor as yourself*, and this commandment confronts the ambiguous and ambivalent actual relationship with the neighbor, always provisional, always contingent, with a transcendental moral imperative—*the imperative, precisely, to come closer to that strange contingency‖* (101).
by Lurie and Tearle we see the disruption of the monologic consciousness. In this, perhaps, there is potential.
Conclusion

How can one both make a biopower function and exercise the rights of war, the rights of murder and the function of death, without becoming racist? That was the problem, and that, I think, is still the problem.

Michel Foucault

In his 2008 article “Beyond the biopolitics of disposability: rethinking neoliberalism in the New Gilded Age,” Henry Giroux articulates the framework of a “biopolitics of neoliberalism” which he argues characterizes the politics of the present moment, especially the present moment of the United States (587). Drawing on Foucault’s conception of biopolitics as expressed in “Society Must Be Defended,” Giroux observes that “neoliberalism as a mode of biopolitics not only expands the sites, range, and dynamics of power relations, it also points to new modes of subjectification” (602). A neoliberal paradigm discourages collective political action in favour of individualistic self-regard, and substitutes for citizens who participate in political processes consumers who, in voting, select from a pre-determined array of (essentially similar) political options. Neoliberal biopolitics transform “the social state into the corporate state, one that generously sells off public property to transnational corporations and military contracts to private defense contractors, and one that ultimately provides welfare to an opulent minority,” and needless to say, the caesura between the “opulent rich” and those whose social services are auctioned off is racialized (589).

In his conception of biopolitics, Giroux draws as heavily on Agamben as he does on Foucault, arguing that in the process of fostering the flourishing of the corporate rich, the neoliberal biopolitical state subjects the disenfranchised poor to the conditions of what Agamben calls “bare life,” of mere survival at the level of an inmate in a concentration camp. What Foucault would designate the “subrace” (“Society” 61) becomes Agamben’s homo sacer, a

1 Society Must be Defended, 263.
person who can be killed without punishment. In the present context, Giroux argues, “The life unfit for life, unworthy of being lived is no longer marginal to sovereign power but is now fundamental to its form of governance” (603). Giroux sees illustrations of Agamben’s concept of “bare life” in recent events such as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which revealed “a new kind of politics, one in which entire populations are considered expendable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves,” but he asserts that “Agamben’s notion of biopolitics places little emphasis on the productive nature of power or, for that matter, power that does not originate with the state” (604). Ultimately Giroux finds Agamben’s account of biopolitics to be overly pessimistic, and so despite the insights his theories offer, Giroux largely rejects Agamben’s paradigm.

Instead, Giroux argues that we must fight biopolitics with biopolitics. Against Agamben’s formulation of power as only centralized and repressive, Giroux turns to Hardt and Negri, and also back to Foucault, to argue for a productive notion of power and for the need to make “pedagogy more central to any oppositional notion of biopolitics, governmentality, and struggle” (608). Ignoring any potential (Foucauldian) objections that power is never really only repressive or only productive, or that biopolitics cannot be recuperated, Giroux continues on to explain that to oppose the biopolitics of disposability in which marginalized populations are not only entirely superfluous, but can and should be eliminated from the social and political body, what is needed is

the promise and reality of public spheres that in their diverse forms, sites, and content offer pedagogical and political possibilities for strengthening the social bonds of democracy; that is, new spaces from which to cultivate the capacities for critical modes of individual and social agency, as well as crucial opportunities to form alliances in the collective struggle for an oppositional biopolitics that expands the scope of vision, operations of democracy, and the range of democratic institutions. In other words, a biopolitics that fights against the terrors of totalitarianism in its various fundamentalisms and guises. (Giroux 612)
Against Foucault’s distress, evident in his lectures at the Collège de France, that “socialism takes...over wholesale” the assumption that “the essential function of society or of the State, or whatever must replace the State, is to take control of life, to manage it” and thus, in Foucault’s view, to take over a technique of power in which one segment of the population is pitted against another (261), Giroux seems to believe that the problem with biopolitics is not its form, but its content. If biopolitics becomes “progressive” (612), he suggests, then presumably the fact that biopolitics works through the creation of racial divisions within the state will be set aside; a racist technique of power can become, unproblematically, a tool to fight racism.

In its attempt to counter a totalitarian biopolitics with a “progressive biopolitics,” Giroux’s “solution” brings us back to this dissertation’s original observation of the continuity, in their biopolitical groundings, between apartheid laws and much anti-apartheid and post-1994 writing. Giroux’s wish for an “oppositional biopolitics” stems from his assumption that the (socialist) state should continue to manage life. If the right purposes arise, Giroux seems to say, then biopolitics can be a benevolent form of social organization. It may seem unfair to criticize Giroux for being unable to see beyond the biopolitical when Foucault himself seems to have been unable to imagine how “whatever must replace the State” might be organized differently. But Giroux’s desire for an oppositional biopolitics not only exemplifies the problem that Foucault identifies with socialist political organization, but also indicates how “appropriate” it continues to seem to many—despite the work of Foucault—for the state to manage life, and how deeply the biopolitical paradigm is entrenched.

This work of this dissertation first grew out of my observation that redemptive interracial relationships constituted a common trope in much South African writing. Though I
could understand how the trope worked, I found it difficult to understand why a romantic relationship or passionate friendship—in short, why love and desire—should so “naturally” be imagined as the foundation of the nation. Why not “brotherhood,” or, as I discuss in the final chapter of this thesis, neighbourliness?

The concept of biopolitics as elaborated by Foucault in the Collège de France lectures very usefully explains why “love” so easily comes to serve as a paradigm for nationalism and why this “love” should produce such violent exclusionary effects. Biopolitics explains the conjunction and normalization of (hetero)sexuality and gender in nationalism, and explains how this conjunction produces racism even when, like Giroux, we wish to imagine a “progressive biopolitics.” But, as with many of Foucault’s master concepts, biopolitics shows us what is, and why, without necessarily being able to suggest what could be.

I have tried to look beyond this major limitation of the concept of biopolitics, but though I have noted in the works of several South African authors some narrative strategies that seem to me to work against biopolitical tropes, I would hesitate to claim that they offer any definitive solutions. Instead I have suggested that we turn away from the desire for definitive solutions, implicated as this so often is in the concomitant desire for closure. As Rosemary Jane Jolly exhorts, “Let us jettison the idea that closure can, or even should, be imposed on South Africa’s past in order to initiate its future” (“Desiring” 709). I have argued that in novels like Playing in the Light, Triomf, The Restless Supermarket, and Disgrace, the refusal to attempt to close the wounds of the past and narrate a plan for the future constitutes an ethical gesture in which a desire for closure through reconciliation is rejected in favour of an ethics of ongoing reparations.
In the rejection of reconciliation and closure as an imagined basis of the nation, an ethics of reparations rejects the centrality of the desiring subject and its “need” for affirmation. Writing of the commodification of human rights in calls for retributive justice in South Africa in place of the open-endedness of the TRC, Jolly builds on Teresa Ebert’s critique of “ludic feminism,” which, Jolly follows Ebert in arguing, in its focus on the politics of representation discounts the demands of a politics of emancipation (703). Ludic feminism, like postmodernism, “collapses the distinction between desire and need,” and I have argued that biopolitical tropes also adopt wholesale this focus on the desiring subject (703). Žižek’s concept of the monstrous neighbour, though, reinstates what Jolly designates the “subject-in-need” as the centre of politics, turning away from the neoliberal individual to “the collective subject of labor and its need in terms of prevailing material conditions” (“Desiring” 704).

I end Chapter 5 of this dissertation with the cautious suggestion that there may be potential in the development of an ethics of reparations rather than of reconciliation in South Africa, and potential in the substitution of the figure of a monstrous neighbour for a beloved as the basis of ethical relations. My caution proceeds from a recognition that to imagine “solutions” to biopolitical social organization in South Africa and elsewhere is not the role of a literary study like this one. Such an attempt would merely reproduce the assumption of a position of mastery in the attempt to “write the right story” that I criticize in Bloodlines in Chapter 3. Rather, I argue for the cultivation of a condition of receptivity to otherness, even—indeed especially—in its most monstrous forms. Žižek’s essentially misanthropic argumentation seems to me to disallow any vision of ethical relations based on

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2 Ebert’s critique of recent academic feminism as a form of mere “ludic feminism” is part of her larger materialist critique of the “linguistic turn” in cultural studies. Ebert argues that emancipatory politics have been sidetracked by a narrow focus on representation, and advocates a Marxist response. See her Ludic Feminism and After Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism (1996), and, more recently, The Task of Cultural Critique (2009).
love and desire, and so I follow him in seeing in monstrosity an irreducible ethical challenge that sets the conditions for a rigorous understanding of justice.

Apartheid made the underlying biopolitics of the state all too explicit in South Africa, and thus the South African fiction I have discussed engages directly with the biopolitical paradigm. Although *A Blade of Grass* and *Bloodlines* ironically reaffirm biopolitics in their attempts to reverse apartheid mores, the complex collage structure of *Triomf* directly invokes biopolitical narratives while simultaneously preventing their reinscription. *Playing in the Light, The Restless Supermarket*, and *Disgrace*, like *Triomf*, disallow the redemption and reformation of character in their depictions of inter-racial relationships and, in doing so, frustrate any readerly desires to find in the novels a model of behaviour to emulate. Instead, these novels incite their readers to come to terms with unreformed protagonists, a process that may expand readers’ identifications beyond the complacencies of “love.” If the modern state is necessarily a biopolitical state, and if the biopolitical state is necessarily a racist state, then we must look beyond it; perhaps in searching for “whatever must replace the State,” we may begin here.
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