

ABSTRACT

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WRITERS: NARRATING THE SELF,
NARRATING THE NATION

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This dissertation examines the ways in which Black women writers construct the South African nation in their fiction. Based on analyses of four novels, Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1979), Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1989), Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000), and Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), it examines how those most disenfranchised by the policy of apartheid in South Africa articulated, configure and re-imagine the nation through their writing.

It also investigates how these women writers construct themselves as writing subjects in a society that has historically denied them creative and personal agency. I view Black women's writing as a form of activism and resistance to apartheid, and situate the production of their novels within the larger political context of twentieth century South Africa. The dissertation thus focuses on the ways in which the apartheid doctrine affected Black women's lives politically and as producers of writing.

Drawing theoretically on Mamphela Ramphele's conceptualizations of space, Carole Boyce Davies' formulation of Black women writers as "migratory" subjects, and life course theory, I analyze life history interviews with four writers in an attempt to map the ways they transcended their "received" identities as laborers and reproducers of labor for the apartheid nation, to become authors of their own lives and works. I expand traditional feminist definitions of agency, arguing that, for these women, writing became an act that was cumulatively agentic, instilling in them increased personal agency. This outcome was the opposite of the apartheid's state intended goal of oppressing and silencing these writers. I further argue that in writing, the authors were engaged in *creative re-visioning* - a subject's ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for her to achieve within her lifetime.

The dissertation then goes on to examine four novels produced by Tlali, Ngcobo, Magona, and Wicomb, emphasizing the ways in which these texts undermine unitary, masculinist forms of nationalisms, be these apartheid or emerging African nationalisms. I conclude by proposing a Black South African feminist literary criticism as a means for producing literary texts about Black women and as a methodology for interpreting such texts.

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Dedication

For my mother, Una Boswell, and son, Jesse Meintjes

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A moving scene opens Black South African writer, Laretta Ngcobo's debut novel, *Cross of Gold* (1981). Sindisiwe Zikode, a mother, a freedom fighter against the apartheid regime, and a former domestic worker, is on the run from South African police. When the reader first encounters her, Sindisiwe stalks the border between South Africa and Botswana, where she is exiled, and from which she tries to facilitate the safe passage of her young sons from South Africa. The novel's opening pages make palpable the danger the family faces in its bid for freedom from a politically oppressive regime.

Early in the first chapter of the novel, Sindisiwe is shot by police from the South African side of the border. She secures a safe crossing for her sons, but unable to get to a hospital, dies an excruciating death under a searing Southern African sky. Sindisiwe is buried in a shallow grave by strangers as her sons try to process the loss of a mother they hardly knew. She has, however, left some sort of legacy that her sons discover in a suitcase after her death: a long, lyrical letter, describing the change in her subjectivity from apolitical domestic worker to a militant, anti-apartheid activist. The letter describes, in great detail, Sindisiwe's transformation into a political subject. In its pages, Sindisiwe bears witness to the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, which killed 69 peaceful Black protesters in the township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Determined to frame the political event from her own perspective as a Black woman, Sindisiwe makes her standpoint clear in the opening sentences of her

letter: “Whatever you know, it is not from me you got it” (Ngcobo 1981, 20). Making clear the urgency of rendering her own version of an event which changed the South African political landscape and marked the beginning of the armed struggle against the apartheid regime, Sindisiwe emphasizes her intent to “recount to you here events as I saw them, and as they have affected me and brought me here” (Ngcobo 1981, 20). In this way, Sindisiwe bears witness, producing for her sons a counternarrative of the political uprising and ensuing deaths that differs from the official, apartheid discourse on the massacre. In doing so, she renders an account with her own situated knowledge “from below,” as one who had experienced the massacre. Though she is a witness to this monumental event in South Africa’s history, Sindisiwe is doomed to die early in the novel, while her son, Mandla, carries on the political activism she has started.

Sindisiwe’s fate can be read as allegoric of the state of Black South African women’s literary writing at the time of *Cross of Gold’s* publication in 1981. At this time, only three Black women had published novels in English: Bessie Head, South Africa’s most prolific and only published Black woman novelist, who would prematurely die in exile in Botswana the very year of *Cross of Gold’s* publication; Miriam Tlali, who became the first Black woman to publish a novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1979), within the borders of apartheid South Africa one year before the appearance of *Cross of Gold*; and Ngcobo herself, who had written and published *Cross of Gold* from the safety and loneliness of exile in England.

The similarities between these authors’ and Sindisiwe’s lives are striking. Like Head and Ngcobo, Sindisiwe is immediately marked in the text as an exile,

situated outside the bounds of the nation. Her words come to her children and to readers from beyond “those few strands of barbed wire fence [standing] between her and her children, her home, her husband and her country” (Ngcobo 1981, 1). As a writer and Black woman she is spatially and discursively displaced from the country about which she is writing. She is an outsider, trying to enter national political discourse, but succeeding only minimally because of structural constraints placed upon her by apartheid, and ultimately, her death.

Like Sindisiwe’s letter, which is smuggled back into the country by her son and furtively disseminated there, these writers’ literary output was forced underground almost immediately upon publication by banning orders from an apartheid government which deemed it politically incendiary. Like her letter, the novels of Head, Tlali and Ngcobo were stealthily read and circulated at high personal risk.

In this way, Sindisiwe’s tragic and premature death at the hands of South African police can be read as an allegory for the predicament of the Black woman author in apartheid South Africa. Through censorship, banning, imprisonment, harassment by the security police, exile, and disenfranchisement, Black women writers were effectively sentenced to a metaphoric death which threatened to extinguish their attempts at creative expression.

Cultural critic Edward Said has noted that “the capacity to represent, portray, characterize and depict is not easily available to just any member of just any society” (Said 1993, 80). South African society, structured in recent history by the oppressive and exploitative systems of colonialism and apartheid, has historically been organized

in a way that systematically excluded Black women from writing and other forms of cultural production. The apartheid system worked on multiple levels to not only disenfranchise Black women and Black subjects in general, but also to repress creativity and the capacity to dream. Through curtailing the educational opportunities available to women; through politically disenfranchising them; and responding to activism against apartheid through censorship, imprisonment, violence and banning, the apartheid government effectively prohibited Black women from the realm of literary production. Yet, like Sindisiwe, Black women writers still insisted upon rendering creative accounts of life, political events, human relations, and whatever else they chose to depict.

This dissertation analyses the ways in which selected Black South African women writers, in daring to write, construct the South African nation in their fiction. It examines how those most disenfranchised by the policy of apartheid in South Africa articulated, configured and reimagined the nation through their writing. It analyzes the fiction of Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, and Zoë Wicomb in an attempt to trace the ways in which these writers conceived of and reconfigured the South African nation during apartheid and after the dismantling of this system. Additionally, this work draws on a number of interviews conducted with four Black women writers - Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, and Gladys Thomas – and uses these interviews as an important source illuminating the lives, works and writing processes of these women.

In daring to write under a repressive political regime which effectively forbade them from doing so, these women displayed what critic Carole Boyce Davies

calls “migratory subjectivity” (Davies 1994, 36). In her theorization of the ways in which Black women’s writing renegotiates their identities, Davies argues that for Black women, writing can be likened to a migratory experience, since the acts of both writing and migration involve psychological and sometimes physical boundary-crossing, and the constant renegotiation of Black women’s identities. Black women’s writing therefore denotes personal agency, since the act of writing, for a Black woman, consists of a series of boundary-crossings which require an active agent in crossing these boundaries. In South Africa, this migratory subjectivity in Black women writers took is particularly salient, given that these women wrote in resistance to a system of political repression which sought, at its most basic level, to rob them of their full humanity and limit most forms of expression.

This dissertation has two aims. The first is to map the narratives and counter-narratives of the nation that Black South African women writers have used to express their exclusion from dominant racist and nationalist constructs of that nation through literary criticism of the novels *Murial at Metropolitan* (1979) by Miriam Tlali, *And They Didn’t Die* (1989) by Laretta Ngcobo, *David’s Story* (2000) by Zoë Wicomb, and *Mother to Mother* (1998) by Sindiwe Magona. It draws on postcolonial theories of the nation, transnational feminist critiques and theories of the nation, and the feminist work of a growing body of South African literary critics and gender scholars to critically analyze these novels and position them within larger bodies of South African literature. In doing so, this dissertation aims to make visible the work of a body of literature - Black South African women’s writing in English - which has

largely been ignored in mainstream criticism of South African, African and postcolonial literatures.

A second aim is to make visible and contextualize the conditions in which literary production by Black South African women writers take place. Drawing on interviews I conducted with four writers in 2006, I examine the political and material conditions which shaped these writers and their work. A related aim is an examination of these writers' "migratory subjectivity" through analyzing the stories they told me about their lives. This dissertation analyses the ways the act of writing transformed the subjectivities of these writers, leading them into uncharted territories as writing subjects.

Theoretical Framing: The "Nation," Postcoloniality, and Black South African Women's Writing

This dissertation draws on a number of bodies of thought in constructing a theoretical framework. Most important of these are concepts of the nation, postcoloniality, and feminist thought. In what follows I review some of the key literatures from these bodies of knowledge, and demonstrate their utility in examining Black women writers' construction of the South African nation. I have found the work of Louis Althusser, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, and Homi Bhabha useful to think about the nation and its relation to culture and ideology, in that they offer concepts for theorizing these relationships. However, in using their articulations, I have to point out the androcentric nature of their work. In what follows, I briefly outline how these theorists have informed my thinking about nationalisms, culture, and ideology; then

offer a summation of various feminist critiques of these formulations. Finally I articulate where I locate Black South African women writers as producers of culture in relation to these theories.

Culture contributes to the construction of nations, and the novel as a cultural product is implicated in the creation of ideologies that maintain nations. Within modernity, nations have emerged as contested and ambivalent spaces, brought into coherence as much by culture and ideology as by physical borders. Althusserian interpretations of the nation-state hold that ideology plays as large a role in buttressing national formations as other, more concrete, state apparatuses (Althusser 1971). Ideology represents the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1971, 187): a narrative of “reality” which keeps subjects in subjection by making them accept certain interpretations of their lives. Narratives weaved by ideology, or those who hold ideological power, thus construct the nation, and reproduce it by maintaining existing power relations.

It has been argued that the rise of the novel as a literary form coincides roughly with the rise of the Western, imperial nation as social formation (Said, 1993). Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined political community” (1983, 6), and argues that the idea of the nation as organizing political force gained credence in 18th century Western Europe during the rise of the Enlightenment and the concomitant waning of religious influence. Anderson argues that the concept of “the nation” flourished partly because of the invention of print-capitalism, which provided concrete textual means - through the forms of the novel and newspaper – by which members of the “imagined communities” of nations could conceive of those fellow

citizens whom they would never meet, but with whom they shared a bond of belonging to the same nation. “These forms provided the technical means for ‘representing’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation,” according to Anderson (1983, 25). Print-capitalism, and particularly the novelistic form, thus buttressed the formation of nations in Western Europe, making it possible “for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways” (1983, 36).

Edward Said’s examination of culture and imperialism similarly acknowledges the novel as an important cultural form in the creation of imperialist national cultures. Novels are not produced in a cultural vacuum, argues Said, who demonstrates what he calls “the novel’s consolidation of authority” (1993, 71). For imperial Britain this authority made governance and social power “appear both normative and sovereign, that is, self validating in the course of the narrative” (Said 1993, 71). In these ways, writing as a form of cultural production is implicated in constructing the nation, and often, in constructing dominant nationalist discourses of the nation, thus buttressing nationalisms.

Recent postcolonial and feminist theorizing of the nation have contested the concept of the nation, by examining nationalisms as they emerge in so-called Third World contexts, and by illuminating the ways in which nationalisms are often constructed through the exclusion of certain subjects, notably women, from citizenship. In doing so, this body of scholarship by writers such as Said, Homi Bhabhi, Gayatri Spivak, Mary Layoun, Anne McClintock, Nira Yuval-Davis, and

Sangeeta Ray, to name a few, complicates the Eurocentric focus of foundational works about nationalism by theorists like Anderson and Althusser.

Homi Bhabha, for example, provides a more complex formulation of “the nation” and ideology’s role within it, than Althusser. For Bhabha the nation is a liminal space: ambivalence haunts both the idea of the nation, and “the language of those who write of it” (Bhabha 1990, 1). Bhabha reads the nation semiotically, as that which signifies ambivalence: its “cultural temporality” inscribes “a much more transitional social reality” (1990, 1) than unitary nationalist discourses would have it signify. Thus reading the nation as text, as it is written, is valuable in that it displays “the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life” (Bhabha 1990, 3).

In *Wedded to the Land? Gender, Boundaries and Nationalism in Crisis* (2002), Mary Lahoun examines the intersections of gender, culture, and nationalism in territories displaying what she calls “nationalism in crisis” (Lahoun 2002, 18). She similarly defines nationalism as narrative.

Nationalism - at any given time, in a specific space, and in the name of particular nationally defined and constituted peoples - constructs and professes a narrative of the nation and of its relation to a projected potential or already existing state. In doing this nationalism lays claim to a privileged national perspective of the ‘nation’ and thus justifies its own capacity to narrate - to organize and link the diverse elements of - the nation.” (Lahoun 2002, 10)

In functioning as a narrative, nationalism “privileges - indeed must privilege - the authority of its own position as a presumably reliable narrator” (Lahoun 2002, 11). Lahoun’s analysis expands on that of Bhabha’s in its insistence upon including gendered analyses in examinations of the nation and nationalism.

Feminist scholarship such as Lahoun's has done a great deal to counter androcentric theories of the nation and statehood by critically examining the gendered ways in which nation constructs its citizens: specifically how women are discursively constructed and made to stand as sign for the nation, and how deployments of these constructions of women function in the articulation of nationhood. In their theorizing of nationalism and gender, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have noted "that the central dimensions of the relationships between collectives and the state are constituted around the roles of women" (Yuval-Davis and Athias, 1). They also foreground the importance of distinguishing between nations and states, arguing that while nationalisms have been a major force behind the emergence of the modern nation-state, the nation has all too often been conflated with statehood. Anthias and Yuval-Davis consequently advocate an awareness of the ways in which national processes play out on the level of ethnicity and ethnic identity formation, while cautioning against the use of the concept "ethnicity" to signify minorities.

Anne McClintock, through an explication of Afrikaner nationalism and its creation of the trope of the "mother of the nation" in apartheid South Africa, argues that "all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous" (McClintock 1995, 352). For McClintock, nationalism positions male subjects in the same relation to the nation as they stand to women; she argues that "nations have historically amounted to the institutionalization of gender difference" (McClintock 1995, 353). Of the many male writers who have theorized the nation, McClintock credits only Frantz Fanon with being attentive to gender and the position of women in relation to nationalist formations. Similarly, Sangeeta Ray has critiqued masculinist

theories of nationalism which continue to use Ernest Renan's 1882 lecture on nationalism as a framework, despite a number of feminist interventions into such androcentric discourses of the nation. Through an analysis of a number of novels that have India as their subject, Ray demonstrates one of her central arguments around nationalism as it has been deployed by both colonizers and the indigenous peoples of India: that "woman" becomes a sign for the nation in imperial, independence and postcolonial nationalist discourses. Ray further argues that the figure of the woman is invoked as a stabilizing mechanism on which to consolidate national identities and notions of unitary national cultures, destabilized in recent times by postmodernist reconfigurations of culture as influenced by transnational elements.

Elleke Boehmer, a South African feminist literary critic, has pointed to the ways in which patriarchy and nationalisms buttress one another. She argues that "two mutually reinforcing cases can be made for the relationship between patriarchy and nationalism. The first identifies in both a unitary, monologic vision, a tendency to authorise homogenising perceptions and social structures and to suppress plurality. Nationalism, like patriarchy, favours singleness" (Boehmer 1991, 7). Since national identity is overwhelmingly gendered male, excluding women from constructs of national identity, Boehmer argues that for women, writing can be a way of fracturing this exclusive masculinist conception of national identity: "In writing, women express their own reality and so question received notions of national character and experience" (Boehmer, 1991, 9).

I have focused here on certain canonical theories of nationalism and nation formation, as well as important epistemological interventions generated by feminist

theorists who have examined women and gender in relation to narratives of the nation. Most male theorists have been rightly faulted for the scant attention they pay to the way nationalism interpellates and utilizes women as sign for the nation, and feminist theory has sought to redress this gender-blindness. Most discussions about nation also center around either western or postcolonial nations, the latter category of nations having attained independence from various imperial forces at different stages of the twentieth century, and having had their heterogeneity subsumed under the rubric of “the third world” or “the developing world.” However, theories of the nation, and the relationships of women to various nationalisms, sit uneasy in respect to a country like South Africa, until recently marked by legislated racial separation and discrimination. While South Africa achieved “independence” from Britain in 1962, this independence had, as its defining characteristic, the policy and ideology of apartheid, which rendered the majority of South Africans non-citizens on the basis of their race. The nation formed in 1962 thus defined itself through exclusion of the vast majority from citizenship through white hegemony, and the extreme economic exploitation of those Black people categorized as Bantu, Indian or Coloured.

The existence of the apartheid state, which had its legislative genesis in the 1910 Land Act that disqualified all African people from owning land, throws into sharp relief a number of questions about nations, nationalisms and postcolonialism. Could apartheid South Africa be considered a postcolonial state? What sort of a postcolonial nation was a country that based nationhood on the exclusion of the majority of subjects living within the geographical boundaries of this nation? Did the disenfranchised constitute “nations within a nation?” And can white South Africa

during apartheid be considered a neo-colonial force within a newly-independent nation? What sort of nationalisms operated within the apartheid state? Can present-day South Africa, rid of the scourge of apartheid, be considered postcolonial? How do conflicting, oppositional strains of nationalism constructed by the apartheid government and anti-apartheid liberation movements shape the ‘nation’ today? How are women positioned in relation to the ascension of African nationalism as a metanarrative of South African society and the waning hegemony of white nationalisms? How does the nation-building project which in 1994 would style South Africa as the “Rainbow Nation”¹ deploy women as the signs of this multicultural society? And most importantly, how have Black women conceived of the nation, inserted themselves into national discourse, and reimagined the nation in their writing?

Though responding to all these questions is beyond the scope of this dissertation, they form a kind of substratum underlying my discussion of Black South African women writers. The feminist work briefly reviewed above is especially helpful in thinking about how nationalisms deploy and designate women. My concern, however, seems almost the corollary of examinations into the way nationalisms construct women. Rather, my interest here is in the way subaltern women, those doubly disavowed in South Africa by apartheid on the grounds of their race and gender, have constructed the nation through representations of themselves, their realities, and the nation in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The focus here is not on imaginings or constructions of women by dominant imperialist or

¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu coined the “Rainbow Nation” phrase at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first president of democratic South Africa in 1994.

nationalist discourses: instead, it inverts this focus to examine how such women read their nation/nationlessness, and imagine that nation through counter-narrative. Since apartheid rendered Black women essentially without a nation, I focus on the ways in which Black women writers inscribed the nation and made sense of their position in it. This dissertation privileges the novel in English as a form of narrating the nation. I argue that the novels written by Black South African women and investigated in this dissertation represent what Gayatri Spivak calls the “subaltern speaking” (Spivak, 2001), even though such speaking, entailing “a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception” (Spivak 2001, 2207) was not always heard by those constructing metanarratives of the nation.

The Politics of Citation in Feminist Literary Criticism: Engaging with the Other

This study draws on materialist feminist literary criticism to investigate the ways in which Black women writers Miriam Tlali, Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, and Lauretta Ngcobo construct the nation in their fiction. While many Black women wrote poetry, prose, plays, autobiographies and short stories during the period under review, this dissertation focuses exclusively on novels written in English, and in doing so, maps a historiography of Black women’s literary production within the genre of the novel.

I draw conceptually on a number of discrete academic disciplines: feminist literary theory and criticism, postcolonial theory and criticism (which may often overlap with materialist feminist literary criticism); and South African history, wherein Black women’s cultural production is embedded. In recognizing the embeddedness of Black women’s writing in history, this dissertation takes a

materialist-feminist critical approach to the writings of the authors reviewed here. A materialist-feminist approach to literature can be characterized, amongst other things, by its “commitment to the view that the social and economic circumstances in which women and men live - the material conditions of their lives - are central to an understanding of culture and society” (Rosenfelt and Newton 1985, xi). Though “doubly committed to materialist analyses” (Rosenfelt and Newton 1985, xviii) of women’s lives and work through its commitment to analyzing gender relations and economic relations, materialist-feminist criticism also emphasizes the importance of ideas, culture, and language as locations for the production of ideology.

My deployment of materialist feminist literary criticism as an analytical tool comes with one qualification: in using this method of analysis, I am aware of the Eurocentric biases of much feminist criticism. Central to my use of materialist feminist literary criticism is the understanding that feminist criticism, like most other bodies of knowledge, is an epistemic construct, which in its very construction, privileges the voices of a few while omitting many other perspectives. Thus, an awareness of the constructed nature of feminist literary criticism, its originary biases, and its omissions of certain subjects, is key for using this literary tool in a work that examines the politics of inclusion and exclusion in literary production by Black women.

Mary Eagleton’s deconstruction of the field of feminist literary studies makes clear the constructed nature of U.S. feminist literary criticism, which Eagleton argues has been both “selective and schematic” (Eagleton 1996, 1). She goes on to deconstruct the founding narrative of feminist literary criticism, which usually

presents a few key texts as “founding” works in the field. These founding texts include Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* (1980), Mary Elmann’s *Thinking About Women* (1979), Eva Figes’s *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1972), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Patricia Meyer Spacks’s *The Female Imagination* (1976), Ellen Moers’s *Literary Women* (1978), Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Included in this ordinary narrative are one or two dissident voices who critique the racial exclusivity and heteronormativity of the field, including Barbara Smith and Adrienne Rich. Eagleton argues that:

This is a familiar narrative and yet for me it is one that is becoming increasingly difficult to offer without numerous reservations and qualifications. Large sections of this account now need to be placed within imaginary inverted commas as the received version but a highly questionable one. (Eagleton 1996, 2)

Eagleton advocates greater sensitivity and awareness of the exclusivity of constructing epistemic bodies. She outlines three principles for deconstructing the field of feminist literary criticism: 1) “an understanding of institutional contexts and demands and the wider political and economic forces that situate them,” 2) a renewed interest in empirical work: “who, when, where, which publications and journals, which conferences, which networks, what database, what was translated, into which languages” (Eagleton 1996, 6); and 3) “an ongoing analysis of the cultural and political significance of feminist literary practice” (Eagleton 1996, 1).

As Shirley Geok-Lin Lim (1993) has pointed out, feminist scholars of color in the United States - be they American or “third world” subjects - are compelled to reference and engage with these “founding” feminist literary critics in order to enter

any debate about the hegemony of white feminist criticism. As a feminist scholar of color, with non-U.S. origins but located within the American academy, I am challenged to work productively with the tensions I experience between drawing on exclusionary feminist epistemologies, and entering the “conversation” of (materialist) feminist literary criticism. In negotiating these tensions, I have found helpful the work of Black feminist literary critics and postcolonial feminists located in the U.S. Theorists such as Barbara Smith, Gayatri Spivak, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Carole Boyce Davies, to name but a few, have all outlined ways for producing materialist feminist criticism, grounded in historical specificity and the politics of specific locations, while engaging with feminist hegemony and other racist canonical formations.

Smith’s principles for Black feminist literary criticism are particularly instructive for my purpose. For Smith, a Black feminist literary critic displays “a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women’s writings [while also working] from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition” (Smith 2001, 2307). In addition, such a critic recognizes that “thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (Smith 2001, 2307).

Smith asserts that a Black feminist literary critic looks first to the works of other Black women for critical insights and analysis, is aware of the political nature

of her work, and strives to make connections between her politics and the political contexts of all Black women. “Logically developed, Black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use.” It also holds the potential to “overturn previous assumptions about [a literary work] and expose it for the first time in its actual dimensions” (Smith 2001, 2308). For Smith, a salient aspect of Black feminist literary criticism is the realization that Eurocentric theoretical tools are inadequate for the criticism of Black women’s work: “She [the Black feminist critic] would think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women’s art” (Smith 2001, 2308).

In addition to following Smith’s principles for a Black feminist literary criticism, I will use as theoretical guides the work of Spivak, Boyce Davies, and African feminist critic Amina Mama. Spivak argues, in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” that most English (and other European) literature produced in the nineteenth century was part of an imperialist project of culturally representing England to itself. Accordingly, representations of the “third world” were part of the construction of Britain, existing as its constitutive other. If we remember this fact, writes Spivak, “...we would produce a narrative, a literary history, of the ‘worlding’ of what is now called ‘the Third World’” (Spivak 1991, 243). For Spivak, writing in 1991, the dominant form of feminist literary criticism at that time reproduced some of “the axioms of imperialism” apparent in colonial “worlding” of the “third world”:

A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm. It is supported

and operates by an information-retrieval approach to ‘Third-World’ literature which often employs a deliberately ‘non-theoretical’ methodology of self-conscious rectitude. (Spivak 1991, 243)

For Spivak, this neo-imperialist intellectual tendency is a form of epistemic violence - what she defines as the “persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” (Spivak 2001, 2197). For postcolonial theorists, be these feminists or not, there exists a danger of complicity with such epistemic violence. A postcolonial critic is complicit in epistemic violence if she or he claims to represent or to be able to “speak” for the postcolonial subaltern. Spivak’s theorizing is useful for this dissertation as a reminder that epistemic violence is still a possibility for me as a South African critic. It holds a warning to never take for granted my perceived position as an “insider” to the authors and literature I wish to examine, and makes visible the impossibility of any claims I might wish to make of “representing” South African women writers.

In addition to the above-mentioned theorists, I also draw on the work of Black transnational feminist literary critic, Carole Boyce Davies, who has produced an important concept for the theorizing of Black women writers’ subjectivity - “migratory subjectivity.” I discuss this concept in greater detail in Chapter Three, where I examine Black women writers’ agency in relation to their writing.

I also borrow from Amina Mama’s concept of African cultural studies in formulating an approach to reading Black South African women writers. In her influential essay advocating the application of cultural studies to studies of postcolonial identity-formation in Africa, Mama delineates the history of this field, and cites theorists such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Stuart Hall as important for understanding ideology and its relation to culture. Mama argues that “cultural

studies have opened up the theoretical terrain on which the dynamic and recursive interdependence between economy and ideology may be explored” (Mama 1997, 62), and outlines the role that cultural studies could take in countering negative and reductive epistemologies that reduce Africa to the primitive other. For Mama, cultural studies in Africa

faces the task of holding up a mirror to show the people what they are like, and of nurturing and inspiring their creative imagination and intelligence. It should also involve documenting and analyzing cultural outputs and the political conditions in which they are developed, thus developing African awareness of the dynamic and changing content of the numerous cultures across Africa. (Mama 1997, 78)

Mama further argues that African cultural studies should utilize the category “gender” as an analytical tool, and should “be able to address cultural changes and the power relations underpinning the process of cultural production and reproduction” (Mama 1997, 79). I draw on Mama’s formulation of African cultural studies as a guide to producing feminist literary criticism which documents the political, ideological and economic contexts in which Black South African women’s writing takes place.

Ideology becomes especially salient in examining Black South African women’s literature, given the subject position assigned Black women under apartheid, and the subject matter of their novels. If, as Bhabha suggests, narrative functions similarly to ideology, Black South African women’s literary production can be read as counter-narrative to hegemonic, racist and sexist apartheid ideology. Thus, in analyzing Black South African women’s novels written during and after apartheid, this dissertation attempts to draw upon materialist-feminist and African cultural studies in order to discern the counter-narratives and counter-ideologies constructed

by these writers in their resistance against an extremely oppressive structure. This project of necessity locates such writing within the historical events which formed structural and ideological apartheid.

This dissertation is additionally theoretically and stylistically indebted to the work of Rita Barnard and Meg Samuelson, whose respective monographs *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007) and *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of The South African Transition* (2007) have collectively made significant inroads to redressing the unequal critical attention Black South African women writers have heretofore received by feminist and literary critics. In Chapter Three, I follow on Barnard's use of Mamphela Ramphele's conceptualization of space in order to analyze life history interviews I conducted with four writers. Samuelson's monograph, *Remembering the Nation, Disremembering Women?* provides a comprehensive treatment of South African literature and its positioning of women in relation to the nation during the transitional period of South African history from 1990 to 1994. Both writers employ a feminist critical lens to interrogate South African literature by men and women. While my work differs in singling out the literary output of Black women, since these women's works have never been collectively analyzed in relation to each other, I acknowledge these critics' monographs as important precursors to my own dissertation.

Finally, I am hugely indebted to the work of Pumla Dineo Gqola (2003), an African feminist and cultural critic. As well as intellectually and methodologically informing my project, her work has served as a political model for engaging with the politics of citation in producing a Black feminist study. Through engagement with

Gqola's work, I am provided with a model for citing Black women scholars on the African continent and in the diaspora, whose work often goes unacknowledged and is invisibilized by the current structures of what counts for knowledge production. I am hopeful that the work I have produced continues the important literary conversations Gqola, Barnard, and Sameulson have initiated.

Race and Subjectivity: Defining Black Women

Deconstructing and unraveling the various rudiments of identity, especially in a country emerging from years of institutionalized racism, is a project fraught with complexity. Identity, always fluid and dynamic, "measured" or defined, represents, at best, a momentary freeze frame; a composite of experience and subjectivity as temporal as the moment in which it is defined. For Black (American) feminist theorists (hooks, 1990; Collins, 1990; Davies, 1994, Baca Zinn and Dill, 1996) the multiple strands interwoven in Black women's identity - race, gender, class, sexuality, and location - are not easily untangled for scrutiny: these markers intersect to delineate and circumscribe the realities, experiences, and opportunities for actualisation in Black women's lives. Intersectionality has been defined "as an innovative and emerging field of study that provides an analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality" (Dill and Zambrana 2009, 1). Gendered identities cannot be examined without noting the intersectionality of gender with race, class, and sexuality; an analysis of racial identity will fall short if it does not interrogate the various differences between the women studied in this dissertation, and their differing locations.

The use of the term “Black” as a racial and identity marker gained currency as a political and descriptive term in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Caribbean and South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, when it was used to assert a subversive Black identity. “In most contexts,” writes Davies, “the term ‘black’ resonated unabashed acceptance of African identity, located in history and culture (‘blackness’) as powerful or beautiful in a world of cloying, annihilating whiteness” (Davies, 1994: 6). The term “Black” as a marker of identity gained credence in South Africa during the late sixties and seventies through the Black Consciousness Movement, spearheaded by the charismatic leader Steve Biko. In 1971 Biko proposed the adoption of a radical Black identity as the antithesis to white racism.

Being Black is not a matter of pigmentation - being Black is a reflection of a mental attitude... By merely describing yourself as Black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being. (Biko 1978, 12-13)

Biko’s proposition was an attempt to galvanize and unite oppressed South Africans against the divide-and-rule strategy of the apartheid regime, effected with the promulgation of the Population Registration Act of 1950, which subjected all South Africans to official racial classification set out by the apartheid government. This strategy confined Black people to the constructed racial categories Bantu, Coloured and Indian, and restricted people classified within these groups to certain areas. Social, sexual and marital interaction between these “races” was also criminalized.

The Act was one of a series of laws designed to keep different races apart, and promote the economic and social advancement of those classified white, while disenfranchising all others not designated white. These acts

[R]equired that people be strictly classified by racial group, and that those classifications determine where they could live and work. Other areas controlled *de jure* by apartheid laws included political rights, voting, freedom of movement and settlement, property rights, right to choose the nature of one's work, education, criminal law, social rights including the right to drink alcohol, use of public services including transport, social security, taxation and immigration. (Bowker and Star 2000, 197)

A large part of the segregation project was also to “divide and rule” Black South Africans - thus the non-white population was categorized into three separate, legally constituted races: Bantu, which was subdivided into eight separate ethnicities; Asiatics, or people of Asian descent, including Indians; and Coloureds, who were also described as persons of mixed race. This racial taxonomy was also hierarchical, so that the white race was seen as the pinnacle of humanity, the Bantu people were ranked lowest, and the Asiatics and Coloureds fell somewhere in between these two racial categories. The category “Coloured” was thus constructed, through the Population Registration Act, to position Coloureds as “not white enough to be white and not black enough to be black” (De La Rey and Boonzaier 2002, 80). Economic and social privileges were embedded within this hierarchical taxonomy: Coloureds, for example had less freedom of movement, political freedom or educational opportunities than whites, but were relatively well off compared to Bantus, whose lives were far more viciously circumscribed by apartheid laws. Though both the Bantu and Coloured races were disadvantaged and oppressed by apartheid policy, Coloureds experienced certain forms of privilege, such as employment preference in certain low- and unskilled forms of labor. Creating the racial category “Coloured” thus resulted in social and psychological alienation from other “races,” producing the borderland of a racial identity neither white nor Black; privileged but with no claims

to citizenship or rights. Confined to existence within this liminal racial space, apartheid Coloured identity constructed itself in relation to lack - not white; not Black. It was in an attempt to transcend these apartheid identities that Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement proffered the ideal of a unified, politically conscious, activist Black identity.

While identity has become much more fluid in post-apartheid South Africa, many Black people cling to the identities inscribed upon them by apartheid and the Population Registration Act. Nthabiseng Motsemme argues that while the collapse of apartheid has opened up “spaces for new identities to be negotiated and created”, “the collapse of the meta-narrative of apartheid has called historically and politically-defined identities into crisis” (Motsemme 2002, 647-673). This “crisis of identity” has manifested itself in many ways. De la Rey and Boonzaier, in a study examining the way Black women gender activists in the Western Cape subjectively experience race, found that divisions fostered by apartheid race categorization have lingered, and that “contemporary experiences of division between ‘Coloureds’ and Africans in the Western Cape are remnants of apartheid strategies and policies that explicitly sought to divide black South Africans” (De La Rey and Boonzaier 2002, 77).

Writing on Coloured identity in the “new” South Africa, Zoë Wicomb points to the ways in which many Coloured people, who had previously considered themselves Black, have begun to reassert collective Coloured identity as a vehicle for making citizenship demands from the state. While Coloureds were designated to a liminal racial identity during the years of apartheid they, ironically, embraced this identity as political emancipation became a reality for South Africans of all races. In

doing so, many Coloureds have continued to inhabit a space of racial liminality, with many in this group constructing racial identity in relation to lack - not white, not Black. In post-apartheid South Africa, this liminality has often manifested itself in a Coloured discourse of disavowal and exclusion, and a conceptualization of Coloured identity as “residual,” as Zimitri Erasmus points out in the introduction to her edited anthology on Coloured identity, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (2001, 18). She argues for the reconceptualization of Coloured identity beyond such notions, positing that such identities need to be reimagined as “cultural identities comprising detailed bodies of knowledge, specific cultural practices, memories, rituals and modes of being, (Erasmus 2001, 21) and understood as a “creolized cultural identity” (Erasmus 2001, 22).

In examining the reconstitution of racial identity in post-apartheid South Africa, Black South African feminist theorist Pumla Dineo Gqola points also to the appropriation of “trendy Blackness” (Gqola 2003, 74) by certain white South Africans, who linguistically appropriate Black culture, and, in the “new” South Africa, attempt to link their identities ancestrally to Blackness. Yet these attempts have foreclosed the possibility of making sense of South Africa’s past and redressing the past and present social injustices that flowed from apartheid:

These fashionable and opportunistic white appropriations of Blackness in South Africa trivialise precisely what they ostensibly celebrate. In conflating Africanness, Blackness and linked identities with the presence of an aboriginal African ancestor, they depoliticise race and ahistoricise power relations. They undermine the discursive social and political constructions of race. In this manner, attempts by progressive white and Black South Africans to meaningfully come to terms with the country’s racial past in order to forge forward are thwarted. (Gqola 2003, 74)

Additionally, Erasmus warns of the dangers of “rainbow nationalism” (2001, 20), which, as an ideology eager to build a united new South Africa, reads all South African racialized identities as merely “different,” thus depoliticizing and ahistoricizing ways in which these identities were deployed at different political and historical moments, and effectively is blind to the workings of racial power in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

The term “Black” (as with other racial categorizations in post-apartheid South Africa) is thus a contested one in contemporary South African culture. Although its meanings are fluid, there is a danger of expediently appropriating Blackness as a means of flattening out the complexities of inequality which is apartheid’s legacy. As Erasmus warns, identifying Colouredness as Blackness may deny complicity with apartheid hierarchical racial taxonomies, from which those racialized Coloured undoubtedly benefited relative to those racialized African. In examining women’s work in this dissertation, I am not yet, however, prepared to forsake the signifier “Black.” In using the marker “Black” in my examination of the literature of Black South African women writers, I subsume Coloured and African identities under this moniker. I do so following on the Black Consciousness politics of Steve Biko, as a way of categorizing the work of a group of women whose voices and artistic expressions were subsumed by the apartheid metanarrative of white supremacy. Given the small number of women not racialized as white who were able to write and publish fiction in South Africa’s recent history, it makes analytic sense for me to

group the works of some of the most important counter-hegemonic women writers under the rubric, Black women's writing.

While "Black" here is used as a phrase to group the literature of subaltern South African women into a concrete category, this dissertation will attend to the heterogeneity of the writers whose work and lives are examined in this study by applying an intersectional analysis to their lives.

Locating Myself Within This Research Project

My interest in Black South African women's literature dates back to 1994. At the time I was working as a 20-year-old apprentice journalist at the anti-apartheid weekly newspaper, *South*, in Cape Town, South Africa. I had been asked to review a novella called *The Cardinals* by Bessie Head, a writer I'd not previously heard of or read.

Nothing in the preceding years had prepared me for this encounter with Head. As a child who'd come of age during the last decade of formal apartheid, I'd received an education in accordance to my designated place within South Africa's racial hierarchy. I'd been forced to live and go to school in a Coloured township, since Coloured was my designated race. An avid reader, my literary diet consisted of books borrowed from a government library, and literature prescribed by apartheid bureaucrats for language instruction in school. All of the literature to which I was exposed had been authored by writers deemed politically palatable by the government. Black writers of any gender were excluded from these works. Most Black writers had been banned because of the political content of their work, anyway. The political changes in South Africa leading to the first democratic election in 1994 unleashed a flood of previously-banned literature. It was at this moment that I became

acquainted with Head's first novel, written in the early 1960s and published for the first time, posthumously, in 1993.

The experience of reading Head's work was profoundly unsettling. Try as I might, I was unable to produce the required book review for my newspaper's art pages. Something about the work disturbed me so much that I was unable to process it beyond a very raw, emotional level. Weeks went by; deadlines were missed; but I was unable to meaningfully engage with the work on an analytic level. Head's writing confounded me on two levels: this was the first time I had experienced the city I'd been born in, lived in and loved, on the pages of a work of fiction. In *The Cardinals*, Head had rendered the place that I loved vibrantly and intimately. She had written a love note, of sorts, to a city I was about to inhabit, for the first time, as an autonomous, liberated citizen. The place she had sketched was the same living, breathing city I was exploring daily.

The experience of having my world depicted in this way was alien. Until then, the worlds I had entered through fiction had always been elsewhere. While it was enjoyable being transported to foreign places, it had never occurred to me that my own world could be the subject or setting for fiction. The literature I had read before had always some other place or subjectivity at its center. Finding my home town, with its beauty and ugliness, as a central character in a work of fiction drew me into the text in a way previously unknown. My connection to the writing, almost visceral, was so unfamiliar that it left me unable to analyze the work with the necessary distance I mistakenly thought necessary for a good book review.

The Cardinals mystified me on another level. Its main character, Mouse, was a young Black woman who had just started working as a journalist. She also wrote fiction in her spare time, and the novella was a *kunstlerroman* illuminating her internal struggle with writing. Unsure of her talent and unsure of her voice or whether she even had anything to say, she nevertheless carried on writing. As a writer just starting out, I connected deeply with this character. My choice of profession was not one that had been approved of or encouraged by my family. And as a writer in a progressive newsroom, I constantly doubted my ability. My approach to “news” and orientation towards interviews was often very different from the attitudes I perceived in more experienced journalists. I was acutely aware of my power to represent people, and simultaneously afraid of this power. The character’s struggles with finding her voice resonated with me. But mostly I was shocked to find the experiences of a young Black woman, of the same ethnicity as me, depicted in fiction.

Never before had I encountered the subjectivity of a young ‘Coloured’ woman as the center of a novel. The message I had received through twenty years of fiction reading was that interiority of a young Black woman embedded within apartheid’s social relations had just not been a subject worthy of literature. Upon reading Head’s work, I realized to my dismay that I had internalized this message. I had never before questioned why I had not read about Black women or Black girls; girls who looked like me and lived where I lived, and worked in the same profession. The discovery of a Black woman character, followed by the realization of my own blindness in never even missing such a character before, left me unsettled. I had no words with which to describe my encounter with Head.

In the following months this encounter haunted me. As I reflected upon my inability to engage with her novella, an underlying issue became apparent. Head's work had disturbed me, I realized because, before reading it, I had not thought it possible that a Black woman could be a writer. My education and socialization had led me to believe that producing art – the production of a beautiful thing for no reason other than the pleasure of creating – was an activity that I or someone like me should not consider a possibility. When I looked around at the women who made up my community – my mother, aunts, great-aunts, neighbors and grandmothers – it was apparent from the models produced by their lives that I was expected to work, but not for pleasure or fulfillment or actualization of any talents. Black women were simply not expected to be creative. We worked always in the service of others; Black men or white people. The most esteemed position I could aspire to, as a Black child born in the 1970s, was a teacher, a noble profession, but in the vision it offered me, a limited proposition. Reading Head crystallized the fact that a Black woman who had lived under apartheid, in similar conditions as I had, had succeeded in carving out a creative life. She had wanted to sketch the people and world around her in words, and that she had done so seemed to me a supreme act of love for herself, the city, and the people she had captured in her work.

Here began my search for more writing by women. In this way I was introduced to male writers Njabulo Ndebele, Tod Matshikiza, Steve Biko; discovered and had my life forever changed by Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. Yet, almost a decade would pass before I found other books authored by Black South African women. I had forged a successful career as a journalist by

2001, when I was invited to attend a creative writing workshop facilitated by poets Deela Khan and Shelley Barry of the Black women's writing collective WEAVE. The workshop was part of a national disability awareness week, and for one day, I had the experience of writing and sharing life stories with a mix of women ranging from mentally through physically disabled, to able-bodied. This experience changed the direction of my life. Here, I was struck by the stories all of us had inside of us, which, with the gentlest of prodding, could be coaxed out and onto the page. The stories – snapshots of lives lived in happiness and pain - amazed and inspired me. Again, I became interested in the ways in which life experiences of those perceived as at the margins of society could be spun into something beautiful and meaningful.

I started working with the group WEAVE, whose aim was to make Black women's writing visible – voluntarily at first, and then as a sometimes-paid part-time worker, a shift which coincided with my re-entry into higher education as a graduate student in Women's Studies at the University of the Western Cape. This fortuitous intersection of working with a Black women's artistic group which had a specifically political aim of encouraging Black women to write and publish, and reentering academia in an explicitly feminist space, reawakened the questions I had asked myself almost a decade earlier about the politics of Black women's writing.

The discipline of Women's Studies gave me the conceptual tools and language to interrogate the politics of writing. I started to understand the exclusion of Black women from South African literary canons as a systemic process and began to understand that the works of fiction that came to stand as South African literature were produced by racialized, gendered processes which marginalized Black women

in systematic ways. My reading unearthed writers I had not heard of previously: Noni Jabavu, Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo, and Zoë Wicomb. These were writers who had succeeded in publishing fiction despite the enormous odds stacked against them as Black women situated within a highly oppressive regime, only to be banned and have their work go out of circulation.

These women's writings were difficult to come by, their stories scattered amongst publishers or short story anthologies not available in South Africa, and very little literary criticism on their work had been published. What little criticism I did find was sporadic and published in inaccessible journals.

The experience of trying to find the literature produced by Black women writers, and the unevenness of literary criticism about this work, ultimately led me to this project. I wanted to read a historiography of Black South African women's fiction writing, and when I found none, decided to write, as a dissertation, what I wanted most to read. It was ironic that as a Ph.D. student in the United States I found easier access to manuscripts than at home in South Africa. As I began a systematic reading of the works of the first Black South African women writers to publish book-length literary works – Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo, and Zoë Wicomb – the idea started to form that I could interview the writers who were still living. The production of literature in English by Black South African women is such a recent phenomenon that, barring Bessie Head and Noni Jabavu, all of the women who had founded a Black women's literary tradition were still alive, living in relative obscurity in South Africa or abroad.

Methodologically, this dissertation surveys four novels written by Black South African women in English. Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson has argued that part of the work of a critic involves uncovering meanings from beneath censorship and omissions of the dominant culture: “The process of criticism is not so much an interpretation of content as it is a revealing of it, a laying bare, a restoration of the original message, the original experience beneath the distortions of the various kinds of censorship that have been put upon it” (Jameson 1971, 404). This dissertation aims to “lay bare” or make visible the works of Black women writers who have been ignored by androcentric and racist criticism of South African literature. My project aims to chart a historiography of Black women’s writing in South Africa, tracing their writing mainly through the genre of the novel.

Gay Wilentz rightly argues that “committed critics of oppressed people’s literatures agree that we cannot separate the literature from the historical or cultural context in which it was written” (Wilentz 1992, xiii). To locate the production of literature within its historical, political and cultural contexts requires an interdisciplinary approach which relies not only upon reading, analyzing and interpreting texts, but also upon an excavation of the material conditions under which the texts examined were produced. To this end, my analysis examines historical events and the impact these events had upon the lives of the writers included in this study. Key events in the unfolding of South African history dominates its national narrative, and these events are easily looked up in archives or revisionist history books, which abound in post-apartheid South Africa. Yet mere knowledge of these

events did not seem to me adequate to locate the writers and their works within history.

Since all of the writers except for Bessie Head were still living at the time of research and writing, I decided to add life history interviews to the analysis of literary texts. During the summer of 2006, I traveled to South Africa with the aim of interviewing all the novelists who would agree to see me. I conducted one interview each with Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo, who, after Bessie Head, were the first Black women to publish novels in English in 1979 and 1981 respectively.² Along with Head, these writers can be considered the founders of a Black women's literary tradition in South Africa. In addition, I was extremely fortunate to interview Sindiwe Magona, whose *oeuvre* of two autobiographies, two novels, a collection of poetry, and a collection of short stories makes her one of South Africa's most prolific Black writers.

I interviewed an additional writer who is not a published novelist: Gladys Thomas, a noted anti-apartheid activist and playwright, poet and short story writer, whose work has appeared in many international anthologies during her decades-long writing career. I believed that including her perspectives on the process of literary production in South Africa will enrich this project. In interviewing these writers, I drew on life-course theory, an approach developed largely by sociologist Glen H. Elder in his empirical work on human development throughout and after the Great Depression. With its focus on locating subjects within history – one of the prerequisites of a feminist materialist literary criticism – the life course orientation

² Tlali published *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1979 and Ngcobo *Cross of Gold* in 1981.

provided me with methodological tools to do so. The life-course approach emphasizes “ways of studying and understanding lives in a changing society” (Elder 1999, 302), relating an individual’s maturation process with certain historical events within the culture within which he or she is located. The life-course approach thus “allows for the encoding of historical events and social interaction outside of the person as well as the age-related biological and psychological states” (Elder and Giele 1998, 23).

The scope of this dissertation is limited in several ways. First, I focus on novels produced only in English. While Black women writers have written and published in indigenous South African languages, most literature produced during apartheid centered on exposing the inhumanity of the system to an outside audience of international anti-apartheid sympathizers and exiled South Africans. South African feminist literary critic Desiree Lewis has argued that many narrations of the nation during the 1970s and 1980s, most notably life histories of Black women, were explicitly published and circulated to “codify, distribute and in certain cases produce mediating and testimonial texts that could effectively transmit the stories of apartheid to readers who were physically, politically and culturally very far away from it” (Lewis 2001, 163). It is my contention that novels by Black South African women published during the 1980s and 1990s served a similar purpose of explicating Black women’s lives under the apartheid system, and raising awareness within a national and international community about the effects of apartheid. Thus the majority of such fiction was written and published in English to make it accessible to audiences on a global scale. I therefore examine only English novels, as these are most likely to shed

light on how Black women writers discursively constructed the nation, especially to an outside audience.

A second limitation is one set by analyzing mainly the genre of the novel. While examples of plays, protest poetry, and short fiction abound in the apartheid and post-apartheid era, my analysis focuses primarily on novels. Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* that the 18th Century European novel was “immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references and experiences” (Said 1993, xii). For the colonial powers Britain and France, in particular, argues Said, novelistic narrations served the function of buttressing colonial nations and their imperialistic expansion into “other” spaces. In addition, the narratives by which such expansions were justified became part of a “novelistic process” (Said 1993, xii), so that

the novel’s consolidation of [national] authority is not simply connected to the functioning of social power and governance, but made to appear both normative and sovereign, that is, self validating in the course of the narrative. (Said 1993, 71)

It would seem, from the discussions I had with writers, that the novel as a genre seemed to choose them – in a way, propelling their writing as form. Miriam Tlali, for example, says she never chose the form for her first published work, *Muriel at Metropolitan*. Instead, the form chose her: “I had a lot to say... and I didn’t care to write a short story” (Tlali 2006). The form also allowed her to transform a story which was autobiographical, and embroider upon its cast of characters and events. Thought Laretta Ngcobo had written bits of poetry and expressive writing before, her entry into serious writing came in the form of a novel. Similarly to Tlali, the form seemed to choose her, as Ngcobo regards the choice of genre as “natural”:

A novel allows you space to say, right, this happened. If it hadn't happened, what else could have happened? What could I have done, what could have happened if it didn't happen that way? What else? I could have two, three, four alternative narratives. When a memory or an event takes place, I have a way of exploring other possibilities. (Ngcobo 2006)

In focusing on Black women's novels within South African literary traditions, I examine how those most disenfranchised and oppressed within a nation conceive of that space and construct counter-discourses from a subaltern position. In choosing the novel as a primary unit of analysis, I model my work somewhat on Gay Wilentz's comparative study of African and African-American women writers. Wilentz states that these two forms "are the most approachable in terms of reconstructing social values and as vehicles for social change; moreover, the world represented in these forms often reflects the culture in more direct ways than in forms such as poetry" (xvi-xvii). The Black woman's novel thus provides the best vehicle for analyzing discourses that fracture dominant nation-building narratives.

Organization of Chapters

In this chapter, I have set out the rationale for my project and charted brief geneologies of the bodies of literature I draw upon and wish to expand upon with this study.

Chapter Two locates Black South Africa women writers within place and time, in South African history. I chart the ways in which the apartheid policy and its major laws affected women's lives politically, locate Black women's resistance to these policies, and review Black women's literary production during this period as a form of resistance to apartheid.

Following on Rita Barnard, in Chapter Three I analyze the life history interviews I conducted with four writers, Sindiwe Magona, Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ncgobo, and Gladys Thomas, in an attempt to map the ways they transcended their “received” identities as laborers and reproducers of apartheid labor in order to become authors of their own lives and literary works. This chapter expands on traditional definitions of agency, arguing that, for these women, writing became an act that was cumulatively agentic, instilling in them increased personal agency. I argue that in writing, these authors were engaged in *creative re-visioning* – an individual’s ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for her to achieve within her lifetime, given the structural constraints imposed by the societal location in which they are situated.

Chapter Four considers the ways in which Miriam Tlali and Laretta Ncgobo reimagine and reconfigure space, and by extension, the nation, in their pathbreaking novels *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1979) and *And They Didn’t Die* (1990). I demonstrate how Tlali and Ncgobo both use space in these novels as a means to “write” the nation from a subaltern standpoint. Both of these iterations of the nation-space offer readers new ways of reading and understanding the nation as a space which is not only raced, but also gendered in very specific ways.

Ideologies and interpretations of motherhood are examined in Chapter Five, which critically explores Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998) and her deployments of the subject position of motherhood to challenge emerging dominant nationalist discourses. I argue that she strategically uses the patriarchally-sanctioned

authorial position of motherhood in order to subvert patriarchal, nationalist discourses.

In Chapter Six I offer an intertextual reading between Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000) and textual testimony submitted before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). I argue that the novel represents an important intervention into the ways in which the TRC processes constructed the women who testified before it as secondary victims of apartheid atrocities. Focusing on narratives of rape as produced by the TRC and the novel, I contend that Wicomb's text interrogates and challenges the silences surrounding the treatment of women guerrillas by the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle, effectively drawing attention to the omissions in public discourse around the ANC's treatment of women within its own military ranks.

Chapter Seven concludes this dissertation, and offers a theory of Black South African feminist criticism. I make the argument that certain Black women's fiction can be regarded as theory, and thus constitutes a Black South African feminist criticism, while also offering the concept as an analytical lens for reading South African fiction.

Chapter 2: Locating Black Women Writers in South African History: Black Women's Activism and Writing

Black women's literary production should be understood within the wider South African political context, which in the period under review in this dissertation was dominated by apartheid. Though colonial South Africa was always racially segregated and marked, as with other colonial societies, by the exploitation of colonized bodies and the decimation of indigenous cultures and history, apartheid ideology became legally entrenched when the white, Afrikaner National Party ascended to power in 1948. In this chapter I discuss South Africa's history during the twentieth century in relation to Black women's literary production, focusing on the ways in which the apartheid doctrine and its preceding policy of racial segregation affected Black women's lives politically and as producers of writing. This chapter is especially attentive to Black women's resistance to apartheid, and the gendered nature of their response to increasingly repressive apartheid laws. It is structured in three broad sections: the segregation era, before formal apartheid (1910-1948); the apartheid era (1948-1990); and the post-apartheid era. For each broad historical period I survey the laws and conditions which structured Black South Africans' lives; document Black resistance broadly and women's resistance specifically to apartheid; and survey the types of literatures Black women produced as a result of and in reaction to the political conditions of each period. In creating this brief historiography

I rely mainly upon feminist rewritings of literary and political history, and view Black women's writing as a form of political action and resistance to apartheid.

In constructing this history I have tried, as much as possible, to draw on historical accounts by Black women activists and feminist analyses of the transition to democracy by analysts such as Shireen Hassim and Annemarie Goetz. I have also accessed newspaper reports from pro-African National Congress newspapers published during the liberation struggle using the DISA digital archive, maintained by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Additionally, I accessed other primary sources such as the Federation of South Africa Women's (FSAW) Charter from an online database of primary documents maintained by the African National Congress.

Black Women's Writing During the Pre-apartheid, Segregation Era: 1910-1948

Although legally implemented during the 1940s and the 1950s, apartheid's genesis was a series of segregationist laws enacted in the early twentieth century under British colonial rule. These laws include the South African Act of Union, passed by the British House of Commons in 1909, which in 1910 established the Union of South Africa. This Union was predicated upon the exclusion of Black South Africans from citizenship, as the law which established it removed the limited parliamentary rights that a small section of the Black population had heretofore held. White political power was further buttressed by the Native Land Act of 1913, which made it illegal for Africans to buy or lease land anywhere in South Africa, or live anywhere outside of specially-designated reserves. This act effectively secured over 80 percent of South African land to whites, who made up less than 20 percent of the population. The

Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 also bolstered segregation, making South African cities the preserve of whites, and permitting Africans in urban spaces only for work purposes. In addition, the 1936 Native Land and Trust Act fixed the distribution of land on a permanent basis, with 13 percent being allocated to Africans, the majority of the country's population.

The African National Congress became the primary extra-parliamentary opposition to these segregationist policies. Formed as an anti-colonial organization in 1912 (then known as the African Native National Congress) in direct reaction to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the ANC was aimed chiefly at securing political and land rights for Africans who were disenfranchised and had been systematically removed from their land.

During this period a number of male African intellectuals rose to prominence as writers. Sol T. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, published in 1916, illuminated the devastation wrought by the Natives Land Act. Plaatje later published *Mhudi* (1930), an epic love story set against the historical backdrop of the war between the Ndebele and Baralong ethnic groups in the early nineteenth century. It was the first novel published by a Black South African in English. Other prominent Black male writers during the earlier half of the twentieth century, according to Michael Chapman's historiography, *South African Literatures*, include S.E. K. Mqayi, Thomas Mofolo, J.J.R. Jolobe, H.I.E. Dhlomo, R.R.R. Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi and A.C. Jordan, who formed part of an educated literary elite, closely aligned with the then African National Natives Congress (Chapman 1996). These writers were

important precursors for and influences on Black women writers who would publish novels and other creative writing in the latter half of the century.

Though there was a dearth of published writing by Black women during the pre-apartheid era, a number of Black women's works written during this time have been excavated and re-recorded for posterity, thanks to the publication of the anthology *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (Daymond and others, 2003). In an attempt to retrieve the often subsumed voices of South African women writers, the editors of this collection gathered various oral and written forms of expression, such as political speeches, petitions, essays, court depositions, and oral and published poetry and storytelling. The editors of *Women Writing Africa* point out that Black women who were able to articulate their expression in the public domain, whether in writing or speech, were often authorized to do so through their membership in a relatively elite group who had gained literacy through colonial education.

The history of literacy and education for Black South African women is a contested and complicated one. Christian missionaries were the first to offer Black women limited access to education, steeping women in ideologies of domesticity and femininity, models which were often unattainable to these women because of their race (Daymond and others, 2003, 25). Phyllis Ntantala, for example, in her autobiography, *A Life's Mosaic* (1993), describes the colonial education she received as a young girl in the 1920s as "brainwashing" (Ntantala 1993, 30), recalling that:

There was too much emphasis in our lessons on England, English culture, and Europe.... All we knew of Africa were her big rivers, the Gold Coast and Egypt, which was somehow projected as part of Europe. We even recited 'The Loss of the Birkenhead', where one line reads, 'our English hearts beat true'. (Ntantala 1993, 30)

Nevertheless, mission education accounts, in part, for what is considered the first publication of a Black woman's writing in South Africa: Adelaide Charles Dube's poem, "Africa My Native Land," in the Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga Lase Natal* (Daymond and others, 2003, 161). Published in 1913, the year of the Native Land Act, the poem laments the loss of access to ancestral land. It praises African ancestors whose "glorious kingdoms rose and fell" (Daymond and others, 2003, 162); then decries the loss of this beautiful land to colonizers:

But Alas! Their efforts were all in vain/
For to-day others claim thee as their
own/ No longer can their offspring cherish thee/
No land to call their own –
but outcasts/ in their own country! (Daymond and others, 2003, 162)

Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, the first major female poet to write in isiXhosa, published a large body of poetry in the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* during the 1920s (Daymond and others, 2003, 176). Her poems were overtly political, commenting on politics within the African National Congress, and containing appeals for Black solidarity in the face of white oppression (Daymond and others, 2003, 176). Victoria Swartbooi's novella, *UMandisa*, published in 1934 in isiXhosa, emphasized the importance of the African cultural value *ubuntu* or humanity, through the coming-of-age story of Mandisa, the novel's protagonist (Daymond and others, 2003, 206). Black women's writing during the pre-apartheid, colonial years was thus sporadic, and largely dependent upon their educational status, which generally remained low for the majority of Black women during this period.

Black Women, Political Resistance, and Writing During Apartheid: 1948-1990

The introduction of formal, legal apartheid by the National Party, elected to power in 1948, stymied the development of a Black literary tradition. After coming to power,

the National Party-led government quickly instituted a number of laws which legally entrenched white economic and political hegemony, disenfranchised all Black South Africans, including Coloureds and Indians, and legalized the continued exploitation of Black South Africans as labor for whites. Black South Africans, who comprised 80 percent of the country's population, were denied citizenship, including basic rights such as the right to vote, the right to move around freely within the country, the right to form political organizations, and the right to own land. White economic privilege and political power were legally entrenched through a series of segregationist laws, enacted after 1948 and during the early 1950s.

The notion of white superiority was central to the ideology and workings of apartheid. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, for example, aimed, in the words of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, to

[R]eform [education] so that Natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them... Racial relations cannot improve if the wrong type of education is given to Natives. They cannot improve if the result of Native Education is the result of frustrated people who have expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa do not allow to be fulfilled. (cited in J.H. Wheeler 1961, 250)

Other primary laws buttressing apartheid were the Population Registration Act of 1950, which required all South Africans to be strictly classified into four broad racial groups: "Europeans, Asiatics, persons of mixed race or Coloureds, and 'natives' or 'pure blooded individuals of the Bantu race'" (Bowker and Star, 1999, 197); The Group Areas Act of 1950, which determined where people were allowed to work and live, based on their racial classification; and the 1951 Bantustan Authorities Act, which created Bantustans or reserves where Africans were forced to live. The 1950s

Suppression of Communism Act outlawed communism, and gave the government the authority to ban publications it labeled communist. This law became one of the key mechanisms for suppressing information and banning literary and other writing opposed to apartheid, which were automatically classified as supportive of communism.

Black women felt apartheid's devastating impact in uniquely gendered ways. The National Party introduced arguably the two most detrimental pieces of legislation for African women in 1952. The pass laws had the effect of severely curtailing African women's mobility and access to urban centers, thus restricting their access to employment. In addition, these laws effectively destroyed African family life. The Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952 made it illegal for any African person to be in an urban area for more than 72 hours (Effects of Apartheid, 1980), unless such a person was exempt from this law. This law was specifically aimed at bolstering the existing "influx control" policy, aimed at halting the urbanization of African women and confining them to the rural reserves.

The second law passed in 1952 was the Natives Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act (The Role of Women in the Struggle, 1980). Until this point, South African law required all African men over the age of 16 to carry passes, which legally enabled them to work and move around in urban South Africa. Contrary to its name, which suggests the abolition of passes, the law's intent was the opposite. It legally extended the compulsory bearing of passes to African women. Until this law was passed African women had been exempt from carrying passes. The government of the South African Union had once before tried to impose passes on

women in the Orange Free State Province in 1913, but was met with fierce resistance and was forced to shelve the plan.

The extension of these pass laws to women in 1952 meant the destruction of African family life, since African men who were required as cheap sources of labor in the cities had to leave their families behind in the reserves. The 1952 Act, which came into effect in 1955, meant that African women could not join or live with their husbands in urban settings. Women were confined to the rural reserves designated their “homelands” by the government. Here the apartheid state expected them to survive as subsistence farmers, care for the elderly and their children, and produce future apartheid labor (Meer 1985). The Native Law Amendment and Natives Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Acts thus became key apartheid structures to reinforce segregation, keep African women out of formal, urban labor markets, and ensure the continued supply of Black labor. In addition, these laws allowed white-owned industry to severely exploit African men who worked in cities: since African families were theoretically cared for through women’s subsistence farming in the reserves, men were paid on a scale deemed sufficient to support only themselves in urban areas (Effects of Apartheid on the Status of Women 1980).

The African National Congress vehemently resisted formal segregation. In 1952 the ANC and South African Indian Council (SAIC) initiated the Defiance Campaign, in direct reaction to the amended pass law and other discriminatory legislation. The campaign demanded that the government repeal all “Pass Laws, Stock Limitation, the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, the Group Areas Act of 1950, the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 and the Voter’s Act of 1951,” as these

laws in effect sought to “destroy the economic position of the people and to create a reservoir of cheap labour for the farms and the gold mines, [and] to prevent the unity and development of the African people towards full nationhood and to humiliate them in a host of other manners” (ANC 1952).

Politically active Black women responded to these apartheid mechanisms and the oppressive structures produced in a gendered way. Politicized by the two Pass Law Amendments and their implications for women, Black women became increasingly involved in the ANC Women’s League (ANCWL), an affiliate of the ANC formed in 1943 to involve women more systematically in Congress activities. In response to the threat of the extension of the pass laws to African women, women of all races founded the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), South Africa’s first autonomous national women’s organization, in 1954.

Chaired at its inception by Ida Mtwana, the federation authored the Women’s Charter, which stated its aim as “striving for the removal of all laws, regulations conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population” (FSAW 1954). In 1956 FSAW initiated the largest women’s protest against the extension of Pass Laws to African women. On August 9, 1956, 20,000 women of all races from around the country marched to the apartheid government’s seat of power, the Union Buildings in the capital, Pretoria. The women’s petition not only opposed the extension of passes to women, but demanded the repeal of all pass laws, including those circumscribing the movements of African men: “We shall not rest until ALL pass laws and all forms

of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished. We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice and security” (FSAW 1954).

In addition to this massive protest, FSAW also initiated key campaigns such as the sustained protest against compulsory passes for African women; bus boycotts, which were successful in lowering transportation costs for workers; and protests against sub-standard housing for Black South Africans. With a mass membership of approximately 230, 000, FSAW successfully mobilized women nationally for key demonstrations and campaigns, and placed women’s demands for adequate housing, just labor laws, access to education, and the abolition of the pass system, within a framework of the struggle for Black political rights. Despite FSAW’s resistance and political action, the South African government continued to issue passes to African women. Given the dire consequences for women if they were found without passes – imprisonment and deportation back to their designated homelands – many had no choice but to acquiesce to the pass laws. Despite widespread resistance, 75 percent of all adult African women had been forced to accept passes by 1960 (Schmidt 1983).

The year 1960 signaled a radical change in the way apartheid was administered and in how anti-apartheid activists responded to the state. While the apartheid government regularly imprisoned or banned its most vocal critics, until this year organizations like the ANC, FSAW and the ANC Women’s League were tolerated and allowed to operate as civil society organizations. But on March 21, 1960, apartheid police opened fire on a group of activists peacefully protesting the pass laws in the township Sharpeville, killing 67 protestors, including 40 women and

eight children. About 80 percent of those killed or injured were shot in the back (Effects of Apartheid 1980). This event marked a change in the nature of the apartheid government's response to anti-apartheid protesters. The ANC, the main liberation movement, was banned, and many of its leaders arrested under an imposed State of Emergency. ANC leaders like Nelson Mandela and Govan Mbeki were tried and found guilty of treason, and imprisoned for life. In response, the ANC renounced peaceful anti-apartheid activism, and started an underground, guerilla war against the apartheid state.

Most of the leaders of FSAW, who were members of the ANC, were also banned, prohibiting them from appearing in public places, addressing groups of people or organizing any political activities. FSAW itself was never banned; yet the imprisonment or banishment of key leaders meant it could no longer function effectively. The only autonomous national movement for women thus stopped all political activity.

With no political base from which to organize, activist women continued to work within the African National Congress for social and political change. Given that the ANC was driven underground, most women within the movement worked covertly, or joined the ANC in exile outside of the country during the 1960s and 1970s. From these precarious positions activist women (largely Black) continued to articulate demands for the end of apartheid and a more just and inclusive society for South African women and men, even though these demands could not be voiced as public protest within South Africa. As apartheid became increasingly repressive during the 1960s and 1970s, conditions for Black women worsened. In a speech to

commemorate Women's Day, August 9, in 1978, Makhosazana Njobe, a leader of the ANC Women's League in exile, described to exiled South Africans the conditions Black women were facing as mothers within the country:

Our women live in perpetual anxiety of husbands and children who disappear from homes, sometimes without trace. Our children are detained in solitary confinement without any change of clothes for days, some are cold bloodedly murdered; children of 7 years old are interrogated for hours, tortured and even made to appear in the racist courts of law as accused.... In fact hundreds of them have their young and tender bodies riddled with bullets from the fascist police guns. (Njobe 1978)

Black women strategically adapted their resistance to apartheid as conditions worsened. On June 16, 1976 apartheid police again lashed out at children protesting the introduction of compulsory Afrikaans as the language of instruction in schools. At least four children, including 13-year-old Hector Peterson, were killed by police bullets, unleashing student riots across the country. In the ensuing violence, police killed over 1,000 Black people - many of them children of school-going age. In the aftermath of the uprising, South African police increasingly targeted children in repressing anti-apartheid protest, since the youth were becoming increasingly militant in their demands for a free South Africa.

Apartheid's blatant brutality against children led a number of Black South African women to leave the country and join *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) (Spear of the Nation), the ANC's military wing, which was engaged in guerilla warfare against the state. Young women who had witnessed the events of the 1976 uprising, or who were subsequently detained and tortured by police, led the influx into the armed wing of the ANC. Njobe reported to exiled women that the 1976 massacres had led to a reinvigoration of the struggle against apartheid, and that young women especially

were eager to participate in the fight against apartheid as soldiers. She warned the apartheid government that “the 1956 babies [present at the pass law protest] are now 22 years and older. When next the women come to the Union Buildings, he shall not witness music by our women but sounds from the barrel of a gun” (Njobe 1978).

Despite the militant rhetoric circulating amongst exiles, inside South Africa, activists were severely curtailed in their responses to the 1976 violence. Another round of arrests and bannings followed the uprising: ANC activist leader Winnie Mandela; sociologist and anti-apartheid activist Fatima Meer; Joyce Seroke of the South African Young Women’s Christian Association; Sally Motlana, the vice-president of the South African Council of Churches; and Mamphela Ramphele, a medical doctor working with rural women, were among those arrested and detained in the aftermath of the 1976 killings. Many of these women were also banned upon their release from prison (Njobe 1978).

The 1976 violence increased Black women’s militancy and resolve to end apartheid. But with virtually all political organizations, including women’s organizations banned, and with many prominent leaders of the women’s movement either in prison or banned, most Black women found it extremely difficult to organize themselves and work collectively against apartheid. The nature of apartheid during the 1970s and 1980s determined to a large extent the type of resistance women could offer. During the latter part of the 1970s and the early half of the 1980s, increased apartheid repression meant that large, mass-based protests such as those organized by FSAW in the 1950s were a dim memory.

Black Women's Literary Output During Apartheid

The implementation of formal apartheid, in addition to oppressing and brutalizing Black citizens, stymied the development of a Black literary tradition. All apartheid laws, but particularly the Bantu Education Act of 1953, seriously impeded Black literary production: playwright Richard Reeves remarked in 1982 that the Suppression of Communism Act had rendered South African writing in English “virtually ... White by law” (Rive 1982, 3). Since most Black writing criticized apartheid and was considered incendiary, Black writers' works were almost uniformly banned under this law. In addition to the political action described above, Black women resisted apartheid through writing.

Coupled with the Suppression of Communism Act and the Bantu Education Act, a third law stymied the intellectual development of Black South Africans: the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. This law prohibited Blacks from attending universities designated “white,” and proposed separate tertiary institutions for different races, effectively excluding the majority of Blacks from tertiary education. Black South Africans (including Africans, Coloureds, and Indians) could subsequently only attend the University of Fort Hare, while whites had nine universities from which to choose. The act effectively excluded all but the elite from tertiary education, as educationist John Weeler's research shows:

At the end of 1960, approximately 30, 000 European students were attending the Universities of Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand, Cape Town, Rhodes, Natal, Potchefstroom, Orange Free State, Pretoria, and South Africa. In contrast, approximately 600 African, Coloured, and Indian students were attending Fort Hare University College... At least 100 Africans, Coloureds, and Indians are permitted to take correspondence courses from the University of South Africa. (Wheeler 1961, 248)

With the majority of Black South Africans excluded from tertiary education and publication, literary production became a domain almost impossible to access for the majority of Blacks. Collectively, the Bantu Education Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, and the Extension of University Education Act largely account for the fact that by the end of the 1980s, only a handful of novels had been published by Black South African women.

Bessie Head was the first Black South African woman to write a full-length novel, but significantly, did so as an exile in Botswana. *When Rain Clouds Gather* appeared in 1968, followed by *Maru* in 1972, and *A Question of Power* in 1973. Head's subsequent works include *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Stories* (1977); *Serowe: Vilage of the Rainwind* (1981); *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984) and *The Cardinals, With Meditations and Short Stories* (1993), which are all collections of short stories and other prose. Head was able to produce these novels only once she had left the oppressive space of South Africa in 1964 on an exit permit which would permanently prohibit her return.

Women writers' narrativization of Black dispossession within their own country continued with the publication of *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1979. *Muriel* was the first novel published by a Black woman, Miriam Tlali, within the borders of the South African nation. The novel is clearly aimed at a white South African and international audience, as its detailed explication of apartheid makes clear. It is path breaking because it is the first by a Black woman in South Africa, and also the first South African novel to locate its point of view within the subjectivity of a Black woman. Tlali's second novel, *Amandla*, (1980) is a militant depiction of the Soweto

uprising of 1976. A year after the publication of *Amandla*, Laretta Ngcobo published her first novel, *Cross of Gold*, in 1981. Similarly to Head, Ngcobo was able to write and publish two novels, *Cross of Gold*, and her second novel, *And They Didn't Die* (1990), only once she had left South Africa. Her husband's arrest and imprisonment for his political involvement led to her leaving South Africa for Swaziland, Tanzania and Zambia in the 1960s. She eventually settled in England, where both her novels were written. Just like Head, she found herself creatively stifled and unable to produce literary work in a country which was "muzzled breathless" (Ngcobo 1987, 134). Ngcobo has written:

There was a relentless persecution of those writers and journalists who dared speak the truth. In their reports of the self-mutilating ghettos, they exposed what the system was doing to destroy the lives of men and women. The government launched a witch-hunt against all so-called agitators - and there are no better agitators than those who wield the pen. Most of those writers and journalists were finally forced to leave the country and face exile. So was I. (Ngcobo 1987, 134)

A number of additionally important literary works were also produced by Black women during the 1970s and 1980s. A significant work was the collection of poetry, *Cry Rage!*, published in 1972 by Gladys Thomas and James Matthews. Thomas's poem, "Fall Tomorrow," condemned the apartheid government's Group Areas Act of 1950, which segregated living spaces according to race, resulting in the forced removals of hundreds of thousands of Black South Africans from their erstwhile homes. Focusing on the chaos wrought upon family structures and destruction of communities by the Group Areas Act and its forced removals, Thomas notes the dehumanization implicit in apartheid law:

Let our sons dazed in eye/ rape and steal/ for they are not allowed to feel./ Let our men drink,/ let them fight,/ let what is said about them/ then be right,/ for they are not allowed to think. (Daymond and others, 2003, 335)

The poem became one of Thomas's most well-known, and predicted the fall of the apartheid government: "You that remade us/ your mould will break/ and tomorrow you are going to fall!" (Daymond and others, 2003, 335) The joint anthology was immediately banned upon publication, becoming the first anthology of poetry to be thus censored.

Another important literary contribution by a Black woman during the 1980s was Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography, *Call Me Woman* (1985), published in Britain to great acclaim and winning the CNA Literary Prize. Focusing on her experiences as a teacher, social worker, and anti-apartheid activist, *Call Me Woman* is considered by Kuzwayo a major contribution in the struggle against apartheid, one that "intensified the awareness and immediate need for change in South Africa" (Kuzwayo 2001, 49). The autobiography also documents her struggles with an abusive husband, the eventual breakdown of her marriage, and the way in which apartheid warped her experience of motherhood, given that her youngest son was not allowed to live with her in Soweto because of apartheid's "influx control" policy:

Think of it. A young child denied by the state his right to receive his mother's tender loving care – care which would help him grow and mature into a worthy citizen of the community. Very many mothers and children in Soweto, for a variety of reasons and under different circumstances, have at one time or another come face to face with this problem. In trying to solve it, some of them have met with some success; but the majority have knocked their heads against a hard granite wall. (Kuzwayo 1985, 18-19)

In this autobiography Kuzwayo demonstrates the way in which African identity is conceptualized as communal through explicating the conditions of Black women as a

group under apartheid. She achieves this by relating, in Part One of the book, the stories of women she has encountered through her vocation as a social worker. Only in part two of the volume does she relate her personal story, thus grounding her individual experience of apartheid within the experiences of the collective of oppressed women.

An important vehicle for Black writing as resistance to apartheid during formal segregation was the literary journal, *Staffrider*. Founded by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in 1978, the journal aimed to “provide a forum for the literary and artistic work from the oppressed communities in South Africa” (Oliphant and Vladislavic 1988, 1). The journal published creative and journalistic writing by a number of Black women, including Carol Mathiane, Alice Ntsongo, Duzile Ndelu, Jumaimah Motuang, and Susan Lamu. Yet an edition publishing the finest work of *Staffrider* to celebrate its tenth anniversary in 1989 contained no contributions by women. Boitumelo Mofokeng, a regular contributor to the journal, took issue with this exclusion:

As it stands, it is a sad history, at least for me, because it suggests that women’s contribution in that period was a very small, almost non-existent one. But the truth is that women did write for *Staffrider* and almost all of them have been excluded from this anthology.... The international world has been denied the opportunity of knowing and understanding the role of women writers, especially Black women writers, in South Africa. (Mofokeng 1989, 41)

Staffrider’s omission of women from its commemorative issue is representative of a larger exclusion of Black women from South African literary canons during the apartheid period. As feminist literary critic, Carole Boyce Davies noted in 1986:

The writings of South African women writers have so far been relegated to the literary [critical] bushes. White male and female writers have for years

maintained privilege in literature as they do in life: the literary establishment knows Athol Fugard and Alan Paton, for example, and has some degree of familiarity with Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing. Within the African literary tradition, South African male writers like Eskia Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, Peter Abrahams and Dennis Brutus have visibility. Few have ever heard of Noni Jabavu, Lauretta Ncgobo or Miriam Tlali. (Davies 1986, 31)

As with their exclusion from political life and citizenship rights, Black women's creative expression was severely restricted during the years of apartheid. Where Black women did write and publish, their works remained unknown and unexamined, considered unworthy of analysis or artistic merit.

The End of Legal Apartheid: 1990 and Beyond

By the late 1980s, it became apparent that the apartheid regime would no longer be able to cling to white, minority governance and would have to capitulate to international and internal pressure to transfer political power to the majority. Women activists aligned to the ANC and other liberation movements consequently organized the Malibongwe Conference in the Netherlands in 1990 as a means of strategizing to place gender concerns and the position of women on the national agenda as the transformation to democracy approached. Themed "Women United for a Unitary, Non-racial, Democratic South Africa," the Malibongwe Conference for the first time brought together activist women from within South Africa and those exiled by the apartheid regime. The aim of the gathering was overtly political: it sought to outline a position on women's emancipation, so that women's demands would not be forgotten once national liberation had been achieved.

At the Malibongwe Conference speaker, Frene Ginwala called for the inclusion of a gender equality clause in a new, post-apartheid constitution. In addition, she demanded that such a constitution protect women from discriminatory customary law and protect their reproductive rights (Hassim 2002). Women at the conference drafted a “Programme of Action,” which reaffirmed their commitment to the emancipation of women as part of the national liberation struggle:

The emancipation of women requires national liberation, the transformation of gender relations and an end to exploitation. We believe that our emancipation can only be addressed as part of a total revolutionary transformation of the South African social and economic relations. (Malibongwe Conference Programme of Action 1990)

With prescience the conference resolved, amongst other things, to “ensure that the issue of women’s liberation receives priority on the agendas of the ANC and all progressive organisations and that there is an ongoing discussion about the relationship between national liberation, women’s liberation and working class victory in these formations.” The conference also noted that “there is an urgent need for united action towards the formation of a national women’s structure,” and that through creating such a structure, “we shall be able to place firmly on the agenda of the National Liberation Movement, the Mass Democratic Movement and all our organisations, the process of integrating women’s emancipation into the national liberation struggle”(Malibongwe Programme of Action 1990). Thus, if national liberation was a prerequisite for women’s emancipation, the women’s movement would make sure the corollary would also hold true: that national liberation would not take place without the emancipation of women. This conference also paved the way for the formation of the Women’s National Coalition in 1992.

Two weeks after the conference, the National Party government unbanned the ANC and other prohibited political parties, released key anti-apartheid activists such as Nelson Mandela from prison, and began the process of negotiating a peaceful transfer of power from the white minority to the majority of South Africans. South Africa, in 1990, was in a unique position; an oppressive political regime was being dismantled through a gradual process of negotiated settlement, and the liberation movement, branded terrorists by the apartheid government, became a legitimate political party, charged with negotiating the transition to democracy on behalf of the majority of disenfranchised Black South Africans. The women's movement, at the beginning of this period, had been decimated by the apartheid government's continued bannings and detention of members during the 1980s. And as political analyst, Shireen Hassim (2002), has demonstrated, the unbanning of the ANC saw women's organizations subsumed by the ANC Women's League, which weakened the power of autonomous women's organizations to insert their demands into the national discourse of transformation. Political parties, including the ANC, came to the negotiating table in 1992 at the Congress for Democratic South Africa (CODESA) with not a single woman delegate present – provoking the outrage of women's movements across the political spectrum, and causing the ANC Women's League to threaten to mobilize women for mass boycotts of the first democratic election.

Political parties' exclusion of women from the CODESA negotiating forum, as well as the resolution at the Malibongwe Conference to work towards a national women's organization which would foreground women's emancipation, led women from all political parties to form the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in 1992.

The coalition resulted from a 1991 meeting of women across the political spectrum. This coalition was pioneering: for the first time women were not seeking to build an organization affiliated with the anti-apartheid movement, but were organizing explicitly around their gender across political divides. Hassim describes the proceedings of the meeting which led to the formation of the WNC as follows:

The meeting agreed that even though women were divided by race and class, sufficiently strong grounds existed for a common struggle, although at this stage the grounds were defined in the broadest possible terms to mean ensuring that women's interests were addressed in post apartheid South Africa. It also agreed that because of the differences among women, the organisational form should be that of a political coalition based on gender, rather than a single new organization. (Hassim 2002, 700)

The coalition marked a key moment in the liberation movement's history: Black women within the movement, for the first time, broke ranks with the African nationalist movement to form an alliance based on gender with political opponents such as the National Party. The Women's National Coalition, strongly driven by the ANC Women's League, was a direct signal to the liberation movement (and incumbent government) that the issues of women's emancipation and gender equality would not be ignored. With "the single purpose of drafting a Women's Charter of Equality, which would gather the demands of individual women as well as women's organizations" (Hassim 2002, 700), the message from the women's movement was unequivocal: Black women's emancipation would no longer be pushed onto the backburner in the interest of national liberation.

The WNC at its inception gave itself a life-span of one year, from April 1992 to April 1993. Its strategy, according to Hassim (2005), was to seize the opportunities for inclusivity made available by the national negotiation process - a strategy which

proved highly successful once the WNC was allowed to participate in the CODESA negotiations. The WNC's approach to inclusion did not rest on technocratic notions of equality, as Hassim argues:

The WNC did not see inclusion in terms of 'becoming equal to men' - that is, there was no assumption on the part of the WNC's leadership (although there may have been on the part of some constituents) that the male 'political world' was unproblematic or even coherent in itself. The strategy of inclusion aimed to create the political space for women to articulate a broader notion of citizenship, and to define the content of citizenship in ways that recognized the plurality of interests in society. It meant to broaden the substantive content of citizenship beyond the class and race interests initially represented at the multiparty negotiations. (Hassim 2005, 60)

The WNC secured many political gains for women during South Africa's transition to democracy, by seizing the opportunities presented by the negotiated power transfer and insisting that gender equality and women's issues be inserted into the discourse of inclusivity arising from the transfer of political power. These gains include the entrenchment of the right to sexual equality within the Bill of Rights of South Africa's new constitution. Another important political gain was the institutionalization of a quota system, whereby each political party would be allowed to contest the election only if at least 30 percent of its candidates were women.

The WNC did not survive as a political force for long after the first democratic election in 1994. Racial and ideological tensions within the coalition were difficult to quell. The ANC Women's League withdrew from the coalition almost immediately after the ANC was elected to govern, leaving the coalition without a sizeable, mass-based constituency. Key women ANC leaders, having abandoned the WNC, fell back into the fold of the party, and were given leadership positions in the legislature, the cabinet, and the new state bureaucracy, leaving a vacuum of

leadership within the already weakened women's movements (Hassim 2005).

Another important gain of the WNC was the creation of a new gender machinery by the government. In 1993, the year before the general election, the WNC had organized an international conference to strategize around mechanisms that would guarantee equality for women post liberation. The result was an impressive gender machinery consisting of a number of institutions, implemented after 1994 and aimed at transforming gender inequality within society. Chief amongst these were the Commission on Gender Equality; the Office on the Status of Women, located within the office of the South African president; the parliamentary Joint Monitoring Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women; and the Parliamentary Women's Caucus. These structures, however, became a double-edged sword for women: women's emancipation became part of the "official" government discourse, with the government claiming to be the only real authority to affect change in women's lives, according to Shireen Hassim and Annemarie Goetz (2003).

Gender analysts such as Gwendolyn Mikell (1995), Florence Wakoko and Linda Lobao (1996), Hassim (2002), and Hassim and Goetz (2003) suggest that times of political flux and uncertainty, such as the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, open up strategic space for women to insert gender-specific demands within the national framework. The examples of the Malibongwe Conference and the Women's National Coalition bear out this assertion. The transition to democracy also opened up a new, strategic discursive space for Black women and their writing. Whereas Black women's writing under apartheid focused largely on the injustices of apartheid and the political disavowal of Black people, the end of apartheid signified

the opening up of a new terrain in which to explore issues not directly related to apartheid and Black exclusion from the nation. Whereas the dominant national narrative prior to 1994 was the ideology of apartheid, post-apartheid's metanarrative became a unitary African nationalism, which would be deployed to foster a united new South Africa. As I discuss in greater depth in Chapters Five and Six, Black women writers have continue to fracture this metanarrative, with many choosing to explore issues of minority ethnicity, female subjectivity, and female sexuality; heretofore unexplored in South African literature. These literary excavations have engendered a multitude of counternarratives to the construct of a unitary nation.

Rayda Jacobs, for example, has fictionalized the history of slavery in South Africa in her novel *The Slave Book* (1998). This narrative inserts the story of a large population of South African Muslims, descendent from Malay, Malagasy and Indonesian populations enslaved and brought to Southern Africa by Dutch settlers. The novel destabilizes the Black/white racial binary opposition constructed in opposition to apartheid prior to 1994, and asserts Muslim ethnicity as an important part of the South African nation. A subsequent novel by Jacobs, *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003), explores the subjectivity of a pious Muslim woman who becomes addicted to gambling and visiting the casino - a recent addition to the post-apartheid landscape, where gambling has just recently become legalized. The novel also explores the treatment of Muslim women by men, sending a strong protofeminist message for women in abusive relationships, while advocating for acceptance of LGBT-identified people within the Muslim communities of Cape Town.

Sindiwe Magona has emerged as a prolific writer who has documented in her numerous autobiographies her struggle from domestic worker to United Nations employer and published writer. Her novel *Mother to Mother* (1998) is the fictional account of the death of white American Fulbright Scholar Amy Biehl, who was murdered by an enraged mob of Black men during a political protest in 1993. The incident made headlines in South Africa for several weeks, and bolstered white fear of retribution by Black South Africans as the country prepared for the 1994 election. Magona narrates the story from the point of view of the mother of one of the men responsible for killing Biehl. The narrative takes the form of a lament to Biehl's mother, hence the title *Mother to Mother*, and explores themes of retribution and forgiveness as these are sedimented by race and race relations. I devote Chapter Six to analyzing *Mother to Mother*.

Another important counter-narrative to the dominant discourse is the critique of nationalism's positioning of women. Zoë Wicomb has addressed this issue in her groundbreaking novel *David's Story* (2000), which I analyze in greater depth in Chapter Five, in relation to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in post-apartheid South Africa to excavate human rights abuses during the apartheid era.

While much more literary criticism of Black women's writing has emerged in the post-apartheid era, few studies examine the contexts in which Black women writers have worked, their processes of becoming writers, and their identities as writers. In 2000, a path-breaking issue of the South African feminist journal *Agenda* devoted the entire edition to the topic of women's writing. Subtitled *The Politics of*

Writing, this issue became the first collected volume detailing women's writing, the huge obstacles many faced in becoming writers, and the day-to-day challenges of writing as women within a "third-world" context, in a country where apartheid still casts a long shadow. The collection relied upon the personal narratives of individual writers, both established and aspiring, to elucidate their writing lives, as well as analysis from Black and white women within the academy. In this issue, poet, playwright, and short story writer Gertrude Fester writes poignantly about having to overcome her socialization as a Black woman before she could begin to write:

There are numerous reasons why very few black South African women write or even think themselves able to write. Apart from our class and race position, our socialisation was patriarchal. Nice girls became good and dutiful wives and mothers. For most of us, middle or working class, growing up in apartheid South Africa meant we dreamt of perhaps becoming teachers or nurses, never writers or TV personalities. Some of us who had committed teachers were encouraged by them to read, but never, ever to write. (Fester 2001, 43)

A 2003 study of ten Black women writers and their constructions of identity found that half the women surveyed did not consider themselves writers, though they had published in a number of publications and in multiple genres, including short story, poetry, and plays. Half of the women surveyed "were uncertain as to whether or not the term [writer] was one that could be used to describe themselves, and tended to define writer in such a way as to exclude themselves, effectively renouncing writer as part of their identities" (Boswell 2003, 585).

Apartheid's gender and racial socialization, in the case of Fester, and the under-valuation of Black women's work in a patriarchal and racist society, in the case of Kuzwayo, represent structural historical constraints which mitigate against Black women writing in post-apartheid South Africa. The uncertainty, in some Black

women, about calling themselves writers, represents a further, psychological constraint reigning in creative agency.

In surveying the historical terrain of Black women's literary production, it becomes clear that whereas rigid laws and separatist ideology constrained Black women's choices and opportunities - and therefore literary agency - in apartheid South Africa, the end of formal apartheid has not been a panacea for Black women writers. Many still struggle against the constraints of internalized racial and gender inferiority in post-apartheid society, as well as the structural inequalities which continue to haunt this country in the absence of restorative justice for those economically exploited by apartheid. Those writers who have succeeded in producing one or more novels can therefore be seen as displaying high levels of personal agency, working within the historical constraints of present and apartheid South Africa. In the following chapter I examine personal agency and its mutually constitutive relationship to writing in the lives of four Black women writers interviewed for this study: Laretta Ngcobo, Miriam Tlali, Gladys Thomas, and Sindiwe Magona.

Chapter 3: The “Daily Bludgeoning by Apartheid:” Black Women, Writing, and Agency

Twenty-seven years of my life was lived in South Africa but I have been unable to record this experience in any direct way, as a writer. A very disturbing problem is that we find ourselves born into a situation where people are separated into sharp racial groups. All the people tend to think only in the groups in which they are and one is irked by the artificial barriers. It is as though with all those divisions and signs, you end up with no people at all. The environment completely defeated me as a writer. (Head 1990, 61-62)

Bessie Head’s reflection on writing is a telling commentary on the conditions faced by Black women writers during apartheid. The South African nation left Black women with little imaginative space to envision different lives, given the day-to-day difficulties of negotiating life under the apartheid regime. What Sindiwe Magona calls “the daily bludgeoning by apartheid... the constant interaction with people who reminded you of your inferiority” (Magona, 2006), made it difficult for Black women to even think of themselves as creative subjects, able to insert an artistic and political voice into national discourse through writing.

Yet a few Black women transcended this “daily bludgeoning,” and were able to succeed as writers. This chapter examines the ways in which four writers, Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, and Gladys Thomas reimagined themselves as writing subjects within a political system which attempted to deny them creativity, political agency, and humanity. Drawing theoretically on Mamphela Ramphele’s conceptualizations of space, Carole Boyce Davies’ formulation of Black women writers as “migratory” subjects, Bessie Head’s creative articulations on her writer’s subjectivity as shaped by place, and life course theory, I analyze life history

interviews with the five writers in an attempt to map the ways they transcended their “received” identities as laborers and reproducers of labor for the apartheid nation, to become authors of their own lives and works.

Throughout this chapter, I consider agency a key tool for understanding how it is that these writers took on the work and identity of writing. Using Mamphela Ramphele’s concepts of ideological, intellectual and psycho-social space to analyze the writers’ lives, I expand traditional feminist definitions of agency, arguing that, for these women, writing became an act that was cumulatively agentic, instilling in them increased personal agency. This outcome was the opposite of the apartheid’s state intended goal of oppressing, intimidating, and ultimately, silencing, these writers. I further argue that in writing, the authors were engaged in *creative re-visioning* – the ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for oneself to achieve within one’s lifetime. I posit this creative re-visioning as an additional dimension to theoretical notions of human agency, and demonstrate how it enabled the women to author their work and re-author their lives.

Theoretical Framework

My analysis of these writers’ lives is informed by South African anthropologist Mamphela Ramphele’s writings on space. In her pathbreaking monograph, *A Bed Called Home: Life in the Migrant Hostels of Cape Town* (1993), Ramphele theorizes space as existing and operating on multiple physical and psychological dimensions, a framework which I find useful for examining the different spaces - physical and metaphorical - which enabled the five women to renegotiate their identities as writers.

In using Ramphele's framework, I am particularly indebted to the scholarship of Rita Barnard (2007), who reads Black South African women's historical and contemporary writing through the theoretical lens of spatiality conceived by Ramphele. Barnard uses the concept of ideological-intellectual space as a "fresh vantage point – we may think of it as newly cleared 'intellectual space' – from which we may reassess the nature and value of black South African writing from the apartheid era" (Barnard 2007, 124). Barnard's intervention is important for two reasons. First, it re-reads, reassesses and revalues black women's writing, often dismissed as descriptive, journalistic; preoccupied with mere documenting, even "antiaesthetic" (Barnard, 2007; Lewis, 2001) and therefore, devoid of artistic merit. Second, Barnard's use of Ramphele's theorizing as a scaffold for reframing the literary debate on Black (women's) writing is equally important as a political maneuver. In foregrounding Ramphele's theories on space, Barnard inverts the traditional role of Black women in much western and South African academic discourse as objects about whom others theorize. This is particularly the case in South Africa, where Black feminist critic Desiree Lewis has argued that even within feminist discourse "the knowledge/power dialectic has a racial form: recognition of black women's own interpretations would lead to white feminists' loss of dominance in an academic domain where their hold is already tenuous and threatened, particularly since a high premium has always been placed on authoritative interpretations of the colonized, the underclass, the dominated in South Africa" (Lewis 1996, 96). Barnard's use of Ramphele's conceptual framework for rereading Black women's apartheid-era literature acknowledges a Black woman's agency as a

theorist. I depart from Barnard's use of Ramphela's theory in that I use it in this chapter to analyze women writers' lives, not their fiction, as Barnard does.

Ramphela examines the ways in which spatiality operates in the lives of Cape Town's migrant laborers, who live in cramped conditions in specially-constructed, same-sex hostels, and the implications of their living conditions on the formation of collective and individual identity. She considers space as both political and ideological – a “product literally filled with ideologies” (Ramphela 1993, 1) which can contribute to the oppression of subjugated people. Ramphela theoretically defines space as multidimensional, and examines the “impact of the[se] various dimensions of space on the process of both transformation and replication of particular forms of power relations” (Ramphela 1993, 2). She argues that space should be examined on at least four levels: the physical, the political-economic, the ideological-intellectual, and the psychosocial.

Physical space refers to the geographical, bounded elements of any material location. For any individual, physical space delimits the world, “defin[ing] parameters of the space one can legitimately appropriate for use” (Ramphela 1993, 3). Physical space can function to exclude certain individuals, while maintaining privilege for others. Political-economic space is the realm within which social relations play out. Ramphela defines it as “that aspect of social relations concerned with the capacity to marshal authoritative and allocative resources” (Ramphela 1993, 3). Government policies are examples of systems which operate within the political-economic sphere, and may limit the choices available to individuals within this space.

Ideological-intellectual space and psycho-social space are the conceptualizations of space most salient to this examination of women writers' subjectivities and processes of becoming writers. Ramphele theorizes ideological-intellectual space as the framework within which the norms for social discourse are negotiated and legitimized. It also refers to the capacity to critically interrogate social orders, especially the dominant social order and ideology. Ideological-intellectual space enables the individual's critical capacity to locate him or herself within her society's social order, helping them to "to demystify ideology and to limit the impact of the constraints of a hegemonic order on social relations" (Ramphele 1993, 5).

The fourth dimension of space, psycho-social space is one I link to an individual's agency, as she responds to and resists the messages she receives from society about her place in the world. Ramphele argues that "one is given certain cues by one's environment that encourage one either to expand or narrow one's expectations and aspirations in life" (Ramphele 1993, 7). This realm influences an individual's perceptions about her worth, image, and "place" in society, and what she can realistically expect to achieve within her lifetime. In using Ramphele's theoretical framework on space I attempt to examine the ways in which the writers interviewed carved out the physical, ideological-intellectual and psycho-social spaces requisite for becoming writers.

In my analysis of these writers' lives, I consider them to be "migratory subject[s]" (Davies 1994, 36), a term conceived by Black feminist literary critic Carole Boyce Davies to denote Black women writers' creative and personal agency. She contends that

The subject here is Black women as it is Black women's writing in their many meanings. Migrations of the subject refers to the many locations of Black women's writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated.... It is not so much formulated as a 'nomadic subject,' ...but as a migratory subject moving to specific places and for definite reasons. (Davies 1994, 36-37)

In her exploration of the ways in which Black women's writing renegotiates their identities, Davies argues that for Black women, writing can be likened to a migratory experience, since both the acts of writing and migration involve boundary-crossing, and the constant renegotiation of Black women's identities. She argues that her term - migrations of the subject - "promotes a way of assuming the subject's agency," since "Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts" (Davies 1999, 37). In this chapter I link the agency of the writers interviewed to various boundary crossings, both physical and psychological. In examining the ways in which the writers cross these boundaries, I demonstrate how the women renegotiated and reframed their identities as they started and continued to write.

Additionally, I consider as foundational to an analysis of Black South African women's writing, Bessie Head's autobiographical writing on space and place. In articulating her dislocation from her homeland, South Africa; in the act of writing; in the act of physically migrating to another country in order to obtain the ideological-intellectual and psychological space needed to pursue her creative work; and in being the first Black South African woman to publish novels in English, Head was a pioneer who opened up a space into which others could and did follow. Head's autobiographical writing reveals great insight and self-conscious reflection on the transgressive nature of writing as a Black South African woman. Already a successful

writer in the 1970s, Head reveals a keen insight into the lack of ideological-intellectual space afforded by the country of her birth. In 1978, reflecting on her creative process as a novelist, she wrote:

I spent a whole portion of my life in a country where it was impossible for black people to dream, so I know what that's like. I spent another portion in a country where it is possible to dream and I have combined these two different experiences in my writing. (Head 1990, 64)

In demonstrating an awareness of her “migratory subjectivity” in her analysis of her life and the interplay of different geographic and ideological spaces she inhabits as a writer and Black woman, Head embodies the border-crossing - both physical and psychic - that was necessary for her to become fully creative; fully able to dream. “The least I can say for myself is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life,” she wrote in 1975. “My work was always tentative, because it was so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing” (Head 1990, 28). It can be argued that in creating these new worlds, Head created them not only for herself, but also for the women who would follow her into these worlds. Head’s work and life form the scaffolding upon which all other Black South African women writers’ works rest; “blazing a new trail into the future” (Head 1990, 64).

Finally, I draw on life-course theory, an approach developed largely by Glen H. Elder in his empirical work on human development throughout and after the Great Depression. Set in the United States, this work is an expansive, longitudinal investigation into the effects of the Great Depression upon families, and more specifically, children, who experienced the Depression in Oakland, California. Elder documents the effects of the Depression on children born between 1920 and 1921

throughout their lives. From this study evolved the field of life course research, and its theoretical approach to human development, which centers around studying life experiences within the context of constantly-evolving societies (Elder 1999). Elder describes the life course as referring to “a pattern of socially defined, age-graded events and roles which is subject to historical change in culture and social structure” (Elder 1999, 302). In this way, the life-course orientation allows historical events and social interactions which occur within the individual’s larger culture to become embedded in analyses of the social processes people experience. Individual agency, what Elder describes as individuals’ ability to “construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance” (Elder 1999, 302), is a central analytical concept in life course research. The life-course approach to understanding people’s lives conceives of agency as the planning the individual is capable of doing and the opportunities available to her within the constraints of history and social structure.

In selecting the life-course lens with which to view writers’ lives, I anticipated that examining the tension between each writer’s individual agency and the structure of apartheid oppression would be fruitful analytical ground for excavating the processes by which these writers came to inhabit their writers’ subjectivity. In interviewing the writers and analyzing their life stories, I attempted to note and account for the degree of human agency they displayed, and also expand upon this definition of human agency.

In conceptualizing this dissertation, I initially envisioned writing a historiography of Black South African women’s novels written in English, with the

aim of critically surveying all such published literary output by Black women. As I began a systematic reading of the works of the first Black South African women writers to publish book-length literary works – Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ngcobo, and Zoë Wicomb – the idea started to form that I could interview the writers who were still living. The production of literature in English by Black South African women is such a recent phenomenon that, barring Bessie Head and Noni Jabavu, all of the women who had founded a Black women’s literary tradition were still alive, living in relative obscurity in South Africa or abroad. This discovery informed my decision to conduct life review interviews with as many Black South African women writers as would be willing to participate in this project, and resulted in interviews with four writers: Miriam Tlali, Laretta Ngcobo, Sindiwe Magona, and Gladys Thomas.

I conducted one interview each with Miriam Tlali and Laretta Ngcobo, who, after Bessie Head, were the first Black South African women to publish novels in English in 1979 and 1981 respectively³. Along with Head, these writers can be considered the founders of a Black women’s literary tradition in South Africa. In addition, I was extremely fortunate to interview Sindiwe Magona, whose *oeuvre* of two autobiographies, two novels, and a collection of short stories makes her one of South Africa’s most prolific Black writers. Additionally, I interviewed Gladys Thomas, a noted anti-apartheid activist and playwright, poet and short story writer, whose work has appeared in many international anthologies during her decades-long writing career. In 2007, Thomas was awarded The Order of Ikhamanga in Bronze by

³ Tlali published *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1979 and Ngcobo *Cross of Gold* in 1981.

South African President Thabo Mbeki, in recognition of her literary contribution to the South African anti-apartheid struggle.

A basic tenet of feminist research which involves obtaining data from human beings is an attentiveness to the way power operates between researcher and researched, in an attempt to avoid reproducing the skewed, often androcentric power-relations which have traditionally existed within the social sciences (Naples 2003; Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1991; Jayaratne and Stewart 1991; and Anderson and Jack 1991). It is generally accepted that the researcher holds a disproportionate amount of power relative to the “subject,” and it is a duty of the feminist researcher to try, as much as possible, to acknowledge and attempt to reduce this power differential. In collecting interview data, in analyzing and interpreting it, the researcher has a great responsibility to stay as true as possible to the respondent’s intended meaning, and the subject’s own analysis of her life. Yet simultaneously, feminist researchers (Naples 2003; Acker, Barry, & Esseveld 1991; and Anderson and Jack 1991) also acknowledge the near impossibility of equalizing power-relations at all the stages of a given research project. What Naples calls the “dilemmas of power” (Naples 2003, 37) can, however, be minimized through rigorous reflective practice by the researcher:

Although not a complete solution, feminist ethnographers have used reflective strategies effectively to become aware of, and diminish the ways in which, domination and repression are reproduced in the course of research and in the products of their work. (Naples 2003, 37)

Though the overall aim of this dissertation project was not to construct an ethnography, I used ethnographic methods in practicing reflexivity by keeping a detailed research journal, in which I recorded my impressions of the interviews and

the writers before and after the interviews. This practice helped me not only to describe the writers and their surrounds, but also to be aware of my own biases and unexamined assumptions in relation to the women I interviewed. The interviews were framed as informal conversations, and though I had prepared schedules for each interview, I let them unfold organically as conversations, rather than question and answer sessions.

I used Elder's life-course theory in conceptualizing and conducting each interview. Four central principles undergird life-course theory, according to Elder and Giele: the principles of linked lives, timing, location in time and place (history), and human agency. The two latter principles are particularly salient to this study, given that I sought to examine the writers' creative agency under the system of apartheid, which represented an enormous constraint upon their personal, political, and creative agency.

Elder sums up the life-course paradigmatic principal of location in time and place as follows: "The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their lifetime" (Elder 1999, 304). Life course theory thus views the individual as not only developing along a personal trajectory, but also as embedded in his or her society's historical events and social relations. Apartheid was successful, in part, because it systematically introduced a cluster of mutually reinforcing laws which defined subjects racially, then circumscribed their movements, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and choices of sexual and marriage partners, based on their assigned racial identities. The ages of the women in this sample at the particular moments in

history when certain key apartheid laws came into effect - i.e. their location in history during crucial moments in the construction of apartheid - will have profoundly affected their material and intellectual circumstances. Thus locating respondents in historical time and place would be of critical importance in this study.

Human agency is the second paradigm which structured my approach to interviewing the women. The life course orientation views agency as dependent upon “a complex system of constraints and opportunities, that powerfully shapes the experiences that men and women can have, what they can know, and who they can become” (MacAdam 1992, 1213). Agency is always and inextricably linked to the life-course paradigm of history, as Shanahan, Elder and Miech make clear:

Human agency - one’s planning and choice making - links history with biography through adaptation to change. Agency is especially relevant to the life course, including education and occupation.... People make choices among options that construct the life course, but they are also constrained and enabled by opportunity structures of school and work. (Shanahan, Elder, and Miech 1997, 54)

Going into the interviews, I expected to find that a great degree of individual human agency – the ability to make appropriate educational and other choices, within the confines of historical constraining structures – would account for these women’s ability to, first, imagine the possibility of being writers, and second, to actually produce and publish novels. In accordance, I designed interviews to investigate how they came to make the decisions they did in their writing and broader lives.

The Interview Process

Life course theory offers a method for conducting life review interviews, which I drew upon in designing questions for the interviews conducted with Tlali, Ngcobo,

Thomas and Magona. I conducted one semi-structured interview with each writer, which I recorded with a small digital recorder after obtaining participants' permission to do so. These were semi-structured life reviews - where subjects reflect upon their lives, retrospectively giving meaning to different events throughout the life course. Each interview lasted between one-and-a-half and three hours. These interviews and accounts of the writers' lives gleaned from them are incomplete, provisional accounts of these women's personal and writing lives.

Often, the women preferred emphasizing points that they deemed important, steering the interviews in directions they felt were most appropriate. As a feminist researcher, I allowed such "digressions" from the prepared schedule, as part of my reflexive practice. As Anderson and Jack (1991) have shown, this approach to semi-structured interviews articulates a feminist praxis that minimizes any power imbalance between researcher and subject, allowing subjects a measure of control in the interview process. Respondents were thus free, to an extent, to steer the interview process down avenues which were relevant, meaningful and significant to them. This gave respondents the power to define their respective realities in terms of what was most important to them, and lessened the power differential between us by allowing subjects to be the "experts" on their own experiences.

The writers' disparate locations (both geographically and socio-politically), and differences among them in age, social class and ethnicity among the women I interviewed, bore testimony to the multiplicity of Black women's experiences and perspectives.

Miriam Tlali welcomed me into a modest but pristine home in Moroka, Soweto, the vast and sprawling township southwest of Johannesburg. She lived alone in this house framed by a neatly-clipped lawn, and filled with comfortable, homely furniture. It was in this house that she started writing and produced the first novel by a Black woman to be published in South Africa. Here, in the backyard, she had to bury her manuscripts in the dead of the night to avoid having them destroyed by the security police. Her living space seemed centered around an old coal stove, which radiated warmth throughout the small house on a blisteringly cold day. Tlali wore a loose-fitting garment in a traditional, brown cloth. A matching turban was draped around her head. She was friendly, yet reserved; and seemed to be struggling with sadness. It became apparent why shortly into the interview: Tlali had lost both her husband and son within the short space of the two preceding years, and was clearly grieving. She explained how the loss had compounded her poor health, and often expressed the fact that she felt unwell. She moved slowly, as if in pain, during intervals in the interview when she got up to get documents or prepare tea.

In Durban, Laretta Ngcobo was the personification of *ubuntu*, or African hospitality. An engaging and lively 72-year-old at the time, Ngcobo had carved from her demanding schedule as a provincial parliamentarian in the KwaZulu/Natal legislature a substantial amount of time for an interview. A consummate politician, Ngcobo discussed politics and current events in South Africa with me in an exquisitely-furnished downtown apartment. Her domestic worker prepared and served lunch, and Ngcobo later invited me to lodge overnight with her upon discovering that I needed to find a hotel. She put me up in a beautiful guest bedroom, and arose early

the next morning to greet me as I departed in a taxi. Ngcobo had taken me to dinner at her favorite restaurant the previous night, and appeared to be as interested in my life and experiences as I was in hers. As a returned exile and widow, with three adult children, Ngcobo seemed happy with her work as a politician and her life in general, though she rued a lack of time to write. “South Africa is a killer for me,” she said. “It crowds in on you and it has not allowed me to write on my return [from exile] because I immediately got involved in politics, and politics is the direct opposite, it is a killer of creativity. I cannot create and also have politics” (Ngcobo 2006).

Sindiwe Magona lived in Muizenberg, a picturesque suburb of Cape Town, her generously-sized white house perched on the edge of a lagoon, with Table Mountain forming a magnificent backdrop to the view from her living room. Highly energetic, she appeared much younger than her sixty-two years, and spoke and moved with speed. She took expert control of the interview from the start, giving succinct answers in elegant language. I remember thinking that she spoke like a writer, in well-crafted, often humorous, phrases that rolled from her tongue like smooth, cool pearls. Magona had lived in New York for more than twenty years before returning to South Africa after the first democratic election in 1994. She loved the country, but, like most of the other writers interviewed, was highly critical of the post-apartheid government and the country’s social and political problems. Magona’s home, though quiet, seemed to vibrate with her energy. A young cousin worked quietly in the background – the telephone rang non-stop and Magona paused our conversation once to field a call from her daughter. Her minimalist, immaculately-furnished home reflected what I could discern of her personality: practical, yet warm and beautiful;

no-nonsense and down to earth. At the end of our interview, Magona hitched a ride with me to a writers' meeting she was facilitating in the township of Guguletu, on the outskirts of Cape Town. Though she lived comfortably in an up-market suburb reserved for whites only under apartheid, it was clear that she was strongly-connected to her erstwhile neighborhood, where she had raised three children on her own in a tiny house without electricity.

Gladys Thomas lived modestly in the ironically-named Coloured township, Ocean View, with neither ocean nor any natural beauty in sight. Recently widowed, Thomas owned a small, government-constructed home in this remote township, which had been designated residential space for Colored people forcibly evicted from areas declared white by the apartheid regime. The space she inhabited played an important formative role in her writing: Thomas described how her anger at being uprooted from a beautiful, coastal town and “dumped” in desolate Ocean View became a catalyst for her writing. She recalled that “it was a horrible move. Everything seemed unfinished. Trees were still growing. Oh! It was dry! It was like a sea of sand” (Thomas 2006).

Finding Meaning from Women's Writing Lives

The writers interviewed, though all Black, ranged in age, ethnicity, social class, and geographic location. Their experiences as relayed in the life review interviews were equally disparate, with the writers having few things in common save for being writers, and their common experience of living under the apartheid system. Even the way they experienced apartheid and the impact it had on their writing, lives, and families, varied tremendously. Two writers, Laretta Ngcobo and Sindiwe Magona,

were forced or chose to go into exile; the others remained in South Africa and were targets of police harassment, while continuing to write. The multiplicity of their life encounters and perspectives made it difficult to analyze their lives in a way that enables meaningful generalization about their experiences.

To analyze interview data, I transcribed all tapes, and went through interview transcripts to compare the experiences of the writers. I noted similarities in responses to questions, and also similar life-experiences or descriptions of major life events. Paying attention to two major points within the life course – childhood, and various points at which the women started to write – I noted similarities and differences in the ways the writers retrospectively interpreted their childhood experiences and their entry into writing.

In analyzing this data, Ramphela's theoretical framework on space, Davies' concept of "migratory subjectivity" (or Black women's writing subjectivity) and life course theory on agency, guided me. In using this framework, I was aware that I was imposing a structure upon the writers' lived experiences as they chose to convey and make meaning of them. I believe this inevitably leads to a flattening out of some of their experiences; a privileging of *my* view and analysis of their lives over theirs. This, in my view, is a risk inherent to writing about others' lives, but one that I hope is worth taking in excavating otherwise inaccessible knowledge and synthesizing the writers' individual experiences.

I constructed four main areas of analysis within which to structure the interview data on the authors' writing lives: 1) childhood literary influences; 2) igniting the spark: imaging the self as writer; 3) space for writing; and 4) structural barriers to

writing versus agency. I chose these areas because, regardless of age, class, ethnicity, or genre, the writers had a common experience of having been drawn to stories and storytelling while very young, most often by older family members. All of them mentioned some kind of event, or a culmination of events, that led them to start writing. In addition, all of the writers faced structural constraints when they wrote. These threads seemed common in all the conversations, and privileging these common areas of experience seemed the most productive way to proceed analytically with the interview transcripts.⁴ Some of the respondents' voices have been privileged, and others muted, as they did not all speak at equal length, or equally directly, to the categories prioritized. All of the themes raised are worthy of further excavation in their own right, and ideally I would have liked to give each theme and each respondent's voice substantial space in this document.

Reading Black Women Writers' Lives

Childhood Literary Influences

The writers interviewed all had positive recollections of stories and storytelling during their childhood, especially the written word. Both Tlali and Ngcobo recalled having had access to big trunks of books belonging to their fathers. Miriam Tlali recalled: "My mother used to read to us, which was very, very extraordinary at the time." Ngcobo's parents, too, were readers: "They read these books sometimes and

⁴ It is important to note here that many more analytical categories were identified, but because of the constraints of length of this dissertation, they could not be expanded upon. Instead, I chose substantive analysis of five areas, with the aim of exploring these in greater depth than would be allowed had I chosen to analyze a greater number.

my mother was a phenomenal reader.” Gladys Thomas found a love of the written word and a route to writing through plays, in which she acted as a young girl and later, a newlywed, as a member of the Peninsula Dramatic Society. Sindiwe Magona traces her love of reading to a neighbor, a domestic worker, who brought home discarded books from the white family for whom she worked in Cape Town. Magona recalls:

I have always liked books, loved books; loved reading. And I was fortunate in that although I never bought books in my family, I lived next door to Mrs. Yawa, who was a domestic worker at that time. She carted back to the location in Retreat where we lived all these wonderful reading materials: books, comics. So I grew up reading. (Magona 2006)

For Ngcobo, there was very little difference between the written and spoken word. Spoken poetry and stories structured communal life and her experience from a young age, and was a part of each individual’s subjectivity in her community.

My mother’s side were creative, particularly my grandmother. My grandmother was a creative poet. And I am talking now of real deep Zulu culture. Almost every child in the Zulu culture has got poetry attached to her life or his life. I have got my own little bits of poetry that they named or that they created for me. Some of it is still meaningful to me today. (Ngcobo 2006)

Ngcobo learned the art of storytelling from her mother:

She inspired me. Starting with our traditional stories, we just lived in that atmosphere of storytelling and analysis and enjoyment. So we had this whole thing within the family. It was well-accepted and they were good storytellers. I know if they’d had the opportunity they would have been fantastic writers. It is that background that gave me love and understanding of the written word, and the word that is told. (Ngcobo 2006)

Thus stories, and the love of written or spoken narrative, made up a substantial part of these writers’ childhoods. Mostly through parents, or other older, influential individuals in their lives, the writers developed a love of written and oral storytelling.

In retrospect, all the writers recognized the value of storytelling and books as formative forces within their early lives.

Imagining the Self as Writer, and Starting to Write

While they all loved reading and even writing, none of the writers interviewed expressed having a vision of themselves as writers while they were young; nor were they encouraged by the societies and families in which they were embedded to imagine themselves as writers. Clearly, the “psycho-social space” for imagining themselves as artistic, creative authors did not exist at the location in history at which these writers found themselves as children.

Magona recalls:

I loved books; I loved writing. But did I think I would write books? No! I thought all the books I ever read were by long-dead, white men. In South Africa, even the Xhosa books were by white men... not someone who looks like me, who was African, female, and then, young. So growing up, I certainly didn't associate writing with anything I could aspire to. (Magona 2006)

Miriam Tlali describes, how as a young woman, she was a skilled writer, sought after by illiterate members of her community to write letters. Yet she could not imagine being a creative writer: “The idea of becoming a writer in South Africa in the 1960s was quite absurd. It didn't even enter my mind” (Tlali 2006).

Lauretta Ngcobo started writing at age nine, as a way of expressing her feelings as her father lay dying. Even at this age, the message she received from the society in which she lived was that her written articulations as a Black woman were not important.

When I was little we sat and composed stories for ourselves and songs, and it was then I started writing. I started writing all sorts of tiny little pieces. That's when expression came to me – that what I felt, what I thought, I could put down on paper.

But of course I didn't attach the importance of keeping what I was composing safely and considering it something that was a process. It was always immediate, and therefore once I was happy, it [writing] was over, and I would do it again at another time. For me it was a fountain that would never dry up.

My problem came when I was able to express myself properly, but it was dawning on me that people were not really looking for what I thought, or what I felt. It came from all directions, from the written word, from society. (Ngcobo 2006)

For Gladys Thomas, too, there was no encouragement for writing, nor women on which to model herself as a writer: "I was never encouraged. Never. Not during my time. I went to school. When girls of my age were in standard six, you left school because you were considered very educated. I think I was fourteen when I started working in a factory" (Thomas 2006).

For most of these women, becoming writers was not something expected of them, or a possibility within the realm of their imagination. Yet, they all started writing, despite the discouraging psycho-social space they inhabited, which made it impossible for them to imagine themselves as writers. Without fail, despite their received knowledge of their status in the world, something triggered in these women the need to write; the desire to creatively express what it was like to inhabit their lives. All of them described their anger with the apartheid system, and their feelings of being disavowed citizens of a country they loved, as a catalyst for beginning to write.

"It was almost by accident that one stumbled into the world of writing," says Miriam Tlali. Tlali describes a "spirit of revolt" as the impetus which started her writing creatively:

I took up writing because I came to learn about the situation in this country in education in my high school days and that was just when the Afrikaners were coming to power, when they took over. I was at high school, I think, and the spirit of the ANC had been working and my father had been part of the ANC himself, so the feeling of revolt had been in me because I was raised in Sophiatown, where people use to stand up against the system. (Tlali 2006)

Still, she did not seriously consider the possibility of becoming a writer during this time. It was only later, after she had married and given up her dream of studying medicine at Witwatersrand University in order to tend a young family, that writing became an imperative. Confined to her Soweto home by duties caring for her ailing in-laws, Tlali had some time to reflect upon her situation as an African woman in apartheid South Africa. Her oppression by the state, as well as her confinement as caretaker within the family, led to profound feelings of depression and disavowal. The intersecting realities of being a disenfranchised citizen and having to take on a subservient role within her family compelled Tlali to start writing as an outlet for her feelings of disappointment and revolt. Eventually, she wrote *Muriel at Metropolitan*, published in 1979, the first novel to be published by a Black South African woman within the space of the apartheid nation. The novel was loosely based on her time as an administrative worker at a furniture store in Johannesburg. Tlali documents the indignities her chief character, Muriel, suffers under apartheid labor laws, which forbade her from sitting in the same office space or even using the same restroom as her white co-workers. Both her oppression at work, and her frustration with caring for her ill in-laws, acted as an impetus for writing the novel:

Here I was now stuck. And then I got a job at this place, Metropolitan Radio, because all the time, in my mind I was still revolting against the system, I was still hoping for better for my people, so I knew I had to do something and writing seemed to be the best thing for me to be doing – something against the system anyway.

[At home], I would be sitting here and my mother-in-law would be moaning, groaning from pain in the bedroom, and then the only way to keep sane - I was aware that my studies had been interrupted, and the feeling that I had disappointed my mother, that I had disappointed myself. The system was so very cruel to us, and especially women, African women. We were nothing. All these things, they were revolting inside of me. Had I not written it [*Muriel at Metropolitan*], really, I would have gone crazy. (Tlali 2006)

Gladys Thomas was also compelled to start writing by her rage at the injustice of the apartheid system. As a Coloured South African, she was forcibly removed from her home in Simon's Town as a result of the Group Areas Act, which designated the village a white residential area. Along with her spouse and three children, Thomas was forced from this picturesque town to a far-flung, isolated township, perversely named "Ocean View." Upon receipt of her eviction notice, Thomas wrote her first poem, "Fall Tomorrow," which predicted the demise of the National Party. She recalls:

Everybody had to move, we got our letter to move out of our houses and it was actually not a poem that I wrote, it was actually a lot of anger. Because poetry's supposed to be beautiful, but I was so angry that I wrote my first poem about being moved out of our houses to this area.

And it was a horrible move. Everything seemed unfinished. Trees were still growing. Oh it was dry, it was like a sea of sand. But we quickly adapted. I stayed in an apartment block with my children. The three teenagers, they were young still. We had to explain to them why we're coming here, why we're leaving Simon's Town. All those stuff we had to explain to our children, which was very heartbreaking. It was just dumping us here. And that made me so angry and that is how I started to write. (Thomas 2006)

Thomas sent her poem to writer James Matthews, who encouraged her to continue writing. Their protest poetry was jointly published in an anthology, *Cry Rage*, which was banned within weeks of its publication in 1972. However, the anthology garnered critical acclaim and provided discursive impetus to the anti-apartheid

struggle (Horn 1993), giving Thomas the impetus to continue writing: “I continued to write after that. I wrote short stories, plays. That’s how I started to write. I got all this attention” (Thomas 2006).

Space for Writing

While despair, anger and revolt propelled Thomas and Tlali to inhabit the psychosocial space necessary to begin writing, for Ngcobo and Magona, being situated within a national space in which they were oppressed and disavowed as citizens rendered them unable to find the psychological space, or time, to write creatively. Ngcobo recalls writing short pieces while growing up and throughout her young adult life, but always destroying her work upon completion. “I wrote them, they were my expression and then that was that, I discarded them, especially when we had to move. I burnt a lot in Durban, when I was leaving Durban at the time, because that would lead the police to a whole lot of other things and a whole lot of other people” (Ngcobo 2006).

At the time, in 1957 Ngcobo’s husband, Abednego Bhekabantu Ngcobo, had been arrested and charged with treason for his political leadership within the ANC’s Natal Youth League. Later in that same year, he was discharged from the Treason Trial, and in 1959 became a founder member and treasurer-general of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), a political group which would be banned in 1960. As a member of the PAC, he was again arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act, and started serving a two-year prison sentence in 1961. With her husband imprisoned, Ngcobo became a target for police, who hoped to intercept messages she was relaying between imprisoned members of the Pan Africanist Congress. She was

forced into exile in 1963, after receiving word that police were coming to arrest her. She fled South Africa for Swaziland with just a few hours to spare before police arrived at her door. Ngcobo recalls:

My husband was in jail, and then they were after me. They wanted the usual, they were looking for information. They were hunting me up and down especially through the school where I taught. They used the children to find information - what kind of subjects I was teaching, what I set for their debates and for their essays, and that kind of thing. So in the end they caught up with me and I left. I ran away. I actually escaped within a matter of hours before they came. (Ngcobo 2006)

The conditions of her life in South Africa made it virtually impossible for Ngcobo to meaningfully pursue her creative writing. After living in exile for a number of years in various African countries, Ngcobo was eventually reunited with her family, and they settled in England. It is within the relative safety of this country that Ngcobo started to write seriously:

England gave me space. First of all, I was in my own self questioning very seriously, everything that had happened in those seven years from 1959 to the mid-sixties. I began questioning what has been happening to me. I began questioning the politics; I began questioning everything. And I wanted answers. There was a feeling of being lost. Here I was, I remembered as a student at Fort Hare with all my friends, how we dreamt even in that abysmal time. We had dreams. Where were they now? Where were all my friends? What had I done wrong? Why was I flung so far out? So it was a way of going back to my life, particularly my political life, and the things that I had done and done well or taken wrong decisions, and were just worth telling.

And so when I was in England now, there was time, for instance, just a few months when I wasn't doing anything. I would stay at home and think, the children are in school, and think and write. I began writing like that. I had space, I had time. (Ngcobo 2006)

Similarly, Magona had to leave the space which did not allow her complete freedom in her creative articulation, nor enable her to write seriously. It was only after she

moved to the United States at the age of forty to pursue graduate studies that she could make the internal shift necessary to consider herself a serious writer:

I also think it's just getting to know yourself so well and having the space - the emotional and psychological space - to believe in yourself. The daily bludgeoning by apartheid, and what living during that era was - when you go shopping, it doesn't matter what you do, you are daily in constant interaction with people who remind you of your inferiority. It takes a lot to overcome that - believe in yourself despite this daily bludgeoning, where you are [seen as] not completely human, not completely intelligent. (Magona 2006)

Tlali was never exiled from South Africa, and had to carve out both the psychological and physical space for writing within the confines of an oppressive racial system and a patriarchal family structure. When Tlali started writing, she did not have a physical space in which she could sit down to write: "I didn't have a study, I would always sit and write on my lap, and my husband was quite happy with that," she recalls. Because African women were equivalent to minors in their relationships with their spouses under apartheid law, Tlali would have needed his permission to build the small studio or study she dreamed of having. "I could not very well say to him, 'I want to build something because we are many here.' I would have to wait until everybody was asleep and I'd sit alone there and then use my lap. But it became inconvenient for me, and when I asked him to build a little study he wouldn't. He refused"(Tlali 2006).

Despite this lack of space, Tlali was able to create the psycho-social space necessary. All the writers did so; a fact which I attribute to their high levels of personal agency. In what follows I discuss the ways in which agency shaped their writing, and writing, in turn produced increasing amounts of agency, becoming cumulatively agentic for the writing subjects.

Agency Shaping Writing, Writing Shaping Agency: Black Women's Creative Re-visioning

Individual agency was an important factor in the writers' lives before they became writers, helping them propel themselves into literary careers. Indeed, without the amount of agency they displayed throughout their adult lives, it could be argued that they would not have been able to conceive of themselves as writers, or make the psychological shift necessary to inhabit and work from the ideological-intellectual space necessary to start and continue writing.

The concept of agency, and the amount of will and choice an individual has in relation to the patriarchal structures in place in any given milieu, has been one of the central concerns within contemporary feminist discourse (Gardiner 1995; Messer-Davidow 1995). From a purely sociological view, agency has been defined as the ability to make appropriate life, educational, artistic, and other choices, within the confines of historical constraining structures. It is dependent upon "a complex system of constraints and opportunities, that powerfully shapes the experiences that men and women can have, what they can know, and who they can become" (MacAdam 1997, 1213). Agency is inextricably linked to an individual's location in time and place, or history. Feminist theorist Ellen Messer-Davidow points out that agency is usually assigned an individual, a collective, or social structure, and argues that traditional definitions of agency as an individual's capacity to "determine or act" (Messer-Davidow 1995, 25) do not go far enough in facilitating an understanding of the way agency operates across different locales. Drawing on social theorist Anthony Giddens's reformulation of agency as coproduced by and with social structures, Messer-Davidow redefines agency as "both the regularized practices of actors and the

structured processes of their social system. Agency, then, is neither a capacity of the individual nor a function of the social formation, but the co-(re)constitution of individual practices and social processes” (Messer-Davidow 1995, 30).

Here, I want to broaden these definitions of agency by bringing to bear upon them Ramphel's theory of space, specifically the concepts of ideological-intellectual and psycho-social space. While Shanahan, Elder, and Miech and Messer-Davidow conceptualize agency as the complex interplay between the individual's will and actions, and the historical structures or constraints of the period in which they live, Ramphel's constructs of ideological-intellectual and psycho-social space have the potential to add an additional dimension to the theoretical concept of human agency. Ideological-intellectual space, in enabling an individual to use a critical consciousness to locate herself within an existing order; and psycho-social space, in giving one the capacity to critically interrogate her given status or received knowledge about her “place” in the world, become critical tools for what I call *creative re-visioning* – a subject's ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for her to achieve within her lifetime. It is this creative re-visioning which, within the matrix of action and social structure, provides a gap for creative acts which may chip away at the edifice of a social structure, particularly an oppressive one. If an individual were always to act within the constraints of history, social change would not be an outcome of individual or collective agency. The fact that, within history, oppressive and dangerous structures and institutions have been changed attests to the fact that human beings have the potential for transgressive action, which can profoundly change the functioning of a given social order. It is this potential for transgressive acts which

Ramphele's notions of ideological-intellectual and psycho-social space help account for and understand.

Using Ramphele's concepts of space, I now expand the definition of human agency as an individual's ability to act within the constraints of her historical location, while simultaneously critically interrogating these constraints and holding the potential for creatively re-envisioning the social structures which check her actions. It is important to note that the potential for creative re-envisioning always exists, but is not always realized, or is realized to varying degrees. In what follows, I discuss agency and creative re-envisioning in the lives of the authors interviewed.

All the writers interviewed displayed high degrees of personal agency, which the narratives and vignettes from their interviews made clear. Long before she became a writer, Tlali displayed a strong sense of agency, which would later aid her in becoming an author. She recalls shunning academic subjects that were traditionally designed for girls during high school: "I chose mathematics and science rather than do domestic science. Already I had that kind of thing, because I realized these other [subjects] were for women and they perhaps lead to docility, and we were against such things, in the spirit of revolt" (Tlali 2006).

Magona, too, spoke of a sense of personal agency in the way she conducted her life, long before becoming a writer. This sense of being in control of her destiny was especially important when her husband left her with three children to care for at the age of twenty-three. She links her writing to her own sense of agency she required as an adult, while hoping that it would inspire others to seize the opportunity to be more agentic subjects:

I don't think I'm any worse for some of the experiences I've gone through and certainly they still make me [who I am]. And as a grown up now I choose what to believe and I choose what to look at and just laugh away. When you are growing up as a child you can't make these decisions. You are born into a family and that's what you must accept. Every human being has a childhood to overcome. We all have to recover from our childhood – that's part of growing up, recovering from your childhood. And I hope in this way [through writing] I can help people look into... it doesn't matter what went on in your home. It doesn't matter. You grew up, and once you grow up then it's your life now, you can make of it what you will. This is really the beauty of human life, that you are not stuck in any one place. (Magona 2006)

Yet, a strong sense of personal agency was not enough to enable Magona to write in South Africa. To become a serious writer, she had to physically leave the national space. Living in the U.S. gave her the “emotional and psychological space” necessary to believe in herself. Magona acknowledges that without the move to a place that was less structurally oppressive, she would not have been able to tap into a sense of personal agency to the degree that she did in order to become a writer:

Before I left South Africa I attempted doing some writing - play, novel - but the daily harassment of being African in South Africa just made it a rather dubious pursuit. I didn't type, didn't own a typewriter. We didn't have electricity in Guguletu then, and I don't see that I could have put it together. It might have happened, but it would have been just that much harder for me to begin to write and to gain the confidence to call myself a writer. (Magona 2006)

For all of the writers, a strong sense of agency was equally important in sustaining their writing lives. Tlali and Thomas, for example, having chosen to remain in South Africa, experienced brutality and harassment at the hands of the Special Branch of the South African Police, charged with maintaining “stability” and repressing revolt within South Africa's borders during the height of apartheid. Tlali attracted unwanted attention from the government and the police force for becoming the first Black woman to publish a novel within the country:

Nobody knew I existed before that, and the Special Branch came to see me all the time, all the time. They would come, I couldn't even write, they would come and search the house, they would take whatever written material they could get hold of, and I had no peace at home. And I felt I could never stop now. I went on and on and on.

So I resorted to writing at night, and burying my books, some of my books, in the yard. So that when they [Special Branch] came in, they couldn't take them away. My husband used to take the pick and shovel and dig in the yard and he would bury them there, in plastic, in different areas of the yard. (Tlali 2006)

Thomas experienced similar police harassment, though not to the same degree as

Tlali:

They used to come and knock on the door here and say they were going to lock me up. They used to threaten me. Once every two or three months, the security police would come and knock here and ask if I'm still living here, if I'm still writing such nonsense. But they never detained me. They never detained me. They kept threatening: it was nerve-wracking when they would knock on the door, you'd think they were coming to fetch you. That was their idea of trying to stop me from writing. (Thomas 2006)

Paradoxically, increased state repression and surveillance of these writers had the opposite effect of that intended. Instead of deterring Thomas and Tlali from writing, police harassment increased their resolve to write, have their voices heard, and tell narratives of collective Black suffering.

It is my argument that the act of starting to write, a highly agentic act of transgression, was ultimately an act that engendered increased personal agency. While Magona and Ngcobo could conceive of themselves as writers only once they had left the oppressive national space of South Africa, and found themselves, in the words of Magona, with the "emotional and psychological space" necessary to write in a meaningful, sustained way, the same was not true for Tlali and Thomas. Both writers chose to remain in South Africa, despite ever-increasing surveillance and

harassment by apartheid authorities. Their shifts into sustained writing careers cannot be explained by having the necessary physical space and reflective time, unobstructed by the “daily bludgeoning” of South African racism, for imagining themselves as creative subjects.

Thus I argue that for Tlali and Thomas, the act of writing in itself created the psycho-social and ideological-intellectual space they needed to become writers and sustain writing careers. Given that in choosing to remain in South Africa, they chose to stay in a place which did not afford them either physical or psychological space to write, they actively and consciously created that space for themselves through the act of writing. In writing, they became active agents in opposing the oppressive apartheid regime, and when they were punished for this form of resistance, they resolved to write more. Thus the act of writing became cumulatively agentic – a transgressive act which, through repetition, increased their personal agency as their literary output became more prolific, and as they became more recognized as writers. As Tlali recalls, the intensifying police harassment made her determined to “never stop now. I went on and on and on” (Tlali 2006).

Thomas similarly recalls that the attention garnered by her first anthology of poetry, co-published with James Matthews in 1969, sustained her in writing:

Nobody ever thought about doing something like that or writing something like that, so we launched our book at the old Space Theater in Cape Town, and within a week the government banned the book of poetry. That brought us a lot of attention. And then we continued to write because this was the first book of poetry to be banned in South Africa. That’s how I started to write. I got all this attention. (Thomas 2006)

Thomas went on to write three one-act plays, one of which won a prize in the newspaper *The World*, which was subsequently banned for publishing Thomas’s

work. Thomas also won the Bertram's Award for her highly-acclaimed play, "Avalon Court," which documented life in a township apartment block after forced removal.

Ngcobo's experience writing a strong woman character in her second novel, *And They Didn't Die* (1990), underscores the cumulative nature of these women's writing agency. For Ngcobo, the act of writing contributed to a sense of being personally liberated as a woman. She describes in her conversation with me how the process of writing her second novel, *And They Didn't Die*, became a profoundly liberatory experience. Aware of the criticism her first novel, *Cross of Gold* (1981) had received from feminists because the only woman character is killed off in the first chapter, Ngcobo recalls that at the time of writing that work, she just was not able to conceive of a strong Black woman surviving in her fiction:

I think it comes from the background that I had come from. I think I had learned earlier that women didn't count much. They hadn't got an independent life of their own. When Sindisiwe dies, only her sons can live and go into the cities. Women remained in the rural areas. They didn't go out, they didn't make things happen. And I think that was on my mind, even though I myself had succeeded to get out of that situation and go as far as Fort Hare University. (Ngcobo 2006)

For Ngcobo, writing the strong, powerful woman character Jezile, who defies both patriarchal African culture and apartheid laws in her second novel *And They Didn't Die*, was the result of an increased sense of freedom and personal agency, brought on by her move to England and the success of her first novel. Prior to writing *And They Didn't Die*, Ngcobo says her writing was limited by "my prison, my mental prison - my view of women and society that held me even in my creativity" (Ngcobo 1006). This is why, upon reflection, she felt her first woman character, Sindisiwe, *had* to die:

Sindisiwe herself dies because what else can she do? Now that she has got out of South Africa she's gone as far as she can. And Sindisiwe died three times. I

wrote that chapter three times, and every time I came to point where Sindisiwe was dying. And not that I thought about it at the time, my creativity just snowballed to that end and Sindisiwe died, and I didn't try anything to save her. The third time she tried to die, she died. (Ngcobo 2006)

Ngcobo attributes having the time and psychological space to write in England, and her engagement with the British feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s, with the shift in her consciousness that allowed her to imagine a strong, living Black woman as a character. Her creative re-visioning allowed her to construct Jezile, a character who herself displays great personal agency by moving around the country on her own and defying both the patriarchal structure of the rural African society within which she lives, and the apartheid state. As Jezile's sense of increased personal liberty expands, so does her author's. Upon completion of the novel, the creation of this character led to an increased sense of agency and personal freedom for the Ngcobo, which she reflected upon during our interview:

I think my own liberation came through this book, in the middle of writing this book. Again, I don't know the moment, but slowly, not only in fact by the time I get to Jezile and Jezile has to go into town, you know the different little steps she takes towards her freedom, you remember? There is a point where I think there is a freedom that she grabs for herself.

Jezile defies [her husband] saying: 'I don't care what Siyalo says, I'm going to Durban.' I think that's a snapping point perhaps not just for my character, but perhaps for me, you see. Because by the time I came to the end of this book, now that you ask me, I emerged a different woman, even toward my husband. My husband couldn't cope with, well, it's the wrong word to say he couldn't cope, but there were signs that he was not understanding this new woman. You know I could see he was very unsettled. It took a bit of time for him to accept that I was a writer.... I was living my life, there were things that I could do that he couldn't do that I didn't need him [for]. I think the book, in fact I think it's the first time that I ever really thought through this phase. It's the first time today that I see my own freedom linked to the freedom that I wanted for my women. (Ngcobo 2006)

The writers' recollections of their writing and life experiences show the way agency and their own processes of creative re-visioning allowed them the capacity to inhabit the psycho-social and ideological intellectual space that enabled them to write. When the structural barriers of their historical location - apartheid policy, state brutality, and patriarchy - started to bear down on them this did not reduce their agency or literary output. The converse was true – the more they wrote, the more they were oppressed. But the more they felt the oppressive forces of apartheid and their gendered conditioning, the more determined they became to write. Agency engendered writing, which, along with creative re-visioning, engendered more agency and more writing. Thus writing produced what I call cumulative agency, the increased will and ability to write under the most oppressive circumstances.

Agency is an individual's ability to make choices, plan for the future, and successfully execute plans, within the constraints of the historical period and social structure within which she is located (Elder 1999; Shanahan, Elder, and Miech, 1997). All of the writers interviewed for this project were born and lived through apartheid, a social and ideological system which narrowly constricted the educational and vocational opportunities available to them. The overlap of racist apartheid ideology, which sought to prohibit Black women's entry into virtually all spheres of society, and familial patriarchy, meant the writers examined here were born into locations where the psycho-social space necessary for imagining themselves as autonomous, creative beings simply did not exist. Their designated "place" within the apartheid social order was that of laborer or producer of labor; their sole purpose within the apartheid schema the maintenance of white hegemony and privilege. All of

the interviews reflect childhood and young adult experiences marked by the absence of the psycho-social space to dream, to imagine a different order, to think of opportunities available to the self as boundless. Given apartheid's project of physical and psychological domination, this lack of vision is to be expected.

Yet all of those interviewed were ultimately able to inhabit the psycho-social and ideological-intellectual space to imagine themselves as writing subjects. How did this shift in subjectivity occur? A confluence of events influenced their decisions to become writers: having caring older individuals who introduced them to and inculcated a love of written and oral stories; having parents who believed it was important that they receive the best education possible for within that particular moment in history (even though for Gladys Thomas, this meant leaving school at the age of 14); experiencing events which sparked so much rage that they just *had* to write; finding themselves outside of the narrow confines of apartheid South Africa, suddenly with time to think and reflect upon their lives, and the urge to tell and bear witness to what they had seen. The interesting paradox is that the system designed to stymie and impede their intellectual development, ultimately provided the impetus - whether through feelings of anger, revolt, despair, or disavowal - to write. The act of writing subsequently became cumulatively agentic for these writers, instilling determination to continue writing, and propelling them into sustained writing careers. Creative re-visioning, or the ability to re-envision or reimagine what is possible for each writer to achieve within her lifetime, is a vital aspect of agency employed by these writers, which ultimately accounts for their ongoing creative agency, and persistent articulation as creative subjects.

Chapter 4: Rewriting the Apartheid Nation-Space: Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo

Writing turns space into place. (Daymond et al. 2003, 4)

Black women's histories, lives, and spaces must be understood as enmeshing with traditional geographic arrangements in order to identify a different way of knowing and writing the social world and to expand how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination. (McKittrick 2006, xiv)

This chapter considers the way two Black women writers - Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo – conceptualized and reimagined the concept of “the nation” and national space in their novels. Through an examination of space in Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1979) and Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990) it argues that Black women writing fiction during this period wrote as an act of resistance against a system which deliberately denied them creative agency, and what Mamphela Ramphele calls “intellectual space” (Ramphele 1993).⁵ In doing so, they carved out intellectual space that enabled them to critique dominant ideologies of Afrikaner nationalism and white supremacy, while imagining and writing alternatives to a nation in which their relationships were primarily ones of disavowal and dispossession. I argue that Tlali and Ngcobo's works, read together, construct a narrative of nationlessness and dispossession. The conditions under which they produced literature, the reception of their work, and the topics they chose to address attest to their disavowal as citizens. Their work structures a counter-narrative to the

⁵ See Chapter Three for a detailed discussion of Mamphela's theorization of physical and intellectual space.

dominant ideology of apartheid, and the apartheid state's justification of its policy that it assured "separate but equal" development of the separate races.

My analysis of these writers' works is situated within the pertinent literary debate of the 1980s about the state of Black South African writing during this period. This discussion among critics of Black South African literature – many of them creative writers – centered around the aesthetic, or rather, lack of aesthetic, in Black South African writing during apartheid. Critics such as Njabulo Ndebele, Lewis Nkosi, and Es'kia Mphahlele bemoaned the perceived lack of any literary aesthetic beyond the blatant banality of the political spectacle that was apartheid. They indicted apartheid literature, particularly Black protest literature, as overdetermined in its desire to represent the grim reality of apartheid, emphasizing, in particular, hyperrealistic portrayals of the dismal materiality of Black lives under apartheid. Ndebele referred to this mode of production as the "literary culture of the spectacular" (Ndebele 1986, 142). Since the maintenance of apartheid depended on the spectacle of public humiliation, degradation and obliteration of Black subjects, Ndebele argued - its obscenity hinged, in part, on the spectacular public exhibitionism which was part of the display and enforcement of white might - the Black South African writer could hardly be faulted for having "his imagination almost totally engaged by the spectacle before him" (Ndebele 1986, 143). Ndebele describes literary culture of the spectacular as that which:

...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 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. (Ndebele 1986, 149-150)

Ndebele posits the need for the “rediscovery of the ordinary” as a way of refining Black literature and dealing with “the complex and all embracing” (Ndebele 1986, 155) problems of apartheid South Africa.

In a similar vein, Nkosi wrote of the “naïve realism” of writers like Laurretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali, reducing their fiction to “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (cited in Barnard 2007, 124-125). Es’kia Mphahlele refers to “the tyranny of place” in Black South African literature: the Black writer’s obsession with mimetic depictions of the Black township - that locus around which apartheid processes played out in all their brutality. For Mphahlele, the Black writer “tends to document minute-to-minute experience. There is a specifically African drama in the ghettos that the writer cannot ignore.... He must have place, because his writing depends on his commitment to territory” (cited in Barnard 2007, 125). In a summation of this debate, literary historiographer Louise Bethlehem (2001), names this purported (anti)aesthetic the “rhetoric of urgency” in Black South African writing.

More recent feminist rereadings of Head, Tlali, and Ngcobo’s work expose this debate about the ‘realist,’ anti-aesthetic mode of Black literary production during apartheid as androcentric. Critics such as Wisker, Daymond, and Barnard have demonstrated how a rereading of women’s apartheid literature which uses gender as an analytical lens opens up new interpretive possibilities for these works, allowing the critical space for discovering a more meaningful aesthetic. This gendered aesthetic often pioneered new literary forms, rendering more nuanced, richly textured accounts of life under apartheid.

In a comparative analysis of the short stories of Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali, M.J. Daymond repudiates Ndebele's claim of a Black literary aesthetic governed by the impulse to document the spectacular, arguing that in his neglect of these women's oeuvres, he dismisses an important site of literary production which does, in fact, return to the "ordinary," as he exhorts. Daymond makes the case that gendered reflection, both in writing and criticism, represents one pathway to "the ordinary." She asserts that in drawing on communal experiences as source material for their short stories, Head and Tlali pioneered an "inclusive aesthetic for Southern African writing" (Daymond 1996, 225), as their stories constitute a hybridized, new form dependent on the interrelated modes of speech, storytelling, and writing. In doing so, both writers "have begun to invent a new tradition which re-establishes the weight and dignity, as a subject matter for writing, of women's view on gendered experience" (Daymond 1996, 226).

Gina Wisker, too, argues convincingly that South African women's writing during the apartheid era negotiates a paradox: though such literature may well have documented social issues in the realist mode, it simultaneously creatively envisioned alternative worlds. For Wisker the works of Tlali, Bessie Head, Ingrid de Kock, Gcina Mhlope and Zoë Wicomb are instructive in their offering of "an imaginative rebellion, a creative alternative or set of alternative envisionsings of life and its values" (Wisker 2001, 143). Wisker posits that through their literary investigations of female subjectivity in relation to location or place, these works opens up a creative space for re-envisioning and reimagining the self, and by extension, the place of the (Black) female subject in the given social order of apartheid South Africa. Wisker

demonstrates how, in these writers' works, "imagery which enables an exploration of the ideas of identity and hope for creative change in the future recurs as that of geography, of the house and home space, and of journeying" (Wisker 2001, 144).

Wisker argues that for these women writers, a sense of place is an aid to

develop and improve the imagination, [engendering] a place from which to plan and build, create and project forward positive developments and alternatives.... Bound up with space, place and people is the security of identity from which to project a positive future. (Wisker 2001, 146)

While Wisker's analysis of space as bound up with "the security of identity from which to project a positive future" seems prematurely celebratory, given the conditions of Black women's literary production during apartheid, it is clear that in writing the nation - rendering their accounts of what it was like to be a Black citizen gendered female during apartheid - Black women writers were creating an intellectual space for examining Black women's experience of the nation under apartheid. If conceptualizing the nation as narration allows for a recognition of its ambivalence, as Homi Bhabha suggests, making visible "those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of people and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge" (Bhabha 1990, 3), reading the nation from the standpoint of those most disavowed by its ideologies offers a fruitful site from which to re-examine South Africa as nation. And, if writing turns space into place, as the editors of the most comprehensive anthology of Southern African women's writing, *Women Writing Africa* (2003), assert, Black South African women's acts of writing of the apartheid nation-space created a place deserving of analytical excavation.

In what follows I examine the ways in which Miriam Tlali and Laretta Ngcobo use space in their novels, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, and *And They Didn't Die*, by way of depicting and reimagining the South African nation. First, I contextualize the novels by briefly outlining the conditions under which they were written; then I analyze Tlali and Ngcobo's use of space and location as a literary device. This analysis is theoretically indebted to the work of Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, who put forth the concept of oppositional Black geographies as a set of theories for understanding both the spatiality of race - the way Blackness is implicated in the production of geographic space - and the ways in which Black subjects respond to and resist the oppressive geographies produced through racialization. These critical race geographers argue that Black human geographies can be read as ways to determine “how the lives of these [Black] subjects demonstrate that ‘common sense’ workings of modernity and citizenships are worked out, and normalized, through geographies of exclusion, the ‘literal mappings of power relations and rejections.” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 4) Following on these precepts of Black geography, I argue that both Tlali and Ngcobo, in rendering visible the fissures within the seemingly naturalized apartheid sites they construct in their fiction, are engaged in situated knowledge production and a reconfiguration of apartheid space into a more socially just place. I demonstrate that in revealing the inherent contradictions and injustices of apartheid spatiality, “their contributions to both real and imagined human geographies are significant political acts and expressions,” which make visible and geographically available the “erasure,

segregation, marginalization, and the mysterious disappearances” inherent in apartheid spatiality (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 4).

Between Two Worlds: Miriam Tlali

Miriam Tlali’s novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, was the first novel to be published by a Black woman within the borders of South Africa. First published in 1979, the autobiographical account of Tlali’s work as an administrative assistant and debt collector for a furniture store in Johannesburg was for the author a way of “fighting the system with my pen – the only way I could.” (Tlali 2004, 7) Tlali started writing the novel at a time of great personal and political frustration: unable to cope with the humiliation of spending day after day in a racist work environment, she had left her job at the furniture store which is fictionalized in her novel. She had also quit, in part, to care for her ailing in-laws.

I would be sitting here and my mother-in-law would be moaning, groaning from pain in the bedroom, the little bedroom, and then the only way to keep sane [was writing]. I was aware that my studies had been interrupted, and the feeling that I had disappointed my mother, that I had disappointed myself - all those things, and what was happening [under the apartheid system]. The system was so very cruel to us, and especially women, African women. We were nothing... All these things, they were revolting inside of me. Had I not written it, really I would have gone crazy. (Tlali 2006)

If finding the physical and intellectual space for writing was hard, publishing the completed manuscript was even more difficult. *Muriel at Metropolitan* was rejected by several publishers, and lay “at the back of the dressing-table, gathering dust” (Tlali 2004, 8) for years. Ravan Press in Johannesburg finally agreed to publish it, on condition that Tlali cut substantial portions from the manuscript. Tlali recalls that, “Some months later, they handed me the expurgated version. After I had read it, I was

devastated and I sighed: ‘What have they done to you?’ I looked at the pages of this baby I had given birth to, now reduced to shreds” (2004, 8). At first, Tlali refused to have the edited version of her novel published, but relented months later, as her mother appeared close to death. Forced to accept the compromise so that her mother could see the work in print, Tlali was further incensed by the title the publisher chose for the work. “The title was ridiculous, because they wanted to call it ‘Miriam at Metropolitan.’ I even said, ‘I don’t want my name on it,’ so they said, ‘Okay, we shall call it Muriel.’ So I thought it was really very debasing” (Tlali 2006). Tlali recalls feeling despondent when the book was released with this title.

It was a far cry from ‘Between Two Worlds’ – one of the tentative titles I had preferred. And I returned to my matchbox house in Soweto, locked myself in my little bedroom and cried.... Five whole chapters had been removed; also paragraphs, phrases, and sentences. It was devastating, to say the least. (Tlali 2004, 10)

To deal with her disappointment and avoid harassment by police, Tlali fled to Lesotho, the country of her mother’s birth, to escape attention. The novel was summarily banned.

Muriel at Metropolitan is aimed largely at explicating the inhumanity of apartheid and the exploitive labor conditions experienced by Black South Africans. The novel is set within the extreme confines of the Metropolitan radio and electronics store in downtown Johannesburg where the title character, Muriel, works. The store functions as a simulacrum for apartheid South Africa, with its rituals distilled from the national, separatist arena and re-enacted within the microcosm of the shop floor. Muriel begins the novel by sketching a bleak picture of the nation, within which she situates the store:

The Republic of South Africa is a country divided into two worlds. The one, a white world - rich, comfortable, for all practical purposes, organized - a world in fear, armed to the teeth. The other, a black world; poor, pathetically neglected and disorganized - voiceless, oppressed, restless, confused and unarmed... (Tlali, 1987, 11)

Daily, Muriel traverses these two worlds, as she journeys from the township in which she lives to her place of employment. As an African woman in the metropolis, Muriel inhabits a liminal space – she is that which is not wanted within the space of the city, actively prohibited from moving freely within its streets. She embodies abjection. Yet, like countless other Black bodies, her labor is needed for the smooth functioning of the largest South African city – the economic powerhouse of apartheid South Africa. Like the other Black bodies inhabiting the apartheid city, Muriel needs the despised Pass in order to enter and leave its bounds. She inhabits Johannesburg conditionally, contingent on her ability to labor and the whims of the white officials who have the power to facilitate or prohibit her entry into the space. Her very presence in the city which simultaneously needs and abjects her points to Tlali's production of an oppositional Black geography, which, in the words of McKittrick and Woods accounts for making visible the “unknowable” and figuring these unknowable bodies into the “production of space” (2007, 4).

Muriel's liminality extends to the store, which is spatially arranged to maintain apartheid through the separation of racialized bodies and omniscient surveillance of these bodies. Metropolitan, from Muriel's perspective, is labyrinthine in structure; its myriad “L-shaped” passages (Tlali 1987, 8 and 35) clogged with bodies – “too many people moving or sitting in too small a space, and there was too much brushing against and bumping into one another” (Tlali 1987, 24). Within this

space the white owner, Mr. Bloch, occupies a “strategic point” (Tlali 1987, 67) next to the till, facing the door, from where he can “see almost every point in the large shop except the workshop above” (Tlali 1987, 67).

The reader encounters and negotiates the space of the store through the movements and confinement of Muriel, the only Black woman staff member. On her first day at Metropolitan, Muriel receives a taste of what is to come when the owner whips the cushion from her seat before she is allowed to sit down. Because she is not allowed to inhabit the same physical space as the white women who work as clerks, Muriel is initially given a workspace in the attic above the store, which she shares with three radio mechanics, all men. Muriel grows to like this space, since it allows for an unobstructed view of the store below, and knowledge of the boss’s movement within the space. Her only complaint is a steep set of stairs she has to negotiate every time a customer needs her assistance. Muriel’s movements between the attic and the store eventually become too cumbersome and time-consuming, forcing Muriel downstairs to share the white women’s space.

Here, she encounters bureaucratic separateness from the white women which mirrors the country’s laws. In a store which so rigidly enforces apartheid that it has a coat rack labeled “Whites Only” (Tlali 1987, 106), Muriel’s presence causes a dilemma. Like the city she serves, Metropolitan needs her labor; yet her physicality is undesirable. Consequently, the space within the store is completely reconfigured in order to “accommodate” Muriel downstairs while maintaining apartheid between her and the white women workers:

Old furniture standing behind filing cabinets was moved; a more or less convenient place was created for me just below the stairs. I was separated

from the rest of the white staff by the cabinets and steel mesh wires. (Tlali 1987, 15)

Tlali's description of the store's interior, bounded by cabinets and steel mesh wire, resonates with the grim description of the nation as "a country divided into two worlds". Even Muriel's excretory functions need to be regulated in accordance with apartheid laws. After the white women complain when she uses their restroom, Muriel is forced to use an outside latrine, one of her most debasing experiences at Metropolitan:

It was filthy. It was open to anybody from the street. I had forgotten that I had resolved never to use it again. Being in there was like being in hell. As you sat (if you had the courage to do so) holding your breath, drunken men of all races kept pushing the door open and peering in at you. (Tlali 1987, 34)

The liminality invoked by Muriel's placement within the space of the store becomes a trope for her state of mind, as she negotiates the psychological space between her reality as a Black, disenfranchised woman, and her co-opted position as an instrument of white oppression. She is literally "between two worlds" as she becomes the interlocutor between her white employer and the African customers he is exploiting. As the only clerical worker in the store who speaks an African language, Muriel translates and fills out higher purchase agreements for the customers, becoming an accomplice in their economic exploitation as they become mired in debt. She also asks for their pass books in order to fill out their payment agreements, thus acting as an unwilling agent of apartheid surveillance, and struggling with the guilt of feeling like "the white-master's-well-fed-dog" (Tlali 1987, 91).

Muriel is confined to her side of the "colour line," from where she goes about her duties as a clerk, and later credit control manager. Tlali sets up this situation to

demonstrate, through a series of vignettes which unfold against the backdrop of the store, how the arbitrariness of racial classification and its resultant racial hierarchy undercuts the productive functioning of the store, and, by extension, the nation. The absurdity of Muriel's separation from the white women becomes apparent soon after her move, when Mr. Bloch requires her to put payment statements into customers' ledger cards. Muriel is not allowed into the white side of the store to do this task because she is Black, but the cards are too important to be allowed into Muriel's Black space. The boss is forced to temporarily co-opt Muriel into the white side of the store, a prospect Muriel does not relish, given the chaotic state of that space:

I looked at the little space I was going to share with the unfriendly white staff. There was no proper office with convenient, modern, labour-saving, systematic methods of record-keeping. There were just piles and piles of papers, books, catalogues, stacks of folders and files containing invoices, statements, delivery-notes, hire purchase agreements, approved and pending approval, old and recent, lay about. In fact, everything you can think of. Things were just jumbled around on tables and desks.... There were radio spare parts, tape recorders, irons, electric kettles, and so on. (Tlali 1987, 24)

Despite being rigidly policed by apartheid laws and Mr. Bloch, the state of disorder in the store and its constant crowdedness gives it a shambolic air, the antithesis of the racial ordering and separateness that is apartheid's preoccupation. Thus, while the store is set up to maintain the separation of races, it is impossible for it to function smoothly without the integration of Muriel's Black body within its bounds. The space's constant abjection of Muriel, one of its integral parts, along with her reluctant reintegration, points to the illogical nature of apartheid. The clutter and chaos prefigures disintegration and decay, and, ultimately, apartheid's demise.

While Metropolitan's primary function is presumably to make as much money as possible for its owner within the framework of apartheid capitalism, Tlali demonstrates, through her rendering of Metropolitan's spatiality, the ways in which the maintenance of apartheid undercuts this capitalist function. While the store has to make a profit, its secondary function is the constant maintenance of apartheid within its confines, an objective which consistently subverts the store's money-making capacity. The owner, Mr. Bloch, is constantly engaged in "clearing" the store of Black customers, whom he paradoxically needs for the maintenance of his business. In the novel's opening sequence, a number of Black customers and prospective employees are lined up in the store's aisles, waiting for him. He immediately orders the Black foreman to "just get rid of these boys, man; they've been here too long, man" (Tlali 1987, 9). In a later exchange, when two Black men are lingering, he exhorts the store manager: "Get rid of them quickly, Pont, they're smelling the shop out!" (Tlali 1987, 26)

Mr. Bloch's anxiety with "clearing the shop" (Tlali 1987, 9) becomes a recurring theme within the novel; a fixation which extends to the Black workers. Throughout the novel they line up to see him, take orders, or receive their pay, causing Mr. Bloch to constantly reconfigure the space by moving their bodies around. He constantly bellows: "Stand there!" (Tlali 1987, 45) In policing the store in this way, Mr. Bloch is also engaged in the project of maintaining white purity. As geographer Perry L. Carter points out, configuring and reconfiguring human geographic spaces can be read as a racialized act aimed at preserving white privilege:

'Race' at its basic level has to do with bodies and the spaces between them. Whiteness, or any other racial identity, cannot exist without the concurrent

existence of exclusive racial spaces. These exclusionary spaces can range in scale from the home to the nation-state. White privilege is largely the prerogative of not having to share spaces with non-Whites. White privilege requires the power to keep certain bodies within certain places. (Carter 2006, 241-242)

Yet, the maintenance of apartheid and by extension, Mr. Bloch's maintenance of white purity within the store, works at cross-purposes with the store's capitalist aims. The customers are, after all, the lifeblood of the business; their presence and money necessary for its continued survival. Yet Mr. Bloch's obsession with purging the store of Black bodies and maintaining its white purity, along with the spatial layout of the place, paradoxically abjects those most needed for its survival, in the same way the apartheid state abjects those Black subjects upon whose labor its functioning hinges. Again, in using the recurring trope of clearing the space, Tlali articulates a subaltern, Black geography, which points to the structural contradiction within the system of apartheid; one which prefigures apartheid's eventual demise.

Tlali makes visible a similar flaw in apartheid-capitalist logic in her depiction of endless rounds of waiting in the store. A recurring motif in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, related to the allocation of space, is the image of lines of Black customers and workers, standing around, idly waiting for Mr. Bloch. Apartheid is enforced even in the ease with which bodies are allowed to move through the space of the store. White customers are never expected to line up – they are served immediately upon entering the store, regardless of the number of Black customers, or how long these have been waiting. As the white owner of the store, Mr. Bloch is unable to delegate responsibility for the store's functioning to anyone Black. As part of the maintenance of apartheid in the store, he has to witness or approve any significant transaction or

interaction. As a result, the workers spend hours of unproductive, idle time, merely waiting for him. When Muriel is granted special permission to cross over to the white side of the store to reconcile the statements with the ledger cards, she has to wait on Mr. Bloch to prepare the space for her by reorganizing the chaotic desk. “I just had to wait. No one else was allowed to touch those piles of paper. He alone could do it” (Tlali 1987, 24).

And so I waited. For hours I had nothing to do. Later in the afternoon, I grew more and more restless, so I went and asked him if there was nothing I could do while waiting for the clearing to be done. ‘Just wait, Muriel,’ he said calmly. (Tlali 1987, 24)

Many other vignettes center on the Black male salesmen waiting. Such lining up and waiting directly undermines Mr. Bloch’s constant clearing of the space, since it paradoxically, leads to Black bodies spending longer periods of time in the space he wishes to purify. Yet he seems unable to reconcile his methodology of making Black people wait with the constant congestion of the store. His two anxieties – constant surveillance of the store, and the repeated, ritualistic clearing of the space of Black people – thus work against each other to further chaos in the space. In addition, the waiting subverts the primary capitalist function of the store: when workers wait, they are unproductive, and are unable to make money. Mr. Bloch seems oblivious to these contradictions inherent in his systems of surveillance and cleansing, and the larger contradiction between apartheid, productivity, and creating wealth.

The impossibility of maintaining pure apartheid through the ritualistic cleansing of space becomes a larger theme within the novel, one that haunts the perimeters of Metropolitan Furniture Store. While the self-perpetuating drama of surveillance and unproductive clearing within the store is reiterated within the store,

another type of “contamination” takes place just beyond its doors. Metropolitan is housed on the ground floor of a block of flats (apartments) occupied by white tenants. These flats are also the sites of “location[s] in the sky” (Tlali 1987, 16) – cramped, tiny quarters on the top of the apartment blocks which by night house the Black domestic workers who tend to the occupants of the flats by day. Again, the Black body is abjected from the space which cannot function without its labor into the liminal space of the location in the sky. The Black body and its necessary labor are thus present within the city and the white home in this way, but the location in the sky marks an attempt to erase all traces of the Black body. Yet these traces can never be completely erased.

Tlali shows how the liminal space of the location in the sky, used by whites to abject Black bodies, works to subvert the apartheid system. During her visit to the outdoor toilet, Muriel becomes acquainted with Ben, a caretaker for one block of flats, and the occupant of a tiny room which is part of the location. Ben has a lot of disposable income, and when Muriel enquires about its source, he reveals to her that he rents out the room at night to couples who are having illicit sex. Ben’s best paying customers are white men who are having sexual relations with African or Coloured women, an act made illegal by South Africa’s Immorality Law.

‘Do you have many such mixed cases?’ ‘Oh yes!’ Ben exclaimed. This Saturday night, for instance, the Marshall Square Police sergeant is coming with Hazel.... He is always coming with her, and he gives me a lot of money. Ten rands per night. I don’t mind. I give them the room and squeeze myself into the boiler room or the toilet.’ (Tlali 1987, 33)

On another occasion, Ben protects Muriel from white kids who are throwing stones at her, causing Muriel to caution him that he might be jailed for harming white children.

Ben replies:

‘Not when their fathers are some of my best customers. They are my brothers-in-law at night when the lights are out.’ (Tlali 1987, 111)

Again, a space which is created to preserve the purity of white South Africa becomes the site of contamination by means of interracial sex. The structures which are meant to maintain the pristine nature of whiteness - policemen and patriarchal fathers - become the very agents of white contamination by Black bodies. Again, Tlali shows how apartheid works against itself, its contradictions ultimately becoming the source of its demise.

The ultimate commentary on apartheid’s unviability comes toward the end of the novel, in a climactic confrontation between Muriel and the white women workers, shortly before Muriel resigns. The women are discussing the world’s first successful heart transplant in South Africa, notably the fact that a Coloured person’s heart was transplanted into the body of a white person. The conversation centers around the permissibility of putting a Coloured heart into a white body, and how the authorities could have allowed the transplant, given the apartheid laws. One of the most racist white women, Mrs. Stein, argues that “the heart is merely a muscle. It merely pumps blood” (Tlali 1987, 176). Muriel retorts that, “Surely the Coloured’s heart was not cleaned out or sterilised first to make sure that none of his blood would be introduced into the white man’s veins?” (Tlali 1987, 176) This, says Muriel, is proof that human beings are human beings, since blood cannot be Black or white. “Blood is blood,” she insists, to the dismay of the whites in the store. The ultimate ‘contamination’ of white

space – implanting a non-white heart into a white body – points to the constructedness of race, extending the trope of deconstructing pristine, uncontaminated white space to the arena of the body, thus deconstructing racial physicality and boundaries. It demonstrates the hypocrisy of apartheid’s foundational lie: that differentially marked, racialized bodies are, indeed, materially different, and should therefore be treated unequally. Tlali shows the interdependence of different racial bodies upon each other, demonstrating again how Black bodies are literally the lifeblood of white bodies and the white nation which abjects as it exploits Black subjects. In pointing to the socially constructed nature of both the body and of space, Tlali thus denaturalizes white hegemonic ideology about the racialized body and racialized space, the idea, as McKittrick puts it, that space “just is” (2006, xi) and instead demonstrates, through her alternate view from below the way that apartheid uses bodies and space to racially co-construct each other.

Lauretta Ngcobo: Stirring Up the Nation to Create Feminist Space

In contrast to *Muriel at Metropolitan*, Ngcobo’s *And They Didn’t Die* (1989) is set against the sweeping backdrop of a vast rural landscape, and a main character’s migrations between this rural and various urban settings. Stung by UK feminist criticism that the only woman in *Cross of Gold*, Sindisiwe, dies too soon, Ngcobo uses her second novel, *And They Didn’t Die* to bring to life a host of strong, resilient Black women characters, chief among them Jezile, engaged in countless acts of resistance against the apartheid state. Ngcobo was able to write and publish two novels, *Cross of Gold* and *And They Didn’t Die*, only once she had left South Africa. Her husband’s arrest and imprisonment for his political involvement led to her exile

in Swaziland, Tanzania and Zambia in the 1960s. She eventually settled in England, where she wrote both novels. Like many other Black writers, she found within the physical space of South Africa little room for creative expression: while living in the country she found herself stifled and unable to produce literary work in a nation which she describes as “muzzled breathless” (Ngcobo 1987, 134). It took time and the development of a feminist consciousness for Ngcobo to conceive of a strong, agentic, Black woman character. In critiquing *Cross of Gold* years after its publication, Ngcobo reflects that Sindisiwe’s premature death was a product of her socialization within a deeply patriarchal and racist society.

I had learned earlier that women didn’t count much. They hadn’t got an independent life of their own. When Sindisiwe dies, only her sons can live and go into the cities. Women remained in the rural areas. They didn’t go out, they didn’t make things happen.... Sindisiwe herself dies because what else can she do? (Ngcobo 2006)

And They Didn’t Die’s title is a direct commentary on the criticism of Sindisiwe’s death in *Cross of Gold*. Set in the small, rural reserve of Sigageni in the then Natal Province, the novel explicates the effects of apartheid on the most dispossessed group in South Africa: Black rural women, confined to the Bantustans (or Black reserves) through apartheid law. The main character, Jezile, is a woman confined to a Bantustan in rural Kwazulu/Natal. Separated from her husband, a migrant worker in Durban, by the Pass Laws which prohibit her from entering and living with him in the city, Jezile is forced to live with her mother-in-law in abject poverty. Because apartheid prohibits her from working in the city, she ekes out a living as a subsistence farmer. Conditions of drought, exacerbated by oppressive apartheid laws, make life almost unbearably difficult for Jezile. She is plagued first by childlessness, in a

deeply patriarchal society where a woman's worth is measured by her ability to produce children; then suffers the misery of watching her children slowly starve towards death because of the harsh conditions spawned by apartheid segregation and the confinement of Black women to the Bantustans. The novel shows the impact of the exploitative migrant labor system operated by the apartheid government, which saw fit men torn away from their families to work in the cities as cheap sources of labor, with devastating consequences for Black family life.

Like Tlali's novel, *And They Didn't Die* is path-breaking in its portrayal of the experiences of a Black woman from her perspective, giving its main character a subjective life, interiority, and a voice heretofore unparalleled in South African literature. While the primary source of oppression in Jezile's life, and the lives of the other women in her community, is apartheid law, Ngcobo makes visible the ways in which African women are positioned between two overlapping forces of oppression: apartheid and patriarchal African customary law. Apartheid denies the women the right to own property, thus condemning them to unrelenting poverty, and delimits where the women may live, how often they see their husbands, and their freedom of movement. While Sigageni is gendered a female space through the forced absence of men conscripted into the migrant labor workforce, customary law renders it a deeply patriarchal space. Customary law considers all married women minors and prescribes rigid behavioral codes, enforced by mothers-in-law in the absence of men. The women of Sigageni defy these codes at the cost of being ostracized from their community. In grappling with these intersecting forms of oppression, Jezile shows a keen understanding of the ways in which these two oppositional forces operate upon

her and constrict opportunities to create a fulfilling life for her and her three children. Jezile expresses feelings of being “trapped between the impositions of customary law, state law and migratory practices” (Ngcobo 1999, 40), and once able to identify the sources of her oppression, she is able to act strategically in order to resist and mitigate them.

Ngcobo opens the novel by introducing Sigageni as a space gendered female, with a community of women who act collectively to resist apartheid and continually transform the space within which they live. The novel has an omniscient narrator, and while the reader identifies with Jezile, its main character, it is not as intimate an identification as with Muriel, who is the first person narrator of *Muriel at Metropolitan*. This is a deliberate strategy, since Ngcobo attempts with *And They Didn't Die* to demonstrate the mechanics and value of communal women's resistance, as well as the strength of the women's movement in a rural location. The novel's opening fictionalizes the 1959 protests against the extension of pass laws to African women, beginning with a scene of rebellion by the women of Sigageni. In this year rural women started destroying government-owned dipping tanks, used for dipping white farmers' cattle to eradicate parasite infestations, in rural Natal, eventually demolishing up to three quarters of all government dipping tanks. Because of the dipping-tank protests, hundreds of rural Natal women were arrested in 1959. Ngcobo's novel opens with a white government official surveying a destroyed dipping tank, and lamenting the behavior of

these women, this strange breed of womanhood, thin and ragged and not like women at all - they think they rule the world, they spill men's beers, they herd cattle, they plough fields, they run this community. That's what it is; that's

why this defiance - they've lost respect for manhood, for all authority, but they haven't got the sense to do it properly. (Ngcobo 1999, 2)

In contrast with Muriel's initial silence and acquiescence to the system under which she works and lives, the characters in *And They Didn't Die* are from the outset marked as rebellious, resistant women who refuse to be co-opted in the perpetuation of apartheid. Their illicit movement in the middle of the night to the dipping tanks on the outskirts of their village marks them as women who are not afraid to transgress the spatial restrictions placed upon them by apartheid law. The reader is introduced to Jezile through this action: though one of the younger women in the community, she is a ringleader within this group, and the one who initiated the act of resistance.

Jezile's movement through space despite the restrictions placed upon her by apartheid and patriarchal culture becomes an enduring theme throughout the novel. When she is unable to become pregnant as a newly-wed because of the infrequency of her husband Siyalo's visits, Jezile takes matters into her own hands and resolves to travel to Durban without her mother-in-law or husband's consent in order to spend time with Siyalo. She makes the decision to leave Sigageni by herself, resolving to "wait no longer for other people to do things to make decisions about her life" (Ngcobo 1999, 10). She informs Siyalo of her imminent visit by letter, then reflects:

Her letter had a decisiveness about her that thrilled her. It felt wonderful to be taking charge of her own destiny, she had never done it before. She stopped for a moment as an encroaching doubt about Siyalo reared to intimidate her. She dismissed it as instantly as it had come – he would have to live with a changed wife just as she was coping with a fast-changing husband. (Ngcobo 1999, 11)

Radicalized by the communal activism of the women of Sigageni, Jezile is emboldened to take action in her personal life and to decide for herself what is needed

to improve her life. This sense of agency plays out mostly through migration: she leaves the village and travels on her own to the unknown city of Durban in order to be with Siyalo and conceive a child. Through a developing sense of personal agency, she is able to act decisively and embark on a journey from a familiar place into the unknown. And migration, in turn, radicalizes Jezile even more, engendering her increasing levels of agency, given the political protests she encounters and becomes part of once in Durban.

Jezile's first encounter with the space of the city is overwhelming, invoking contradictory feelings. Durban, with its "hotch-potch of human experience, that patchwork of human endeavour" is at "at once elevating and shattering; vast yet constricting" (Ngcobo 1999, 22). Ngcobo sketches a detailed picture of the single-sex hostels where African men who labor in the city are forced to live, conveying Jezile's shock at the conditions in which she finds Siyalo living. The hostel, "honeycombed with a thousand windows" (Ngcobo 1999, 24), proves an unpleasant surprise for her:

Except for the free flow of the people, in and out of the gate, the place was so austere and grim it could have been a prison. It gave the feeling of prohibition, and a feeling of trespassing that made Jezile's heart beat faster. (Ngcobo 1999, 24)

The inside of the hostel is even grimmer. The description of the space Siyalo occupies makes clear the intent of apartheid spatial design of hostels: to dehumanize the people who live there by affording them no personal space or privacy. Beds are crammed into the long hostel passages, denoting the transience of the bodies meant to occupy these spaces. A passage is not a space which contains; rather, one passes through it in order to move from one location to another. The migrant workers who are crowded

into this space are clearly temporary cogs in the wheel of apartheid capitalism, easily dispensed with and interchangeable with other Black male bodies.

In an attempt to secure some privacy, the occupants of the hostel have created small cubicles by curtaining off space around each bed. Registering Jezile's shock at his living conditions, Siyalo creeps "with stooped shoulders" (Ngcobo 1999, 24) towards his cubicle and disappears behind the curtain "as though they were back in childhood, playing hide-and-seek" (Ngcobo 1999, 24). The space seems to reduce those who live in it to children, making them appear and feel smaller than what they are. Siyalo's stooped shoulders signify a shrinking of dignity; a constriction of the self in order to fit within a designated space. As Jezile inspects the tiny cubicle, Siyalo is filled with embarrassment and shame as he finds "the Durban of their dreams, and his life it, under scrutiny" (Ngcobo 1999, 25). As Siyalo becomes smaller before her eyes, Jezile finds herself resenting both Siyalo and Durban, the place that has turned him into less of a man. When he takes her, the following day, to the township of KwaMashu, he too becomes associated with the "matchbox houses" of the squalid township – that "human reservoir of Durban" (Ngcobo 1999, 30) with its "little houses stuck on the green hills like scabs" (Ngcobo 1999 28).

Everything he said shattered her illusions and she resented it. She turned her head and fixed her gaze in the distance in an effort to cut out Siyalo and the city. Nothing seemed right about this place. She was not sure whether it was the place or Siyalo. (Ngcobo 1999, 28)

In this way Siyalo's identity becomes entangled with that of the space which delimits the bounds of his person and ultimately, reduces him in his wife's eyes. Here, Ngcobo demonstrates how "practices of domination, sustained by [white hegemony's] unitary

vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where non-dominant groups ‘naturally’ belong” (McKittrick 2006, xv). However, Jezile’s oppositional vantage point, her questioning of her husband’s “place” within the space that dehumanizes him, serves to interrogate the natural order of apartheid hostels, questioning the idea that space “just is” (McKittrick 2006, xi), and that Siyalo belongs there. In this way, Ngobo succeeds in separating Siyalo’s identity from the oppressive space in which he finds himself, denaturalizing both the space of the hostel, and the racialized construct of Siyalo as a Black man as shaped through place.

As Margaret Daymond (1999) points out, *And They Didn’t Die* functions as a treatise on the effects of the Land Act of 1913 on Black South African women in particular. This Act severely curtailed Black ownership of agricultural land. The Act’s extension in 1936, the Native Land and Trust Act, saw Black ownership of rural farm land restricted to 13 percent of all available land in South Africa. While the effects of this disavowal had been documented by Black male writers, for example, in Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930), Ngobo’s is the first novel to depict the consequences of this abrupt severance from the land from the standpoint of a Black woman. Ngobo uses motherhood as a literary device to convey the devastating psychic disruption that comes from being torn from ancestral land. In traditional African culture, an individual’s connection to the land of his or her ancestors is an integral part of identity. Dispossession of such land has far reaching consequences on the self. As Wisker has posits, in Black women’s literature “space, place and the people in that social context enable self-definition, the establishment and maintenance of an identity, a sense of belonging, and a place from which to grow” (2001, 146). Jezile is

viscerally confronted by the destabilization of identity stemming from dispossession from the land upon the birth of her first daughter. Alarmed at the death of her friend Zenzile during childbirth, Jezile takes the unusual precaution of birthing her baby at a state hospital. Her mother-in-law resents this fact, as it has severed the newborn from her place of birth. Visiting Jezile and the baby, S'naye, the mother-in-law feels "something constricting about the place... They were dealing with Jezile and herself and the baby as though they owned them" (Ngcobo 1999, 73). MaBiyela berates Jezile for handing over the placenta to the nurses.

'The placenta is the bond between you and the baby and the earth. It will always draw you together. It should be buried in a secret spot, known only to the members of the family. Otherwise, it leaves you and the child vulnerable. .. And for the baby, it is the tie that binds her firmly to her place of birth. It will always draw her back to her home, no matter how far she travels.'
(Ngcobo 1999, 74)

Jezile, full of remorse, realizes that she does not know what has happened to the placenta - it has probably been incinerated, leaving her daughter forever disconnected from the place of her birth.

Jezile shuddered visibly. It was her turn now to look disturbed. It was as though the hospital had deprived her of a prized possession; a bequest to her child; an affinity so abstract, yet so binding to her and to the land – the place of her birth. (Ngcobo 1999, 74)

MaBiyela agonizes over the future that awaits the baby, who has started off "a waif," just as "our whole nation is that of waifs and strays now" (Ngcobo 1999, 74). The poverty which indirectly unhomes the baby is a direct result of apartheid policy. Her disconnection from her place of birth echoes the births of millions of other babies born in apartheid South Africa, forever disposed from the soil of their country, and thus, from a fully actualized identity.

Ngcobo's most valuable contribution to South African literature is by far the feminist reconfiguring of space in *And They Didn't Die*. The women in her novel are constantly stirring up the spaces they occupy, transforming space into protective feminist enclaves or political tools with which to resist apartheid. Several scenes in the novel attest to this spatial reshaping. The first space transformed by women's activism is the prayer meeting every Thursday afternoon. Here, the women are aware that "they were keeping a tryst with a large number of other women from the length and breadth of the country. Few things could bring together so many women at one time of day throughout the country, every week of every year" (Ngcobo 1999, 40-41). Nosizwe Morena, a local physician, leads the prayer meeting, ostensibly a religious gathering. While these meetings are partly aimed at prayer and worship, "in some parts, prayer had assumed a much wider meaning over and above the strictly religious intention. They still sang and prayed and cried, but they also talked and discussed the causes behind their beset lives" (Ngcobo 1999, 41). After prayer, Nosizwe leads the women in a consciousness-raising session, expounding on the causes of their hardship. She explains that:

'There are times I feel that many of us suffer and fight back without the full understanding of what is going on, why it is going on, and where it is taking us to. We, the women in the rural areas, need to know why we are here when our husbands are there; why we starve when south Africa is such a large and wealthy country, and what might happen to us if we keep on asking these questions.' (Ngcobo 1999, 42)

Nosizwe further explains the reserves and their functions as providing "a source of cheap labour for white people's agriculture, mining and industry" (Ngcobo 1999, 42), and the women as the producers of migrant labour who are forced into starvation by

their husbands' absences. She links the women's struggle with grinding poverty to their lack of access to land, and links their struggle to wider, pan-African anti-colonial struggles headed by Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, urging the women to "rise and demand our own freedom in response to the call of that spirit of freedom that is raging through our continent" (Ngcobo 1999, 48). Though ten policemen are monitoring the prayer meeting, they are impotent in the face of the form the gathering takes. To break up a meeting in a church would be obscene; with "their purpose foiled" (Ngcobo 1999, 49) "they stood there watching people praying to their God" (Ngcobo 1999, 49) before leaving the women's space.

This meeting is a key event in the novel, which radicalizes the women of Sigageni and charges the atmosphere of the entire village. After the meeting, it is as if "a fuse had been lit and the moment of detonation was not far off" (Ngcobo 1999, 50). In this way, the women use the seemingly benign space of the prayer meeting, transforming it before the very eyes of the oppressors into a tool for fighting their political oppression. So, the women come to inhabit two parallel spaces in their day-to-day living. There are the surface activities of day-to-day subsistence, which mask a subversive space within which they are constantly strategizing against and resisting the enforcers of apartheid.

To the casual observer the women of Sabelweni (the larger district) were at home looking after their livestock. But beneath the surface, within the community, they formed a network of messengers relaying messages from one group to another. And whenever the police or soldiers came round, the women gave warning cries as signals to others in hiding. (Ngcobo 1999, 180)

In this way, they continuously reconfigure apartheid space and geography, and in their resistance, succeed in transforming the space into one which works for the

benefit of Black women. The women similarly subvert space to use it as a protective mechanism when they are being persecuted. While protesting the extension of the Pass Laws to African women, the women set out to defy the officials who arrived in the village to issue passes. The women collectively move away from the area in which official tents have been erected, prompting police to follow them. The women sit down around Jezile, drawing a protective circle around her with their bodies while dropping their pass books at her feet.

Jezile, facing away from the assembly of policemen, stealthily set the pile of books alight. The police watched unable to observe exactly what was happening at first. Then there was a sudden cry of triumph from the women who were mingling and dancing, some ululating and others shouting slogans. The police were thrown into total confusion, and it was quite some time before they realised that the women were burning their passes. Although they had seen the women forming a ring around Jezile, they could not say exactly who had done what. (Ngcobo 1999, 79)

When they are arrested a few days later for protesting against the extension of the pass law, the women are sentenced to six months of hard labor. Imprisoned, they spend their days crushing enormous quarry rocks into small stones, “an exercise in futility, a waste of physical strength...” in which they spend their days pitching themselves “against the might of the earth, against nature, in conflict with the bedrock of life” (Ngcobo 1999, 96). At the quarry, they protect their leader, the doctor, who is unaccustomed to difficult physical labor, in the same way they protected Jezile when she burnt the passes.

The women around Nosizwe drew closer, so close that from a distance the watchful guard could not count her flagging strokes. In quick, deft movements Jezile dragged mounds of broken pieces in front of Nosizwe, a pile larger than any in front of the others. That evening, the women went back to prison happy that they had shielded her from the prison guard. (Ngcobo 1999, 97)

In using their bodies to protect Jezile and Nosiswe, the women demonstrate the effectiveness of communal political action. When acting together, it is difficult for police to single out one scapegoat: their collective shielding forms a community poised to act against apartheid's enforcers. Ngcobo, through the reconfiguring of space via Black female bodies, here provides a model for effective feminist political action.

Both Tlali and Ngcobo use space in their novels as a means to "write" the nation and its geography from a subaltern standpoint. Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* uses the compressed space of a capitalist venture to show the structural contradictions of apartheid, foretelling the eventual demise of the system. Ngcobo's novel uses a larger, migratory space which is constantly reconfigured and reordered by the women who inhabit it for the express political aim of gaining their liberation. Both of these iterations of the nation-space offer readers a novel way of reading and understanding the nation as a space which is not only raced, but also gendered in very specific ways. Written from the subjective viewpoint of Black women, these texts offer ways to understand the nation that had not previously existed.

While both writers engage creatively with apartheid space, and Ngcobo, particularly, offers an alternative way for Black women subjects to inhabit space, both novels end on a somber note, seemingly offering little vision for a South Africa without apartheid in the immediate future. In *And they Didn't Die*, Jezile eventually becomes a fugitive from the law after killing a white soldier who attempts to rape her daughter. She explains the death to her estranged husband: "I had to kill him. They've destroyed us, Siyalo. They broke our marriage, they broke our life here at Sabelweni,

and they've broken all our children's lives and killed many. He was raping our daughter. I had to defend her. We have to defend ourselves" (Ngcobo 1999, 245). This conclusion represents an unapologetic justification for the armed struggle against the apartheid state.

While Jezile is able to exert a certain amount of agency as a Black, rural woman through her and other women's creative use of space; apartheid structures ultimately come crashing down on her, quashing what little agency and resilience she has left. All the relationships that make meaning in of her life are destroyed; she has to abandon her home and become a fugitive after killing a white man: all she escapes with is her life.

Tlali's Muriel, having had enough of the racism in the store, quits her job at Metropolitan for a better-paying one at a motorcycle repair workshop. While the new position offers the hope of better conditions, the offer of employment is ultimately withdrawn, as the owner of the workshop does not have a separate restroom for Muriel, as required by law. Her hopes of a better life are crushed – no matter where she moves she cannot escape the rigid confines of apartheid. At the end of the novel, she is unemployed, and reflects on her desperate situation:

Those damnable laws which dictate to you where, and next to whom, you shall walk, sit, stand and lie... This whole abominable nauseating business of toilets and 'separate but equal facilities'... What is one to do anyway? One is forever in a trap from which there is no way of escape... except suicide. (Tlali 1987, 189-190)

The works reviewed here represent an insertion of Black women's experiences into a realm from which they have been deliberately "written out" by apartheid law, structures and ideology. Given the brutality of the apartheid state, these writers are

preoccupied with highlighting the adverse conditions Black people, and especially Black women face, the harshness with which apartheid laws are implemented, and the consequences of apartheid in Black people's lives. What emerges is a fairly unitary discourse of dispossession, with the express political aim of toppling apartheid. As such, these novels should be read as highly subversive acts of writing: writing which countered a brutal metanarrative of white supremacy and segregation. In a very real way, these writers, in inscribing their versions of reality on South African history, were risking their lives. While preoccupied with the workings of apartheid on the nation, and on the subjectivity of Black women in particular, a close reading of their work reveals that their literary aesthetic can hardly be termed an anti-aesthetic, as it has been characterized by critics such as Ndebele and Nkosi. In narrating from the standpoint of Black women and in creatively engaging the spatiality of apartheid, Tlali and Ngcobo offered new ways of reading the nation, valuable for elucidating the ways in which the national space genders Black women, and how Black women, in turn shape and reshape that space.

Chapter 5: Interrogating “Truth” in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, Narratives of Rape, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has arguably been this country’s greatest post-apartheid nation-building project. As a nationalist apparatus in an emerging democracy, the Commission was conceived to unify a fractured people and construct the “Rainbow Nation” espoused by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC’s Chair. But how did the practices of the TRC and the discourses generated by it situate women?

This chapter examines the way in which the TRC produced what Nthabiseng Motsemme and Kopano Ratele have called a patriarchal, nationalist discourse around women and gender. It then goes on to perform an intertextual reading and analysis of the novel *David’s Story* (2000), by South African writer Zoë Wicomb, that juxtaposes the novel intertextually with narratives of the rape of guerrilla women, presented at the TRC and subsequently published in the Commission’s *Report*. *David’s Story* was published in 2000, two years after the TRC’s final report on human rights violations, victim reparation and amnesty for perpetrators of human rights violations during the apartheid era. Set in the period 1991 to 1994 – the interregnum between the unbanning of the liberation movement and the first democratic election, Wicomb’s novel is the story of an anti-apartheid activist, David, as related to an unnamed female writer, because the chief protagonist feels “unwilling or unable to flesh out the

narrative” himself (Wicomb 2001, 1). The text chronicles David’s struggle in the underground anti-apartheid movement, and also atrocities he has witnessed the liberation movement inflict on those suspected of being spies for the South African government. Though the novel does not directly deal with the subject of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I read it against narratives of the rape of women guerrillas within the liberation movement as produced at the TRC, since the novel is the only contemporary one which deals with this subject.

David’s Story represents a counter-narrative to the three dominant, nation-building narratives produced by the TRC: discourses of truth as a fixed quantity, grand narratives of unifying nationalism, and the elision of women’s experiences of rape and torture within the ranks of the liberation movement. I argue that the novel represents an important intervention into the way in which the TRC constructed women who testified before it. Often, they were constructed as secondary, indirect victims of apartheid, and their experiences of human rights abuses, including rape by their fellow combatants within the liberation movement, were elided by the TRC’s treatment of their stories. I show how the novel challenges these discursive constructions of women as secondary victims of human rights abuses by means of a narrative structure which destabilizes the identity of the main character, thus undercutting and de-authorizing the story he tells. In doing so, Wicomb disrupts the notion of a coherent self capable of producing and laying claim to a cohesive “truth.” Such a notion of truth was central to the TRC’s nation-building mission, as is evident in the Commission’s logo: “Truth: The Road to Reconciliation.”

I further argue that *David's Story*, in revealing the silences around the rape of guerrilla women by their fellow combatants during the anti-apartheid struggle, works to highlight this elision in South Africa's national history. Comparing *David's Story* to narratives surrounding the rape of guerrilla women presented at the TRC and published in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* thus uncovers this novel as an intervention into masculinist, unitary discourses of the "new" nation.

This chapter is divided into three sections: I outline the position of women in South Africa during the transition to democracy; discuss how the nationalist discourse about the emerging South Africa produced at the TRC situated women in relation to the nation; and finally, I analyze *David's Story* in relation to women guerillas' TRC testimony about rape.

Women and the South African Transition to Democracy

With the election of April 1994, South Africa achieved a relatively peaceful transition from white supremacist theocracy to fully-inclusive democracy. Formerly dispossessed Black citizens were inaugurated into legal citizenship within their country, and the ANC-led government embarked on a deliberate nation-building project, aimed at solidifying a unitary national identity for all South Africans.

In pursuit of this goal, the policies enacted by the South African government echoes the trends Kumari Jayawardena documents in studying the anti-colonial struggles of other 'third-world' countries, among them India, Egypt, Turkey, and Sri Lanka. Jayawardena posits that the rise of nationalist, anti-imperialist political organizations often engendered the emergence of feminist movements in such

societies, and that “struggles for women’s emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements” (Jayawardena 1986, 8). However, Jayawardena also shows that once nationalist ideals were achieved, the demands of women tended to be subsumed under new discourses of the emerging nation. While legal equality may be obtained for women in such societies, women’s movements have rarely been able to change patriarchal attitudes which manifest themselves in each of these societies’ post-liberation struggles.

Even with legislated citizenship obtained through nationalist struggle, women remain “both of and not of the nation” (Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem 1999, 12), as patriarchy continues to position them in a liminal, ambivalent space in relation to the nation. Elleke Boehmer notes of Africa’s many anti-imperial struggles that “at all points in the long process of decolonization and national reconstitution, male power elites were operative, their authority having been already endorsed and blessed by earlier colonial and indigenous patriarchies” (Boehmer 1991, 7). And so

Despite promises of national freedom, women were therefore excluded from full national participation on an equal footing with men. Even where women, as in Algeria or Zimbabwe, fought for freedom alongside men, national consciousness was composed by male leaders. Mother Africa may have been declared free, but the mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed. (Boehmer 1991, 7)

South Africa’s belated entry into “freedom” gave feminist activists, many of them working under the aegis of the national liberation movement, the opportunity to strategize around their position in the liberation movement and their future citizenship in a free South Africa. Debates around women’s role within the liberation movement and in a future South Africa became increasingly pronounced toward the latter half of

the 1980s.⁶ Unable to ignore the sexism and marginal status accorded them within the mass democratic movement, the women within the liberation movement foresaw the need to act strategically to ensure that women and gender concerns would not be marginalized in a democratic South Africa.

Aware of the ways in which nationalisms had marginalized gender concerns post-independence elsewhere on the African continent, South African women in the national liberation movement organized the Malibongwe Conference in the Netherlands in 1990 as a means of strategically placing gender concerns and the position of women on the national agenda. Themed “Women United for a Unitary, Non-racial, Democratic South Africa,” the Malibongwe Conference for the first time brought together activist women from within South Africa and those exiled by the apartheid regime. The aim of the gathering was overtly political and twofold: the conference prioritized national liberation as the primary means for emancipating women within South Africa, while also emphasizing that women’s emancipation needed to occur concurrently to national liberation. The Conference resolved to “ensure that the issue women’s liberation receives priority on the agendas of the ANC and all progressive organisations and that there is an ongoing discussion about the relationship between national liberation, women’s liberation and working class victory in these formations” (Malibongwe Conference Programme of Action 1990).

As politicians began negotiating the transfer of political power from the white minority to the Black majority, women were initially excluded from the negotiating process. Political parties, including the ANC, came to the negotiating table in 1992 at

⁶ See Shireen Hassim (2002) and Desiree Lewis. *Gender and Women’s Studies in South Africa: A Review Report* (2002).

the Congress for Democratic South Africa (CODESA) with not a single woman delegate present. This exclusion provoked the outrage of the women's movement and elicited a threat from the ANC Women's League to mobilize women to boycott the first democratic election. It also led to the formation of the Women's National Coalition in 1992. The coalition resulted from a meeting in 1991 by a broad range of women's organizations, women aligned to political parties, and women aligned to the mass democratic movement. The organization formed was unique in South Africa, as for the first time women were not seeking to build a movement affiliated to the progressive, anti-apartheid movement, but were organizing explicitly along gender lines.

The Women's National Coalition successfully demanded inclusion in the CODESA negotiations. As a result of its inclusion, it obtained many gains for women in post-apartheid South Africa, amongst these the enshrinement of sexual equality in the country's new constitution and a quota system which guaranteed that women would make up at least thirty percent of all governing structures (Goetz and Hassim 2003). Yet, the situation in South Africa mirrors that which Jayawardene has pointed out with regards to many postcolonial Asian nations; that is, structures of patriarchy have remained largely unchanged in South Africa after 1994.

On the other hand, some analysts such as Gwendolyn Mikell, Florence Wakoko and Linda Lobao, and Annemarie Goetz suggest that women can benefit from moments of transition. They argue that times of political flux and uncertainty, such as the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, open up strategic space for women to insert gender-specific demands within the national framework.

The examples of the Malibongwe Conference and the Women's National Coalition bear out this assertion.

Significantly, the transition to democracy also engendered a new discursive space for Black women and their writing. Whereas the narratives of Black women writers under apartheid were concerned with decrying the political disavowal of Black people, the end of apartheid signified the opening up of potential space to explore issues not directly related to hardship under apartheid and exclusion from the nation. Moreover, whereas the dominant national narrative prior to 1994 was one of separateness and white supremacy, the metanarrative of post-apartheid South Africa became a unitary, Black nationalism - often masculinist in its articulation - which would serve to foster a united new South Africa. In continuing to struggle for women's emancipation from oppressive social and political structures Black women writers have continued to fracture this metanarrative, with many choosing to explore issues of minority ethnicity, female subjectivity and female sexuality. These literary explorations have engendered a multitude of counternarratives to the dominant construct of a unitary nation. Chief among these works has been *David's Story*, which I examine in relation to the TRC after a brief discussion of the way women testified at the TRC.

Women and the TRC

Even before its inception, the TRC was conceptualized primarily as a mechanism for building national unity in a country deeply fractured by years of apartheid, the policy of institutionalized racial discrimination enforced by the National Party (NP) government. The National Party legislated apartheid into being in 1948 through a

number of laws disenfranchising the majority – Black South Africans – and assuring the political and economic hegemony of whites. By the mid-1980s, faced with increasing pressure from the liberation movement within and outside of South Africa, and under mounting international pressure, apartheid was crumbling. In 1990 the Nationalist government unbanned the liberation movement, led by the African National Congress (ANC), and released Nelson Mandela, a key figure in the liberation movement. The scene had been set to transfer political power from the white supremacist regime to a democratic government elected by the majority of South Africans. *David's Story* is set within this period.

The call for a South African Truth Commission first came from senior ANC member Kader Asmal, at his inaugural address as professor of human rights law at the University of the Western Cape in 1992. The ANC's National Executive Committee in 1993 echoed this call, while negotiating a peaceful power transfer with the National Party. The ANC saw such a commission as an important mechanism "to get to the truth" of human rights abuses committed during apartheid (Boraine 2000, 12). Noting the success of the commission's antecedents in other transitional societies, the party submitted that "[t]he experience of Chile, Argentina and El Salvador reflects the cleaning power of truth" (Boraine 2000, 12), initiating a discourse of truth dependent on the concept of "cleaning" - a truth that would arguably produce a clean slate on which to inscribe new concepts of nationhood. The "cleaning power of truth" would also offer absolution to those who committed atrocities during the term eventually set out by the Truth Commission - 1960 to 1994. During the negotiated transfer of power an amnesty agreement was written into South

Africa's interim constitution in order to ensure the peaceful transition from apartheid state to democratic dispensation. The result was the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995, which formally established the TRC the year after South Africa's first democratic election secured political victory for the ANC. The Act outlines a number of objectives for the commission, framed by the overarching aim: "to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past" (Promotion of National Unity Act No. 34, 1995). Other objectives include:

establishing as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from March 1960 to the cut-off date... facilitating the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all the relevant facts relating to acts associated with a political objective and comply with the requirements of this Act; establishing and making known the fate or whereabouts of victims and by restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims, and by recommending reparation measures in respect of them; [and] compiling a report providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the activities and findings of the Commission. (Promotion of National Unity Act No. 34 1995)

The Act defines gross violations of human rights as "the violation of human rights through- a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill-treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a)" (Promotion of National Unity Act 1995).

Gross human rights violations were thus defined to exclude acts of rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment or other forms of gender-based violence, though it could be argued that the Act, through the stated objective of "*establishing... the nature and extent of gross human rights violations*" (emphasis mine) leaves room for the commission to establish, retrospectively, that sexual and gender-based violence

were indeed gross human rights violations. Though this definition allowed for flexibility in defining gross human rights violations, the omission of rape, sexual harassment or sexual assault from the official definition was, whether deliberate or simply an act of omission, a glaring one, which would have serious repercussions for women's testimony at the TRC. Explicitly naming forms of gender-based violence like rape and sexual assault as gross human rights violations, or even forms of torture, would have created the discursive space for women to narrate such experiences as legitimate forms of human rights abuses in testifying at the TRC. It would have allowed South Africans, who were emerging from a period of severe state repression and brutality, to conceptualize acts of rape or sexual abuse as serious human rights violations, on par with killing, torture and kidnapping. Instead, the Act's framing of gross human rights violations to exclude gender-based violence set the scene for a TRC that effaced narratives of sexual violence even before the commission's first hearing. A new metanarrative of "cleaning," "reconciliation" and "nation building" had been constructed, leaving little room for women's counter-narratives. As Dorothy Driver (2005) has shown in her examination of the changing social construction of gender during the TRC's tenure, the Commission ultimately also completely ignored the possibility of the rape or sexual abuse of males, thus "absenting the naming of male rape as a performance of gender" (Driver 2005, 225). This omission marks yet another silence operating around the construct of rape, which genders rape as female, as Meg Samuelson has argued, and effectively "produces women as victims of a special kind" (Samuelson 2007, 121).

The TRC itself thus produced a nationalist discourse of valiant suffering for the greater good of a democratic society. Motsemme and Ratele argue that this discourse was patriarchal, as it privileged heroic male accounts of abuse and resistance, accounts which become the discursive bedrock for forging a new South African national identity. Consequently, they argue, many women's stories, couched mostly as narratives of loss, were subsumed by dominant, masculinist nationalist discourses. The overall project of the TRC was, after all, to produce a nation. Motsemme and Ratele further argue that the kind of nation that the TRC enacted, aspired to profoundly influence ways in which the past was invoked and remembered:

[A]ny conscious act to remember the past will be exclusionary; it will reflect partial truths. Women's testimonies within the TRC reveal a different version of the past, and thus foreground the idea of competing and uneven recollections of the past. In their descriptions women testify to the difficulties in maintaining relationships with their men folk and perceived struggles and failures to sustaining families and homes. Their memory, in other words, is not what generally tends to be spoken of as heroic. Women's testimonies tended to be filled with a deep sense of loss and often negative recollections of the national struggle. (Motsemme and Ratele 2000)

Thus, because many women's stories emphasized loss, women as a group inhabited a liminal space at the TRC. At best, women were allowed to insert a severely weakened counter-discourse into the dominant nationalist discourse being constructed by the TRC's work, but too often this counter narrative was not included in the prevailing narrative of Black unity.

In her study of the TRC's work, social anthropologist Fiona Ross further asserts that the Act reified the categories "victim" and "perpetrator" in relation to gross human rights violations, so that people testifying before the commission inevitably had to categorize themselves as one or the other, not both. The constructs

“victim” and “perpetrator” elided notions of agency, especially women’s agency. Women who had experienced abuse or violation and had recast themselves as survivors, instead of victims, would necessarily have been excluded from either of these categories. What room would exist for their memories and narratives at the TRC?

Women opened the TRC hearings in East London in April 1996. “Truth is a woman,” wrote poet and journalist Antjie Krog of this hearing, simultaneously feminizing truth and objectifying women at the TRC, “Her voice distorted behind her rough hand has undermined man as the source of truth. And yet nobody knows her” (Krog 2000, 177). Within a month it became clear that although women were more or less equally represented as testifiers before the Commission, their stories centered around violations committed against men, prompting a special submission before the TRC entitled “Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” by scholars Sheila Meintjes and Beth Goldblatt in May 1996. Noting that most women described the experiences of men while testifying at the hearings, the submission proposes that women “should also be encouraged to speak about their own experiences,” and that “[t]he TRC should empower these women so that they are able to locate themselves not just in the private realm as supporters of men but in the public realm as resisters to oppression. There is nothing in the [Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation] Act which prevents these types of questions from being asked by Commissioners” (Meintjes and Goldblatt 1996). A number of interventions stemmed from the gender submission: the TRC held two workshops with the media and women’s organizations to encourage women’s participation; it subsequently held

three special women's hearings aimed at eliciting women's accounts of gross violations of human rights abuses; and in 1997 it inserted the following statement on the forms used by the Commission to record testimony: "IMPORTANT: Some women testify about violations of human rights that happened to family members or friends, but they have also suffered abuses. Don't forget to tell us what happened to you yourself if you were the victim of a gross human rights abuse" (*TRC of South Africa Report 4* 1999, 283). These interventions were somewhat successful: women testified, to a certain extent, about their own experiences of human rights abuses, including sexual assault by apartheid police. In its Final Report, the Commission concluded about the special hearings for women that:

As elsewhere in the Commission, the relatively few women whose experiences are recorded must represent many, many more who did not want to present their own stories, or were not able to do so for some reason. Nevertheless, the limited evidence available confirms the fact that women were active in all roles - as perpetrators, and in the full range of different victims. It also indicates ways in which women's experience of abuse might have differed from that of men. (TRC 1999, 4: 316)

Significantly, the commission concedes in its final report that its definition of gross human rights violations "resulted in a blindness to the types of abuse predominantly experienced by women" (TRC 1999, 4: 316). A handful of women related experiences of sexual torture and rape in apartheid prisons, or by neighbors affiliated to opposing political parties. The Commission registered surprise that "as many women as did spoke about being raped or otherwise sexually abused" (TRC 1999, 4: 294).

But women's experience of rape and torture at the hands of their comrades within the liberation movement remained shrouded in silence. This was hardly

surprising, given the fact that if women involved in the liberation movement claimed that they were raped, according to senior ANC official Jessie Duarte, “they were regarded as having sold out to the system in one way or another” (Meintjes and Goldblatt 1997, 5). The Commission notes in its final report that “where sexual abuse was perpetrated by men within the liberation movements, there were further pressures not to speak” (TRC 1999, 4: 295), and cites the experience of a senior ranking official in the underground guerilla movement, Thenjiwe Mtintso, who was told the following by a male comrade: “You know, it’s going to get to the point where I am going to rape you. And it’s going to be very easy to rape you... and I know there is no way that you are going to stand in front of all these people and say I raped you” (4: 295).⁷

Only one woman testified before the commission about being tortured and raped by her comrades within the liberation movement, but dire personal consequences accompanied her testimony. Lita Nombangu Mazibuko⁸ was responsible for helping combatants leave the country, but was suspected of being an apartheid spy after her charges had been killed by apartheid police. Mazibuko was subsequently found to have been a police informer and a co-perpetrator of apartheid police’s human rights abuses (TRC 2001), and to have gained financially from the murders of the anti-apartheid soldiers entrusted to her care. The TRC report states that: “She was kidnapped, tortured and interrogated. Torture included hitting and

⁷ Cited in *TRC of South Africa Report*, Vol. 4, 10. 1999. p. 295. However, it should be noted that Mtintso did not submit this information directly as testimony before the TRC, but related this story at a workshop held by Goldblatt and Meintjes in March 1996, who recounted it at the submission on gender and the TRC in May 1996.

⁸ Lita Nombangu Mazibuko is alternately referred to as “Lita” and “Rita” in the TRC’s Report, and in written transcripts of her testimony at the TRC. This may be an error in transcription, or in editing on the part of the TRC authors. For the sake of consistency, I refer to her as “Lita” throughout this dissertation.

kicking, as well as being forced to stay in holes for long periods” (TRC 1999, 4: 307). The report further cites her testimony before the commission as that of “being raped by at least three comrades, one of whom ‘cut through my genitals ... he tied my hands, my legs, they were apart, he also tied my neck and he would also pour Dettol over my genitals’” (4: 307-308).

Mazibuko’s testimony unleashed a storm of controversy and threats of legal action against her after she testified before the commission that a senior ANC official, premier of the Mpumalanga province Matthews Posa, had tried to intimidate her to prevent her from implicating senior Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) members in her rape. Posa instituted defamation charges against Mazibuko, who subsequently publicly apologized to Posa for her statements against him at the TRC. In response to her apology, the ANC issued a public statement expressing support for Posa:

The ANC has never been in doubt about the bona fides of Premier Matthews Posa in this regard. We expressed our conviction that Premier Posa gives his unswerving support to the current process as led by the Truth and Reconciliation process. In this context, Premier Posa would not engage in activities aimed at undermining the integrity of the TRC process. As a member of the ANC NEC [National Executive Committee] sub-committee on Truth and Reconciliation, Posa is guided in his actions by the views of the movement to add impetus to the process of peace, reconciliation and nation building among all South Africans. The ANC accepts the apology tendered by Mazibuko. (ANC 1997)

The statement goes on to warn the TRC: “We however, express our conviction that the TRC will ensure that in future no unsubstantiated allegations are allowed to be made against the integrity of individuals without allowing those affected an opportunity to respond.”

The allegation made against Phosa was serious and warranted his swift attention. However, the party's closing ranks around a senior male figure, while sending out the message to those within and outside of the ranks of the ANC that dissent would not be tolerated, obscured the more important issue: the rapes committed against Mazibuko. The media spectacle created by Phosa's legal threats and especially his comment that "[s]he [Mazibuko] must bear the consequences of her loose utterances" would have made any woman think twice about testimony that would implicate senior ANC officials. It is telling that the ANC conflates Phosa with itself in its written statement, stating: "The ANC accepts the apology tendered by Mazibuko." The apology was made to Phosa, but accepted by the ANC. Implicit in the ANC's statement is the notion that an attack against a senior, male member is an attack against the party. This patriarchal attitude would have discouraged any dissenting daughters within the ANC. The way the party assumed Phosa's innocence even before it was proven replicates the "her word against his" scenario which often unfolds when powerful men are accused of rape. The ANC obviously did not even consider for one moment that Mazibuko may have been telling the truth about Phosa; it "has never been in doubt about the bona fides of Premier Matthew Phosa in this regard." Mazibuko's statements were automatically discounted without being investigated, inevitably casting aspersions on the veracity of her account of rape in exile.

Furthermore, the veiled warning that the TRC ensure no future "unsubstantiated allegations" were made, would have further encouraged a culture of silence around human rights abuses within the liberation movement. The task of the

TRC was to investigate allegations of gross violations of human rights. How then, would it establish the veracity of allegations if it were to suppress testimony before it was given? The debacle drew strong criticism from freedom of expression organizations towards the Commission for not assuring that testifiers' comments would enjoy privilege. Thus the only woman to testify about sexual abuse and torture at the hands of members of the liberation movement had her testimony of the actual rapes effaced by the ensuing fray about Phosa's involvement in attempts to silence her. The TRC's Report refers very briefly to her testimony, and names her as a victim of gross human rights violations (*TRC of South Africa Report 5* 1999, 2). In its findings, the Commission has one sentence on the experience of human rights abuses of women in exile: "Women in exile, particularly those in camps, were subjected to various forms of sexual abuse and harassment, including rape" (TRC 1999, 5: 6).

David's Story and the TRC

David's Story has been hailed as a pioneering text in post-apartheid South Africa - one that dares to address two central issues shrouded in silence in this emerging democracy: the question of what happened in ANC detention camps, and the issue of the ANC's treatment of women within the ranks of its underground army. In addition, Wicomb is concerned, in this novel, with the pitfalls of representation, specifically the representation of acts of trauma such as rape and torture upon the female body. Her novel, in addition to bringing attention to the silences around guerilla women's experiences of torture and sexual abuse during the apartheid struggle, can also be read as a meditation on the troubling nature of representing, through cultural artifacts like literature, histories inflected by the violence of racism and sexism.

The novel pivots around the interactions of three central characters: David, a 35-year-old commander in the military wing of the anti-apartheid movement; Dulcie, another high-ranking soldier within the same movement; and an amanuensis, an unnamed woman writer to whom David relates his “story” in an attempt to record his history and, by extension, the history of the liberation struggle, which has heretofore been repressed in the narrative of the South African nation. Set in the transitional period of South African history between the end of formally-legislated apartheid in 1990 and the first democratic election in 1994, the novel details David’s struggle with his identity in the emerging South Africa. David, after dedicating his life as a guerilla in the liberation movement, finds himself at a personal crossroad, where he contemplates his past, his future in a “new” South Africa, and his ethnicity as a Coloured of mixed racial descent: “...nowadays, there is also more time to think, and turning an eye inward, he finds a gash, a festering wound that surprises him, precisely because it is the turning inward that reveals a problem on the surface: his very own eyes are a green of sorts – hazel, slate-quarry, to call it, but greenish for god’s sake – and that, to his surprise, he finds distasteful” (Wicomb 2001, 12). David is shocked and bemused to find his mixed ancestry and the physical traces of miscegenation embodied on his person repulsive. He embarks on a journey of unearthing the history of his ancestors, while simultaneously initiating a writing project with the amanuensis which becomes the novel, in effect producing a text which is “fathered from a distance” (Wicomb 2001, 141).

David’s Story also represents a counter-narrative to the three dominant, nation-building narratives produced by the TRC: discourses of truth as a fixed

quantity, grand narratives of unifying nationalism, and the elision of women's experiences of rape and torture within the ranks of the liberation movement.

The functioning of the Commission hinged fundamentally on the construction of truth as a stable, obtainable entity, upon which reconciliation, and thus the development of the nation, was dependent. From the very first sentence of *David's Story*, Wicomb jettisons such notions of a fixed, totalizing truth. The story begins: "This is and is not David's story" (Wicomb 2001, 1), calling into question the idea that the "truth" of David's story can ever be known. In true postmodernist fashion, the novel points to the invented nature of all narrative, pointing self-consciously to the gaps and contradictions within its structure: there are only versions and tellings of the story, not one master narrative. Perspectives are all the reader can hope to discover.

Wicomb sets up a constant tension between the first person narrated amanensis's interpretation of David's life, and his own words and account, embroiling the two characters in many philosophical arguments about the nature of truth and the responsibility of representation. These discussions become part of the text, calling "truth" to constantly account for itself. Though the narrator presents herself as no more than a stenographer, the story is clearly *her* story too - she concedes for example, that David's story starts with Eva/Krotoa, the first Khoi woman who lived at the Dutch castle in the Cape, while admitting that is "the only section I have left out" (Wicomb 2001, 1). "I am, as David outlined my task, simply recording.... For my part it is comforting to know that my occasional flights of fancy, my attempts at artistry, would not be detected by him" (Wicomb 2001, 2-3), the narrator further writes in the preface, contradicting both her own and David's

designation of mere recorder. Indeed, Wicomb blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction from the moment the reader engages the book, in the preface: what is assumed to be an author's preface turns out, in retrospect for the reader, to be as fictional as the rest of the story. Wicomb destabilizes the categories author and character by writing the preface in the voice of the female narrator, a writer to whom David relates his story with the hopes of her writing it, because he was simply "unable/unwilling to disclose all" (Wicomb 2001, 2). The writer-narrator remains unnamed, referring to herself throughout the novel as "purely... amaneunsis" (Wicomb 2001, 2), though she is anything but. The story is thus a contested one, bearing no authoritative narrator or account, with both tellers set up early as unreliable. Truth is a fiction. Wicomb's conceptualization of truth in the novel stands in stark contrast with the TRC's goal of unearthing truth for the sake of reconciliation and nation, as made explicit in the text of Commission banners, "Truth: The Road to Reconciliation," strategically centered inside each venue where TRC hearings took place.

Wicomb also inverts the gendered confessional structure of the TRC, where women related their stories to a commission consisting of mostly men, who then interpreted their stories and presented them in the TRC report. Six out of seventeen Commissioners were women; this did not, however, shape the way in which the commission initially conceived of truth as "gender neutral" (Ross 2003, 10). After the first round of testimony, a woman Commissioner, Mapule Ramashala, remarked: "I have been very disturbed that women witness stories about other people, and are totally removing themselves. Part of this has to do with the male-dominated structure of the Truth Commission, and the lack of probing questions" (Ross 2003, 11).

Wicomb subverts this male-dominated, gendered confessional structure in her novel in two ways. First, David, whose story this seems to be on the surface (and from the title) “confesses” or narrates his story to a woman, the amanuensis. Though this is David’s story, she has the power to mediate his life and represent David; she shapes his tale, deciding which aspects of his life to foreground, which experiences to elide, and which parts to fabricate when he doesn’t answer questions to her satisfaction. The gendered power relations of representation are further inverted by Wicomb’s deployment of several, seemingly peripheral women characters who comment on and add texture to David’s story. Many of these women, such as his wife, Sally and his mother-in-law, Ouma Sarie, provide counter-narratives more nuanced and insightful than David’s own story, which is characterized by a severely reductionist view of the mechanisms of the liberation movement, and his own and women’s roles within the struggle. Thus, it becomes evident that David’s story is not merely David’s: he is surrounded by women, and the reader furthermore has access to their perspectives and interior worlds. These women’s interpretations of events are often contradictory to David’s, in keeping with the novel’s postmodern decentering of truth. This causes David to lament to the narrator: “You have turned it into a story of women; it is full of old women, for God’s sake.... Who would want to read a story like that? It is not a proper history at all” (Wicomb 2001, 199).

Arguably the most important woman in the novel is Dulcie, David’s love interest and fellow comrade in the struggle. Her story – equally compelling, but in the text, untellable – represents a ghostly parallel to David’s. David initially refuses to speak about Dulcie, but by his own admission, his story cannot exist without hers.

She is, in David's words, "a kind of scream echoing through my story" (Wicomb 2001, 115). David is dependent on telling Dulcie's story in order to relate his: he betrays a belief "that some trace of hers is needed for his to make sense" (Wicomb 2001, 78), but also reveals a desire "to lose her story within his own" (Wicomb 2001, 78). Yet he is unable or unwilling to relate her story to the amanuensis in any meaningful way. Dulcie is a "protean subject that slithers hither and thither; out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself..." (Wicomb 2001, 35). Dulcie's character remains a shadowy outline throughout the novel, an unknowable anachronism located within no discernable temporal space. Her narrative becomes the palimpsest underwriting David's; one which David attempts repeatedly to erase even as it continues to bleed through the surface of his story.

Dulcie, the unrepresentable and unspeakable, is an indictment of the liberation movement's treatment of women guerrillas. As Wicomb has written elsewhere:

The problem of representing her is twofold: first, she is the necessary silence in the text; she can't be fleshed out precisely because of her shameful treatment which those committed to the Movement would rather not talk about, and her gender is not unconnected with this treatment. (Wicomb 2002, 190-91)

Dulcie is thus the unspeakable in the text – she is alluded to, imagined; a product of the amanuensis's conjecture – and can never be circumscribed as a fully rounded character within the text. In her story there is "no progression in time, no beginning and no end. Only a middle that is infinitely repeated, that remains in an eternal, inescapable present" (Wicomb 2001, 151). David "wants her traced into his story as a recurring imprint in order to outwit her fixedness in time" (Wicomb 2001, 151). Dulcie is thus a "recursion" (Wicomb 2001, 184) within the text; a kind of inverted,

gendered recursion of David's story, which haunts his insistence on inscribing an androcentric, "proper history" (Wicomb 2001, 199).

Dulcie is also the Black female body in tortuous pain. Many of the scenes centering around her involve her physical torture. She is visited nightly in her home by a crew of men who bypass all her security measures and torture her in her own bed, but it is unclear *who* is doing the torturing. These scenes of torture appear in an ahistorical, decontextualized vacuum: upon reading the scenes of torture, all written in the present tense, the reader is unsure of whether they are flashbacks, involving torture by the South African military during apartheid, or by her own comrades within the anti-apartheid movement. The scenes are vaguely and ambiguously constructed, and the torturers possess a quality "that makes them both friend and foe as they tend to the cracks and wounds carefully inflicted" (Wicomb 2001, 179). It is the horror of not knowing, not the torture itself, which drives Dulcie close to death and suicide.

She has a feeling she knows them, or has known some of them perhaps some time ago, in another place. Yes, the figures in their Black tracksuits are familiar.... She hallucinates, turns them into friends, family, comrades. Which brings a moment of pure terror, of looking into the abyss.... Never again does she try to identify them. That is where death lies. (Wicomb 2001, 179)

This ambiguity, the torturers' quality of being "both friend and foe" reflects the fate of female guerillas within the anti-apartheid movement. Dulcie's unspeakable body of pain can be read as the unspeakable pain women guerrillas suffered in the ANC training camps and detention camps outside of South Africa. This silence extended beyond the TRC, as researchers Meintjes and Goldblatt found when preparing for the submission on gender before the commission: "We were unsuccessful in our attempts

to speak to women about their experiences in the camps. In an interview with Caesarina Kona Makhoere she expressed an unwillingness to speak about the camps but intimated that her experience had been terrible. She said ‘At least in [an apartheid] prison I knew I was in the enemy camp’” (Meintjes and Goldblatt 1996). Women combatants were not able or willing to name their comrades within the liberation movement as perpetrators of sexual violence during the anti-apartheid struggle, since doing so would have divided them in fighting their primary enemy: the apartheid state. Friends or comrades could not be ideologically conceptualized as the enemy, thus forcing such women to reconfigure abusers within their ranks as “not the enemy.” For Dulcie, the not knowing – not being able to categorize her torturers clearly as either friends or enemies – adds a layer of trauma to the physical torture of her body. Yet finding out the truth about her torturers’ identities as friends or foes is not an option for Dulcie. Pursuing the impulse of vague recognition to its logical conclusion, that she is being tortured by her comrades, is an avenue which could ultimately lead to her psychic destruction. “That is where death lies” (Wicomb 2001, 179). For women guerillas fighting side by side with men during the struggle against apartheid, such a recasting of male comrades as enemies would hold a similar destructive potential for their subjectivities of resistance to apartheid oppression.

David is extremely reluctant to talk about Dulcie, exacerbating the tension between the amanuensis and himself. Unable to extract from David answers to her questions about “facts: age, occupation, marital status, what she wears, where she was born and raised – necessary details from which to patch together a character” (Wicomb 2001, 78), the narrator invokes Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in order

to construct Dulcie's subjectivity and corporeality. Similarly to Sethe, Dulcie bears the imprints of torture upon her physical body:

Her back is strong, broad, almost a square depending on where one considers the back to end. This square is marked with four cent-sized circles forming the corners of a smaller inner square, meticulously staked out with blue ballpoint pen before the insertion of a red-hot poker between the bones.... Each circle is a liverish red crinkled surface of flesh, healed in the darkness under garments that would not let go of the blood. One day, a nice man of her own age will idly circle the dark cents with his own thumb and sigh, and with her bear it in silence, in the deepened colour of his eyes. (Wicomb 2001, 19)

This projection of Dulcie fantasizes about a man, "perhaps a man called David, who will say nothing and who will frown when she speaks of a woman in *Beloved* whose back is scarred and who nevertheless is able to turn it into a tree" (Wicomb 2001, 19). But unlike Paul D, the man in *Beloved* who is able to support Sethe and embrace the physical and psychological remnants of her torture, a man who "wants to put his story next to hers" (Morrison 1987, 287), David is unable to weave the strands of his and Dulcie's stories together into a coherent whole, foreclosing the possibility of healing from psychological and physical trauma for both him and Dulcie. Frustrated by his unwillingness to address Dulcie's experiences, the narrator prods and probes, often infuriating David:

I ask about the conditions of female guerillas. Irrelevant, he barks. In the Movement these kinds of differences are wiped out by our common goal. Dulcie certainly would make no distinction between the men and women with whom she works (Wicomb 2001, 78).

David's insistence of gendered experience of war as "irrelevant" echoes the silence of the ANC in its submission about gender and human rights violations within the underground liberation movement. "In presenting the ANC report to the Commission,

Deputy President Thabo Mbeki acknowledged that men had committed ‘gender-specific offences’ against their women comrades. He said that the perpetrators had been punished, but *did not describe either the offences or the punishment in any detail*” (TRC of South Africa Report 4 1999, 295) (emphasis mine). The gendered experience of violence at the hands of the ANC is completely effaced by this “acknowledgement,” resulting in Commissioner Hlengiwe Mkhize’s remarking that the ANC submission had “fail(ed) women” (TRC 1999, 4: 295). However, the TRC perpetuates this elision of women’s experiences in ANC camps in its findings, which contain only three paragraphs on women in general under apartheid, and only one sentence about the experiences of women within the ANC’s military.

An important gap or silence within the novel’s structure is Wicomb’s treatment of the rape of women guerrillas by fellow soldiers. Wicomb raises the issue of rape within the guerrilla movement in an ambiguous way which challenges the structure of the silencing nationalist discourse around rape by replicating and subverting it. Consider the following two paragraphs, where David’s wife, Sally, undergoes military training within the ANC’s armed wing. A male comrade is teaching her how to swim, but Sally is not learning fast enough:

Sally had not known that she was afraid of water. She loved paddling and took some pleasure in feeling the resistance of water, but required to swim at one of the training camps, she found it impossible to put her face in it. In the thick Mozambican heat the water felt like oil, and the comrade with his hand under her belly barked his instructions, Up, draw up your legs, and out, kick, flap the ankle, hands forward, round and again. And how poorly she performed, unable to confess her terror.

He said, as they made their way gingerly across the burning sand, A fuck, that’s what you need, and she saw his bulging shorts and knew that her time had come, as she had known it would come sooner or later, this unspoken part of a girl’s training. And because she would not let him force her, lord it over

her, she forced herself and said, Okay, if you want. It did not take long, and she had no trouble pushing him off as soon as he had done, and since she had long forgotten the fantasy of the virginal white veil, it did not matter, no point in being fastidious, there were more important things to think of, there was freedom on which to fix her thoughts. Then, cleaning herself in seawater, over and over, she lost her fear, found her body dissolving, changing its solid state in the water through which she moved effortlessly. Which was, of course, just as the comrade had said. (Wicomb 2001, 123)

Two things stand out about this description: the entire reference to and description of the rape takes up one paragraph of the 213 page novel, seemingly replicating the way in which the TRC process and the liberation movement leadership elided this occurrence. At no point is the word “rape” used in naming the experience.

“Unable to confess her terror,” Sally mirrors the silence of those who did not come forward to testify of rape or sexual abuse. The narrative is structured to replicate the effacement of women’s experience by dominant nationalist discourses, but in its silence about the act of rape, it works to show *how* these narratives silence women who have experienced sexual abuse within the liberation movement. By portraying rape as a *de facto* part of a woman’s training within the liberation movement, the inevitability of which is made explicit through the phrase “her time had come, as she had known it would come sooner or later,” Wicomb inscribes sexual violation onto the experience of being a woman and guerilla, thus retrieving sexual abuse from the silence surrounding it at the different levels of discourse within the liberation movement and at the TRC.

When one considers the testimony of one General Andrew Masondo at the TRC, the attitude around rape in the setting of the camp becomes clear: “In Angola there are at one time twenty-two women in a group of more than 1000 people ... there was an allegation that ... Commanders were misusing women... *the law of supply*

and demand must have created some problems” (TRC of South Africa Report 4 1999, 307) (emphasis mine). The tone of inevitability surrounding the statement that the law of supply and demand “must have” created problems suggests that rape and other forms of sexual abuse became naturalized within the Angolan camp setting. Little wonder, then, that Sally regards her rape as “the unspoken part of a girl’s training,” coming “sooner or later.” It is best for her to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Notice how General Masondo, too, avoids using the word “rape,” further naturalizing rape and effacing its occurrence and effects.

What is striking about Wicomb’s description of the rape is Sally’s inability and refusal to see herself as a “victim” of rape. While the incident is certainly unpleasant for her, the naturalization of rape makes her view herself not as someone who has been violated, i.e., a victim of gross human rights violations, but as someone who perseveres through the ordeal. Sally’s seeming compliance with her rapist helps her to assert some measure of control over her body and psyche while being subjected to the rape. The act of acquiescence is also an act of resistance, which enables Sally to conceptualize herself outside of the framework of victimhood.

The Commission acknowledges some of the difficulties surrounding the construction of the victim/perpetrator binary, stating in its report that the term “victim of gross human rights violations” would exclude some people who felt they had survived despite the abuses inflicted upon them: “However, when dealing with gross human rights violations committed by perpetrators, the person against whom that violation is committed can only be described as a victim, regardless of whether he or she emerged a survivor. In this sense, the state of mind and survival of that person is

irrelevant; it is the intention and action of the perpetrator that creates the condition of being a victim” (*TRC of South Africa Report 1: 59*). This definition of a victim robbed those described as such of agency. Clearly, against the light of this definition, Sally is no victim - her strategy is one which minimizes the discomfort, perhaps, of the rape, and is geared at securing her continual psychological and physical survival. This does not mean that Sally is not raped. She is, however, not a victim. The TRC’s conceptualization of victim is, in any case, at odds with the way in which South Africa’s strong anti-rape lobby conceives of those who experience rape and live to tell the tale: such people are in no uncertain terms “survivors.” As Meg Samuelson has eloquently stated, in her comparative analysis of the rapes in *David’s Story* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*:

For the characters in these novels, entering language to speak rape may entail being weighed down by the rhetoric that has been spun around rape. If the available discourse on rape reduces women to victims or objects of exchange, then, when rape is spoken, the subjects of rape may be re-objectified. Speaking rape thus potentially reiterates the primary violence. (Samuelson 2007, 122)

Caught in discourse between the victim/perpetrator binary, neither Sally, nor women combatants who may have been raped, choose to be complicit in their further victimization by identifying themselves as “rape victims.” The dominant, nationalist discourse describes victims in one way, completely at odds with the counter-narrative of vociferous anti-rape discourse, thus closing up a space in which rape may productively have been spoken. Couple this clash in discourses with the fact that rape was not identified as a gross human rights violation in the Parliamentary Act which established the TRC, nor in the discourse of the TRC itself, and it becomes apparent why a woman like Sally may not have been willing to testify at the TRC. Having the

experience of rape effaced first, by the discourse of the liberation movement, which naturalized rape; secondly, by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which did not define rape as a gross human rights violation; and third, by the TRC's discourse of victimhood, which may have elided rape survivors' experience, it is no wonder that only Lita Mazibuko related her tale of sexual abuse as a guerrilla. Sally chooses to keep her mind's eye fixed on the goal of collective "freedom" throughout the rape - a freedom which turns out to be constructed within the framework of the "national unity" the TRC seeks to build; but a freedom which cannot and will not acknowledge the violation of women's bodies as part of its price. Thus Sally finds her body "dissolving" after the rape.

She is relaxed, "of course, just as the comrade had said" (Wicomb 2001, 123). The comrade is correct, after all, in saying that she needed a fuck. Her entire experience of rape has been subsumed within the metanarrative of the struggle and the goal of national unity the ANC is still fighting for at this historical moment. Thus Wicomb is able to represent the rape without "speaking" it in the text. The structure of the text, and what it reveals in its silence, mirrors, in its omission, the way in which narratives of rape are subsumed by nationalist discourse. Paradoxically, the absence of the word "rape" reveals the conceptualization of it by the TRC and the ANC - the text's structure reveals what it cannot in signification. In its absence, the concept of rape haunts the text, and ultimately reveals its presence.

Meintjes and Goldblatt, in their submission on gender and the TRC, proffered, amongst others, the following political explanation for ANC women's silences

around sexual abuse, gleaned from an interview with senior ANC soldier Thenjiwe Mtintso:

[O]n an organisational level, they do not wish to have their experiences used politically in the TRC where apartheid is equated morally with the ANC's actions. Some of these women have chosen to participate in an organisational submission being prepared by the ANC rather than come forward individually but it is as yet unknown whether the submission will cover acts such as rape. (Meintjes and Goldblatt 1996)

Such women felt an overriding loyalty to the party and apparently chose to have their experiences represented at the TRC under the ANC banner. It is not known what their involvement was in planning or writing the submission, but in the party's silence around the issue of rape and sexual abuse there lay a huge betrayal, as was made clear by Commissioner Hlengiwe Mkhize's remark that the ANC submission had "fail(ed) women."

David's inability to "speak" Dulcie, to represent her subjectivity or experiences in any meaningful way, and the novel's inability to speak the rape and torture of women combatants at the hands of their comrades, represents the silence around the ANC's treatment of women guerrillas within their ranks, and forecloses the possibility that wrongdoing against women combatants can be acknowledged or redressed. Wicomb thus points to nationalism's deferment of restorative justice for women: the emerging nation, in deferring such justice and the possibility of reconciliation, effectively builds the new South Africa upon the injustice visited upon the bodies of (mostly Black) women anti-apartheid combatants.

Wicomb intervenes in this metanarrative of effacement by the ANC and the TRC: *David's Story* is the first South African novel to raise the issue of human rights abuses against women within the ranks of the liberation movement. In doing so, the

novel challenges the silence around torture and rape of women guerillas within the anti-apartheid movement at many different levels: at the national level, where discourses of reconciliation and nation building became the dominant discourses immediately after the first democratic election in 1994; at the level of liberation movement leadership, which has barely acknowledged the atrocities committed against women within their own ranks, as is evident in Mbeki's submission before the TRC cited above; and at the level of testimony brought before the TRC and resultant discourses of women as "secondary" victims of apartheid human rights abuses produced by the TRC.

The one woman out of 9000 testifiers at the TRC who spoke about rape at the hands of her own comrades now has only two paragraphs devoted to her experience in the TRC's final report. She has been named as a victim of human rights violations in the same final report, but her experience, as well as the issue of sexual abuse by the ANC in general, has been truncated to the point where it has almost disappeared.

Viewed in this light, *David's Story* becomes a crucial counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of national unity at all costs, but especially at the cost of acknowledging the abuses perpetrated by the ANC's armed wing against its own female guerrillas. This is Wicomb's greatest contribution with *David's Story*: in pointing to nationalism's deferment of restorative justice for women, she demonstrates how the emerging nation, in deferring such justice, forecloses the possibility of true reconciliation within the South African nation. She effectively shows how nationalist discourse has built the new South Africa upon the injustices visited upon the bodies of women.

Chapter 6: Mothering the Nation in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*

Concepts and ideologies of motherhood sit uneasily in their relation to the nation. As with the ideology of “woman” as sign for the nation, motherhood has often been deployed in particularly gendered ways to underwrite the construction of the nation. With emerging nations, in particular, such as South Africa in the transition to democracy between 1990 and 1994, conceptions of motherhood become salient in the ways they sometimes may be co-opted and deployed by the patriarchal nation-state in the construction of a new national identity. This chapter examines the negotiation of the concept “motherhood” by Sindiwe Magona in the novel *Mother to Mother* (1998). I examine how Magona positions motherhood within an overarching nationalist meta-narrative which frames motherhood in general, and African motherhood specifically, within particularly static tropes which construct mothers as secondary players in the nation – producers and supporters of heroic, often tragic, sons who are agents of history. Following on Meg Samuelson’s (2004; 2007) elucidation of how Magona uses the patriarchally-sanctioned authorial position motherhood affords her character in speaking her son’s story, I show how Magona strategically uses this subject position on the terms available within patriarchal culture, but also transcends these terms by violating several authorial codes associated with the ideology of motherhood as deployed by nationalism. I argue that Magona interrupts the emerging nationalist narrative in a number of ways: by creating a protofeminist space in which to relate the tale of a young, white woman’s killing; by complicating the reconciliatory discourse

of the “new” South Africa by showing how the racialized difference between white and Black mothers cannot be overcome through simplistic rituals of forgiveness espoused by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); and by invoking an important cultural moment in the history of the Xhosa nation and reconfiguring it as a feminist story in order to issue a warning about unitary forms of nationalism to the emerging nation. Magona achieves these aims by using the subject position of Black motherhood, from which she articulates her opposing narratives of the South African and Xhosa nations.

Mother to Mother fictionalizes the events of August 1993, when a white American exchange student, Amy Biehl, was murdered by a mob of politically-disenchanted Black youth in the African township Guguletu, outside of Cape Town. A young woman who had specifically chosen to visit South Africa during the transitional period in order to help with voter education for Black citizens who would be casting their votes for the first time, Biehl was stabbed and stoned to death by a group of young anti-Apartheid protesters who chanced upon her in the township as she offered a ride home to fellow students from the University of the Western Cape. The novel is written from the perspective of Mandisa, the mother of the fictionalized murderer, who addresses a lament to the mother of the young woman killed. The novel is remarkable in its assertion of the validity of the loss both mothers have experienced: its great achievement is that it is able to contain both the pain of the white mother’s loss and the altogether different grief of the murderer’s mother, without giving one form of loss salience over the other. It creates a space for the articulation of shared grief in a country deeply cleft by racial division and hatred,

portraying the sanctity of both the white life that is lost through political violence, and the life of the young Black killer, whose life story becomes a portrait of the effects of excruciating political trauma and racism upon an individual subject. The novel seeks not to apportion blame, but, contrary to binary notions of “victim” and “perpetrator” which entered the transitional national discourse of the nation through the TRC, seeks to cultivate understanding for the perspectives of both young people around whose lives the novel pivots, demonstrating how both Black and white subjects are ultimately the victims of the unjust system of apartheid.

In Chapter Five, I argued that South Africa’s transition to democracy opened up a new cultural space from where Black women could insert the unique perspectives afforded by their subject positions into national discourse and debates. I held up Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* as an exemplary text which challenges the effacement of women’s experiences and histories from the nation-building meta-narrative of truth and forgiveness, used by the TRC to forge a unitary South African national identity. Set within the same historical period as *David’s Story*, the interregnum between the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990 and the first democratic election in 1994, *Mother to Mother* bears more than a few similarities to Wicomb’s novel.

As with *David’s Story*, *Mother to Mother* is set within the highly ambivalent, transitional space of South Africa, a time of great political instability and uncertainty about the country’s future. The old South Africa has been left behind, but the new has not yet been born. Yet ideologies about the future, “new” South Africa, and the shape the nation will take, are in formation and circulation. Through fiction, Magona enters

the world of the man held responsible for killing Amy Biehl, whose death threatened to disrupt the fragile peace that had been brokered between political parties during the run-up to the historic election of April 1994. The four young men charged and found guilty of Biehl's murder, Mongezi Manqina, Mzikhona Nofemela, Vusumzi Ntamo and Ntobeko Peni, were members of the Pan African Congress's student wing, the Pan Africanist Students' Organization (PASO), an organization known at the time for its slogan "one settler, one bullet." The four were convicted of Biehl's murder and imprisoned, and later appeared before the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where Peni testified that PASO's executive had ordered its members to make Guguletu ungovernable, and to assist the PAC's armed wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army, in winning back Black peoples' land. He said that he regarded this statement as an instruction to injure or kill white people, and believed that killing Biehl would return the land to Black South Africans. Biehl's murderers were eventually granted amnesty by the TRC, and were freed from prison. Thereafter, two of them went on to work for a peace-building foundation established in Guguletu by Biehl's parents to honor her memory. Magona fictionalizes events leading up to Biehl's death by consolidating the murderers into one central character, Mxolisi, whose mother, Mandisa, relates the story of the murder from her son's and her own point of view.

In structuring the novel as a lament narrated from Mandisa's perspective, and addressing the mother of the murder victim, Magona employs a strategy similar to Wicomb's multivocality in *David's Story*. Just as David's story is not just his own, but also the story of a cast of women surrounding him, so too *Mother to Mother*

seems at first glance to be a narrative of Mxolisi's life, but becomes Mandisa's story as well. Magona interweaves the story of the son with the life story of the mother, narrated in the first person from her unique subject position. This narration interrupts the seamless unitary narrative the new, emerging nation seeks to build. In giving Mandisa's story equal, if not more, prominence than Mxolisi's narrative, Magona interrupts the nationalist discourse which, in the words of feminist theorist Nthabiseng Motsemme, "sought to celebrate a heroic and selfless past that gave birth to the new South Africa" (Motsemme 2004, 911). Given that seventy-nine percent of women who testified before the TRC testified about the experiences of men, according to anthropologist Fiona Ross (2003, 17), this narrative of a heroic past produced at the TRC was, inevitably, a masculine emerging nationalist narrative. Magona fractures this production of nationalism, which thrives and perpetuates itself on the construction of the heroic male revolutionary as agent within Black nationalist history, thus reversing the constructed figure of woman as a secondary player as depicted by the TRC. In her examination of motherhood, gender, and nationalism in Flora Nwapa's fiction, Elleke Boehmer asserts that, "where women tell of their own experience, they map their own geography, scry their own history and so, necessarily, contest official representations of nationalist reality" (Boehmer 1991, 10-11). Through foregrounding Mandisa's subjectivity and giving her life story even more weight than her son's, Magona is thus engaged in the project of "interrupting the language of official nationalist discourse and literature with a woman's vocality" (Boehmer 1991, 10).

Similarly to *David's Story*, *Mother to Mother* decenters the idea of retrieving a fixed truth to be packaged for national consumption, as advocated by the TRC; and presents a counternarrative to the reduction of women to secondary victims, in particular, to the singular role of mothers of agents of the liberation struggle. As Schatterman (2008) and Samuelson (2007) show, reading the novel against static discourses of mothers as sacrificial figures, generated at the TRC, disrupts the notion of women as passive spectators to the liberation movement. Samuelson reads women's interpellation by the TRC as reducing them to the status of "mother-witness" (Samuelson 2007, 159), so that their voices were "always already produced as that of the suffering mother" (Samuelson 2007, 161). She further argues that:

The role of the mother-witness was performed by women testifying to the loss of their children, which in turn produced a dominant national narrative of sacrificial redemption, while submerging the myriad of other roles that women played during the struggle. (Samuelson 2007, 159)

Though comparing Magona's narrative of motherhood to those generated by the TRC is not the project of this chapter, it is worth restating the role the Commission played in constructing a new, and gendered, national narrative for post-apartheid South Africa, given its mission of building a new nation, and the prominence it received in South African national discourse at the time of its staging. In constructing a mother who speaks not only of her son's painful history, but also insists on the validity of her own life's story, Magona ruptures the "mother-witness" trope. In addition, *Mother to Mother* disrupts the "victim/perpetrator" binary constructed by the TRC in similar ways to Wicomb's novel, by portraying Mxolisi as a person who simultaneously inhabits both positions. He is the murderer of the young white woman, and therefore the perpetrator of political violence, but Mandisa's account of her son's life shows

how Mxolisi is the victim of sustained structural violence committed by the apartheid state. As in *David's Story*, the line between victim and perpetrator is blurred, further undercutting notions of a simple, totalizing truth.

Motherhood and the Nation

To examine Magona's deployment of motherhood in greater detail, I now briefly survey theories of motherhood and the nation. Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have written extensively about the ways in which nationalism deploy women. They theorize that women stand in relation to the nation in five ways: as biological reproducers of national collectives, i.e., as mothers; as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups; as active transmitters and producers of national culture; as symbolic signifiers of national difference; and as active participants in national struggles. Parker, Russo, Sommer, and Yaegar further point out that such deployments of woman as sign for the nation depend for their "representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal" (Parker et al. 1992, 6). The symbol of the mother is a particularly important construct to nationalism, with mothers figuring significantly in producing the actual subjects of the state, and transmitting national culture to their offspring through socialization in the private sphere of the home.

In apartheid South Africa, the trope of woman-as-nation gained particular salience through the ideological construct of the mother of the nation, strategically used by both Black and Afrikaner nationalisms. Deborah Gaitskell and Elaine Unterhalter's (1987) analysis demonstrates how the different ideologies underpinning

Afrikaner and African nationalism - white supremacy and Black liberation politics - influenced the construction of the “mother of the nation” for Afrikaners (who had emerged from a bruising war with the British at the start of the twentieth century) and the Black liberation organization, the African National Congress, established in 1912. Following on Gaitskell and Unterhalter, Anne McClintock has shown how both Afrikaner and African women have used the term “mother of the nation” to achieve their respective political goals; yet the ways in which this sign of woman-as-nation are deployed differed vastly. McClintock argues that for both groups, “women’s political agency has been couched in the presiding ideology of motherhood” (McClintock 1995, 381). Whereas Afrikaner nationalism portrayed the mother as “the figure of the lamenting mother, with babe in arms” (McClintock 1995, 378), stripping the Afrikaner mother of her militancy, African women have “embraced, transmuted and transformed the ideology in a variety of ways, working strategically within traditional ideology to justify untraditional public militancy” (McClintock 1995, 381). The narrative of the “mother of the nation” can thus be viewed as a particular narrative in the construction of South African nationhood – its meaning unfixed and its utility strategic to the specific master-narrative invoking it.

Magona uses this instability of the concept motherhood strategically: first she uses this identity as a platform from which to articulate a subaltern view through the character Mandisa. Second, using this platform, she subverts male discourses of the new South African nation, rendering them more complex than the unitary forms of nationalism sought in the transitional period. In examining the subject position she creates for the mother, Mandisa, paying particular attention to the ways in which

Mandisa conceives of herself as mother, I investigate how Magona is able to locate Mandisa's identity outside of the constraints of the traditional, patriarchal discourses of motherhood. If, as Elleke Boehmer suggest, the 'motherland' as it is invoked by patriarchy does not always "signify 'home' and 'source' to women" (Boehmer 1991, 5), and if there exists for postcolonial women writers the danger of reclaiming redemptive myths about motherhood that shore up patriarchy, how, then, does Magona reclaim and revision the mother figure, while transcending the permissible nationalist discourse on motherhood that authorizes her to speak?

Magona's Remapping of Motherhood

To write is not only to speak for one's place in the world. It is also to make one's own place or narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity. It is in effect to deploy what might be called a typically nationalist strategy. (Boehmer 1991, 10)

Elleke Boehmer's statement, made in relation to the way postcolonial African women writers have grappled with and transformed the idea of motherhood in their fiction, points to the territoriality of text. If writing turns space into place, as discussed in Chapter Four, then writing from and about a subject position which has previously been unwritten, indeed, charts new territory within the realm of cultural production and representation. Rendering such an 'unwritten' subjectivity into fiction at a time that coincides with the beginning of a new nation may be an especially important writerly strategy for women, since the discourses surrounding subjectivities thus constructed run parallel with emerging ideas of the nation, serving to underpin or subvert nationalist narratives. Magona writes the character of Mandisa, the mother of the liberation hero and murderer, Mxolisi, at a time when the 'new' South Africa is

transforming; reconstituting itself into a single, unitary nation after years of apartheid and disenfranchisement of the majority of citizens. Boehmer proffers that nationalisms and patriarchy overlap and buttress each other, since both favor “singleness – one identity, one growth pattern, one birth blood for all,” promoting “specifically unitary or ‘one-eyed’ forms of consciousness” (Boehmer 1991, 7).

Magona undermines a reifying, patriarchal narrative of motherhood in the story Mandisa tells, first, through creating a space of articulation which is distinctively feminine. As the novel’s title suggests, the narrative is the retelling of a story from one woman to another: the mother of the killer to the victim’s mother. The narrative is pointedly directed at one particular woman, interpellating the white American into Mandisa’s world on the grounds of an assumed shared identity of motherhood. By the end of the novel, the other mother has become Mandisa’s “Sister-Mother... bound in this sorrow” (Magona 1999, 201). Mandisa appeals to the woman as one mother to another, in a haunting reprise of the ways in which Black South African women appealed to their white counterparts to end apartheid. ANC Women’s League President, Gertrude Shope, for example, in 1991 implored white South African women to put aside racial differences.

Women bring life to this world and they have a duty to make sure that this life is preserved and protected. There is a need for us to come together regardless of our colour to look at the situation in the country and respond as women and mothers. (cited in Hassim 1991, 65)

In echoing the call of the activist Black woman who appeals to a racially different woman on the grounds of the shared identity of motherhood, it can be argued that Magona sets up a proto-feminist space devoid of male intervention for the telling and

reception of her story. In the narrative form Magona thus turns away from emergent nationalist discourse in two ways. She creates a woman-centered space for the performance and reception of her story, circumventing male mediation of her narrative by directly addressing the American mother. Magona also disavows the transitional period's dominant national narrative of reconciliation (and national) unity through forgiveness, through Mandisa's refusal to ask for the white mother's forgiveness for the crime. She asks only that the white mother "understand" (Magona 1999, 1) her son, and never asks for her forgiveness or absolution. The only plea for forgiveness is directed at God: "God, please forgive my son. Forgive him this terrible, terrible sin" (Magona 1999, 4).

The content of Magona's narrative mirrors structure - the novel seemingly tells the life story of Mxolisi, whereas in fact, the reader gains greater insight into the life and interiority of Mandisa, his mother. Deftly interweaving the story of the murder victim with Mxolisi's and her own, Mandisa relates the tale in the first person, from a perspective which generates the reader's empathy and identification. Counter to sacrificial narratives of motherhood, the boy's story does not displace his mother's. His birth is not a joyous celebration, but a contested event which seems to pit his very being against his mother's. Thus Mandisa casts his conception in destructive terms. He has troubled her "from before he was conceived; when he with total lack of consideration if not downright malice, seeded himself inside my womb" (Magona 1999, 1). Mandisa goes on to declare that his coming to being "unreasonably and totally destroy[ed] the me I was... the me I would have become" (Magona 1999, 1-2),

a refrain she repeats throughout the novel. She even likens his arrival to the destruction of apartheid forced removals she endured as a child:

My very life came to an abrupt halt. The life I had known. The life I had envisaged. Everything I had ever known had been bulldozed, extinguished, pulverized. Everything was no more. (Magona 1999, 114)

The birth of the son is not a joyful event, but a catastrophe that threatens to derail Mandisa's entire life. As a fourteen-year-old who has not yet completed her education, Mandisa's opportunities and choices are severely curtailed by the pregnancy, and she is effectively doomed to the life of a domestic worker. Mandisa is well aware of this, and therefore does not couch the pregnancy or birth in celebratory terms. Her narrative refuses to sublimate her feelings and experiences of self to the story of her son: she inhabits a seemingly contradictory space of motherhood where the pain of childbirth at one moment "told me that I hated this child... hated him or her with a venom too fierce to ever die" (Magona 1999, 127); yet at the very next moment of his birth she is overcome with "joy, pure and simple" (Magona 1999, 127). Motherhood, then, is not for Mandisa an uncomplicated experience: she professes love for her child while at the same time clearly articulating, without any guilt, the effective effacing of her subjectivity his birth imposes. Mandisa is able to hold both of these emotions, joy and despair, and integrates both of these positions into her experience of motherhood, thus disavowing a nationalist discourse which valorizes motherhood and the sacrifice that is supposedly innate to the experience.

The reader identifies with Mandisa, who recalls her own and her son's life within the twenty-four hour period before and after the murder. One day in the life of the murdered white student becomes the scaffold for investigating Mandisa's entire

life, spanning the latter's childhood, adolescence, entry into motherhood, and marriage. In this way, Magona retrieves the actual event of the killing from a sensationalized international media discourse which focuses only on the white woman's life and death, and contextualizes this story within the history of South Africa that leads up to the death. This transforms the story from the sensational headline-grabber focusing on the victim, to a more nuanced portrayal of the effects of injustice and sustained structural violence. The story of Amy Biehl, in Magona's telling, really begins with Mandisa's birth and the traumatic events of her childhood, when Mandisa and her family are forcibly removed due to apartheid's segregationist land laws, from the Blouville Settlement – for Mandisa, a place of “[g]ood things. Lovely things. Delicious things” (Magona 1999, 49). Mandisa also informs the American mother that violence was nothing new in her life: “For years... many many years, we have lived with violence. This was nothing new to us. What was new was that this time, the victim was white” (Magona 1999, 69).

The story, in fact, stretches even further back in time, to the injustices visited upon Mandisa's ancestors through their removal from ancestral land by white colonizers. “It's been a long, hard road, my son has travelled,” Mandisa tells the other mother. “Now, your daughter has paid for the sins of the fathers and mothers who did not do their share of seeing that my son had a life worth living” (Magona 1999, 3). The white woman's death becomes not the pivot of this narrative, but rather the culmination of decades of oppression and trauma. It is a story within a larger story, spanning decades; even centuries. Mandisa also imparts a sense of collective responsibility for the woman's death by relating her murder to the systemic failures of

other “fathers and mothers” who denied Mxolisi the opportunity of becoming a fully actualized human being. This insistence upon politically contextualizing the white woman’s murder recasts the killing as the result of historical forces, set in motion centuries ago, rather than a random, atemporally-situated crime of chance. In assigning collective blame for the woman’s death, Mandisa once again undermines the nationalist discourse generated by the TRC that finding a perpetrator who discloses all and is then forgiven will lead to national reconciliation and a new, strife-free South Africa. Culpability is formulated as far more complex; in the case of systemic oppression and violence, it is conceived of as collective. Thus approaches to reconciliation and healing a fractured nation would require far more than the ritualistic performance of penitence and forgiveness that may satisfy the “one-eyed forms of consciousness” required by both nationalism and patriarchy to sustain themselves (Boehmer 1991, 10).

Magona further develops the trope of the collective culpability through presenting Mxolisi as a Christ figure within the narrative. Mandisa becomes pregnant with him at the age of fourteen, though she has chosen not to have penetrative sexual intercourse with her boyfriend, China, to avoid early pregnancy. The young Mandisa even submits to regular virginity testing at the hands of her mother, and insists that she and her partner have “playsex,” “never going higher than a little above mid-thigh” (Magona 1999, 97). Despite these precautions, Mandisa finds herself pregnant, causing her grandmother to exclaim: “She has been jumped into!” (Magona 1999, 112) The virgin birth motif is further expanded when Mandisa’s much older aunt

becomes pregnant at the same time: “Biblical Elizabeth’s⁹ story all over again” (Magona 1999, 103). As Fiona Ross’s analyses of women’s testimony before the TRC demonstrates, “Women testifiers were thanked for the ‘sacrifice’ of their dead or injured kin and testifiers were told that their sacrifices (of health, well-being, or the lives of those close to them) had redemptive power for the national body” (Ross 2003, 154). Meg Samuelson argues that Magona uses the trope of the virgin birth to “grapple with, rather than underwrite a discourse of sacrifice” (Samuelson 2007, 165), thus subverting the narrative of sacrifice which was one of the few modes of articulation for those women who appeared before TRC.

Yet, Mxolisi is a saviour figure – as is evident in the allusion to Christ, and in the pieces of his personality pieced together as the narrative unfolds. We learn that Mxolisi would readily confess his own sin, but would never tell on another, preferring to “take the blame himself” (Magona 1999, 154). He is also a savior figure in the community, rescuing a young woman from group rape. He earns numerous accolades, as his mother’s testimony bears out:

In spite of all his politics, two-three weeks ago I could hardly walk anywhere in the whole of Section 3 without being stopped by people whose mouths had no other words to say besides singing Mxolisi’s praises. To everyone, he was a hero.... Young and old, they stopped me on the street to tell me: ‘Mother of Mxolisi, your child is really a child to be proud of. In this day and age, when children do everything but what is decent. We really thank the Lord for you. Yes. We really thank Him because of the son He has given you!’ This Mxolisi! He can make one so proud sometimes.” (Magona 1999, 162)

Like Christ, Mxolisi, whose name means “peace,” is a redemptive figure. Ross points out that at the TRC, “suffering and sacrifice, heavily predicated on a Christian model,

⁹ In the Bible, Elizabeth is the aunt of Mary, who is the mother of Christ. Elizabeth is much older than Mary, and thought to be past her child-bearing years, but becomes pregnant just before Mary becomes pregnant as a “virgin”.

were depicted as constitutive of the foundational order of the ‘new South Africa’” (Ross 2003, 154). Like Christ, Mxolisi becomes a scapegoat whose life is ultimately offered in the nation-building project. He pays the price for the historical “sins” of his nation – the structural violence, injustice, and brutality of apartheid – and becomes the sacrificial figure who is effectively made to atone for the centuries of wrongdoing which culminate in one violent episode. In figuring him as the sacrificial Christ, Magona again comments on the collective culpability for the death of the white woman. Mxolisi takes on the displaced sin of the nation, which is absolved and can continue the project of sustaining itself. The Christ device also complicates the victim/perpetrator binary set up the TRC: the man who redeems the nation through shouldering the blame for its collective sin, who saves a young Black woman from rape, who is praised by all in the community, is also the one who murders the white woman. His complexity as a person encompasses both redemptory and condemnatory elements; Mxolisi’s very existence thus disrupts the reductive national narrative of innocence and guilt produced by the TRC.

Cheryl Walker (1995) has argued for a broader analysis of the category of motherhood in relation to nation. Her primary critique of feminist scholarship relating to South African motherhood is that motherhood has been theorized along two main themes: the “collusion with patriarchy” theme, which conceptualizes motherhood as a patriarchally-approved platform strategically invoked by women, who, in doing so, collude with patriarchy, since they perform a culturally sanctioned version of motherhood in order to be allowed to articulate their subjectivities and concerns. The second theme Walker identifies around which theories of motherhood are clustered is

what she names the “difference” theme, which emphasizes the ways in which racialized difference inflects the ideology of motherhood Black and white South African women respectively choose to embrace. While white women, as argued by McClintock, adhere to a white supremacist and less militant brand of motherhood, Black women have seized the platform afforded by males via the subject position of motherhood, transformed it, and used it to subvert patriarchy. Such analyses, counters Walker, are inadequate. She argues that “while particular, limited constructions of ‘motherhood’ have been appropriated within various patriarchal discourses, these discourses should not themselves be seen as definitive of women’s actual identities and experiences” (Walker 1995, 418).

Instead, Walker proposes that analyses of motherhood encompass at least three different terrains: mothering work, or the practice of motherhood; discourses surrounding motherhood; and motherhood as a social identity. She advocates more research on the theoretical development of motherhood as a social identity, which she defines as involving women’s own constructions of their identities, informed by discourses of motherhood and the practice of mothering. What is gained giving greater salience to motherhood as social identity is an analytical lens which “allows us to address women as agents, as well as probe the interplay between individual and collective processes in the construction of subjectivity and the determination of behaviour. It draws attention to the subjective dimensions of motherhood and how women who are mothers themselves feel and think about this role and relationship” (Walker 1995, 426). She offers a third analytical lens for the concept of motherhood: that of the mother’s subjective concept of herself, “informed by the discourse of

motherhood, [and] mediated by the practice of mothering, but not a simple derivative of either” (Walker 1996, 426).

I have already discussed Magona’s conceptualization of motherhood as a complex set of emotions which acknowledges the partial obliteration of the self inherent in the experience of Black motherhood under apartheid. Now I turn to Magona’s iteration of motherhood in relation to other mothers, notably white mothers. The novel depicts Mandisa’s relationship to two white mothers: the mother of the slain student, and Mandisa’s employer, Mrs. Nelson. While Mandisa interpolates the American mother as a “sister-mother,” forging a discursive connection with her through their shared experience of the unfolding tragedy, Mandisa’s relationship with Mrs. Nelson differs. The reason for Mandisa’s different treatment of the two white women can be found in the nexus of gender, race, and class in South African power-relations between Black and white women, which makes the idea of “sisterhood” between these categories of women virtually impossible.

In her expansive study of Black domestic workers in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, Jacklyn Cock (1989) conveys the apartheid reality of Black and white women in this country. With two out of three white households employing Black women as domestic workers during the eighties, (Cock 1989, 122), it would not be remiss to speculate that the primary forms of interaction between white and Black women in South Africa during apartheid took place through the exploitative system of domestic work, with white women being the main overseers of Black women who

worked in this capacity. After interviewing 225 Black domestic workers for her study, Cock argues that:

In this context feminist theory has to be sensitive to the complex inter-relation of race, gender and class. The intersection of these three lines of oppression in the situation of Black women in South Africa raises important questions regarding both the limits and the possibilities of feminist struggle. (Cock 1989, 1)

Among her findings is that Black women employed as domestic workers often perceived themselves as little more than slaves, given the conditions of their employment: no employment from the law; no laws stipulating minimum wages or reasonable working hours; no unemployment insurance, maternity leave, or sick leave; and the constant threat of instant dismissal. Working under these conditions, Black women found themselves in situations of “ultra-exploitation” (Cock 1989, 4), which left them with little time for social or family life. Whereas the majority of white women employers interviewed for Cock’s study conveyed the sense that they treated their domestic workers as “one of the family” (Cock 1989, 67), none of the Black domestic workers shared this belief. Domestic work also had implications for both Black and white motherhood. Whereas white mothers felt that employing a domestic worker freed up time to devote to the intellectual and emotional development of their offspring, the corollary was true for the domestic workers who were mothers: “Clearly, this is done at the expense of Black children.” (Cock, 1989, 44)

In contrasting the lives and mothering experiences of the two women, Magona reveals how apartheid structures even this most basic of relationships. Of her daily life, Mandisa states:

Monday to Saturday I got to work in the kitchen of my mlungu (white) woman, Mrs Nelson; leaving the house before the children go to school and coming back long after the sun has gone to sleep. I am not home when they come back from school. (Magona 1999, 8)

Contrasted with Mandisa's experience, Mrs. Nelson does not work inside or outside of the home, and is available to greet her children every day when they return home from school. Her only work-related responsibility is overseeing Mandisa's labor in her home; in Mandisa's words, "breathing down my neck every minute of the blessed day" (Magona 1999, 20). From this task she has a weekly day off, during which she goes to the gym, goes shopping, and has lunch with a friend. The needs of Mrs. Nelson's white family always trump the needs of Mandisa's children, as Mandisa demonstrates in her lament:

Where was the government the day my son stole my neighbour's hen; wrung its neck and cooked it – feathers and all, because there was no food in the house and I was away, minding the children of the white family I worked for? Asked to stay for the week-end – they had their emergency... mine was not being able to tell my children beforehand that they would be alone for the weekend. (Magona 1999, 3)

Mandisa's labor of surrogate mothering for a white woman disconnects her from her own children, making her feel that her parental authority is a "mere formality, a charade, something nobody ever heeds" (Magona 1999, 8). Cock's study has demonstrated that, in contrast to African American domestic workers in the U.S., who Bonnie Thornton Dill (1980) found used their employers' affluence as a marker to set aspirational goals for their children, Black South African domestic workers cultivate a powerful sense of deprivation through their constant exposure to their employers' higher standard of living. Cock notes that even though the majority of white employers view their domestic workers as part of the family, the paternalistic

employer/employee relationship which results from the extremely skewed power-relations between Black and white women in this situation actually perpetuates racial discrimination against Black women, since it models, to white children, inequitable power relations between whites and Blacks. Through their domestic workers, white children are thus “socialized into the dominant ideological order and learn the attributes and styles of racial domination from relationships with servants, especially ‘nannies’” (Cock 1989, 3). The corollary is also true: via the experience of their mothers’ domestic work and inequitable treatment, Black children are often enraged and politicized. Cock cites Steve Biko as an example of a Black man who first became conscious of apartheid’s injustice through the mechanism of his mother’s domestic service to a white family. It is little wonder, then, that Mandisa’s eldest son, who is likely to have suffered most severely from her absence, is the radical political activist who kills a young white woman close to his age.

Mandisa’s experience of maternal disconnection due to white demands for exploitable Black labor echoes her loss of her own mother’s time and affection after her family’s forced removal from Blouvillei to the oppressive township space of Guguletu:

Soon all our mothers, who had been there every afternoon to welcome us when we returned from school, were no longer there. They were working in white women’s homes. Tired, every day when they returned. Tired and angry. In time we did not remember coming back from school to mothers waiting and smiling. (Magona 1999, 67)

Black South African feminist theorists such as Zoë Wicomb and Desiree Lewis point to the ways in which Black women’s consciousness about motherhood differs significantly from those of white South African women. Wicomb notes that in

harnessing the position of motherhood for political agency in fighting against apartheid, Black women's domestic roles in apartheid South Africa were politicized, a marked departure "from the Euro-feminist view of motherhood as a condition of passivity and confinement" (Wicomb 1996, 47). Lewis cites a number of studies that have shown how Black and working class women transcend conventional dependent roles associated with femininity as they take on political activist and breadwinner roles, effectively becoming household heads and figures of familial and community authority. Thus, while white feminists attach "key importance to their liberation from the family and domesticity... for many Black and working class women, 'freedom' to enter the male domain [of work outside of the home] is frequently oppressive" (Lewis 98).

This position on motherhood, as exemplified by Mandisa's self-concept as a mother, indicates the salience of racialized identity for Black conceptions of motherhood. Walker argues that the 'difference' theme in South African feminist conceptualizations of motherhood are insufficient as analytical tools because "the opposition set up between a white = western oppressive discourse of motherhood and a Black = non-western = emancipatory discourse, is overly simplistic and does not appear to be based on a serious engagement with the available literature or primary sources" (Walker 1996, 436). While the argument of a simplified discourse of white motherhood as oppressive and Black motherhood as emancipatory may be valid, it is my contention that one cannot investigate the construction of the identity of motherhood without investigating the very concrete material differences in the mothering experiences of women differently racialized as Black and white by

apartheid ideology and law. Given that feminists of color around the world have argued for feminist analyses which are cognizant of the intersectional or co-constructed nature of identity, an unpacking of the system of racial privilege and the ways in which power operates between Black and white women in the South African context is central to investigating the self-concept of motherhood in both Black and white women. I would argue, that contrary to Walker's de-emphasis on racial difference, racial difference is perhaps one of the most important constitutive components upon which Black mothers, particularly those who are domestic workers, base their concept of motherhood. As Magona's text and Cock's research demonstrate, the exposure of Black women domestic workers to the affluence of the white families they work for, and the concomitant exposure to the relative ease with which white women are able to practice mothering, at the expense of domestic workers' family lives, creates a profound sense of deprivation in these Black women's lives. Black women's exposure to white domestic life furthers the sense of powerlessness Black mothers feel in being able to fulfill the emotional needs and control the destinies of their children, as Magona's *Mother to Mother* poignantly demonstrates.

Magona shows through Mandisa's interiority the multiple facets and overlapping components of a mother's identity: she is woman, working class, a sexual being, daughter, friend, scholar, and wife; she is also Black in a country which severely oppresses Black subjects, and Black women in particular. Her own image or idea of herself as mother cannot but be constructed against the iteration of motherhood she is exposed to in the form of her boss, Mrs. Nelson. In the

performance of her white maternal identity, Mrs. Nelson provides an inverted mirror through which Mandisa is able to quantify how apartheid systematically produces a deficit in the quality of mothering she is able to provide her own offspring.

Mandisa's sense of powerlessness at being unable to provide for or direct her children, a direct result of her racial and gender identity, is a significant component of her maternal identity. Magona's emphasis on the difference between white and Black motherhood, and the potential of the domestic worker/employer relationship for radicalizing young Black people, again interrupts the meta-narrative of reconciliation, pointing to the impossibility of meaningful reconciliation between different classes of people when power relations between them remain fundamentally unjust and unequal. While the TRC as nation-building apparatus focused on gross human rights violations such as the murder of Amy Biehl, it left little room for articulations of the grinding effect of a million small, daily humiliations and acts of structural violence which degraded Black South Africans, literally tearing apart the fabric of their lives. Mxolisi's loss of his mother's daily care, affection, and guidance is not a loss one would expect to revisit before the TRC, nor have redressed by this reconciliatory body. In fact, a deafening silence surrounds such losses of parental guidance and love due to apartheid in the broader, reconciliatory nation-building discourses of the "new" South Africa. They remain unacknowledged.

I turn now to Magona's invocation of the historical figure, Nonqawuse, in *Mother to Mother*. South African feminist literary critic Pumla Gqola asserts that it is crucially important to read Magona's literature "in proximity to the lineages of creative storytellers who are explicitly evoked in relation to it" (Gqola 2004, 55).

Magona produces in *Mother to Mother*, a story within a story, of Nonqawuse and the Xhosa Cattle-Killing of the mid-1800s, using the convention of orality to convey the story via Mandisa's grandfather's retelling of it. In doing so, Magona uses the standpoint of motherhood to cast a fresh lens on historical memory, and reconfigure a foundational narrative of the Xhosa nation in order to interrogate the emerging South African nation at the time of its transition to democracy. Magona relays the events of the Cattle-Killing through the literary device of what Gay Wilentz calls "oral literature," used to refer to "written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them" (Wilentz 1992, xvii). Wilentz argues that much African women's and diasporic literature is characterized by this form.

Mandisa invokes the historical events of the Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856-7, when the young prophetess Nongqawuse instructed the besieged Xhosa nation to kill all of their cattle. Though the details of and circumstances surrounding the cattle killing are not fully known, and Nonqawuse's role in it remains highly contested, she remains a central figure within retellings of the story, alternately dismissed by androcentric historians, or the subject of feminist revisionings. What most historians agree upon is that a number of Xhosa prophets at the Eastern frontier of the Cape, a region threatened by expanding colonialism, started prophesying that if the Xhosa left their fields uncultivated, slaughtered all cattle, and destroyed all grain stock, white colonizers would be driven into the sea. Long-dead ancestors would then rise again, along with the destroyed cattle. Grain would again grow abundantly (Andreas, Davies, and Offenburger, 2008). Nongqawuse, a fifteen-year-old orphan, was a key prophetess in the movement, along with her uncle, Mhlakaza, a diviner and chief's

counselor, who owned large herds of cattle. Though the Xhosa were deeply divided about whether to follow Nongqawuse's prophecies, her views eventually held sway, resulting in the killing of over 400, 000 heads of cattle, the deaths of more than 40, 000 Xhosa from starvation, and their displacement from more than 600, 000 acres of land (Bradford 1996). Nongqawuse's name thus became synonymous with death, destruction, and deception.

Magona retells the story of Nonqawuse in *Mother to Mother*, transmitting the account as an oral history via Mandisa's grandfather, who relates it to her when she is a young girl. She deploys the story for two purposes: first, to indicate the danger of a society which does not tolerate dissent; and second, to provide a feminist revisioning of the story of Nonqawuse, which fractures dominant nationalist discourses. For the first purpose, Magona uses the narrative of Nonqawuse to issue a warning about unchecked discourses of emerging, masculinist nationalism in the transitional South Africa. In an interview about her deployment of Nonqawuse, she notes that she conceptualized the retelling as a way of drawing parallels between two political moments which she imagines do not tolerate dissent. She compares the Cattle-Killing to the political protests of 1976 in South Africa, where leaders of the liberation movement called upon students to abandon their schooling in order to fight against the apartheid government. Referring to Xhosa society at the time of the Cattle-Killing, Magona states:

There must have been dissension, there must have been people who didn't want to [kill their cattle]. This for me is 1976... there was this movement, this feeling that to advanced we had to retreat. You know, to be free, to advance in the struggle, every child should just abandon their education. And I say to myself, but how does this help us? Stop school altogether every year?... And subsequently, the young people who were now not in school began to look to

the killing of people, and the necklacing, and the burning of people's houses if they were suspected of being collaborators. (Attwell and Harlow 2000, 289)

In complicating the Nonqawuse story in this way, Magona points to the ways in which collective decision-making which avoids dissent can be dangerous, in the time on Nonqawuse, leading to great losses of human life and cattle; and in apartheid South Africa, leading to the squandering of a life such as Mxolisi's. In an interview with me, Magona indicated her resistance and displeasure with the elements of the resistance movement in 1976, even though she was initially part of this movement, specifically referring to the ways in which young people were deployed in the struggle against apartheid:

It was very threatening. And not only threatening, sometimes one agreed with what was happening with what the youth was voicing. But the modus operandi sometimes left me really bewildered. (Magona 2006)

Magona recounts the brutal murders of Africans suspected of being police informers during the 1970s and 1980s, and the violence which erupted during anti-apartheid protests, which saw suspected apartheid collaborators' homes set alight. She related to me her attempts to be a voice of dissent and reason during this period, with little effect.

What bothered me though was that some of the people were very, very young. And the level of violence. What I asked [is this]: if we say what the children are doing is right - not the protest, the violence, they are descending into barbarism. How will we hold them back one day when we want them to be human beings? They are leaving the standards, the recognized and accepted standards, of being human. Human beings don't do things like that. Then I said, if we allow this, then they'll get used to this way of doing things. Then one day, when we need them to come back into the fold of being human beings, how will we hold them back? And the response was, the usual being howled down. Don't you know there is a revolution going on? (Magona 2006)

Magona's use of the figure of Nonqaqwuse and the Xhosa Cattle-Killing can be read as a warning about the dangers of not tolerating dissent, which she believes contributes to the violent tragedy depicted in her novel.

Magona also uses the novel as a revisioning of dominant historical narratives around the Cattle-Killing. In a comparative analysis of *Mother to Mother* with Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, Rene Schatteman (2008) proposes that both novels use the Cattle-Killing as a "generative site" because of its "potentiality for transferred meaning in the post-apartheid context" (2008, 275). Schatteman argues that like the period of the Cattle-Killing, the transitional present in South Africa is a time of ambivalence and ambiguity. Invoking the historical event allows Magona to emphasise the inherent instability of the transitional period, along with a sense of danger, as well as the political moment's transformative potential. Magona deploys the narrative of Nongqawuse only briefly within her novel; yet the short chapter on the Cattle-Killing succeeds in producing a feminist retelling of the events, and a recasting of Amy Biehl's murder.

Mandisa first encounters Nongqawuse's story as a child, in a context imbued with hatred of white people, "a knowledge with which I was born – or which I acquired at such an early age it is as though it was there the moment I came to know myself.... We sucked it from our mothers' breasts... inhaled it from the air" (Magona 1999, 173). It is within this context that she encounters the story of Nongqawuse, initially at school, where she is taught that her people were "ignorant and superstitious" (Magona 1999, 173) for following Nongqawuse's directives.

Feminist analyses of the Nongqawuse story have taken issue with androcentric interpretations of the Cattle-Killing. J.B. Peires's account, *The Dead will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-6* (1989), is widely considered the most accurate and detailed text on the phenomenon. Peires's account revises preceding histories to suggest that the cattle-killing was a response to encroaching British colonialism, as well as widespread disease in cattle. But feminist historian Helen Bradford's critique of this work reveals it to be a one-sided, male-centered rendering of history. Bradford's revisioning of the historic event hinges on inserting an analysis of the value of Xhosa women's labor and the currency of their sexuality into the discourse around Nongqawuse, an approach completely ignored by Peires. Bradford argues that cattle, in addition to being an indicator of wealth, were also a means of controlling female sexuality. Cattle were central to the regulation of Xhosa society during this period, and functioned as currency, most notably in their utility as bride wealth. In addition to providing meat, milk, and leather, cattle were also exchanged in marriage by males, who had to pay the family of his bride a number of cattle determined in negotiations prior to the wedding. But this function was profoundly patriarchal, as Sara Mdivuvu shows. She has argued that the practice of labola is detrimental to women, since it reduces them to property being exchanged between their fathers and their husbands' families, who, in paying labola, "purchase" the women's reproductive capability (Mdivuvu 2002). The exchange of cattle thus regulated women's reproduction and sexuality, since a young Xhosa woman of marriageable age was expected to be a virgin who would procure for her family a good bride price. Since dowries for brides (labola) were paid in cattle, and sexual

transgressions against women, such as rape, were punishable by the extraction of cattle from perpetrators, cattle played an important role in regulating both gender and sexual relations. As colonial pressure intensified against the Xhosa, their cattle were also struck with lung-disease, which decimated their stock. In the period just before the Cattle-Killing, stock numbers had plummeted so that most Xhosa men could no longer afford bride prices. In turn, argues Bradford, more sexual transgressions were performed against young Xhosa women, who were increasingly being raped and becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Bradford posits that older men felt themselves under threat; as the guardians of young women's virtue and the ones controlling transactions of their sexuality through the procurement of cattle, they were no longer able to exert the same measure of control over young men and women. Speculating that Nongqawuse may have been a victim of incest perpetrated by her older male relatives, Bradford posits that:

Nongqawuse's prophecies should be read against the understanding that the society in which she lived symbolically equated women with cattle, which functioned to regulate sexual practices. Her exhortation to kill cattle came along with denouncement of sexual offences, and the instruction that these be stopped. (Bradford 1996, 361)

Bradford thus makes a plausible argument that Nongqawuse's prophecies may have been a result of her sexual mistreatment by male relatives, and that her exhortation to kill cattle may have been one strategy to decrease men's social and sexual control over women's bodies. Translation of the primary documents used to construct androcentric historic accounts of the Cattle-Killing had all excised references to rape, incest, adultery, and fornication in Nongqawuse's prophecy, according to Bradford, ultimately eliding this perspective on the event. Additionally, Bradford argues that the

role of women's labor in Xhosa culture has been completely overlooked in most accounts of the Cattle-Killing. She shows that part of Nongqawuse's prophecy that agrarian land should be neglected directly impacted women, who were the main cultivators of the soil. Most women supported Nongqawuse's prophecies since she predicted a new order where female labor would be unnecessary, a fact disregarded by official accounts of the killing.

Magona inserts the story of Nongqawuse into her lament, and revises andocentric tellings of it. At her grandfather's knee, Mandisa learns the importance of cattle in her culture, as her grandfather explains the ways in which cattle are important and have currency. This is especially important to Mandisa, who is a city dweller and therefore disconnected from pastoral Xhosa life. Her grandfather emphasizes the motive of driving the abalungu into the sea: "the more terrible the abomination, the greater the sacrifice called for" (Magona 1999, 178), driving home the seriousness with which the Xhosa viewed the appropriation of their land by white colonists. Mandisa thus reflects on the subjugated knowledge she has gleaned from her grandfather: "He explained what had seemed stupid decisions, and acts that had seemed indefensible became not only understandable but highly honorable" (Magona 1999, 183).

The story of Nongqawuse resonates with Mxolisi's on many levels. Both are teenagers, living in a time of liminality in which their nations are under threat and rapidly transforming. Both are initially seen as savior figures – Mxolisi is described as a "general" in the informal army of school children fighting for liberation – yet their communities turn on them when the results of their actions become catastrophic.

Both, most strikingly, are engaged in activity which holds the promise of liberation of their people from white domination, and the restoration of their land rights. As the testimony of Amy Biehl's actual killer makes clear, Peni acted on the belief that in killing Biehl, he was contributing to ridding his country of the scourge of white people who had stolen land from Black South Africans. He believed killing her to be a legitimate avenue for redress for Black people dispossessed of their land.

Magona uses the Cattle-Killing as a way of offering a more expansive view on the Biehl killing, situating it within the larger history of the Xhosa and South Africa. She does this to wrench attention away from the present political moment, providing historicity and context to Mxolisi's act of murder. In doing so, she positions the murder of the white woman within a larger national history, demonstrating how the injustices of the past, if not redressed, cannot but resurface. Her contextualization of Mxolisi's actions against centuries of white oppression helps the dead woman's mother process "acts that had seemed indefensible," rendering these "understandable" (Magona 1999, 183), in the same way that Mandisa's grandfather engendered her understanding of Nongqawusi.

Thus Magona not only transforms the discourse surrounding Nongqawuse, but also uses it to offer an explanation for the murder of the white woman. In addition, her textual strategy of invoking Nongqawuse again disrupts the mechanistic TRC model of forgiveness and redemption, pointing to the fact that some human rights abuses have their roots not only in the modern apartheid period, but in centuries past. Without an acknowledgment of the systemic historic abuses against the oppressed people of South Africa, attempts at reconciliation remain superficial. Magona's

invocation of Nongqawuse can thus also be read as a warning for the future of South Africa if a more encompassing notion of justice is not embraced.

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Towards a Black South African Feminist Criticism

To write is not only to speak for one's place in the world. It is also to make one's own place or narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity. It is in effect to deploy what might be called a typically nationalist strategy. (Boehmer 1991, 10)

This dissertation has aimed to make visible the ways in which selected Black South African women writers have made visible their standpoint on the apartheid and emerging South African nation through their fiction. I have argued that during the apartheid era, pioneering Black women writers Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo were able to insert a counter-hegemonic vision of the nation into national discourse by critiquing the construction and use of apartheid space and offering an alternative vision for the reconfiguring of space for a more just and equitable South African social order. Their novels are exemplary of a critical Black geography (McKittrick 2007), combining the genres of fiction with an activist approach to critiquing dominant modes of spatiality, as organized by apartheid ideology and law; and in making visible the lives of those who inhabit the fissures and margins of this spatial arrangement.

I have also argued that in the post-apartheid, transitional period from white dictatorship to multi-racial democracy, the writers Zoë Wicomb and Sindiwe Magona have used the discursive space opened up by the transition to democracy to interrogate androcentric nationalist rhetoric by calling into question the patriarchal, unitary nature of nationalism in *David's Story* and *Mother to Mother*. Zoë Wicomb achieves this in *David's Story* by decentering notions of a cohesive "truth:" a concept

central to the nation-building project of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She further achieves this aim by recreating in her text the silences around discourses of rape within the African National Congress's military wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe, as these silences and omissions were reproduced by the TRC. In this way, she draws attention to these elisions in women's experiences without speaking the unspeakable act of rape. Magona fractures emerging, one-eyed forms of unitary nationalism by relating the story of a young freedom fighter, responsible for the political killing of a white woman, from the perspective of his mother. In doing so, she decenters the narrative of the Black, male militant as an agent of history and a heroic figure in the liberation of South Africa, and creates a more textured story of the interconnected lives of the son, his mother, Mandisa, and the white people who shape their destinies. She delivers this story within the proto-feminist narrative space she creates within the novel, which she also uses for a feminist reconstruction of the Nonqawuse story – a foundational narrative for the Xhosa nation.

While the four novels examined in this study differ stylistically, and in the periods they depict, what they share is a subaltern perspective on the nation and a commitment to interrogating hegemonic discourses of citizenship, whether these are the result of apartheid or African national patriarchies. Their efficacy as cultural and subversive texts lies in an uncompromising willingness to challenge meta-narratives which, in creating national identities, seek to create an oppositional "other" against which to construct these identities. Often this "other" is gendered woman. The texts of all four writers surveyed refuse this sublimation of Black woman as other, and insist upon inserting the figure of Black woman into national discourse. Given the

different types of patriarchal nationalisms faced at different periods in South African history, the writers' whose texts are examined here used different literary strategies to contest dominant nationalisms.

Juliana Macuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, in her analysis of gender in African women's writing, posits that African women writers specifically concerned with gender, and the historical deployments of gender as a social category in both colonial and postcolonial Africa, in addition to creating worlds within the text are also engaged in the project of "fictionalized theory or [...] theorized fiction (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997, 263). She argues that the novels she analyzes in her monograph, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (1997) are not just fiction, but also theoretical texts:

The theory is embedded in the polysemous and polymorphous nature of the narratives themselves. These texts reinscribe and foreground teleological, ontological, and epistemological insights and praxes relevant to the specific histories and politics that preceded the fictional texts. (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997, 262-263)

I similarly locate the fictional texts examined in this dissertation within the realm of theory, and contend that in interrogating the logic of patriarchal nationalisms, be these Afrikaner or emerging, postcolonial African nationalisms, the authors of these novels effectively theorize a Black, feminist praxis for engaging with and subverting these nationalisms. Following on what South African feminist literary critic Pumla Dineo Gqola names "the creative theorisation in the arena of African feminist imagination" (Gqola 2008, 51), I propose that the work of Tlali, Ngcobo, Magona, and Wicomb produces a Black South African feminist criticism. I define this Black South African feminist criticism as both the theorization about Black women's positionality in

relation to structures of domination such as apartheid and Black patriarchy, and as a method for reading transgressive, feminist literature produced by other Black women writing subjects. This Black South African feminist criticism is thus an approach to reading Black South African feminist fiction, which brings a feminist ethic to reading such work, much in the way Barbara Smith proposes a Black feminist literary criticism in the U.S.A.

A Black South African feminist criticism operates on two levels: in the production of fiction which theorizes Black women's lived experiences and strategies for emancipation, and in offering entryways into reading aforementioned texts. In what follows, I outline the ways in which a Black South African feminist criticism operates at these two levels.

Black South African Feminist Criticism: Fiction as Theory

Here, I want to argue that Black South African women's feminist fiction writing should be reconceptualized also as a form of literary criticism. Fiction which qualifies as Black South African feminist literary criticism is characterized by narrating experiences and events from the perspectives and interiority of Black women. Black women are portrayed as thinking subjects, not mere ciphers or bodies. In this way, writers of such texts foreground the subjugated knowledges of Black women, suppressed by hundreds of years of colonialism, and later, decades of apartheid. Black South African feminist criticism, in fiction, locates Black women historically, allowing insights into the forces of oppression that operate against them, as well as the opportunities they are able to take advantage of within the matrix of power within which they find themselves situated. In representing Black women in fiction, a Black

South African feminist criticism thus historicizes and situates Black women as subjects constrained by the politics of their respective social locations. Yet, significantly, Black women are also represented as agentic beings, able to navigate and negotiate the constraints they face. This leads me to another characteristic of a Black South African feminist criticism.

In Chapter Three I introduced the concept of creative re-visioning: a subject's ability to re-envision and reimagine what is possible for her to achieve within her lifetime, given the constraints operating upon her, and the expectations the society in which she is located has of her. I argued that the writers I interviewed, Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo, Gladys Thomas, and Sindiwe Magona, were engaged in a creative re-envisioning of their lives as they became writing subjects. Since the societies in which they were born and raised deemed them only fit for domestic labor, and educated them accordingly, their acts of creatively reinvisioning themselves as writers in possession of creative agency marked a radical shift in their subjectivities. I now extend this argument to encompass the subjectivities of the Black women these writers construct in their fiction. In writing Black women characters who are thinking subjects, who are located within the historic constraints of their social location, and who provide alternative forms of consciousness and counter-narratives to dominant modes of knowledge, Black South African feminist literary critics additionally bestow creative re-visioning of the self upon the subjectivities they bring to life within their fiction. The Black female subjectivities that are created in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, *And They Didn't Die*, *David's Story* and *Mother to Mother* are constantly engaged in renegotiating the bounds of what is possible for them to

achieve within the systems in which they find themselves living. Utilizing their agency, they interrogate and push against the structures that hold them back within South Africa, a process, which in turn, engenders further agency. While the women in these narrations do not end up in a world with a restored, more just, social order they nevertheless continue to fight against discourses and practices which deny them agency and humanity.

An additional characteristic of a Black South African feminist literary criticism is found in the way such criticism responds to and positions Black women in relation to oppression. It recognizes that Black women experience intersecting forms of oppression: that their situation cannot be accounted for by merely considering the effects of one system of oppression upon them. As is made clear in the novels examined for this dissertation, the Black women protagonists who inhabit the worlds created by Tlali, Magona, Wicomb, and Ngcobo, negotiate overlapping forms of oppression, including oppression by white supremacist ideology, and by Black patriarchies. The authors position their women characters between these systems, often offering, through their characters' struggles, models for simultaneously negotiating the discourses and practices of both systems of oppression.

A final characteristic of a Black South African feminist literary criticism is its insistence on imagining different social worlds, where justice, humanity, and agency are freely available to all oppressed citizens. Through critiquing dominant structures within their society, and using their creative fiction to imagine different worlds, these authors are engaged in a transgressive process of reshaping the world from a subjugated perspective. Though the degree to which each of the four authors

discussed in this dissertation imagines a different alternative to the present of their literary text varies, each writer, in showing the fallacies of and contradictions in masculinist nationalisms at different historical moments, begins the work of transforming society. Thus, Miriam Tlali demonstrates the unworkability and unviability of the apartheid system, which needs the Black bodies it continuously abjects in order to maintain itself, and points in the direction of a different world without the dreaded pass laws and artificial boundaries within which the protagonist, Muriel, finds herself. Laretta Ngcobo, in her imaginative, feminist utilization of space in *And They Didn't Die*, shows a model for Black women's resistance by demonstrating the ways in which Black women have literally reconfigured the oppressive spaces in which they find themselves, by working collectively and using their bodies to shelter each other. Zoë Wicomb, in *David's Story*, points to the dangers inherent in inaugurating a new nation upon the foundation of a stable, unitary understanding of the concept of "truth." She also demonstrates how national unity is built upon the bodies of Black women guerillas whose stories of rape and abuse were ultimately subsumed by nation-building discourses at the TRC. Wicomb thus indirectly opens up a discussion of what the alternative might look like: how a more inclusive discourse around reconciliation might work to forge true reconciliation and healing. Sindiwe Magona, in a similar fashion, points to the reductive nature of the type of reconciliation forged within the South African nation by the TRC which, in failing to account for the structural violence committed against Black South Africans during apartheid, circumvents the chance to produce meaningful reconciliation which

figures different types of structural violence and loss into South Africa's national narratives.

Black South African Feminist Criticism as a Method for Reading

A Black South African feminist criticism lens offers, to literary critics, modes of interpreting Black women's fiction and other writing that refuses to reduce such writing to mere description. As an analytical and theoretical practice, it is the antithesis to modes of knowing and knowledge production which enables the esteemed South African writer, Nadine Gordimer, for example, to preface the autobiography of Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman* (1985), with the following opening remark:

Fortunately, although she is not a writer, she has the memory and the gift of unselfconscious expression that enable her to tell her story as no-one else could. (Gordimer 1985, xi)

Gordimer conceives of Kuzwayo as a stenographic recorder of her own life, reliant on memory, not artistry or creative agency, for constructing her own life story. Her book-length work is "unselfconscious expression," not a thoughtful, crafted body of writing, but an almost reflexive blurting out of her story. For Gordimer, Kuzwayo is not a writer.

A Black South African feminist criticism as a method of engaging with Black, women-authored texts, takes as its point of departure the intrinsic worth of a Black woman – shaped by oppressive forces such as slavery, apartheid, colonialism – sitting down to write and producing a text from her uniquely gendered, classed, and racialized position within Black South Africa and its diaspora. Whether fiction, autobiography, or poetry, such work should be approached as potentially containing

insights and perspectives not available elsewhere. Additionally it attends to the political discourses that shape Black women as speaking subjects, noting the dominant discourses of the time and location in which a text is situated, while locating the Black women textually represented within this time. It notes that power structures often intersect, so that apartheid and Black patriarchy, for example, can work together to shape Black women's lives. It is excruciatingly attentive to these forces, the ways in which they operate, and the ways in which they are depicted textually.

A Black South African feminist criticism is attentive to the historiography of Black women's existence within past and present South African societies, and notes the ways in which historical constraints have impeded the lives of Black subjects represented in texts it seeks to elucidate. It carefully seeks, and attends to, the subjectivities of Black women within texts it analyzes, utilizing, again, the unique subaltern vantage point afforded by Black women's subjugated knowledges. It searches for these knowledges where they are present, notes the absence of such unique ways of knowing where these lacunae exist, and embeds interpretations of presences or absences of Black women's subjectivities in its critique of the work under scrutiny. It is similarly attentive to formulations of Black women's agency in relation to oppressive structures, as portrayed in literary texts. It extrapolates meaning from the presence or non-existence of Black women's agency within literary texts. Viewed in this way, a Black South African feminist literary criticism can be used as a method for reading and evaluating *any* body of South African fiction, biography, or autobiography, regardless of the race and gender of the author. Inferences can thus be

made about the inclusion and omission of Black women's subjectivities and agency in literary texts that extend beyond the subjectivities of their authors. Where these are absent, the silences around Black women's interiority, thought processes, and agency, in themselves "speak" volumes about the authors' intentions and aesthetic. Foregrounding Black women's subjectivities in this way, in a country with a majority Black and female population, will open up new ways of seeing the nation of South Africa; novel ways of reconceptualizing formal knowledge, and what stands for knowledge; and most significantly, in centering the knowledge and subjectivities of those most oppressed by different structures of power, will open up unprecedented ways of refiguring the nation as a more just, equitable place, where Black women will finally be able to feel themselves at home.

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