

# **The Black and Its Double:**

**The Crisis of Self-representation in Protest and 'Post'-protest Black South African Fiction**

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To

Ubumnyam' obungaka

Ingathi uwedwa

And to

Inkwenkwezi yam

Thina sOyama ngawe

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## Abstract

This study explores the crisis of representation in black South African protest and 'post'-apartheid literature. Conversant with the debates on the crisis of representation in black South African protest literature from the 1960s to the late 1980s, the dissertation proposes a re-reading of the 'crisis' by locating it in the black writer's struggle for an aesthetic with which to express the existential crisis of blackness. I contend that not only protest but also contemporary or 'post'-protest black South African literature exhibits a split or fractured mode of writing which is characterised by the displacement/*unheimlichkeit* produced by colonialism and apartheid, as well as by the contentious nature of that which this literature endeavours to capture – the fraught identity of blackness. In my exploration of the split or double narratives of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*, K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*, and Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*, I examine the representation of blackness through the themes of violence, trauma, powerlessness, failure, and unhomeliness/unbelongingness – all of which suggest the lack of a solid foundation upon which to construct a stable black identity. This instability, I ultimately argue, suggests a move beyond an Afrocentric perspective on identity *and* traditional tropes of blackness towards a more processual, fluid, and permeable post-black politics.

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## Introduction

This dissertation began as a response to one of the most important debates from the mid-to the late-twentieth century in the field of South African literary criticism: the debate on the crisis of representation in black South African protest fiction. Spearheaded by Lewis Nkosi, and subsequently taken up by Njabulo Ndebele, this debate primarily focused on the artistic and/or aesthetic shortcomings of protest literature, the mode that dominated black South African writing from the 1960s to the late 1980s. Both Nkosi and Ndebele argued that protest literature is aesthetically mediocre: unimaginative, journalistic and superficial. They claimed that this writing should only be read as socio-political sloganeering, and had no right to set itself up as ‘legitimate’ literary production. Nkosi and Ndebele were not alone in this particular view of protest literature: Nadine Gordimer, Farouk Asvat, Martin Trump, and Albie Sachs also argued in a similar vein in their respective commentaries: *The Black Interpreters*, “A Critical Look at Black S.A. Writing,” “Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* and Debates within Southern Africa’s Literature of Liberation”, and “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom.” For example, Gordimer claimed, in 1973, that “the lopping-off of a young indigenous tradition [...] has had a stunting effect on prose writing. No fiction of any real quality has been produced since [the 1960s] by a black writer” (51). Asvat’s and Sachs’s articles more strongly resonate with Nkosi’s and Ndebele’s positions, however. More specifically Sachs’s argument against the use of art as propaganda was that “we should ban ourselves from saying that culture is a weapon for struggle [...because] this affirmation seems not only banal and devoid of content, but actually wrong and potentially harmful” (19), and Asvat claimed, in *The Sowetan*, that,

South African writing appears to flourish upon the fact that it is black, that it is oppressed, and that it is South African: so they keep writing – over and over again – the same material that you’d get in any newspaper of worth or in a political pamphlet.  
(qtd in Zander 38)

My current discussion poses itself, in part, as a defence of protest literature, drawing on the critical interventions of such literary and cultural commentators on the period as Jane Watts, Mbulelo Mzamane, David Attwell, and Gareth Cornwell, to name a few. These critics, to my mind, justifiably adopt a position that militates against the (prescriptive) focus on the artistic and/or aesthetic shortcomings of protest literature, since such a focus reduces the category of “literature” to “an unwarranted, elitist privileging of certain modes of discourse”, to borrow Jonathan Culler’s words in another context (280). More sympathetic evaluations of protest fiction further contend that forms of artistic expression are inseparable from the historical and political contexts within which they emerge.

As a result, any critic exploring protest writing in South Africa needs to consider the impact of colonialism and apartheid on black subjectivities, while also taking seriously the assumptions of this literature as well as the particular demands that these writers make upon their audiences, readers and critics. And, as one practitioner of protest writing observes “when one examines literature, or when one creates literature, one is either following an established order and functioning within it, or one is bucking that order, challenging it, questioning it” (Brutus 81).

I locate my project within these debates because of their preoccupation with the establishment of a black South African literary tradition. And, while I disagree with Nkosi’s and Ndebele’s views on black protest fiction, my sense is that their arguments are ultimately concerned with the question of an aesthetic – the quest for ‘suitable’ forms of aesthetic representation to convey black experience – as well as the continuing development of a black literary tradition in South Africa. These debates are linked to other important debates in the corpus of African literature, such as the role of the African writer, the language crisis produced by the impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures and languages, as well as the tensions between art and (political) commitment in African writing. My discussion acknowledges these concerns, but focuses specifically on black South African literature’s search for identity and its fictional engagements with the concept and identity of blackness. While the debates on the crisis of representation focused on the protest literature produced during the apartheid states of emergency – specifically black writing from the 1960s to the 1980s – my project extends this focus to include ‘post’-apartheid literature. It is my contention that contemporary black writing also exhibits a split or fractured mode of writing which derives from the contentious nature of that which the literature endeavours to capture – the fraught condition of blackness, suspended between the reality of an identity irrevocably impacted by the trauma of colonialism and apartheid and the problematic quest for a post-racial future. I maintain that black identity is structurally and theoretically predetermined, and there is a ‘crisis of the ordinary’ which is evident in the state of endemic homelessness of black communities represented in this literature.

My dissertation is divided into four chapters which have their own internal logical structure as well as an organic relationship with one another. The first chapter provides a brief overview of the debates on the crisis of representation in black South African literature. I specifically focus on some of the remarks which Nkosi and Ndebele made regarding South African protest literature, the lively debate that their writings sparked, as well as the search for a new critical methodology with which to read protest literature, and, indeed, African literature as a whole, since the latter, too, is also characterised by the displacement/*unheimlichkeit* produced by European colonialism. Using these debates as my starting point, I maintain that black writing is set in a state of permanent tension – a crisis – with regard to the representations of blackness. However, my view of this ‘crisis’ is not an

aesthetic one in the sense of Nkosi's and Ndebele's formulations. I argue that it is an aesthetic 'crisis' only in so far as black writing straddles the uneasy, and sometimes contradictory, dialectic between a nostalgic notion of African identity and black identity as a reality produced specifically by apartheid in South Africa. Because I am of the view that the history of black South African writing has been characterised by a search for identity (as Watts maintains), coupled with a quest for an African or alternately a black aesthetic, I argue that there is a gap in scholarship about black identity; that is, an elision of the interplay and ruptures between the concepts 'African' and 'black'.

Moreover, the Afrocentric position espoused by Ndebele and others – that protest writers should derive inspiration from traditional/indigenous African cultures and or oral traditions – belies the profound cultural deracination and alienation owing to centuries of institutionalised racial discrimination in South Africa, and the impact of Black Consciousness philosophy and its creative and intellectual attempts to rehabilitate this disintegration of African cultures. I therefore argue, in response to the Afrocentrists, that the search for identity and the quest for an 'African' or Afrocentric aesthetic needs to seriously engage the influence of Black Consciousness philosophy and the move towards instituting a specifically black – as opposed to African – aesthetic in South African literature. My analysis of the primary texts in this study, then, works on the assumption of the profound influence of the BCM on black writing, the quest for black identity and the project of instituting a black aesthetic.

The second chapter of this study is an exploration of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* – a novel whose technical or experimental dexterity, and exploration of the personal and collective aspects of trauma, has been under-appreciated within South African literary criticism. I examine Serote's engagement with the tropes of trauma, the vagabond, institutionalised dysfunctionality as well the notion of blackness as a redemptive identity – that is, a social invention designed to subvert the dehumanising psycho-social proclivities of apartheid, while also providing black communities with a powerful cultural structure of meaning, self-definition/determination and feeling in the face of the life-denying realities of apartheid. In a close textual reading of the first part of the novel, I explore Tsi Molope's shattering experience of trauma and its impact on his sense of self, as well as Serote's jazz-inflected creative imagination, an imagination through which he not only constructs Tsi's subjectivity, but also indicates black identity's improvisations or fluidity. My reading of the second part of the novel foregrounds the cultural trauma consequent on apartheid, and the notion that, out of this trauma, emerged the redemptive identity that is blackness. In my analysis of this novel as whole, I also foreground Serote's staging of the split personality or the doubleness of black identity, which is illustrated both in the structure and content of this poignantly titled novel.

Chapter Three presents a close reading of K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and develops the

notion that blackness emerges out of the shattering experience of trauma, so that it is always fragmented and disintegrating in space and time. Accordingly, I begin the discussion with a critique of the ‘new’ South Africa’s idealism, as epitomised by the poetic symbol of the “Rainbow Nation”. Through a close reading of *Thirteen Cents*, I argue that the novel’s protagonist’s life and personal traumas offer a compelling critique of the post-apartheid city through the themes of poverty, marginality, exploitation, family disintegration, violence, abject powerlessness and the legacies of trauma that continually play themselves out in the present. Ultimately, I argue that the “new” South Africa espouses a repression of the chaotic plurality of the identities which constitute its imaginary community or, rather, a repression of the legacies of trauma which continue to hold the post-colony ransom. In other words, in *Thirteen Cents*, the “Rainbow Nation” is shown to understate the reality of everyday suffering and marginalisation, and, more importantly, it disregards trauma in its emphasis on a schizophrenic narrative of non-racialism and multiculturalism. Thus, to speak of the rainbow and of national coherence and wholeness (an imagined community?), is not only a romantic project but also sets up black identity for the aporetic state of disillusionment. Indeed, political independence has not been enough to root out what Cornel West terms the “funk”<sup>1</sup> or unhomeliness of being-black-in-the-world.

Chapter Four explores Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* and the ways in which the novel grapples with issues of identity, femininity, and psychosocial dislocation, while pointing to the vast delusion of South Africa’s ethos of liberation. I take my cue from the novel’s title which, I argue, not only poses the existential question of the meaning of blackness, since “coconutness” implies that even blacks can fail at blackness given the coconut’s pariah status within the black community, but also interrogates the meaning of this failure (and its redemptive possibilities) in a context which still presupposes whiteness as the human standard.

My interest in these three novels is ultimately rooted in their preoccupation with the fundamental questions of being black-in-the-world, and the concomitant sense of perpetual homelessness which is both symptom and cause of the “nervous condition” of blackness. Furthermore, in terms of content and style, there is considerable experimentation in these texts – an experimentation which evinces some aspiration towards exceeding the spectacular as well as the grammar of realism. All three texts deploy senses of time that are far from linear. In fact, some of their strongest resonances are the simultaneity of past/present and future, the tension generated by nostalgia for a precolonial

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from West’s *Youtube* lecture entitled: “Philosophy and the Funk of Disappointment,” the term “funk” – in the context of my discussion – points to the aporia of disillusionment both as a critique of the triumphant spectacle that is the ‘Rainbow Nation’ and the tendency of this spectacle to belie trauma’s subject-constitutive role in the formation of (‘post’-colonial) black subjects.

African identity, and the perpetual restlessness or “funk” of blackness. The novels indicate that the “funk” persists in the present and that the distinction between protest and post-protest fiction is tenuous.

## Chapter 1

### Black South African Literature's Search for Identity

#### 1.1 The Debates on the Crisis of Representation in Black South African Literature

In 1966, Lewis Nkosi sparked a heated debate around what he later termed the “crisis of representation” in black South African fiction. In the much-quoted article “Fiction by Black Writers”,<sup>2</sup> Nkosi critiques the over(t)ly political nature of protest literature by arguing that black South African writing is nothing more than “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (246). He maintains that “Black South Africans write as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived” (246), and that “it is impossible to detect [in this fiction] any significant and complex talent which responds, with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by the conditions in South Africa” (245). As a result, he claims, protest literature “exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given ‘social facts’ into artistically persuasive works of fiction” (246). Later, in his 1982 article entitled “South African Literature: Resistance and the Crisis of Representation”, Nkosi carries his reflections further, by locating the crisis of South African fiction in the black writer’s valorisation of “one kind of commitment [...] at the expense of the other, the political or ethical over the aesthetical” (39). He adds that, because black writers perceive their work as “an extension of the rock and the petrol bomb” (45), they are now “confronted with a crisis of how to forge new instruments of representation out of old tired realistic forms in order to close the gap between style and content” (49).

The debate on the “crisis of representation” was subsequently taken up by Ndebele in his influential collection of critical essays entitled *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. In the first essay of this collection, “Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction”, Ndebele offers a brief review of Yashar Kemal’s *Anatolian Tales* as a way of illustrating his views on “compelling and imaginative” storytelling, while also setting the stage for what he perceives is “missing” in the South African literary situation, specifically in black protest fiction (1). His use of the word “missing”, in this context, is significant, since it not only points to that which is lacking or absent in black writing (that is, imaginative storytelling), but also gestures to the notion that this writing ‘misses the mark’: it misfires or fails at a very basic level because it is incapable of resolving the “conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social

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<sup>2</sup> This article was first published in *Black Orpheus* 19 in 1966. However, the version I am using in this discussion appeared in Liz Gunner’s and Lindy Stiebel’s *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*.

information” (16).

To begin with, Ndebele corroborates Nkosi’s view of the superficiality of form in black writing. He explains that

this superficiality comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterised [as] either good or evil, or, even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand. [...] moral ideology tends to ossify complex social problems into symbols which are perceived as finished forms of good or evil, instead of leading us towards important necessary insights into the social *processes* leading to those finished forms.

(15, emphasis in original)

Ndebele then argues that a distinction should be drawn between the “journalistic” informational ambience of protest fiction and the “storytelling” narrative ambience of true literature (24). Such an approach would impress upon writers the fact that they are “storytellers, not case makers” (26), as much ‘politically engaged’ writing suggests, and would also “give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture [...] and] make it possible for people to realise that in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be explicitly oriented to resistance, are valid” (26-7).

The second essay in Ndebele’s collection, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary”, opens with a critique of the history of black writing in South Africa and its preoccupation with the “representation of spectacle [...] a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation” (31). Ndebele does not believe the reality, however, that this preoccupation stems from the fact that the experience of apartheid has been so “mind-bogglingly spectacular” (31). As he explains,

the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random massive pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation [...] the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations [...] the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness. (31-2)

He also does not take lightly the plight of the black writer, who is “sometimes a direct victim, sometimes a spectator” (32), and his/her consequent engagement with the spectacle of apartheid as well as his/her inability to overcome it. However, he contends that black writers’ imaginations are crippled in the process and the result, as evinced by the quality of their work, is an outstripped creative imagination that degenerates into sloganeering and superficial thinking (32). It is, he emphasises, “the emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, [the] exhaustion of content by the form”

(33). Ndebele succinctly explains the problem of black literary praxis and its fixation on the surface symbols of oppression – a fixation which ultimately, allegedly, does not engage the reader’s imagination – in the following remark:

The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly, it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it. (41-2)

Accordingly, he calls for a “freeing of the writer’s imagination”, by way of “rediscovering the ordinary daily lives of people”, if this literature is to remain relevant and authentic in its conscientising role. That is, “the ordinary day-to-day lives of the people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (52). To illustrate this point, Ndebele identifies trends in new South African writing which, he argues, have significantly broken from the tradition of protest literature. He singles out stories by Michael Siluma, Joël Matlou and Bheki Maseko which, “by focusing attention on people’s everyday lives, by analysing subjective experience and by deploying the resources of an African folk culture, [...] have ‘rediscovered the ordinary’” (Davis 291).

## 1.2 Criticism of Nkosi’s and Ndebele’s Positions

Both Nkosi’s and Ndebele’s positions on literary art sparked a lively debate in critical studies in South Africa, since their arguments evince their own formal and ideological assumptions as to what constitutes ‘good literature’, without engaging protest literature on its own terms. Nkosi’s “Fiction by Black Writers” has been rightly accused of imposing a Western aesthetic to critique South African protest writing, an imposition which constitutes, in the words of Wole Soyinka, a “second epoch of colonisation” (x). Gareth Cornwell, for example, argues that the significance of Nkosi’s remarks lies in the

*implicit revelation of the extent to which the literariness of protest literature differs from that of mainstream modern Western literature.* For while the writings in question make no claim to be factual or true in the logical or strictly referential sense, one of the first things to strike the reader is their deliberate and unequivocal attempt to involve him in a verifiable external world – the world of contemporary South Africa,

with its unique complex of social, political and psychological structures.  
(53, emphasis added)

The work of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike alerts us to the hegemonic power of Western literary or critical theory, and its disempowering effects when imposed on other forms of registering experience, such as those found in African literary practices. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1987) cautions against this prescriptive and Eurocentric way of reading African literature. The problem, as Ngugi sees it, is that Africa is dissected and therefore defined and understood according to Western ideas; its "destiny is always decided around conference tables in the metropolis of the Western world" (4). The obvious danger, here, is the "underlying notion that Africa [is] an extension of the West" (89) and, by implication, African literature is an appendage to English literature. Thus, Ngugi's work emphasises the need for a recuperation of African cultures and heritage: a "call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language [...] a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation" (108). While commenting specifically on the South African literary context, Michael Vaughan argues in a similar vein when he states that:

What we need, then, is to free ourselves of the shackles of outmoded literary concepts and practices [...]. This implies a reversal of the present priorities: from universalism and timelessness to the here and the now; from the West to Africa and the Third World; from academic elitism to more reciprocal relations with writers and writers' groups [...] from a concentration upon the immanence of the text to one upon the material conditions of the production and reception of literature; from consumerism to activism; from non-politicism to politicisation. (49)

In South Africa, many creative writers and critics alike have identified the redundancy of the position which militates against politics in art or, rather, the view that protest fiction is 'superficial' because it is inescapably 'political' and oppositional. Mbulelo Mzamane, for example, re-asserts a belief in the instructional value of literature: "Significant literature of all time is that which has the most to teach to the majority of readers [...]. Art and politics in South Africa, as in many parts of Africa, have become inseparable for the simple reason that politics pervade all aspects of a Blackman's existence" ("Literature and Politics" 123). He continues by emphasising the historical dimension to protest fiction, a dimension which is consistently denied in the perspective shared by Nkosi and Ndebele:

From its beginnings Black South African literature has been associated with politics. A certain range of political subjects has occupied Black writers; subjects like the land

question, labour exploitation, the living conditions in general, protest and the liberation struggle [...]. The first writing of a political nature by Blacks inevitably concerned itself with the important issues of the day. One of the most important of these was the whole problem of the land question, of white occupation. (125)

Similarly, in an interview about protest literature by Theophilus Mukhuba, Siphosiphiso Sepamla disagrees with those critics who focus on its aesthetic or artistic shortcomings:

They must take cognisance of the historical perspective that is governing the present-day writer [...]. It is important to be aware that the present-day Black South African writer always expresses immediate experiences. Your Dostoevsky, your Kafka are people we are not exposed to. And again it should be borne in mind that writing relates to tradition. (43)

Given the limitations of this study, it is impossible, however, to fully explore the genealogy of black protest literature in English in South Africa. Such an undertaking would necessitate a thorough overview of literary trends, beginning with the literature of dispossession (and mourning) of the early twentieth century, as espoused by writers such as Sol Plaatjie, I.W.W. Cilashe, the Dhlomo brothers, Thomas Mofolo, and Peter Abrahams. This literature is often read within the tradition of resistance, since it is preoccupied with affirming indigenous cultures and histories, while it also grapples with the problem of colonial encroachment and the loss of land – “the most important foundation upon which tribal life was built” (Shava 11). And, as Ngugi reminds us, “[t]he basis of all human communities is the soil, land. Without the soil, without land, without nature there is no human community (*Writers in Politics* 7). Next, the literature of the District Six writers and the *Drum* decade (associated with the 1950s, Sophiatown and the Harlem Renaissance), with its focus on the urban black experience, would need to be explored. And, finally, the *Staffrider* generation of the 1970s and 1980s (associated with the Black Consciousness Movement) would require analysis, together with the radical move towards a more combative literature and preoccupation with what may be termed a ‘disruptive experimental’ turn in black writing. Attention would also need to be paid to the larger political tensions, the intellectual traditions that emerged out of these fraught historical moments of contestation,<sup>3</sup> and the (overlapping and sometimes contradictory) distinction between resistance literature and protest fiction that certain critics insist upon. Nevertheless, though the above sketch is, obviously, overly schematic; it does allow one to “identify trends, make comparisons and gain insights that might not otherwise be apparent” (Gaylard 11) – that is, to trace a broad history of black South African writing.

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<sup>3</sup> The work of Ntongela Masilela, and Bhekizizwe Peterson would prove useful in this regard.

The point I wish to make here is that Nkosi's and Ndebele's positions displace the protest writers (and their artistic expressions) from the time in which they live. In response to this tendency, writers such as Miriam Tlali, Mongane Serote, Richard Rive, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, and Dennis Brutus, among others, have responded by delegitimising the perspective that seeks to speak of art and commitment separately. At the 1985 symposium on "Contemporary Black South African Literature",<sup>4</sup> both Kgotsitsile and Brutus argued vehemently that "there is no uncommitted writing" (81). Kgotsitsile, for example, recalled Achebe in arguing that the writer "functions as an educator whether he realises it or not. [...] In a situation of oppression, there are no choices beyond didactic writing; either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation [...]. Every writer is committed to certain values, even if he attempts to create illusions, such as art for art's sake" (81). And Brutus affirmed the view that the protest writer regards his task as redemptive: "one of the things we are doing is to engage ourselves in the struggle to recover and rediscover our humanity" (84). Thus, in response to the claim that protest literature is indicative of superficial thinking and sloganeering, we would be wise to remember Ngugi's assertion that, "[f]or these patriotic defenders of the fighting cultures of African people, imperialism is not a slogan. It is real, it is palpable in content and form and in its methods and effects" (2). In returning, more recently, to the question of aesthetics, David Attwell (correctly, in my view) asserts that:

black writing is indeed replete with instances of aesthetic self-consciousness, not excluding the very kinds of experimentalism that one associates with modernism [...] assertions about the overwhelming prevalence of documentary realism all too frequently involve generalisations based on other critical statements with little or no discussion of the literatures' actual qualities: its range, its idiosyncrasies, its very unfinishedness. (156)

These sentiments are arguably well demonstrated by the primary texts in this study since each, as I have indicated earlier in the introduction, displays considerable experimentation in terms of content and style, and in their attempts at exceeding the spectacular as well as the grammar of realism.

### **1.3 Toyi-toyi Literature and the Search for a New Critical Methodology**

Evidently, the quest for a new critical methodology through which to read protest literature and, indeed, African literature as a whole, is central to the debate on the crisis of representation. Ndebele is aware of this, and his work is geared towards this task of constructing a "theoretical foundation"

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<sup>4</sup> Their presentations were included under the section entitled "Panel on Literature and Commitment in South Africa."

for the phenomenon of protest literature, a phenomenon which he sees as characteristic of a “socially entrenched manner of thinking about South African reality, [one which] reproduces itself uncritically” (58). His use of stories by black writers such as Siluma, Maseko, and Matlou as examples of the direction that black South African literature should take is redemptive, because it does not read the black aesthetic project against Western aesthetics. However, his argument, like Nkosi’s, does not take seriously the assumptions that protest writers make and risks homogenising what is a disparate field. At the risk of stating the obvious: protest literature, drawing on the resistance tradition, was oppositional and aimed at challenging apartheid policies, while also articulating the aspirations of the black community for liberation. And, like all literature, it is a product of its time; that is, protest is linked to the historical moment within which it is produced. Its meaning cannot, therefore, be determined outside of the profound dislocation that is consequent on institutionalised trauma. Protest writing responded (by way of creative literary performance) to the exclusivist racist culture of apartheid South Africa, a culture which resulted in what Stuart Hall terms “double displacement” in “decentering individuals from both their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves” (275).

As artistic and/or literary expression, protest literature marked the movement of what may be termed the ‘aesthetics and politics of the black community’. Contrary to the view that some critics advance – that this writing is aimed at a white readership with the intention of soliciting sympathy and/or empathy – practitioners of protest fiction have consistently claimed that their writing is directed, primarily, at black readers with the aim of articulating their demands while conscientising them to “take charge of their own lives and their political destiny” (Watts 5). In this regard, Tlali, in a speech delivered in Amsterdam in 1984, had this say:

We black South African writers (who are faced with the task of conscientising ourselves and our people), are writing for those whom we know are the relevant audience. We are not going to write in order to qualify or fit into your definition of what you describe as “true art”. Our main objective is not to receive ballyhoo comments on our works. What is more important to us is that we should be allowed to reach our audience. Our duty is to write for our people and about them [...]. We would like to reflect our hopes, desires, sacrifices and endurance in our present in a manner that we know will appeal to them. (26)

Tlali’s speech is interesting, in that her conception of post-Black Consciousness protest literature suggests a radical break from the early protest novels which, while dealing with the themes of struggle and revolution, tended to focus on the cultural alienation experienced by the western-educated black middle class, thus de-emphasising the working classes and peasants. This view is lucidly articulated

in Watts' comparative study of the early protest novels of Peter Abrahams (*A Wreath for Udomo* [1956]), Richard Rive (*Emergency* [1964]) and Alex La Guma (*In the Fog of Seaso's End* [1972]), and the "combative literature" of the eighties, such as Tlali's own *Amandla* (1980), Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1981), Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), and Mbulelo Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto* (1982). The *Staffrider* generation of protest writers were interested in reaching "the mass of the people" (Watts 33), an undertaking which, though not unprecedented, as Watts notes, was relatively new in South Africa (33). The attempt to reach a mass audience necessitated "the need to break away from the constraints of the old forms, [since] social as well as literary revolution [was] at stake" (Watts 34). The writer's task, then, was to undermine the power of Western critical discourse: "to put a stop, within their own environment, to the policing of language, to the ideological support system provided to the power structure by the literary institution" (Watts 51), as well as to establish the "language of the people as the language of their literature" (Watts 36). As Watts observes, protest writers took

the language of the township streets – that vigorous mixture of African grammar, local idiom and jazz rhythm, often incorporating words from English and Afrikaans as well as the vernaculars – and from it forge[d] their poems and novels and autobiographies. What seems like violence to the language to the mother-tongue speaker of English serves two functions: it enables the township reader to identify with it, and it alienates the white readership, and by that very alienation is often able to shock readers into a new form of awareness of what the writer is trying to convey.

(36)

Clearly, the literature of this generation points to an era of experimentation in the production and distribution of literature, and to new attitudes to form and language. Mothobi Mutloatse famously summarised this attitude, in his introduction to the anthology *Forced Landing* (1980), as follows:

We'll write our poems in narrative form; we'll write journalistic pieces in poetry form; we'll dramatize our poetic experiences; we'll poeticise our historical dramas [...]. We will have to *donder* conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and writer alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery as a people.

(5)

Like the *toyitoyi*, which was "probably the most acknowledged (and contentious) image of resistance in the eighties" (Peterson, "The Arts in the 1980s" 951), this protest literature obliterates the (fluid) boundaries between literary performance and politics. My linking of protest literature with the *toyitoyi*

toyi, here, follows Bhekizizwe Peterson's astute reading of the toyi-toyi's revolutionary quality, in that toyi-toyi is not only

performative, it is also public: it insists on exceeding whatever sanctioned spatial boundaries are supposed to regulate its enactments. The stages that it thrives on are those that are located outside the walls of conventional theatres ... [where] the people can exhibit their power. [...] the toyi-toyi not only inaugurates and occupies spaces that are under contestation, it also transforms them into sites of confrontation where some form of [resolution] (whether physical or ideological, temporary or long term) between the activists and the state must crystallise. (952)

As Cornwell cautiously advances, the project of a disruptive experimentalism with form in protest fiction rested, in part, on the notion of 'un-literariness':

One may even say that the more fact the work contains, or appears to contain – that is, the more keenly the congruency of real and presented worlds is impressed upon the reader – the more effective the protest. Since fictionality is traditionally regarded as one of the defining characteristics of literature, this is tantamount to saying that the less "literary" this writing is, the more nearly will it fulfil its function and achieve its purpose. (57)

As a result, he contends that "[t]o disregard the documentary content of such a work becomes tantamount to accepting an imaginary invitation to aestheticize what the novel shows to be the brutalizing and dehumanizing effects of the South African socio-political system" (54). While I agree with Cornwell's remarks, it is important to note that the views of Nkosi and Ndebele cited earlier are not without their merits. I suspect that, in their arguments against protest fiction, Nkosi and Ndebele have in mind a notion of protest literature that does not apply to the *Staffrider* generation. In other words, they subscribe to the view that

Protest springs from a feeling of being a ward: it is the activity of apprentices, and it is the action of subordinates who see themselves as such. It is both solicitous and moderate. It functions within the system, often with regard to due process, prescribed channels of communication, and respect for law and order. The end in view of protest is reform, never revolution. Protest is a quest for accommodation, not a struggle for empowerment. (Mzamane, "Cultivating a People's Voice" 119)

However, as Mzamane points out, "These same assumptions cannot be made for every South African writer" (119). The aforementioned perspectives on (the defence of) protest literature – by Mzamane, Cornwell, Watts and Attwell – have already shown these assumptions to be problematic, and at times fraught. However, their arguments do not debunk Ndebele's quest to "redefine relevance", such that

‘relevant’ literature need not only be work that is concerned with the grand politics of the nation state and their impact on the ordinary lives of people, but also that literature which “rediscovers the ordinary” in the direct focus on people’s everyday experiences, since “the struggle involves people not abstractions” (52). Where Ndebele’s theory of ‘the ordinary’ falls short, however, is in its resistance to the disempowering effects of institutionalised homelessness for the black subject. Attwell addresses this fact when he states that:

black South African writing can reflect a sense of dislocation at home. The force of this can be gauged from the fact that before the term township became the standard descriptor of the black dormitory suburb, the common term was location. Ironically, the location names a place of permanent unease or unsettlement, a place where one experiences one's dislocation from rural life, economic independence, political representation and citizenship [...]. This is where the modernist decentring speaks to the spectral nightmare which was apartheid itself. (159)

Likewise, Nkosi’s work, specifically in *Tasks and Masks*, is useful in its consideration of the language crisis in African writing, as well as the search for an aesthetic with which to represent black experience. I would therefore like to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to both Nkosi and Ndebele for their critical interventions, which have influenced my own approach to literary studies and my research interests.

Using their debate on the crisis of representation in protest writing as my starting point, I believe that black writing is set in a state of permanent tension with regard to the representation of blackness. In my discussion, however, I wish to adopt a more existential approach. This existential outlook is inspired by my own interest in and search for identity. The ‘crisis’, as I read it, is therefore not an aesthetic one in the sense of Nkosi’s and Ndebele’s formulations: it is an aesthetic ‘crisis’ only in so far as black writing straddles the uneasy, and sometimes contradictory, dialectic between African and black identity in reality. I draw here on Dennis Nakasa’s interventionist stance, in which he maintains that

the concepts “African” and “black” have a “contradictory” or “dialectical” “aesthetic” relationship which is either consciously or unconsciously repressed and concealed in, particularly, South African literary discourse. This repression and masking of the dialectical interplay between the concepts “African” and “black” has led to a situation where writers, and critics and readers generally perceive these concepts to have an unproblematic symbiotic relationship in terms of which they could, without any conceptual justification, interchange. (1)

Accordingly, I make a distinction between African identity and black identity, to indicate the

continuities and discontinuities between their literary and ideological stances. I read African identity through the lens of an indigenous paradigm and/or Afrocentric theory which emphasises indigenous cultures and place-consciousness, and eschews a race-centred perspective. Black identity, conversely, is understood in the light of black existential philosophy and/or the ideology of South Africa's Black Consciousness movement which, although it foregrounds race-consciousness, works on the assumption of Africanness in its pursuit of liberation for black communities. In view of the interplay and tensions between these two identities as they are represented in black writing – which for me constitutes the crisis of representation – I take issue with Nkosi's and Ndebele's Afrocentric vision that protest writers should derive inspiration from traditional/indigenous African cultures, a view that is also shared by writers and critics such as Mphahlele, Manganyi, Ngugi and Achebe, who agree that “it is only through an exploration of tradition that modern writers can define themselves” (Watts 23). This position belies the profound cultural deracination and alienation owing to the enterprise of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, as well as the impact of Black Consciousness philosophy and its creative and intellectual attempts to rehabilitate the disintegration of African cultures. Ultimately, in response to the Afrocentrists, I argue that the search for identity and the quest for an ‘African’ or Afrocentric aesthetic needs to seriously engage the influence of Black Consciousness philosophy and the move towards instituting a black aesthetic in South African literature.

#### **1.4 The Black and its Double**

In 1989, Watts observed that:

the history of black writing over the last five or six decades in South Africa has been a history of a search for identity [...] the purposeful quest for a people who have had to emerge from conscious and subconscious subjugation, rescue their psyche from alienation and near obliteration and forge a collective will to carry out the task allotted to them by history. (5)

However, this quest for liberation, as well as the question of black identity, in South Africa, has been predominantly interrogated through the dialectic of racial alterity, defined in contradistinction to whiteness. This opposition is not unreasonable given the racial crisis in the country, as well as the alienating force of western education on black writers – an education whose values jar with traditional African values. Nevertheless, the problem with the Manichean aesthetic/methodology is the

implication that black people are objects in the western project of domination. In response to this self-other (that is, white versus black, Western versus African, or “us” versus “them”), dialectic then, I propose a self-double (black/African) dialectical approach which places black subjectivity at the centre of aesthetic discourse in African literature. I take my cue here from Mphahlele’s critique of Negritude, specifically his assertion that “[i]t is *a dialogue between two selves* in the African and only indirectly addressed to Western civilisation” (*Voices in the Whirlwind* 15, emphasis added). Also, drawing on the tenets of Black Consciousness philosophy, I call for a more introspective view to aid the kind of vision that Ndebele has for a new literature that can “[bring] about a highly conscious, sensitive new person in a new society” (72).

One could claim that the term “New African” as used by Tiyo Soga, for instance (qtd in Couzens 33-4), and the concept of blackness are ‘different names for the same complex reality’. My insistence on the distinction between black and African identity, however, and my focus on their philosophical relationality, follows Paul C. Taylor who – in “Post Black, Old Black” – asserts that:

It seems more productive, and a more efficient use of the linguistic resources that we happen to have available, to insist on the differences of emphasis that have produced these terms. Each then becomes a partial window onto some relatively distinct aspect of the far-reaching and multifaceted reorganization of black life that has occurred over the last couple of decades. (625)

To state the obvious, despite of the prevalence of notions such as ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ in the discourses around African cultural productions, identities are constructions or inventions. Echoing Stuart Hall, Maria Eriksson Baaz reminds us that identities are about “being positioned and investing in a particular (subject) position. This process of positioning cannot be understood outside discourse and power” (5). However, the fact that identities are inventions and or social constructions does not make them any less ‘real’. As Hall himself maintains, identities

relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as “the changing same” [...]: not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our ‘routes’. *They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity*, even if the belongingness, the “suturing into the story” through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field.

(“Who Needs Identity” 4, emphasis added)

Arguing in a similar vein, and writing specifically on the invention of African identities, Paul

Tiyambe Zeleza states that: “The pages of history drip with blood shed over invented identities. Indeed, African historians have long known about the invention of ‘Africa’ as a ‘sign’ with multiple and conflicted spatial, political, and cultural referents, but that has never stopped them from writing about ‘Africa’ as an organic spatio-temporal configuration” (15). Indeed, the fact that the concept of Africanness does not exist in the indigenous lexicon is proof of its very inventedness. I should note here, however, that my discussion is less about the western invention of Africa, and more about the ways in which African writers and scholars have themselves attempted to (re)invent, (de)mythologise and recuperate Africa and African subjectivities in the process of self-determination.

### **1.5 African Identity through the Afrocentric perspective**

The task of defining ‘African identities’ is as difficult as that of describing or defining ‘Africa’ since, as Zeleza notes, “The idea of ‘Africa’ is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that extrapolations of ‘African’ culture, identity or nationality, in the singular or plural, any explorations of what makes ‘Africa’ ‘African’, are often quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency” (14). Even so, the obvious clue for deciphering (any) African identity is the place-specific signifier ‘Africa’. The significance of this place-consciousness lies in the attempt to *locate* those tropes and identities prefixed by Africa’s “problematic commandments”, to use Zeleza’s words (14). Molefi Asante, a leading scholar in Afrocentric theory who emphasises the need to “relocate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the illusion of the fringes” (1), strongly eschews the view that African identity is decentred. He argues that

To say that we are decentered means essentially that we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dis-located and dis-oriented. We are essentially insane, that is, living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. (1)

Asante’s view above, which is shared by a number of Africana scholars, not only foregrounds the place-conscious perspective of African people as ‘centred, located and oriented’; it also insists on the dimension of Africa as more than a geographical location, that is, on Africa as a cultural fact. This ‘cultural fact’ should, however, not be misconstrued to imply a monolithic or homogeneous African culture for, as Amilcar Cabral once observed,

The fact of recognising the existence of common and particular features in the cultures

of African peoples, independent of the colour of their skin, does not necessarily imply that there is one and only one culture on the continent. In the same way that from an economic and political viewpoint we can recognize the several Africas, so also there are many African cultures. (51)

Evidently, the subject of African identities is “as vast and complex as the continent itself” (Zezeza 14). Cabral’s observation above further suggests a deviation from the view that collapses Africanness and blackness, a deviation that also features prominently in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* (1992) and in Asante’s “Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change”. Asante, for example, insists that Afrocentricity is “not color-conscious, it is not a matter of color but of culture that matters in the orientation to centeredness” (3), whilst Appiah maintains that “Africans share too many problems and projects to be distracted by a bogus basis for solidarity” (26).

Mphahlele, whose work is shaped by his theory of African humanism, also argues in a related vein on the search for a common African aesthetic in South African writing. To the question posed by Nakasa on the cultural and literary meanings of the concepts ‘African’ and ‘black’ as they are used in South Africa, Mphahlele responded in the following way: “We are African and should not accept the term ‘Black’, which the white media have latched on as a way of depriving us of our Africanity, since they feel excluded”. He added that “‘Black’ should only be used as a convenient political term for all who are not officially classed ‘white’ [...] ‘African’ refers to a cultural fact” (qtd in Nakasa viii; ix). For Mphahlele, as it is for some of the scholars I have pointed to above, the concept of Africanness is related to what Rauna Kuokkanen calls the “indigenous paradigm” (412), in which “language and style, for instance, may reflect oral traditions of the particular culture, whether stories, songs, prayers or word plays” (418). The “indigenous paradigm” emphasises the retrieval and recovery of traditional knowledges and epistemologies as crucial elements in the struggle for self-determination and the process of decolonisation (Kuokkanen 412).

But the case of South Africa makes awkward the development of such an “indigenous paradigm” or an exclusive focus on an indigenous African cultural perspective – one which negates the fact of blackness and the impact of the Black Consciousness Movement on South African cultural production. Indeed, South Africa poses a serious challenge to Appiah’s claim that the impact of colonialism has been overemphasised: “the experience of the vast majority of these citizens of Europe’s African colonies was one of an essentially shallow penetration by the coloniser” (7). South Africa, self-evidently, experienced one of the longest histories of slavery and colonialism (followed by apartheid) on the continent, spanning a period of four centuries. The sheer weight of this history has influenced our cultural productions, as well as our conceptions of our identities. And, as Nkosi points out, “nowhere else in Africa is [the] disruption [between tribal life and urban moralities] so

complete” (*Tasks* 80). He asserts that

the problem of a usable tradition still lies as the heart of the problem of South African literature [...]. The question is not whether Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho cultures exist, from which a writer might derive sustenance in the same way that Soyinka might draw inspiration from Yoruba lore or Achebe from the Ibo one; it is simply that the black South African writer is engaged in a contest the nature of which gravely limits his ability to make use of the indigenous tradition. (79)

The “contest” of which Nkosi speaks is the race-conscious struggle for self-determination and decolonisation which is epitomised by the ideological stance adopted by the Black Consciousness Movement. As Nakasa argues,

The fact that South Africa’s political economy is a racial capitalist mode of production means that one cannot hope to rid this system of its class exploitative relations without getting rid of the dialectic of black inferiority and white superiority inherent in the dominant mode of production. The class underpinnings of the black world outlook give it an immediacy surpassing any Afrocentric concerns with place consciousness. (24)

Even Mphahlele, with his (early) scepticism towards the concept of blackness, as indicated earlier, is compelled to widen the scope or parameters of his cultural place-conscious perspective on African humanism to include the race-conscious outlook: “In South Africa because the white man’s law decrees a separate existence, I must reserve my humanism for people of my race and dictate the terms on which anybody else wants to affiliate or cooperate [...] my being an African humanist also means that I work with anybody whose aim is to achieve true happiness for man here on earth” (“Botho and Ubuntu Humanism” 10). Thus, he (re)positions his work as

an attempt to indicate the relative distances between tradition and the present – some shifting, others freezing, some thawing, others again presenting formidable barriers [...]. We need to appreciate these distances if we are to understand what the African writer is about. He is part of the whole pattern. (*Voices in the Whirlwind* 128)

That these issues remain unresolved – even in the ‘post-apartheid’ contemporary moment – is evident in the fact that, in her paper presented at the 40th African Literature Association Conference in 2014, Grace Musila used the delicious phrase “Lot’s Wife’s Syndrome” to describe the ambiguity of the figure of the “African” in black South African literature, as well as the complex and complicated relationship that black South Africans have with the concept of “Africanness”.

## 1.6 The Tensions between the Afrocentric and the Black Consciousness Perspective

Unlike the place-conscious aesthetic of the Afrocentric ideological stance, the black aesthetic is race-conscious and thus places the “experiencing subject, the racial subject, at the centre of a social and political crisis permeating the dialectic of aesthetic consciousness” (Nakasa 20). In other words, “while the assumptions of an African aesthetic reveal a *place-centred* form of consciousness, those of the black aesthetic express a *race-centred* consciousness” (Nakasa 250). According to Nakasa, “a race-conscious otherness occupies a level of discourse whose language is distinct from that of, for instance, an Afrocentric or place-centred discourse” (17). The language of the race-centred perspective, in South Africa, was produced by the impact of colonialism and apartheid and the pernicious hold that race had – and still has – on the national consciousness. Apartheid thrived on a system which marginalised and inferiorised black subjectivity to the benefit of white minority rule and superiority. The emergence of a black-centred ideological movement was therefore an attempt to counter white superiority and, ultimately, black inferiority. When the Black Conscious ideology coined the phrase “Black is Beautiful”, for instance, its aim was to “counter the dominance of white racism which was rooted in the perception of black as an inferior other of white” (Nakasa 22).

The grammar of Black Consciousness was mainly preoccupied with reclaiming an identity for as well as the agency of black people; it demanded, for example, that the word black be used instead of the notoriously insulting ‘non-white’ or ‘non-European’ (Manganyi 17). And, for once, “power”, “beauty”, and “consciousness” became conjoined with “black” to describe “the seized moment”, and to affirm the dignity and humanity of those subjugated communities that colonialism sought to deny any sense of history, intelligence and identity – that is, by appealing to a consciousness of their shared experience of their suffering so that they might escape it. To this end, the Black Consciousness ideology adopted an anti-Eurocentric, anti-imperialistic separatist posture that underscored black solidarity. This solidarity, as Manganyi explains, was “not by design racialism. It was a way of relating, of being-black-in-the-world in its temporality of past, present and future” (24). He adds,

A separatist posture should never be understood to negate the existence of other racial groups. This posture would seem to arise from the fact that we as a people want to indulge unhindered on self-reflection, on self-definition and we are putting conditions on how this should take place. (24)

Premised on self-reflection and self-definition, then, the Black Consciousness Movement was a life-affirming philosophy in the face of life-denying realities during apartheid. As such, the philosophy was ultimately broader than the tradition of resistance, in that blackness was not simply a convenient

political tool and/or term, but an affirmative statement about a cultural identity, and a “lived, embodied reality, not [...] a floating abstraction” (Gordon, “A Phenomenology”). It is important to note, however, that, even in this situation, in which black concerns overrode those about Africanness, the latter continued to have a strong hold on the black South African imagination. The debates on the crisis of representation in black South African fiction illuminate this point, as does Mphahlele’s work, which attempts to synthesise the Afrocentric and black-centred perspective in his version of African humanism. I note Mphahlele here because of his accomplished critical and creative contributions to the development of African literature in South Africa. He is, to my knowledge, the only writer to edge in the direction that inspires the possibility of a self-double dialectical approach in black South African literature. Furthermore, as Nakasa writes, Mphahlele is “a significant writer who, in spite of a long period of exile, has lived before 1948 and during the post-’76 and the 1980s crises of apartheid in South Africa” (6).

The problem in black South African literary criticism has been either the collapse of the distinction between the black body and the African body so that the two are synonymous, a conflation which ultimately ignores the nuances in their different ideological stances, or the tendency to read the black body as a lesser body to the African body. For example, while Nkosi acknowledges the possibility that black South African fiction may be “more ably written and much more substantial in its achievements than a great deal of the ‘masks’ and ‘kola nut’ school of writing which is happily pouring out of the presses at an unprecedented rate and is so frequently applauded by European critics in search of the exotic” (*Tasks* 79), he nevertheless applauds this Afrocentric school for producing what he calls “the sort of art which conceals art”, and he specifically notes Achebe’s work in this regard (54). Even as he veers towards towards the “experimentalists” in his study of the “modernist temper” in African literature, his discussion favours those African writers who could be read as developing the “indigenous paradigm” – such as Amos Tututola, Gabriel Okara and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, among others (*Tasks* 53-74). His position, as noted earlier, is influenced by his unease with the focus on the theme of struggle and conflict in black South African writing. Thus, he advances the following unfavourable critique: “All the elements which have fertilised the African novel elsewhere, the proverb, myth, legend and all the other linguistic procedures which give their own peculiar stamp to social relationships in a traditional African setting, appear as a kind of distraction in the urban environment of South Africa” (79).

Similarly, and despite the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement on his critical and creative output, Ndebele’s theory of the ordinary – as I have already indicated earlier – valorises the Afrocentric approach (and subordinates the demands of the black aesthetic) in its agitation for a greater use of the resources of African folk culture and the oral tradition in the project of

‘rediscovering the ordinary’. In addition, Nakasa’s “The Dialectic Between African and Black Aesthetics in Some South African African Short Stories”, while influential to this study, at times promotes the place-centred perspective, and thus tends towards a reading of blackness as simply an oppositional identity which is trapped in the dialectic of otherness: “the term ‘African’ denotes an historical sense of belonging to Africa ... [while] the term ‘Black’ stands, for as long as racial segregation remains entrenched in the South African consciousness, as an oppositional other of ‘white’” (254). I have already pointed to the problem of such a binary polarisation or Manichean aesthetic, specifically in that it implies that black people are objects in the project of white domination and thus “flatten[s] and homogenise[s] the complexity of the black community” (Peterson 184). For this reason, the content of difference, as explained by Jonathan Rutherford, resonates with my understanding of Black Consciousness ideology and the birth of the black subject premised on cultural difference and identity as opposed to otherness. Rutherford writes:

[otherness represents] what is alien [...] the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties [...]. But a cultural politics that can address difference offers a way of breaking these hierarchies and dismantling this language of polarity and its material structures of inequality and discrimination. We can use the word difference as a motif for that uprooting of certainty. It represents an experience of change, transformation and hybridity. (10)

The scepticism around the concept of blackness and the valuation of the Afrocentric perspective to the subordination of black concerns is, however, understandable given the fact that there is no scientific or biological basis for race – that is, that race is entirely a social construction or invention. This means that the significance of raced bodies can shift depending on the historical moment. As Peterson explains, “the notion of blackness, like the philosophy of Black Consciousness, was seen as a ‘transient force’ [...] a process that would be transcended and ‘render itself redundant’ with the ‘social liberation of the black’” (167). This view is typical of that Afrocentric strand which, when it concedes race, reads blackness as simply a convenient or strategic political term that is ultimately devoid of the cultural fact of Africanness. This is because Afrocentrism fundamentally values place-based communities, and thus favours the metaphor of roots. Drawing on Liisa Malkki, Per Gustafson explains this metaphorical system (of the Afrocentric position) as follows: “[the] metaphorical system (including the soil, the land, and so forth) link[s] people to place, identity to territory. In this context, roots signify emotional bonds with the physical environment but also contain notions of local community, shared culture, and so forth” (670). The Black Consciousness perspective, however, views the relationship between people, place, culture and identity in terms of routes. For instance, the emergence of Black Consciousness philosophy was the result of “very complex

intellectual routes of circulation” (Peterson 163). That is, the philosophy and the Movement were influenced by other liberatory, people-centred intellectual traditions of the world black community, such as the American Civil Rights and the Black Power Movement, Pan-Africanism and Negritude in some African countries (Snail 51). Moreover, black identity is associated with fluidity since it fundamentally eschews an essentialist perspective. As Lewis R. Gordon asserts, in a discussion of Biko’s notion of Black Consciousness:

To aim at becoming black undermines the legitimacy of whiteness, but it does so with an additional consideration. Whiteness, in spite of the historic and empirical reality of mixture [...] works on a presumption of purity. Blackness, however, is a broad category that includes [...] a mixture. Consequently, Biko was able to work with a range of peoples under the rubric of blackness that ironically includes some of those listed under the old racial designation as “white”. The old racial designations supported absolute interpretations of such identities, but Biko argued for their permeability. (“A Phenomenology of Biko’s Black Consciousness” 85)

Afrocentrists were sceptical of this emphasis on identity’s elasticity, because it was viewed as a deviation from the project of rooting or locating structurally marginalised and unhomed African identities. In addition to these Afrocentric anxieties surrounding black identity, there was also the problem of the language question – that is, “the construction of one’s identity through the linguistic and ideological resources of the other” (Nakasa 22). However, the language debate with regard to the expression of blackness in the English language, did not fully comprehend the reality of the fluidity of language, and that language can be “adopted as a tool and utilised in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences” (Ashcroft et al 39). As Bill Ashcroft maintains,

it is false to think that words somehow embody the culture from which they derive [...] false because it confuses usage with property in its view of meaning, and it is ultimately contradictory, since, if it asserts that words do have some essential cultural essence not subject to changing usage, then post-colonial literatures in English, predicated upon this very changing usage, could not have come into being. Language could be imprisoned in origins and not, as is the demonstrable case, be readily available for appropriation and liberation by a whole range of new and distinctive enterprises. (53)

Linked to the above problems, and more pressing as I see it, is the question of whether the “black” in black aesthetics is the same as the “African” in African aesthetics. And if not, is blackness an epistemological deviation from Africanness? It is crucial, at this point, to observe that the ideology of Black Consciousness does not deny African (cultural and existential) identity. In fact, blackness, as articulated by Black Consciousness, assumes the idea of Africanness and, as a result, rests on a

concern for the black community's cultural destiny coupled with the quest to recuperate those indigenous histories and identities that colonialism silenced or denied. According to Peterson, "One of the main emphases of Black Consciousness in cultural matters was the implications and complications that stem from the need to engage in cultural reaffirmation, a 'return to the source' or the 'roots' of African culture" (166). Likewise, Nakasa maintains that, "[the] notion of an undifferentiated black majority is a notion which, during the political heyday of 'Black Consciousness', saw the 'African' values as being contained within the assumptions of the 'Black' world. It was through these assumptions that [...] 'Black' humanistic concerns were conceived as representing the socio-political values of an incorporationist and reconstructive 'Black' aesthetic" (75). Manganyi's discussion of "the temporality of black consciousness" is also useful here. He asserts:

black consciousness in its temporality includes the consciousness of our cultural heritage [...] If black consciousness simply amounted to a mere recognition of this historicity, it would be nothing more than ancestor worship [...] It follows that for black consciousness to be an 'active presence' in the world, it has to deal with the present and the future. (*Being Black in the World* 19)

Unlike the Negritude movement – a seminal influence on the philosophy of Black Consciousness in South Africa, since the Negritude writers were "among the first writers in Africa to be conscious of a need to foster pride in being black, to identify the pride to be taken in African traditions, to uncover the worth of all that was African beneath the accretions of white value systems" (Watts 74) – the concerns of the Black Consciousness Movement shifted their focus from the nostalgic Negritude tendency to romanticise and idealise the tribal past to "the attempt to come to terms with an endurance of imperialism, exploitation, with uprooted languages and customs and the imposition of alien ways of experiencing" (Watts 50). At the time, Mphahlele had this to say about the new mood of black-centred consciousness:

We began as black writers in this land of false social values, unsure of ourselves. We used to mourn the loss of idyllic tribal life [...]. We grabbed the tools education gave us [...]. And now we are like banished prophets shouting in the wilderness but shouting all the same. (*The African Image* 200-201)

In my view, then, blackness in the local context is the 'product' of an irrevocably traumatised African identity following the advent of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. The profundity of this trauma should not be taken lightly, since trauma, as many trauma theorist agree, is that which continually returns to haunt the individual and or community because it is characterised

by belatedness. And so, culturally alienated from that conception of Africanness which rests on the sacrosanctity of tribal life, and whose humanistic vision espouses the idea of Africa as ‘beautiful, innocent, non-violent, bountiful, vibrant’, and the African character as a “warm, loving, caring, socially-oriented being opposed to the cold technology-oriented whites”<sup>5</sup> – a vision so overly romanticised that it has come to represent the nostalgic desire for a return – blackness emerged as a powerful political and cultural structure of meaning and feeling in the face of life-denying realities during apartheid. The development of Black Consciousness philosophy was also influenced by the view that, if Africans chose “conservatively and remain[ed] loyal to [their] indigenous culture, then [they] opt[ed] to stay in a calcified society whose developmental momentum has been checked by colonization” (JanMohamed 5).

Even so, blackness remains haunted by its African revenant, since it houses not only the memory of racial violence but also symbolically gestures to that alienated African self. As a result, it is important to note, as Peterson does, that “such a break in tradition could never be total” (162). That is why I maintain that there is a self-double dialectic or consciousness in the black aesthetic imagination – an ever-present consciousness of being *both* African *and* black, despite the contending ‘roots’ versus ‘routes’ ideologies of these two terms. Hall might chime in here, reminding us that

identities [are] ‘framed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture. [...] identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity. (226-227)

Lewis R. Gordon illuminates this self-double dialectical approach in his theorisation of blackness through the lens of melancholia as a subject-constituting attachment to loss. He explains:

One could think of modernity as inaugurating a unique form of melancholia that formed the black subject. The situation is a frustrating one of a longing for a precolonial existence *as what one is*, of longing for black existence in a form that blacks could never have existed. Fanon’s infamous criticisms of history and the past come from this insight: There is no place in the past for black people; there is no place to which black people can return.

(“Through the Hellish Zone of Non-being” 8)

In black literature, this self-double consciousness is evinced in the black writer’s attempts to recover

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<sup>5</sup> See Mphahlele’s critique of Negritude cited in Watts (75-77).

or gesture towards certain cultural practices, while rejecting the colonial endeavour to confine black people to the status of ‘problems’ or condemn them to what Fanon calls “the zone of non-being” (*Black Skins* 7). As Cornwell puts it,

It is no wonder that the South African government has persistently tried to legislate the writer out of existence, for to put pen to paper in defiance of forces which strive to reduce the writer, in Fanon’s terms, to the level of non-being, is to say not only “I exist, and it matters that I exist” but also “I protest against whatever seeks to deny me this existence”. (52)

Moreover, the search for a black aesthetic in South African writing, “is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community” (Neal 1). The Black Consciousness literature of the 1970s and the efforts of the *Staffrider* magazine from the 1970s to the 1980s, for instance, evince this profound concern for people-centred artistic forms of expression. While citing Mutloatse, Peterson observes that: “Participatory Literature of Liberation does not condone or allow spectators because it has made no provision for [passers-by] or cowards; it demands active participants, because *our literature is one based [on] the African communal experience where there’s virtually no difference between artist and audience*” (170, emphasis added). Watts makes a similar observation in her study of South African protest fiction, and suggests that the black-centred aesthetic presupposes a strong sense of community that is rooted in traditional African cultural modes of existence:

Though the majority of black writers are town bred, and links with traditional patterns of living have broken down far more decisively in South Africa than in other African countries – both by the growth of urban populations and the distortion of the tribal pattern by the white government for their own political ends – these writers nevertheless carry within them a consciousness of the traditional role of the artist in African society. And there has been sufficient carry-over of certain social patterns into the townships – the strong bonds of the extended family, the inherent preference for closely-knit social groups [...] the retention of group judgements and group pressures, even after the tradition of group decisions has begun to break down, the gatherings for weddings and funerals – for the significance of this traditional role to be readily comprehended, even if the modern writer feels the need, because of political developments, to change it. (21)

In his writing on the search for a black aesthetic in South African writing, Peterson also suggests what I have termed the self-double consciousness in black literature, that is, the influence of the indigenous paradigm on black art. He explains:

Instead of art for art's sake, art was championed as being directly concerned with exploring social and historical issues. Drawing on the example of the traditional *imbongi*, emphasis was often placed on the links between artist, life and "the people". Individualism in art was seen as a "cruel tragedy [...] an alienation from the artist's environment and an entry into the spiritual isolation of the petty bourgeoisie [...] detachedness [...] Bohemianism and monk-like solitude"; in contrast, the preferred, committed perspective drew on Sekou Toure's popular dictum that "to take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write revolutionary songs; you must fashion the revolution with the people, the songs will come by themselves and of themselves". (170)

## 1.7 Conclusion

In the discussion above, I have attempted to indicate the subtle differences and nuances in the Afrocentric and black-centred ideological and literary approaches. Like the Afrocentrists, I draw a distinction between the African cultural identity and black identity. As a result, I assert that one can read black identity politics without subjecting black identity to African identity and vice versa: the two can be read independently. Studies interested in black South African literature's quest for identity, as well as the search for a black aesthetic, should therefore take cognisance of the notion that there are two streams of consciousness in the black literary imagination: the place-centred and the race-conscious outlook. However, the Black Consciousness ideology of South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement – in its construction of blackness through tropes of elasticity – both assumes the notion of Africanness *and* supersedes an exclusively place-centred perspective. This is not to say that the place-centred perspective is inherently stagnant or redundant; for, as Hall would contend, identities are by their very nature always in the process of formation. I maintain, however, that the theories of the Afrocentric perspective – their preoccupation with a 'return to the source/roots' – flatten the complexities of the black community with regard to ideas around cultural hybridity and the possibilities of infinitely fluid selves. As such, I point here to the limitations of the Afrocentric theory as opposed to the identity itself.

Drawing on the tenets of Black Consciousness philosophy, specifically the concern for the black community's cultural destiny, my project focuses on the Black Consciousness aesthetic since it is, to my mind, a more fluid and inclusive identity which is open to discourses of cultural hybridity and continues to have significant resonance in the post-apartheid moment. In the following chapters of this dissertation, and in the light of the black writer's self-double dialectical consciousness, I explore fictional representations of blackness, and the staging of this split personality – the doubleness of black identity – through themes of trauma, homelessness, alienation, and the crisis of an unbecoming blackness. Accordingly, Gordon's Fanonian reading of the existential situation of

blackness through the lens of melancholia – “a subject-constituting attachment to a loss” (“Reasoning in Black” 4) – is central to my exploration of the unhomely as an unsettling juncture of the personal and political modalities of identity formation.

## Chapter 2

### Purgatorial Identity and Redemptive Fantasy in Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood*

Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) is a rich narrative replete with evocative imagery, flashbacks or analeptic sequences, poetry, and complex symbolism. The novel presents a fairly comprehensive inter-discursive engagement with black existential thought regarding the meaning of blackness in the modern world, as well as with the musical traditions of Africa and its diaspora, borrowing from *ingoma-jazz* and the *blues*. *To Every Birth Its Blood* wrestles with the thraldom of black subjects under apartheid, negotiates their autonomy by exploring the "processes through which personal and political commitment develop" (Eke 64) and, in its preoccupation with the quest for both personal and communal political freedom, evinces the capricious interaction between art and politics. Serote's work is heavily influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement. Written between 1975 and 1980, *To Every Birth Its Blood* was ultimately shaped by the 1976 student uprising, a period popularly referred to as "the days of Power" to signify the influence of Black Consciousness during this era (Sole 64). The novel is divided into two parts, shifting from existential and modernist practices in the first part to radical political concerns in the second, a bipartite structure which is a bone of contention in much literary criticism exploring this work. Nick Visser, for example, argues that Part I and Part II of the novel are in fact two separate novels. He asserts that "the events and aftermath of June 1976 compelled [Serote] to abandon not just one fictional project for another but one kind of novel for another, and one kind of politics for another" (72). I read this splitting in the novel's structure as the staging of the 'doubleness' of black identity, and focus on Tsi's journey throughout the novel and the ways in which his anxieties and restlessness can be read as reflecting the shifting consciousness of blackness.

The initial reception of the novel, both nationally and internationally, was fairly mixed, with some critics asserting that it is "the most powerful and penetrating exploration of the Power period" (Barboure 172), while others argued that "the spectacle takes over and the novel throws away the vitality of the tension generated by the dialectic between the personal and public" (Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 51). My own discussion is an attempt to analyse *To Every Birth Its Blood* with specific reference to Serote's engagement with the tropes of trauma, the vagabond, and the meaning of personhood in his fictional representations of blackness. These representations, I maintain, convey a 'crisis of identity' for the black subject whose sense of self emerges as contradictory or unresolved.

Drawing on black existential philosophy as well as contemporary debates on the question of identity in social theory, I propose to adopt the notion of blackness – as it was articulated in Black

Consciousness philosophy – as a redemptive fantasy. First, Jacqueline Rose’s conceptualisation of the state is an instructive precursor to my understanding of the kind of social structure that apartheid brought about in South Africa, and its implications for senses of personhood for (the) marginalised black communities. In *States of Fantasy* (1998), Rose distinguishes between the *State* as a form of governance and *state* as (a condition of) consciousness and/or mental health, in her psychoanalytical examination of the interplay between these two forms of state. Drawing on her intuitions, I speak to both senses of state as I grapple with the apartheid state, as well as the mental states of those black people who are forced to endure the “dehumanising psycho-social and structural instrumentalities” of oppression – to use Chabani Mangayi’s words (“The Violent Reverie” 54). I argue that the state of governance, in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, is neurotic in its obsession with power and in its preoccupation with pacifying and controlling black bodies. Serote, in his representation of apartheid – both the state of governance and its mental health – collapses the boundaries between the different senses of *state* to suggest that authoritarianism is contingent on neurosis to perform and/or retain its power, such that there is no distinction between madness and apartheid. This neurotic nation state produces shattered citizens, as seen in Tsi’s character who is caught in that “post-modern predicament” of “belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time” (Rose 2). It is this shattering that Serote grapples with and attempts to redeem in the second part of the novel, specifically through his representation of the Movement and its adoption of Black Consciousness philosophy, a philosophy which purports the notion of blackness as a redemptive identity – that is, an identity able to will into existence an “imaginary community” (in the sense of Benedict Anderson’s use of the phrase). Thus, despite Biko’s observation that oppression makes the “black man [...] a shell, a shadow of a man [...] drowning in his own misery [...] an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity (31), blackness as a redemptive identity subverts the dehumanising proclivities of colonialism, while also providing black communities with a powerful cultural structure of meaning, self-determination and endurance.

The title of this chapter touches upon some of the novel’s important themes, namely ideas around the doubly-dislocated black individual in modern urban spaces, and the impact of oppressive colonial ideologies upon such an individual’s spiritual well-being. The term “purgatorial identity” draws heavily on the Sartrean notion of the “nervous condition” of the native – those members of marginal communities who are excluded from dominant colonial structures culturally, materially and otherwise. It also speaks to the experience of profound cultural deracination and incoherence, an experience which Manganyi describes as the “incongruence (disharmony) between an individual and his fundamental transactions with his total existential situation” (*Being-Black* 45). Purgatorial identity also describes the ambiguous condition of “non-whiteness” or the existential crisis of a people who are no longer African (in the Afrocentric sense which negates race-consciousness) and not quite black

either (that is, if blackness is understood as a liberatory cultural identity as opposed to simply a political term and/or tool). This purgatorial ‘blackness’, which is a product of the traumatic colonial enterprise in South Africa, is defined by a chronic sense of instability, insecurity, alienation and anger, “coupled with an ideation characterised by helplessness” (Manganyi 10). Examples of this “nervousness”, to appropriate Sartre, abound in the first part of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, which stresses the “impotence of the isolated individual” (Barboure 174) through the character of Tsi Molope (the sole narrator of Part I). Tsi wanders the tangled streets of the township aimlessly and is haunted by a complete disintegration of his personality. Accordingly, he registers the world as defeated, and this is further highlighted by his dysfunctionality in all social events and relations and, ultimately by the madness of apartheid.

The concept of purgatory, however, also implies a sense of hopefulness and a belief that the suffering will come to an end: Serote suggests this ‘cleansing’ or, rather, ‘redemption’ in the second part of the novel, in which the impotent and isolated individual can overcome his defeat through dedication to “the Movement”. Part II of *To Every Birth Its Blood* abandons the alienated individual narrator in favour of a group narrator who reflects the political aspirations of the black community. Purposeful movement – in the form of organised political action against oppression – takes over the role of the hero (Barboure 176). The novel as a whole centralises the redemptive possibilities of the motif of the journey, the notion of redemptive memory – that is, the memory of what black people have lost in the colonising violence of apartheid and the need to fight against their subjugation – which prompts Serote’s defeated characters into liberatory resistance. Serote also gestures towards a sense of redemptive fantasy in the idea of blackness, a notion which I explore later in my discussion.

## **2.1 “The Bellow of the Bull before Slaughter”: Serote’s Jazz-inflected Creative Imagination**

Mongane Wally Serote was born in Sophiatown in 1944. He published his first anthology of poetry, *Yakhal’inkomo* (“the cry of the cattle in the slaughter house”), in 1972, and it was subsequently awarded the Ingrid Jonker Prize for début poetry in English. To date, he has published eleven anthologies of poetry. Serote was not only heavily involved in the Black Consciousness Movement but also the African National Congress. His early works were influenced by the (attitudes of) Black Consciousness philosophy, specifically its concerns with the black community’s cultural destiny, and its emphasis on self-analysis and self-determination – concerns which were central to the philosophy’s project of decolonising the mind. He was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship to study at Columbia University in the late 1970s where he began writing his début novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood*. It was completed in Lesotho, Gaborone, in 1980. He has subsequently published three novels:

*Gods of Our Time* (1999), *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002), and *Revelations* (2010).

Like many writers of protest literature between the 1970s and late 1980s, Serote's work refuses to unyoke "documentary" literary genres and "imaginative" genres (Watts 237). Originally a poet, in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Serote produces a multi-textured narrative style that is a fusion of both the poetic-symbolic and the realist-mimetic. The first part of the novel draws on existential and modernist practices, as it grapples with the totalising proclivities which predetermined black identity under apartheid; its deeply introspective tone captures the intensity of black experience under that regime. The narrative constantly collapses the fluid 'boundaries' between madness and apartheid as it delves into the psyche of one man who awakens to the horror of his existence, but is too traumatised to respond in any meaningful way. The second part of the novel is characterised by what Dennis Brutus describes as a "naked unornamented way" of writing (73) in its shift to focus on the radical political concerns of the Movement, or the "irruptions of history" (6) as Visser contends. The novel is marked by many shifts, or, as I argue, 'improvisations', which brand *To Every Birth Its Blood* as jazz-like in its experimental structure. It is perhaps useful at this point to note the influence of jazz on Serote's writing in general. His first collection of poetry, *Yakhal'inkomo*, was inspired, in part, by his experience of Winston Mankunku Ngozi's performance of a jazz piece of the same title. He writes,

I once saw Mankunku Ngozi blowing his saxophone. Yakhal'inkomo. His face was inflated like a balloon, it was wet with sweat, his eyes huge and red. He grew tall, shrank, coiled into himself, uncoiled and the cry came out of his horn. (6)

Jazz carried particular meaning for Serote because it "oriented [him] emotionally in the struggle to cope" ("Black Man's Burden" 181). This jazz sensibility is evinced in *To Every Birth Its Blood* through Tsi's subjectivity, which is modelled on the voice of the blues singer, in which "the work chronicles a tragic history of personal and social dispossession" (Jacobs 8). As Johan Jacobs illuminates,

Serote presents his soloist, Tsi, as a cultural broker in performance not only with the other characters in the novel, but alternatively defining himself against the ensemble and submerging himself in the stream of history, improvising in solo flights in a construct which takes its form from contemporary black music and all that has influenced it in South Africa [...] the ensemble is made up not only of fictional players [...] but also of the contributions of Nina Simone and Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela and Dollar Brand, Coltrane and Miles Davis [...] all of whose solo flights punctuate the narrative from time to time. (14-15)

In an interview with Eduardo Mendieta in 2011, Cornel West describes the influence of jazz and the

blues on black existential writing as a “focus on the funk”, by which he means: “wrestling with the wounds, the scars, the bruises, as well as the creative *responses* to wounds, scars, and bruises — some of them inflicted because of structures and institutions, some of them being tied to our existential condition” (1). Jazz, in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, is a way for Tsi to focus on and come to terms with the ‘funk of black life’, as it were. His improvisational solo flights edge towards self-discovery, as I explore later in my discussion. What I wish to briefly point out, for now, is that jazz is the ‘Movement’ of Part I, a way of connecting with the world black community through its creativity, which transcends the Atlantic. As Mphahlele asserts of the blues:

It’s a long black song. They sang it centuries ago, our ancestors. And here we are out in the cold [...]. We are the never-ending story that began that long time ago. We are the extension of their woe. Of their blues. (qtd in Jacobs 16)

And as such a ‘Movement’ of self-discovery, jazz in this novel gestures towards Paul Gilroy’s argument that identity is “a process of movement and mediation that is more approached via the homonym routes” (19). The representation of jazz depicts identity as mobilised; in this way Serote shifts focus from the notion of “rooted” identities which is popular in nationalist literature, and draws attention to the processual, “routedness” of identity.

*To Every Birth Its Blood* is set in the township of Alexandra, the “Dark City”, which is juxtaposed with Johannesburg, the “Golden City” (28). The novel consists of a disjunctive structure which is presented in two parts. The first part covers the period before the 1976 student uprising and is narrated through the perspective of Tsietsi (Tsi) Molohe – a failed journalist, actor and teaching assistant. Traumatized by and unable to come to terms with the experience of a violent sexual encounter with the police, as well as the total existential “funk” of blackness under apartheid, Tsi is a drunken escapist who wanders the disconnected streets of the township aimlessly. He is overcome by the disorienting feeling of being “lost in the streets” (31), and by his sense of alienation and helplessness. As Watts notes, “Even [his] most intimate relationships, with his wife, his parents, his siblings are contaminated by his condition of despair” (238). As a result, Tsi seeks solace in the embrace of jazz and liquor, because “beer makes things easy” (1). As the new wave of Black Consciousness politics, with its emphasis on black pride, begins to emerge in the township, Tsi attempts to redeem his meaningless existence. Towards the end of Part I, he assumes a research post at McLean’s College, a correspondence school in Johannesburg. However, his choice of involvement proves inadequate, as it does not fully respond to the exigencies of life under apartheid. Thus, the narrative of Part I is characterised by defeat, impotence, anger and futility.

The second half of the novel replaces the individual, isolated protagonist of Part I by focusing

on various characters, namely John, Oupa, Dekeledi, and Oni, among others. Serote uses third-person narration not only to express a collective voice, but also to depict “the global nature of urban experience founded on the interaction and integration of different practices” (Wilkinson 96). Part II opens in the aftermath of the ’76 uprising, which has inspired the young black characters to fight for their liberation. Movement, as a motif in this part of the novel, acquires a purpose, as the characters organise – through participation in “the Movement” – to combat the oppressive regime. As Jane Wilkinson observes, “roads and streets recuperate their potential as signs for onward-going movement” (97). Thus, one can safely conclude that the Movement is itself the hero of the second part of the novel. Serote, however, is not sentimental in his representation of the struggle against subjugation: the freedom fighters are not depicted in spectacular imagery, and he constantly calls our attention to the bloodshed and the disenchanting truth that freedom is not just a desirable utopia but demands great sacrifice, as the novel’s title suggests.

## **2.2 Critical Perspectives on the Novel’s Structure: Temporality, Trauma, and Jazz**

The novel’s disjunctive structure – its fragmentation, discontinuities and overall polyphonic narration – has inspired compelling critical debates among scholars exploring this work. Dorian Barboure, for example, has argued for the novel’s unity and insists on a “balance” between Parts I and II (177). She maintains that the significance of Part I is its exploration of individual consciousness, and that here “the impotence of the isolated individual is graphically presented” (174); Part II, on the other hand, is interested in collective consciousness and overcoming the overwhelming sense of defeat which defines black experience under apartheid. For Barboure, the shift from first-person narration to third-person narration, the temporal shift, as well as the chaotic plurality of the work as far as its focus on a set of characters is concerned, while “initially disconcerting”, gives expression to Serote’s overall “humanism” (180). She concludes that “the formal structuring of the novel implies that it is commitment to a group, and ultimately the community, that is decisive” (180). Similarly, Watts comments on the continuity between Part I and Part II through the characters of Tsi and John, respectively:

The break in the form serves the same end: in the two parts of the novel Serote is exploring the levels of change [which are] conscientisation and politicisation. The use of two separate characters enables him to achieve this on a much broader canvas than a single character would, for he is able to follow through the changes in different personality types with different motivations and different qualities of experience. (238)

Like Jane Gleggs's review of the novel (34), Watts's analysis seems to suggest that *To Every Birth Its Blood* is the *Bildungsroman* of a whole community; an assumption which Kelwyn Sole has shown to be problematic, since "the right course of action is implied throughout" (75) – commitment to the Movement – which inevitably reveals the novel's circularity. Visser, responding to Barboure's interpretation of the novel, opposes her assumption of the work's unity which, he argues, falsifies and obscures the text's meaning by "overlooking the circumstances of the actual composition of the novel and demonstrating [an] unwilling[ness] to entertain the possibility of inconsistency and contradiction within the novel" (68). Visser traces the chronology of the novel's composition and asserts the intrusion of external states of affairs into Serote's fictional project:

When Serote was already some way into the process of writing [the] novel, the events of June 1976 erupted, and he expanded the novel to incorporate them. The novel, *in the very process of its composition* was opened to the unfolding of history, to the unfolding of momentous events as they occurred. (69)

Because of the contradictions and inconsistencies in the novel's temporal and ideological framework, Visser concludes that *To Every Birth Its Blood* is, in fact, not one but two novels – "the product of two separate fictional projects" (68).

Annie Gagiano challenges Visser's critique of Barboure, however. She strongly maintains that the novel's aesthetic unity reveals "a bondedness which is not merely the accidental result of the novel being a set of pages between two covers" (84). Gagiano's discussion is concerned with Serote's use of the recurrent motif of dislocation which, she asserts, reflects "the fragmentation of black South African experience" (84). My own analysis is in line with the kind of argument that Gagiano puts forward, that is, that the overall structure of the novel reflects the fragmented ontology of blackness. The 'break' or fragments in the work express the difficulty of assimilating the deeply traumatic experience of colonial violence into a story, or rather translating it into literature. *To Every Birth Its Blood* struggles with the memory of South Africa's past and its fraught present under apartheid rule; its structure mirrors the various splits within the society which Serote imagines, especially the incoherent or bipolar political and existential realities in the country. My impression is that the silences and gaps, the novel's structural fluidity in terms of its ideological and temporal imagination, as well as the influence of jazz and poetry, not only point to trauma's unspeakability, but also set *To Every Birth Its Blood* firmly in the process-based grammar of postmodernism. *Processes*, by their very nature, denote a sense of flux – of unfinishedness – in contrast to *products* which are always finished within set boundaries. *To Every Birth Its Blood* rejects the limitations of boundaries (products): in its negotiation of the conceptual dimensions of time and experimentation with forms

of expression, it constantly straddles the line between reality and fantasy/nightmare.

The chronology of the overall plot is fairly difficult to sort out, particularly the narrative of Part I. This is because, as Visser observes, the narrative is “not presented from a fixed and identifiable temporal standpoint” (70). The novel opens *in medias res*, with Tsi’s prophetic realisation, as he and his wife, Lily, walk into their home, that “another time was coming when we would have to be in the streets again” (1). Tsi’s realisation foreshadows the impending political revolution of Part II, and also foregrounds the sense of homelessness that characterises black communities in the context of apartheid South Africa. This thereby sets the general restless tone of Part I. The first three chapters occur in the present – after Tsi’s days as a journalist, but before his time at McLean’s College. This, however, is not immediately clear, as the phases of his life seem to blur into each other. Initially it appears as though Tsi is narrating the story from his time at McLean’s College, but at other points from his period as a journalist. It is also difficult to assign dates or determine the length of time of the various phases of his life; for example, how long he is in Lesotho, or a journalist, and “during what part of his life he is involved with the theatre” (Visser 70). The confusion occurs due to the novel’s “unfixed”, “free-floating” and consequently process-based structural and temporal fluidity – what Visser ultimately contends is an “inconsistency of temporal vantage point in the action as a whole” (71). Adding to the novel’s “free-floating” temporality is the fact that some of the chapters are recounted through Tsi’s memory, of which he admits: “memory can be an unreliable mirror. It shifts and shifts, now and then emphasising the dramatic, now and then leaving out detail, now and then flushing out detail at surprising moments” (29). While the text does not readily resolve these temporal inconsistencies, the general outline of the stages of Tsi’s life gradually becomes clear: he grew up in the township of Alexandra (29), he was a member of a gang in his youth (115), he spent some time – during his high school years – in Lesotho, he became a journalist and at some point a member of a politically-motivated theatre group, followed by a long period of unemployment, and then began extension work at McLean’s College (148).

Sole explains the novel’s temporal inconsistencies – “the emptiness of time”, as he puts it – by proposing the notion that Serote “shuttles continuously between two systems of temporal-ideological perception” (59). He reluctantly agrees with Barbour’s assumption that the novel’s temporal ordering is ideologically motivated – reluctantly, because he maintains that Barbour’s viewpoint seems to be “unconscious of some of the work’s intricacies and dislocations” (59). Sole maintains that

The temporal looping employed by the author in Part I is the key to this process of understanding [of Serote’s “felt thought”], and contains strong indications as to the

author's ideological and conceptual choices. The formal structuring and temporal sequencing of this or indeed any quasi-historical novel can never be a completely mimetic imitation of what has happened in reality, but will embody a choice of both what events to highlight and when to highlight them. (59)

For Sole, Serote employs the stylistic device of fragmentation to demonstrate the madness and immorality of apartheid, as well as the ways in which it disrupts time for the people it oppresses (61). While I largely agree with Sole's interpretation, I wish to add that part of the reason for the novel's temporal inconsistencies is the fact that Tsi narrates the story – in the opening chapters of the novel – after his traumatic encounter with the police. And trauma, as many trauma theorists agree, is a shattering experience whose force impairs normal cognitive functioning. Trauma also disrupts the experience of time as linear, since it is characterised by a mode of haunting. The novel's temporal disjunctions, then, mirror trauma's symptoms. As Viljoen and van der Merwe observe: "When a person is overwhelmed by a trauma, the coherence of the life narrative is shattered" (1). This is because trauma constitutes a "break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 61). In the narrative of Part I, Tsi is presented as alienated, impotent and shameful. His traumatic experiences and inability to overcome them exemplify the meaninglessness of time, and so the narrative reflects his temporal dislocation.

The action of Part I is circular and time is experienced as repetitious or empty. Apart from trauma's shattering, this emptiness of time resonates with the theories of African philosopher, John S. Mbiti, who advances the notion of "African time". Mbiti's theory of "African time" provides a useful template for reading *To Every Birth Its Blood* because, as Manganyi asserts, in order to understand the meaning of being for the black subject, "one has to have an understanding of African ontology – the African's philosophy of being, [his] philosophy of existence" (45). Similarly, Mbiti argues that "the [African] concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African people not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation" (16). According to Mbiti, the African concept of time is two-dimensional, comprising of an indefinite past and a present. He posits that,

A person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth [...]. [Time] moves 'backward' rather than 'forward'; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place [...] Time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real. (17)

For Mbiti, then, there is no such thing as a future in African time; this idea is understood only as potential time:

The future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time. If however, events are certain to occur, or if they fall within the inevitable rhythm of nature, they at best constitute only potential time, not actual time [...] Actual time is therefore what is present and what is past. (17)

The community of Part I in Serote's novel seems bound to this temporal view, that is, the notion that time is a composition of events. As a result, time – in the colonial moment – is meaningless, empty, for Serote's characters because nothing (of real significance), in terms of progress for blacks, happens. Moreover, in the African cultural milieu, the community is the individual's link not only to the broader socio-economic and cultural life, but also to themselves. As the Ubuntu maxim claims, "I am because we are". Abdulai, in this regard, notes that,

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; the individual depends on the corporate group. (5)

The community of Part I, however, is traumatised and echoes Tsi's defeated posture. As a result it reproduces "shattered" individuals who, like Tsi, endure lives dominated by fear and meaninglessness. As Tsi himself recounts, on the meaninglessness of his existence:

Everything that I was there with me in the bed. My bad breath, probably smelling like shit, from beer last night or that morning; my pounding aching head, my fear, because my heart was still jumping; my recollection of the banging on the door; my helplessness, my despair, my anger; my limp muscle, which lay looped as if it were ashamed to have ever erected [...] I thought something was going to snap and snap forever. (51)

This meaninglessness is also evinced in the various dysfunctional relationships between the characters in Part I of the novel.

Apart from the monotony of time in Part I, which is additionally fragmented by a series of analeptic sequences, Serote's novel evinces a stylistic affinity with jazz which further compounds the chronology and overall structure of this narrative. The novel is composed of jazz-like improvisations which are most evident in the use of motifs and symbols which "change meaning as their context in the novelistic action changes" (Sole 57). For example, the motif of silence is fairly complex in the novel because it is constantly pulled in opposite directions at the same time: it can be liberatory (reflective) and oppressive (traumatic), both desirable and pernicious. However, Serote suggests jazz as a way of negotiating and possibly overcoming the "nothingness of silence" (Titlesad 115). For

instance, when Tsi and Ausi-Pule are listening to a Dollar Brand recording, Tsi says:

Dollar would stalk the house, bombard it, rise high and high, go low and low, in that journey which Dollar takes, sometimes as an ant moving, moving, on and on, climbing on thin grass as if it were a huge fallen tree trunk, moving, moving back and forwards as if seeking something which he himself does not know, moving on and on, at times like a tiger, agile, beautiful, ferocious, stalking, knowing, planning and ready for the final attack. Yes, Dollar would dominate the silence. (23-4)

Serote's use of jazz as a structural trope is remarkable for a variety of reasons. First, as Jacobs convincingly notes, "American jazz styles gave black South Africans a sense of connection with the world black community" (6). This recalls the black intellectual heritage of the Sophiatown Renaissance, which was inspired and influenced by the Harlem Renaissance – seminal influences of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa – with its preoccupation with issues of self-representation/stylisation or, in other words, fashioning a self-hood in the mould of 'performing' blackness. One begins to see, here, an attempt at continuity in a work marked by many discontinuities. Second, jazz also perhaps alludes to the synthesis of cultures in the urban environment of townships. Third, the novel's disjunctive structure can be read as a progression from a "neurotic pulsation" (Part I) to an uninhibited "explosiveness" (Part II) which suggests that "the history of jazz expresses the history of blackness from an agitated 'nervous condition' of the colonised to the violent dissonance of armed struggles for liberation" (Titlestad 167). Jacobs maintains that jazz is, in fact, a central motif for the entire novel because *To Every Birth its Blood* mimics the pattern of call and response (between the individual soloist and the group performance) between the two sections of the narrative (14). He argues:

The very structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood*, divided as it is into a first part which consists of the first-person narration by Tsi Molohe of his own story of defeat and despair in Alexandra, and a second part, narrated in third person, in which the consciousness shifts from the individual to the collective as it documents the growth of "The Movement", is cast in the mould of blues and jazz – more specifically, as assimilated into black South African urban culture. Only in his music, it seems, can the black South African fully tell his story [...]. [The novel's] apparent discontinuities and shifts in voice and focus [are] typical of the blues form. (14)

Jazz, which is saturated with elements of blues, "does not suggest spiritual transcendence over life's difficulties, nor does it invite collective surrender to its subjective testimony"; the movement of the music, as Jacobs argues, "is the creation of reflection" (11). Thus the first part of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is deeply reflective and mimics the mood of the blues. Tsi, as in the jazz form, engages in

improvisational solo flights of “self-identification” as he grapples with the pains and limited pleasures of urban life under apartheid (Jacobs 15). For example, when he struggles with his strained relationship with his father, his jazz inflected imagination connects with the figure of Coltrane:

it seems important to know where you come from, what happened; so that you can order the future, which is supposedly built for you. Fuck Coltrane. He was beating. Beating like the woman of old, beating corn. Beating grass. Building a future. I want to know about you. Coltrane, beating, beating. Kneeling. Coiling. Curling. Searching, digging, digging and giving in, I want to know about you. Starting from scratch, as if he had no journey whatsoever in his life; Coltrane starting from the beginning, as if a newly born baby, trying, finding, searching a future, searching the past we all know so little about [...] Coltrane, whose son was he? Kneeling and searching repeatedly, with the same energy, pleading, begging, I want to know about you. My father, who are you? Who the hell am I to hurl insults at you? My mother says you fought and fought with everything you had. You fought with your eyes, ears, feet, hands, and she should know how you fought. But I must say every time I look at you I see a terrible, a brutal defeat. I want to know about you. Who are you? (59)

Michael Titlestad’s interpretation of the passage above is instructive at this point. In tracing Tsi’s quest for self-discovery, he maintains that Tsi, here, attempts to connect with his history (“where you come from, what has happened”) by “digging”, which suggests “the journey down the genealogical lines of one’s inheritance” (117). According to Titlestad, Tsi “hears, in Coltrane’s playing, a cultural and political genealogy: he searches for the ‘father’ at the same time he clears a space to fashion a way forward [...] to recover and to either extend or overcome historically constituted constraints” (118).

Also worth noting in Tsi’s “acoustic engagements” which interrupt the silence of defeat, to paraphrase Titlestad (115), is that Serote inserts the figure of the artist, through Coltrane and other jazz artists in the novel, as the conscience of the people: with Nina Simone’s black conscious rhetoric “pounding and pounding on my head, shoulders, pounding and pounding me to a pulp” (25), and Max Roach mediating the silence of defeat with “Members don’t get weary” (26); with Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* “climbing high, high, cutting through distances, flying high [...] ah what is it we do not know” (38), and “Coltrane coming in with his battle, perpetual battle that must at last have killed him, at times going through walls, through barbed wire, sightless [...] carrying his mission out, to seek to search” (39). These reflective solo flights also, significantly, foreshadow Tsi’s eventual flight into exile towards the end of the novel, and so can be read as prophetic. Just as the socio-political situation in the country climaxes during the “days of Power” and the Movement takes over the role of the hero in Part II, so too does the movement and flow of the narrative change. It becomes apparent, as Titlestad argues, that “soul is the music of the second part of the novel” (120), and the rhythm and

tempo of time also begin to pick up speed until the novel eventually gestures towards an imaginary if uncertain future.

Part II provides Serote the space to re-imagine and recuperate the community, as well as (its sense of) time. The era of Black Consciousness (and black pride) galvanises the community into action, and time and movement are recovered and accorded the extraordinary possibility of redemption. As Sole states, “Human will alters the experience of time” (67). The young black characters of Part II are engaged in the burgeoning organised resistance against apartheid, under the leadership of the Movement. The atmosphere is determined and hopeful. Serote also edges towards the notion of memory as redemptive, in that it links the people to their history, and conscientises them about the radical need to struggle against black oppression. In this regard, Sole submits that “understanding the present in terms of its generation by the past is the only way for black people, individually or communally, to start moving into a future that is not meaningless or repetitive” (62). Evidently, Serote attempts this powerful mediation in the symbolic articulation of the Movement. He writes:

The Movement is old. It is as old as the grave of the first San or Khoikhoi who was killed by a bullet that came from a ship which had anchored at Cape Town to establish a stop station. The Movement is as young as the idea of throwing stones, of hurling one’s life at the armed men who believe in God and shoot with guns. The Movement is the eyes which see how poverty is akin to a skeleton. So white. So dry.

(318)

The Movement is not only the people’s link to their history of dispossession, it *is* their history (Visser 74). Also, membership and commitment to the Movement is inevitable; it is like fate, because “Fate is not an abstraction. Fate is thought, is life, is experience. It is the ability to say no when the consequences of that may be sweet or sour. It is a conscious decision” (320). The Movement is also represented in organic metaphors to convey the sense that it is a force of nature: it is like “water flowing from a dam, approaching every corner of the country” (272), “like the sea, is deep and vast, is reflective. It can be calm. It can be rough and tough. Like the wind, it moves and moves and moves” (359). Ultimately, because it falls within the inevitable rhythm of nature – as Visser remarks (74) – the Movement is unstoppable. It is

an idea in the mind of a people; a resolve that it will never accept the process of defeat. Since the settlers first settled, all their laws and wars have succeeded in only postponing the real issue – that the people want and need their land. (327)

Through movement – I refer here both to the ways in which his characters negotiate (themselves in)

physical spaces as well as their activities in the Movement – Serote reconfigures the nature of time, from circular to linear time, and of reality, as his characters begin to immerse and project themselves into the world as subjects and agents. In this way the narrative gestures towards the Mbitiean notion that time is made by people, that people are in fact not subject to time but create it through their active engagement in “events” (16-17). The characters in Part II recreate the meaning of linear time – in delegitimising and disrupting the “meaningless forward motion of white capitalist time [which is] non-progressive in terms of black experience” (Sole 67) and by committing to the Movement, which changes the pattern of time and experience for black people (Sole 68-69). It is clear that Serote uses the idea of the Movement and, above all, the motif of the journey to give meaningful expression to his characters’ existential crisis, as well as a sense of purpose, so that they might, in some ways, overcome their epic defeat. However, his articulation of this necessary “journey” in symbolic and metaphoric language also alerts the reader to the novel’s schizophrenic forms of expression. That is to say, “the novel is pulled into two different forms of logic – the one linear, realistic and analytic, and the other imagistic, repetitive and intuitive” (Sole 57). Stylistically, the novel is therefore characterised by a constantly shifting interplay of symbols and motifs. The motif of the journey, for example, is used to mark a variety of actions which include

the sexual act, the trek towards liberation, the journey of the individual through life, the journey into political exile, the experience of being tortured, and the music of Dollar Brand. (Sole 57)

Sole maintains the view that, “rather than adding to the meaning, such protean, contradictory patterns act as a hindrance to any sense of final symbolic pertinence, in terms of the denouement on a realistic level” (57). For Sole, then, this constant fluidity of reference signals Serote’s failure, in that the reader is left, finally, “with a ‘poetic’ sense of politics which falls short of being able to deal with the struggles and contradictions likely to occur in a post-apartheid South Africa” (73). In contrast, however, I argue that Serote’s multi-textured style – the sense that the novel is composed of (jazz-like) improvisations; the fusion of the poetic-symbolic and the realist-mimetic; the constant change in the meaning of symbols and motifs to suit the action of the narrative – gestures towards an unresolved and process-based, open-ended ideological standpoint which not only resonates with the post-apartheid era, but also illuminates our understanding of contemporary trauma fiction in South Africa. And, if we read *To Every Birth Its Blood* as quasi-autobiographical, Serote, as a black artist writing in apartheid South Africa, writes not only from the ‘nervous’ perspective of a people who have been violently forced to bear witness to the dislocation that has forged blacks as outcasts, but also from a space of uncertainty, of liminality, which captures the spirit of his work, its fluidity.

### 2.3 Part I: Purgatorial Identity, Liminality and Black Nihilism

The narrative of Part I offers an in-depth exploration of one man's psyche as he grapples with the idea of home and the reality of homelessness, with the humiliating and traumatic experience of violence, and with a paralysing consciousness of his defeat. In *Tsi*, Serote creates a narrative persona influenced, perhaps, by the literary concerns of twentieth-century modernist existential literature. *Tsi*, as I have indicated, registers the world as defeated. Serote early sentences him to the tyranny of absolute entrapment – the predetermined value of blackness in anti-black South Africa – the blackness of blackness, if you like, which drives him to a state of chronic restlessness. So disabled is he by his powerlessness that he cannot, even in moments of courageousness, imagine relief: “I felt the need to survive, yet everything, the darkness, the vastness of the empty earth, empty sky, even the lights that kept a steady distance behind us, suggested nothing about life, or survival” (82). *Tsi*'s defeat and helplessness are highlighted in the first chapter during one of his aimless walks on the violent streets of Alexandra. A nameless man is murdered in the shadowy alleys and, when *Tsi*'s friend, Moipone, proposes that they inspect the body, *Tsi* violently rejects Moipone's voyeuristic curiosity:

“They killed him,” Moipone said at last. “Let's go and see”.  
“You want to eat him,” I said, becoming angry.  
“No, but maybe we know him.”  
“Fuck it, if we knew him, we should have gone to him before they killed him.” (7)

According to Watts, this incident points to “*Tsi*'s inability to fuse feeling and action” (239), and calls upon the reader to witness his existential angst. It also, Watts further argues, evinces the frustration and anger of a “people who have been victimised to such an extent that they turn on each other in inverted aggression, and who are too manipulated by fear to go to each other's assistance” (239).

*Tsi*'s place in the world is very much in question; his alienation from the community of Alexandra is established fairly early in the narrative. While walking the streets of the township, for example, he comes to the realisation that: “As usual, I was walking into crowds. I never walked with them. I walked into them” (5). Moreover, he is not only alienated from the community, he is also alienated from himself. This self-alienation recalls Manganyi's discussion of the legacies of colonial domination and the racist socialisation of the black body, which sever the dialogue between an individual's body, his society, and his being-in-the-world with objects/things (28). According to Manganyi, these legacies of colonialism result in a “pathological” black person who is “estranged from his body and his environment” (44). *Tsi* struggles with and is paralysed by a sense of invisibility;

as a black man (and person) he has to live and grapple with the various stereotypes projected onto him by the apartheid orthodoxies. This is evident in his (ironic?) description of himself: “I am a curious and dangerous combination, if we are to take Verwoerd’s dream of South Africa seriously” (29). His growing awareness of his disconnectedness ends in the devastating vulnerability of perpetually feeling lost:

I fear this feeling. It knocks me down. It puts the lights out of me. I do, I fear this strange feeling. I do not know, God, I do not know how many times it has grabbed me. Suddenly, not knowing where to go. It is strange, strange indeed; I fear this feeling. Lost. Big man I am. Lost. (45)

This desolation, coupled with his continuous feelings of defeat and impotence, confine him to the negative impulses of bitterness and shamefulness (Watts 238). One observes these responses, for example, when he visits his brother’s partner, Nomsisi, and she confesses that she had instinctively thought that it was the police at the door when, in fact, it is Tsi who has come asking about her. Tsi bitterly remarks to himself: “There was something shameful in all this. We waited to be fetched” (43). Even so, he is unable to synthesize his consciousness with action. By his own admission, he is “an observer rather than a participant” (71). Indeed, it could be said that he resembles that “finished product at the end of the apartheid machine that Biko condemns” (Eke 68). His lack of will power makes him, as Biko argues of all defeated blacks, “a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity” (31).

I stated earlier that Tsi’s story begins ‘in the middle’ – just after his violent encounter with the police during his days as a journalist, but before his period at McLean’s College – and the reader encounters him as an unemployed and escapist drunkard who is overwhelmed by silences and seeks solace in jazz. The tone of Part I is nihilistic and pensive, which gives the story its reflective edge. Tsi exists in a liminal space of uncertainty between sobriety and drunkenness (45), between consciousness and oblivion. His entry into the narrative, in the first line of the novel, foregrounds the motif of the journey and Tsi’s endemic state of homelessness: “So, when she and I walked into the house after we had been in the street so long, I knew that another time was coming when we would have to be in the street again” (1). This motif of home and homelessness initiates and sustains the novel. *To Every Birth Its Blood* purports the mythic notion of home as a site of wholeness, a fixed place of belonging and rest, and ultimately of rootedness. As Jeanne Moore’s research on the concept of home illuminates: “Home signifies not only a physical place but also represents a center of activities, source of identity, belonging from the past, a goal for personal and social development, an abstract state of being, and a legal concept” (145). Serote’s characters, however, are deeply unhomed

by the claustrophobic, scatological and sinister landscape of the township. Alexandra is alienating and, in response to this environment, “the people seemed not to see each other. They looked somewhere above, somewhere in the distance. Layers and layers of walls were always between people, breaking the reach, erasing the touch” (72). This sense of the unhomely is particularly stressed in what Gagliano terms a “strangely rhapsodic passage, a sort of dark hymn to Alexandra” (“Serote’s Novel” 85), when Tsi laments:

But what is this shit, what is this thing called Alexandra? Seven streets. Twenty-two avenues. Houses. Tin houses. Brick houses. Torn streets. Smell. Dongas. Dirty water in the street. Dark city. Devil’s kitchen. Township. What is this mess. Our home. Our country. Our world. Alexandra. Permits. Passes. Police. Security police. Permit police. CID. South African police. Pass police. Murder and robbery squad. (54)

Tsi’s home is not a place of comfort and belonging: “At home, in the yard, houses seemed to crush into each other, people seemed to be riding on each other. There was no space, nowhere to move, all the time someone’s breath was warm, close to your throat” (72). Added to this feeling of claustrophobia is the constant threat of the township gangsters and the police who “came on horseback, in fast cars, in huge trucks and shot for real [...] with machine guns and banged on doors” (30), during permit and pass raids, all the time instilling a sense of fear, exile and homelessness among the residents. As Tsi’s friend and colleague, Boykie, later declares: “it is only in our memory that this is our land” (78).

Consequently, the notion of home is juxtaposed with its inverse: homelessness, rootlessness and displacement. According to Moore, “Homelessness can be seen as a condition of detachment from society characterized by the lack of affiliative bonds that link people into their social structures” (146). Tsi, for example, is completely unanchored and is often “lost” in the streets of the township. He is haunted both by a chronic lack of accommodation evinced by his inability to be (and feel) at home, and by a deeper societal disconnection. His most basic and personal relationships with his family are fraught. Sole, for example, points out that “Tsi is presented as an individual dislocated from, but ineluctably held within, his own marriage” (59). He is unable to communicate his alienation to his wife, Lily, because he fears that something is “going to snap and snap forever” (3, 51) – that she too would realise the meaninglessness of their existence and he would lose whatever sanity he has left. Lily is both a source of comfort and symptomatic of his inadequacies: Tsi longs to go home to be with her when he is lost in the streets of Alexandra (45), but he is also loathe to confront the vulnerability and the emptiness which her “digging eyes” (3) seem to expose in him. This ambivalence presages his schizophrenic interaction with women in general. On the one hand, he

thinks of women in terms of nourishment and food imagery, terms which undoubtedly allude to the “Mother Africa” trope. For example, of Lily he says, “Lily can enjoy a person like a child enjoys a peach. You see the juice flowing down her tender, strong fingers, towards her smooth arms. Her teeth dig in, right into the flesh; you can see her thick, warm lips embrace the peach, tasting its flesh” (2), and of his mother he recalls, “My mother called me that way, so many times, in that long dragging way, as if my name were spaghetti threads. Her lips tasting the name, something about her voice becoming tender” (2). On the other hand, those women of whom he does not think fondly are impaired; Tshidi (his mistress) and Minki (whose smile is likened to “the skeleton of a dove”) are prime examples of this.

Tsi’s relationship with his parents and siblings is also troubled. Barboure notes that the members of his immediate family are either broken or damaged: his brother, who is symbolically named Fix, is incarcerated on Robben Island for suspicion of anti-establishment activity, and the uncertainties surrounding his detention have put much strain on the Molohe family; his older brother, Ndo, is “irrationally violent and constantly abuses his wife”; his parents are “old, empty and silenced”; and younger sister, who also has a difficult relationship with her parents, is “misguided by trashy escape fantasies, falls pregnant and is rejected by her parents” (172). Tsi is most bitter about his parent’s overpowered demeanour. He claims: “There was nothing I envied or liked about my mother and father. They seemed trapped in a painful terrible knowledge” (53). His mother is a lonely old woman who sometimes talks to herself. She seems to have surrendered to the faith in “going home to her saviour” (62), and in this way uses religion as a crutch. Tsi’s memory of his mother canonises her in the image of singing “the cradle-song of death”, to use a phrase from Du Bois, “as if the song was choking her” (62):

If you ask me who do I trust  
I will say it is the Lord  
I long for my Lord, my saviour  
home is where I am going. (62)

The “cradle song of death”, according to Du Bois’ *Of the Sorrow Songs*, is a genre in Negro Spirituals and was sung by African-American slaves to express a “soul hunger” for some “unseen power”, the hope for rest in death (184). The song, in Serote’s novel, captures a similar meaning, but may also gesture to Mrs Molohe’s resilience and fearlessness of death. Tsi’s father, on the other hand, is detached and seems timid and cowering in his posture behind his newspaper, with his spectacles “clinging round his round fat face, like a child clinging to its mother” (60). Later, when Tsi reflects on the forced removals in Sophiatown – which epitomise the defeat of the older generation – and is

again struck by the hopelessness of black lives, he considers, with tragic nostalgia, the empty shell his father has become:

Long ago, he used to walk fast, wake up early in the morning, work late into the night. Now something has happened to his movements. His back bends forward, he walks slowly, almost dragging his left leg. He still reads the newspaper, every morning, and every evening. But now, unlike long ago, he reads it all by himself, in the bedroom surrounded by silence [...]. He has become strangely quiet. He stares into space a lot. Talks in monosyllables. (61)

Through the Moloape family, Serote shows the familial space as a major site of silence – a silence which is expressed as their inability to communicate effectively, and also to overcome the historic trauma of colonial-apartheid violence. In the face of such trauma, language becomes retarded: “meaning [is] ultimately inaccessible, an event too terrible to declare or formulate, [and silence] mark[s] the final unavailability of any reference point for orienting language and experience” (Wolosky 243). Or, as Serote writes in the self-consciously disjointed poem, “Black Bells”,

Words  
Like thoughts are elusive,  
Like life,  
Where everybody is trapped. (62)

The choice to mute the ‘head of the family’ not only evinces the scale of his emotional, ‘unspeakable’, trauma, but also stresses the emasculation of black men by the apartheid regime which has also affected his sons, as indicated earlier. The family is a site of colonial violence, a phenomenon that takes on a myriad of forms, including psychological, physical and structural violence. In this way, Serote destabilises the conventional assumption of the family as a stable institution. Moreover, the familial space echoes the larger black community: the structural fractures within the family unit reflect a collective sense of powerlessness. This is intensified by the formless space of the township, since identities are implicated in notions of place. Alexandra, as I have argued, is unhomely, and this unhomeliness is foregrounded as the reason behind Tsi’s alienation and rootlessness. He is symbolic of the unaccommodated black man who is disconnected from the urban landscape.

Tsi’s alienation and displacement have deeply-rooted structural explanations in South Africa which are linked to the long history of colonialism and apartheid rule. He states, for example, that “Alexandra is a creation of schizophrenics like Jan Smuts; it is a makeshift place of abode, a township – that is, black people live here. Live here only if the whims of the Verwoerds are still stable to that end” (29). Historically, townships were developed on the fringes of the major cities of South Africa

to control the influx of blacks into the cities. Townships, to elaborate, were constructed as spaces of containment for black people, thereby “fixing” black identity into perpetual “otherness” (Ellapen 48). Gordimer describes the degenerate character of townships as follows:

human conglomerations, neither city nor suburb, now called black townships but once accurately called ‘locations’, since they are sites chosen by whites to dump blacks outside the limits, after work, just as they choose sites well out of the way for city trash heap. (141)

In the novel, the township of Alexandra is the polar opposite of Johannesburg, the “Golden City”: it is cast in the mould of absolute darkness as the “Dark City”. Its streets are tangled and threatening, they rob the young of their innocence. Tsi, whose reading of the differences between the two spaces mirrors the Manichaean logic of colonial orthodoxy, has this to say:

Everything that says anything about the progress of man, the distance which man has made in terms of technology, efficiency and comfort: the Golden City says it well; the Dark City, by contrast, is dirty and deathly. The Golden City belongs to the white people of South Africa, and the Dark City to the black people. The Saturdays and Sundays of Alexandra roar, groan and rumble, like a troubled stomach. The same days in Johannesburg are as silent of the stomach of a dead person. (28)

This passage, on the differences between the spaces inhabited by whites and blacks, parallels Fanon’s argument on the violence of native life in *Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon argues that “the settler’s town [...] is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about” (39). In stark contrast, the “native town” is unhygienic: “[it] is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light” (Fanon 39). This division, as Manganyi notes of black sanctioned spaces in apartheid South Africa, is a form of “psychic manipulation” (27) meant to perpetually displace and unhome the black body. And so, in the black experience, both the “Golden City” and the “Dark City” are spaces of surveillance and entrapment – as *To Every Birth Its Blood* illustrates. The “terrible stew” (29) that is Alexandra, coupled with spontaneous pass raids, epitomises this dislodgement of the black population. After one such raid, Tsi mulls over the helplessness of his situation:

The room seemed so empty. Suddenly I felt lost. I felt tears coming to my eyes. My head pounding. I thought about the knock and the permit. A shit piece of paper which was supposed to allow me to live in Alexandra. Permit. I had lived all my life in Alexandra. I needed a piece of paper to permit me to live on. (57)

The nightmarish quality of township life is juxtaposed with the memory of Lesotho, “with its emphasis on communities; gentleness, [its] circular movement: where the beginning is humility and the search is a desire to be humble, in the process of making a life” (71). Lesotho is represented as an archaic space characterised by traditional values, on par with the Ubuntu maxim on the sacredness of the community for the individual. Because of this romanticisation of the rural space, one could accuse Serote of playing into the coloniser-colonised dynamic, in which the black body is thought incapable of negotiating modernity (Ellapen 52). However, one is quickly disabused of this idea in the representation of rural spaces within South Africa which are marked by severe poverty and drought: Walmanstad is an example of one such rural space in the novel.

Tsi, as a black man in a time when blackness is transgressive of the status quo, grows up with the knowledge that he is “a problem”. I use this term in light of Du Bois’ view, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that blackness (or race, to be precise), in racist America, is “the problem of the twentieth-century” (12). Du Bois problematises, here, the totalising proclivities of race, particularly their framing of the discourses of modernity. One gets a sense, and this is clearer in the collection *The Negro Problem*, that blackness, in contexts where racial discourse is dominant, is the only raced identity. It is at once invisible and hyper-visible and, as a result, it is properly anti-establishment, since it does not fall within the Western scheme of reason and rationality. On the contrary, whiteness emerges as “natural” or, as Hall argues, “original, essential, changeless, and timeless” (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 275).

To return to *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Tsi recalls growing up in a household where he was a stranger to his parents, and his parents to each other; that “something had snapped” long before his birth (62). However, it is only after a degrading and traumatic encounter with the police that he comes to the full consciousness of the black body as excessive. Lewis Gordon argues that, in contexts of oppression, “the black body does not live on the symbolic level, [that is,] it does not symbolise crime and licentious sexuality [...] it is crime and licentious sexuality, bestiality, and all the arrays of embodied social pathologies” (79). As a result, blackness must necessarily be ‘disciplined’<sup>6</sup> and pacified in order for the white social order to survive. It is this knowledge that Tsi grapples with and tries to suppress, with alcohol, at the beginning of the novel. During his days as a journalist, he and Boykie, on a work assignment from Botswana, are stopped and assaulted by the police after witnessing a murder by the latter:

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6 I use this term in the light of Foucault’s notion of “disciplinary power”. As Stuart Hall explains, “the aim of disciplinary power is to bring the lives, deaths, activities, work, miseries and joys of the individual, as well as his/her moral and physical health, sexual practices and family life under stricter discipline and control; bringing them to bear on them the power of administrative regime” (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 289).

lost in the night, and the drama of our time is this time set again [...]. It was us who were the issue of the drama, of the vicious hatred white people have managed to have against black people. (84)

They are subsequently jailed for seven days, beaten, sexually violated and humiliated:

I felt the hand around my neck, wet, shaking in anger, dig its nails into the flesh. I felt as though the bag of my balls was going to be torn off. I felt the air in my arse escaping, I heard its sound, desperate, I tried to hold, I saw the light, and it was then that everything happened: first, something warm ran down my shoes, then my legs had this cold feeling running down them, into my shoes. And then my trousers too were cold, my penis felt as if it was shrinking into oblivion, as the huge hand let go. Tears came into my eyes, and ran down my cheeks, pouring as if forever. The air from the arsehole seemed to sing in laughter, then I felt as if the whole sky had fallen on the back of my neck, something snapped. (89)

The “something [that has] snapped” can be likened to the experience of personal trauma, “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (Erikson 153). This trauma completely shatters Tsi’s view of himself and his sense of well-being, so that when the reader encounters him after this experience, that is, in the opening chapters of the novel, he is bordering on dysfunctionality and nihilism. His post-assault agony disturbs the linearity of time – a disruption which is symptomatic of traumatic events. As Cathy Caruth asserts, a traumatic ordeal constitutes “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Accordingly, the first seven chapters of the novel are stylistically narrated in a recently past but non-specific tense, and are predominately recounted through Tsi’s memory (Sole, “Poetic Resolution” 361). The action is repetitious and time is represented as circular. This circularity signifies the sense of a ‘past that will not pass’ – that is, the temporality of trauma’s haunting – and further explains Tsi’s nihilistic behaviour: his use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, even with the knowledge that “You can’t be drunk and be alert at the same time” (49). Moreover, he seems to (unconsciously?) desire the peacefulness of death, which is contrasted with the chaotic noise of Alexandra. Early in the novel, he visits his grandfather’s grave and at the cemetery he remarks: “The silence here is graceful. The silence sounds like a song of the birds, of the trees, of the wind; something about the silence of this place suggests, makes one suspect that God, or maybe the dead, are looking at one, listening to one, about to talk to one” (11). This peacefulness is equivalent only to the fulfilment he gets from jazz, whose redemptive qualities I have already argued, and this “graceful” silence stands in stark contrast to the “terrible stew” of Alexander and chaos of life under apartheid, in general.

I understand Tsi’s condition of nihilism through Cornel West’s notion of “Black Nihilism” –

that is, “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (277). While West’s work focuses on the African American experience of the legacies of slavery, his ideas resonate with the pre-Black Consciousness era of South Africa – as depicted in *To Every Birth Its Blood* – in the lack of hope and the “absence of meaning” (West 277) in the lives of the black characters. (I read Black Consciousness here as a buffer against the effects of colonialism and apartheid, a “cultural structure of meaning and feeling that embodies values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence”, to appropriate West (277)). Throughout the first chapters of this novel, Tsi’s life is characterised by meaninglessness. He is paranoid that, should he deal with his experience of white power, something is going to “break” or “snap and snap forever” (3, 51, 89). Significantly, during the abovementioned assault by the police, Tsi suddenly recalls the soothing comfort of his grandmother and comes to the significant realisation that he needs to commit himself to “the journey” against black oppression:

I thought of how she would hold my hand, call my name and tell me that I should know that on this earth, I have a journey to make, and that the journey has to be made with and among other people [...]. I thought of her saying to me: Child you must know, in the darkness of your past, where you come from, and in the faint future where you are going, that you were issued by loins which bathed in the fire that made the lightning, that dared the clouds to join and curl into the blood of man, that you were like the plants, so merged with the soil, and water, and wind, and the sun and the moon, that your past is so scattered, nothing could hold you. (88)

Still, he remains traumatised and impotent. His post-traumatic agony effectively renders him a non-person, as I explain later in my discussion. To me, Tsi’s encounter with the police speaks to the gap between knowledge and experience, because it is only after the direct and personal experience, the concrete humiliation that is located in his body, that his view of himself is forever altered. That is, humiliation, coupled with the fact that his body betrays him during the event, shatters his sense of self. His emasculation is emphasised when, for instance, he visits his mistress, Tshidi, and is unable to get an erection (112). The episode not only draws attention to Tsi’s shame and symbolic castration, but also illustrates how post-traumatic stress affects those who interact with traumatised individuals, such that personal trauma is, in some ways, a shared experience:

And, in a sense, it must have happened to Tshidi too; she must have wondered if she was a woman at all when we both knew what was happening, because I could have lain there with her, having no penis, having no balls. When I realised what was happening, I wondered why I had come to Tshidi. Shame pushed me into being brutal with myself. I felt I deserved to be ashamed, I deserved to be told that I was not a man. I felt I did not deserve Tshidi’s beauty, kindness, understanding. I would not have been

surprised at all if she had pushed me off the bed, to the floor, and if she had chased me out of the house. I waited for her to do it. We lay there, silent, distant from each other, both of us asking who we were. (113)

The narrative seems haunted by a ‘silence’, there is a disorienting gap in the last two chapters of Part I and the story itself seems conscious of the silence. Tsi articulates it thus:

It was tangible, it had colour, it had smell, it was familiar; there was no way I could not recognise it, it had been with me while I was still learning to hold my cock and pee. It was here with me now. I took it with me, home, and it kept us company with a bottle of whiskey [...] And then I began to become aware that between the melody, harmony and rhythm of the music that now and then filled my house, from Hugh, Dollar, Nina, Letta, Miriam, Kippie, Cyril Magubane, Coltrane, Miles [...] between their melody, harmony and rhythm, when the pants are down, the silence is there [...] It is heavy. I could no longer listen to the music that had taught me so much! (139)

Towards the end of Part I, it becomes evident that the time for introspection is over, as jazz can no longer mediate the oppressive silence of apartheid brutality. Time is recuperated from an endless circularity of defeat and meaninglessness in that it moves in a more linear rhythm, and the action also becomes fast-paced. As the school children take to the streets and are “souled” by them (137), Black Consciousness galvanises the community into action and everyday spaces, such as the streets, become sites of resistance. Movement is hence recuperated from Tsi’s aimless wandering, and accorded purpose in the Power period. We read that “the infants of that year bore their real names” (140). This means that parents gave their children African names instead of English ones as a way of reclaiming their blackness. Tsi’s parents are also unmuted as they begin to talk about their son, Fix, who “had become a long term prisoner” (140). Furthermore, Tsi’s defeat is also suddenly remedied when he assumes a post and then later becomes head of a research unit at McLean’s College. During the two-year gap in the narrative, we learn that he and Lilly have relocated to Dube, Soweto, and are now a family of three. While Tsi is at McLean’s we also learn that he is in contact with student leaders who are members of the Movement (152). Before long, he is summoned to John Vorster Square and questioned by the police about his activities at McLean’s, after which he realises that “McLean’s is not the answer” (160) to the question of establishing an education system that will empower black children. Part I ends significantly with a family gathering: the Molopes discussing the bravery of the freedom fighters and the necessity of the revolution. The tone for Part II is set.

## 2.4 Part II: Redemptive Fantasies and the Birth of the Black Subject

The second part of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is narrated from a third-person point of view to register a collective voice, which is emphasised by the plural protagonists Part II contains. The choice of third-person narration foregrounds the novel's central theme: that the collective is fundamental in the quest for (liberation and) identity. Part II begins with the lone figure of John, standing by a window, "fighting, fighting so hard, using every trick of the mind he could think of to forget the sound of the FN rifle" (164). John, who we soon learn "stood strictly on the periphery of things" (171), is struggling to come to terms with the brutal murder of his lover, Nolizwe, who was gunned down by policemen on the street during the "days of the school children" (171). The second part of the novel is thus set in the aftermath of the 1976 Student Uprising, in contrast to most of Part I, which registers the years leading to the uprising.

Historically, the June 16 1976 Student Uprising represents a pivotal point in the resistance movements against apartheid in South Africa. The Sharpeville Massacre of March 21 1960 not only awakened black people to their pernicious existence, but also alerted them of the necessity of armed struggle against black oppression. However, during this time many political leaders were either languishing in Robben Island or exiled (Pityana 2). Moreover, "all credible political organisations were banned, and communities were gripped and paralysed by fear, and uncertainty and despair were in the air" (Pityana, 2). This context inspired the formation of the Black Consciousness Movement as the antithesis of the white dominant culture. Black Consciousness, under the leadership of its founding member Steve Bantu Biko (and other important figures in the Movement), essentially emphasised non-violence. Its primary aims were to cultivate a sense of solidarity within the black community due to their collective experience – their "mutual knowledge" – of suffering, and to retrieve and rehabilitate black identity (Manganyi 19). Drawing on the Hegelian concept of consciousness, as well as Du Bois's notion of Black Consciousness, which gave resilience to the Movement, Black Consciousness philosophy signalled the birth of the black subject in South Africa. It was, therefore, a moment of agency for the structurally marginalised ('non'-White) communities. As Manganyi asserts, the BCM "demanded that the word black be used instead of the notoriously insulting 'non'-Whites or 'non'-Europeans" (*Being-Black* 17). The BCM supported the peaceful protest of June 1976, which turned violent when police opened fire on the students. This uprising has since become a reference point to mark the shift from peaceful forms of resistance in the BCM, towards more aggressive and violent ones in the struggle for freedom (Pityana; Hirshmann). As a result, this insurgence is thought to be very important for the transformation and evolution of BC philosophy. While the BCM preceded the rebellion of 1976 as a challenge to the apartheid diktat, the

uprising has become a fundamental part of the lore of (black resistance in the tradition of) the Black Consciousness Movement. It gave birth to a new kind of black person, as *To Every Birth Its Blood* illustrates.

Critics have found Serote's suppression of the actual uprising in this work rather curious. Watts offers some speculation in this regard, citing Serote's exile at the time of the uprising as a possible reason for this 'omission'. She concludes, however, that "the book is concerned not with events but with consciousness", whilst Visser argues that "June 1976 is clearly the fulcrum on which the novel rests; it marks the transition from part 1 to part 2" (68). His observation on the insurrection of 1976 as "an absent center" (68) is very enlightening, not only in so far as it speaks to the uprising as a synecdoche – which is precisely the point he makes, but also as it gestures to the loss of something fundamental, which is the theme of the opening chapter of Part II: the loss of love, of self, of belonging, of roots.

The opening chapter of Part II, as I have already alluded to in the discussion above, is focalised through the character of John and centralises his experiences in the aftermath of the '76 uprising. John is first introduced in the first chapter of the novel when Tsi and his friend, Moipone, pay him a visit at his place of employment (a "One Day Service Dry Cleaner") to invite him out for a drink. He declines the offer, and Tsi has this to say about him: "all you see of John is his quiet face" (8). On his re-introduction in Chapter Nine, when he refuses to participate in political activities with his friends and contemporaries, we learn that he "stood strictly on the periphery of things" (171). Like Tsi, John's character begins with "non-involvement [...] with a deliberate rejection of knowledge" (Watts 238). Both characters seem to echo Du Bois' notion of "two souls"<sup>7</sup> in as much as their predicament speaks to the conflict between the individual and the community. John, who is really struggling to come to terms with the spectacle of black oppression, wrestles to "forget the sound of running, mad footsteps running. The smell of smoke. The sight of fire. The panic-driven, roaring cars. The screaming, screaming as if the skies were ablaze with screams, and the certain presence of death" (164). The abundant use of repetition in this opening chapter signals John's inability to comprehend the horror of those days when "Alexandra had been a stage for battle" (168), as well as the brutal sight of the murder of Nolizwe – whose name ("daughter of the nation/world"), as Gagiano correctly points out – "links her to the idea of the nation" (*Dealing with Evils* 120). The third-person narrator describes this murder in graphic terms:

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<sup>7</sup> Du Bois uses this term to describe the existential crisis of the African American identity, which is torn between Americanness and Negro-ness, to express the conflict of "two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Souls* 9).

Her voice was swallowed by the voice of thunder. Her gait became distorted, she slowed, twisting this and that way from the impact of the bullets which were piercing her body; she spread her arms, and she stood very, very awkwardly in the middle of the street, alone, face to face with the killers, and, like a sack, she went down head first, face into the earth, and was still. (165)

When John does finally allow himself to remember the days of the uprising, it becomes “clear for the first time” (165): he remembers the policemen invading the streets of the township with “FN’s held in the shooting position” (165), Nolizwe’s brother’s futile act of rebellion as he tried to drive through a police barrier and was gunned down; Nolizwe’s protest, who too was gunned down; and himself cowering behind a pillar, helpless (166). His memory of the event becomes a way of re-membering the dismembered life which he shared with Nolizwe – a way of coming to terms with his loss and an attempt at rehabilitation, of restoring what has been shattered. In this way, Serote early presages the trope of the redemptive possibilities of memory, which is his central preoccupation in this section of the book, as I explore presently.

John’s memory of the events of the ’76 uprising also acts as a catalyst for the action of Chapter Nine. It unfolds that John and Nolizwe met at college, where she had completed her law degree and where he studied Fine Arts but was expelled on suspicion of participating in a college strike. After being expelled, John was detained, tortured in an effort to compel him to expose his comrades, and spent eleven months in solitary confinement. Nolizwe tried to comfort him, but John remained unconsolated: instead “He stayed up that night trying to [...] atone. He had felt alone and ashamed of himself” (167). His need to atone suggests that he betrayed the resistance in the past. But John is unable to admit his weakness and complicity – that he is not one of those who “would rather die than give the names; [who] would rather fall from the top floors of buildings to save the lives that must take the lives of these mad men” (167). John’s shame and powerlessness is juxtaposed with the helplessness of witnessing the murder of his lover, an experience which has crippled him: “his heart, which knew calamity, had frozen to steel. He was helpless because he knew now that he was a deadly man” (168). Above all, he feels helpless because his disposition has awakened him to a seemingly impotent desire for action; he says, “I feel helpless because I cannot go to anyone now and then, I am ready to fight, teach me how, so we can end the horror of our country” (168). He tries to resume his daily routines of collecting and delivering clothes, “but the street was there all the time, no matter where he was in Alexandra, to remind him that there had been days of Power and the time of the school children” (171). His attempts at normalcy are also frustrated by the uneasy “silence” (169) following the “days of Power”, because the whole community seems confident in the knowledge that “A relationship had been established; time was to nurture it” (169). Silences, as I indicated earlier in

my discussion, are fairly ambiguous in the text because, as John notes, “silences created more complex silences” (179); they represent defeat at times and moments of deep introspection and contemplation at others, or simply the idea of “resistance by endurance”, as Gagliano argues (*Dealing with Evils* 123). Their meaning constantly changes and has to be located in relation to the novelistic action, which complements Serote’s fluidity of meaning – his jazzed prose, as it were. However, even as John realises the complexities and the sometimes destructiveness of these silences, he yearns for them deeply, for the “the silence of the Kombi. The silence of the deserted street” (183). And, like Tsi in Part I, John finds himself “lost” in the streets (183).

The narrative begins to expand as the novel introduces John’s friends and contemporaries who try to console and support him through his loss. Dikeledi, Onalenna and Vuki (who are actors) pay John a visit, and their discussion of the impending revolution reminds John of Ona’s performance in the Takalani production of the play *We looked for each other in the day and night*. The play, we are told, was staged in a local church which hosted people from different congregations: “The hall was packed with red, blue, green and black blouses, hats and mothers who believed in God” (172). This scene acknowledges the church as a political space in this time of crisis – as a site for private/personal and public/political redemption. It also indicates the infinite intrusion of (matters of) the state in spaces sanctioned for private discourse; and further highlights the significant role of the church in the fight against apartheid, particularly the emergence (in popular discourse<sup>8</sup>) of the notion of Black Theology. Barney Pitsoa-Motsepe asserts that “Black Theology made revolutionary action for liberation possible” (10). It arose from the suspicion that mainstream Christianity was a tool of white dominance and, like Liberation Theology in South America, Black Theology tailored the Christian message to the black situation: “It shaped the religion to one of relevance and suitability to the Black masses in South Africa” by infusing “Christianity with flexibility and relevance to the lives of those marginalized by society” (Gqola 133). Churches, as evinced in the novel, became sites for protest and conscientisation, partly through the staging of theatre productions. It is important to appreciate that this was one of the projects of the Black Conscious Movement: the formation of self-help programmes in Black communities. According to Peterson, “In the Seventies Black Consciousness took on board a number of themes including Black initiative, self-definition, determination and liberation. A significant cultural focus ran through all these objectives, and cultural practices were accorded a prominent political role within the movement” (233).

During her performance, Ona recites a poem about the resilience of black people in the face

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of Black Theology can be traced back to the Black missionary press of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa. However, it only gained traction with the emergence of the BCM, and began to be philosophised alongside the broader psycho-political concerns with black oppression, as instrumental in the struggle for liberation.

of ritualised crimes against black humanity:

Remember, they did it in Sharpeville long long ago  
And then in Cato Manor  
In Sekhukhuniland and in Pondoland  
In Bulhoek  
Every time, after they do it,  
We clean the streets.  
We remove the blood, it's not nice to walk on  
We remove the bodies  
It would be terrible to see dogs eat themselves  
And then we hope.

Her performance makes a profound impression on John because, he remembers: “on stage every word, every step and gesture, was real, so actual for her” (174). As Ndebele concedes, in his critique of black South African protest fiction, because “the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness” (32), it is a truism that “everything in South Africa has been so mind-bogglingly spectacular” (31). Thus, reality constantly blurs into fiction and vice versa: the real and the unreal collapse into each other, as one observes in Ona’s performance. Ndebele surmises that “It is no wonder then, that the black writer [in this case, the black performer], sometimes a direct victim, sometimes a spectator, should have his imagination almost totally engaged by the spectacle before him” (32). As a result, it is not possible to separate the personal and private from the political and public. This memory of Ona’s performance prompts John to think about his old friend Yao (Ona’s partner), who is exiled in America. In a letter Yao has written to John and Ona, he relates his feelings of disconnection from ‘home’, his frustrations because for him ‘the revolution is televised’,<sup>9</sup> and finally, with respect to Nolizwe’s passing, he writes: “to die is part of the answer too” (175). It is partly this knowledge – the significance of dying for liberation as opposed to living a life of meaninglessness – and the clarity he gains from his recollection of the days of Power that galvanises John into action by joining the Movement later in the novel (252-254). It is also important to note that John’s decision to join the Movement is partly motivated by his desire to redeem the disruption of his and Nolizwe’s love. We are told:

The one thing he wanted her to know was that he did not only possess a heart of steel because they had killed her, but mainly because their love, like all love in this country where there was “non crisis”, would otherwise rot and be vulgar. (168)

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<sup>9</sup> This brings to mind Gil Scott Heron’s poem and song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” and ultimately, the role of mass media on the formation of cultural memory.

As the chapter ends, John converses with Oupa, Tsi's idealistic nephew and activist, about the positive aspects of the uprising: that it united the people and clarified the decision for necessary political action. Evidently, clarity of mind and, by extension, a unifying consciousness, are ultimately the key components for political commitment.

The structure of Part II in some ways parallels that of Part I: the narrative delves "into the consciousness of an individual as part of the analysis of changing patterns of consciousness among the population at large, and then spread[s] out to take in how it affects a wider group" (Watts 245). And the confident and optimistic tone of the end of Part I bleeds into the narrative of Part II as the Movement gains momentum. In addition, John "feels to the reader at first indistinguishable from Tsi – as if he is "another" Tsi" (Gagiano, *Dealing with Evils* 120). Indeed, Watts argues that the structure "seems to recall the repetition effects of traditional oral poetry, though here the repetition is rarely exact but at each instance introduces some subtle element of change that gives the literary work its progressive impetus" (238). However, Part I primarily delves into Tsi's individual consciousness, while in Part II John's consciousness "is early meshed" with that of the Movement – which is "much wider and less homogeneous" (Watts 245). Watts advances that

It is as though Serote had conceived his form as two waves of consciousness – one which swells and disperses, and apparently reaches no goal, but which in fact is swept back into and increases the force of the second wave – a wave which swells into a torrent as the movement gathers momentum and engulfs numberless people and places in its forward impulse. (245)

And, importantly, while Part I takes cognisance of the collective experience of massive disruption, in that it acknowledges the cultural trauma of apartheid, it nevertheless explores the psychological and individual experience of trauma, and so borders on the introspective nihilism of the existentialist character. Through Tsi, Serote explores the 'first' stage of Black Consciousness philosophy: the importance of psychological liberation for political freedom. The second part of the novel underscores physical liberation and, as such, can be read as interested in the phenomenon of cultural trauma and collective identity.

Cultural trauma, as Jeffrey Alexander explains, "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). Thus, cultural trauma is characterised by a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric" of a group (Eyerman 2). In *Everything in Its Path* (1976), Kai Erikson writes that cultural trauma is

a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The cultural trauma works itself slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those suffering from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma”. But is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realisation that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (153-54)

The cultural trauma at issue here is the black experience of colonialism, slavery and apartheid in South Africa; the trauma of dehumanisation, dispossession, and structural and psychological violence to the African identity. I call it a black experience because, as my discussion on the distinction between black and African identity in the first chapter argues, blackness is a ‘product’ of an irrevocably traumatised African identity. Blackness only became a racially traumatised category consequent on the violence inflicted upon African identities. In Chapter One, I also flesh out the continuities and ruptures between African identity and black identity. What I want to re-emphasise here is the link between cultural trauma and the formation of collective black identity,<sup>10</sup> that is, of blackness as imagined and articulated in Black Consciousness rhetoric. I argue that the collective remembrance of this colonial trauma, coupled with the lived experience of marginality in apartheid South Africa, led to the institutionalisation of black identity through organisations like the Black Consciousness Movement. In other words, the Movement was a way of negotiating belonging and a new sense of (collective) identity.

The BCM, as previously indicated, rejected the classification of “Africans” as “non-White”, because the negative implications of the latter term diminished their human dignity. Instead, they opted for the radical definition of this identity as black. According to the Biko-SASO Manifesto,

blacks are those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identify themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations. (52)

I will briefly overlook the bluntness of this definition as a theoretical tool for constructing identity and focus, instead, on part of its purpose as a liberatory tool for inspiring resistance to apartheid. As such, this definition of blackness sought to reorientate the “mental attitude” of the oppressed by alerting them to their mutual history of cultural deracination, and attempting to recover shared histories and cultural values. This sense of unity in solidarity was forged through the redemptive fantasy of the hyper-collectivity of blackness. As Jan Mohamood once argued,

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<sup>10</sup> Here I am following Roy Eyerman’s approach in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formations of African-American Identity* (2001).

For the nonwhite South African, the only escape from the real deprivation and generic perception lies in forming or belonging to a new community which, though demanding certain sacrifices and self-imposed limitations, will nevertheless recognize his individuality and treat him as a complete rather than a marginal being.

(235)

I read blackness, then, as a redemptive fantasy not only because the identity is produced in contradiction – by contradiction I reference the fact there is not biological basis for race, and I also acknowledge blackness’ dialogic engagement with whiteness – but also that blackness was/is a social invention designed to subvert the dehumanising psychosocial proclivities of colonialism, while also providing black communities with a cultural structure of self-determination and endurance. And, as such a redemptive fantasy, blackness – in Black Consciousness rhetoric – sought a sense of cultural decolonisation: to *imagine, recuperate and articulate a liberated identity* that would “rise as one in the creation of a socialist utopia” (Trump 10). However, as a tool for constructing identity, it should be noted that the Biko-SASO definition of blackness is fraught since it foregrounds the conditions of the oppressed, their concrete situation – discrimination. That is, it makes the oppressive socio-historical conditions part of the identity and, in this way, it fails to give us liberated black subjects. Nevertheless, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, responding to the exigencies of the time, seems interested in the philosophy of the Movement as a tool for liberation in its institution of the collective. And, by focusing on the collective, Serote attempts to counter the lived experience of dislocated and unhomed black people.

Cultural trauma, appears to embody a “double capacity” (Sztompka 193) as both identity-disrupting and identity-solidifying (Smelser 44) or, to put it differently, it results in the formation of new identities. As Piotr Sztompka writes, “In spite of its immediate negative, painful consequences, [trauma] shows its positive, functional potential as a force of social becoming” (194).

Chapters Ten to Twelve of the novel focus on Dikeledi – whose family has a long history of political involvement – as the narrative continues to expand and incorporate the swelling consciousness of the young and old revolutionaries of the Movement. Chapter Ten opens with David Horwitz, Dikeledi’s colleague, who seems to always be hovering over her at work, always unsure of himself around her. Dikeledi, who at first seems to abhor his behaviour, secretly enjoys his attention. When he offers her a lift to Alexandra “she smiled mischievously. Her beautiful, childlike face, her dark staring eyes, wore a watchful expression” (198). In the car, however, she brings their quiet flirtation to a halt by enquiring about David’s wife and their children. We soon learn that David is struggling with his conscience, because he is “different from the other whites who have servants, who

have swimming pools, two cars, a garden boy” (199). He is contemplating letting their domestic worker go, but is conflicted because, as he argues, “if we don’t employ her, someone else will or she will starve” (199). When he asks for Dikeledi’s opinion on the matter, she abruptly retorts “I have no opinion about that. I have no woman working for me” (199), a retort which is followed by a “strange silence in the car” (199). Their dialogue, or lack thereof, can thus be interpreted as a comment on the fraught relations between blacks and whites at this historical moment – specifically following the BCM’s public withdrawal from multiracial organisations. In this political climate, we are told much later, Dikeledi, who works as a journalist, has decided to change her name: “Her byline was no longer Rose Ramono but Dikeledi Ramono” (249). Her father had given her the name Dikeledi, “because he had come to believe that Africans were weeping everyday” (220). Meanwhile, David is considering emigrating to “London. Maybe Germany. France. Which?” (200), because he is unable to make sense of his life in South Africa and wants to “leave all the problems behind. Servants. Nasty neighbours. Guilt of being white” (200). This, of course, undermines his “differen[ce] from [...] other whites”, because it illustrates his uncurtailed sense of mobility as a result of his privileged position as white, and above all underscores the ‘false consciousness’ of white liberalism in this context. As Dikeledi and David approach the township, they observe “hordes of people [arriving from work] pouring into the township” (200). When she gets out of the car, she comes to the realisation that “she [is] one of the many, many people” (201) and is thus symbolically engulfed by this wave of blackness as she enters the township. Martin Trump, who takes issue with Serote’s representation of white liberals, his “stereotypical portrayal of characters from the ruling class” (6), argues that the novel “refuses these characters a positive role in the struggle” (6). However, he misses the point of the text – its unapologetic interest in and exploration of black consciousness. And, unfortunately, his critique recalls Manganyi’s argument on South African liberalism as “a form of narcissism – a form of white self-love” (17).

Dikeledi lives in Alexandra with her mother, Grace (a director of the Alexandra Welfare Centre), and her younger sister. The sisters’ older brother, Morolong – who was named after “a brilliant African leader” (219), was disowned by their parents when he dropped out of school, and spends his days lost in the streets. And their father, Michael Ramono (a former school principal and revolutionary), is imprisoned for his activities in the Movement. The family moved to Alexandra after the defeat of Morolong (the political leader), when Sophiatown was “pulled out, roots and all” (219). It is at this point that Michael Ramono’s underground political activity began to surface:

He spent many nights reading, writing, planning. He spent many days and nights travelling, dreaming. Ramono spent many days and nights dreaming about being near

the oasis. His wife knew this, but not the details, and she made it a point not to stand in his way. She was always ready to help, to pack his suitcases and to unpack them, and to know only his destination. She, in turn, was dreaming about him and his oasis [...]. He gave all he could to respond to Africa's need. He lost his principalship. Weeks passed without his being at home and, when he was home, whites, Indians and coloureds came. His wife became clearer about the oasis from what the newspapers said. She was as the earth to a tree: this sometimes made him weep. (221)

Ramono's involvement in the Movement draws attention to the price of political commitment – the trope of sacrifice, as it were: the disruption of his family life, as well as the realisation that the oasis is elusive, “that one may reach it, or one may never see it. White laws had reared him and, like a chicken now walking the ground, now held in the air held by the claws of a hawk, Ramono had vanished” (221-222). He is eventually snatched by the apartheid system, as Gagono argues, “like a ‘chicken [...] in the air, held by the claws of a hawk’ as if removing him from contact with the soil” (“Serote's Novel” 86).

African feminist theory has long criticised the representation of women like Grace (and arguably Tsi's mother in Part I) in nationalist literature as ‘auxiliary members’ of the struggle. Anne McClintock, for example, argues that the nationalist agenda privileged male political agency, while women were perceived “as the militant protectors of their communities and activist children” (116). Similarly, Florence Stratton problematises the propensity, in nationalist discourses, to represent womanhood via the analogy of the ‘Mother Africa trope’, which means that women only serve as ‘an index for the state of the nation’ and are symbolic of “the heritage of African values, an unchanging African essence” (41). The national subject, in these nationalist representations, is typically male, and the female or feminised Africa is subjected to his gaze, thus perpetuating male dominance. Pumla Gqola, from her radical feminist perspective, delegitimises the very foundations of liberation movements in South Africa, particularly the BCM, which are premised on the notion that “race is the primary oppressive force for all those racially subjugated in South Africa” (134). She argues that the fallacy of this supposition is that it privileges a *specific* black experience of oppression: “[it] pronounces a hierarchy of oppression. It is also ironic that exploring the ‘primary’ oppression invariably leads to the repudiation of all other forms of oppression” (134). As Ona, in *To Every Birth Its Blood* realises, while observing the old lady MaMaria, “Women seem to be waiting, waiting, all the time waiting, for the men to come back, and then waiting after the men have died, to follow them” (283). Evidently, women are displaced both by racial and patriarchal discourse. Siga Fatima Jagne, admittedly drawing on Spivak's notion of the subaltern, argues that “the Third World woman experiences a triple displacement: as a woman in patriarchal discourse, as the feminine that undoes the whole in deconstructional discourse, and as a colonized woman” (7).

Serote, however, does not easily fall into the trend of nationalist African literature, specifically in his portrayal of the younger generation of women as revolutionary subjects. Female characters like Dikeledi, Onalenna, and Nomsisi are actively involved in the quest for liberation. It is important, however, to note that generally the older generation, with the exception of figures like Ramono, is represented as impotent. Their role in the present is to impart their wisdom, as evinced in the conversation between Tsi and old man Zola in Part I; Dikeledi and her father; MaMaria and Ona, Hlase and Mmaphefo. Oupa (Tsi's nephew), whose role in the Movement is very important, links the struggle to the ancestors, since his name literally means "grandfather" (Gagiano, *Dealing With Evils* 123). The older generation then, represents the defeat of the old-guard leadership of the resistance. It is the younger revolutionaries who – drawing on the political wisdom of the old – form a new guard to counter black oppression. And, significantly, the Movement is a communal journey, so that when Dikeledi is recruited by Oupa, she is not recruited alone but together with John. As Watts emphasises:

This is not the journey of an individual, examining his soul and working through a philosophical justification of the need for commitment to a movement that will, in the last resort, turn to violence to achieve its objectives. It is the socialisation of one who has allowed introspection and private grief to deflect him from the needs of his community – a community which is not a philosophical abstraction, but composed of close friends and relatives and their connections, spreading outward in an ever-increasing circle. (246)

The Movement, as I have indicated earlier in my discussion, becomes the hero, or rather the central protagonist of Part II, because it significantly alters the experience of blackness in this context of overt subjugation. It connects the people to their history of dispossession and oppression, a history which speaks to the redemptive quality of memory as the root of progress, because it is this recollection of history (of collective memory, if you like) which allows bonds of causality to be established in the novel (Sole, "This Time Set Again" 62). The Movement not only galvanises the people into liberatory resistance – thereby awakening them from the oppressive "silence" following the upsurge of '76 – but also accords value to black identities such that blackness becomes desirable – as one observes in Dikeledi's changed attitude. She reflects: "a new, a brand-new black woman and man had been created" (235). The Movement also changes her experience of time. As Sole observes, when she learns that Onalenna is a member of the Movement, Dikeledi "thinks of the previous day – before she had this knowledge – as the old past", a distinction which indicates a rupture in the fabric of time as militant activity increases ("This Time Set Again" 67). Thus the Movement speeds up the experience of time (Sole 67). On this idea of the retrieval, or redemptive possibilities, of historical time Sole remarks:

Simultaneous with the process of disruption of apartheid South Africa, the emptiness of “conquered time” is nudged into progressive, linear time by and for supporters of the Movement [...]. Individuals such as Onalenna and Dikeledi and other fighters set time free, and set loose a chain of events which can no longer be controlled by any individual. (“This Time Set Again” 67)

The streets are also recuperated from their tangled disconnectedness, in that they are clearly mapped out in the minds of the characters. Wilkinson corroborates this claim: “It is *their* city, a city they move through with determination, a city, despite its continuing divisions, they can occupy and *use*, just as they will soon be occupying other parts of their country” (490). Thus the Movement is expressed as a natural element: “like water flowing from a dam approaching every corner of the country [...] the Movement is like the wind” (272), and in terms of spreading roots: “Like an old tree, the Movement spreads and spreads its roots. It entrenched itself in the soil issuing root after root, to spread and spread and spread” (326). This metaphor of the “old tree” is a deliberate focus on the historical dimensions of the struggle, and in this sense, attempts to re-member those dismembered members who have fought for liberation, and registers those who will still sacrifice their lives for this endeavour. The Movement’s rooted identity – rooted in history, that is – can also be interpreted as Serote’s attempt at rooting or locating his characters, thereby countering the dislocation consequent on apartheid. For example, when the young and idealistic Oupa is captured by the police and tortured into admitting he belongs to the Movement, he responds heroically: “Yes, I am a member of the Movement” (313). The word member, as Gagiano explains “does not merely indicate his admission, now that it no longer matters, of his involvement in this organisation – it proclaims his incorporation in the life of the land itself, which will move on beyond his own death” (“Serote’s Novel” 89). Additionally, the underground work of the Movement is significant, in that it implies a deep connection with land; for example, when Themba is on (Movement) duty in Walmanstad he says this of its residents: “The people here carried with them the smell of water and the smell of the soil. They seemed to come from underground” (314). The Movement is further described in organic metaphors, “like the sea” and “the wind” (359) and, because it is part of nature, it is unstoppable (Visser 74). As a “natural force”, it grows and expands beyond the locations of Alexandra, Johannesburg and Soweto, spreading to other parts of the country, both urban and rural.

Consumed with the objective of “disciplinary power”, the state responds with violence: “There were cops all over Alexandra. Some houses were searched. The real owners of Alexandra had now moved in, had taken the township over at gunpoint.” (269-70). To this invasion, members of the Movement engage in kind: traitors like the policeman, Mpando (263), and the four chiefs responsible

for identifying ringleaders are eliminated, a bomb is planted in Johannesburg Central (269), and farmers throughout the country witness their farms being torched, their prison workers and cattle set free (Watts 246). The Movement's response thus recalls Fanon's important work on violence, in which he claims "from birth it is clear [to the native/black] that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called into question by absolute violence" (37). According to Fanon, the natives' violence is important, because it works against the separatist structures of colonialism and unifies the people. It is also cathartic because it is "a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him feel fearless and restores his self-respect" (94).

I cannot stress enough the significance of the Movement as a form of redemption for the black people in this novel. It not only unifies the revolutionaries in imaginary oneness – in the sense of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" – but it also imbues the people with agency so that they insert themselves into the world as subjects. This imagined community is underscored by the generosity and compassionate links shared by those belonging to the Movement:

The tenderness between Onalenna and Dikeledi; and John in his grief, between Dikeledi and her mother and sister in their family tragedy, between John and Oupa and Dikeledi in their visit of consolation – a tenderness that, like the struggle, spreads outwards to Mmaphefo, Russia, Hlase, Tuki, Themba – these safety nets of affection provide the foundation of the profound humanism that underlies the violence of the struggle. (Watts 247)

Sole has taken issue with this sacrosanct representation of the Movement, and he problematises Serote's gesturing towards the notion that "membership to the Movement will give the individual unproblematic access to a close relationship with 'the people'" (346b). However, Serote, as Watts (247) and Barbour (176) also argue, is not sentimental in his representation of the Movement, because the price for commitment has dire consequences: the townships are reduced to 'a stage for battle' and everywhere people are in mourning for their lost loved ones; Oupa and Mandla (and countless others) are tortured and killed. Personal relationships also suffer the strain of public conflict: the relationship between Themba and his partner, Granny, breaks down as a result of his commitment, a commitment which also negatively impacts upon their son Fidel; Yao and Ona's relationship, too, remains fraught, even after his return from the United States of America. The novel nears its end with some of the members of the Movement being "vomited" (346) out of the country and into exile in Botswana (and neighbouring countries), and with the reintroduction of a confused Tsi, who is still traumatised and abuses alcohol in an attempt to cope with the "mass psycho-pathology" consequent on oppression (Sole 74). Tsi laments:

I had become something called a refugee. At first, that is what I called myself. Then I said, I am a political refugee. Then I did not want that tag. I said I was an exile. Then I said, how can I be an exile in Africa? No, I am not an exile. What am I then?  
(346)

I believe, however, that the reintroduction of Tsi evinces some anticipation of the kind of criticism advanced by Sole on Serote's representation of the Movement. Tsi functions as an example of how the Movement is not a cure for the divided self, but is simply "the first leg of the journey" (367). Earlier in the novel, Tsi states: "I am with the BSO right now, but I realise that that is only a stage, just a stage in our battle to reclaim a home for our selves" (79). His reintroduction reads to me like a 'return of the repressed', that is, the repression of the need for psychological liberation in the quest for freedom, for "decolonizing the mind", to borrow Ngugi wa Thiong'o's phrase. It evokes the sense of a past that will not pass. And so, even though the novel closes on a hopeful note, with a nameless birth in exile – a woman lying on a back: "Her vagina, open like the lip of the earth, the lip of the sky when the sun pours out, was red with blood" (368) – and its final words are the encouraging assurance: "Push, push, push" (368), that this scene is juxtaposed with Tsi's eternal restlessness is telling of post-liberation South Africa. Tsi's unease or restlessness foreshadows the tension of the transition into constructing a democratic South African nation when the ghosts of the past have not properly been dealt with. The tendency to suspend the project of decolonising the mind, or to collapse physical liberation and psychological liberation, has already been eloquently argued by Fanon in "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" in *The Wretched of the Earth*; and this eternal return of the repressed is symptomatic of the kind of problem that post-apartheid writers wrestle with – as I explore in the ensuing chapters.

To summarise, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, whether consciously or unconsciously, raises interesting questions about the meaning of blackness and Black Consciousness. The two are obviously distinct, because blackness is an identity, while Black consciousness is an awareness of this identity. However, the novel seems to collapse this distinction, such that Black Consciousness means being black, as evinced by the characters in Part II. The novel also ventures a step further by suggesting that Black Consciousness is not simply the awareness of the fact of being black, but a commitment to the Movement against black oppression. As a result, consciousness is empty without complementary action. This proposition follows the philosophy of Black Consciousness that advanced black nihilism or impotence as a condition of 'non-whiteness'. Biko, in "The Definition of Black Consciousness", argues that

the fact that we are all not white does not necessarily mean that we are all black [...]. If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white. Any person who calls a white man 'Baas', any man who serves the police force or Security Branch is *ipso facto* a non-white. (52)

Non-whiteness expresses a condition of suffering; a purgatorial identity that is characterised by displacement. It epitomises the notion of non-personhood which we find in African philosophy. According to this philosophy, personhood does not simply define "whoever has soul, or rationality, or will, or memory" (Menkiti 173). It posits that individuals, identities, are defined by their enviroing communities, and so personhood is achieved only after "a process of incorporation" into the community (Menkiti 172). This view, as Ifeanyi Menkiti, who cites Mbiti, maintains the Ubuntu maxim: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (171). Furthermore, the conception of personhood in African traditional thought, he argues, "includes an idea of excellence, of plenitude of force at maturation" (172). To substantiate this claim, he insists on the existence of the expression "this is not a man" in various African languages. Accordingly, he reaches the conclusion that "personhood [in African societies] is something at which individuals could fail" (173). This ambiguous identity, in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, is personified in the character of Tsi, and to some extent, Yao. Tsi, as we have seen, is alienated from himself and the community; he lacks the will power to commit to the struggle against apartheid. Interestingly, the struggle is represented as an intrinsic part of black identity; the novel stresses the Movement's deep connection to the people's history and identity. And, as it gains momentum, the characters begin to blur into each other, and are defined by the Movement. The Movement then becomes symbolic of blackness, and Tsi's refusal to participate in its activities signals his lack of personhood. He effectively lives up to his name, since Tsietsi means "tragedy". While the movement of jazz offers him some redemption, by providing moments for negotiating through the "funk" of being black, as well as a connection with the world black community, Tsi emerges at the end of the novel, as "an empty shell". What strikes me most about Serote's representation of the Movement as blackness, is this sense that black identity is claimed in movement, in motion, and so gestures to the notion that identities are perpetually in flux. Perhaps Tsi's romanticisation of Lesotho, his desire for 'roots', is meant to alert us to the rigidity of his sense of self or identity, a rigidity which is superseded in the age of routes. Ironically, however, the Movement's identity is rooted in history, and its purpose is to root the displaced blacks in their land. And so the novel's ideological standpoint ultimately remains unresolved.

### Chapter 3

#### Trauma, Liminality and the “Funk” of Disillusionment in K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents*

In their introduction to the critical essays contained in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy*, editors Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly comment on the “parodic” fantasy of the “rainbow nation”, and simultaneously point to South Africa’s heroic and exceptionalist culture: “The New South Africa – the Rainbow Nation – is always on the verge of becoming the Rambo Nation” (5). Likewise, Achille Mbembe advances a nuanced reading of the nature of post-colonial states in Africa: “The post-colony is characterised by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation” (102). South Africa’s socio-political transition from apartheid to a democratic nation illustrates the discourse of ‘nation-building’ as a romantic project. I use the term ‘romantic’ in its most general sense – that is, simultaneously to echo Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imaginary community”, and to point to South Africa’s animated idealism in its desire for coherence and unity following the trauma of apartheid. This desire was articulated as the birth of the ‘new’ South Africa: apartheid had been dismantled and new political, economic, cultural and social imaginaries were being created and negotiated. The ‘new’ South Africa democratically elected its first black president in 1994, and legislated the embrace of its culturally diverse society in the new Constitution, anthem, flag and other national paraphernalia. The grand narrative of the nation espoused heroic rhetoric and celebrated its vision of a unified, multicultural society through the poetic symbol of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, a term coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. However, because the country had had a long history of white dominance and exploitation, it was necessary for its people to come to terms with this past in order to build a future. To this end, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up as a space for redemption, healing and reconciliation.

The TRC was constituted in 1995 to “uncover the truth” about apartheid atrocities committed between the years 1960 to 1994 (*TRC Report* 1:116). The work of the TRC took the form of public hearings which commenced in April 1996 and continued to August 1998. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the majority of these hearings, highlighted the TRC’s role in “unearth[ing] the truth about our dark past; to lay the ghosts of that past so that they will not return to haunt us” (qtd in Ramphela 46). According to Grace Kim, “the spectres of the apartheid past would be summoned up by the TRC for exorcism, to enable South Africans to carry on with their lives” (4). Though the TRC welcomed testimonies from victims and survivors of human rights violations in an effort to restore human and civil dignity, it also solicited ‘truthful’ confessions from apartheid perpetrators in exchange for amnesty. These public hearings – which were conveyed and mediated by television,

radio and print media – staged South Africa’s move away from the repressive “gag” that was apartheid, which forcibly muted its victims (Asmal et al. 2007), to the newly-emerging expressive South Africa in which the “voiceless” victims could be “given voice” (Harris 174) and thereby incorporated as subjects and citizens into the nation. This process in turn stressed the newly constituted nation’s high regard for democratic inclusivity and its desire to counter the politics of marginality.

During this time of reconciliatory and heroic rhetoric, the nation was described in bookish metaphors as ‘turning the page’ or ‘closing the book’ on the structural violence and trauma of apartheid. However, despite these remarkable efforts, the book is not closed on the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, a legacy which continues to haunt the ‘new’ South Africa, as much contemporary socio-political theory and post-apartheid literature shows. One example drawn from this literature is Kabelo Sello Duiker’s novel *Thirteen Cents*, which allegorically grapples with South Africa’s perpetually unbecoming newness. The South African literary giant, Eskia Mphahlele, on numerous occasions persuasively argued for the significance of fictional projects – both as social commentary, and as creative ways of rediscovering ourselves. In the essay entitled “The Role of the Writer in the African Renaissance”, Mphahlele privileges the role of the African writer in grappling with the fragmentation of the “Black World” and in providing useful insights into socio-politico-cultural conditions and the kinds of “selves” that emerge out of these fraught sites (205). He emphatically states that “this new consciousness, with the arrival of democratic rule in 1994, beckons especially us writers, to broaden our horizons, grow bigger, contain in our heads bigger territory, even while we grapple with our national concerns” (211). In an interview with Victor Lackey, Duiker similarly privileges the role of fiction in “tell[ing] us about ourselves”, and he further broadens this territory to include an exploration of the taboo issues of mental illness and homosexuality in his work (20).

Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* was written during the years of South Africa’s transition period, and is temporally set between 1998 and 2000. While the novel is not overtly political in terms of its themes or tone – that is, it does not grapple with the grand politics of the nation state – its preoccupations interrogate what lies beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation and reconstruction (Mzamane 224). It follows the life of an orphaned street child, twelve-year-old Azure, who wanders the streets of post-apartheid Cape Town, and provisionally frames South Africa’s social and economic inequalities as well as its developmental challenges. The narrative appropriates the form of the *Bildungsroman*, as it explores Azure’s growth to psychological maturity: as Kim points out, “due to its focus on development, this form (the *bildungsroman*) has often been linked with nation-building” (70). Azure’s coming-of-age is thus set against the backdrop of the ‘new’ South Africa and offers a

compelling critique of the post-apartheid city through the themes of poverty, marginality, exploitation, family disintegration, violence, abject powerlessness and the legacies of trauma that continually play themselves out in the present.

In this chapter, I propose to read *Thirteen Cents* as a novel of disillusionment steeped in a trans-generational trauma that is embodied in its protagonist.<sup>11</sup> The novel, characteristic of the mood of disillusionment, problematises the notion of ‘post-apartheidness’ and unmasks the inherently romantic sensibility of transformation, as well as South Africa’s fraught desire for utopia – the desire upon which the Rainbow Nation rests. In the essay “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’”, Anne McClintock points out the deceptive implication of the prefix ‘post’ in “post-colonialism”, a prefix which unproblematically presupposes a linear temporal logic and invariably assumes “development” or “progress” from the colonial era to a post-colonial world (85). According to McClintock, “the preposition ‘post’ - belies both the continuities and discontinuities of power that have shaped the legacies [of colonialism]” (87), deceptively hiding the impact of the past on the present. Likewise, as Kim argues, “the prefix ‘post’ in ‘post-apartheid’[...] suggests that the ‘problems of the past’ are truly that – problems of the *past* – without acknowledging their continuous implication in and complication of democratic South Africa” (4). The same can be argued for the term ‘new’ South Africa and its preoccupation with “perpetually troping”, to borrow Geoffrey Hartman’s words (qtd in Roger Luckhurst 7), the Rainbow Nation. Duiker’s novel, I argue, interrogates this discourse in its critique of a ‘new’ South Africa which (unconsciously?) espouses repression. In *Thirteen Cents*, the Rainbow Nation is shown to understate the reality of everyday suffering and marginalisation and, more importantly, to disregard trauma in the pursuit of possibility and hope.

Through Azure’s personal experiences, Duiker weaves a complex narrative that represents the legacies of violence and trauma which hold the present ransom. According to Vickroy, “traumatised children [do not only provide] poignant metaphors but also concrete examples of neglect, exploitation, disempowerment, and disavowal of communities and even entire cultures” (81). Azure is rendered homeless after discovering his parents in a pool of blood, and subsequently flees to the streets of Cape Town. The narrative, however, does not dwell on this originary traumatic event, but focuses instead on Azure’s quest for survival, whilst simultaneously highlighting other socially induced and perpetuated damaging experiences. This is because, as Anne Whitehead, following Cathy Caruth’s argument in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, explains: “Trauma emerges as that which, at the very moment of its reception, registers as a non-experience, causing conventional epistemologies to falter” (5). And, because it is not assimilated fully at the moment of its occurrence,

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<sup>11</sup> I wish to acknowledge my debt to Thandokazi Njovane, who first drew my attention to the presence of trauma in *Thirteen Cents*.

“trauma represents as a mode of haunting” (Whitehead 13). Caruth argues, in this regard, that “To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Azure’s narrative and narration provide the illusion of progression in terms of chronology and his growing self-sufficiency. However, this is undermined by various incidents of abuse in the novel which trigger trauma-ridden memories of his past, testifying to the notion that the present is haunted by the spectres of his unresolved past. In the end, Azure breaks under the strain of his abject powerlessness, a disintegration which is symbolic of his continual re-entry into the experience of trauma. He is further compelled to acknowledge the loss of his parents and the residual effects of this loss. The novel closes on an apocalyptic note of rupture, signalling Azure’s psychic erosion, as well as the relentless presence of the past in the present. In addition, as I shall argue, the novel’s dystopic ending ultimately represents the aporetic or paradoxical sensibility of disillusionment. In my interpretation of *Thirteen Cents*, disillusionment is shown to embody the same romantic bias, rooted in a desire for coherence and wholeness, against which disenchantment stands.

### 3.1 “The Travelling Salesman”

Before tragically committing suicide in 2005, K. Sello Duiker had published two critically acclaimed novels, *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001). *Thirteen Cents* was awarded the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best First Book in 2001 and, in 2002, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* secured the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for English Literature. Duiker has since been lauded for breaking the “silences” on issues of (black) sexuality in South Africa literature (Odhiambo 84; Raditlhalo 101),<sup>12</sup> as well as for his ability to “graphically portray the gritty underground of a cruel urban Cape Town” (Kim 83). His third novel, *Hidden Star*, was published posthumously in 2006.

Duiker’s literary influences reveal interesting thematic concerns in his works that locate him within the corpus of African literature. In interviews, Duiker consistently claimed to be influenced by writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*), Bessie Head (*A Question of Power*), and Ben Okri (*The Famished Road*). The impact of these writers on Duiker’s own work is clearly visible in *Thirteen Cents*. Ayi Kwei Armah, for example, is known for his scatological and

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<sup>12</sup> Raditlhalo observes that, while some writers – like Eskia Mphahlele, André Brink, Zoë Wicomb and Achmat Dangor – have attempted to grapple with issues of sexuality (in their respective works: ‘Mrs Plum’ [1967], *A Chain of Voices* [1982], *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* [1987] and *Z-Town Trilogy* [1990]), sexuality remains a peripheral concern in South African literature (97). Similarly, Tom Odhiambo points out the absence of sex and sexuality in black South African writing, both during apartheid and in the post-apartheid context (83).

grotesque vision of post-independence Ghana in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. This landmark novel is a prime example of the literature of disillusionment, disillusionment being a prevailing thematic concern in many post-independence Africa novels. It makes use of what Mbembe terms an “aesthetics of vulgarity” (1) as it grapples with issues of military dictatorship and spiritual death in a neo-colonial Ghana. The novel’s view of the latter resonates with Fanon’s essay, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” in which he argues that the ruling class of the “post” colony is “not even a replica of Europe, but its caricature” (175). By contrast, while *Thirteen Cents*, as I have already indicated, is not overtly interested in the grand politics of the nation-state, it nevertheless contains a sustained questioning of the ideal of nationhood and belonging. The text confirms the failure of both the ruling-class and the ‘new’ nation to protect the most vulnerable members of society. Furthermore, Duiker evinces a stylistic affinity with Armah’s scatological aesthetic in the use of excremental imagery throughout *Thirteen Cents*.<sup>13</sup>

Literary critic, Osita Ezeliora, has already drawn comparisons between Duiker’s novel and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*. Both texts use the literary trope of childhood, first-person narration, and a fusion of the real and the fantastical in their respective explorations of the experiences of their young male protagonists. According to Ezeliora, in both Okri’s Azaro and Duiker’s Azure “we are confronted with the narratives of two peculiar African kids whose common inheritance of poverty and whose unique sensitivity to the social realities of their universe compel them to seek alternative salvation in dreams, hallucinations, visions and revisions of the hidden mysteries of their environment” (167).

The influence of Bessie Head’s work on Duiker is evinced through the latter’s interest in and representation of racial identities which undermine the popular nationalist discourse of ‘authentic’ selves; Duiker opts instead for racial ambiguity, as seen in the protagonist of *Thirteen Cents*. Azure is a black boy with blue eyes. Duiker employs this sense of Azure’s being suspended between races as a stylistic instrument to represent his protagonist’s precarious position as both an outsider (marginal) and liminal (with regard to his age) in the in-between space of ‘post’-apartheid South Africa. Hein Viljoen and Chris van der Merwe argue that in-betweenness or liminality is characterised by indeterminacy, ambiguity and hybridity: “the liminal lies halfway between separation and integration – at the midpoint from one social [order] to another” (12). *Thirteen Cents* plays on this idea of in-between states, not only in its reflection of Azure’s psychological condition or state of mind and its allegorical gesture to a nation-state which is caught between (an unfinished) past and (an ambiguous) present, but also in its representation of the landscape of Cape Town as a zone of

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13 The narrative is peppered with incidents demonstrating Azure’s vulnerability or outrage, incidents which are foregrounded by his descriptions of his bleeding anus, spitting, pissing and shitting, respectively.

liminality.

### 3.2 De-mothering the Mother City

The action of *Thirteen Cents* is set in Cape Town, fondly known to many South Africans as the ‘Mother City’. Cape Town inhabits an awkward position, given its history as the hub of the colonial enterprise in South Africa and its preservation as a tourist capital in post-apartheid South Africa: “a place where the image of the mountains and the sea will linger in your mind” (Callenberger 82). The city is a space of potentiality: it is where Azure and Vincent seek refuge and attempt to make new lives for themselves, a hybrid space where identities overlap and borrow from each other in complex and shifting ways, and where transgressive musical genres, such as Kwaito, and creolized languages, like Tsotsi-*taal*, are celebrated and help to construct liberating and sometimes fraught senses of identity. As Sarah Nuttall argues, “the city [is] a place of manifold rhythms, forged through daily encounters and multiple experiences of time and space” (742). Indeed, Cape Town, in Duiker’s vision, is emblematic of Bhabha’s “third space of culture” in an urban context.

However, even with its potentialities, Azure experiences the city as an isolating and marginalising space. Timothy Johns, for example, points out the irony that, “despite [Azure’s] proximity to the hub of an international capital (Cape Town), he lives according to a primitive economy, sleeping and bathing outdoors” (257). According to Callenberger, Cape Town, in literary representations, “functions as a heterotopia [...] it is a single physical space that holds different, fragmented meanings that reflect the constantly shifting ebb and flow of society, including class structure, political struggles, racial tensions, and culture” (82). Correspondingly, Duiker’s novel veers from the notion of Cape Town as a “beautiful microcosm of the Rainbow Nation” (Callenberger 82), and represents the city as unhomey and unmotherly, thereby subverting the ‘Mother Africa’ trope. As the novel’s blurb claims:

Cape Town, between the postcard mountain and sea, has its own shadow-side lurking in its lap: a place of dislocation and uncertainty, dependence and desperation, destruction and survival, gangsters, pimps, paedophiles, hunger, hope and moments of happiness.

The city’s landscape is therefore contradictory, characterised by the juxtapositioned co-existence of zones of affluence and areas of abject poverty, which evoke the “heritage of apartheid” (Callenberger 92). Indeed, as Callenberger concludes, “the rules have technically changed to a system of ownership based on wealth [instead of race. However] the nation suffers from apartheid-era amnesia. Land is

still disproportionately in the hands of white people in South Africa” (92). Furthermore, Duiker’s vision of the city is crime-infested: “he paints a picture of street children at the mercy of drug-pushers, dealers, and ruthless gangsters who, having emerged from South Africa’s prisons, continue where they left off” (Raditlhalo, “Victory of Sorts” 74). This harsh urban landscape is highlighted in the character of Azure, who is forced into child prostitution for survival. In this regard, Raditlhalo reminds us that “Azure’s work is in itself a reminder of the lack of gainful employment for the city’s flotsam, pointing to a larger societal problem of unemployment, which links up with criminality, prostitution and gangsterism” (“Victory” 78). The narrative, as Ezelióra maintains,

amplifies the daunting implications of ‘globalisation’ and multiculturalism for a largely uneducated indigenous population. Faced with the elementary existential problem of survival, an embarrassing tension is generated between the privileged white man at the centre, and the helpless and hungry black child so ruthlessly exploited in a universe obnoxiously controlled by adults.

(165)

### **3.3 Identity, Exploitation and Agency: Chapters 1-7**

Recounted in the first person, the narrative of *Thirteen Cents* invites the reader to engage with its protagonist’s story on his own terms. The novel opens with Azure introducing himself and confidently instructing the reader on how to pronounce his name: “Ah-zoo-ray” (1), he coaches. Azure immediately stands out because of his unusual name, which he explains is the only thing he has left from his mother (1). Naming, in the black world community, has historically played a significant role in liberatory movements that resisted the totalising proclivities of colonial oppression, as well as in the black subject’s quest for identity. This is evident in the South African context, for example, through the Black Consciousness rhetoric. English and Christian names, which were linked to the internalised psychological oppression of black people, were rejected in favour of African names that registered an attempt at recuperating a structurally marginalised identity. Similarly, Cornel West argues that, in the African-American context, the use of “unique names” for children was “designated to set them apart from all others for the purpose of accentuating their individuality and offsetting their invisibility” (315). Azure’s unique name, then, reads in conversation with this individual black quest for identity. However, in the world of this novel, his name is also an immediate reference to his unusual physical features, specifically his blue eyes.

These blue eyes, as Sam Raditlhalo has already pointed out, are “a play on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (“Travelling Salesman” 98) and, I would suggest, *Tar Baby* as well. Blue eyes, in these novels, are highlighted as objects of desire in a context in which blackness is registered as ugliness, and are inextricably linked to notions of ‘success’ and ‘happiness’, respectively. Both

Morrison's novels, however, ultimately call into question the power of blue eyes as markers of beauty, liberty, wholeness and self-actualisation (in the quasi-Marxist or Maslowan sense of the word). In *Thirteen Cents*, Duiker also uses the image of blue eyes to destabilise the aforementioned assumptions of Morrison's characters, as well as to highlight Azure's quintessential otherness in a context in which power and personhood is racially determined. Azure's blue eyes do not translate into beauty or power. Instead, they challenge racial boundaries or the discourse of racial purity which continues to haunt 'new' nation. The result is that those who are anxious about themselves and their own positions of power respond violently towards him, unconsciously evincing a negative identification with their own sense of self-hood. Azure, too, seems to have internalised his marginality, and responds to his reflection in the mirror in the following way:

I can never look at myself too long in the mirror as my blue eyes remind me of the confusing messages they send out to people. I wear my blue eyes with fear because fear is deeper than shame. (19)

His blue eyes evoke the sense of being suspended between two races. This motif of in-betweenness is confirmed by Azure's age since, in the opening passage of the novel, he reveals that he is "nearly thirteen" (1) and therefore "almost a man" (1): his age situates him in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. The novel thus evinces elements of the originally European genre of the *Bildungsroman*, which it appropriates for the South African context.

The *Bildungsroman* is traditionally understood as a "novel of formation" or "novel of education" (Abrams 119). M.M. Bakhtin defines it as a "novel of emergence" due to its thematic representation of a "man in the process of becoming" (19). The genre's appropriation, coupled with the use of first-person narration, in Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* is noteworthy for its countering of the politics of marginality and silencing. Children are conventionally silenced by the presupposition that they cannot speak for themselves (Nabutanyi 2), an assumption that inadvertently renders them marginal and subaltern. Kim explains that the "restriction from exercising certain rights until they are of legal age" (68) suggests a paradoxical citizenry (for children) because "[they] at once belong to the nation, but, at the same time, are limited in their capacity to act therein" (68). However, Duiker's Azure is accorded the extraordinary liberty of uninterrupted self-articulation, which early signals his sense of agency – a contentious issue throughout the novel, given his vulnerability on the streets and the difficult choices he is forced to make in order to survive. My use of the term 'agency' is both general in its invocation of such constructs as will and a negotiation of subjectivity, and specific in its reference to Nick Turnbull's argument that agency is linked to language: "the rhetorical turn supports an increased capacity of agency in the use of language to construct identity and to relate to

others. Agency is a fundamental property of rhetoric” (207). The use of first-person narration also affords the reader a sense of immediacy and of a close relationship to the narrator. Moreover, it records Azure’s (mis)-leadingly casual tone, which is disconcerting given the grimness of the text’s subject matter.

Azure is homeless and lives on the streets of Sea Point. He is quick to disabuse the reader of the association of homelessness with victimhood or vulnerability by pointing out that he is “nearly thirteen” (1). He corroborates this claim with evidence of his self-sufficiency: “That means I know where to get food that hasn’t seen too many ants and flies” (1) and “I’m almost a man. I can take care of myself” (2). However, his childlike reasoning here inadvertently highlights his vulnerability as a homeless youth. Moreover, he divulges very little information about his past prior to living on the streets of Sea Point. At the beginning he reveals only that he lost his parents: “Papa was bad with money and got Mama into trouble. The day they killed them I was at school. I came back to our shack only to find them in a pool of blood. That was three years ago. That was the last time I went to school” (2). This brief information “foregrounds the violence that allows for children to be rendered without family simply because of the deficiencies of the parents” (Raditlhalo, “Victory” 73). As a result, Azure is denied the vital institution of the family, “the first locus of development [... which] provides nourishment to the individual and sets the conditions of growth” (Visser 5). The termination of his schooling also points to the “lack of important cultural markers” in the form of “the bonds of the extended family” (Raditlhalo, “Victory” 73), since there is no one to look after him. And so Azure emerges as profoundly unanchored, neglected and displaced – a scandal of a ‘new’ South Africa that is evidently unable to protect its most vulnerable members: children. His lack of a family leads him to invent a social network of people whom he trusts. There is Joyce, for example, who banks his money and occasionally feeds him, and Liesel who sells him marijuana and whom he enjoys talking to.

Azure’s unsentimental diction describing the loss (and discovery) of his parents in a pool of blood, adds to the fiction that he “almost a man” and, as a result, can take care of himself. He marvels when he reflects on his maturity: “My friend Bafana can’t believe that I saw my dead parents and didn’t freak out. But I told him. I cried and then it was over. No one was going to take care of me” (2). However, it is not “over”, because his parents’ poor choices have a bearing on his homelessness, and his pragmatic attitude points to his repression of the incident. He has not adequately mourned or dealt with his loss; he does not even stay for the funeral, because survival takes precedence over mourning.

On the streets of Sea Point, Azure lives by his own strict set of rules: staying clean by bathing in the ocean every morning and staying away from hard drugs, though he does smoke marijuana (2).

He tries to instil his strict rules in Bafana, a nine-year-old boy whom he occasionally spends time mentoring. Bafana wilfully ran away from home to live on the streets scavenging for food and abusing drugs, and Azure's strict rules are met with much resistance. Azure, in turn – because of his skewed sense of protection – responds with violence: “So whenever I see him smoking that stuff I beat him. I once beat him so badly he had to go to Groote Schuur to get stitched. I don't like that stuff. It does terrible things to your body” (2-3).

To obtain money, Azure explains that he makes a living as a car-guard, which is not easy given the social hierarchies on the streets: the older boys bully the younger ones for prime parking spots, fruit sellers hurl insults at them, and he has to live with the constant threat of ruthless gangsters and corrupt policemen. However, it soon becomes clear that his main source of income derives from engaging in (pederastic or paedophilic) prostitution with older white men. In disturbingly graphic moments in the text, Azure, using his usual casual first-person narration, expertly describes the process of selling his body, as well his sexual activities with his clients, all the while maintaining the illusion of agency – he negotiates the price for his body, and when he fails to achieve the desired amount, he convinces himself that he is making an investment, since the client might become a “regular” (10).

The focus on pederasty and prostitution in the novel does not necessarily indicate that it is essentially interested in homosexuality, or worse, de-valorises the male homosexual orientation by linking it to paedophilia. As a result, I disagree with Tom Odhiambo and Raditlhalo's assessment that Duiker's second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, is a sequel to *Thirteen Cents*, providing Duiker the space to “broaden and expand on the themes [of homosexuality] left undeveloped in [the latter]” (Raditlhalo, “Travelling” 99). Odhiambo concurs:

In *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* it is the childhood of Azure that is transformed into the youth of Tshepo – the older protagonist also lives in Cape Town and experiences life in circumstances quite similar to those of Azure. The two protagonists' social, economic, and sexual lives seem to have been adapted from the same script. (85-6)

The similarities between Azure and Tshepo are indisputable, since both characters are, to borrow from Raditlhalo, “prisoners of a psychosis which started in childhood” (99). However, the treatment of homosexuality in *Thirteen Cents* is fairly arbitrary – that is, the novel places emphasis on economic need rather than sexual orientation. Azure himself is not homosexual; he explains that to get an erection he fantasises about women: “I think of Toni Braxton and Mary J Blidge. They usually do the trick for me” (9). Significantly, Azure describes his work in prostitution as performing “tricks” (8). Homosexual prostitution, then, only highlights Azure's aborted innocence, his need to survive the

harsh reality of street life, and the complicated matter of his agency which effectively reduces “homosexual desire [to a] game played for money” (Johns 253). This is illustrated by Azure’s attitude towards his clients, and his mechanical responses to their instructions: “I’m forced to smile. That’s what they expect [...] I know their games. I smile” (8). Much later he comments: “I know how to please a man. I know these bastards. I’ve done this a thousand times. They all like it if you play with the part between their balls and asshole” (84). Furthermore, Azure’s maleness and his sexual exploitation challenge the prevalent perception that it is only females who fall prey to gender violence, and thus support the notion that “violation knows no boundaries” (Raditlhalo 101). It is also vital to mention that his clients are all white, which speaks to the exploitation of the black body by the white gaze, a motif that Duiker sophisticatedly brings into focus through his the resurrection of Saartjie Baartman towards the end of the novel.

Throughout the opening chapters of *Thirteen Cents*, Azure wrestles against his exploitation by adults by attempting to negotiate his already limited sense of agency. We see this tension gradually unfold through his views on grown-ups and their desire to assert power over children. For example, he reveals that “[grown-ups] just swear at you because you’re a *lytie* and they are big” (3), and that “[t]here’s nothing for *mahala* with grown-ups. You always have to do something in return” (6). In retaliation against these abusive adults, he devises ritualised or rehearsed responses that effectively satirise them and undermine their power over him:

You must act like a grown-up. You must speak like them. That means when you speak to a grown-up in town you must look at them in the eyes and use a loud voice because if you speak softly they will swear at you. You must also be clean because grown-ups are always clean. And you must never talk to them like you talk to a *lytie*. Like I can’t talk to them like I talk to Bafana. I must always say “Sir” or “Madam”. It’s like saying “Magents” except it’s for grown-ups. And when I can remember I say “please” and “thank you”. Those two words are like magic, my secret. They’ve made me nice money every time I used them with a smile. (3)

In this passage, Azure not only lays bare the notion that adults perform grown-upness, but also their parochial sense of words and meaning: that is to say, they fail to realise the fluidity of language. Moreover, that grown-ups fall for his trickery reveals their gullibility, and so Azure – like the spectator of satire – adopts a position of superiority in relation to them. Or, at the very least, he is able to assume an agency that allows him to mock them: “Grown-ups are strange people. How can they put a fountain for drinking water outside a toilet. And I mean right outside the Men’s toilet” (7). Similarly, Azure critically views official institutions, such as banks, “through a parodistic criminal lens” (Johns 258). He comments, for example, that “[banks are] like gangsters, they want to know

everything so that you cannot run away from them” (12). I am reminded, here, of J.C. Scott’s astute argument in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985). He posits that people in positions of abject powerlessness do not always adopt overtly collective forms of resistance against exploitation and subjugation. They access, instead, what he calls “everyday forms of resistance”, that is, informal and covert modes of resistance (xvi). For Scott, as Peter Collins points out, resistance “comprises relatively minor and mostly ‘hidden’ actions [...] small, non-public actions” (10). Some examples of these “ordinary weapons” are “foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage [...] back-biting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt” (xvi-xvii). Azure, as we have seen, attempts to offset his marginality by employing these covert forms of resistance: mocking, challenging grown-up logic, and reading adults always as a comprehensible, finished puzzle, so that they emerge as unsophisticated and simple, even in their pretentiousness. His use of these “weapons” is, however, understandable given the kind of exploitation and violence that he endures at the hands of characters like Allen and Gerald, among others.

Allen is a pimp and a stolen-goods pedlar whose notoriety rests on the fact that he “once killed someone” (13). He is brutally abusive to the prostitutes who work for him, he is greedy, and he terrorises the neighbourhood, preventing the street kids from purchasing clothing anywhere else except from him to keep them dependent on him. As a result, he claims power and superiority over others, especially the homeless children. Azure has this to say about him:

Allen will never give me proper clothes because that would mean that I look like him [...] He always has to outdress you, outsmart you. It’s his way. It’s the grown up way. He only wears Nike shoes and expensive jeans and tops. He always gives me clothes that are just about to fall apart so that I’m always dependent on him. So that I will always go back for more and spend my money on him. (16)

This interpretation of Allen shows Azure to be very perceptive of the power dynamics at play here. Also, significantly, he is aware of the kind of response that such a situation demands from him. Accordingly, he does not challenge Allen when he short-changes him in a transaction, but evinces a kind of street-wisdom, by choosing to understand the money he has lost as “protection money” (15). He rationalises: “I can walk a little safer knowing that Allen has my money. Money is his language [...]. It’s the only way I can be safe on the streets. There are too many monsters out there” (16). The *savoir-faire* with which Azure rationalises this relationship, which is clearly exploitative, positions him as a subject – self-consciously participating in the transaction – as opposed to a victim, as someone who is acted upon.

Gerald is another character who evinces similar traits to Allen: he exploits street children by forcing them to become drug mules and perform other “work of evil” (18). Vincent later compares Gerald to the “king of dinosaurs” (60) – T-Rex – and he thus emerges as the urban predator with whom “even the devil can’t compare” (61). Gerald is the leader of the Twenty-Eights gang and is irrationally violent. In a telling incident, Azure, high on marijuana, mistakenly calls him by the name of one his black lackeys, Sealy. Gerald, predictably, reacts violently and, afraid for his life, Azure is forced to flee. He spends a number of days aimlessly wandering the streets, all the while hiding from Gerald and his gang, and as a result is unable to make money. Frustrated and overwhelmed by a feeling of entrapment, Azure reprimands himself for giving in to weakness: “Men don’t cry. And since I’m nearly thirteen I mustn’t cry. I must be strong. I must be a man. That is what men do. They don’t cry because tears are messy. They make your eyes all puffy and snot just runs from your nose and that’s messy. Grown-ups aren’t messy” (24). Azure’s desire to grow up and become a man seems contradictory, however, given his overt suspicion of and disdain for adults throughout the text. This contradiction – at least in his naïve articulation of masculinity as self-sufficiency – seems to suggest a strategic negotiation of agency; that is, “contradiction becomes a rubric for moving in new directions for thinking [...] acting, and negotiating tensions in constructing identity” (Renegar 6). However, Azure, in this particular context, cites Allen and Gerald as examples of his desired version of masculinity (24). This paradoxical complex of both desiring and abhorring manhood or adulthood foreshadows a more profound schizophrenic tension within the text, an idea I will explore later in my discussion.

Azure turns to his friend, Vincent, with whom he ran away from Johannesburg to the streets of Cape Town, for advice about his problem with Gerald, and Vincent informs him that Gerald has been looking for him. He further advises him to surrender himself up. Their conversation is very illuminating in that it grapples with the source of Gerald’s and Allen’s violence, as well as critiques the city and its people. Vincent believes that the reason behind Gerald and Allen’s aggressive behaviour lies precisely in the fact of their colouredness and their inability to escape it – that is, to become white. According to Vincent, Gerald is “fucked up. He thinks he’s white because he’s got straight hair and a light skin” (35). In addition, Gerald is also envious of Azure’s blue eyes which, should he himself possess them, would complete his fantasy of whiteness. Just as Gerald aspires to whiteness, so too does Allen. Vincent has this to say about the latter: “I know [Allen] looks white but if you look at him closely you can see some coloured blood. He hates it, that’s why he’s so fucked up [...] imagine being nearly white but not quite” (36). Evidently, Gerald and Allen have not only internalised the apartheid philosophy of racial binarism and white superiority, but also struggle with

the stigma of racial hybridity that leads them to the impulses of shame and violence.<sup>14</sup> What is more, Allen's employment and abuse of exclusively white prostitutes speaks to his desire to possess whiteness and highlights the currency of the white body, a body which is synonymous with desirability. Ironically, then, Allen is able to manipulate and derive financial gain from the same exclusionary and racist ideals which produce his inferiority complex.

To counter his victimisation, Vincent advises Azure "to be more black" (35). For instance, he must watch what he wears, and ought to perform his blackness and marginality by looking like *makwerekwere*, a derogatory term for foreigners from other African countries. Their talk thus highlights the view that identities are essentially constructions and performed. It suggests a move away from ideas of authenticity, and gestures, instead, towards fluidity and flux; a sense of relationality which directly contradicts the demands made upon Azure on the street – as we see in Gerald's attempts to arrest his sense of identity and (physical) movement and development.

### 3.4 Entrapment and Flight: Chapters 8–14

With no other alternative, Azure eventually surrenders himself to Gerald. He is severely beaten by Sealy, who is following orders, as Gerald makes it known that he will not "dirty [his] hands on a piece of shit like [Azure]" (39). This scene is strangely tragicomic: it highlights both Gerald's performance of power and Azure's private attempts at diminishing this power through his use of everyday modes of resistance. Gerald unreasonably orders Azure to wash his car with his spit and polish it; however, finding the car already washed, Azure enquires about polish, to which Gerald retorts: "Tell this poes I didn't ask him to polish my car" (40). Azure then silently but mockingly reflects: "I'm sure he said clean and then polish my car" (40), adding "I do it slowly but every time Sealy walks nearby I work faster" (41). However, Azure is soon disabused of his sense of agency, as Gerald's pervasive power is illustrated in his seemingly effortless collaboration with the police, who visit him openly at his home under the bridge.

The police are shown to be as corrupt as the gangsters: "They want to eat as well. Streets are hard [...]. Half of them are fucked on crack and buttons" (59). This critique of the police in the 'new' South Africa undermines the attempt to reform their image during South Africa's transition years. The South African Police *Force*, for example, was renamed the South African Police *Service*,

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14 For a more nuanced account on coloured identity, frustration and shame, see Mohamed Adhikari's articles "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910-1994" and "Not White Enough. Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community."

foregrounding its duty to serve the population and rehabilitate criminals, through its sister branch, the Department of *Correctional Services*. In Duiker's novel, however, the police are criminalised. They are neither able nor willing to protect the most vulnerable citizens. Accordingly, Azure, discomfited with his current predicament, reflectively questions: "where are the police? Why are they never around when you need them? Why do they speak with people like Gerald? Why are they interested in the big guy who drives a BMW who gets his car stolen in daylight? Why are they so scared of the night?" (52). The lack of police intervention, here, depicts a 'new' oppression in South Africa; as Johns argues, "apartheid, with its draconian laws, seemed oppressively 'hands on', [conversely] the protagonist of *Thirteen Cents* faces a world that seems oppressively 'hands off'. The helping hand of the state is nowhere to be found" (257-8). Frustrated and unprotected, Azure is forced to cope and survive in isolation.

Following the beating administered by Sealy, Azure is so severely injured that he needs medical attention. Gerald orders one of his gang members, Richard, to take him to the hospital where a bigoted doctor attends to his injuries. The doctor complains: "The trouble with these kids is [...] they won't go to school or a home. They spend their lives sniffing glue or smoking buttons" (42). His narrow perspective on the lives of street children as (cultural) pariahs is reminiscent of the fruit seller's ignorance at the beginning of the novel: "*Julle fokken mannetjies moet skool toe gaan*" (2). The recurrence of this insensitivity also functions dialogically to compel the reader to confront their own ignorance of the lives of those who reside in the invisible ghettos – that is, the social alienation and invisibility of the homeless. In other words, Azure's narrative and narration compel us "to witness our ignorance of what [such] children undergo in a 'prosperous' South Africa" (Raditlhalo, "Travelling" 98).

Azure is subsequently abducted by Richard and locked up in unsanitary living conditions, as instructed by Gerald. Nursing a physical and spiritual hunger, he turns to a light switch in the room, which he flicks on and off, 'feeding' off the light for the strength and courage to survive:

You're getting stronger, I tell myself and turn off the lights. I start to feed off the light and begin to slowly forget my hunger. Grown-ups, this is how they teach me to be strong. I take in their light and destroy them with fire. (47)

One begins to see, here, a shift in Azure's consciousness and his relational strategies in the social world. Whereas he previously understood himself to be in constant negotiation – in fluid relations – with others, we now see a desire to exact revenge which produces<sup>15</sup> in him a starkly oppositional

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15 I use this word, 'produces', here, in the abstract sense to mean that which is finished within set boundaries. Products, are by their very nature (conceptually) complete and function within limited boundaries. This is in

relationship with adults. This desire to exact revenge on “grown-ups” is solidified by the memory of his parents which is triggered by this experience in captivity. Azure remembers playing with matches, when he was much younger, and setting the family bed alight. What stands out about this incident in Azure’s memory is that his father, who “used to hit [him] for everything [...] never touched [him]” (47) for this accident. As a result, this strangely fond memory of his father seems to affirm an affinity with fire, which he will later use to destroy his enemies.

Presently, Azure is moved to a flat in the coloured area of Salt River, where he is locked alone on the building’s rooftop. Duiker, henceforth, uses the opportunity to develop Azure’s “animist unconscious”, to use a term offered by Harry Garuba (265), that is, to “describe the process of a *continual re-enchantment of the world*” (265, emphasis in original). This animist reality is intimated earlier in the novel, however. In the first chapter, Azure evinces disdain for rats and pigeons because, he claims, they allow themselves to be used in the work of evil (2). His suspicion that pigeons are spies runs throughout the novel, as they always seem to hover around Gerald and his compound under the bridge during moments of vulnerability. On the roof, Azure continues to show contempt for (male) pigeons, who terrorise and “are always trying to screw the women pigeons [...] they’ll do anything for a quick lay” (50-51). Instead he aligns himself with the majesty of seagulls, who stand in direct contrast to pigeons:

They are beautiful seagulls. They have white feathers that they look after and you never see a seagull that looks battered with dirty wings like some pigeons. Seagulls have pride, they always wash at sea with cold water. Like me [...]. They’re not stupid like pigeons. Pigeons are stupid because they let themselves get used. Where did anyone ever see a seagull being used as a messenger bird? Never. (51)

The pigeons, here, function as a metaphorical representation of adults who exploit any signs of weakness in others. The deplorable scale of Azure’s abuse and dehumanisation, during these scenes, is so overwhelming and astounding that it cannot be immediately and adequately represented in conventional realist form. Consequently, his trauma is more disposed towards animist realism. According to Garuba, “An animistic understanding of the world applied to the practice of everyday life has often provided avenues of agency for the dispossessed in colonial and postcolonial Africa” (285).

The scene on the rooftop, the battle between the pigeons and seagulls, is juxtaposed with Azure’s marginality, underscored by the fact that his physical body is possessed by others (Kim 85).

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contrast to the notion of processes (and relations, for example) which are always fluid and in flux.

Richard and his friends take turns molesting Azure, forcing him to perform oral sex on them:

“Suig, suig”, they keep prodding me. In my head I hear seagulls screeching violently, swooping over the sea as waves come crushing down. They are giving you their salt, I tell myself. Eat it, be strong. (54)

The imagery of the screeching seagulls is not only symbolic of his resistance to this dehumanising experience, but also functions as a coping mechanism to imagine flight from his entrapment. Even so, the experience constitutes a “trauma not only in its humiliating intensity, but also in the impossibility of his being able to respond to the situation”, to use Vickroy’s words in another context (84). The experience drastically changes Azure’s being-in-the world. Firstly, he comes to understand the extensive power of the T-Rex, Gerald, who subsequently changes his name to Blue, “a reference to his blue eyes, [and] a reminder of his difference. This act also severs Azure’s connection with his parents, with his past, and strips him of his identity” (Kim 86). Gerald also performs his power by declaring ownership over Azure (57), and, moreover, restricts his movement in the city by removing him from the “areas of the city that he knows and has learnt how to navigate” (Kim 86). As Kim points out, following Michel de Certeau’s work on the city and understanding urban texts:

In walking the city, individuals are able to write their own understanding of the city, possessing the city to some degree. However, Azure is no ordinary practitioner of the city – he is someone who walks every day and whose survival depends on understanding the text that he lives in. His body thus has intimate knowledge of the space around him. For example, the local residential area of Sea Point, which he is no longer allowed to visit, is a place he knows particularly well – by punning on the word “sea” in Sea Point, he explains that this is “where [his] eyes are ... where [he] can see the best” [...], for this is where he “hides out” [...] from those who seek to exploit him. (86)

Like Tsi in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Azure finds himself lost in the urban landscape: “I’ve been walking around town like a lost dog all day. Everyone seems to know where they are going except me” (67). Accordingly, as Raditlhalo argues, “He internalises the urban strain of learning to live with fear” (“Victory” 75) – or, as Azure himself comments:

I know what it means to be scared, to be always on the lookout. I know what it means to hear your own heartbeat. It means you are on your own [...]. I know what it feels like to bite the insides of your nails till your fingertips are raw and sensitive to everything you touch. I know fear. (66)

Secondly, Azure begins to adopt more overt forms resistance. For example, when Joyce refuses to

give him his money back, Azure responds petulantly for the first time. He tells her to “Fuck off”, and proceeds to spit and urinate in her front yard (76). In his new-found overtly aggressive mood, which seems to be encouraged by the seagulls that hover over him “in a mad frenzy” as he limps towards the beach (76), Azure continues on his tirade. When a client, who is later revealed to be a Mr Lebowitz, approaches him, Azure responds ungraciously to his advances: “You’re full of *kak*” (80). He further commands Mr Lebowitz to remove his wedding band, and disrupts Lebowitz’s pre-coitus ritual of showering by audaciously asking “Do you want to fuck me?” (83). As Dennis Nabutanyi points out, “The importance of this episode is in the latent anger and disgust that permeates it” (8). Azure is sickened by Lebowitz’s ‘polite’ manners: “they are perfect and make you feel a little strange, like you’re a dog with fleas” (82). He notes that everything in Lebowitz’s flat is white. Consequently, “One is drawn to the contrasting symbolism and irony of an almost ‘white’ house and an extremely ‘polite’ host, who at the same time sexually exploits children”, as Nabutanyi remarks (8). The scene with Lebowitz, like other moments in the text which highlight Azure’s dehumanisation, triggers memories of Azure’s past (90), as well as the fear of losing Vincent, his only “connection” in Cape Town (93). Vincent is leaving Cape Town, and Azure has this to say about their relationship:

I think of Vincent as my eyes. He’s older than me. He’s seen more, done more. I don’t think anything scares him anymore. Everything seems to make sense to him [...]. He doesn’t bullshit. He says it like it is. And sometimes it isn’t pretty. But that doesn’t worry him. He just stays Vincent, Mandla; the guy I grew up with in Mshenguville. He always looks out for me. All the things he tells me, they help me. They help me become like him, a man, a grown-up. (93-4)

And so, as a final act of rebellion – having lost both his eyes (Vincent) and his base (Sea Point) – Azure purchases a jacket with an orange lining, a colour that Gerald has strictly forbidden him to wear because “Only the sun and [he] can wear it” (68). When Gerald discovers this, he furiously saws off the cast on Azure’s leg, wounding him in the process, and terrified Azure runs for his life in the direction of Table Mountain.

*Thirteen Cents* seems to have been building up to this moment of profound schizophrenic tension, that is, a sense of a world that is constantly pulled in opposite directions at the same time. This tension is worked subtly into the narrative so as not to overwhelm the reader or compromise the credibility of its child protagonist’s personal story. The result is that the text evinces what Dominick LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement [... or] performative engagement with unsettling events” (qtd in Vickroy 26). The novel’s setting in a post-apartheid Cape Town which is reminiscent of the old colonising structures of apartheid is an early indicator of this. The city, as Raditlhalo observes, is “stripped of its enabling mythologies of ‘nation-building’, ‘reconciliation’ and ‘economic revival’,

Cape Town is allegorical of what those at the fringes of a self-satisfied society undergo in this land of sun and turf” (“Travelling” 98). The tension is also staged through Azure’s physical appearance, which not only confuses racial boundaries in a Cape Town where power is racially determined (Kim 85), but also foregrounds the quintessential ‘otherness’ of blackness in this context. The novel is thus a testimony to the violence of the racialised body. Azure’s physical appearance becomes a stylistic instrument through which Duiker explores issues of marginality, trauma and identity negotiation. And, as a stylistic instrument, Azure’s body is the realisation of schizophrenic tension, or better, the enactment of traumatic representation. His body is a concrete manifestation of “empathic unsettlement”; it reads as a text that depicts the ‘unspeakableness’ of trauma – both Azure’s primary traumatic experience, and those socially perpetuated damaging (re)experiences which he endures.

My use of the term “trauma” follows Laurie Vickroy’s definition, which explains the pathology as “a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal emotional or cognitive response and bring lasting psychological disruption” (x). Citing Kai Erikson (457), Vickroy states that

trauma can result from a constellation of life’s experiences as well as from a discrete event, from prolonged exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault, from a period of attenuation and wearing away as well as from a moment of shock. (12)

Traumatic experience, as many trauma theorists agree, is pre-verbal and pre-cognitive, and as such it resists conventional narrative structures (Zaikowski 202). This is because, as I indicated earlier in the discussion, trauma is that which registers as a non-experience at the moment of its occurrence but continually returns to haunt the (traumatised) subject if left unattended (Vickroy 3). Similarly, Caruth identifies the primary defining features of traumatic experiences as “incomprehensibility” together with “belatedness” (“Traumatic” 89).

According to Anne Whitehead, novelists aesthetically represent or ‘give voice’ to trauma by “mimicking its forms and symptoms” (3). Duiker, as I have already indicated, negotiates the impossibility of representing trauma through the use of Azure’s body, whose racial ambiguity remains unexplained throughout the novel. Furthermore, Azure’s body is emblematic of traumatic experience in that it is possessed and abused by others: it is victimised through beatings, othering gazes, and also falls prey to paedophilic desires. Azure’s work as a child prostitute, and therefore his perpetual exposure to danger, is – in the light of trauma theory – an unconsciously destructive confrontation with relentless dehumanisation. His prostitution represents the repetition compulsion associated with

post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Zaikowski, drawing on the intuitions of Sigmund Freud, explains that “during repetition compulsion, traumatized individuals may actually re-enact the trauma in attempts to master and control it, give it meaning, or expel it from the mind” (200). Similarly, Glenn Schiraldi writes: “Repeating the trauma gives an oddly comforting feeling of predictability, familiarity, and control” (qtd in Zaikowski 200). Azure’s repetition compulsion, I should re-emphasise, is not deliberate and is therefore an unconscious re-enactment. As a result he constantly finds himself in situations in which he is re-traumatised. During his time in captivity under Richard’s watch, for example, he asks himself: “Why is [Bafana] outside and I’m up here? Why do I get into trouble and he doesn’t even though he takes millions of drugs?” (52). This lack of consciousness of his constant exposure to danger and exploitation testifies to the haunting quality of trauma. As Vickroy points out, “in a traumatic experience the past remains unresolved and lingering, because it is not processed in the way that normal information is, either cognitively or emotionally” (89).

The originary traumatic event in question is Azure’s discovery of his dead parents, (and, arguably, his prolonged exposure to domestic violence and physical abuse by his father). The loss of his parents, which I argue is the basis of his trauma, has such an overwhelming effect on him that he is unable to assimilate the event into his consciousness without surrendering to his own powerlessness before the fact. In lieu of devastation, Azure responds with a “keen consciousness, intelligence and a resourceful capacity for survival”, to quote Vickroy in another context (114). He removes himself from the site of this traumatic event (Mshenguville, Johannesburg) by relocating to the streets of Cape Town, where he displays remarkable efforts at self-sufficiency. However, even though he has (physically) left home, his home has not left him – that is to say, he is haunted by a persistent presence of the past in his present. Thus, while the narrative ‘begins’ and unfolds on the streets of Cape Town, it seems to have actually begun three years earlier with that moment that forever altered his life (the murder of his parents) and which overshadows his present. As I have already suggested, this ‘haunting’ is evinced in the numerous stressful incidents or episodes in which Azure is subjected to abuse, episodes which trigger memories of his past. Vickroy states that

triggers or associative conditions [...] cause returns to traumatic events [...] a stressful situation will bring current thoughts along the same pathways as a previous stressful or traumatic event. This could account for the individual’s repetitive behaviour and returns to situations of abuse. (12)

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16 Zaikowski, following the American Psychiatric Association, broadly defines post-traumatic stress disorder as “a collection of chronic physiological and psychological symptoms that occur in response to the first-hand experience, or direct secondary witnessing, of an unexpected event that threatens the integrity or existence of the body, and elicits extreme terror and helplessness” (200).

A few examples of these triggers in *Thirteen Cents* are when Azure tells us about the abuses hurled at him by the fruit sellers and immediately thereafter reveals the loss of his parents (2); his powerlessness in captivity, which triggers the memory of burning the family bed and his parent's response to the incident (47); and his time with Mr Lebowitz, which causes him to think of his own powerlessness juxtaposed against his exploitative and greedy relatives:

Nobody cares when you die. They just want to know what you will leave them. I remember my father saying that about my grandfather after he died. I hope he left me that watch, he kept saying. He never did get it. The relatives came before we did and cleaned out my grandfather. (90)

These stressful episodes are the only moments in the text where the reader is privy to Azure's life prior to living on the streets. As trauma theorist, Donald Kalsched, asserts: "a full narrative history cannot be told by the person whose life has been interrupted by trauma" (13).

In addition, Azure's unresolved past affects his present not only through his refusal to form close bonds with people – he prefers isolation to relationships – but also in the ways in which he negotiates relating with others. His relationship with Bafana is a prime example of his unwillingness to establish meaningful connections. Azure claims: "That *lytie* is getting under my armpit, under my soft spot. I mustn't let that happen, I tell myself. I've seen too many kids die and disappear. There's no point in getting too close" (7). As a result, he establishes a stern relationship with Bafana which ultimately indicates his internalisation of his own abusive past. When Bafana ignores his rules, for example, Azure responds violently, to the point that Bafana needs medical attention. Azure, here, collapses his fondness for Bafana with 'protective' violence. This can be linked to his own father's behaviour, suggesting the transference of roles. Vickroy argues that "transference, or the attempted recreation of previous emotional experience, though a common psychological phenomena, is also a powerful indicator of attempts to repeat and resolve traumatic situations" (136).

Throughout the narrative, then, Azure displays characteristics of traumatisation which manifest in the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. These symptoms include, but are not limited to, hyperarousal and intrusion. According to Zaikowski, hyperarousal "is marked by such traits as nightmares, insomnia, generalized anxiety, psychosomatic complaints, explosive anger, irritability, heightened startle reflex, and hypervigilance. Traumatic symptoms in this category can be understood as a chronic engagement of the nervous system" (200). And intrusion "is distinguished by flashbacks, nightmares, repetition compulsion, and other modes of reliving the trauma" (Zaikowski 200). Azure, as we have seen, exhibits some of these traits, specifically "nightmares", "repetition compulsion", "generalized anxiety", "irritability" and "hypervigilance". However, his

first-person narration deceptively downplays these traumatic aspects of his narrative. His matter-of-fact diction purports the fiction that he is mature enough to handle the reduction of his body to a (sexual) commodity and other various damaging experiences. Nabutanyi, in this regard, points out that, “although the subject [Azure] is discussing is traumatic, he uses simple, mundane, and banal vocabulary to justify his persona as an adult who can engage in the selling of his body and eloquently talk about it” (6).

In light of the insights of trauma theory, Azure’s narration is a survival strategy. It is an enabling tool to help recover his sense of self and agency in the face of annihilative experiences. Vickroy maintains that “feelings of helplessness can lead to breakdowns, and to avoid this, victims’ defensive mechanisms allow them a sense of agency, even if illusory, to help retain a sense of self” (25). As with his use of the ‘weapons of the weak’, Azure’s narration is, effectively, a defence mechanism. Defensive mechanisms help survivors to “fill the void” of their losses “through an active creation of self” (Vickroy 133). And so Azure refuses to cast himself as a victim. His narrative underscores his quest for survival, which is a dominant trope in the novel (Ezeliora 173). Intent on resisting the criminal underworld of the city and its people, Azure endeavours to isolate himself from the gangsters and other like-minded (exploitative) individuals, declaring “I’m not a *moegu*” (13). However, gangsters like Allen and Gerald are relentless in their efforts to keep him dependent and own him. Following their abuses, Azure is forced to flee to Table Mountain not only to remove himself from entrapment, violence and exploitation in the city, but also to re-negotiate his sense of self and agency.

### **3.5 “Things Fall Apart”: Chapters 15-22**

The scene of Azure’s climb up the mountain is marked by a latent explosive anger and desire to exact revenge on the city and its exploitative populace. Azure rejects everything and everyone on his path, chanting the mantra: “Destroy, destroy, destroy” (103). As he passes a government building, he calls the memorial statue of a man on a horse “ugly” (103), signalling a critique of the social and political structures which have rendered him marginal and invisible. This can also be linked to his critique of the police and banks earlier in the novel, which also highlights his trauma. As Vickroy argues, “Traumatic experience can inspire [...] a loss of confidence in the social and cultural structures that are supposed to create order and safety” (13). Possessed by “a mad animal energy” (104), Azure rejects Gerald’s power over him and all the grown-ups who “are full of shit” (106), as they have consistently abused and appropriated his body. He further disavows the power and privilege of white people who “walk like they own the road” (124), and who bathe in the sun while “their children [walk]

around naked like little gods” (104). Thus he abandons the city in favour of the oppositional power of the mountain which “stands [high above the city] like a giant that is about to move and crush everything in its way” (104). And, as he climbs higher up the mountain, Azure says: “I can see the now-quiet city. It lies weak beneath me. I spit” (105). The city is silenced, weakened and finally rejected.

Although the mountain is situated in the heart of the city, it is represented as a space that is peripheral to the urban lifestyle and therefore outside of society. Louise Green, for example, argues that the historical and social experience of Table Mountain has always “represented a space outside the particular social relations imposed by apartheid [...] the mountain itself remained curiously unlegislated. The space of the mountain seemed to exceed that which could realistically be controlled” (175-6). For Azure, the mountain is a space where he can see, reflect without “feel[ing] rushed” (110), and assert a sense of agency which is considerably curtailed in the city. As he “move[s] up into the light” (106), Azure cleanses himself of the city’s “bewitching world” through the heat of the sun: “I feel the sun’s heat on my back. I take in the heat with pleasure and sweat it out. I’m cleansing myself” (105). The mountain is, henceforth, portrayed as a divine space:<sup>17</sup> “the top part leads to the sky, to the sun, to fire!” (106). And, in this heaven-like space, Azure claims: “I feel happy and miss nothing. I don’t feel hunger and I don’t feel thirst. I just feel myself. I feel strong” (107). He also acquires a profound sense of purpose on the mountain: “For the first time I work like I know what I’m doing. I don’t think too much” (107).<sup>18</sup> His retreat to the mountain, therefore, epitomises his effort to renegotiate and assert his agency – a struggle which is also signified in the narrative’s shift from social realism to animist realism. Azure is situated in the liminal space between the ordinary and the fantastic.

The animist unconscious obliterates the boundaries between the real and the magical, the spirit and human world, in the “continual re-enchantment of the world” (Garuba 256). Animist logic, as Garuba advances, “subverts [the] binarism [between tradition and modernity] and destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic” (270). Animism, in the context of Duiker’s novel, functions to open up limitless possibilities for Azure’s struggle to reclaim autonomy. At the mountain, the object(ive) world is spiritualised and Azure is able construct a kind of homeliness – the animals on the mountain welcome him “[they] come out to see me” (106), “the sun seems to smile” at him

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17 This representation of the mountain draws on indigenous myths about Table Mountain; the amaXhosa, for example, called the mountain “Umlindi Wemingizimu, the watcher of the South”, which points not only to its spiritual significance but also to the power it exerted over the landscape” (Green 173).

18 Azure’s work and purposefulness here recalls the historical view of the mountain as a place of work: “from the slaves collecting wood in the early history of the colony to the flower pickers collecting for the flower market in the city, the open ground of the mountain has been almost continually transformed by work” (Green 173).

(106), the stream quenches his thirst (105, 108, 113), the fire “begs” him to “feed” it (108) and in turn is his “blanket” (118). Azure’s animist reality is, ultimately, a way of exercising agency and control over the threatening environment of the city within the re-enchanted (and transformative) space of the mountain. Animist realism also metaphorically deconstructs official notions of time. According to Garuba, “this concept [...] opens up a different time outside the usual linear, positivist time encoded with notions of progress and increasing secularization” (271). Citing Kumkum Sangari, Garuba explains this conception of time as “poised in a liminal space, which, having broken out of the binary opposition between the circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge” (271). This liminal conception of time is, in *Thirteen Cents*, articulated through Azure’s dreams, in which historical representation and Khoisan mythology are intermingled with Azure’s own past.

In the dream-world, Azure encounters Saartjie, “a woman who looks like she lived a very long time ago. She is short and her bum is big but she has the lightest smile I’ve ever seen. She wears only a leather thong and her long breasts are like fruit, like fat pears [...]. She has a beautiful face and a yellow skin that seems to glow” (119). Saartjie invokes the ancestral woman Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman who, in 1807, was taken from Cape Town to Europe, where her body was exhibited and hypersexualized as the “Hottentot Venus” (Yancy 91). The possession of Saartjie’s body by others mirrors Azure’s own marginalisation and dehumanisation. What is more, both Saartjie and Azure share a similar experience of dislocation, of feeling lost and homeless. Saartjie, for instance, claims that she was once a fish, and Azure tells her that he was a seal. He also confesses that he is lost and trying to find his way home, to which Saartjie responds: “It is a hard thing not to know where you come from” (120). They thus both, in a sense, feel themselves to be out of their element.

The resurrection of Saartjie, here, gestures to the retrieval of buried histories. As Pumla Gqola observes in her important book, *What is Slavery To Me*, South African history and fiction have been silent on the issue of slavery and pre-apartheid histories of dispossession and trauma. Saartjie’s appearance in Azure’s dreams, then, “counters the suppression of her history – her story of degradation, along with the stories of the Khoi people, [which were] silenced for decades” (Kim 89). Furthermore, her appearance on the mountain is significant, in that Saartjie died overseas and her remains were only returned to South Africa in 2002 (Kim 89). In Azure’s dream-world, she is represented as being home (Kim 89), albeit damaged. She reveals an old wound under her breast which is full of maggots, pointing to the degradation of her body. To this, Azure responds by adopting a nurturing role in cleaning the wound, as well as a protective role by shielding Saartjie from her

father's wrath and eventually killing the evil Mantis.<sup>19</sup> Consistent with my view of the scenes on the mountain, Kim argues that "Azure is [here] able to access his inmost longings though an alternative historic-mythical knowledge system, which presents itself for Azure to draw on as an alternative past to the city's history of domination and oppression" (89).

Temporal disruption, in Azure's narrative, is also symptomatic of his unresolved trauma. Whitehead postulates that "trauma [because it is only experienced belatedly] carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to [...] linear temporalities" (5). Trauma fiction, she argues, represents trauma's temporal disjunction through forms of possession or haunting (6). *Thirteen Cents*, we have seen, continually suggests this haunting in the various ways in which the past re-surfaces in the present. Duiker intensifies this notion of haunting by directing our attention to Azure's "inner world of trauma", to use Kalsched's phrase (1), on the mountain. This is depicted in Azure's fantastic assumption of the "omnipotent role of destroyer" (Vickroy 123) and in his dreams. The latter function as a symbolic indication of his desires: they affirm his desire for companionship, family and nurturance.<sup>20</sup> They also underscore his desire for revenge and autonomy. When the real T-Rex, who is also Azure's father in his dreams, terrorises the city, everyone who seeks refuge on the mountain is silenced – their lips are sewn together with wire – and thus denied agency, which ironically points to Azure's own feelings of entrapment and powerlessness. However, his nemesis, Gerald, also appears to him with his lips sewn together. The fact that Gerald is subsequently beheaded and devoured by the T-Rex (123) thus constitutes a symbolic victory and affirms Azure's desire for vengeance. However, even though Azure's dreams help to displace the power that others have over him, they do not prepare him for the world he will eventually have to face in the city. Commenting on the limitations of the psyche's primitive defences, Kalsched writes:

The problem for the traumatized individual [is the] incipient tragedy [which] results from the fact that the Protector/Persecutor [defense mechanism] is not educable. The primitive defense does not learn anything about realistic danger as the child grows up. It functions on the magical level of consciousness with the same level of awareness it had when the original trauma or traumas occurred. Each new life opportunity is mistakenly seen as a dangerous threat of re-traumatization and is therefore attacked. (5)

When Azure descends the mountain after four days, the scene is reminiscent of the initiation ritual in Xhosa tradition where 'boys' go to the mountain and return as 'men'. As Azure descends, he finds

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19 Kim explains that the Mantis was a god that was worshipped by the Khoi (89).

20 See, for example, his relationship with Saartjie, who is cast in the role of surrogate mother – she looks after him, cooks for him, and dotes on him, as archetypal mothers are prone to do.

thirteen cents in his pocket – a discovery which affirms his desire to become a man. However, he also reveals that he has lost a cent on the mountain, which foreshadows his interrupted *Bildung*. According to Kim, the “‘thirteen’ in the book’s title seems to signal [Azure’s] arrest in permanent adolescence, always between adult and childhood” (92). Thus, Azure recalls the Peter Pan Syndrome of the boy who *wouldn’t* grow up, re-presented here as the boy who *couldn’t* grow up. The “thirteen cents” also, notably, “indicates his worthlessness, as well as his commodification within this capitalistic city” (Kim 92).

Azure’s return to the city is bitter-sweet: he finds, to his relief, that Gerald has died mysteriously, but the old social order has been replaced by a ‘new’-old one in Sealy, who has subsequently risen to power and is the new leader of the gang. Though Sealy takes him under his wing, Azure remains sceptical of his new life and, as a result, the novel never quite returns to its former social realist mode. In the end, all the people who reside under the “incomplete bridge” are forcibly removed and their shanty is bulldozed, rendering them homeless and dislocated. Feeling lost again on the streets, Azure finally rejects and deserts the city for Table Mountain. As he climbs up the mountain, he chants the mantra: “My mother is dead. My father is dead” (154). At the top of the mountain, he finds a crevice between rocks, where he seeks shelter from the stormy weather. Once inside, he discovers a cave, where he makes a huge fire for warmth and light:

On one of the walls there are strange markings. Someone drew stick people and they are carrying spears and they run after a cow. But the cow is drawn really well. I can see its horn and its tail. I look at the drawings and a strange thought comes to me. I start walking around the fire. I walk in a circle, driven by a strange sensation to move [...] I walk faster and faster and start clapping to a rhythm. (157)

Azure, here, engages in shamanistic rituals: he begins to have visions (of the coming apocalypse?) and draws shapes on his body by using the ashes from the fire, which also fuels his “madness” (158). As Kim argues,

Azure is writing a new future for himself by rejecting his past and inscribing the same body that has been used and taken up by the adult men. Whereas the release of blood from his anus had been a sign of his domination and commodification, here a release of blood from his nose highlights his complete entry into the shamanist trance state [...], thus signalling Azure’s emergence into power. (91)

He accesses an alternative source of power that is linked to KhoiSan history, and which is highlighted by his vision of Saartjie. This power enables him to imagine the destruction of his foes, and his body

is, again, represented as an important site for reclaiming agency.

The following morning, Azure watches as the city below is enveloped and devoured by a tsunami, and balls of fire fall from the sky (161-3). The mountain increasingly becomes an island and recalls its Khoi name, *Hoerikwaggo*, which means “mountain of the sea” (Green 173). Azure, in the meantime, continues to chant: “My mother is dead. My father is dead” (161-164). This apocalyptic scenario, in which nature avenges Azure, points to the schizophrenia of his attempts to reclaim autonomy from the city and freedom from his abusers. Kim argues that:

In his act of rejection and destruction [Azure] takes up the same type of power that he had resented in adults. One of Azure’s last complaints about adults before returning to the mountain for the last scenes is that “they think they are God. They think they know it all – the score” [...]. With his destruction of the city, he adopts their power (to an extent that they were not even able to) and plays God. His *bildung* might result in him escaping the oppression of his society, but it comes at the cost of adopting the violence that was used against him in this destructive act. (91-2)

The novel’s dystopic ending also points to Azure’s psychic disintegration, which is underscored by the closing lines: “I have seen the centre of darkness. I have seen the slave-driver of darkness and he is a mad bastard. I know his secrets. I know what he does when we sleep. *My mother is dead. My father is dead*” (164, emphasis added). The recurrence of this mantra draws attention to the site of his original trauma, a trauma which he has consistently downplayed throughout his narrative, and which he is forced to acknowledge in this ambiguous ending.

### 3.6 Conclusion

At the end of the novel, it becomes apparent that Azure’s narration (which emphasises his survival on the streets) is part of the same ‘trick’ that he plays on his clients when he deceives them into thinking that he derives pleasure from their homosexual activities, or the deception he practises on adults who fall for his “magic words” (3). In other words, by foregrounding his survival, Azure attempts to trick the reader into accepting his self-sufficiency, his keen intellect and, ultimately his wrath and his destruction of the city. His attempts at tricking the reader are, however, undermined by the various incidents which highlight his trauma, as I have argued above. Furthermore, the narrative casts doubt on the matter of his empowerment at the end of the novel. It is unclear, for example, whether Azure is a triumphant victor, given that the final image of him is that of a fearful young boy hiding under a “fallen rock” (Kim 92).

Both on a structural level and on the level of content, *Thirteen Cents* is held ransom by various unresolved schizophrenic tensions: the novel's linear logic versus the haunting time of trauma; the tension between disillusionment/disenchantment versus re-enchantment of the world; Azure's scathing views of grown-ups versus his desire for manhood, to name but a few. These tensions – which are reminiscent of the Freudian 'return of the repressed' – not only point to the novel's underlying schizophrenia, its sense of being pulled in opposite directions at the same time, but also reorder its conceptual and temporal dimensions. Thus, while the novel seemingly progresses in a linear fashion, it actually elides the fact that time moves backwards, forcing Azure to return to the originary traumatic event which has altered his sense of *being-in-the-world* – as the final line of the novel indicates.

Ultimately, what one finds in *Thirteen Cents* is the aporia and impotence of disillusionment, or, rather, the infinite dialectic between romanticism and disenchantment which essentially renders the process of re-enchanting the world a still-born one. As indicated in my Introduction, Cornel West explains this paradox lyrically as “funk”. In a public lecture, available on *Youtube*, entitled “Cornel West on Philosophy and the Funk of Disappointment”, West maintains that “disappointment is a modern bias, rooted in a romantic view of the world in which you're so hungry for wholeness and harmony that if you don't get it you're locked in alienation and disenchantment”. The impotence of Azure's disenchantment, coupled with his trauma, results in the gradual erosion of his (psychological) defences and, finally, his breakdown. And, as an allegorical narrative, *Thirteen Cents* seems to gesture towards the Gramscian notion that “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”, as Mzamane (xvii) argues. That is, the old colonial structures are being dismantled, but there is nothing new or tangibly ground-breaking to replace them. In such a context, then, disillusionment is a given – it is a constant companion for the post-colonial subject whose subjectivity, as Fanon once noted, is locked into a “zone of non-being” (*Black Skins* 7). As a result, this post-colonial subject, to use West's words, is always “shattered and shattering all time”. It would seem that a “second coming” – in the sense that Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, draws on W.B. Yeats's poem, that is, as connoting divine intervention – is needed to overcome the ingrained structural, institutional and psycho-social violence and trauma of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. Duiker casts the kind of freedom that has been achieved in South Africa in the mould of delusion. And, as Gordon observes, “Delusional freedom is not freedom at all, but another kind of bondage” (22).

## Chapter 4

### A Poetics of Failure in Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*

[Take] a stroll out of the confines of conventional knowledge and into the unregulated territories of failure, loss, and unbecoming, [...] make a long detour around disciplines and ordinary ways of thinking.

(Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 7)

An accomplished work of existential angst and ironic narration, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* prompts a return to the question that Stuart Hall asked almost a decade before this debut novel was published. In his exploratory essay, "What is the 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?", Hall locates his discussion within the discourses of "the global postmodern"<sup>21</sup> as he grapples with the ambiguous placement of blacks in relation to postmodernism (105). He also interrogates the (essentialist) representations of the signifier "black" in popular culture, while privileging the contradictory space of black popular culture as potentially redemptive (108-110). Interestingly, Hall begins this work by provocatively (and ironically) asking the question: "what sort of moment is this in which to pose the question of black popular culture?" (104). The intrigue of this question lies beyond its sexy currency. After all, Hall argues,

Moments have their historical specificity, and although they always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this, they are never the same moment. And the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question, and therefore the strategies of cultural politics with which we attempt to intervene in popular culture, and the form and style of cultural theory and criticizing that has to go along with such an intermatch. (104)

While Hall poses this question in a context different to my own, my interest lies in its ability to transcend the Atlantic and speak to the cultural politics of representation in 'post-colonial' states generally, and in South Africa, more specifically, where issues of identity construction remain a site of major contestation and conflict. The question of the meaning of blackness has been a bone of contention, in South Africa, especially since the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement in the early sixties. In *I Write What I Like*, Steve Bantu Biko offers a complex, if not contradictory, definition of blackness. He contends that blackness is "not a matter of pigmentation" or skin colour, but "a state of mind" (52). In the same breath, he argues that any man or woman who calls a white man (or woman) *baas* (that is, has internalised and accepted his/her inferiority) is a "non-white" (52).

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21 A term he admittedly loathes because, he argues, it is "so empty and sliding a signifier that it can be taken to mean virtually anything you like" (105).

He adds: “blacks [are] those who are by law or tradition politically, economically, and socially discriminated against as a group and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations” (52). For Biko, then, blackness lies not in the ways in which it is imagined and returned by the anti-black racist, but in how the black person constructs his/her *own* meaning of self – a self-construction that requires a consciousness of cultural heritage and history, and the ways in which colonialism endeavours to distort these, together with an affirmation of pride in being black. This inquiry into the meaning of blackness continues to fascinate the imagination, particularly in the context of a changing South Africa, where multiculturalism and cultural memory have seemingly superseded racial memory in popular culture, and where the phenomenon of “coconutness”, to use a term put forward by Ndumiso Ngcobo (30), complicates issues of identification and in some ways espouses historical amnesia.

The term “coconut” is derogatory, and is popularly used in reference to a black person who not only prefers English as his/her main medium of communication, favouring it over African languages, “or who is unable to speak an African language”, but who also speaks like “a white person” and has adopted a western lifestyle (Spencer 67). In other words, “‘coconut’ refers to someone who is black on the outside but white on the inside” (Spencer 67), just as the coconut fruit has a brown shell and white flesh (Rudwick 102). Unlike the racial slur, “kaffir”, which was used by white people to diminish the humanity of black people during apartheid, “coconut” emerges from the black community itself, and points to the pariah status of “coconutness” as an attack on ‘black authenticity’. It captures the same phenomenon that the term “Black Englishmen” did in the late nineteenth century to describe “African language speakers who attended mission schools, spoke ‘immaculate’ English, and adopted a western lifestyle” (Rudwick 112). Njabulo Ndebele, in an interview with Mary West, argues in similar vein when he explains that:

The usual reading of the “coconut” image, both in [Matlwa’s] novel and in South African life, revolves around the old polarising theme of ‘civilized’ black people versus ‘savage’ black people, or those who went to school and were educated, as opposed to the uneducated ones. From this perspective, “coconuts” are those from black communities who have betrayed their roots by becoming “white”, through attending model C schools, and who perhaps may now even be living in neighbourhoods where such schools are located. They are perceived to have lost their black identity. (19)

“Coconut”, thus, not only refers to a black person who is culturally lost, but also painfully ashamed of their blackness (Hlongwane 10).

Matlwa’s *Coconut* is instrumental to an understanding of the cultural dynamics in

contemporary South Africa, and insightful in the ways that it points to the socio-historical and psychological traumas which have given rise to the coconut phenomenon. As Gugu Hlongwane argues: “In post-apartheid South Africa what is a problem is no longer the violence of apartheid – with its crude institutionalized racism – but the repercussions of apartheid manifested in a nation that is impoverished economically, educationally, spiritually and psychologically” (11). The novel is divided into two parts and features two female protagonists (Ofilwe and Fikile, respectively) who grapple with negotiating their femininity, belonging, alienation, shame, as well as schizophrenic ideas about their blackness. Spencer contends that the novel “interrogates the various ways in which cultural tensions created by the historical legacies of apartheid, conjoined with American global power, produce a cultural hegemony that privileges ‘whiteness’ over ‘blackness’, and results in ‘whiteness’ becoming a new form of aspirational identity” (68). Accordingly, I read Matlwa’s novel as a work on failure, since failure takes on a peculiar role in the narrative as a critique of the triumphant (imaginary?) spectacle that is the ‘Rainbow Nation’.

My use of the term “failure”, draws on Margaret Werry and Roisin O’Gorman who, in “The Anatomy of Failure”, posit that “Failure is symptomatic of a current order. It maps what is thinkable, acceptable, appropriate, normal, desirable in any given set of conditions” (106). Thus, failure, in my discussion, speaks – broadly – to the obstacles to (and perhaps impossibilities of) the structural and cultural landscape of post-apartheid South Africa realising the dream of the ‘Rainbow Nation’. I also draw, to a large extent, on the work of Tlhalo Raditlhalo and other like-minded critics who are sceptical of the discourse of multiculturalism in contemporary South Africa and the ways in which its adoption plays out in popular culture to the detriment of blackness as espoused by the Black Consciousness Movement. According to Raditlhalo,

the political liberation of South Africa was achieved at the expense of social and cultural transformations that reveal the unconstructed modalities of *be-ing* that were never fundamentally questioned in the quest for freedom from oppression. And yet, buried in the crumbling walls of apartheid were the seeds of self-hate, crises of identity and deliberate implantations of what Ngugi wa Thiong’o labels ‘whiteache’ in *Wizard of the Crow*. (19)

Following this trajectory, I argue against the hegemonic discourse which maintains that race and racism no longer significantly determine life opportunities in South Africa, and view this discourse as emblematic of a turn towards historical amnesia. As Marzia Milazzo observes:

Colorblind talk – which contends, among other things, that institutional racism no longer considerably determines life opportunities; that inequality can be understood

as an expression of class disparities which transcend racial hierarchies; that economic power is primarily a consequence of individual merit and personal responsibility; and that racial categories should therefore preferably *not* be invoked – shapes literary imaginaries, academic scholarship, and public racial discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. (36)

According to Milazzo, the maintenance of “colorblind talk” registers a structural and institutional failure which “prevents us from understanding the socio-political function of race” (38). By drawing attention to the phenomenon of “coconutness”, however, Matlwa’s novel stages a quasi-‘return of the repressed’ in its tackling of race and the politics of representation in contemporary black South African literature. The novel, by extension, also inspires a review of the dubious yet indisputable ‘fact of blackness’, since “coconutness” poses the question of meaning to blackness – as will become apparent in the course of my discussion.

The “failure” in my title also speaks to the ‘failure’ of “coconuts” to *be* (read: to be white), and hence the “failure” of black persons to achieve ‘humanity’ in a context which still presupposes whiteness as the human standard. My use of “failure”, then, draws on the specialised (psychoanalytic) sense in which Lewis R. Gordon interprets Fanon’s works as articulating failure. To begin with, Gordon – reading Fanon – announces the fact that, historically, ‘blacks’ have not structurally been regarded as human beings, since the notion of humanity has been a domain restricted to whiteness (“Zone of Nonbeing” 3). ‘Blacks’ represent a “problem” to the white world and are deemed “problematic beings” – as emerges in Du Bois’s view on the pathologisation of blacks in the essay “The Study of the Negro Problem” and in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Paraphrasing Du Bois, Gordon claims that, “Blacks [...] suffer the phobogenic reality posed by the spirit of racial seriousness. In effect, they more than symbolize or signify various social pathologies – they *become* them. In our antiblack world, blacks *are* pathology” (*Existential Africa* 87). Elsewhere, Gordon reasons that the predicament of black people is their ultimate location *outside* of (white) systems of order and rationality:

A perfect system cannot have imperfections. Since blacks claim to be contradictions of a perfect system, the imperfection must either be an error in reasoning (mere ‘appearance’) or lie in black folk themselves. Blacks become rationalized as the extraneous *evil* of a *just system*. (“Geography of Reason” 6)

Thus configured, blacks are locked into what Fanon calls “a zone of nonbeing” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 7) which, Gordon explains, is a state of limbo which would “place blacks below whites but above creatures whose lots are worse, or [...] the point of total absence [...] which would mean hell” (“Zone of Nonbeing” 3). However, Fanon, gesturing to the fundamental failure of blackness, notes

that, “in the majority of cases, the black lacks the benefit of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell” (*White Masks* 8). What then, Jared Sexton asks,

is the nature of a human being whose [*being* human] is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all? Or, rather, whose being is the generative force, historic occasion, and essential byproduct of the question of human being in general? How might it be thought that there exists a being about which the question of its particular being is the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility for any thought about being whatsoever? What can be said about such a being, and how, if at stake in the question is the very possibility of human being and perhaps even possibility as such? What is the being of a problem? (6-7, emphasis added)

Grappling with a similar thought, Gordon explains this neurotic situation by employing the concept of melancholia:

to be black in the modern world is to be a being who has never had something to which one feels entitled, namely, what it is to belong in an ordinary way of belonging. Exacerbating the situation is that the absence of that belonging renders even the feeling of entitlement illegitimate. It pushes the black into the realm of what Fanon aptly described as the zone of nonbeing [...]. What this means is not only the ascription of illegitimacy of black participation in the nonblack world, but also the failure of black effectiveness in the black world. Blacks, in other words, also fail at being black. To love the self, then, the black must learn to love those who do not belong and always fail [...]. (“Reasoning in Black” 5)

Now, while Du Bois and Fanon write in and of a context of overt racism and anti-blackness, their insights resonate with Matlwa’s novel which, although written in and about a “supposedly free post-apartheid country, registers a racially divided South Africa” (Hlongwane 13). In addition, the similarities between Fanon’s character in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Matlwa’s protagonists in *Coconut* are difficult to ignore. Like Fanon’s character in the first seven chapters of *Black Skin, White Masks* Matlwa’s “coconuts” live, in good faith, the white construction of blackness. This construction, Gordon asserts, is told that “if he or she is really human, then he or she can go beyond the boundaries of race. The black can ‘really’ ‘choose’ to live otherwise as a form of social being that is not [...] any racial formation” (“Zone” 3). However, like Fanon’s character, the “coconut” soon realises that to live this way means living as ‘white’ (Gordon 3). In other words, his/her life mirrors Du Bois’ notion of a “double consciousness” in which, as Gordon explains, “one is yoked to a self-image that is entirely a function of how one is seen by others. [Where blackness] means to be so in exclusively white terms” (“Geography of Reason” 6). Or, as Du Bois himself explains, “double consciousness [is] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by

the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (*The Soul of Black Folk* 45). This double consciousness not only results in alienated black selves, but also means that “knowledge of the constructed aspects of a self fails to transform that self [when] the standpoint of appearance is always a colonial one” (Gordon, “Geography of Reason” 12).

In this chapter, I locate Matlwa’s *Coconut* within this discourse and assert that an understanding of the specifically existential dimension of “coconutiness” is crucial to Matlwa’s characters, who are confronted with the burden of racial trauma and experience themselves as problems. They attempt to escape this ‘problemhood’ by adopting Eurocentric ideals of beauty and by transforming themselves through mastering the English language and accent. But, as Gordon argues, “mastering the language for the sake of recognition as *white* reflects a dependency that subordinates black’s humanity” (“Zone” 6). My linking of “coconutiness” to the broader anxieties and tensions that continue to haunt the world black community is thus a way not only of locating the “coconut” in space and time (or a particular historical moment), but also of attempting to understand its pariah status in the light of black existential theory following the psychological violence of colonialism. To put it simply, the problem of ‘being a problem’ that “coconuts” experience corresponds to the plight of many black people throughout history. In essence, then, “coconuts” exemplify the ways in which “the past continues to speak to us”, to borrow Hall’s words in another context (*Cultural Identity* 226).

Finally, I uphold the redemptive possibilities of failure for the black person who is situated in a context that neither affirms blackness nor accords it value. This view of failure as possibly redemptive follows Werry’s and O’Gorman’s:

Failure is productive, because it demands redress. In failure we are forced to think critically, to reimagine, to make something new [...]. Failure is a threshold. It is a limit point, a stoppage, a caesura: a moment in which the linear drive of progress, betterment, accomplishment grinds to a halt. Failure’s threshold is also an opening, a crucial, often painful state of imagination. After the familiar, bleak, heavy vacancy, that bottom-punched-out-of-my-world emptiness recedes, something new happens. (Maybe). (105-6)

For me, to fail at personhood in a context that presupposes whiteness as the human standard is not necessarily negative. This failure highlights the structural inconsistencies and contradictions of a Western rationality that has, for centuries, and self-deceptively, sought to become *ontological*, an “Absolute Being”. Such a being, as Gordon asserts, “[stands] in the way of a *human* being, or a human way of being” (“Zone of Nonbeing” 1). Failure, then, as Werry and Gorman argue, “imperils a [...] claim to authority; it exposes the flimsiness of power” (107). This particular view of failure also

resonates with Judith Halberstam's work, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, in which she argues,

Failure can be counted within that set of oppositional tools that James C. Scott called "the weapons of the weak" [...]. We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (88)

Moreover, and most importantly, for a black person to fail at personhood points to the need for socio-cultural theorists and identity politicians to continue the work of grappling with the meaning of blackness and its possible futures – what Fanon once called:

passionate research [...] directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. (qtd in Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 223)

#### **4.1 "The notion of systemically well-adjusted blacks is the obscenity of the happy slaves"<sup>22</sup>**

When Raditlhalo argues that the "coconut" is "an indefensible obscenity", he is not at the same time suggesting that there is something fundamentally wrong with being a "coconut". What he is picking up is a structural failure to construct positive avenues in which to explore blackness in the cultural milieu of contemporary South Africa. That is, there are no spaces in cultural (and popular?) discourse which affirm blackness, which imbue this identity with the extraordinary license of full vitality that whiteness affords. Blackness continues to be ghettoised, and is still largely the face of criminality, dysfunctionality and sub-normality, despite the reality of a black-majority government South Africa, and regardless of the interventions of fringe movements such as the Black Conscious Collective and September National Imbizo – previously Black Wash – and the current popularity of whiteness studies and the latter's deconstruction of whiteness and white privilege. Consequently, blackness remains the unresolved, ambiguous antithesis of whiteness.

To advance his argument, Raditlhalo cites the neutering of the philosophy of Black Consciousness in the popular imagination, specifically this Movement's consciousness of the lacuna around the role of culture in the struggle for freedom (23). He recounts that:

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<sup>22</sup> This subtitle is a quote lifted from Gordon's "When I Was There, It Was Not" (14). It resonates with Raditlhalo's discussion on *Coconut*, specifically the view that colonialism (and its legacy) makes no room for a normal black body.

in all the years of struggle the political formations, by and large, did not make an effort to inculcate an awareness of the role culture could play in the liberation of South Africa. With the exception of the BCM, African culture played a secondary role in the culture of liberation, in that efforts at self-definition were now directed solely at politics. It is also in this dispensation that education itself was relegated to an afterthought, with the use of the slogan: “Liberation now, education later”. (22)

Black Consciousness, as argued earlier, was a powerful cultural structure of meaning and feeling in the face of the life-denying realities of apartheid. The power of Black Consciousness philosophy rested not only in the importance of naming and claiming (or recuperating) blackness, but also in the attempt to restore dignity and humanity to the structurally marginalised black person who fell prey to the psychosocial proclivities of colonial violence. “The BCM”, Raditlhalo argues “sought to resuscitate black self-worth in the light of ongoing effects of absolute oppression” (22). By invoking the philosophy of Black Consciousness, Raditlhalo not only underscores “the importance of culture as a matrix that allowed black communities to endure, [since] the nonracial movements did not really give this terrain of black existence much thought” (24), but also reminds us of the significance of self-definition for (‘previously’) oppressed groups. His theoretical grounding in the black radical tradition anticipates critiques such the one advanced by Aretha Phiri in her article: “*Coconut* and the Dialectics of Race: Interrogating Images of Whiteness and Blackness in (Black) Literary and Cultural Studies”. In her response to Raditlhalo’s discussion of Matlwa’s *Coconut*, and specifically his assertion that this novel registers “[contemporary] South African unease with race” (19), Phiri contends that he “misses the novel’s evocation of the necessarily porous and performative character of race and culture generally” (1). She argues that it impossible to imagine and represent blackness without “imaging and imagining whiteness” (2). While disagreeing with this implication that Raditlhalo’s reading of *Coconut* is essentialist (read: lacks complexity), Gugu Hlongwane argues that his analysis can be read in the light of Helene Strauss’s discussion of strategic essentialism (16). Strauss, for example, claims that, “In the context of ‘racial’ and cultural overdetermination, where a subject’s location on axes of privilege limits his or her choices, essentialist claims to identity are made for various reasons, ranging from the strategic to the reactionary” (qtd in Hlongwane 16-7).

At the heart of Raditlhalo’s discussion is the Black Consciousness rhetoric that black people need to define themselves according to their own values, and that this involves a strong positive assertion of pride in being a black person. The BCM – like many other early theorists in the field of African Philosophy/Black Existentialism – believed that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor was control of the mind of the oppressed”, and that “the necessary accompaniment was psychological liberation of the black man from the confines of centuries of racism and paternalism” (Hirshmann 5). As Fanon observes:

Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

(*Wretched of the Earth* 170)

The “fundamental questions of being” in Raditlhalo’s title thus speak to his interest in African identity, and locate his discussion within the field of Africana philosophy – that is, “philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation”, coupled with the “existential demand for recognizing the situation or lived-context of Africana people’s being-in-the-world” (Gordon 3-4). As a result, Raditlhalo’s argument foregrounds the work of other black intellectuals, such as Toni Morrison, Steve Biko, Ralph Ellison, Cornel West and ESKIA Mphahlele, who are invested in the plight of black humanity in the modern world.

Phiri’s discussion, then, fails to register the various nuances in Raditlhalo’s approach and theoretical grounding. I would argue, too, that, while Phiri and Raditlhalo are interested in the same text, and while Phiri frames her discussion as a response to Raditlhalo’s, the differences in their positions and theoretical frameworks not only highlights the dissimilarity of their politics but also means that they are, in fact, not having the same conversation. The centrality of Black Consciousness in Raditlhalo’s work, I believe, seeks to dethrone whiteness as the oracle or interpretative voice of blackness, and also to assert an agential black exegetical role in rendering black experiences meaningful to paraphrase George Yancy, in another context, (66). While I take seriously the point that Phiri makes – that is, that “whiteness and blackness in fact mirror and reflect each other in shifting and complex ways” (7) – I agree with the view that “the posing of the white as the standard for a dialectic of recognition renders the plight for black humanity a stillborn one with only one solution for the black – become white” (Gordon, “Hellish Zone” 7). In response to Phiri’s argument, then, I contend that there is no mystery to the dialectical relationship between whiteness and blackness,<sup>23</sup> however, the meaning of blackness, specifically in the context of a changing South Africa, remains unresolved.

It is from this position, I imagine, that Raditlhalo concerns himself with “fundamental questions of being”, and thus offers a critique of the brand of multiculturalism embraced by South Africa’s ‘Rainbow Nation’, a multiculturalism which rests on superficial inclusion but practises exclusion and repression. He contends, for example, that, “when the ANC adopted non-racialism as

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23 After all, Fanon’s *Black Skin White, White Masks* is concerned with this very idea of the *dialectics of recognition*, as is Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness”, Hegel’s conception of the lord-bondsman dialectic, Foucault’s notion of “biopolitics”, Homi Bhabha’s “third space of culture”, Sarah Nuttall’s “cultural entanglement”, as well as numerous other studies on race relations, hybridity and creolization point to this fact.

a principled stance, it took for granted that multiculturalism was a given, rather than non-culturalism [...] that is precisely where South Africa comes a-cropper, since it is impossible to assert difference (culture) yet espouse non-somethingness (non-racialism rather than humanness)” (11). His uneasiness with the ethos of liberation, as espoused by the ANC and the country at large, recalls an important distinction between freedom and liberty that is advanced by Gordon. According to the latter, the concept of liberty is “purely negative”, in that it suggests the absence of constraints and “exemplifies what we share with other animals”, whereas freedom “entails responsibility and maturation. One could have liberty without freedom” (“Hellish Zone” 8). Raditlhalo expresses a similar view when, with Matlwa’s *Coconut* in mind, he likens the kind of liberation that has been achieved in South Africa to a mirage, a vast delusion. He finds the disavowal of (black) culture in the name of non-racialism indefensible in a black-governed South Africa:

The disengagement from African cultural practices by some of the wealthier members of the South African black community – a community that, much as in Jane Austen’s astute novels, sets the tone for the lower classes – is detrimental to African humanism, thus culture in South Africa. The urban space, it seems, retains the hypnotic disavowal of the African personality, much as it did during the dark days of apartheid. Though much has been written on the African character of cities such as Johannesburg (see, for instance, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall), what Matlwa’s text exposes is the *mirage* of black lives in such spaces. (35)

Ultimately, Raditlhalo’s struggle is with the ‘emasculatation’ of the culture espoused by the BCM, an emasculatation which, he argues, “has brought into being a segment of the nation that hankers after whiteness” (19). We therefore have, in South Africa, “a situation where young South Africans suffer from a debilitating sickness of whiteache, in which they do not simply wish to ‘pass for white’ but ‘be white’” (21). The “indefensible obscenity”, then, is not the “coconut” him/herself, but the existential, psychosocial and political reality, the situation which makes “coconuttiness” the only viable mode of expression and being for the (upwardly mobile) black person. I should clarify that the term “coconut”, here, is understood in the light of Sarah Nuttall’s notion of cultural entanglement. She argues that “the idea of the coconut represents a first wave in the negotiation of inter- and cross-cultural social life, more specifically the cross currents, and increasingly splits and contradictions, within ‘blackness’ as it has been lived and interpreted so far” (101). This optimistic, if not idealistic, understanding of “coconuttiness” naturally does not take into account the pathology of self-hatred that continues to haunt black people, whose self-identification is coloured (pun intended) by a trans-generational inferiority complex. This gothic disposition – that is, the hauntology of past traumas – provides the point of entry into the politics of race and representation for Matlwa and, indeed, is the

fulcrum upon which Raditlhalo's argument rests.

#### 4.2 “Unbecoming Women”: The Novel's Double Narrative and Genre

*Coconut* sets up a first-person double narrative involving two teenage protagonists, Ofilwe (Fifi) Tlou and Fikile (Fiks) Thwala, who are the narrating voices of the two parts of the novel respectively. Ofilwe, is the pampered, private-schooled, designer-clad daughter of a BEE beneficiary – John Tlou – who lives in a high-security country estate, called Little Valley, in Sandton. In this predominantly white community, Fifi struggles to fit in, and both desires and abhors the gaze and acceptance of her white peers. Fikile, her doppelgänger, is an orphaned high-school drop-out from the township of Mphe Batho. She moonlights as a waitress at an upmarket coffee shop in the suburbs of Johannesburg, where her life intersects with Fifi's. Fiks is driven by her obsessive aspiration to escape the township and obtain 'true' happiness and success. This, in her imagination and perverse reality, means transforming herself into the image of whiteness. The protagonists thus “speak from two distinct subject positions: [Ofilwe] from within the privilege of the plush, gated estates, a private-school education and the modern shopping malls of the suburbs; and [Fikile] from a sub-economic township” (Spencer 68).

The significance of these dual protagonists and narrators has already been pointed out by Lynda Spencer, who maintains that “[b]y having two narrators the author succeeds in providing the different perspectives of two characters located on each side of the socio-economic fence while struggling to negotiate self-identity in post-apartheid South Africa” (68). Randi Jean Rogers similarly argues that, “by having two females of the same nation, race, and age dealing with similar identity struggles from two different economic and cultural settings, [Matlwa] emphasizes [...] the experience of emotional diaspora, of being divided against oneself – and the restlessness of mind caused by it” (58). This idea of a split at the root of the novel – that is, the “two-ness” or duality in the novel's structure – can be extended further and viewed as a literal representation of Du Bois's notion of double consciousness, as will become apparent below.

The novel recounts a single day in the life of Ofilwe and Fikile; set on one uneventful Sunday, *Coconut* explores their struggle to negotiate their blackness and femininity, among other issues. The narrative, however, is not chronological, but is interrupted by a series of 'interludes' in the form of flashbacks, memories of events and conversations, diary entries, private thoughts and dreams. These interludes not only foreground the fractured nature of the protagonists' identities, but also complicate the issue of the generic identity of Matlwa's novel. *Coconut* seems to appropriate the form of the novel of development, the *Bildungsroman*, in its chronicling of Fifi's and Fiks's growth to maturity.

However, the *Bildungsroman*, as a genre, is invested in notions of linear progress and coherent identity (Fraiman iv). In her study of female-authored texts written during the Georgian and Victorian periods, Susan Fraiman adopts a sceptical stance in questioning the existence of the female *Bildungsroman*, as the genre is classically male-oriented and noticeably patriarchal in its ideological assumptions about masculinity and femininity. In her aptly titled book, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*, she “push[es] back against conventional assumptions about becoming” (iv), and views female-authored texts as counternarratives, since they “account for growing up female as a deformation, a gothic disorientation, a loss of authority, [and] an abandonment of goals” (xi). Fraiman argues that, “by dramatising female development in contradictory ways, [women’s writing] point[s] to the ‘feminine’ as a site of ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility, thereby opening up still more space for debate around this term” (31). Her interpretation of female-authored novels illuminates my reading of *Coconut*, since Matlwa’s novel not only rests on narrative disunity, but also constructs Fifi’s and Fiks’s psychic development in terms of conflict and uncertainty. *Coconut* imagines womanhood, as does Fraiman, “not as a single path to a clear destination but as the endless negotiation of crossroads” (x). Accordingly, the novel’s ending offers no clear resolution (or any indication as to the future prospects of the main characters).

Furthermore, the *Bildungsroman*, variously named the “novel of formation” or “apprentice novel”, presupposes the active guidance of mentors who supervise the protagonist’s development – “in an organised, quasi-institutional way” – and guide him towards a path of eventual ‘mastery’ of his goals (Fraiman 5). There is a noticeable absence of mentors in *Coconut*, however, as both Fifi and Fiks are forced to navigate their “becoming” without constructive or validating nurturance. Fifi, for example, is profoundly estranged from the rest of her family. Her father’s absence is keenly felt throughout her narrative, as he only provides material support and is devoid of emotional, psychological and spiritual care. After his company, *IT Instantly*, is awarded a government tender to refurbish post offices, John Tlou takes full advantage of his instant wealth by moving his family from Mabopane township to Sandton, enrolling his children in the best preparatory schools, and “com[ing] to a financial agreement with his wife for her not to work anymore, as he [will] provide for her needs” (Raditlhalo 25). All of this occurs before the start of the narrative, however, so that when we meet John he is an unremitting philanderer who is a ‘caricature of whiteness’ (represented here as success) with his silver-grey Mercedes, classical music (which he pronounces an ‘acquired taste’), and golf on the weekends (Raditlhalo 25). John is unsupportive of his children’s dreams and decisions. He berates his son, Tshepo, for instance, who wishes to study towards a degree in African Languages and Literature, instead of Actuarial Science, as his father had desired. When Tshepo attempts to explain his goal to write (“I want to speak. I want to say those things that people are afraid to hear”) his father

– ironically – silences him by calling him a “lazy little bugger” and belittling his dream as “absolute nonsense” (80). Tshepo subsequently retreats from the rest of the family: we are told that he “slipped between the panels of wood in the floor and disappeared” (81), and that he finally “stopped being” (83). Likewise, when Fifi decides to distance herself from her white friend, as she is unable to maintain the friendship – since it demands from her that she always play the role of apprentice, always catching up to whiteness, while simultaneously muting her blackness – her father argues that “it is careless to throw away a useful relationship” (67), thereby stressing that Fifi can better herself by befriending white people (67). Indeed, as Raditlhalo notes, “John Tlou is the ‘unfinished’ product of the ‘new’ South Africa” (25), and Fifi herself remarks that her father is driven to acquire “all things that insinuate wealth and stability” (64).

Ofilwe’s mother – who fussed over her children when they were younger – is similarly inattentive. Fifi experiences herself as a mere spectator in Gemina’s life; she emphasises the brief stolen glances between them in the car (63), and watches her mother “transform herself from unassuming proud mother of two and housewife to cosmopolitan woman-on-the-move” (65). She admits, however, that their relationship has not always been fraught and burdened with heavy silences:

In my memory Mama and I used to speak a lot. I would tell her everything, except the things she did not need to know. Mama knew that I desired to be an astronaut one day, and have a house in the southern hemisphere and another in the northern hemisphere so that I could avoid the winter. Mama knew that my favourite colour was green but that I hated peas. Mama knew that I wanted to have four children whom I would name Cloud, Claude, Claudia and Claudette but did not want the trouble of a man in my house. (55)

Fifi also admits that she desires a closer relationship with her mother: she wants to “hold her hand [in public] so that [people] may see that she is [hers] [...] but [they] do not hold hands. It is not something [they] do” (53). This is partly because, as she explains, “Mama does not like to be touched. I personally have never seen it happen but she tells me that her skin is sensitive and breaks out in rashes if it is in contact with human flesh for a prolonged period of time” (64). Furthermore, Gemina discourages Fifi’s curiosity about missionaries and African religions. When her daughter asks about *Badimo*, for example, she carelessly retorts, “I don’t know, Ofilwe. Goodnight” (9). This incident not only serves to highlight the interrupted dialogue between the young and the old, but also evinces the parents’ unconsciousness of their own history – what Raditlhalo calls the “delinking of a discernible number of Africans and their [culture and heritage which] has been a crucial downside of the liberation struggle” (24).

Ofilwe, like her brother, has become fiercely critical of her family, more specifically her

mother. She describes Gemina as a “metallic blue black [...] giant” (52), adding that her father married her because he “sought controversy” (52). Despite her knowledge of her father’s philandering, which threatens to break up the family, Fifi seemingly believes that her father saved her mother from a “life of nothingness [, as she was] a nothing girl with a metallic blue-black skin” (52). While she recognises that her mother is beautiful, Fifi states that Gemina lacks “the one thing that would have made her perfect: Daddy’s fair skin” (66). Gemina, too, appears to hold a similar opinion of herself when she shields her face with her handbag for fear of “losing complexion” (51). She is a particular source of shame for Fifi because of her inability to speak ‘proper’ English and her embarrassing hospitality when Fifi’s friends sleep over. Delighted at the prospect of having white children sleep in her house, Gemina’s fussiness, in Fifi’s eyes, means that she is “dumb”: she does “not know that white people only bathe at night” (53). Gemina’s opinions are consistently marginalised in her own home because she is not well-educated; her husband illustrates this when he scoffs at her for coming to Tshepo’s defence when Tshepo expresses a desire to study African Languages and Literature: “Don’t give me that rubbish, Gemina. You understand nothing of the real world. You could not even finish high school” (80-81). Likewise, Fifi hides notifications about her school’s parent-teacher evenings from Gemina, because there is no point in informing her given that she “didn’t go to high school” (51) herself. She rationalises her decision by pointing out that “parents’ evenings are there to give parents the opportunity to assess their children’s scholastic progress, to ascertain if all milestones are being achieved and determine where their dear little Bo ranks amongst the rest of his peers [...]. Mama wouldn’t understand any of that” (51). At first it seems as though she is shielding her mother from feeling out of place in her elite school, but it soon becomes clear that she is embarrassed by her mother’s “ghastly” English (51), and so spares herself the humiliation of being associated with her. Her deliberate decision to exclude her mother from aspects of her life not only speaks to her poor opinion of Gemina, but also, as Spencer argues, depicts the hegemonic cultural structures which act upon her and effectively force her to “disavow her mother and thus part of herself” (70).

Fiks is similarly denied a stable family unit and constructive guidance to facilitate her *Bildung*. She lives the kind of life that terrifies Fifi when the latter muses on the quality of their lives had it not been for her father’s financial prowess (13). Fiks resides in a poorly serviced one-bedroomed shack at the backyard of another family’s house: there is no bathroom, so she has to fetch water and wash in a bucket in the kitchen every morning. Spencer maintains, for example, that “What Fiks’s story suggests is that, for the majority of black people, especially those living in appalling conditions in the townships and rural areas, the demise of apartheid has not translated beyond political freedom: for them, it may be regarded as a failed revolution” (69).

At the age of twelve, Fiks woke up in a pool of blood after her mother committed suicide by

slitting her wrists. Abandoned by her grandmother – a domestic worker who “had too many of her white children to take care of” (114) – and burdened with the knowledge that she has never known her father (114), Fiks was subsequently left to the care of her uncle who molests her until she is forced to make a makeshift bed on the floor (113-115). She admits that she only realised that her uncle was sexually abusing her after “Childline Ousies came to [her] school and talked about rape” (115) – a reflection that testifies to her lack of proper parental care and the security that the word “home” suggests.

Her uncle is a university drop-out who squandered the opportunities he was afforded by his wealthy benefactors. Following his academic exclusion from the University of Cape Town, he began working as a security guard at *Lentso Communications*. Currently, he is regularly used, by his white employers, as a “nameless black face, [a] pawn for striking black economic empowerment deals” (108), and rewarded with useless radios. Fikile describes her uncle as a “sorry, pathetic, little twerp” (103) who regularly misquotes Shakespearean passages which he does not comprehend.

With inadequate primary role models to guide them, then, both Fifi and Fiks turn to images in the mass media to validate themselves and construct their sense of selfhood. Their consumption of popular media in the form of magazines is, however, shown to be destructive, as the images merely reinforce feelings of limited self-worth and cultural dislocation – their representations of the preferred standard of beauty are exclusionary and promote adherence to whiteness.

### **4.3 “Keeping *Kroesies* in Check”: The Politics of Hair and Beauty**

*Coconut* opens, tellingly, with a focus on the politics of hair and beauty – both as a way of confronting the dilemma of identity formation for these ‘coconuts’, who are trapped in the complex of “black skin, white self”, and as a means to highlight femininity as a social construction and performance. During the Sunday church service she is attending with her family, Ofilwe’s attention is distracted from the sermon by “a tiny chocolate girl”, Sponono, who is obviously delighted with her braids: “plastic, shiny, cheap synthetic strands of dreams-come-true make their way out of her underaged head” (1). Jessica Murray astutely argues that “this succinct description of the child’s braids highlights both the artificiality of the hair and the aspirational value with which hair is invested” (92). The opening scene satirises the attainment of beauty and a concern with appearances in a farcical manner: Sponono is “burdensomely layered [in a] satin floral dress”, while her mother’s “greedy fingers” run through “the knotted mess of a little girl’s desires” (1). Sponono’s morning at church ends tragically, however, when she apprehends the threat of being dethroned as the ‘great beauty’ that her name ironically suggests. One of her braids falls to ground, causing her to wail uncontrollably until mother and

daughter, clasping the fallen braid, are forced to leave. The scene ends with Ofilwe rehearsing to herself the conventional wisdom that “pain is beauty” (3), which then prompts her to recall the humiliations she herself has endured regarding her hair (Raditlhalo 26). She remembers the painful experience of taming and straightening her naturally tightly coiled hair at Ous Beauty’s hair salon when she was only ten years old:

Ous Beauty kept a comb with the finest of teeth. In the mirror in front of me sat a girl with the coarsest of hair. That the two could work in harmony, I would never be convinced. Such pain. Teeth gritted, I watched her artificial red nails part my wiry hair so that she could base my hair [...]. I held my breath at every pull [...] and shut my eyes tight, refusing to let the tears that wrestled violently within [...]. Ous Beauty then began to smear the cream on my hair. I always watched her vigilantly, making sure she did not miss a spot. A chemical reaction. A painful exothermic chemical reaction. Burn. Burning. Burnt. When Ous Beauty asked me if I wanted to wash it out, I said no. I wanted every last tiny weeny curl straight. (3-4)

What stands out in this passage is the pain that black girls, and indeed women in general, endure in their efforts to manipulate their appearance so that they may attain femininity and thus conform to hegemonic standards of beauty. As Murray notes, “For a woman to be properly feminine, she must [...] manipulate her appearance to conform to very specific ideals of beauty that flow from distrust of the female body in its natural state” (91). Femininity then, is a social construct and, in the words of Judith Butler (who is echoing Simone de Beauvoir), “an incessant project, a daily act of reconstruction and interpretation” (131). Accordingly, femininity is a “state to be constantly sought” in spaces like Ous Beauty’s salon, where its definition and negotiation are being constantly contested (Black & Sharma 101). Murray further observes that, “for as far back as women could remember, something had hurt about being female [and] what hurts is beauty” (94). We see in Ofilwe’s narrative, for example, that attaining beauty is more important than avoiding physical pain (Murray 94). She recalls that she was “not bothered by the tenderness of [her] scalp” (4) as a result of the horrific burning caused by the chemical reaction, “nor was [she] alarmed at the white of [her] roots that had come to the surface”, as she was “just delighted to be beautiful again” (4). For her, “beauty is dependent on having hair that is so ‘straight’ and ‘silky soft’ that Ous Beauty’s fine-toothed comb could ‘slip effortlessly’ through it” (Murray 94). And this is an ideal that is set by “white” hair (Murray 95). The posturing of “white” hair as ‘good’ hair, and therefore of whiteness as the yardstick of beauty, is a primary example of what Raditlhalo calls “shades of whiteache [that are] implanted in [the] young minds of black children by the parents themselves” (24). We see in Ofilwe’s narrative, and through Sponono’s, that little girls are socialised into the idea that their natural hair – that is, unaltered hair – is not ‘good’ enough to make them presentable, and is thus unacceptable.

Throughout the world black community, black people have long struggled with issues of beauty and inferiority. Institutions like colonialism, slavery and apartheid have perpetuated internalised racism and self-hatred. As Zimitri Erasmus argues, the “racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty” (12). The colour caste system, as many critics who are interested in the politics of black hair and beauty agree, has not only influenced standards of beauty, classicism, and social acceptability (White 297), but has also impacted on the relationship that black people, and specifically black women, have with their hair. This is because hair texture was used as a measurement of beauty and femininity, a standard which was blatantly Eurocentric in that it valued long straight hair (White 297). While white women are also subjected to gendered and racialised standards of beauty which are difficult to attain and/or maintain, “their white skin and [kink-free] hair privilege them in a system in which part of the basic definition of whiteness is superiority to blackness (Collins 79). Black women, then, are “doubly subjected”, in that their beauty is measured against this standard which was – and still is – neither created for them (White 298), nor designed to affirm black forms of beauty (Patton 25).

Writing about the American context, Tracy Owens Patton provides a historical lens on the colour caste system and the politics of hair – both of which continue to have a devastating effect on the lives and psychology of black women:

Since 1619, African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against White beauty standards, particularly pertaining to their skin color and hair. During slavery, Black women who were lighter-skinned and had features that were associated with mixed progeny (e.g. wavy or straight hair, White/European facial features) tended to be house slaves and those Black women with darker-skin hues, kinky hair, and broader facial features tended to be field slaves. (26)

In apartheid South Africa, similar marginalising and devaluing practices – such as the infamous pencil-test – were used to de-humanise black people and disparage black beauty by stigmatising ‘*kaffir hare*’. It is against this historical and sociological background that movements, such as Black Power and the BCM, in America and South Africa respectively, endeavoured to create a positive black self-image through the 1960s slogan “Black is Beautiful”. This period witnessed the popularity of more ‘natural’ hairstyles, such as the Afro and, later, dreadlocks, which challenged hegemonic definitions of beauty, as well as encouraged a sense of black pride by revalorising black hair as an ethnic signifier (Mercer 5). Practices such as hair-straightening were viewed negatively – that is, as “pitiful attempt[s] to emulate Whites [that] equated hair straightening with self-hatred and shame” (Patton 29).

Current scholarship on the politics of black hair problematises the view that hair-straightening,

in black communities, is a slavish imitation of whiteness. Patton, for example, argues that “[c]reativity in hairstyling can be a challenge to assimilationist notions of beauty (regardless of style worn) because it can challenge perceived expectations” (27). While her work does not belie the racialised significance of hair straightening, she maintains that “straightening one’s hair is not synonymous with racial shame or ‘acting white’”, and that the practice can be understood as “a way of expressing black pride rather than a way of precluding it” (29). In “Black Hair/Style Politics” Kobena Mercer speaks in a similar vein, arguing that “the *diversity* of contemporary black hair-styles is something to be proud of, because this variousness testifies to an inventive, improvisational aesthetic that should be valued as an aspect of Africa’s ‘gift’ to modernity” (53). She also points out the problematic notion of ‘natural’ hair, since hair is “never a straightforward biological ‘fact’ because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally ‘worked upon’ by human hands” (34). This emerging scholarship veers from the notion that women are “cultural dopes”, that is, by attempting to “*de-psychologize* the question of hair-straightening and recognize hair-styling itself for what it is, a specifically cultural activity and practice” (Mercer 34), and by emphasising the power that women can gain by capitalising on those structures which are linked to the commoditisation of body practices (Black and Sharma 100). As Murray points out, in her article on *Coconut*, “[p]ower that flows from physical appearance is power nonetheless” (98), and that Matlwa’s characters use this power to access opportunities to better their lives. In other words, “beauty is a form of cultural capital that can be exchanged for social and economic capital and [...] individual women do empower themselves through beauty” (Murray 103).

Nevertheless, the world, it seems to Fifi, has more affection for white girls with long flowing hair – like her school friend, Kate Jones. Sandwiched between Sponono’s ordeal at the church service and her own painful memories of her experience at Ous Beauty’s hair salon, is Fifi’s recollection of her lust over Kate’s “burnt amber locks” (1), a recollection which helps the reader to understand her willingness to endure the pain of straightening her hair (Murray 95). She remembers poetically that “Kate Jones had the most beautiful hair I had ever seen in all my eight years of life. Burnt amber. Autumn leaves. The setting sun. Her heavy and soft hair, curled slightly at its ends, would make proud swishes as she rolled around the playground” (1). Everyone seems dazzled by Kate, who possesses the charm of ‘good’ hair. Fifi notes that, despite the fact that Kate was “overfed and hoggish”, “spoilt and naughty”, “rude and foul-mouthed”, the teachers “overlooked the red crosses in Kate’s school workbooks, monstrous bullies exempted Kate from the pushing and prodding that all juniors endured, popular kids made no fun of Kate’s podgy face and swollen ankles, and little black girls scattered helter-skelter, doing her favours in return for a feel of her hair” (1).

Evidently, Ofilwe learns from an early age the social capital that ‘good’ hair affords, and is

thus willing to endure great physical pain to keep her “‘kroesies’ in check” (Murray 93). Murray argues that the pain at issue here is both physical and psychological: “[i]t extends to the pain that women experience when they are obliged to construct their identities in a social milieu that is fundamentally hostile towards them” (91-92). This pain, then, “becomes [the] grounds for alienation and an ingrained self-hatred” (Raditlhalo 26). We see Ofilwe, for example, struggle with her physical appearance, a struggle which culminates in self-hatred and shame when she nicknames her nose “Mud War” (66). Later, as she matures, she berates herself in the following manner: “I do not like to watch what you do to yourself, little black girl. I do not like to see you sell your soul for a silver skin. Why do you pull at your button nose? Do you not see that it is beautiful that way?” (61). Nevertheless, when she dreams about her “future children”, she fantasises that “they are painted in shades of pink” (19).

What is more, Fifi is delighted when her classmate, Tim Browning, pays her the compliment of inviting her to his party because she “was not like the other girls in [their] class [because she] was calmer and cuter and looked a little like Scary Spice” (8). She emphasises: “Tim Browning doesn’t just invite anybody to his parties. He wants me there for a reason. He told me once that I was different” (8). It is clear here that Fifi’s social acceptability rests on muting her blackness, because the ‘difference’ that Tim points to “refers to her divergence from blackness” (Murray 98). As Murray contends, “Tim’s reference to Ofilwe’s calmness draws on familiar colonial constructions of black people as savage and primitive [...]. Tim is using calmness as a euphemism for civilization [...] suggesting that Ofilwe is acceptable because she is more civilized than the other black girls in their class” (98). She is soon disabused of this idea of her ‘difference’ when her crush, Junior P. Mokoena, refuses her advances on the grounds that he “only date[s] white girls” (24) and, later, when Clinton Mitchley refuses to kiss her during a game of spin the bottle, because “her lips are too dark” (45). It is no wonder, then, that one finds, in *Coconut*, a pathological inversion of the 1960s slogan “Black is beautiful” to ‘Beautiful *but* black’ – as evinced through Ofilwe’s social relations, and in her view of her own mother, as indicated earlier.

Ofilwe’s uneasiness with her blackness is mirrored and dramatised in Fikile’s deep desire to escape and negate this identity. Having internalised the notion that she is a problem, Fikile attempts to reinvent herself through what she terms “Project infinity” (109), a project which entails that she actively seek association with whiteness and white people. As a result, she drops out of school in the tenth grade and secures a waitressing job at Silver Spoon, where she “[mixes] with the who’s who of this country. Everybody from big-shot businessmen to surgeons and celebrated television producers” (141). She describes the establishment as a microcosm of cosmopolitanism: a place where “business deals [...] that determine the strength of the rand and gold” are struck, where “actors and actresses

practise their lines that are filmed and spoken on TV and heard by millions of South Africans every night on the evening soaps”, and where “emails are sent [...] to Europe and back to Silver Spoon again” (141). And, while she does concede that waitressing is “not glamorous”, she exhibits a great deal of self-importance in declaring that it is at least better than “packing bags at Checkers or cleaning toilets” (141). In addition, she understands herself to be “essential [...] to the functioning of Silver Spoon” (141), as customers frequently solicit her advice. Consequently, she is willing to do anything in her power to keep her job, including stealing a pair of black slacks for work (122). She also changes her name from Fikile to Fiks because, she rationalises, “many find it too difficult to pronounce” (146).

However, it soon becomes clear that the real reason behind her name change is to reinforce the fictitious persona that she has created for herself as a result of her desperate attempts to fit in at Silver Spoon. For example, the name Fiks corresponds better with the image that she “grew up in white environments for the most part of [her] life” – as does her carefully cultivated accent and “refined” manner (146). And, to add flesh to this fiction, she claims that she “lived in England for a while [where] Mummy and Daddy still lecture”, and is quick to stress a frivolous reason for leaving – that she “couldn’t stand the [dreadful] weather” – which suggests, of course, her infinite (but imaginary) sense of mobility and access to wealth. Her name change also reflects the reality that many black people have assumed new identities – whether willingly or not – in order to participate in the cultural economy of ‘civilization’ and Eurocentricity (read: whiteness).

Furthermore, Fiks thoroughly buys into the hegemonic ideals of beauty in her desire for acceptance and socio-cultural mobility. She keeps a box of “treasures” which testifies to the “progress” that she has made, “despite the odds” (118). These treasures include: all the magazines that she has collected from the age of thirteen, “dainty little emerald-green coloured lenses that float gracefully in the sapphire blue contact-lens solution”, Lemon Light skin-lightening cream, sunscreen, eyeliner, mascara, eye-shadow, blush, and eyelash straightener (117) – all of which are eclipsed by her “blow-in-the-wind caramel-blond hair (pinned perfectly to make it look real)” (117).

Fiks reveals, too, that she was forced to wait for her “charming” appearance – that is, her caramel-blond hair extensions – because her uncle “misplaced the money he was supposed to pay the braiding lady with” (117-118) when she was a child. That she had to wait for ‘beauty’ until she could afford it is indicative of the notion that beauty is an exclusive commodity; a privilege of the middle to upper classes that evidently marginalises those with limited financial resources. This is an idea that Ofilwe earlier points to when she notes that “Month end was always frantic at Ous Beauty’s, because at month end everybody felt rich” (3). Fikile’s obsession with altering her physical appearance to meet a Eurocentric ideal – expressed in her maxim “fake it till you make it” (147) – is reminiscent of what Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden have termed “The Lily Complex” (177). They

define this complex as “altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive [...]. As Black women deal with the constant pressure to meet a beauty standard that is inauthentic and often unattainable, the lily complex can set in” (qtd in Patton 26). This may lead black women to loathe their own physical appearance and believe that “Black is not beautiful” and that they “can only be lovely by impersonating someone else” (qtd in Patton 26).

Fiks’s self-loathing and contempt for blackness is patent throughout the novel. For example, she exclaims: “Black people! Why must they always be so damn destructive? And to think, they have never invented a thing in their squalid lives!” (134-5). As a response, she identifies herself as “brown”, because blackness is claustrophobic and represents “dirt and poverty”, while whiteness translates to “wealth and happiness” (118). The novel shows that her “white-ache” (Radithlalo 29) and her “self-alienation” are longstanding. As a child, when her grandmother reprimanded her for staying indoors with her magazines, instead of playing outside with the other children, for instance, Fikile’s retort was: “It’s hot outside and my skin will get dark” (131). This concern with not appearing dark is “shaped by contempt for blackness, it is also informed by her life experience, which has shown her that power and privilege are associated with whiteness” (Murray 103). Fiks’s desire for whiteness is heavily mediated by the fashion magazines that she obsessively consumes, since their pages represent “the life [that she] was born to live” (167). She boasts that, at fifteen years, she knew “what perfume Gabrielle was wearing to the Grammys” and could “even advise you what to pack when spending a weekend away in the Bahamas” (167). Evidently, she models her life on the problematic images that these magazines sell, and further uses the power that her “altered” self affords to gain access to the lifestyle that she aspires to, one epitomised by Silver Spoon. However, as Spencer points out,

in a painful irony, [Silver Spoon] also points to the distance between this fantasy and her dismal living conditions, emphasizing, in the distance between the two arenas, the fact that she was not born with a silver spoon in her mouth. To compensate for the reality of her life in the township, she becomes completely obsessed with the lives of her customers, seeing herself as far more than a waitress; rather, to her mind, she is a vital cog in the existence of the coffee shop: she is a therapist, friend and confidante as these strangers become, she imagines, her surrogate family. Their world of break-ups, smashed-up cars and retail therapy is a reflection of her fantasy; thus she lives vicariously through their stories while waiting for “Project Infinity” to come to fruition. (76)

Fikile’s character – her disdain for blackness and delusions of whiteness – recalls Ferdinand Oyono’s Toundi in his satiric masterpiece, *Houseboy* (1956), a novel that “anticipates Fanon’s assertion that the colonised person is neurotic” (Corti 46). Toundi, in his naïve optimism, willingly leaves his native village and rejects his cultural heritage, in order to live at the French mission. There he is mentored

by an abusive priest, Father Gilbert, who attempts to ‘civilize’ him through the process of assimilation.<sup>24</sup> Toundi subsequently changes his name to Joseph and, in the beginning of the novel, we are alerted to his uncritical adoption of French colonial attitudes and his eager disavowal of his ‘cannibalistic heritage’ when he states that: “My race was that of the eaters of men. Since the arrival of the Whites we have learned that all other men are not animals” (16). Furthermore, although Toundi is subjected to colonial violence (both physical and psychological), he is delighted at having secured above average work as a houseboy, instead of having to labour outside of the master’s house, and thus evinces a great deal of self-importance. Fikile, as I indicated earlier, evinces a similar disposition in her view that her job is better than “packing bags at Checkers”, as she is in the hub of whiteness at Silver Spoon where she interacts with ‘real people’. Both Toundi and Fikile – in their delusions of grandeur – illustrate what can be called the ‘house nigger versus field nigger syndrome’, which ultimately leaves them in a liminal state in which they are bereft of a sense of identity outside the slave-master dialectic. Toundi’s narrative ends with his consciousness of the dilemma of colonial identity, when he asks the poignant question: “What are we blackmen who are called French?” (4). Fikile’s narrative, however, has a more ambiguous ending, as she does not seem to have completely abandoned the view which she shares earlier, that “perhaps God made some races superior, as an example for other races to follow” (157).

Fikile’s desire not only to “‘pass for white’ but [also to] ‘be white’” is also reminiscent of Pauline and Pecola Breedlove in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (Radithlalo 27): Pauline because she “gets her images of the world not from magazines, but from motion pictures [and] imbibes the same [distorted] notions of physical beauty as Matlwa’s protagonists” (27-8); and Pecola because her racial self-loathing is manifested in a yearning for blue eyes (Phiri 6). In his comparison of *Coconut* and *The Bluest Eye*, Radithlalo maintains that:

The travails of Pauline Breedlove and the quests of Pecola, Ofilwe and Fikile should alert us to the very concept of the aesthetic as a discourse of power, one that has played a far from negligible role in the consolidation of the bourgeoisie and its accrual of cultural capital. In effect, it is an important concept that partakes in the relation between white supremacy and modernity and is closely related to the consequences of the construct of ‘race’ during what Cornel West calls “the Age of Europe”. (28)

One cannot help, then, but point to the irony of Ofilwe and Fikile’s names. The name Ofilwe roughly translates to “you have been blessed”; however, the material blessings with which she is endowed

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24 My use of the term “assimilation” is informed by Gust Yep’s definition which explains it as a “view [that] directs the marginalised person to try harder and harder to adhere, obey, and follow the rules of the dominant group-rule that he or she can never fully and completely participate in creating” (80).

result in a deep sense of (self-)alienation and dislocation, as I have suggested. Fikile, as Spencer notes, means “you have arrived” (69) – a painful irony that is felt throughout the novel, as we witness her desperate attempts to escape her humble beginnings through her self-reinvention and her efforts to construct a surrogate family at Silver Spoon, as well as the ever-present suggestion that she will never become the “Sarah Kinsley” of her dreams (125). Both protagonists are trapped – willingly (in the case of Fiks) or not (in Fifi’s case) – in the complex of being either “too black to be white” *and* “too white to be black” (Spencer 66). Their feelings of alienation and dislocation filter through all aspects of their lives.

### 4.3 Unhomely Homes and Perpetual Rootlessness

I wish to turn, now, to an examination of Ofilwe’s and Fikile’s experiences of *unheimlichkeit* or unhomeliness. Ofilwe, for example, feels deeply unhomed in her family’s triple-storey Tuscan-styled home, despite its luxuriousness and the comforts it affords. The vastness of the space keeps the individual members of her family separate, and so she longs for the kind of intimacy that her favourite TV show, *The Benedicts*, projects. However, she asserts that “in real life people have to go to work” (64). At one point, significantly, Ofilwe offers a quasi-gothic description of her home, while also noting her mother’s entrapment:

The midday sunlight beaming through the punch skylights high above the staircase and the wisp of Mama’s white dress as she hurries up the stairs remind me of a make-believe fairytale. In the tale a beautiful but damned princess runs up a twisted tower in a forgotten castle escaping the crafty dragon that has kept her hostage in a moonless dungeon below. She runs up to a radiant prince above who will slay the dragon and free her from a life of darkness. (76)

Similarly, when she views her father, who is outside in their lavishly styled garden, from her isolated vantage-point on the second floor, she observes that “Daddy resembles a character in a world of pretend” (78). The staged opulence of the house, coupled with its oppressive silences, give it an uncanny aura that casts its inhabitants as ghost-like. I am reminded, here, of Anthony Vidler’s work on “Unhomely Houses” in *The Architectural Uncanny*, in which he writes on the fascination with haunted houses in nineteenth-century literature. He states that, “the house provided an especially favoured site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits” (17). Drawing on Freud’s notion of the uncanny, Vidler explains that

the uncanny or *unheimlich* is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the *heimlich*, thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis. (Vidler x)

Though not quite emblematic of a ‘haunted house’ – in the sense that Vidler speaks of unhomey houses – the Tlou home is, nevertheless, unhomey. This is underscored by the fact that the family has traded their sense of freedom for the security that gated communities like Little Valley promise. As Sandra Evans argues, “One of the determining features of gated communities is order: the strict rules and regulations that control life within the gates” (47). The Tlous, for instance, are unable to perform a thanksgiving ceremony, because “their cultural beliefs are offensive to the cultural sensibilities of the other residents, who are mostly white” (Spencer 72). Accordingly, they meet with opposition from their neighbours and are issued with a fine, as they are in violation of the estate’s rules (73-74). Indeed, they represent a class that is “not quite at home in its own home” (Vidler 3-4). It is little wonder, then, that Ofilwe expresses a deep disconnection from communal Pedi rituals and the rest of her family at the beginning of the novel (8), since her life is shaped by this reality of unhomeliness – a reality which underscores her feelings of rootlessness.

Fikile similarly feels a sense of unbelonging in the ‘in-between’ space of the township. Stephanie Rudwick’s study, which partly explores the historicity of South African townships as “essentially ‘forced’ living spaces” (105), claims that townships are “physically and metaphorically ‘between’ those who live in central or affluent suburban city areas and those who live in rural places” (105). Fikile’s narrative challenges the ‘ghetto-fabulous’ rhetoric popularised by black South African popular culture (from the mid-90s to mid-2000s).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the irony that Fiks lives in Mphe Batho should not be taken lightly, since the name literally means “give me people” in seSotho and alludes to the Ubuntu maxim “I am because we are”. Fikile feels no such ties to her community and consistently rejects communal gestures, such as greetings (129), in an effort to distance herself from this community. Moreover, she regards all black men as “a bunch of uneducated criminals [who] want to rape [her]” (129). In one particularly painful incident during a taxi ride to work, she rudely awakens a small baby, whose head is resting on her shoulder, screaming “I don’t care if he is a child or a dog, just get him off me” (138). This to the dismay of the other passengers, who reprove her for her shameless carelessness. As she gets off the taxi, she muses:

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25 For a useful overview, see Bhekizizwe Peterson’s “Kwaito ‘Dawgs’ and the Antimonies of Hustling” as well as Sarah Nuttall’s “Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg”.

*I am not one of you*, I want to tell them. Some day you will see me drive past here in a sleek air-conditioned car, and I will roll up my windows if you try to come near me, because *I am not one of you*. You are poor and black and I am rich and brown.

(140, emphasis in original)

Fiks's desperation to escape the township is not unlike her own mother's violent departure from life through suicide. However, unlike her mother, whom she regards as "a coward who ran out of life, leaving me alone, drenched in her wretched blood" (147), Fikile is prepared to do anything to achieve the life that she desires. Her choice to drop out of her school (called *Vula Mehlo*, which ironically means "open your eyes") was informed both by her alienation from her peers and by the fact that the school did not appeal to the vision she has nurtured for herself:

when I got back to school in January [...] mind all air-brushed and sweetly scented in Ridgley's new fragrance, I felt strangely out of place, detached, as if I was watching them. Bo Zanele, bo Thabo, bo Meshoe seemed to be on Bop TV in black and white. They were so dull, so dirty. Smelling of petroleum jelly and wearing the same old brown tunics, white socks (now yellow) and torn school shoes [...]. It was like I was a puzzle-piece, pulled out of the puzzle and bent and now I could never fit back in. I'd seen pictures of another life, a better life, and I wanted it. So I went out of the school gates and never went back. (167-8)

This determination speaks to her desire to escape a 'black' lifestyle, and embrace a 'white' one.

If Fikile feels out of place at school, so too does Ofilwe, who struggles to fit in with her peers (14, 16, 57). Fifi is also critical of the alienating and limited education on black history that she receives from the school, as it "only goes as far back as lessons on the Dutch East India Company in grade two" (18). Ofilwe's unbelonging, anger, and frustrations are most keenly felt in the silent 'prayer' she utters, during her family's ritual of a traditional English breakfast at the Silver Spoon after church:

I hate it, Lord. I hate it with every atom of my heart. I am angry, Lord. I am searing within. I am furious. I do not understand. Why, Lord? Look at us, Lord, sitting in this corner. A corner. A hole. Daddy believes he enjoys his food. Poor Mama, she still struggles with this fork and knife thing. Poor, poor, poor pathetic us. It is pitiful. What are we doing here? Why did we come? We do not belong [...]. Lord, I am cross with you. I, they, thousands of us, devote our lives to You. Some, Father, labouring endlessly so that You may be pleased. But still, Lord, still we are shackled. Some shackled around the ankles and wrists, others around their hearts, but most, Lord, are shackled around their minds [...]. They laugh nastily, Lord. You cannot hear it, but you can see it in their eyes [...]. We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups, speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our *mqombothi* laughs. They will scold us if we dare, not with their lips, Lord, because the laws prevent them

from doing so, but with their eyes. They will shout, “Stop acting black!” “Stop acting Black!” is what they will shout. And we will pause, perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are we not black, Father? No, not in the malls, Lord. We may not be black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools. Oh, how it nauseates them if we even fantasise about being black, truly black. The old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged. We know Lord, because those disapproving eyes scold us still; that crisp air of hatred and disgust crawls into our wide-open nostrils still.

(30–31)

Ofilwe’s ‘prayer’, as Phiri states, “registers her sense of futility at a contemporary blackness which is impotent in the face of a fundamentally unchanging South Africa where racism, specifically whiteness, is still pervasive” (4). Raditlhalo also points to the absurdity of Ofilwe’s situation when, locating her anxieties within the broader ambit of South Africa’s ambiguous freedom, he asks:

how is it possible for a black person not to be black but merely fantasise about being black? Does it essentially mean that, having been so oppressed for too long, the oppressed have, through a process of a disinherited imagination, lost the will to remake themselves in their own African images? (32)

It seems, then, that to be “black, truly black” – or to comfortably inhabit that cultural identity in the ‘new’ South Africa – is not a realisable option available to Ofilwe.

It is also important to note, here, how language functions to marginalise and/or entrap Matlwa’s ‘coconuts’. Fifi recalls being subjected to “laborious pronunciation sessions” (Spencer 70) by her white friend, Belinda:

“Say ‘uh-vin’ Fifi [...] not ‘oh-vin’, ‘uh-vin’.”  
“This is boring, Belinda, let’s see who can climb the highest up that tree.”  
“No, Fifi! You have to learn how to speak properly.”  
“I can speak properly.”  
“No you can’t, Fifi. Do you want to be laughed at again? Come now. Say ‘uh-vin.’”  
“Uuh-vin.”  
“Good. Now say ‘b-ird.’ Not ‘b-erd’, but ‘b-ird’.” (49)

Though Belinda is earnestly trying to teach Fifi how to adopt a ‘proper’ white accent, the incident highlights a power differential, as she is in a superior position to Fifi. When Fifi ultimately masters the ‘white accent’, she too uses the English language to establish her own superiority over her cousins in the township:

I am smart and speak perfect English. That is why people treat me differently. I knew

from a very young age that Sepedi would not take me far [...]. I observed my surroundings and noted that all those who were lawyers, doctors and accountants, all the movies stars that wore beautiful dresses, all the singers that drove fancy cars and all my friends who owned the latest clothing [...] speak English [...]. I spoke the TV language; the one Daddy spoke at work, the one Mama never could get right, the one that spoke of sweet success [...]. Look at those sorrowful cousins of mine who think a brick is a toy. Even the old people know I am special. At family reunions they do not allow me to dish up for myself ... They scold my cousins for being thoughtless. Get up and dish out for Ofilwe [...]. They smile at me and say, “You, our child, must save all your strength for your books.” Do you see, I always tell my cousins [...] as soon as my schooling is over, I will come back and teach them English and then they will be special too? (54)

Commenting on the fraughtness of Fifi’s views in the passage above, Spencer contends that, “whereas language grants Fifi access to a world of economic power from which her cousins are and will be excluded, her privileged status dissociates her from these social networks central to youth culture in the township, thus limiting her access to what is considered to be ‘hip’ and ‘cool’ in the township domain” (72). Furthermore, her possession of the language of power later adds to her anxieties about her identity, expressed in her comment about the “agony [of] playing a role you would never dream of auditioning for” (48). Spencer explains that, “in the global structure, English, the currency of business, is linked to power and associated with whiteness [...] in the South African context, in spite of eleven official languages being designated as enjoying ‘official’ national status, English remains the dominant language of power and finance” (69). Gordon’s work on Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and the power of language to form reality, as well as the attempts, by black people, to transform themselves through a different (read: Eurocentric) language of self-presentation, is useful here. According to Gordon, black people’s “transformative linguistic performance[s]” result in a “comedy of errors”:

instead of being a transformer of words, the black is considered to be [...] a “predator” of words, and even where the black has “mastered” the language, the black discovers in those cases that he or she has become linguistically dangerous. Against the class critique, Fanon observes that the black never speaks whiteness as even working-class whites speak whiteness. Such whites speak whiteness “bookishly”, whereas people of colour speak whiteness “whitely” or “white-like” [...] “white-like” and “whitely” signify imitation. The black, thus, becomes a masquerade, a black wearing a white linguistic mask. (“Zone of Nonbeing” 4-5)

Ofilwe gradually comes into a consciousness of her “white linguistic mask” and begins to understand English as her ‘other tongue’ instead of her mother tongue, as she had previously asserted (57). This notion of an ‘other’ tongue is “linked to otherness, to something that is at least not entirely

one's own" (Rudwick 110). The full force of this hits Ofilwe on her sixteenth birthday (58), when she is "confronted with the fact of her rootlessness, centred on the [African] languages that her friends speak around her and through her. As her friends speak of their ancestral homes, their relatives and the countryside, [Fifi] has nothing to contribute" (Raditlhalo 30). As a result, she takes seriously the warning that Tshepo offers:

You will find, Ofilwe, that the people you strive so hard to *be* like will one day reject you because as much as you may pretend, you are not one of their own. Then you will turn back, but there too you will find no acceptance, *for those you once rejected will no longer recognize the thing you have become*. So far, too far to return. So much, too much you have changed. Stuck between two worlds, shunned by both. (93)

Ofilwe's narrative is emblematic, then, of Du Bois's notion of "double-consciousness", which he explains as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of other" (16-17). Even her yearning for a "metallic blue-black" ancestry (52) is informed by the alienating force of her "double-consciousness". When she observes her Grandmother's devotion to the British royal family and the seriousness with which she mourns for Princess Di, for example, Ofilwe wonders about her "own Princess Di" (18) – her own cultural heritage. Thus the reader finds her trapped in the uncomfortable space between an artificial nostalgia for and an imaginative rediscovery of this past which is quintessentially manifest in her melancholia. My use of the latter term draws on Gordon's explanation of melancholia as "a form of suffering that is a consequence of a loss that is distinct from bereavement" (8). He elaborates: "in the case of death, there is not a chance of reconciliation with the lost object. But in the case of melancholia, there is a continued presence of that which has been lost" (8). Gordon points to the importance of the formative effect of melancholia on black subjects when he argues that:

One could think of modernity as inaugurating a unique form of melancholia that formed the black subject. The situation is a frustrating one of a longing for a pre-colonial existence *as what one is*, of longing for black existence in a form that blacks could never have existed. Fanon's infamous criticisms of history and the past come from this insight: There is no place in the past for black people; there is no place to which black people can *return*. ("Hellish Zone" 8)

For Fikile, however, there seems to be an acceptance of the impossibility of a 'return'. She does not display any nostalgia for the past and, in fact, works tirelessly to sever all cultural ties to her blackness. This is because she has known from an early age that whiteness is "better" (136) than blackness. When her teacher, in her early school years, asks her what she wants to be when she grows up, Fikile categorically answers: "White, teacher Zola. I want to be white" (135). Questioned on why

she thinks whiteness is “better”, she responds that “everything” (136) affirms this view. She therefore not only uses her physical appearance to gain access to the world she most desires, as I have argued earlier, but she also adopts a new vocabulary through which to express her new self. She boasts: “I use words like ‘facetious’ and ‘filial’ in everyday speech and speak English boldly, without hesitation” (137). Later, she explains her linguistic transformation thus:

It’s the thing you take for granted that turns out to be the most important thing in your life [...]. Your accent, for example [...] for me, my whole life has become about how I speak, about what sounds the words make as they fall on the listener’s ear [...]. People don’t realize how much their accent says about who they are, where they were born and most importantly what kind of people they associate with. [...] it is what you sound like that helps people to place you and determines how they will treat you. Trust me, accent matters. Don’t let some fool convince you otherwise.

(154)

Fiks’s keen adoption of the English language speaks to her attempts to “live words that transcend, if not eradicate, [her] blackness”, to use Gordon’s words in another context (4). And her constant refrain: “I am not black, I am brown” is reminiscent of Fanon’s character, in *Black Skin*, who similarly struggles to ‘wear’ blackness and ultimately asserts ‘non-blackness’ in statements such as: “I am not black, I am brown [...] I am not black, I am Martinican [...] I am not black, I am simply a human being” (qtd in Gordon 4).

Ultimately, in *Coconut*, we have a dramatisation of what Yancy calls the “phenomenological return of the black body” – that is, those “instances in which the black body is reduced to instantiations of the white imaginary” (66). According to Yancy, “these instantiations are embedded within and evolve out of the complex social and historical interstices of whites’ efforts at self-construction through complex acts of erasure and denigration of black people. These acts of self-construction are myths or ideological constructions predicated upon maintaining white power” (66). He further contends, along Fanonian lines, that “to have one’s dark body penetrated by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerfully violating experience” (66). Instances where blackness is experienced through the lens of a historico-racial schema that not only confiscates the meaning of the black body, but also affirms whiteness as the only ‘true’ gaze, are visible throughout Matlwa’s novel. But perhaps the most memorable example of the oppressive power of the white gaze and its ability to render ‘others’ invisible is illustrated in Tshepo’s experiences at the Instant Fried Chicken outlet, where he accepts employment in his effort to emancipate himself from the claustrophobic comforts of his father’s success. At Instant Fried Chicken, Tshepo comes close to realising Fanon’s insight that the white gaze constructs the black body into “an object in the midst of

other objects” (*White Masks* 109). His white employer, Isabelle, regularly mistreats her black staff, accusing them of incompetence and claiming that they are “lazy, ungrateful people who don’t deserve nothing” (28). She further accuses them of having a crèche-level education, which offends Tshepo as he is returned to himself in a manner which he does not recognise – that is, he becomes a casualty of misrecognition, reduced to an idea held by another. He contemplates correcting Isabelle:

I could point out that I, Tshepo Tlou, in fact graduated as Dux Scholar from my junior school, taking all the subject prizes including The Reader Award and the certificate for Most Promising Pupil from an Underprivileged Background. She will curl up in shame when she hears I have received academic honours three years in succession at my current high school, am Vice-Captain of the senior cricket team despite my age, co-chair of the debating society, deputy president of the Student Link and have just been recently offered a scholarship to further my education at any tertiary institution in the country. (27-8)

However, in the end he decides not to speak up for himself. His situation becomes all the more unbearable when the white patrons of the establishment also render him invisible: “Do these people not see me, hear me, when I speak to them? Why do they look through me as if I do not exist, click their fingers as if it is the only language I understand? I want to call them to order. Tell them that they have no right treating people the way they do” (29). In this instance, his body is phenomenologically returned to him as inferior, a situation that mirrors Fanon’s own experience of his blackness when it is returned by the white gaze: “What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood” (*White Masks* 122-3)

Ofilwe and Fikile’s (self)-alienation and cultural dislocations also emerge in the instances where their bodies are returned to them in ways that estrange them from their communities. Their experiences of their blackness – that is, as a claustrophobic *fixed entity* – draw on white constructions of blackness as inferior, instead of the liberating discourse of Black Consciousness. Consequently, they internalise the notion that their blackness is a problem – as indicated earlier in my discussion – a dilemma that Du Bois considered a century earlier in his classic essay “The Study of the Negro Problem”. Gordon explains this merciless conflation, or the collapsing of blackness with problemhood, and its divergence from the notion of blacks as people ‘with problems’, as follows:

a problematic people [...] cease to be people who might face, signify, or be associated with a set of problems: they *become* those problems. Thus, a problematic people do not signify crime, licentiousness, and other social pathologies; they, under such a view, *are* crime, licentiousness, and other social pathologies.

(*Existential Africana* 69)

In the end, however, Ofilwe embarks on a detoxification – that is, by distancing herself from her white friends who do not affirm her – to combat her ‘problemhood’. As Gordon, echoing Fanon argues, “overcoming being a problem requires becoming *actional*” (“Reasoning in Black” 1). Fifi also resolves to learn Sepedi one word at a time: “just like an athlete, I would gradually increase the workload until eventually I would be strong and fluent” (59). Her decision is informed by her distrust of those around her who “all mercilessly trick [her]” (89), as well as by the wisdom that she gains throughout her narrative and which she illustrates in her final insight:

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

This final insight registers Ofilwe’s awareness of the cultural assassination and assimilation that membership in the white world require, and reinforces her resolve to distancing herself from this entrapment – her effort to decolonise her mind. Fikile’s narrative, however, has a more ambiguous ending. First, she considers the advances of an older white patron at Silver Spoon who consistently over-tips and flirts with her. She reasons that “anything worth having comes at a price, a price that isn’t always easy to pay [...]. He seems to really like me and I enjoy his company, what is there to lose? (176). Second, she comes close to admitting, to herself, that her philosophies of life and ideas of success are fraught:

I need to spring-clean my head. There is a real big mess up there but I am too afraid to go in because I do not think I have the strength to handle the task of tidying it all. It is a long time since I was there last. I am scared of what I may find. I am fearful of the cluttered floor, the dusty shelves, the locked cases, the stuffed drawers, the broken bulbs and the cracked windows. (177)

Later, she experiences a disillusioning and self-revealing moment on the train ride home, when she encounters a young black (conscious) man. The man shares his anxieties about his daughter’s refusal to speak isiXhosa, which he perceives to be the result of the influence of her private school education (188). And, while he has no problem with racial integration in South Africa’s multi-racial schools, he is concerned about the assimilation they encourage, to the detriment of diversity and multiculturalism:

listening to all those little black faces yelping away in English, unaware that they have a beautiful language at home that they will one day long for, just broke my heart [...]. Standing at the edge of that playground, I watched little spots of amber and auburn become less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to

be. Standing at the edge of that playground I saw tiny pieces of America, born of African soil. I saw a dark-skinned people refusing to be associated with the red soil, the mud huts and the glistening stone beads that they once loved. (189-90)

The man “functions as a small beacon of hope for Fikile”, and his anecdote “serves as an allegorical subtext for the story and both [Ofilwe’s and Fikile’s] struggles for identity and assimilation” (Rodgers 61-2). The encounter also unsettles Fikile, who is directly implicated in the uncritical assumption of Western values which confirm her own inferiority. Having reached a vague understanding of this, Fikile rushes out of the train when it stops at Mphe Batho Station without a word of goodbye, a hastiness which points to her unwillingness to confront the problematic fact of her “coconutness”. The novel thus ends on an unresolved note, as it is unclear whether Fiks will now embark on a different path of self-representation/self-invention, or doggedly continue to pursue her “Project Infinity”.

#### **4.5 Unbecoming Blackness?: Towards a Post-black Politics**

Consistent with my view of *Coconut*, Spencer concludes that

neither Fifi nor Fiks have been accepted into the imaginary middle class they desire; the promises of this world have not been fulfilled. Instead, from the “in-between” space into which they have each been cast, they have to negotiate continually between compromised values, contradict[ory] selves and conflicting desires; they live in perpetual ambivalence, suspended between two worlds, belonging nowhere. (77)

Thus theirs is a liminality that points to the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute black identities, while also gesturing to the structural and/or institutional failure, in the cultural and socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, to affirm such identities. This is why Raditlhalo’s view of the necessity of Black Consciousness philosophy resonates with me because of its attempts to resuscitate black self-worth in this context. However, it is also important to note that some of the tenets of Black Consciousness philosophy no longer have the same cultural or political purchase as they once did – that is, in the current moment of cultural entanglement. After all, as Hall notes, “blackness [...] is always complexly composed, always historically constructed. It is never in the same place but always positional” (“Old and New Identities” 57). The Biko-SASO definition of blackness, in “The Definition of Black Consciousness”, for example, captures a very particular view and experience of blackness which does not readily resonate, in some ways, with what blackness is today. To repeat, it defines blacks as:

those who are by law or tradition politically, economically, and socially *discriminated* against as a group in the South African society *and identify themselves as a unit* in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations.

(52, emphasis added)

Apart from the obvious observation that legislated discrimination no longer pertains in South Africa, what of the growing black middle class of today? How would they place themselves vis-à-vis this definition? Moreover, the key word, in the Biko-SASO definition, is “discrimination”, which captures a concrete situation (apartheid) without also capturing what Black Consciousness was designed to achieve: the articulation of a liberated (black) identity *post-apartheid*. In other words, should discrimination – and white hegemony, more generally – fall away, by the logic of the Biko-SASO definition, blacks (and whites, too) would cease to exist. Thus Black Consciousness wills its own social death, by envisioning a historical moment when race is not *the* determining factor in South Africa. By making the conditions of the time part of the definition of the subject, the Black Consciousness definition of blackness suggests both that identity is always in process, and provides a “space-clearing gesture”, to use Appiah’s words (*In My Father’s House* 149), for a post-black politics – a notion to which I will return shortly.

According to Hall, “identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it” (“Old and New Identities” 49). What *Coconut* reveals, however, is that, in contemporary South Africa, the ‘story’ of race has not (yet) been supplanted. Nevertheless, the novel also alerts us to the redemptive possibilities of this failure. For, failure, according to Werry and O’Gorman, “unmakes selves, and makes them up again and again, revealing identity not as the monolith we often imagine it to be but as the fluid process of reinventing ourselves in the face of circumstances and in the company of others” (110). In a novel such as *Coconut*, then, we are confronted with this failure of blackness to offer a solid or stable sense of identity: the characters vacillate between essentialist notions of blackness (such as Tshepo, who wears his mother’s kaftans (83) and intimates a quasi-Négritude politics in his performance of blackness, and Ofilwe, who is nostalgic (53), and who, in her ‘silent prayer’ associates blackness with stereotypical “booming voices and “*mqombothi* laughs” (31)), and a complete negation of blackness in favour of whiteness (as seen in the character of Fiks). Granted, the failure of blackness, in these instances, is represented as the characters’ own failure because they, on occasion, essentialise blackness, and, at other times experience it as a claustrophobic entity, fixed within set boundaries. However, it is important to note that the very concept of “coconuttiness” – this schizophrenic suspension between two races, or, rather,

this black-skin-white-mask syndrome – begs the existential question of the meaning of blackness, since ‘coconuts’ inhabit a pariah status in the black community. ‘Coconuts’, as I have discussed above, are too black to be white *and* too white to be black. Their “coconutteness” recalls those black people whom Biko calls the ‘non’-whites – that is, those who fail at blackness because they have internalised and accepted their inferiority, and who also fail at whiteness because of the existential fact of their black bodies. This failure, however, challenges prescriptive conceptions of identities, for what does it mean for a black person, in the current post-apartheid moment, to ‘fail at blackness’ if not to point to the residual tendency to essentialise blackness? An essentialising moment which Hall describes as “weak because it naturalises and dehistoricises difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic” (“What Is This ‘Black’” 111). So, while Matlwa’s *Coconut* foregrounds the historic-racial baggage that creates and/or haunts the ‘coconut’ identity, resulting in self-hatred, alienation and cultural dislocation, “coconutteness” – as an abstract concept – is a zone of potentialities, pointing to failure’s threshold, and prompting us to interrogate the ‘black’ in black popular culture.

In view of this redemptive failure in a novel like *Coconut*, we are beginning to witness a move towards a post-black politics in South Africa. Post-blackness should not be confused with neo-blackness, however. The “post” in post-blackness is similar to that in the term “postmodernism” and is used as a “temporising label” – that is, “a definition to describe where we [have] left rather than where we are going” (Taylor 629). The “post”, according to Paul C. Taylor, is also used as a “space-clearing gesture [...] a way of making room for alternative approaches” (629). He also argues that the “post” of post-black is similar to the “post” of postcolonialism, since, “postcolonialism [...] insists both that colonial conditions continue to shape the contemporary world and that they have given way to something new. But it imagines the new state of affairs in pointedly pluralistic and nonlinear terms” (631). This post-black politics in the context of South Africa, more generally, and in *Coconut*, specifically, means the emergence a new wave of Black Consciousness politics: a re-evaluation of the meaning of blackness in the changing socio-political and cultural landscape of South Africa, and a shift from the old unifying discourse of race during the nationalist era, which ultimately obscures the class stratifications within black communities, as well as the individual aspects of blackness. In other words, as Taylor asserts, blackness – in a post-black moment – differs from the “older (nationalist) approaches [which] usually began with assumptions about a stable black personality, culture or subject. [...] blackness ceases to be a foundation and becomes a question, an object of scrutiny, a provisional resource at best, and, for some, a burden” (“Black Aesthetics” 8). Indeed, in keeping with her role as a creative writer, Matlwa, through *Coconut*, raises questions and provokes conversations about blackness and its possible futures. My hope is that these questions and

conversations will add to the project of critical race philosophy in the South African academy, and lead to a sharpening of the tools with which we read and understand blackness – and, indeed, all identities – in contemporary South Africa.

## Conclusion

Informed by one of the most important debates in the field of South African literary criticism – the debate on the crisis of representation in black South African protest literature – this dissertation has explored the notion that black writing is set in a state of permanent tension with regard to the representation of black identities. However, while the debate on the crisis of representation focused on black South African fiction from the 1960s to the 1980s, and specifically on the artistic/aesthetic shortcomings of black writing during this period, my discussion has extended this focus to include ‘post’-apartheid black South African literature which exhibits a similar split or fractured mode of writing. This split derives from the contentious nature of that which this literature endeavours to capture – the fraught identity of blackness. I have also challenged the idea of aesthetic mediocrity in protest literature, maintaining, instead, that the crisis in black South African literature – from an identity politics standpoint – lies in the tensions between the valuative concepts ‘African’ and ‘black’, or the dialectic between a nostalgic (pre-colonial, canonical) notion of African identity and black identity as a reality produced specifically by apartheid in South Africa. Thus, in Chapter One, which explores black South African literature’s search for identity, I have attempted to move beyond what I have characterised as a methodology of otherness – a self-other or black-white dialectical consciousness – in the scholarship about black literature’s search for identity. And, while I do not deny blackness’ dialogic engagement with whiteness, I argue for a self-double dialectic or black-African approach which – by focusing on the existential and ideological tensions between Africanness and blackness, through the lenses of Afrocentric theory and Black Consciousness philosophy, respectively – places black subjectivity at the centre of aesthetical discourses in African literature.

Furthermore, I have drawn attention to the notion that, in studies interested in black literature’s search for identity, there are two streams of consciousness in the black literary imagination: the place-centred (Afrocentric) and the race-conscious (Black Consciousness) perspective. With this in mind, I have challenged the tendency, in South African literary discourse, to either collapse these two streams of consciousness such that they are indistinguishable, or to valorise the Afrocentric approach to the subordination of black concerns. The Afrocentric perspective – with which detractors of protest literature, such as Nkosi and Ndebele, evince some affinity – not only flattens the nuances of black identity’s crisis of identity, but also dislocates protest writers from the time within which they live. And, because the Afrocentric articulation of African identity places emphasis on indigenous cultures and place-centeredness and eschews race consciousness, it belies the profound experience of cultural deracination and alienation produced by the enterprise of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, as well as the impact of Black Consciousness philosophy in the attempt to rehabilitate this

disintegration of African cultures. As a result of these limitations of Afrocentric theory, I have argued that blackness, as imagined and articulated in Black Consciousness philosophy, provides a more sophisticated and relevant perspective both on the historical context which this study explores and on identity formation for those communities formerly categorised as ‘non-white’. First, although blackness foregrounds race-consciousness, it works on the assumption of Africanness and is thus a ‘product’ of an irrevocably traumatised African identity following the advent of the colonial enterprise in South Africa. Hence my agitation for a self-double dialectical consciousness in the black aesthetic imagination – that ever-present consciousness of being *both* African *and* black, despite the contending ‘roots’ versus ‘routes’ ideologies of these two terms. Second, blackness – because of its inherent fluidity – reveals a permeability which not only challenges the essentialist (Western and/or colonial) logic of identity, but also affirms the view established, in contemporary social theory, on the *processual* nature of identities. In view of blackness’ fluidity, the continuing relevance of Black Consciousness philosophy for black South African writing, and the self-double dialectical consciousness in this fiction, my analysis of the primary texts in this study has explored the crisis of writing blackness via the split or double narratives of Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents*, and Matlwa’s *Coconut*. All of these novels grapple with the themes of trauma, marginality, and unbelonging, and the lack of a solid foundation upon which to construct a stable black identity.

*To Every Birth Its Blood* provides an insightful view of black identity politics. The novel explores the fragmented experience of blackness which is mirrored in the various dualities and tensions in the narrative: the split between the two parts of the novel, coupled with Serote’s use of schizophrenic forms of expressions in his fusion of the poetic-symbolic and the realist-mimetic; the tensions between history, memory, trauma, and silence as both disruptive and redemptive; the tensions between circular and linear time, jazz and soul; the dialectic between the personal and the public; the continuities and ruptures in the novel’s ideological framework; and, ultimately, the question of being and nothingness. What I have foregrounded in Serote’s novel is his uninterrupted use of the motif of the journey and m/Movement in his engagement with black identity politics. Written of and during South Africa’s “Days of Power,” a historical period when black nationalist movements assumed a stable black identity and culture – when Black Consciousness and the 1976 Student Uprising recast the official liberation discourse of non-racialism by promoting black solidarity, Serote’s novel foregrounds movement/the Movement (read: becoming and fluidity) in the search for both personal and political liberation and identity. Serote’s use of jazz as a structural trope in the first part of the novel, and his modelling of Tsi’s subjectivity in the voice of the blues singer, suggests that jazz is ‘the Movement’ of Part I. As Lewis Gordon writes,

The quintessential black existential response in music is the blues. The blues focuses on life's difficulties and brings reality to the world of *feeling* or black suffering and joy. As an art form, the blues defies predictability and human closure. It welcomes improvisation, which makes it and its offsprings – jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, reggae, samba, salsa, and hip hop – exemplars of the existential credo of existence preceding essence and its connection to the question of freedom. [...]he unique ways in which the blues brings to life the reality of and paradoxically joyful insight into suffering – to face it instead of avoiding it – points to an anthropology of black adulthood as a struggle against despair. This makes the blues an important adversary of antiblack racism. Racism attempts to force black people to the developmental level of animals at worst and children at best, freeze them there, and denigrate black self-value. The blues, by contrast, encourages maturation, growth, and is life affirming. (“Geography of Reason” 25)

Thus, jazz represents Tsi's movement or journey towards self-discovery in the face of shattering experiences. Part II of the novel has been accused of arresting the ideological fluidity and the tension generated by the dialectic between the personal and the public achieved in Part I, in its shift from existential and modernist practices to radical political concerns. However, this suspension of ideological fluidity is temporary and serves to highlight the Fanonian insight on the necessity of (combative) action against oppression. Furthermore, while the Movement takes over the role of hero, blurring the individual identities of the characters in favour of a unifying discourse on the collective aspects of black identity, so that blackness is meaningless without consciousness, that blackness is synonymous with (the) movement affirms that identity is “a process of movement and mediation” (Gilroy 19), and that blackness is the product of very complex routes of circulation. The novel's ending, its re-introduction of Tsi who remains traumatised and defeated, is prophetic in its caution against the tendency – in nationalist movements – to suspend the project of the psychological decolonisation of the mind in the pursuit of political liberation. Thus the novel ends on a funky blues note which defies closure.

Working from within this framework of a fraught liberation ethos, *Thirteen Cents* suggests disillusionment with South Africa's heroic discourse of transition from apartheid to a “Rainbow Nation”. While not overtly political in terms of its engagement with the grand politics of the nation state, Duiker's novel interrogates what lies beyond the rhetoric of reconciliation, through the themes of violence, (transgenerational) trauma, exploitation, marginality, poverty, and abject powerlessness. In this deceptively simple narrative, which implies a notion of linear or progressive time when, in fact, time moves backwards and there is a ‘return of the repressed’, Duiker depicts the ways in which the legacies of colonial violence and trauma hold the present ransom. His sustained use of the trope of liminality – his representation of the ‘post’-apartheid situation in terms of inbetweenness, caught

between an unfinished past and an uncertain present, and of his protagonist, Azure, whose age suggests that he is poised between childhood and adulthood, and who is suspended between two races, given that he is black boy with blue eyes – points to the ambiguity of the kind of freedom that has been achieved in South Africa. Moreover, Azure’s racial indeterminacy suggests a move beyond the traditional/nationalist tropes of blackness, that is, of black identity as a stable entity. However, for Azure, this instability is not redemptive in the sense of Serote’s novel and Matlwa’s, in which trauma and failure, respectively, suggest a threshold out which a new life-affirming philosophy emerges. Rather, unable to cope in the present, Azure evinces a disruptive haunting by the past which, coupled with the totality of this traumatic experiences, leads to a gradual weakening of his psychological defences and, ultimately, his own destruction. Significantly, Duiker’s apocalyptic vision of the unhomely post-apartheid state self-critically points to impotence of disillusionment – a disenchantment which, as I have argued, embodies a romantic desire for coherence and wholeness.

In contrast to *Thirteen Cents*, Matlwa’s *Coconut* suggests a fairly hopeful outlook on failure in the post-apartheid landscape. While similarly registering unease with the triumphant spectacle of the “Rainbow Nation” – specifically in Matlwa’s characters’ struggles with their identities and belonging, among other issues – *Coconut* alludes to the possibility of failure as redemptive. ‘Coconuts’, as I have indicated earlier, not only fail at whiteness given the existential fact of their blackness, but they also fail at blackness because they have internalised the anti-black inclination to view blacks as ‘problems’, and have thus accepted their inferiority. After all, “coconut” refers to a black person who is culturally lost, and also painfully ashamed of his/her blackness (Hlongwane 10). Even so, this failure of “coconuts” to be either black or white carries a paradoxical success, because it challenges the essentialist or prescriptive logic of racialised identity, and gestures towards the possibility, at least, of a ‘post-race’ society. Nevertheless, as Paul Taylor succinctly puts it, speaking of the postcolonial situation, “the past casts a long shadow, and the diverse and inchoate present has not organised itself sufficiently to emerge into its own light” (“Post-Black, Old Black” 631). My reading of these three novels demonstrates the crisis of representing black identity, or, in Gordon’s words, “the realization of there not having been a ‘whole’ black self [which] haunts black existence” (“When I Was There” 13). In the light of this realisation, these novels point to a need for an introspective and interrogative post-black politics – a post-black politics which recalls the Fanonian prayer: “O my body, make of me a man who always questions!” (*White Masks* 232).

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