

# **White Women Writing the (Post)Colony: Creolité, Home and Estrangement in Novels by Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the ways in which white subjectivity is shaped by colonial and imperial spaces. Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Marguerite Duras's *The Sea Wall* (1952/1967) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004/2006) are vastly different novels from multifarious literary traditions, yet they join each other through their protagonists: white creole women. In this study, I engage most prominently with white creole female subjectivity, framing my study with theories of the subject proposed by Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler. In order to interrogate creolité, I draw on Bhabha's concept of "thirdness" – a category signifying a position in-between binary categories of representation – and Butler's conceptualisation of subjectivity/subjection, through which she highlights the ambivalences of the process of interpellation. I also read through lenses proposed by whiteness studies in the United States and South Africa, approaching creolité not as an indication of racial hybridity, but rather a term connoting cultural and political in-betweenness. As my discussions of the novels illustrate, white creole femininity in the (post)colony is a subject position through which intricate webs of "complicity and resistance" (Whitlock 349) have to be negotiated. Looking at the white creole women as textual constructs embedded in genres which advance a particular set of politics, I explore the ways in which the authors, through their novels and protagonists, navigate various political and cultural ambiguities and inconsistencies.

Establishing the theoretical framework in the introductory first chapter, in Chapter 2 I read Rhys's novel as a modernist text that elicits a particular postcolonial politics. I link the protagonist's social alienation in London and the Caribbean to the experience of the middle passage; this is followed by an exploration of her sexuality with reference to the figures of the European prostitute and the 'Hottentot' Venus. In Chapter 3 I investigate Duras's novel and trace the ways in which a family of impoverished "Colonial natives" (Duras 138) continually fail to establish themselves as 'legitimate' white colonials in (French colonial) Southeast Asia. Lastly, in Chapter 4, I approach Van Niekerk's novel not only as a feminist re-writing of the *plaasroman*, but also as a "complicitous critique" (Warnes 121) that reflects nostalgically – yet critically – on Afrikaner nationalism. I show how the novel registers a vision of the quotidian that is uncomfortable and unhomey.

Together, the three novels speak in highly comparable and complex ways about how white creole women experience (un)homeliness in the (post)colony. This thesis probes the extent to which the novels negotiate 'home' (or the lack thereof): displaced, alienated and often expressing forms of nostalgia, the protagonists struggle to establish forms of belonging in spaces within which they oscillate between opposed cultures, ideologies and politics. Ultimately, my study is crucially underscored by the question of displacement and estrangement (in various guises), and the way in which they inflect the establishment and performance of femininity.

Key terms: femininity, whiteness, creolité, the (post)colony, subjectivity, home, estrangement, space, imperialism and colonialism, national identity, ambiguity, displacement, nostalgia

## ABSTRAK

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die wyses waarop koloniale en imperiale ruimtes wit subjektiwiteit beïnvloed. Jean Rhys se *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Marguerite Duras se *The Sea Wall* (1952/1967) en Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat* (2004/2006) is uiteenlopende romans uit verskeie literêre tradisies: nietemin sluit hulle by mekaar aan deur hul hoofkarakters – wit kreoolse vroue. ‘n Bespreking van wit kreoolse vroulike subjektiwiteit vorm die grondslag van my studie, en ek struktureer dit rondom Homi Bhabha en Judith Butler se teorieë van subjektiwiteit. Ek benader kreoolsheid deur middel van Bhabha se konsep van “thirdness” – a kategorie wat ‘n plek tussen binêre opposisies aandui – asook Butler se teorie van “subjectivity/subjection” waarin sy the ambivalente proses van interpellasie belig. Verder lees ek die tekste met behulp van benaderings soos uiteengelê deur blankheid studies in die Verenigde State en Suid-Afrika. Ek beskou (wit) kreoolsheid dus nie as ‘n aanduiding van ras-hibrideit nie, maar eerder kulturele en politieke ambivalensie. My bespreking van die drie romans illustreer postkoloniale wit kreoolse vroulikheid as ‘n subjek-kategorie wat verwickeld is in vorms van medepligtigheid én opstandigheid (Whitlock 349). Ek beskou die karakters as literêre konstrakte wat ingebed is in genres met spesifieke politieke standpunte. As sodanig, dink ek ook na oor die wyses waarop the outeurs, deur middel van hul romans en hoofkarakters, uiteenlopende politieke en kulturele teenstrydighede uitbeeld.

In Hoofstuk 1 lê ek ‘n teoretiese raamwerk uiteen, en in Hoofstuk 2 beskou ek Rhys se roman as ‘n modernistiese teks wat terselfdertyd opvallende postkoloniale politieke temas bevat. Ek vergelyk die hoofkarakter se posisie as sosiale verstoteling in Londen en die Karibiese Eilande met die ervaring van die “middle passage”; daarna vergelyk ek haar seksualiteit met dié van die wit Europese prostituut en die ‘Hottentot’ Venus. In Hoofstuk 3 bespreek ek Duras se roman, en verken die wyses waarop ‘n gesin van “Koloniale inboorlinge” (Duras 138) in Suidoos Asië deurentyd misluk om rykdom en sosiale aansien te bekom. Laastens, in Hoofstuk 4, interpreteer ek Van Niekerk se roman nie net as ‘n feministiese herskrywing van die plaasroman nie, maar ook as ‘n “complicitous critique” (Warnes 121) wat nostalgies, maar ook op ‘n kritiese wyse, oor Afrikaner-nasionalisme nadink. Ek argumenteer verder dat die teks ‘n ongemaklike beeld van die alledaagse, asook die identifisering met die eie, skets.

Wanneer die drie romans tesame beskou word, is dit duidelik dat hulle op hoogs vergelykbare en komplekse maniere nadink oor hoe wit kreoolse vroue hul sosiale en politieke posisies in (post)koloniale ruimtes ervaar. Hierdie tesis ondersoek die wyses waarop die romans tuisheid (of die gebrek daaraan) te bowe kom: die hoofkarakters is dikwels misplaas, vervreem en nostalgies, en is dikwels verwickeld in 'n stryd om te behoort, midde-in teenoorgestelde kulture, ideologieë en politieke standpunte. Ek baseer my tesis op die groter oorkoepelende problematiek van ontheemdheid en verveemding (in verskeie gedaantes), en hoe dit vorm gee aan die vestiging en beoefening van vroulike subjektiwiteit.

Kernwoorde: vroulikheid, blankheid, kreoolsheid, (post)kolonialisme, ontheemdheid, vervreemding, ruimte en plek, imperialisme en kolonialisme, nasionale identiteit, dubbelsinnigheid, nostalgie

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1. White women writing creolité:<sup>1</sup> Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, Marguerite Duras's *The Sea Wall* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Marguerite Duras's *The Sea Wall* (1952) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004) are vastly different novels. They span continents and eras, and address multifarious political issues in a wide range of spaces and places. Written in English, French and Afrikaans (with Duras's and Van Niekerk's texts appearing in English translation shortly afterwards), they are located and produced in different linguistic and literary traditions. Thus, in many ways, they seem an unconventional and uneasy cluster. Yet, what binds these texts together are their authors and protagonists: white creole women. Embodying a particular intersection of the categories of race, gender and class in (post)colonial and imperial spaces, Anna Morgan (*Voyage in the Dark*), Suzanne (*The Sea Wall*)<sup>2</sup> and Milla de Wet (*Agaat*) occupy subject positions that explode the settler/native binary. They are displaced, alienated and unhomed – a way of being that produces various forms of nostalgia. Speaking in equal – and therefore highly comparable – measure to the influence of empire, and geographical and cultural space upon subjectivity, the novels show how white female creolité in the (post)colony is consistently associated with an ambiguity of origin and political orientation.

I write as a white South African – creole – woman, and have chosen to group these works together as they all are produced from, and feature in central roles, the position of white colonial femininity. In this study, I argue that space – in the form of physical, contextual and abstract realms – influences and ultimately shapes the formation of white creole female subjectivity within the (post)colony. Engaging with cultural displacement and crises of national identity and

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<sup>1</sup> For the title of my thesis and this particular section, I am indebted to Mary West's study, *White Women Writing White: Identity and Representation in (Post-)Apartheid Literatures of South Africa* (2009).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Sea Wall*, Duras presents her protagonist without a last name.

political affiliation, I am interested in the ways in which the novels metaphorically explore what it means to be estranged from one's surroundings and from oneself. My engagement with creole in-betweenness and ambivalence is however not limited to interpretations of the protagonists. The genres and narrative forms of the texts themselves, the historical contexts out of which they emerge and within which they are placed, together with the public, private and geographical spaces depicted in them are all underscored by a fundamental ambiguity. My use of creolité as *concept* enables me to interrogate how imperial and colonial discourses and policies fail conceptually and physically to *place* individuals according to binary categories of representation. I employ creolité not merely as a category that destabilises oppositional subject categories, but also as a concept that unsettles various forms of 'legitimacy' and 'authenticity'. Rather than focusing on instances when creolité is a site of agency and potential, I will investigate how creolité – as a destabilising concept – reveals the ambiguities and inconsistencies of subject categories.

Born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams in 1890 in British colonial Dominica (Ghosh-Schellhorn 179), the author of *Voyage in the Dark* took the name Jean Rhys, and published this second novel in 1934, shortly after her authorial debut.<sup>3</sup> In her biography on Rhys, Lilian Pizzichini argues that Rhys was torn between her Caribbean background and affiliation to England as imperial 'motherland', and in *Voyage in the Dark* she reflects on her personal experiences of dislocation. The text is set within Britain's colonial period, featuring simultaneously imperial London and one of its colonial outposts, the Caribbean, while focusing on the experiences of a young, white creole woman, Anna Morgan. Rhys's much-acclaimed last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (seen by Mary Lou Emery as an important entry-point into Rhys's earlier work)<sup>4</sup> provides a key position from which to approach *Voyage in the Dark* as it also locates the protagonist in juxtaposed geographical and cultural spaces. In this sense, *Voyage in the Dark* pre-empts the various forms of dislocation experienced by *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s creole protagonist by presenting, through the figure of Anna Morgan, the Caribbean as a cultural and geographical home.

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<sup>3</sup>Together with three volumes of short stories (the first of which, *The Left Bank and Other Stories*, was published in 1927), Rhys authored five novels between 1931 and 1966, culminating in the publication of her much-acclaimed last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

<sup>4</sup> See Emery *World's* xii

*Voyage in the Dark* travels back and forth between the British colonial Caribbean and London's urban landscape during the first decade of the twentieth century. Through its particular combination of historical placement, geographical location and a colonial protagonist, the novel advances an implicit critique of British imperialism and colonial policy. Written between the first and second World Wars – historical events whose effects would start to dismantle British imperial power and initiate “the rise of independence movements throughout the world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1) – the narrative is presented from the perspective of a colonial subject speaking from within, and outside of, the imperial metropolis. The interstitial historical and political moments out of which *Voyage in the Dark* emerges also find expression in its ambivalent form. Anna's stream-of-consciousness narrative is presented in a typically modernist aesthetic, but also reacts against European – particularly British – ideologies and discourses, and particularly those that underpin imperialism and colonialism. Rhys's novel thus introduces an interesting point of connection between modernist form and a postcolonial thematics.

The politics underscoring *Voyage in the Dark* anticipate *Wide Sargasso Sea* in two ways: both novels articulate a critique of British imperial ideology during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and depict the social rebellion of female protagonists “defy[ing] nationalistic, sexist, and racist models of identity” (E. Johnson 29). Just as *Wide Sargasso Sea* establishes an intertextual relationship with Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century novel, *Jane Eyre*, *Voyage in the Dark* frames itself with reference to Émile Zola's nineteenth-century French novel, *Nana*. The text is also autobiographical, and even more so than *Wide Sargasso Sea*: it draws on Rhys's past experiences and her concomitant crisis of belonging shaped by the British imperial mission. Writing in the early twentieth century, Rhys articulates Anna's white creolité through nineteenth-century European conceptualisations of the prostitute and the ‘Hottentot’ – figures who were similarly characterised through notions of degeneration and ‘abnormal’ sexuality (Cavallo 30). Via these figures, Rhys writes back to the “decadent characteristics” associated by the British with colonial Caribbean women – particularly the “intemperate and unchaste” (Carr 48) white creole woman. Preoccupied throughout her career with the plight, (hi)stories and “voice of the disempowered” (44), Rhys establishes and contextualises in *Voyage in the Dark* important political themes that characterise her oeuvre: the resistance and rebellion of her female

protagonists against their social surroundings, and in particular, British imperial and colonial ideology during the early twentieth century.

Rhys's white creole protagonist embarks on a journey from the colonies across the Atlantic Ocean and into the British 'motherland' in order to start a career as stage performer. However, Anna's career fails, leading her to become economically and emotionally dependent on a series of male lovers, and she eventually slides into prostitution. By the end of narrative, she is socially ostracised, falls pregnant, and undergoes an illegal life-threatening abortion. The combination of her Caribbean background, her creole identity, and – according to English norms – her illicit sexuality renders her a socially marginal figure, occupying the outskirts of “respectable” English society in the metropolitan landscape. Anna's social alienation in London is prefigured by her earlier journey across the ocean, an image that illustrates and reiterates the theme of the voyage already foreground in the title.<sup>5</sup> The trope of the voyage encapsulates not only Rhys's personal experiences as a migrant from the Caribbean navigating the London metropole (an experience she reworks in *Voyage in the Dark*), but more importantly the social estrangement experienced by her female protagonists. The voyage represents Anna's physical journey across the ocean from one geographical and conceptual realm to the other, and symbolises her psychic and emotional search for subjectivity, home(liness) and belonging – something which she, along with Rhys's other female characters, more often than not fails to achieve.

Like Rhys, the author of *The Sea Wall* also adopted a *nom de plume*. Born as Marguerite Germaine Marie Donnadiou in 1914 in Saigon, Indochina (now Vietnam), Marguerite Duras was the second of three children of French school teachers who emigrated in 1910 to French colonial Indochina as part of the country's imperial project in Southeast Asia (Coward 7). As a child growing up in the rural surrounds of Saigon, Duras was fluent in Vietnamese and French, and she continued to see herself as creole throughout her life. Although she relocated to France in her eighteenth year, and spent most of her adult years on the European continent, she did not receive France as “her country” and had a lifelong preoccupation with having grown up “‘outside’ [of] French culture” (Winston 70). Duras's sense of “cultural separation” and “cultural displacement”

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<sup>5</sup> The trope of the voyage also appears in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Antoinette travels from her Caribbean home to Rochester's in imperial England.

(98) features particularly in her Indochinese trilogy – *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* (1984) and *The North China Lover* (1991).<sup>6</sup> Over a period of four decades, Duras revisits her personal experience of in-betweenness and displacement as it frames her various depictions of the central character – a white, creole French-Indochinese girl. Duras’s personal displacement is furthermore re-presented in the ambiguous intersection of form and politics within the text. The novel expresses Duras’s strained affiliation to both native and settler cultures, and facilitates her simultaneous criticism of – and affiliation with – French colonialism. *The Sea Wall* marks also an interesting moment in her oeuvre as it flags a point of transition between her earlier realist style and the more elliptical and fluid quality of her later works.

Like Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*, Duras’s *The Sea Wall* combines autobiography with fiction<sup>7</sup> - as does her entire Indochinese trilogy, which re-presents her personal experience as cultural and geographical outsider. This is staged through the central event of a love affair between the female protagonist and an older, wealthy man (significantly appearing in *The Sea Wall* as a European man, but presented in *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* as Chinese), which is revisited and rewritten across the three texts. In *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* – later versions of this story – Duras depicts the events in an elliptical narrative style, while its first rendition in *The Sea Wall* the story is plotted in a more realist fashion. In this early text, Duras positions the love affair between the protagonist and the older man within a specific historical moment, enabling her to reveal and interrogate “the impact and legacy of the French colonial presence in Indochina” (Norindr 54). In this way, she contextualises the altered – yet similar – narrative of the later texts. The detailed and historically precise presentation in this novel has led the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva to argue that in *The Sea Wall* the history of French colonial Indochina functions as both narrative “cause and setting” (Black 234).

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<sup>6</sup> Duras’s *Un Barrage Contre le Pacifique* was translated into English as *The Sea Wall* in 1967, *L’amant* as *The Lover* in 1985, and *L’amant de la Chine du Nord* as *The North China Lover* in 1992. Apart from her Indochinese trilogy, Duras also published numerous novels, short fiction, and plays, some of which were adapted for the screen.

<sup>7</sup> Although both Rhys and Duras frame their fictional narratives on autobiographical experiences, my study will not engage explicitly with the autobiographical underpinnings of Rhys’s, Duras’s and Van Niekerk’s works. I do, however, draw on biographical information to engage with the forms of displacement associated with white creole femininity.

Set in the 1920s, *The Sea Wall* presents the story of a widowed mother and her two children as they struggle to make a living on an infertile land concession. As a result of their poverty and position as social outsiders, this family of impoverished, white creoles stand on the margins between white colonial society and the native Southeast Asian population. The narrative plots in detail the family's attempts to escape economic destitution through their arrangement of a love affair between the daughter, Suzanne, and an older, wealthy man, Monsieur Jo. Duras explicitly places the affair between the white, French-speaking creole girl and the older French man against the particular socio-historical context of French imperialism and colonial exploitation, while honing in on the specific experiences of subjects standing in-between the categories of the white European colonising "self" and the Southeast Asian "other".

The relationship and possibility of communication and even communion between the white self and its other is explored further in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Van Niekerk was born in 1954 in the Caledon region of what is now the Western Cape. An Afrikaans-speaking South African prize-winning poet, novelist and playwright, Van Niekerk often critiques patriarchal Afrikaner nationalism in her work. This theme is explicitly elaborated in her first novel, *Triomf* (1994),<sup>8</sup> appearing at the end of the apartheid regime and the dawn of a new political era. Her second novel, *Agaat* (published in 2004 in Afrikaans and translated into English by Michiel Heyns in 2006) earned her, amongst others, the esteemed Hertzog prize for Afrikaans literature in 2007. *Agaat*'s narrative framework – like *Triomf* – presents the historical context of apartheid South Africa by foregrounding an Afrikaner cultural context throughout most of the narrated time.<sup>9</sup> The novel is saturated with references to the "cultural goods" and idiomatic expressions of Afrikaans language and culture (Heyns "Translator's"), yet Van Niekerk's use of this cultural specificity is paradoxically subversive. Illustrating the drive of Afrikaans culture, language and politics towards asserting exclusivity, purity and self-determination, the story simultaneously reveals the fundamentally creolised and mixed nature that underscores Afrikaner identity, and the difficulty with which it establishes bonds with racial others in an apartheid state. Clearly, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Triomf* was translated into English in 1996, appearing under the same title as the original Afrikaans edition. Apart from *Triomf* and *Agaat*, Van Niekerk has also published anthologies of poetry, and short fiction.

<sup>9</sup> If *Triomf* stages the political transition from Johannesburg, *Agaat* writes the story of Afrikaner identity from the Cape. Moreover, while the narrating and narrated voices in *Triomf* reiterate the self-enclosed and homogenous identity and of an Afrikaner family, *Agaat*, on the other hand, is shot through with the (implicitly) dissenting presence others.

text is profoundly ambiguous, and has even been described as a “complicitous critique” of the traditional *plaasroman* (Warnes 121). Appropriating the genre in order to critique Afrikaner nationalism and white landownership Van Niekerk inevitably reproduces some of its crucial elements. In this way, the novel implicitly asks the question if it is possible to destabilise the aesthetic norms underpinning the apartheid project without reinstating them.

*Agaat* tells the story of Milla de Wet and her relationship with her coloured servant, Agaat. Set on Grootmoedersdrift, the family farm Milla inherits from her mother and grandmother, the narrative maps the interconnected lives of these two women. Told from Milla’s perspective, the chronological development of Milla’s and Agaat’s story is inverted so that the narrative slowly unfolds via flashbacks, memories, hallucinations, and readings of the diaries Milla had kept as a young woman. At the end of the novel, the beginning of their story is revealed: the young, married and childless Milla rescues Agaat as an abused and neglected toddler, adopting her as her own child and training her in farming. When Milla falls pregnant, the bond between them is transformed into that between master and servant: Agaat is abruptly relocated from her bedroom in the family home to an outside servant’s room (a renovated storeroom), and forced to give up her status as family member in order to adopt her new role as servant to the white family. In the narrative present, Milla is diagnosed with Motor Neuron Disease (MND): her body is systematically paralysed, and, with Agaat as her caretaker, the power relationship between the two women is inverted.

Georgina Horrel writes that South African literature dealing with the ‘new’ South Africa simultaneously conceals and displays “a crisis” of white identity and subjectivity (767). In *Agaat*, van Niekerk self-consciously reveals this two-way pull by dealing specifically with the position of Afrikaners before and after the political transition. She pairs Milla’s MND diagnosis with the historical event of South Africa’s political transition, such that her mute paralysis becomes symbolic of her loss of political power as a white Afrikaner in postapartheid South Africa. Her social position – both politically, and in her home – is consequently represented through the various fragmentations her narrative voice undergoes: it is channelled through the first and second person, is ventriloquized by Agaat as she reads Milla’s diaries, presented



through sections in stream-of-consciousness, and even gives over to Agaat's own voice at the end of the narrative.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2. Imperialism, colonialism, and whiteness in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and (apartheid) South Africa

Anna's, Suzanne's and Milla's subjectivities are explicitly framed by the historical moments, geographical contexts and spatial locations established by imperialism and settler colonialism, while the texts that house them interrogate different imperial and colonial ideologies and spaces. *Voyage in the Dark* features British colonialism in the Caribbean and imperial London at the turn-of-the-century; *The Sea Wall*, French colonialism in Indochina during the early twentieth century; and, in *Agaat*, South Africa's apartheid state, following a history of Dutch and British colonisation. Rhys articulates a critique of British imperialism through the voice of an alienated, white colonial subject, while Duras depicts the poverty of white colonial creoles as a reaction against French imperialism's institutionalised systems of exclusion and classification. If both situate their novels in a period that intimates the dissolution of Western empires, Van Niekerk engages with an historical period after Dutch and English colonialism in South Africa. Much of this text is set within the ideological framework of apartheid, a form of 'internal colonialism' that simulated the features of European colonial rule. Although different from societies under British and French rule, apartheid South Africa nevertheless extended the social, political and spatial taxonomies characteristic of colonial societies. Carrying with it the "imprints of a colonial history" (Steyn xxiii), it became a "generic form of the colonial state in Africa" (Mamdani qtd. Steyn xxiii).<sup>11</sup> Rita Barnard includes South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle under the umbrella

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the narrative is framed by another voice in the prologue and epilogue – that of Jakkie, Milla's son who has broken off contact and is pursuing an academic career in ethnomusicology in Canada. In my discussion of *Agaat*, I will however not focus on his voice and will explore, rather, the white creole protagonist and the relation between the two central female characters.

<sup>11</sup> Barnard addresses the differences and similarities between European colonialism and apartheid when she expresses her "reservations about the term 'postcolonial' to engage with South Africa's apartheid past. She refers to Annamaria Carusi, who argues that South Africa's postcolonial status was a "*fait accompli*" by the time a white Afrikaner minority took over to establish an independent republic in 1961 (Barnard 8). Thus, although postcolonial independence "was not true for the black majority", it "nevertheless made more sense for them to think of the liberation struggle as aimed at a *postapartheid* rather than a *postcolonial* society" (8).

term “postcolonial”, and argues that certain “postcolonial themes” such as “[t]he deconstruction of the mimetic claims of the Western map, the inadequacy of European landscape iconographies to the task of describing new colonial territories, and the production of new, locally defined and strategic identities” are central to South African literature (8). As seen in *Agaat*, apartheid South Africa replaced European occupation with the political domination of an Afrikaner minority under the National Party’s white government.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna is the child of white plantation owners in the Caribbean; in *The Sea Wall*, Suzanne and her brother, Joseph, are the (creolised) children of French settler-immigrants in colonial Indochina; and, in *Agaat*, Milla’s Afrikaner cultural identity builds on a white settler history in South Africa and white minority rule (post Dutch and British colonisation). While white settlers establishing themselves in colonial spaces typically turn to Europe as a point of reference (see Lamb 5), Anna, Suzanne and Milla, as white creoles, relate to their white European settler forefathers in ambiguous ways. My reading of the authors’ depictions of the problematic of (creolised) whiteness is framed by J.M. Coetzee’s definition of “white writing” in South Africa as “white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (Coetzee 11). Coetzee’s phrase, “no longer European, not yet African” – or, for my purposes, Southeast Asian or Caribbean – depicts the different and various forms of in-betweenness and ambiguity experienced by the novels’ central characters. Rhys’s characters, like herself, are neither truly British nor Caribbean, and Duras is no longer French, while not yet completely Southeast Asian. Similarly, Milla’s Afrikaner identity stands somewhere in-between her European (French, Dutch and German) background and her Africanness. But while Coetzee’s phrase indicates a movement towards repatriation or total assimilation, the white creole writers reiterate through their protagonists a sense of being stuck in an uncertain process through which transformation is always deferred. Generated by a type of writing in limbo, Anna, Suzanne and Milla are trapped in a (textual) purgatory of ambiguous national identity and cultural and geographic (un)belonging.

In order to illustrate how the novels combine cultural creolité with the problematic of colonial whiteness, I read the protagonists partly through the lens of whiteness studies. Representing the universal human (Dyer 17), whiteness has often been associated with the idea of the autonomous

and universal Subject, and facilitated “the fiction of a self detached from the world around it” (Pinney 67). Investigating and excavating the history of white subjectivity, Melissa Steyn writes that, over time, the “racialness” of white people’s lives were “edited out” (xxvi) so that being white came to mean being non-raced. Whiteness studies questions the assumed race-less normativity associated with white subjectivity, aiming to show how it presents itself as the ubiquitous and universal Subject. Erasing all markings of race and ethnicity to become a category “without properties” (Dyer 38), whiteness, as Larry Grubbs notes, operates by “conceal[ing] itself” (406) – an idea that resonates with Horrell’s depiction of the processes of concealment and display at work in (white) South African literature. Writing specifically about the South African context, Leon de Kock argues that whiteness has been associated with “blankness” (“Blanc” 175), and within colonial discourse and apartheid, was established in opposition to “barbarism” and “uncivilised behaviour” (187). He foregrounds two major thrusts that characterise whiteness studies: the negation of ideas of racial purity (especially the kind of whiteness propagated by the colonial endeavour), and the problematisation of whiteness as a type of “political affiliation” (181) that, according to Grubbs, secures a “passport” to privilege and power (408). Whiteness has thus been conceptualised as a constructed category that establishes itself through performative assertions of privilege, moral propriety, and the possibility of owning material property.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, whiteness is shown to be not an “internal, immutable essence”, but rather a “positionality of power and privilege” (Steyn xxx) that “does not remain constant” (xxxix).

While whiteness studies in European or North American contexts often depict white subjectivity as a transparent category, it becomes visible when set against the colonial landscapes of the novels. Sarah Nuttall argues that a certain dissociation from the self, and the act of covering up – the process of performing that which you are not – is a central thread in white subjectivities within works of white South African authors. This also holds for Rhys’s and Duras’s texts. The three novels come to terms with European or imperial whiteness, and particularly the embedded, invisible (and sometimes normative) privilege it produces. For Anna, Suzanne and Milla, embodying (creole) whiteness, and the attributes associated with it, in the colonial space, is

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<sup>12</sup> I borrow the notions of privilege, propriety and property from Stéphane Robolin who draws a “tight linguistic and conceptual association” between the words “proper”, “propriety”, “property” as they cluster around and give meaning to, whiteness (363).

fraught with difficulties. In *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Sea Wall*, colonial ideology fails to secure privilege for all colonial whites, while in *Agaat*, on the other hand, the ethical problems underscoring the performance of whiteness in apartheid South Africa are revealed as it is placed in relation to racial and cultural others. Consequently, the protagonists' performances of creole whiteness are particularly visible, seem contrived at times, and thus marked. In this sense, the artificiality of their 'white' performances makes visible the ways in which (creole) whiteness explicitly masks forms of doubleness or "difference[s] within" (De Kock "Blanc" 176). Through white creolité, therefore, the novels illustrate the "process of becoming someone you were not in the beginning" (Nuttall 58), and forward a confrontation with "the untruths – latent, blatant, imminent, potent – that inhabit the white self" (14).

### 1.3. Creole "thirdness" and white creole female subjectivity

Although Anna, Suzanne and Milla inhabit different historical and physical surroundings and navigate them in diverse ways, they share one crucial characteristic: they embody a particular nexus of subject categories – white, creole and female. By engaging with the historical moment and ideological structure of European colonialism, along with conceptualisations of race (whiteness), gender (femininity), and cultural location (creolité), I show how the subjectivities of the central characters are explicitly shaped and influenced by the conceptual and physical realms they inhabit. These abstract spaces and real places are "not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other" but rather "come into existence *in and through* relation to each other", often in "contradictory and conflictual ways" (McClintock 5). We see therefore in the texts how white subjectivity (as a racial and social position) is fundamentally inflected and nuanced by creolité and femininity.

Discussing creole subjectivity in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and George Sand's *Indiana*, Adlai Murdoch refers to the OED standard definition of "creole", which denotes a person of either "mixed European", "black", or "other European" descent. Murdoch goes on by noting that the notion of creolité is "linked to displacement [...] rather than race", such that a creole subject might be "either white or black, colonizer or colonized" ("Rhys's"

254). Judith Raiskin also describes the etymology of, and the host of classificatory offshoots associated with, the term “creole”, asserting that it has come to refer to both “mixed racial ancestry”, together with “syncretic cultural and linguistic practices”, and to “full European ancestry”. Referring initially to “those of (some) European descent born in European colonies or in dependent territories that once were colonies” (3), the term later came to signify “cultural interactions and mixtures” (5). “[T]he product of myriad ethnic and linguistic influences and cross-fertilizations” (Murdoch “Rhys’s” 254),<sup>13</sup> the creole occupies a precarious place in-between the geographical and cultural landscapes of Europe and its colonies. As the term signifies a “permanent border” (Humm 62), straddles multifarious categories of race and culture, and marks the influence of geographical space on subjectivity, it is clear that creolité signals “variant, even contradictory, meanings” (Raiskin 4). Due to its conceptual instability and the profound ambiguity underscoring it, creolité problematises any attempt to essentialise or fix it as concept and subject position. An “unnameable third term” (Murdoch “Ghosts” 1) – an “inherently unstable category shot through with the ambiguities and essentialisms of its origins in the colonial period” – it simultaneously eludes and reinforces colonial “strategies of containment” (Murdoch “Rhys’s” 254). Yet, despite its slipperiness, creolité, as cultural designation and political position can, according to Murdoch, be activated in a strategic attempt to harness the ambiguous in-between space of racial and cultural hybridity. This thesis aims to explore this possibility as it foregrounds white creole subjectivity, thus rethinking – and contributing towards the work of undoing – the conceptual and social power of imperial and colonial whiteness.

In my reading of Rhys’s, Duras’s and Van Niekerk’s novels, I employ creolité as an indication not of racial ambivalence, but rather of geographical and cultural ambiguity. In this way, I address “home” through the questions of national identity, displacement and (un)belonging. In the texts, white creolité is presented as a subject position that problematises the protagonists’ affiliation to the racial and cultural ‘homelands’ of Europe and the colonies, leading to their

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<sup>13</sup>Creolisation as a cultural process has its roots in the Caribbean and its historical legacy of European colonization. Shaped by genocide and slavery as a result of French and British colonial occupation, the Caribbean was systematically made up out of “newcomers” and “cultural strangers”, and became a community comprising of one dominant group and another of “legally and subordinately slaves”. The Caribbean novelist and poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite sees creolisation as a process occurring historically within slave-owning societies of the Caribbean, amongst a social group of creoles (203). In such societies, subjects were influenced by, and responded to “their environment and [...] to each other” (202).

continual oscillation between settler and native cultures. Inhabiting a space of cultural and geographical uncertainty, they occupy what Homi Bhabha has called an in-between “third space”. For Bhabha, forms of racial and cultural in-betweenness are related to the ways in which colonial projects have scattered the links between particular races, cultures and geographical spaces. This conceptual “third space” – represented and realised by “borderline negotiations” (223) between opposed cultures – is an interstitial position that reveals moments of interaction in-between the boundaries of binary subject categories, settler and native cultures, and the spaces of Europe and the colonies. Bhabha’s “thirdness” furthermore encapsulates those moments of interaction that were to be found at the social and conceptual margins: irreducible to the categories of coloniser and colonised, white settler and black native, it escapes and exceeds the stranglehold of colonial “structures of reference” (227). It also inserts the notion of “splitting” – the destabilisation of autonomous, coherent subjectivity – within the process of representation itself. Making use of Fredric Jameson’s articulation of split subjectivity (something that fractures “time and being” [Bhabha 307]), Bhabha argues that “thirdness” introduces ambivalence at the heart of representation. For him, it is only through “a structure of splitting and displacement – the ‘fragmented and schizophrenic decentring of the self’” that a “new historical subject” might “[emerge] at the limits of representation” (310). “Thirdness” thus associates alternative modes of being with split subjectivity, reconceptualising the legitimacy of colonial and imperial categories, and destabilising the coherent and autonomous Enlightenment subject.

While Bhabha sees the thirdness elaborated in the creole as destabilising and renegotiating colonial binaries, Murdoch asserts, however, that it also reiterates “the strategies of containment” characteristic of the colonial encounter’s “dominant designations of difference” (“Rhys’s” 254). Created and shaped by oppositional dichotomies, creole “thirdness” can only assert itself with continual reference to the binaries of colonial and imperial discourses. Creolité is thus conceptualised in this thesis as, on the one hand, something particularly enabling, heterogeneous and fluid, and, on the other, a category that is “rather unsatisfactory” in describing and naming “the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse” (Gilroy 2). I place myself in-between Murdoch’s and Gilroy’s criticism of creolité and Bhabha’s celebration of creole “thirdness”, holding that, in spite of its so-called “indeterminacy” and

ineffectualness as locus of signification and agency, creolité facilitates a critique of colonial interpellation, representation and agency.

An important conceptual framework that shapes my reading of white, creole female subjectivity is provided by the theories of the subject proposed Michel Foucault<sup>14</sup> and Louis Althusser,<sup>15</sup> and in particular their later elaboration by Judith Butler. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler works through various theories of the subject in order to engage with the problematic and ambiguity of subjectivity. Framed by, and finding its being within, ideological systems of representation, the subject comes into existence through a continual interaction with the power structures that control its formation. Negating its own autonomy, the subject gives itself over to subjection, securing representation at the price of denying its own “identity”. Part of becoming a subject, Butler writes, is therefore an attachment to power structures that not only subject the self, but simultaneously also provide ready-made categories through which the subject is ‘hailed’, facilitating representation. She expounds this Foucauldian and Althusserian idea by arguing that the power that propels systems of representation is a force that not only “presses on the subject from the outside”, and “subordinates” and “sets underneath”, but one that also forms the subject, “providing the very condition of its existence” (2). In its trajectory of attaining representation, the subject assumes a category created by external ideologies and discourses:

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault conceptualises subjectivity by illustrating how ideologies and discourses – structures of power – shape the coming into being of the subject. Signalled by the French “asujettissement” – a term denoting both ‘subjectivity’ and ‘subjection’ (Butler also draws on this in *Psychic Life*) – the concept refers simultaneously to two opposed processes. On the one hand, it denotes the idea that one is “subject to someone else by control and dependence”, and on the other, it refers to the notion of being “tied to [one’s] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault 351). For Foucault, the relationship between the subject and ideology relies on an adversarial interaction (347): subjected to an ideological system or framework of representation, the subject would then be bound to a system that would “structure the possible field of action” (341) within which she might act.

<sup>15</sup> The coming into being of the subject is for Althusser a process relying upon a power relation between the individual subject and ideology. He conceptualises this interaction through his notion of interpellation, a form of hailing through which an ideological system ‘calls’, integrates and continually reasserts a subject’s position within society. Althusser argues that ideology reproduces itself and functions by ‘recruiting’ the subject: she recognises herself in those categories constructed by language and ideology, becoming a subject of ideology (28). Althusser writes that this interaction between the subject and the political system that produces her is a reciprocal one. Ideology, he argues, finds its meaning in, for, and through the subject, functioning by “constituting concrete individuals as subjects” (26). This two-way interaction is furthermore profoundly ambiguous – reiterating the duplicitous meaning of the word “subject” (as explicated by Foucault and Butler). Althusser goes on to say that the interpellation of subjects also functions according to a form of specularly, or via a “mirror-structure” (31). ‘Mirroring’ – functioning as a form of “duplication” – reproduces given representational categories through the figure of the subject – a process which in turn ensures the functioning of that particular political system (31). Thus, through repeatedly hailing subjects, ideology sustains and reproduces itself.

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. (20)

While Butler shares Foucault's understanding that subjectivity necessarily entails subjection, she also pushes beyond his theory by showing how a "fundamental dependency on a discourse" might also paradoxically initiate and sustain agency (2). Assuming a category outside the self, the subject simultaneously gives itself over to power that controls and enables agency. This interaction between the dominating effect of power and the self is for Butler a precarious and ambiguous process: the subject asserts her agency "in the act of opposing subordination", yet it is precisely through this act of dissent that the subject "reiterates its subjection" (11).

In the three novels, the protagonists' creolité makes visible some of the ambiguities of subjectivity and agency. In *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Sea Wall*, Rhys and Duras deal explicitly with the question of white creole in-betweenness in the colonial space, foregrounding its fundamental ambivalence through their protagonists, while in *Agaat*, Van Niekerk explores the problematic place of whiteness within the (post)colony, showing how apartheid ideology in South Africa reconstructed white Afrikaner creolité as an autochthonous subject position. Underscoring Anna's and Suzanne's ambiguity as characters and subjects is their inability to activate their (white) creole "thirdness" into a site of agency, while in *Agaat*, Van Niekerk addresses the difficulty with which Afrikaner whiteness might recognise the ambiguity of 'home' and belonging. As a concept, creolité thus pushes beyond various colonial subject categories, enabling a conceptual rethinking of what it means to be 'placed' – interpellated, to use Althusser's term – as a legitimate, recognizable subject within an imperial/colonial system of representation. The protagonists themselves do not entirely unmake settler-native binaries and attain agency as white creoles per se, but their creolité does ask readers to interrogate critically the conceptual strongholds of imperial/colonial binary oppositions.



Anna's, Suzanne's and Milla's creolité is also modified in important ways by their femininity – a gender category shaped in their case by both Western epistemologies and imperial discourses. Butler's conceptualisation of the production of the subject highlights the intersecting categories of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and regionality. According to her, it is therefore “impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler *Gender* 3).<sup>16</sup> In the novels, feminine subjectivity is not only shaped by Western epistemologies, but is also shown to play a crucial part in colonial ideology and the (re)production of Empire. Throughout history, the West has constructed the category of woman as that of the “inherently uncivilised” and “primitive” (Ware qtd. Steyn 19) counterpart to masculinity – a category associated with the Western conception of mankind's “essential” and “eternal” characteristics (19). In imperial discourse, however, white European women came to be associated with the white, universal subjectivity of European men, rather than with the ‘barbaric’ and ‘uncivilised’ ‘nature’ of the racial other (Ware 237). Within and through these discourses, white female subjectivity was thus ambiguously placed in relation to categories of representation as it adhered not only to the characteristics associated with the white, autonomous, Western Subject, but also with the ‘uncivilised’ or ‘othered’ hysterical and sexualised body. In the following chapters, I will therefore show how the novels elaborate white creolité through imperial and colonial conceptions of femininity.

#### **1.4. Home, the crisis of displacement and nostalgia**

Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk explore and theorise the concept of ‘home’ as both a physical space of intimacy, and a geographical region signifying a certain national identity. In both these senses, ‘home’ is connected to forms of spatial, geographical, ideological and cultural belonging, related to feelings of ‘being at home’ and crucially shaping subjectivity around the question of ‘knowing one's place’. The South African novelist and critic, Zoë Wicomb (herself identified by Raiskin as another creole writer), notes that in some postcolonial novels a type of synthesis

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<sup>16</sup> Chandra Mohanty makes a related point in her essay, “Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses”. She warns that feminist scholarship about the colonial world often forgets a “crucial point”: the fact that “women are produced through” and “implicated in” the “effects” of, amongst others, “kinship structures, colonialism, [and the] organisation of labour” (Mohanty 68).

occurs between individual and place: “setting becomes absorbed into character” (Wicomb 145). For Wicomb, a given setting interacts with a particular culture and ideology so that “ready-made, recognizable meanings” are provided, functioning in a similar way as intertextuality (146). In the novels under discussion in this thesis, a back-and-forth interaction between the white creole female subjects and the physical and historical spaces and places of colonialism and imperialism is established, so that Indochina, the Caribbean, the London metropole, and the then (Cape) Province of South Africa become the locations “upon which histories and cultures are inscribed and interpreted” (Carter, paraphrased in Darian-Smith, Gunner, Nuttall 5). These landscapes become recognizable backgrounds to which the protagonists can be said to belong, and through which the reader approaches them.

In the texts, the interaction and fusion of subject and location illustrate the ways in which the establishment of a physical and psychic home is very often a difficult and problematic endeavour for the protagonists. Martin Heidegger writes that existence is encapsulated in man’s relationship to space, and that being and dwelling become inseparable (Heidegger 146-147). Drawing on the old German “bauen” – “to build” – Heidegger shows how “man *is* insofar he *dwells*” (147), and that man “persist[s] through spaces by virtue of [his] stay among things and locations” (157). In the novels, creolité draws attention to the question of national identity and belonging through the metaphoric and physical space of the home – a location that embodies the relationship between “place and identity” (E. Johnson 31), and appearing in the forms of natural, cultivated or built landscapes, as well as the intimate space of the family house. However, the authors employ these symbols of belonging and intimacy not to represent images of “shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (George 1), but rather to signify sites of “loss” (E. Johnson 14), unhomeliness and unbelonging. Challenging the notion of emotional and physical dwelling, Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk problematise, through their protagonists’ strained relationships with their immediate surroundings, the question of belonging and being ‘at home’. In order to think about the ways in which Anna, Suzanne and Milla feel unhomed, I draw on Sigmund Freud’s conceptualisation of the uncanny. The uncanny (“unheimlich”), or unhomely, describes images or symbols of the “known” or “familiar” (Freud 220), that have become alien through processes of repression. Freud argues that the “frightening element” of the uncanny lies in the feeling that that “which ought to have remained hidden [...] has come to light”, that something which has been repressed

has resurfaced (241). Furthermore, I explore Anna's, Suzanne's and Milla's displacement through the general notion of unhomeliness, signifying, in this thesis, their general uneasy feeling of unbelonging, or not being 'at home'.

Imperial discourses framed European empires and their colonies around the notions of 'home country' and 'elsewhere', founding colonial subjects' search for national identity and belonging upon the promise of repatriation (E. Johnson 20-21). The geographical and cultural displacement of the three white creole female protagonists, together with their emotional and psychic unhomeliness, bring their national identities into crisis, leading the reader to ask: do they, as "[children] of European background, born and raised in the colonies, 'belong' in the land of [their] birth" or do they "belong in the unfamiliar reaches of Europe" (E. Johnson 17)? Susan Marangoly George asserts that the concept of home within colonial and imperial discourse is founded upon the principle of "a pattern of select inclusion and exclusions" (2), and as such enables the authors' depictions of the crisis of national identity. Underscoring this problematic is the institutionalisation, by imperial and colonial discourse, of "exclusionary discourse[s] of belonging" that implied that, for many colonial subjects, 'home' was "positioned between and across geographical and cultural boundaries" (E. Johnson 15). It is hence through the protagonists' displacement that the opposition between "metropolitan 'home'" and "colonial 'periphery'" (17) disintegrates. Dwelling unsuccessfully in their surroundings and homes, the characters experience a "lack of 'fit'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 391) between culture, language and place and are therefore not "at peace" – not "preserved or "spared" (Heidegger 149) from the horror of physical, cultural and conceptual displacement.

The emergence of creolised cultures and peoples illustrates colonial ideologies' uneasy recognition of certain individuals as legitimate subjects and others as illegitimate ones, and this is reflected particularly through the spatial taxonomies that govern the colonial space. Colonialism thus shaped social practice both through institutionalised forms of discrimination, and systems of physical placement and displacement. In postcolonial discourse, "place" is closely linked to the notion of "displacement" – occurring in the form of physical movement to the colonies, alienation from a language, and via the incommensurability of the environment and a given language's "descriptive possibilities" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 391). Colonialism –

functioning on the principle of organising physical spaces according to the categories upheld by imperial (Western) discourses of race – can be seen to fragment societies through very particular forms of spatial organisation. In colonised spaces and places, the “social practice” of colonialism and imperialism therefore instituted a system that organises and “sorts” (Lefebvre 375) space according to a “spatial duality” (373) of centre and periphery, and white (or settler) sameness and non-white difference. This is clearly shown in the novels’ depictions of colonial and imperial spaces: subjects are placed according to racial and cultural categories, thus continually reproducing binary subject categories through physical space.

Through the ways in which they deal with space, place and the question of displacement, *Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat* join each other in their nostalgic engagement with the loss of the space of the ‘home’, and in their expression of the fundamental ambivalence of ‘home’ and homeliness. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym writes that although nostalgia is associated with real experiences of loss and displacement, it nevertheless expresses “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii). She draws an important distinction between what she identifies as two distinct forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia attempts to re-establish “truth and tradition”, is central to religious and national revivals and promotes a “return to origins”. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging” and shows the ways in which “many places” and “different time zones” can be inhabited simultaneously. What restorative nostalgia understands as truth, reflective nostalgia brings into question (xviii). Rhys’s, Duras’s and Van Niekerk’s different engagements with memory, history, and ‘home’ speak to the characteristics of Boym’s reflective nostalgia, and are illustrated through the protagonists’ dual affiliation to, and dis-ease with, their whiteness and the colonial politics of privilege and property associated with it. Nostalgia thus structures their longing for home and shapes their experiences of unhomeliness, figuring less to illustrate their desire for a “concrete place in the world” (E. Johnson 127), than their mourning of “the impossibility of [a] mythical return” (Boym 8).

What the texts’ illustrations of displacement and estrangement reveal is a critique of ‘origin’, and an interrogation of “the experience of displacement that affects all colonial residents” (E.

Johnson 18). It can however be argued that the physical and psychological estrangement experienced by the characters is prefigured by an original, underlying form of displacement. Lamb reminds us that historically, Europe was shaped and “perpetually modified by migrations, settlement and new migrations” (5), revealing itself as an originary location formed by creolisation and hybridisation (Pinney 55). In colonial spaces, the establishment of creole cultures and subjectivities therefore became “an imitation of an imitation” (Brathwaite 204). By foregrounding white creolities from the colonial Caribbean, colonial Indochina and (post)colonial South Africa, the contaminated histories of Europe are implicitly surfaced; furthermore, through its conceptual, real and cultural instability, white creolité in the three novels negates forms of placement within, and belonging to, geographical locations, cultural homelands and imperial/colonial subject categories. For this reason, I employ the problem of white colonial alienation (through creolité) not only as a marker of estrangement experienced by particular subjects in particular colonial contexts, but also as a theme that both critiques ‘legitimate’ colonial subjectivity, and questions what it means to belong at all.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Voyaging into imperial darkness: modernist estrangement and (post)colonial politics in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark***

#### **2.1. Introduction**

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Jean Rhys frames the narrative of her protagonist, Anna Morgan, with the physical, geographical and cultural spaces of the colonial Caribbean and metropolitan London. Journeying from the colonial periphery to the imperial centre, Anna is situated in an in-between no-man's land that articulates her interstitial creole subjectivity. She is neither fully at home in imperial and colonial subject positions, nor in the material spaces within which she moves. Met with rejection and suffering from a condition similar to what Orlando Patterson has termed "social death"<sup>17</sup> in London, she realises that there is no home to which she can return. Disorientation and alienation ensues, culminating in an "existential vertigo" (Moses 44) that leaves her trapped in a narrative stasis without any progression or resolution. Subject, theme, and form intersect to portray a female protagonist who falls in-between categories of race and culture. In *Voyage in the Dark*, as in her later novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys employs a "thematics of destabilization" (Smith 119), together with a colonial female protagonist, to critique notions of white propriety and sexual respectability, and to negate the idea of "pure" national identity. In Rhys's narrative world, the "inner darkness and confusion" (Frickey 542) of split subjectivity challenges the Enlightenment construction of the subject, while Anna's jarring narrative without progression replaces the linearity of the *Bildungsroman*, and the search for home and belonging is answered with estrangement and dissociation.

Written between the first and second world wars, *Voyage in the Dark* depicts in first person narrative voice the experiences of a white, female creole subject from the colonial Caribbean in metropolitan London. In the text, Rhys addresses the question of creole displacement through images of the voyage (or dream), while interrogating at the same time the ways in which the

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<sup>17</sup> Patterson's phrase is taken from his influential study, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982).

sexual identity of white creole women were conceptualised during the colonial period. The protagonist, Anna Morgan, is the daughter of colonial plantation owners, and her white creole subjectivity underscores her search for belonging. Although she is complicit in the plantation economy, and consequently rejected by the black community of ex-slaves, she is unable to relate to the community of white colonialists in the Caribbean and thus experiences her subjectivity as isolated and refused. She embarks on a journey to the imperial motherland to pursue a career as a stage performer in London. Her career fails, and she experiences disillusionment and alienation, finding herself cast as a social outsider. Moving from hotel room to hotel room and man to man, she systematically slides into prostitution. She becomes pregnant, and the novel ends after she undergoes a botched abortion, leaving her in a semi-comatose, hallucinatory state.

*Voyage in the Dark*'s publication in 1934 coincided with the dominance of European and North American modernism. A critique of the West and its empires was inaugurated during the period following the first World War (and during which *Voyage in the Dark* was published), an event whose "fratricidal carnage called the idea of European civilization into question, prompting reflection on its alleged superiority over the non-European nations in opposition to which it was defined" (Gasiorek 91). Emerging at the end of, and as a response to, the great war, modernism – as an aesthetic movement – contemplated not only the social effects of world war, but also reflected upon a historical moment characterised by "imperial and ethnographical adventure, massive immigration" and "communication and travel" (Ramazani 292). However, this radical expansion of the West's cultural and geographical boundaries had the ideological repercussion of initiating "intercultural collisions and juxtapositions", causing "epistemic instabilities and [the] decentring of globalization" (292) – in short, an implicit challenge to the West and Western imperialism. If we read *Voyage in the Dark* as part of this movement, it becomes clear that Anna Morgan's social estrangement and inability to assimilate the two imperial spaces are not unique to Rhys's text. What distinguishes the novel, however, is its decentring of the foundations of the modernist novel, marking a moment in Rhys's oeuvre through which she moves into a postcolonial literary mode. She succeeds in doing this by rewriting the typically modernist Ur-scene of experiencing "existential vertigo" (Moses 44) as the expression of disillusionment with Western society. Rhys replaces the voice of the modern (Western) urban subject with that of the colonised creole turned metropolitan outcast when she enters London from the colonial margins.

In doing so, Rhys employs the existential crisis of the modern experience to articulate the uneasiness of the colonial subject in transition from the colony to the imperial space.

London is, however, not the sole (geographic) locus of her unbelonging as it offers, rather, a reiteration of her estrangement from imperial racial and cultural binaries in the Caribbean. Her journey into the motherland thus becomes an extended, never-ending voyage into the heart of social and emotional darkness.<sup>18</sup> “[Decentring] the traditional ‘character’ as unified self” (Emery “The politics” 418), the form of the text stages the anxiety and social discomfort experienced by the modern subject via Anna’s encounters with the overwhelming cityscape of London, and also with cultural difference. As a colonial subject she expects to come home to the imperial motherland, but comes to realise that she is received as a social outsider. She cannot feel at home in either the Caribbean or in London; moreover, she is unable to assimilate these spaces into a type of amalgamated “home”, unable to fit together these opposite cultural and political arenas. In part through its peculiar typographical lay-out (the narrative is throughout interrupted by textual parts in italics and sections resembling stream-of-consciousness) the text illustrates the divergent cultural and physical spaces that saturate Anna’s consciousness.

In her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (published in 1966), Rhys also engages with the plight of a socially outcast woman transported from the Caribbean to metropolitan London. Here, Rhys revisits and rewrites Charlotte Brontë’s famous feminist *Bildungsroman*, *Jane Eyre*, in order to rescue the attic-bound Caribbean creole, the marginalised Bertha Mason, from Brontë’s nineteenth-century narrative. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys performs a similar gesture. Establishing an intertextual relationship with another canonical text – in this case, French author Émile Zola’s 1880 novel, *Nana* – Rhys writes back to the ideological framework within which Zola’s text originally appeared. She excavates in particular the construct and figure of the prostitute and its nineteenth-century association with racial pathology and degeneracy. Through Anna, Rhys engages the intersection between constructs of race and gender and reinterprets the

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<sup>18</sup>The title of the novel – *Voyage in the Dark* – echoes the titles of two other early modernist texts: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Virginia Woolf’s barely modernist novel, *The Voyage Out*. Both these texts link in interesting ways with Rhys’s as they plot an imperial/colonial subject’s voyage from the imperial heartland to a colonial periphery (or vice versa) across oceans or rivers. Rhys’s novel’s title also resonates with what Edward Said has described as the “*voyage in*”: the movement of “anti-imperialist” (Said 294) intellectuals and scholars from the colonial peripheries into the metropolis during the early twentieth century. For him, this effected the establishment of “an especially interesting variety of hybrid cultural work” (295).



plight of the socially ostracised woman by unveiling the fluid and unstable boundaries between white propriety and illicit sexuality.

*Voyage in the Dark*, like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, can be described as a text that leaves the reader “unrooted, disturbed and unsatisfied” (Scharfman 106). This is established both in the author’s choice of female protagonist and in the way in which she is portrayed: Rhys positions a socially marginal character (who also falls outside of colonial and imperial categories of race and culture) at the centre of the narrative structure (Hite 25). She furthermore experiments with modernist form in such a way that the oscillating geographical and conceptual spaces depicted in the text frame Anna’s creole subjectivity. This causes a reorganisation of the different forms and tropes of space: Rhys includes illustrations of both tangible and immaterial realms, leading her to re-think the ways in which the spatial locations that situate the life-narrative of the subject are presented. Anna’s narrative straddles centre and periphery so that she – through the mechanics of the text – is embedded in a no-man’s land, neither inside the imperial locus, nor completely outside it. Through Rhys’s management of geographical space, we see how Anna’s unstable identity indexes both the in-betweenness of creole identity, and the fundamental instability of the subject.

## **2.2. The Black Atlantic, the modernist novel, and the split subjectivity of colonial whiteness**

Rhys originally gave her novel the title “Two Tunes”. For Joan Givner, the “two tunes” of Anna’s West Indian background and her experiences in London in the narrative present signify the way in which “the primitive and the civilized, the sexual and the social could never harmonize” (113). In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna’s subjectivity – highlighted in the text by the interiority of her thinking self – becomes divided between the spaces of Europe and the Caribbean colony, as well as the ideological and cultural connotations they carry. While Rhys presents urban London as the location of the protagonist’s experiences in the present, Anna also frequently navigates the Caribbean through her imagination and memories. Rhys’s positioning of imperial England in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is inverted in *Voyage in the Dark*, in which it is the Caribbean that offers an “alternative landscape [that] operates as a competing frame of

reference” (Friedman 220). These two geographical ‘homes’ highlight her strained relationship to place: they frame her narrative, and are depicted in conjunction with her crisis of filiation and affiliation.

In her colonial Caribbean home, Anna feels ostracised by both the white colonial creole community of the Caribbean, as well as its black community. She hates “being white”, and although she longs to be black, realises that her black caretaker, Francine, like the other blacks on the island, “disliked [her] [...] because [she] was white” (Rhys 62). Arriving in imperial, metropolitan London as a colonial creole, Anna is also alienated by the white English. Told to “get on or get out” (74), she experiences Londoners as “hundreds thousands of white people white people<sup>19</sup> rushing along” (15) with “glassy eyes” (103) and shrinks from their “faces like masks, set in the eternal grimace of disapproval” (140), all the time “jaw[ing] and sneer[ing]” (25). She also sees Hester, her English stepmother, as “old and sad” (72). Thus, regardless of the landscape through which she moves, Anna feels estranged from all those surrounding her: colonial whites, black Caribbeans and English Londoners.

Anna’s voyage across the ocean prefigures her journey into imperial unbelonging. Rhys structures her text around this event, which marks Anna’s psychic separation of her memories of her colonial Caribbean past from her present experiences in London. Pre-empting her estrangement within imperial society, the voyage across an oceanic limbo signals her nostalgic journey in search of home and belonging, and is reiterated throughout the text. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, has a shattering impact on self-narrative, and this is illustrated in Rhys’s novel. Anna’s loss of belonging is inaugurated by the geographical and physical displacement of the voyage: this becomes a traumatic recall (Caruth qtd. Burrows 59) that haunts her dreams and daydreams, shatters her ability to narrate her life-story and thus scatters her subjectivity across the geographical spaces depicted in the text. Travelling across the Atlantic – a space separating the Caribbean and England – the voyage becomes a journey into the dark, symbolising Anna’s journeying between the two realms of colonial periphery and imperial centre, as well as her arrested movement into imperial society. Struggling to connect past and

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<sup>19</sup> Through Anna’s repetitive description of the Londoners as “white people white people”, Rhys foregrounds the protagonist’s claustrophobia as she moves among the English crowds.

present, the ‘here’ and the ‘elsewhere’, and dream and reality, Anna’s story is presented as a type of dreamwork, occupying a “mysterious threshold between dream and waking, [where] one reality [refuses] to admit or confirm the existence of the other” (Porter qtd. Givner 107).

The way in which *Voyage in the Dark* presents Anna’s voyage resonates in interesting ways with two other historical and/or literary representations of the oceanic journey. Her experience as a colonial subject sailing across the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy)<sup>20</sup> echoes the middle passage of incarcerated black slaves transported over the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean. Anna’s psycho-social estrangement in London also reiterates these slaves’ social isolation upon entry into the New World plantation economy, while simultaneously performing some of the ways in which other early modernist texts have presented imperial disorientation. Anna’s voyage into imperial darkness is of course not identical to that of African slaves, and a comparison between the two is clearly problematic. However, the ship upon which Anna travels from the Caribbean to England does close the “triangle” of the Black Atlantic, and it is specifically her articulation of this oceanic and psychic journey that reiterates many of the characteristics of the middle passage experience. The Black Atlantic – as a site of human trafficking – is presented in *Voyage in the Dark* as a seascape that separates the past from the future, thrusting the transported individual into a state of dissociation. Smallwood writes that slaves’ journey across the ocean left them without a clear sense of space and time, a movement that “stretched their own systems of reckoning to the limits” (131). Unable to integrate “random, indeterminate” events into a coherent journey beginning at one point and ending at another (135), slaves were held captive within a space that became “a world unto itself” (142), turning into a “temporal and spatial entrapment” (125). “The ship plowed forward in time without ever getting anywhere”, Smallwood writes, “always seeming to be in the same place [...]. It was as if time were standing still” (135). Putting them “into a new relationship to time-space” (184), the journey across the ocean would insert slaves into a landscape that was conceptually, culturally, ideologically and geographically alien – a traumatising displacement that would disrupt their ability to connect the “there and here, then and now” (191) into a linear narrative.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy conceptualises the idea of the “Black Atlantic” in his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

Like the African slaves' experience of the voyage across the Atlantic, Anna's journey is a crossing "with no itinerary and no directional control" (Smallwood 8), one with no clear beginning or end, and thus never drawing to a close. Andrew Thacker argues that the voyage which, in various forms, steers off-course is one of the most prominent metaphors of Rhys's oeuvre, and a trope that, he argues, "constantly subverts any discourse of place as settled attachment" (192). Throughout Rhys's works, the image of an uncertain voyage on an uncharted ocean symbolises her protagonists' crises of national identity and their deep-felt sense of social alienation, brought about by various forms of displacement. In *Voyage in the Dark*, this trope is activated and most directly and explicitly engaged. The "voyage" of the novel's title already signals this journey, marking Anna's crossing from one imperial realm to the other. Here, the voyage thus comes to stand for Anna's journey into meaninglessness and social alienation, intimating her geographical, psychic and social disorientation once she reaches London from the colonies.

Orlando Patterson writes that this oceanic crossing-over – a form of "natal alienation" – transformed the slave into an "external" and "internal exile" (44). As a result, she "became a social nonperson" who could not "belong [...] to any legitimate social order". The extent to, and way in, which the slave was transformed into someone suffering a form of "social death" (Smallwood 30) structured every aspect of her life-world; I therefore cite Patterson in full:

Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (5)

Although clearly not under the same extremity of condition as the slave, Anna's dislocation in the English metropole mimics some of the experiences of transported African slaves, foregrounding her lack of social connections in a landscape not her own.

Rhys illustrates Anna's alienation also through the metaphor of the dream and dream-like images – a theme characterising the work of other modernists writing to, from and about opposed spaces within the British Empire. For Elleke Boehmer, the question, “[w]hat [...] happens when different conceptual systems interact within an imperial context” (93) frames the letters between the modernists Leonard Woolf and Lytton Strachey.<sup>21</sup> In these letters, the colonial experience is described as a “curious mixture of intense reality and unreality”, a place where there is a “strange sense of a complete break with the past” and where one feels “as if one were acting in a play or living in a dream” (Woolf qtd. Boehmer 96). The way in which Rhys's text presents Anna's unsettling confrontation with one of the two realms of Britain's imperial system also resonates with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps one of the most famous novelistic examples of colonial disorientation. Like Anna, Conrad's protagonist, Marlow, voyages across the ocean from one location to the other within an imperial system. This “paradigmatic” scene of modernist alienation (Moses 45) depicts an imperial subject's encounter with the colony – an unreal and illogical dream-like space (Gasiorek 98) where reality “fades”. Entering the ‘other’ space of the imperial binary, imperial London comes to Marlow “in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream” (Conrad 34). Consequently, his narrative takes on the form of a type of “dreamwork” (Moses 56), so that, as Marlow states, one feels “cut off from everything you had known once” (Conrad 34).

*Heart of Darkness* has been described as the “Ur-text of what will become a generic, even obligatory modernist scene”. Significantly, Conrad places his text not in the imperial urban metropole, but rather in the “apparently ‘uncivilized’, peripheral, and decidedly non-European region of imperial Africa” (Moses 44). While Rhys revisits this characteristically modernist scene, she also reconfigures it by returning *Voyage in the Dark* to the centre of British imperial and English society. Here, she inverts Marlow's movement (from the metropole to the colony) as Anna voyages from the colonial Caribbean to London. In this way, Rhys expresses the crisis of imperial disarray and the modern subject's disillusionment not in the “elsewhere” of the colonies, but rather within metropolitan London. And yet, despite these inversions, Anna almost repeats Marlow's description upon reaching London – presented, now, as the ‘other’ ‘conceptual

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<sup>21</sup>Boehmer's question is taken from an essay in which she discusses works of Leonard Woolf and W.B. Yeats. Woolf was employed as a colonial officer in Ceylon, India, between 1905 and 1911, a period during which he wrote letters to Strachey in London.

system' of the empire. The novel opens with Anna's words of a dream-like unreality and theatricality: "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again" (Rhys 7). A sense of the unreal, combined with the dream-like effect represented by symbols of the theatre, characterise Anna's depiction of life following the voyage. For Rhys, then, "[t]hat feeling of dream" (77-78) becomes a motif through which the oceanic and conceptual schism disconnecting colony and metropole is illustrated, and envelops both Anna's memories of the Caribbean, as well as her experience of London.

Arriving in London at the beginning of the text, Anna asserts that "it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream" (Rhys 8), and this sense of the voyage-as-dream re-appears throughout the novel. After she is abandoned by her lover, Walter Jeffries, she depicts the space in-between the Caribbean and London as a vast sea when she recalls the words of a childhood song (90-91); oceanic imagery recurs when she realises she is pregnant (138) and again when she undergoes an abortion (151). The image of the uncertain voyage on an uncharted, surreal ocean occurs most prominently in one of her dreams. Reliving her journey, she describes a ship "sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong", going on to illustrate her journey as a type of transition during which conceptions of time and space are expanded and/or annulled. Sailing on a sea "transparent as glass", she describes how, as if to envelop her, "the deck of the ship expanded" after "somebody had fallen overboard" (140). In her dream, she tries to escape the space of the ship to get to the shore and, in a passage reiterating the disorientation of the ship-bound African slave, is overtaken by an overwhelming feeling of disorientation:

I took huge, climbing, flying strides among confused figures.  
I was powerless and very tired, but I had to go on. And the  
dream rose into a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and  
powerlessness, and the deck was heaving up and down, and  
when I woke everything was still heaving up and down. (141)

Anna's physical and psychic voyage shows how she is disoriented in London as imperial locus – a landscape where she "finds [herself] at a loss, overthrown, confused, panicked, frustrated, and

turned back upon [herself]" (Moses 45). In this sense, *Voyage in the Dark*'s revision of modernist alienation facilitates a colonial subject's expression of disillusionment with the British Empire and its colonial project. Anna's imperial displacement highlights, furthermore, her inability to connect the metropolitan and colonial realms. This leads her to negate the reality of both landscapes and their connection with each other, stating that "there's not anything else anywhere" and that "it's all made up that there is anything else" (Rhys 91).

*Voyage in the Dark* illustrates, in detail, Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space as a 'pre-existing landscape' that "conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance" (Lefebvre 57). As the urban, imperial locus (a space that, in Lefebvre's words, means "'centre and centrality'" [101]), London is placed in juxtaposition to the colonial margins of the Caribbean, a space that Anna sees as representative of 'home'. However, although Rhys places the Caribbean in the background of the text to zoom in on metropolitan London, it nevertheless plays a central role in Anna's narrative. Both these landscapes shape her affective perception and reception of the external world, while registering her simultaneous dissociation from and complicity in colonial exploitation. Her flâneur-like walks<sup>22</sup> in the streets of the urban metropole as a colonial outsider, together with her ambivalent memories of the Caribbean, therefore show not only how she is embedded in both locations, but also foregrounds her entanglement in a complex web of belonging, complicity and rejection.

Urmila Seshagiri argues that *Voyage in the Dark*'s engagement with various geographical spaces is emblematic of a form of "geo-politics" (487) that shapes the establishment of both the protagonist's creole subjectivity, and the form of the novel itself. The novel extends the political and geographical locations of the modernist text by also including within its framework those spaces that fall outside of the imperial landscape. The external realm of the colonial Caribbean is now also included within the geographical foundations of the novel – a structural shift that aligns the two opposed conceptual and political realms of imperial England and its colonial spaces. The inclusion of the Caribbean in *Voyage in the Dark* thus shows Rhys's engagement with the interconnections between modernist discourse and other discourses that critique the imperatives

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<sup>22</sup> In his monumental work, *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin famously describes and elaborates on the figure of the flâneur. Deborah Parsons presents a female alternative to Benjamin's male flâneur in her book, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (2000).

upon which modernism and empire are built. Addressing the point of connection between modernism and critiques of imperialism, Boehmer suggests that the anxieties underpinning the modernist movement fuelled the later emergence of (post)colonial critiques of Western – particularly British – imperialism and colonialism. She asks the question whether modernism “cannot be seen as an intrinsic expression of an anxiously imperial world, surveying the breaking apart of trusted cultural certainties and the emergence of new, mixed and muddled identities”. As it “emerged out of later colonialism” (108), modernism therefore started to announce a “repudiation of ‘retrograde’ political affiliations” (Moses 67).

If literary modernism initiated a critique of Western imperialism, the inception of postcolonial literature launched a full-scale attack on Western imperialism and colonialism, announcing a “sharp break with the literary modernism that preceded it” (Moses 67). What separates these movements, therefore, are the ways in, and varying degrees to, which they react against Western imperialism and colonialism. While modernism is an aesthetic movement influenced by the disintegration of typically Western ideologies (such as imperialism), postcolonialism can be seen as a literary movement with an overt political agenda, aimed at subverting and refusing Western empires’ political and cultural domination. Seshagiri argues that *Voyage in the Dark* should be read as situated in-between the modernist and postcolonial literary movements; it should also be seen as occupying a place in-between the varying degrees to which modernism and postcolonialism repudiate Western imperial/colonial projects. For Mary Lou Emery, this is encapsulated by a movement, framing Rhys’s oeuvre, towards a period after Empire – a particular “historical and conceptual rupture” (Emery *World’s* xii). As a novel in medias res – in-between spaces, genres and ideological systems – *Voyage in the Dark* thus expresses anxieties about imperial political affiliations, but also renounces them via its recognizably postcolonial theme.

In his famous (yet much contested) essay, “Modernism and Imperialism”, Fredric Jameson conceptualises the relationship between Europe during modernity and the colonial space by arguing that the “inner forms and structures” of modernist texts often reflect Europe’s imperial project, a system in which “the colonised other who is its essential other component or opposite number has become invisible”. Reflected in these aesthetic forms is the “invisible” other, a



geographical, cultural and subject position that stands apart from modernism's European texts, but crucially underscores it. In an often quoted section of his essay, Jameson argues that colonialism "means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located *elsewhere*, beyond the metropolis, *outside* of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world – very different from that of the imperial power – remain unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power". He calls this relationship between metropole and colony a "spatial disjunction", a structural interaction between "absent space and daily life in the metropolis". The colonial space is thus "another dimension", an "outside" space (Jameson 50-51; my emphasis).

Jameson's understanding of imperial and colonial geography, together with Freud's concept of the uncanny, enables one to read Anna's presence in imperial London as a form of resurfacing, a reappearance from "another dimension". Anna's journey from one side of the empire to the other across a "spatial disjunction" is indicative of a restless journey in search of belonging, an illustration of "colonial history coming home" (Dell'Amico 46). Through Anna's unhomeliness, together with what she represents ideologically, we thus see how her presence in London resonates with Freud's uncanny. In the novel, Rhys links Anna's *unheimlichkeit* (unhomeliness) – the movement of the repressed from the unconscious into visibility and familiarity – with her longing for home. London extends however her alienation, and, as she haunts the imperial landscape, the text shows the imperial 'home' as the quintessential unhomely space. We see how her voyage is not a return home, but rather a journey on an uncertain course, a voyage into darkness and nothingness, leading nowhere. She is consequently "divided against [herself], since [she] is most alienated when [she] is at home" (Walder *Postcolonial* 103).

Elaine Savory notes that in Rhys's oeuvre, protagonists' responses to their physical surroundings become a "major way of communicating half-conscious judgements, emotional responses, [and] cultural identity" (137). This is clearly illustrated in *Voyage in the Dark* as Anna's social alienation and psychic unhomeliness is exacerbated through the sameness and dullness of white English society, which, for her, resembles the architectural monotony of the city. London is a landscape devoid of alterity and change, a homogenous and inhospitable urban space: "you were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same" (Rhys 8), she notes, while

the houses are “all exactly alike” (82) and “hideously stuck together” (89).<sup>23</sup> Anna’s Caribbean home stands in opposition to the stifling atmosphere in London. While England is for her a place out of which “the wilderness had gone” (78), the Caribbean is a colourful and heterogeneous natural space that signifies, for her, potential belonging and homeliness.<sup>24</sup> In this “wild” place, the colours are “red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green” and “the earth trembles” (47). Yet while her Caribbean home exists in her mind as a wild, untouched, but familiar space, her relation to it is not unproblematic. As the daughter of a white plantation owner, Anna’s presence in the Caribbean is staged by the mapping and controlling of the natural landscape, a site that, via its history of slave-labour, establishes her identity as white, creole coloniser. We read how one of her memories of her father concerns his position as plantation owner: “It was a good land – or my father always said it was”, Anna recalls: “[h]e grew cocoa and nutmegs. And coffee on the slopes of a hill” (62). Anna’s narrative also channels imperial representations of this colourful, yet colonised space. She remembers a textbook description that provides the Caribbean’s exact geographical coordinates, together with an official imperial history of these islands (91), thus foregrounding her alienated, mediated relationship with this apparent ‘home’.

The interaction between *Voyage in the Dark*’s modernist form and its postcolonial politics (reiterated also by the text’s writing back to the middle passage) seems to theorise the imperial/colonial subject’s ability to perceive and narrate as inextricably linked to the division between metropole and colony, and her placement within this scheme. For a “bound mind” such as Anna’s, the novel’s form “[does] not hold out liberation” but rather “release[s] [it] into a further and more horrible entrapment” (Mezei 202). This entrapment intersects with the text’s “geopolitics” (Seshagiri 487), and thus we see how Anna’s creole subjectivity oscillates, but also becomes contained by, the various geographical, cultural, and conceptual spaces of colonial periphery and imperial centre. The novel’s handling of spaces and places functions not only to contextualise Anna’s narrative, but also to portray her subjectivity. Thus, through her depiction of the different spaces and places within which Anna moves, Rhys shows how Anna’s

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<sup>23</sup> Anna also recalls her train trip across England with Hester: watching the landscape outside through the window, Anna describes it as having a “small tidy look [...] everywhere fenced off from everywhere else” (Rhys 15).

<sup>24</sup> Deanna Madden discusses the relationship between Antoinette and her Caribbean home in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, noting that they are “so closely identified” with each other that they almost become “extensions of each other” (166).

subjectivity is divided between her attachment to the Caribbean and her affiliation with imperial England.

Illustrated in part by the text's fluctuation between normal print and italics, the novel's modernist structure shows how it is "divided against itself". Depicting Anna's "troubled psyche" (Smith 117), the novel oscillates between the opposed physical, geographical and cultural spaces of "sensual" Dominica and that of "the cold, grey monotony of the English city" (Thacker 203-4). Scattered intermittently throughout the novel, depictions of imperial England and the colonial Caribbean articulate Anna's inability to integrate them into one conceptual whole, and thus into one singular (life)-narrative. For Barbara Johnson, the notion of the "split subject" is conceptualised as a form of subjectivity that is characterised by a "self-division", an internal splitting that triggers shifts in the narrative position between the first and the third person, as well as an "externalisation of the inner" and "an internalisation of the outer" (212). This entanglement of inside and outside is often articulated through the "externalisation" of the subject's "feelings onto the outer surroundings" (211) and the depiction of her interiority as particular private and public (thus, material) spaces.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly illustrated when Anna, arriving in London as a colonial foreigner, projects her anxiety and feelings of disorientation onto her physical surroundings. The monotony of London is soon transformed into a menacing atmosphere so that the real spaces of hotel interiors, rented rooms, restaurants and the London cityscape reflect her emotional and psychic states. Houses in the city appear "small and dark" (Rhys 82), but it is particularly their interiors that reiterate Anna's alienation from London and its English society. The apartment where she and her friend, Laurie, stay at the beginning of the novel is ominous as a "lopped" tree outside resembles a maimed body with "stumps instead of arms and legs" (9), while the walls of her cheap, rented room – "a small, dark box" (25) – get "smaller and smaller and smaller until they crush you to death" (30). For Anna, the interiors of rooms signify fear and oppression so often that she starts to express many of her anxious feelings through metaphors of buildings or structures. London's urban centre leads her to cease "wanting to go out" (141) as England, for her, is "a high, dark wall" (127), and its citizens' suspicious looks at her are "high, smooth unclimbable walls all around you, closing in on you" (126).

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<sup>25</sup> Although Johnson specifically discusses black female subjectivity in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her conceptualisation of split subjectivity in (black female) characters also holds for a white creole subject like Anna Morgan.

Johnson's understanding of split subjectivity as involving a form of distancing, a movement from interior to exterior, mirrors what Sarah Nuttall has described as characteristic of the focalisation illustrated in the works of white South African writers. Approaching selected works of white writers such as Ruth First, Gillian Slovo, J.M. Coetzee and Antjie Krog through the lens of Franz Fanon's "racial scopophilia", Nuttall pinpoints an element of "watching" (61) or "gaze" (62) that is present within white writing. She notes the self-conscious act of "watching the self and of watching others watching oneself" (60): the white subject's self-reflexive and self-aware gaze upon itself thus foregrounds a "distancing of the self from the self" (63). "Watching", Nuttall writes, "brings [...] a *splitting*", a "political whiteness" that is characterised by a schizophrenia that "scrambles privilege and punishment, power and penalty". Implicated in this splitting of the self is a gaze that is at the same time both self-conscious and condemnatory, and "implies an identity constructed around distance – or at least a dialectic of distance and proximity" (61). Staring at herself in the mirror, Anna feels as if she was "looking at somebody else", as if she "had gone out of [her]self" (Rhys 23). Through Anna's confrontation with her own mirror-image, we see how the white subject's gaze upon the self involves a certain spatial dimension that splits her subjectivity into a Self and an Other. The split, white subject's gaze can be seen to function according to a form of distancing, spanning across a spatial dimension and speaking the self from different viewpoints. Anna's dissociation from, and confrontation with, herself reveals an internal alterity that is reiterated by the division between her creolité and white English femininity.

Johnson understands the subject's realisation of "the incompatible forces involved in her own division" (B. Johnson 212), and (thus) the negation of a unified speaking position, as potentially empowering. In *Voyage in the Dark*, however, this splitting of subjectivity, together with an "externalisation of the inner" and "internalisation of the outer" proves debilitating. In Anna's consciousness, an intricate commingling of real and imaginary spaces, together with what they represent, occurs. Physical locations enter into dialogue with what they represent politically, so that material spaces also double as their own ideological representations. Anna's social anxiety culminates in a type of psychic implosion as her consciousness moves between the real and imaginary, between London and the Caribbean, ending in a "nightmarish unreality" (Seshagiri

490) where the boundaries between centre and periphery, together with intimate and public spaces dissolve. “Rooms bleed into streets” (Thacker 7), and her anxieties and confused sense of national identity are projected onto her surroundings. Anna does not know “how *not* to mix” the two realms that frame her subjectivity. These two incommensurable spaces become fictional worlds, two unreal landscapes which never form part of one, reliable continuous reality. If the one is real, the elements comprising the other are “all fitting in and all against me” (Rhys 134) (and vice versa). As she voyages through an uncharted space in-between cultures and landscapes, she establishes herself as neither a legitimate white English citizen, nor a coherent subject. For her, non-autonomous subjectivity disables her ability to integrate her colonial past, her metropolitan experiences in the present, and her future – thus, her identity – into one, singular linear narrative.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, one of the ways in which Antoinette can affirm her subjectivity is through telling her (life)-story (Mezei 197), yet it is also through this mode that the protagonist’s jumbled and incoherent subjectivity is foreground. Her narrative, like Anna’s, is saturated with “fragmentary episodes of dissociation, isolated and unconnected visual images and feelings that are shrouded in a sense of unreality” (Burrows 42). “[I]solated fragments” of repressed images and physical sensations resurface and cause “a break in [her] consciousness”. Antoinette’s dissociative narrative is prefigured in *Voyage in the Dark*, where Anna also attempts to establish herself as a subject through narration. Like Antoinette’s, Anna’s story “make[s] no narrative sense” (Burrows 42) as explicit indicators of historical, temporal and spatial coherency are absent. She is unable to link past and present into a linear life-narrative: it is therefore not only on a spatial level that Anna’s narrative rejects coherence, but also on a temporal level.

Dennis Walder writes that it is specifically “through and by means of time” that narrativisation takes place (Walder *Postcolonial* 35), and in *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys shows how a deliberate experimentation with the temporal features of a narrative influences the protagonist’s presentation of her life-story. The novel disrupts the spatial contingency of coherent subjectivity (Barnard 63), but also rearranges the temporal axes according to which Anna’s narrative is structured: her story has no clear beginning, development nor end. Seshagiri refers to the work of Franco Moretti and cites his assertion that experimental modernism marked a crisis in the

European *Bildungsroman*. As an interstitial text, *Voyage in the Dark* adheres to, but also extends the conventions of the modernist novel as “the newness, youth, and refusal of conventional adulthood that are the modernist Bildungsroman’s signature traits” culminate only in “stasis and paralysis” (Seshagiri 497). A sense of stasis, paralysis and disorientation characterises particularly those scenes in the novel that depict Anna’s coming of age and her initiation into sexuality. Anna’s first period announces, for her, the realisation that becoming a woman also means growing old (“I knew that day that I’d started to grow old and nothing could stop it” [Rhys 62]). This also inaugurates a deathly feeling of claustrophobia: “I began to feel awfully miserable”, she states, “as if everything were shutting up around me and I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to die” (59). At this point, she experiences an emotional and physical implosion as time seems to stop, depicted as an apocalyptic and dream-like sequence:

I felt I was more alone than anybody had ever been in the world before and I kept thinking, ‘No...no...no...’ [...]. Then a cloud came in front of my eyes and seemed to blot out half of what I ought to have been able to see [...]. I thought, ‘Well, all right. This time I’ll die.’ [...] I stood there until I felt the pain of the headache begin and then the sky came up close to me. It clanged, it was so hard. The pain was like knives. And then I was cold [...].” (63)

This death-like feeling and emotional collapse consequently repeats itself every time she has a sexual encounter. The onset of menstruation does therefore not announce a progression in her life and narrative, but rather solidifies an experience that will repeat itself. After each sexual experience in the rest of the novel, this death-like feeling, together with a sense of self-estrangement is repeated. After she and Walter make love for the first time, she notes, “[i]t was as if everything in my head had stopped” (Rhys 33), while at another time she goes into a trance-like state where she remembers the “Four Last Things” taught to her at her convent school: “Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven” (48). Anna’s self-estrangement is also illustrated, paradoxically, through a type of traumatic “inward flight”, a “flight into the self which is also [...] a withdrawal from the self” (Burrows 41). This psychic and emotional rift is especially depicted through various mirror-scenes during the novel. In the text, Anna’s mirror-image

becomes a gaze that turns upon itself, and thus becomes an important trope through which the author signals themes of alienation and othering.<sup>26</sup> Anna often looks in mirrors – particularly after she and her lover, Walter Jeffries, have sex – and it is during these scenes that “seeing ‘herself’” transforms her into “the other, that [figure] which only defines the self by its separation from it” (Erwin 145).

The sense of jarring and disorientation experienced by Anna during adolescence marks not only a crisis of experience, but also illustrates a crisis in the novel as a type of *Bildungsroman*. The narrative cannot progress, and is thus stuck in a repetitive loop of events and experiences. Furthermore, Rhys’s typically modernist illustration of commingled places and realms leads to Anna’s social alienation and psychic implosion, jarring her development as subject and disabling all efforts through which she might assert a form of white creole subjectivity. The temporal stasis illustrated in Anna’s social death is furthermore foreground in her “undeath” at the end of the novel. Anna suffers from a feverish hallucination after her abortion, and here, time again seems to stand still, leaving her fate (as subject and character) on hold. The text finally concludes by leaving Anna in a position of disorientation and placelessness similar to the beginning of the novel. As the text refuses to present her travels in a chronological order, she consequently inhabits the different spaces of real life and of her memories all at once. The fluidity connecting her interiority and her environment thus embeds her in a temporal limbo, a space within which her voyages between different times and spaces negate all forms of settling and belonging.

Walder argues that in the works of the novelist W.G. Sebald a nostalgic journeying back home also implies revisiting “the source of suffering, destruction, and ending” (*Postcolonial* 100). This resonates particularly with the fate Anna suffers in *Voyage in the Dark*. In both *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the female protagonists suffer from a division of the self that culminates in two deaths: that of the mind, and that of the body. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys hones in particularly on a form of social and emotional death – one that is in many ways more devastating than that of the body, offering the protagonist no resolution. Anna’s attempt to come “home” leads her to resemble a “blank, doll-like, inhuman” (Mezei 205) figure at the end of the

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<sup>26</sup> In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk also employs the image of the mirror: not in order to illustrate othering and estrangement, but rather to assert Milla’s subjectivity and national identity as an Afrikaner land-owner.

narrative. At this point already psychically and socially dead, she is left in a semi-comatose state after the abortion, in a limbo without progression or resolve. If Rhys offers Antoinette the resolution of a physical death at the end of her story, the author's fate for Anna is worse: Anna does not die, and, at the end of the novel, awaits the traumatic events she experienced up to that point to start "all over again" (Rhys 159). Anna therefore voyages perpetually in the dark: she can neither die nor fully integrate into society, and is rather condemned to haunt a realm in-between the living and the dead, in-between imperial centre and colonial periphery.

Rhys places "estrangement at the centre of her work", but does so "less from the perspective of the expatriate who pulverizes and refashions metropolitan aesthetic codes than from that of the ethnic, or ethnicized stranger – the subaltern rather than the elite cosmopolitan – who is denied a passport within metropolitan culture" (Britzolakis 458). Referring to the oscillating sections within the novel that juxtapose different cultural and geographical spaces, Christina Britzolakis writes that a "syncopated temporality opens up" to reveal "the problem of metropolitan culture's relationship to those ethnic 'strangers' whose identity cannot be contained or determined within national boundaries" (460). *Voyage in the Dark* presents Anna's white creole subjectivity as the central problematic founding her social alienation, but it is also her pervasive sense of disillusionment and homelessness that registers not only a crisis of affiliation, but perhaps a more deep-seated sense of strangeness to herself. Anna's social annihilation, confused identity and general unhomeliness point thus not just to her problematic national identity, but also, in Boehmer's words, to a "division within the self", a type of strangeness that "seems paradoxically closer to the self", and is "more real, more identifiable-with, than are aspects of European culture" (102).

Anna's search for belonging to a "pure" cultural category symbolises the breaking down of her national identity, and soon it becomes clear that she inhabits "a limbo between nationalisms" (Erwin 143). Underscored by a fundamental homelessness and a nostalgic desire for homeliness and an unidentified 'home', Anna's voyage between different imperial spaces is driven by a push and pull between a nostalgic desire for belonging, and its frustrated fulfilment. The novel shows that alienation and feelings of dissociation are not necessarily situated in the spaces within which the protagonist moves, but rather reveal a type of "foreigner [...] within" (Kristeva *Strangers*



192). In this way, Rhys “exposes national identity itself as an imperial fiction that is always subject to confusion” (Ciolkowski 350).

### **2.3. The lady, the prostitute and the ‘Hottentot’:<sup>27</sup> white, creole female sexuality in the metropole**

*Voyage in the Dark* explores Anna’s white creole in-betweenness by tracing its oscillation between the roles of the white, respectable lady, and that of the sexually promiscuous prostitute or “tart”. In the novel, the ambivalent tenets of white “ladyhood” (Narain 500) reveal the unstable foundations upon which white subjectivity and white propriety are founded. The boundaries between (white) sexual respectability and promiscuity blur throughout the text: just as easily as Anna performs the sexual propriety associated with the white English lady – provided she has money – she is able to adopt the impropriety and sleaziness of the “tart”. We read how she treads the line between respectability and shame, between the role of the white respectable lady and the urban streetwalker. In this way, Rhys shows how “respectable” white femininity is a deliberate masquerade, a calculated performance founded upon veiling and “swanking”.

Rhys critiques white English female subjectivity by situating Anna at the problematic nexus of race and gender, showing how her white creole female protagonist is not only “ensnared by colonialist assumptions” (Mardorossian 1071), but also how she has to navigate the impossible boundaries between categories of essential race and culture, and respectable sexuality and sexual impropriety. Enabling this is *Voyage in the Dark*’s intertextual relationship with Zola’s nineteenth-century novel, *Nana*, a text through which Rhys excavates and re-thinks Western patriarchal systems that also seem to frame Anna’s twentieth-century narrative. Rhys sketches Anna’s “illicit” sexuality through the (white) prostitute, Nana – the protagonist of Zola’s novel, and a figure whose sexuality was linked to the (racially marked) Hottentot Venus. In the boarding house where she lives with Maudie, Anna reads *Nana*, a “dirty book” about a

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<sup>27</sup> I employ the term ‘Hottentot’ to refer to the nineteenth-century imperial construct and fantasy of (deviant) female sexuality, rather than the Khoikhoi figure.

streetwalker-turned-courtesan, or “tart”. In this scene, Rhys shows how Maudie challenges both the author and his novelistic project as she states, “I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another” (9). Just as this challenge framed Rhys’s rewriting of Antoinette’s narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, so too does it ground her agenda in *Voyage in the Dark*. In this text, she also excavates the narrative of a marginal female subject – in this case the figure of the prostitute through whom she presents an alternative interpretation of illicit female sexuality. Through Anna Morgan, as through Antoinette, Rhys “transform[s]” and “elucidate[s]” the “repressed elements” of *Nana*, *Voyage in the Dark*’s “precursor text” (Smith 129).

The similarities between *Voyage in the Dark* and *Nana* are striking: narrative events closely resemble each other, the names of the protagonists are anagrams of each other, and Zola originally names his protagonist “Anna Coupeau” (Holden 6). However, while Rhys’s text reiterates the themes, events and symbols featured in Zola’s, it also revises it. In *Nana*, the protagonist’s disastrous career as stage performer announces her turn to prostitution as she uses her body to reach fame and fortune. She embarks on a sexual rampage, moving from lover to lover and destroying all men in her path emotionally and economically. In *Voyage in the Dark*, however, Rhys shows Anna’s turn to prostitution as a last resort, and her acceptance of Jeffries’s money as a desperate attempt to undergo the abortion and somehow escape complete social alienation. In *Nana* and *Voyage in the Dark*, images of the theatrical and the performative underscore the characterisations of the protagonists (just as they frame Rhys’s and Conrad’s articulations of colonial disorientation). *Nana*’s awkwardness on stage and failed career as a singer and actress give way to successful performances of white subjectivity and respectability in real life as she is “able to play the enchantress in town without the slightest effort” (Zola 311). Anna’s failed career as stage performer, in contrast, pre-empt[s] her unsuccessful performances as white English lady. For her, the performance of femininity is marked by failure and culminates in her transformation into a social pariah.

Attempting to conform to the ideals of English subjectivity, Anna soon realises that, for white women, subjectivity is founded upon a performance of propriety and respectability. We read how Anna’s first memory of white subjectivity involves dressing respectably: she recalls dressing for church as a child in “white drawers tight at the knee and a white petticoat and a white

embroidered dress – everything starched and prickly”. White propriety implies being a “lady”: she is haunted by her childhood memory of “[t]he thought of having a wet patch underneath [her] arms – a disgusting and a disgraceful thing to happen to a lady” (Rhys 36). When she arrives in London she also continually attempts to keep her body in check by paying attention to her make-up and clothing.

The numerous references to the figure of the lady, to clothing and make-up, and symbols of the stage and theatricality, show white femininity as explicitly founded upon performative, constructed acts, signifying a deliberate performance, or even deceit. Anna soon learns from Maudie that, in order to portray respectable white English femininity, one ought to “swank” (Rhys 39). The OED defines “swank” or “swanking” as the act of displaying “wealth, knowledge, or achievements” in order to “impress others”. Stating at one point, “I was so nervous about how I looked that three-quarters of me was in a prison” (66), Anna soon becomes aware of the staged quality of white English femininity – a subject-position relying on conscious play-acting. The contrived and constructed nature of ladylike English femininity is clearly illustrated later in the text when Anna describes the made-up face of another friend, Laurie: “I could see all the lines in [her face], and the powder, trying to fill up the lines, and just where her lipstick stopped and her lips began. It looked like a clown’s face, so that I wanted to laugh at it” (106). White English femininity as a sartorial and embodied performance is also illustrated when Hester, Anna’s stepmother, attempts to teach her how to be an English lady. Being a “nigger”, as Hester asserts, means negating the ideals associated with English femininity: “I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger” (56), she tells Anna.

The way in which Anna persistently struggles to perfect her performances of being a lady reveals the ease with which the category of white feminine propriety – the “lady” – is able to transform into categories that signify suspect sexuality. Negotiating the fine line between respectability and disgraceful sexuality requires the female subject to know how to overstep “all bounds”, but in a “way that you could respect”, Ethel Matthews, Anna’s landlady, reminds her, since “there are ways and ways of doing everything” (Rhys 142). Being a “lady”, Rhys shows, depends therefore not merely on dressing the body and keeping it under control. In English society, one becomes a legitimate citizen – and particularly a white lady – through trickery: by slipping into the role of

“pretender” (Ciolkowski 349), and by being willing to “do anything for good clothes” (Rhys 22) if only it enables you to “get off with somebody with money” (38). Legitimate white English lady-like femininity – like the white masculinity of Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* – is thus shown to be a “seductive and dangerous” yet completely “empty fiction” (Ciolkowski 349).

In order to illustrate the permeable boundaries between white sexual respectability and sexual impropriety, the author foregrounds Anna’s creolité. Rhys draws on Nana’s portrayal on stage of the role of the Greek goddess of love, Venus, and transforms it in *Voyage in the Dark* to signify the sexual identity of the Hottentot Venus. Through Anna’s creolité, Rhys is able to pathologise Anna’s West Indian ‘hot-bloodedness’, thus signalling sexual promiscuity as it is mediated by the figure of the “tart”-“Hottentot”. Soon after Anna is shown reading Zola’s novel, Maudie describes her as a “Hottentot” (12) from the West Indies. In his essay, “Black bodies, white bodies: toward an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth-century art, medicine, and literature”, Sander Gilman discusses the relationship between the figure of Nana – immortalised in Zola’s novel as well as in Edouard Manet’s 1877 painting – and that of Sarah Baartman and/or the Hottentot Venus. Gilman writes that in the nineteenth century, the chain of being constructed blacks to “[remain] at [a] most primitive stage” of human development and civilisation (229). This philosophy frames Zola’s novel: part of his Rougond-Macquarts texts, *Nana* gives expression to his theory of Naturalism, a conceptual framework that saw the seeds of moral and physical degeneracy in certain groups of people. As a prostitute, Nana embodies the epitome of illicit sexuality, but also represents a “subclass of woman” whose social and sexual identity was “pre-established by heredity” (226) so that her body was seen to exhibit “primitive” “throwbacks” to the Hottentot or Bushman (229).

Gilman writes that nineteenth-century European and English medical science, art and literature came to see female sexuality through a racial lens, placing illicit sexuality with specific race groups at the bottom of the ‘chain of being’ constructed by eugenics during the time. For medical doctors and researchers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the “antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty [was] embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, [was] the Hottentot” (212). It was particularly the Hottentot woman – embodied in figures such as Sarah Baartman and other Hottentot Venuses put on display in

England and France – who possessed the physical attributes representative of a “primitive” sexual appetite (213). The “uniqueness of [their] genitalia and buttocks”, writes Gilman, represented for Europeans “the ill, the bestial, and the freak”. More importantly, it signified “anomalous sexuality” (218) and “sexual lasciviousness” (213) – characteristics that were seen to be exemplified by the figure of the prostitute in Western societies. Through the (apparent) relation between the steatopygia and “unbridled sexuality” of these groups of women, the prostitute became “quite literally, the Hottentot” (229).

Nana is introduced by Zola as a character whose “heredity assured the reader[s] [of the time] that she would eventually become a sexualised female – a prostitute”. Nana embodies “the characteristics of the sexualised woman” who unveils the “‘primitive’ [that is] hidden beneath the surface” (Gilman 234): although a “good-natured child”, she reveals herself “a disturbing woman [...] with the deadly smile of a man-eater” (Zola 45). In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys also makes use of the same method of disclosure in her characterisation of her protagonist. Anna has simultaneously a child-like<sup>28</sup> outer appearance and an explicitly sexualised inner identity. For Vincent Jeffries, she is “infantile Anna” (69), while at the same time a “rum little devil” (48) for Walter Jeffries, her lover. The novel’s depiction of Anna’s first sexual encounter with Walter Jeffries associates Anna’s sexuality with prostitution as she accepts money from him (76). After he leaves her, she repeats that transaction as she systematically falls into prostitution.

At the end of the novel, the image of white femininity as a calculated performance – depending, in essence, upon carefully chosen clothes, make-up and mannerisms – together with the illicit form of sexuality associated with black femininity, are brought to a climax in Rhys’s depiction of the Caribbean carnival. This scene of carnivalesque mimicry not only figures as a textual reiteration of the hostility experienced by Anna in white imperial England, but also reinscribes and ironises white English femininity – the role Anna is expected to play. She remembers the black Caribbeans’ performative masquerade in colourful masks and festive costumes, the women’s faces decorated with white paint and masks. From behind these masks, slaves are allowed to “put out their tongues” at the white onlookers (157), and for Anna’s Uncle Bo, these

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<sup>28</sup> In her article, “Childlike women and paternal men: colonialism in Jean Rhys’s fiction”, Erika Smilowitz describes Anna as “the most child-like” of all of Rhys’s female protagonists (94).

white masks are “pretty useful” objects that shield “idiot[s] behind it” (156). Appearing near the end of the novel, this scene shows how the black Caribbeans’ performative recreation of whiteness and white femininity, in Bhabha’s terms, “menace[s]”, “repeats”, and “displac[es]” the “reforming, civilizing mission” underscoring the white creoles’ relentless assertion of white propriety and respectability (Bhabha 123, 125). Here, the white onlookers become “the observed”, as the blacks’ “‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence” (127). Dressed in colourful costumes (not slaves’ uniforms), painted white and wearing white masks, the black slaves mime white subjectivity, simultaneously mocking and subverting notions of respectability and white propriety. Uncle Bo’s assertion that “you can’t expect niggers to behave like white people all the time” becomes ironic: in this carnivalesque display, the black slaves not only mimic the colonisers, but are also deliberately reiterating the masked performance of white subjectivity and white femininity. At the end of the novel, Anna understands “why [the black slaves’] masks were laughing” (157): whiteness and white femininity – associated with propriety – are part of a staged masquerade, part of a subject position through which feigned sexual respectability coincides with a sartorial performance, revealing an essential identity that was never there. Linking the masquerade to whiteness, Rhys thus critiques not just white English femininity, but implicitly also the seemingly legitimacy of this subject position, and thus also the question of belonging to imperial subject categories. Rhys’s interrogation of gender therefore coincides with her negation of the notion of “pure” essential race, and stages her rejection of ideas of bounded and homogenous national identities.

## CHAPTER 3

### Barriers against the ocean: ‘native’ whiteness in Marguerite Duras’s *The Sea Wall*

#### 3.1. Introduction

In *The Sea Wall*, Marguerite Duras deploys symbols of alienation in order to unveil the ambiguities and contradictions framing the experiences of a poor white colonial creole family. The author shows how white creolité stands in-between colonial categories of representation, illustrated in the novel through a type of physical displacement that culminates in forms of social alienation. In her oeuvre, Duras “puts forward a philosophy of resistance and revolt” (Coward 30) and shows the effects of “deterritorialization as a result of gender, race, and class relations in the colonies” (E. Johnson 20). In *The Sea Wall*, Duras therefore links the ambivalence of white creolité with (un)belonging, (un)homeliness and social exclusion. The novel specifically hones in on the white creole family’s relationship to physical spaces such as the family home, the natural and cultivated landscape and the built environment of the colonial city, and through this elaborates their problematic national identities as “Colonial natives” (Duras 138). Duras does so by setting her novel against the historical backdrop of French imperialism, explaining the ways in which white subjectivity is performed in the colonial space.

Originally published in 1950 under the title, *Un Barrage Contre le Pacifique*, the novel was translated into English in 1967 as *The Sea Wall*.<sup>29</sup> *The Sea Wall* can be seen to announce the first phase in Duras’s oeuvre, which Murphy divides into three (very fluid) categories: the first, comprising realist and autobiographical works; the second, more concerned with the notion of “the voyage” as physical and emotional displacement; and, the third, foregrounding “emotional alienation and absence” and engaged with memory and remembering (Murphy *Alienation* 11-13)<sup>30</sup> (Duras also includes biographical information in her texts spanning across the three

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<sup>29</sup> The novel was later also adapted for the stage and screen (Glassman 9).

<sup>30</sup> Carol Murphy’s book, *Alienation and Absence in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* was written in 1982, thus more than a decade before the publication of *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*. Although these two later novels

categories). The novels from the first period, Murphy argues, establish Duras's most important themes as they provide the "groundwork" for her later project of re-imagining and rewriting her narratives (11-12). *The Sea Wall* is one such foundational text: due to its "unabashed realism" (Winston 152), the novel's "material and imaginative foundation" (E. Johnson 138) becomes a "fundamental" "master code" (Winston 152-153) for unlocking not just Duras's Indochinese trilogy, but also her oeuvre as a whole.

From the 1950s onwards, Duras's novels were increasingly associated with the French avant-garde (Baisnée 128), which advanced the so-called "new realist" mode (Coward 9-16) in which a characteristically elliptical style was dedicated to "present[ing] reality unobstructed by the conventional screens" (13). Within the trajectory of Duras's oeuvre, *The Sea Wall* is situated at the beginning of this period. The text is thus marked in part by its stylistic ambivalence as it simultaneously adheres to the realist characteristics of Duras's early novels, and starts to exhibit the stylistically abstract conventions of new realism – displayed specifically in the other novels that, with this text, form part of *The Lover*-trilogy. This fictionalised (auto)biographical trilogy is set in colonial Indochina at the beginning of the twentieth century, and consists of *The Sea Wall*, *The Lover* (published more than thirty years later in 1984), and *The North China Lover* (published in 1992). While the last two novels are written in the "more affective, abstract" register of new realism and the "new novel", *The Sea Wall* stands at the early beginning of this genre and presents a more traditionally realist (E. Johnson 30) illustration of events, subjectivities, and spaces.

Unlike the chronological form of conventional trilogies, Duras's *The Lover*-trilogy revisits and retells in each instalment the sexual relationship between a white creole girl and a wealthy, older man. Through the course of the three texts, Duras presents this man in different, yet similar, ways. Although there is no evidence to suggest he is Chinese in *The Sea Wall* (leading one to assume he is French), it has been argued that he, at this stage already, "embodies the stereotypical western construct of the Oriental male" (Rowley 111). This paves the way for Duras's recasting of him in *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*, where he reappears as

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would problematise Murphy's categorisation of Duras's work, I do believe her groupings are valuable to this reading of *The Sea Wall*.



Chinese. In *The Sea Wall*, Duras focuses her lens to render a detailed picture of French imperialism and colonial exploitation during the early twentieth century. The novel places the white family's poverty against the backdrop of France's colonial presence in Indochina, articulating the ways in which the French colonial mission (unevenly) impoverished and abjected natives, the labouring classes, and some of its white subjects. *The Sea Wall* shows how the female protagonist's performance of white femininity is set against particular geographical, cultural, and material spaces, and embeds the genesis of the affair between the protagonist and an older, wealthy man within the social, economic and political circumstances that frame an impoverished white creole family's life in a French colony.

Marie-Paule Ha addresses the particular historical conditions against which Duras's novel is set. Framing Suzanne and her family's colonial lifestyle in Southeast Asia is a historical moment within which, as Ha describes, categories of gender and class intersected in notable ways. She maps a history of France's colonial presence in Indochina and locates the full-scale emigration of French citizens to the colonies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a time-period that coincides with Suzanne's mother and father's emigration to the colony in Duras's novel. According to Ha, one particular discourse associated with French imperialism was that colonial spaces were "a dumping ground for the misfits of the metropole" ("Engendering" 101), a landscape that "provided a solution for those who lost their social position in the metropole or felt burdened by the legitimate [...] but exaggerated conventions" of French society. She goes on to discuss one of "the major social problems" during this period: the rise in numbers of educated women and their "widespread unemployment" (102). This effected the establishment of a generation of class-less (or "out of class") women, dangerously "run[ning] the risk of becoming 'déclassées'" – lower class women. Ha notes how the emigration of educated women – trained primarily as teachers – to the colonies was proposed as a solution to this 'problem' (103).

In *The Sea Wall*, Duras reflects upon, and explores this socio-political background. Early in the novel, the narrator notes that Ma, a "daughter of peasants", "had been so bright at school that her parents allowed her to go to college". At the turn of the century, Ma is trained as a teacher and marries a "schoolmaster who was as sick as she was of life in the northern village". The narrator

also describes French colonial propaganda advertisements, posters presenting “romantic descriptions” of colonial life in Southeast Asia. They are presented with particular raced-class images depicting a (white) leisurely existence – emphasised by white dress – and juxtaposed by native servitude, such as “a Colonial couple, dressed in white, sitting in rocking-chairs under banana trees while smiling natives busied themselves around them”. These advertisements eventually lead Ma and her husband to apply “to be sent, as teachers, to that great Colony then known as French Indo-China” (17). In her novel, Duras reveals the colonial ideal of an exotic and leisurely lifestyle as an empty dream as the text foregrounds the economic and social destitution of these colonial “misfits” (Ha “Engendering” 101).

“All three of them had thought it was a good idea to buy that horse, even if Joseph could earn with it no more than his cigarette money” *The Sea Wall* starts. For the family, the horse – bought in order to transport people “who lived elsewhere and were part of the living world” (9) – represents the possibility of “earning a little money” (11) to recover from their poverty, and an escape from the “salt-soaked plain” where they are “soaked in boredom and bitterness” (9). After her husband’s death, we read, Ma is forced to hold multiple jobs, working first as a French teacher, a piano teacher, and then as “a pianist in a moving-picture theatre”, ironically called “the Eden Cinema” (18). Eventually able to afford a land concession in the salt plains of Kam after ten years of saving, Ma discovers that the cadastral agents of Kam (“those swine” [234]) had sold her a plot on an infertile “desert of salt and water” (229). Her attempts to grow rice fail repeatedly, and her project of building barriers against the Pacific Ocean in order to protect the crops proves useless. Despite the family’s attempts to shore up their property through the sea walls, the unruly ocean – signalling their economic and social powerlessness – nevertheless incessantly disables their attempts to accumulate wealth. This infertile space, where the native children die “of destitution” (259), is a landscape where the white family wait “like damn fools” (47). Ma, Joseph and Suzanne are illustrated as a family of poor, struggling and socially ostracised white colonials, occupying a buffer-zone in-between the impoverished Southeast Asians and the wealthy whites of the colonial city. Duras’s novel thus engages explicitly with the question of whiteness, and untangles it from the notions of property, propriety and privilege.

### 3.2. Poverty and impropriety: white creolité, the bungalow and the salt plains

Duras explores white subjectivity in *The Sea Wall* through depictions of various physical spaces and the white family's navigation of these realms, placing it always in relation to the subject of colonial exploitation and native suffering. Importantly, the author addresses the question of whiteness and its association with property and propriety, and in order to do this, she hones in on the space of the family home and the natural landscape. Duras inverts conventional understandings of the concept of 'home', portraying the family's bungalow, and the landscape within which it is located, not as symbols of wealth and social standing, but rather as manifestations of impoverishment and social struggle. Though this, she problematises the normative association between whiteness, property and propriety. Located in-between the colonial city and the nearby forest and the sea, the white creole family lives in an infertile and multiply "liminal zone": situated between the ocean and dry land, it is also "threatened on all sides" by the water from the flooding river and the ocean, as well as by the wild animals from the forests and mountains nearby (Waters 261). The landscape upon which they live thus mirrors their creole subjectivities in such a way that the notion of displacement – as an interstitial stage between places – governs both their physical and conceptual positions in the colony. While they are situated "above" the native Southeast Asian peasants, they are also ostracised by both the Chinese plantation owners and the wealthy white colonial community. The novel thus makes it clear that physical, social and conceptual in-betweenness, for the family, implies living "miserably" (Duras 22) and in solitude.

*The Sea Wall* represents the creole family's displacement and unbelonging most prominently through the physical spaces and places depicted throughout the narrative. The novel focuses particularly on the family's home: a bungalow constructed out of wooden planks, standing on an infertile landscape next to the Pacific Ocean and placed in juxtaposition to the stately homes of the white families in the colonial city. In the novel, Duras explicitly politicises the private, intimate space of the home (Cone 126). While the figure of the house signifies "the possibility of home in the world" (E. Johnson 126), in *The Sea Wall*, however, it represents the family's uncomfortable displacement and general unhomeliness. Marking their poverty and status as colonial outsiders, the bungalow disintegrates and buckles under the external effects of nature:

when rot sets in, it disintegrates as the natural landscape systematically infiltrates its interior space. We read how the wooden planks of the house crack, warp and buckle (Duras 128-129), followed by the “gigantic hatching out of worms” (226) in the rotting roof. The disintegrating bungalow is further associated with death and decay: underneath it is a tool shed within which Joseph hangs bleeding and decaying deer carcasses after his hunting trips. It is also below the bungalow that the B-12, the family’s car, is eventually stored, covered with dust and rusting away (248). These images are later reiterated by Ma’s actual death. In the space of her bedroom, Ma eventually succumbs to a “great convulsive seizure” that turns her arms and face “purple-splotched” (282). The author thus shows how their house – a space that, in the text, fosters death and decay – denies them not only the possibility of dwelling, but also homeliness and belonging. This signals their “emotional [...] detachment” from the colonial society within which they are embedded (E. Johnson 123-124).

Duras politicises not only the interior space of the family house, but also the natural landscape. Extended images of destruction, death and decay describe the ocean, rice plains and the landscape surrounding the bungalow, systematically engulfing the family. Nature as a death-like force comes to stand in opposition to the overpowering exploitation by French colonial policy, causing and aggravating the white creole family’s ensuing economic and social powerlessness. As a reaction to this threat of “engulfment” by natural forces, the novel shows how the whites of the colonial city assiduously keep nature at bay, taming and cultivating their surroundings. For the poor white creole family, however, this task becomes impossible: lacking money, social standing and even the paraphernalia to control their piece of land, they are shown to be failed colonials, or “Colonial natives” (Duras 138).<sup>31</sup> Duras illustrates this through the family’s persistent attempts to cultivate the infertile salt plains. We read how Ma plants rows of cannas and banana trees, only to see them killed by the drought. Further, in order to protect her rice plantations, Ma, with the help of local natives, constructs barriers against probably the most destructive force in the text: the ironically “inherently destructive” (E. Johnson 118) Pacific Ocean. Eventually eaten away by crabs, the barriers against the ocean disintegrate, resulting in the flooding of Ma’s crops. We read how the ocean overflows the plantations, knocking down

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<sup>31</sup> The depiction of the white creole family as “Colonial natives” resonates with the way in which Tia (in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*) describes Antoinette’s family as “white nigger[s]” (21).

“everything, every stick and stone [...] at one blow” (Duras 41). Both a destructive force and a “freer state of being” (Coward 23), the Pacific Ocean works against the family’s efforts to map and cultivate the land; it furthermore also functions as a marker of Duras’s own ambivalence in the colonial project. She critiques French colonial ideology and its incessant drive to establish a Western space-time continuum that organises the land according to principles of control, systematisation and progress. The novel ultimately reveals imperialism and colonialism as something that not only betrays the poor white creoles, but also disables their attempts to find belonging within the spaces of the French empire. Thus, Duras undercuts a narrative of “unproblematic [...] belonging” (E. Johnson 119).

Images such as “grills, walls, [and] barriers” (Murphy *Alienation* 10) abound in Duras’s texts, symbolising different forms of alienation. This is figured in *The Sea Wall* as a separation from, or antagonism between, the unruly forces of nature and the drive to control it. The series of sea walls, together with their construction and concomitant destruction, represent this struggle. The family’s efforts to install the time of ‘progress’ and colonial modernity are continually resisted and undermined by the cyclical functioning of the ocean and the natural landscape. On the salt plains, nature is ruled by the turning of the seasons and the tides of the ocean, continually thwarting and defeating the family’s efforts to categorise, control and cultivate – processes signalling the Western dual notions of development and progress. For the white creoles, their (unsuccessful) implementation of an imperial (Western) sense of time and space upon the natural landscape continually leads to their ‘engulfment’ by nature and the Pacific Ocean, thwarting their efforts to negotiate economic progress and to be included in the society of ‘respectable’ and wealthy white colonials. Duras illustrates in *The Sea Wall* how cultivating and modernizing the land veil the ambiguity of the white creoles’ position in colonial Indochina. While trying to assert their colonial whiteness through sea walls and plantations, the family also reacts against the corrupt white cadastral agents, thus denouncing the colonial project in Indochina, as well as its process of modernising the colonial space. While this shows their relationship to the salt plains to be explicitly ambivalent, the family eventually turns to the physical landscape as a result of their longing for a place to belong to. Their attempts to establish themselves on the land fail, however: life in the colony does not secure wealth for them, but negates any form of homeliness and belonging.

While the first part of the novel is set within the private space of the family home and against the backdrop of the natural landscape near Kam, part two takes place in the public space of Ram, the colonial city. In this section, Duras seems to recreate the relationship between the imperial metropolitan centre and other colonial ‘elsewheres’, and it is in this space that their physical and social in-betweenness is further elaborated. When the family visits the city, they stay in the Hotel Central, located in-between the wealthy quarter where the white colonials live, and the poorer quarters of the colonial city. It soon becomes clear that every space within which this family moves marks their social position as “Colonial natives”. This interstitial space is described as an area reserved for “the whites who had made no fortune”. A cacophonous and heterogeneous place, it is filled with the urban sights and sounds of “cheap restaurants”, “opium dens”, and “screaming children” (Duras 38).

The drive to cultivate the landscape and establish a form of colonial modernity finds its climax in the wealthy white quarter of the colonial city. Duras presents this neighbourhood as meticulously ordered and structured, marked by its wealth and characterised by the inhabitants’ propriety and obsessive fixation on cleanliness. Located far away from the “natives and the poor white trash of the lower districts” (137), this area is “the largest and airiest part” of the city and is the locus of the “secular and official powers [...] [and] their palaces”. We read how its “impeccable cleanliness” is matched only by its white inhabitants and their white outfits (135). These “noble and aristocratic” (137) white citizens are dressed, the narrator ironically notes, in “the color of immunity and innocence” – “spotless white” (135). Inscribing and exemplifying their position of wealth, propriety and privilege, their clothing reiterates their unmarked ‘blankness’, yet, as the narrator notes, become reminders of a subjectivity that is “very easily soiled” (136).

The wealth and fear of contamination that, as Duras shows, are characteristic of white colonial society, are also recreated in the architectural organisation of the Haut-Quartier, and its placement in relation to the urban edges – a place where, as Lefebvre asserts, difference arises and endures (373). This space, the narrator shows, aims to recreate and visibly perform the “superhuman difference” (Duras 136) between the wealthy whites and “the others who were not white” (135) – the Southeast Asian natives, the Chinese population, and the “white trash” of the

colonial space. Acting as a boundary to keep poor whites and natives at a firm distance, the white quarter's sidewalks are "immensely" and "uselessly" wide, "asphalted" and lined with "exotic trees" and "divided in two by lawns and flowerbeds" that are "sprinkled several times a day" (136). Through the trolley cars' circuit that "scrupulously" and "hygienically" avoids the "fashionable" quarter in "concentric lines" (137), the Haut-Quartier detaches itself from the rest of the city.

While the author maps out the wealth and architecture of the Haut-Quartier, she also shows that the cultivated colonial landscape and the modern city are founded upon the exploitation of native labour:

It was the glittering age, the *grande époque*. Hundreds of thousands of native workers bled the trees of hundreds of thousands of hectares of red earth [...]. Latex flowed. Blood, too. But only the latex was collected as precious, only the latex paid a profit. Blood was wasted. (Duras 137)

The novel similarly reveals that the highway that stretches between rural Kam and the colonial city was built "by convicts and supervised by native troops", working "sixteen hours a day, chained together by fours", of which the Corporal – the family's Malay servant – was one. We read how the Corporal, due to his impoverishment, joined the convicts in "clearing the ground, banking it up, paving it, and pounding it with wooden hand-pounders" (194) in order to be fed like them. The narrator adds that during this time, "the idea was avoided that there might sometime come a day when a great number of people would demand payment for all that blood" (137).

At this point in the novel, Duras's reference to native labour reveals her attentiveness to institutionalised exploitation in colonial Southeast Asia and its effects on the native population. The text illustrates the effects of French colonial policy on both the white creoles and the native peasants: however, unlike Ma, Joseph and Suzanne, natives are presented as almost universally poor. In the novel's descriptions of the native population of Ram, Duras depicts the peasants as figures embedded within their physical surroundings. This space is wild and untameable, and here also Duras extends images of death and destruction to show the effects of the opposition

between French imperialism and colonialism and the spaces of Southeast Asia. The unnamed narrator notes that here, children “died in [...] numbers”, returning “to the earth” like “little dead monkeys”, buried year after year in the mud. As if symbolically filling with casualties, the infertile soil becomes the burial ground for the corpses of children so that it eventually “contained many more dead children than there were children who survived” (93). The author shows how, as a result of colonial occupation, suffering becomes a given and undeniable part of life and death. Duras goes on and links this image of the dying children of Kam (and Southeast Asia in general) to the plight of other colonised peoples – associating it with other imperial and colonial forces across the world. “No doubt children died everywhere like that – in the Mississippi River Valley, in the Amazon, in the cadaverous villages of Manchuria, in the Sudan [...]”, the narrator states. Imperially-inflicted misery and death, as the narrator reveals subsequently, is present “everywhere throughout the world” (259).

In the first part of the novel, Duras presents the cycles of nature as a brooding and vigilant force which, in part two, makes way for a more direct engagement with inequalities and exploitation in the colony. This is presented as a necessity to ensure the establishment of an ultra-modernised colonial city and the creation of white colonial wealth. Standing in the way of the French empire’s establishment of a white colonial society, the land and the native populations are shown in the text as elements that should be tamed, kept at bay, or exploited. Duras places the poor white creoles in-between these figures, and foregrounds their social predicament to show how they relate ambivalently to both the colonised and the white colonising class. Employing the notions of propriety and material property and their association with whiteness, Duras illustrates the ways in which the creole family attempts to assert themselves as “legitimate” white colonial citizens. Ha writes that French families, once settled in the colonies, experienced “an obligation to adopt a certain lifestyle to uphold ‘white prestige’ as a proof of their racial superiority” (“Engendering” 111). The family in Duras’s novel, however, lack the props needed to perform and uphold a type of “legitimate” whiteness: their efforts to cultivate the infertile salt plains fail, while their attempts at upholding a sense of ‘white propriety’ become a constant struggle. We read how they eat either a dinner of stilt-bird (which turns Suzanne’s stomach [Duras 28]) and condensed milk (which rots Joseph’s teeth [27]), or a meal of grilled fish, prepared by the Corporal’s wife. They also rely on Joseph’s hunting for food. On the salt plains, the family wears



clothing that is juxtaposed to the wealthy whites' attire: as white "natives", they dress in loose-fitting clothes and straw hats, outfits standing in contrast to the white suits and dresses of the rich colonials of the Haut-Quartier. The narrator also shows how they own only the bare essentials: their clothing ranges from Suzanne's single pair of shoes to Ma's only "dark red cotton dress" which she never takes off "except to go to bed" (30).

Another way in which the white creoles attempt to establish themselves as white colonials and citizens is through their presence in the city centre – in particular Suzanne's walk in this urban landscape. Similar to the Greek *agora* – the official meeting place of citizens within the city centre – the cityscape becomes a public location that holds the power of recognising a subject's legitimacy, or, conversely, banishing her to invisibility. In this public arena, representation occurs – the interaction between exposure and, particularly, recognition (Madanipour 189) (one is reminded of Lefebvre's assertion that the "social I" functions within a space "where it must either recognize itself or lose itself" [61]). In *The Sea Wall*, the white centre of the colonial city is represented as a meeting place of legitimate, white colonial French citizens, and is the stage upon which colonial subjects can be afforded or denied representation. Suzanne's entry into this arena marks, however, her inability to re-enact not only white colonial femininity, but also "legitimate" white colonial subjectivity. Fitting in neither the category of the white, colonial coloniser, nor the native, colonised peasant, she appears as a decontextualised, impoverished being. Together with her "ridiculous" attire, her creolité marks her as an outsider such that she wanders, similarly to Jean Rhys's protagonist in *Voyage in the Dark*, as a ghost through the city streets.

### 3.3. The "little white whore":<sup>32</sup> female subjectivity and sexuality in *The Sea Wall*

The family's failure to shore up their colonial whiteness becomes even more pronounced in those moments leading up to Suzanne's efforts to assert herself as a white colonial woman. Here, the fact of the family's poverty intersects with their need to present themselves as "proper" white subjects and with their desire to establish a form of upward social mobility. In a canteen near

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<sup>32</sup> Duras *The Lover* 38

Ram, the family meets Monsieur Jo, “the only son of a very rich speculator” (Duras 49). M. Jo falls in love with Suzanne, and, in a bid to escape economic destitution and acquire status, Ma and Joseph devise a plan to facilitate a marriage between Suzanne and M. Jo. Soon the family exploits M. Jo’s desire for Suzanne to obtain trips to, and expensive dinners in, the city. Through Suzanne, they also obtain gifts, such as a phonograph and a diamond ring, which they eventually try to exchange for money in the colonial city. The family’s strategic scheming is ironically an attempt to lay a claim on white propriety, and thus establishes a link with Rhys’s use of “swanking” in *Voyage in the Dark* – a type of performative illusion through which the contradictions in white femininity are, ironically, shored up. “[P]rofit[ing] from Suzanne’s sexual marketability” (E. Johnson 117), they not only use Suzanne’s body as an object of exchange (Winston 168), but also inadvertently prostitute her. Suzanne’s prostitution shows not just how she is cast as a pawn within her family, but also links her to Duras’s other female heroines who, as Rowley asserts, are often established through the male gaze (107). In an early work such as *The Sea Wall*, we see how the notion of specularity underscores the relationship between Suzanne and M. Jo, as well as the way in which his gaze becomes “the basis of [their] relationship” (Corbin 93). He buys her presents of make-up, clothing and jewellery, and we see how she allows him to teach her how to paint her nails (Duras 78). M. Jo’s gaze thus starts to establish Suzanne as a gendered subject and an object of desire, revealing also her dependence upon prostitution as a crucial part in the process of establishing herself as a white, female subject.

Duras’s depictions of protagonists often address women’s different connections to power, desire,<sup>33</sup> and subjectivity (Corbin 6). In what Murphy has categorised as the first period in Duras’s oeuvre, the female protagonists are often “passive” and “lethargic” and “in search of a lover or husband to fill the emptiness of their existence” (*Alienation* 11). Their interiority often matches the physical and social background within which they are placed, so that their “inner void” becomes “indistinguishable from their environment of ennui and stagnation” (11-12). These female subjects’ passivity is furthermore often linked with the politics of the everyday,

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the theme of desire in Duras’s oeuvre, see Carol Murphy’s essay, “New narrative regions: the role of desire in the films and novels of Marguerite Duras”.

and particularly with the space of the home (Cone 126).<sup>34</sup> These women consequently become aware of the emotional and contextual limbo within which they are caught, and a struggle ensues. “[W]rench[ing] themselves from the domination of a brother or a mother”, they manage to divorce themselves from their physical, social and emotional surroundings, even though their “‘success’ is ambiguous” (Murphy *Alienation* 12).

It is in this sense that Duras, in *The Sea Wall*, employs the theme of prostitution in an ambiguous way: not only does it symbolise her protagonist’s subjection to her family, but it also becomes the most important vehicle through which she (tries to) obtain a form of independence. One scene shows Suzanne slowly starting to assert herself when she realises the extent to which both her family and M. Jo use her body as an object of exchange. In exchange for a phonograph – “the latest manufacture, with records in addition, the newest out in Paris” (56) – M. Jo asks to see Suzanne’s naked body while she showers. After initially refusing, she agrees, but realises at this point that trading her body for a phonograph “prostitutes” her, and, with the “spittle [drying] up in her mouth”, opens the door, shouting, “There! [...] Take a look! I spit at you with my naked body!” (57). Reacting thus to M. Jo’s transformation of their relationship into a “commercial exchange” (Corbin 93), Suzanne denounces both her family’s and M. Jo’s use of her body as a commodity, but also (ambiguously) renounces the exploitative, yet desiring gaze with which her suitor establishes her as a subject.

Although the family attempts to establish themselves by inadvertently prostituting Suzanne, it is ironically also through the figure of the prostitute that Suzanne starts to assert her independence, breaking away from her family. In her works, Duras employs sexual relationships, as well prostitution, as acts that “paradoxically liberat[e]” her female protagonists (Bécel 419). In the novel, we see how Suzanne’s sexuality is presented as something that is exploited, but also liberating. While Ma and Joseph use Suzanne’s body in order to procure wealth, Suzanne also performs acts of (semi-) prostitution. After their return from the colonial city, Suzanne tries to assert her independence by waiting next to the highway that runs through Kam, hoping to be picked up by a man (she even clothes herself in a “street-walker’s” dress [Duras 252]). The text

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<sup>34</sup> Caroline Mohsen foregrounds the importance of space and place in Duras’s oeuvre. She focuses particularly on Duras’s screenplay for Alain Resnais’s 1959 film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, arguing that physical locations crucially frame the protagonist’s experiences and memories.

presents these acts in association with her relationship with Carmen, a professional prostitute, and the manager of the Hotel Central, who also becomes a mother-figure to her.

The figure of the prostitute is most prominently embodied in the novel by Carmen, a prostitute and the manager of the Hotel Central, the place where the family lodges during their stay in the city. Carmen is described as “possessing [...] a terrific independence” (Duras 141), having the “entire tricky job of managing the Hotel Central” (139). For her, independence is linked, ambivalently, to the mobility of street-walking, as she sees in the figures of other prostitutes “great adventuresses”, “globe-trotters, the hottest lot of them all”, who go “from port to port” and teach “the Pacific crews the delights of opium”. For her, prostitution is “the most honest profession” (159). As a result of Carmen’s influence, Suzanne goes on to proclaim that she wants “to grow up to be like Carmen”, that she is “a Carmen type” (169).<sup>35</sup> Thus, through the figure of the prostitute, Suzanne is initiated into a world of female independence – one that enables her to go to the cinema alone, and to walk alone in the colonial city. It is also Carmen who initiates Suzanne into agency: according to her, Suzanne can only “win her liberty and dignity” through leaving her mother and by using “*weapons other than those [...] Ma believed good*”. This, Carmen insists, means to street-walk – to go “for some strolls in the city” (148). As a substitute mother-figure, Carmen thus instigates Suzanne’s attempts to establish herself as a white female (gendered) subject. Suzanne’s walks in the city, under her instruction, ambivalently mark her initiation into independence at the same time as they establish her as the object of the male gaze.<sup>36</sup>

Duras’s depiction of the girl-child’s “rite of passage” (Rowley 109) in *The Lover* and *The North China Lover* is prefigured in the city-scenes in *The Sea Wall*. The narrator shows that Suzanne’s stroll through the modern cityscape is a crucially important moment for her as she, “*at the age of seventeen*”, “*set[s] out to explore the great Colonial City*” (Duras 149). This point in the text marks the moment when Suzanne engages, for the first time, in a solitary act without her brother or mother, attempting to establish herself as a ‘legitimate’ white colonial woman. Her rebellious

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<sup>35</sup> Duras’s Carmen is of course associated with Georges Bizet’s nineteenth-century opera of the same title.

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Bizet’s opera has a tragic end: the male desire to own and control results ultimately in Carmen’s death.

and solitary act is, however, quickly transformed into one that marks both her and her family's position as impoverished social outcasts. Through her (slightly awkward) sartorial display, the novel consequently reveals the ambiguity of an impoverished white creole's attempts to become an accepted white colonial subject in French colonial Indochina, but also shows how 'proper' white female subjectivity depends on a particular bodily performance – one which, as we shall see, Suzanne evidently fails to achieve.

Suzanne's walk in the city illustrates the discontinuities between the wealthy whites of the fashionable district and her own family's white creole identity. For Suzanne, walking in the city is not merely an assertion of independence, but is also an activity that signals the process through which the subject is interpellated into an ideological framework. Althusser's conceptualisation of the process of interpellation depicts the ways in which the individual becomes a subject within a given ideological system. In his article on the spatial taxonomies in Duras's *The Lover*-trilogy, Panivong Norindr writes that Duras's white female protagonist enters into the process of colonial subjectification through a specular power that presents herself as other (56). Suzanne's affair with M. Jo accomplishes one of the ways in which she is interpellated as a white colonial creole woman. In the first part of the novel M. Jo's desiring gaze produces Suzanne as both a subject and as an object of desire. The second part of the novel shows how she has to cope with a "web" of "overdetermining gazes": that of her family, other men, and society – gazes which eventually "[come] to dominate her representation of her self to herself" (Corbin 74).

Writing that the white, female protagonist of *The Lover*-trilogy engages in remakings and reinventions of the spaces of the colonial city, Norindr nevertheless maintains that, for the white female subject, walking in the colonial city is a process that, as Butler asserts via Foucault, depends simultaneously upon subjection and subjectification. The female subject starts to see herself as "other", which "triggers the process of subjectification" (Norindr 56). Norindr's conceptualisation of "subjectification" reiterates Althusser's understanding of the mechanics of interpellation: initiated by a gaze that is both internalised and exerted upon her from the outside, Norindr argues, the white, creole female subject becomes an agent, exactly as the result of her subjection to power structures (illustrated in the architecture of the cityscape, the gaze of other white colonials, colonial categories of representation, and a critical, self-reflexivity). While the

Haut-Quartier is shown, through Suzanne's walks, to be a landscape where spatial configurations are remade, it nevertheless subjects the female protagonist to a "spatial configuration of power", a "colonial power exerted not only on the natives but also on the dislocated poor whites who did not succeed in reaping a profit from the land or from its inhabitants" (60).

Despite her subversive use of prostitution in order to establish herself, Suzanne however fails in negotiating entry into 'proper', wealthy white colonial society. Not only does her creolité mark her as other so that she falls in-between colonial categories of representation, but she also internalises the gazes of the white colonials so that her subjectivity splits. Suzanne's improper attire and her creolité are yoked together and function to position her as an outsider as her walking is transformed into the sexual impropriety of the street-walker. These embodied acts morph into an illicit female sexuality – a type of prostitution – and escalate into a form of a psychic and emotional collapse that leaves her bewildered and ostracised.

While prostitution represents for Carmen the ultimate form of liberation, Duras shows that for Suzanne, as for Bizet's protagonist, it is catastrophic. While she initially sees the white space of the colonial city as a platform that would enable her to walk unaccompanied and thus assert her independence as a subject, it is transformed into a menacing landscape where the streets are "fill[ed] with white people" who "[turn] to look" (149) and "[notice] her", and where she is "splatter[ed]" with laughter and "meet[s] those stares and always more stares" (150). In this section, the colonial whites' gaze upon her becomes menacing, and foregrounds her position as outsider. If Suzanne's white skin enables her to "pass for white" in the colonial city, her lack of privilege – illustrated in her attire – relegates her to the margins of the city. Suzanne's outfit is a parody of the white women – "surrounded with the smell of perfume [...] the fresh odors of money" (149-150) – as it is comprised of a cheap "Hotel Central dress, too short and too tight", a "straw hat, the like of which no other girl had ever seen", an "old handbag" "dangling in her hand", and a hairstyle "arranged as no other girl had ever arranged her hair" (151).

As Suzanne's walk in the city transforms into the sexual impropriety of the prostitute, we see how her feelings of alienation escalate, culminating in the almost-splitting of her gaze. As a result, she comes to adopt the menacing perspective of the colonial whites that perceive her as an

intruder that has “no place to go” in a place where “there was no one like her”. Suzanne sees that severe systems of exclusion reign here as “not everyone”, she realises, can walk “among these lordlings and these children of kings” (Duras 150). She consequently flees the scene, seeking shelter in a dark cinema. Her walk in the city illustrates the ways in which Nuttall’s idea of a gaze that is both internalised and turned upon itself – “watching the self and [...] watching others watching oneself” (60) – functions in establishing Suzanne as a subject. We see how she internalises the gaze of the wealthy, white subjects of the colonial city – a gaze that turns upon her, causing eventually the splitting of the self. The text shows how her subjectivity becomes divided as she speaks not only from the position of the first person, but also looks, judgementally, at herself from a third person’s perspective. Performatively, she tries to alter her bodily movements by attempting to walk “in a natural way” (Duras 149) so as to fit into the social order. As she moves from the in-between neighbourhood of the impoverished whites and enters the white quarter, however, a “feeling” “come[s] over her” that foregrounds her otherness and difference, becoming an “unpardonable reality: she was ridiculous and everyone saw it”. “Panic-stricken”, hating “herself” and “everything”, she is transformed into “an object of complete ugliness and stupidity” (150) when her subjectivity is turned upon itself.

Duras follows this moment in the text with a scene where Suzanne meets M. Jo again, and drives with him in his black limousine. In the car, she starts to see herself “through the eyes of an other” (Duras 94), and it becomes clear that her attempts to establish herself have transformed into a process mediated by the desiring gaze of men. Sitting next to M. Jo, Suzanne looks at her body as from an other, external perspective. While she inspects her body in detail, the narrator notes how Suzanne “was regarding in solitude her empire, over which reigned her waist, her legs, her breasts” (80). Duras shows that, in order for Suzanne to assert her independence, her process of becoming a subject must necessarily be mediated through the gaze of others – particularly other men. Although Duras portrays these scenes depicting the split white gaze from the perspective of a poor and ostracised white creole, it nevertheless allows her to symbolically undercut the privilege and social standing of the wealthy white colonials. Within a colonial ideology such as this, Duras seems to illustrate, Suzanne’s subjectivity and sense of self must suffer a necessary form of splitting, placing the subject in a position of schizophrenic in-betweenness that not only

resonates with the interstitial character of creole subjectivity, but also functions, as Nuttall theorises, to undo whiteness, power and privilege (61).

Duras's presentation in *The Sea Wall* of Suzanne's walk in the city illustrates the discontinuities between the wealthy whites of the fashionable district and her own family's white creole identity, while also showing the coming-into-being of the sexualised white female subject. For Suzanne, walking in the city is not merely an assertion of independence (an attempt to establish herself as an autonomous, female subject), but becomes however an activity that explicitly positions her as a social outcast, marking her exclusion from the legitimate citizens of the white quarter. Through Suzanne, Duras presents the ways in which the idea of the free subject, capable of rebelliously acting upon her feelings of boredom and frustration, establishes herself within colonial ideology, and in relation to the categories of representation already set in place by it. Duras illustrates the problematic of white creole femininity by showing how Suzanne's interpellation into white colonial society fails to present her with a sense of autonomous subjectivity. Yet, at the same time, Duras relieves her protagonist of being coercively placed within either one of the categories constituting the colonial binary. As a result, we see Suzanne shifting, throughout the novel, between French colonial subjectivity, and a position marked by otherness – between white propriety and sexual impropriety. The city – ideally the site of her interpellation as a legitimate subject – becomes however the site where she is not recognized by colonial categories. While her illegitimacy as a subject could enable her to actively resist being categorised and placed by a coercive political system, it sends her into a state of dissociation. Although her position as a white, impoverished creole founds her failure to be hailed (she does not fit the mould of the white colonial subject), her interstitial position in-between colonial categories of representation is nevertheless transformed to represent otherness at the end of the city scene. Her creolité, rather than signifying the “unlocalizable” subject (Murdoch “Rhys's” 268), consequently becomes the mark of her difference – she becomes not only “ridiculous” or “scandalous” (Duras 150), but utterly “contemptible” (151).



### 3.4. Ambiguous politics and nostalgia in *The Sea Wall*

In the novel, Duras explores the activation of Suzanne's identity as white colonial subject together with the larger project of mapping the family's social placement as white creoles. Ma's, Suzanne's and Joseph's creolité positions them on the outskirts of the narrated world, where they stand in-between the wealthy whites and the completely impoverished natives, marked by imperial/colonial designations of 'difference'. It is from this position that they move to the city where they try to negotiate their way into white colonial society. However, moving to the city does not relieve them of their ambiguous placement within colonial ideology and discourse. Here, they simultaneously benefit from "the racist hegemony" and "struggle to survive in the colonial economic system from which they fail to profit" (E. Johnson 132).

Although *The Sea Wall* is marked by its critique of colonial powers (and is thus underscored by an anti-colonial politics), it nevertheless articulates the relationship between coloniser and coloniser in rather ambiguous ways. Critics have noted that Duras's works are filled with contradictions (Waters 254; Murphy *Alienation* 10), and that these "inconsistencies" often relate to Duras's ambiguous position, as a white colonial creole, towards "colonialist ideology and discourse" (Waters 254). This has even led to the assertion that although her works are "transgressive", they fail to be subversive or revolutionary (Rowley 107). Looking at Duras's personal politics before and during the publication of this novel helps to provide a guideline in order to understand her positioning in relation to the ideological framework out of and to which she writes. The decade that preceded the publication of *Un Barrage Contre le Pacifique* in 1950 was characterised by Duras's transition from a pro-colonial position to an anti-imperialist stance. After completing her studies in 1939 in France, Duras started to work for France's Colonial Ministry, due to her father's "colonial connections". Working for this division, she "marketed Empire to France's electoral masses" and even served on propaganda committees (Winston 15). As a leading role-player in the construction of popular interest in France's colonial peripheries, Duras co-authored during this period *L'Empire Français* (Waters 255; Winston 15), a pro-colonial propagandist work "designed to strengthen popular belief in the value and legitimacy of the [French] Empire" (Winston 15).

During the approximately ten year period between her authoring of *L'Empire Français* and the publication of *The Sea Wall* in 1950 (her third published novel at this point), Duras's politics had changed radically. In *The Sea Wall*, Duras harnesses her personal childhood experiences of French colonial life, together with her in-depth knowledge of propaganda, in order to articulate her changed politics, staged through her scathing critique of French imperialism and colonial propaganda in the novel. While *L'Empire Français* painted a picture of an exotically romanticised French colonial lifestyle, *The Sea Wall* would, ten years later, offer a "reversal" of the "pro-colonial rhetoric of its precursor text" (Waters 260) to depict the real conditions of French colonial oppression and their parallels with [...] fascist and capitalist forms" (Winston 29). However, in *The Sea Wall*, Duras's ambiguous "borderzone cultural position" produces a narrative swayed by both pro- and anti-colonial sentiments, founded upon "the structures, anxieties, and ambiguities of the disintegrating French colonial order" (57): not only is the text extremely critical of French colonial exploitation, but it is also "implicitly seduced" by "racial binary oppositions" (Waters 255). This is visible in both the white creole family's relationship to the native populations and the white colonial community, and in the novel's general depiction of the natives. It can thus be argued that the overarching political position articulated in *The Sea Wall* stands ambivalently somewhere in-between a nostalgic recreation of a colonial past and an explicit critique of French imperialism and colonial exploitation.

The ambivalent and shifting politics that frame *The Sea Wall* are reiterated in Duras's mapping and illustration of characters, events and themes within the novel. One of the most important ways in which she explores ambiguous political affiliations is through the white creole family – figures situated in-between cultural groups and communities within the colonial space. Through them, the narrative affords a dubious articulation of the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and imperial power and native resistance. Throughout, the family's hatred of the exploitative and corrupt French colonial powers is made evident: we read how Ma and the family express their hatred for the cadastral agents that sold an infertile piece of land to Ma; and at the end of the narrative, Joseph elaborately instructs the native peasants to murder these agents (Duras 286). At the same time, the novel also presents the native Indochinese (Southeast Asian) population in a denigrating manner. The peasants, particularly in part one, are presented as explicitly embedded within the natural landscape: they are indistinguishable from the natural

environment and the cycles of the seasons. Duras's portrayal of the peasants and their children show them to be "other" and "non-human" (Waters 262) – "faceless metaphors for colonial destruction and violence" (E. Johnson 121).<sup>37</sup> Their facelessness consequently presents them as less-than subjects, denying them the option of "self-determination or change" (Waters 258) – the option Duras clearly affords the white, creole female protagonist, and one of the central themes around which the story is based. While the novel also reworks the "idealising nostalgia" in *L'Empire Français* into an "ironic portrayal of the inevitable decline" of French imperialism (261), it nevertheless depicts the numerous ways in which the white creole family persistently tries to establish themselves as white, "acceptable" colonial subjects. If the narrator notes with irony the modernised, airy cityscape of the white quarter of the city, the text also presents the colonial city in (implicitly) positive terms. The built, public landscape of the white quarter is not only a space Suzanne and Joseph desire (when listening to the phonograph they imagine pursuing the colonial dream in the city), but it is also the only landscape that, for them, might set the stage for their independence.

*The Sea Wall* depicts the white creole family through the notion of in-betweenness – not only in terms of subjectivity and political affiliation, but also in terms of physical or geographical placement. In this sense, then, Duras's ambivalent politics ultimately show the problematic of home and belonging, as experienced by ostracised white creoles in the (post)colony. Illustrating their plight through their physical displacement and their social, emotional and psychic estrangement, Duras engages through the family members – and in particular, Suzanne – with the notion of "the isolated individual" (Murphy *Alienation* 11). In *The Sea Wall*, Duras consequently presents each of her main characters – Ma, Joseph, and Suzanne – on their own struggle against either injustice or colonial exploitation (Ma), towards a new, independent life (Joseph) or in reaction to a stifling and exploitative family environment (Suzanne). The author shows, however, the characters to be bound by a similar longing: a desire for homeliness and belonging. Estranged

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<sup>37</sup> A number of critics have noted the theme of violence – as well as its connections to sexuality – in Duras's work (see Bécel 423; Blais; Heathcote; Hill 608). Other critics have also mentioned the particular intersections between violence and incest that characterise the relationship between the young female protagonist and her brother (see Glassman 150; Rowley 113). In *The Sea Wall*, Duras establishes an interesting linguistic resemblance between the names of the male characters: M. Jo, Joseph, and Suzanne's lover at the end of the novel, Joseph Agosti who, like her brother, is also a hunter.

from accepted colonial categories of representation, as well as from a place to which to belong, the white creoles become alienated from their identities as French (colonial) citizens.

Duras articulates the family's problematic national identity not only through their estrangement from communities in the colonial space, but also through nostalgia, an ambiguous desire for a home that never existed. Nostalgia thus functions in the narrative as an index pointing to the various ambiguities that shape the narrative: the family's attempts to search for, and establish a home (in various senses) are never successful, while the text itself also puts forward a narrative framework encoded with a form of colonial nostalgia. Through their futile attempts to belong to the wealthy white community, the family inadvertently express a deep-set desire to reinstate the "grande époque" of French imperialism, when the French colonial mission secured wealth for all French colonials. This is further exacerbated by the dubious ways in which the text presents the native populations. In the text, another prominent way in which Duras engages with nostalgia is through music, an element in Duras's oeuvre that represents the "promise to subvert [the status quo's] structures" (Winston 62). Usually in the shape of a popular song (Coward 24), music functions in her work by representing a future "lyrical existence" (25), and the same can be said of the way she employs it in *The Sea Wall*. Throughout the narrative, Joseph and Suzanne are portrayed playing their favourite record, "Ramona", on the phonograph. This demonstrates a type of "nostalgia for the future" (Walder *Postcolonial* 71), shoring up the ambiguities that structure the novel. Instead of reminiscing about a forgotten past, Joseph and Suzanne (as colonial creoles) romanticise the possibility of a future colonial lifestyle which their mother failed to create. The text links the process of leaving the bungalow – of going on journeys<sup>38</sup> – with a prosperous future and a form of belonging. Listening to "Ramona" would make them think of a time in the future when they "would leave all this" so that the song becomes for them "the hymn of the future", signifying "departures on journeys, of the end of long waiting" (Duras 67).

While "Ramona" registers nostalgia, it also registers the siblings' experience of melancholy and loss (Hill 602). Murphy writes that Duras's "fascination with music as transport underscores the fundamental alienation and absence of characters that retreat progressively into an internalized

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<sup>38</sup> Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* also shows Anna's search for belonging to be a journey or voyage.

world of memory and imagination” (*Alienation* 19). The repetition of the song through the novel thus continually signifies Joseph and Suzanne’s desire to leave the unhomely space of the bungalow, built by Ma. It is only at the end of the narrative that Joseph and Suzanne’s desire for an ‘elsewhere’ is fulfilled. They depart the bungalow after Ma’s death, and also implicitly leave behind the oppressive existence under the cadastral agents. At this point, a new period in the lives of the siblings is announced, developing out of the “destruction of oppressive ideologies and socio-political systems”. As Joseph instructs the native peasants to kill the cadastral agents, an “intuitive union with others” is intimated, part of the process through which a “new, more ‘open’ society” (*Alienation* 11) might be constructed.

If the establishment of ‘home’ is Ma’s project (which, as the text shows, is ultimately a failure), the search for belonging is particularly the siblings’ quest as they, as second generation colonial creoles, are always-already displaced. By harnessing the fact of Ma’s unsuccessful colonial life, and Joseph’s and Suzanne’s never-ending search for belonging, Duras depicts the various ways in which “living at the axis of multiple strains of power and exploitation” (E. Johnson 123) shape colonial life. *The Sea Wall* reveals the ambiguities of this space, together with the difficulty of negotiating forms of homeliness and belonging in a landscape which meets white creoles with physical displacement and social and emotional estrangement. Through the associated notions of whiteness, property and propriety, the text shows the extent to which the socially outcast family’s presence in colonial Indochina becomes a constant struggle towards finding a sense of identity and place. Torn between the locations of the imperial centre and the colonial periphery, they furthermore struggle to assert themselves as “legitimate” white colonial subjects as they navigate private, intimate spaces on the one hand, and public landscapes on the other. Duras’s white creoles are caught up against a landscape that persistently refuses to be controlled, and a white colonial community who vigilantly refuses them entry. Through the family’s feelings of alienation and unbelonging, the author indexes the problematic of both a definitive sense of national identity, and an unambiguous political affiliation.

Although *The Sea Wall* deals with the displacement of white creoles in the particular context of French colonial Indochina in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Duras also touches on the question of a more general sense of alienation and “outsiderness” (Bammer qtd. E.

Johnson 137), particularly in the colonial space. The political inconsistencies and “conflicting premises” (Ha “Durasie” 103) that underscore Duras’s novel finally disclose “the many contradictions, ambivalences and grey areas” in the interaction between coloniser and colonised, and help to show the problems and questions that are “generally overlooked in the black-and-white binary oppositions of colonialist discourse” (Waters 265). Refusing to take a clear stance for or against French colonialism in the early twentieth century in Southeast Asia, the text is rather concerned with exploring the ambiguities of affiliation and belonging emerging out of this period and context. Through her white female protagonist, Duras does this by employing the in-betweenness of white creolité, together with place and placement, in order to problematise the notions of home, homeliness and belonging.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Rewriting the *plaasroman*: (post)apartheid nostalgia and home in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat***

#### **4.1. Introduction**

In *Agaat* (2006), Marlene van Niekerk revisits the Afrikaans ‘farm novel’ (*plaasroman*) to reinterpret the genre’s three most important ideological assumptions: the sovereignty of a patriarchal system, the white subject’s assumed ownership of the land, and the marginalisation of the non-white other, rendered as an extension of the landscape, and denied its rightful ownership of the land. The novel exposes the inconsistencies and unstable foundations of the colonising mission in (apartheid) South Africa by associating it with the mythical origins of the white Afrikaner’s control over, and ‘civilising’ of, the land and others within this landscape. By representing the ideological underpinnings of the *plaasroman*, Van Niekerk reveals how a “complicitous critique” (Warnes 124) might not only revisit the past in order to destabilise dubious cultural and racial assumptions, but also how it could risk reasserting the unequal political system of the past.

Following the British occupation of South Africa (1806-1910), a minority of Boers and Dutch (later establishing themselves as Afrikaners) started to assert their political and cultural difference, as well as detachment from, British imperial rule – a gesture toward independence that was announced by the Great Trek in 1838 (Lamb 10). After the Second World War – more than one hundred years later – this “remarkable proof of settler identity and independence of spirit” culminated in the formal establishment of an Afrikaner nationalist government in 1948, and its implementation of the policy of apartheid. A system based upon “Boer settler nationalism”, apartheid established an historical period characterised by “appalling abuses of power” – thus extending a period of European (white) occupation and political domination (Lamb 11) which, as Barnard asserts, might be seen as similar to colonialism. Unlike other settler colonies such as the United States of America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand where a

white *majority* rule was established through a combination of migration and genocide, South Africa has a history of a white *minority* rule (Steyn xxiv). Steyn argues that white South Africans – particularly Afrikaners – can be seen as “*sociologically indigenous*” (Stone 1985, quoted in Steyn xxiv): as they have “little attachment to the countries of their ethnic origin” (Steyn xxiv), they are placed in a unique position that is characterised by affiliations to both Europe and (post)colonial South Africa. *Agaat*’s focus on Afrikaners and Afrikaans politics is an interrogation of a group of people whose cultural and linguistic identity stands in-between the geographical and cultural realms of Europe and Africa, situated ambiguously in the interstices of Western and African conceptual models, and their different approaches to the natural landscape. In my discussion of *Agaat*, I approach Afrikaans as particularly creolised in so far as it represents a language and culture that, despite laying claim to its Africanness through its name, is driven by an identity that is “no longer European, not yet African” (Coetzee 11).

In 1996, two years after South Africa’s first democratic election, Marlene van Niekerk writes that every form of historical research attempts to accomplish two things: “to make sense of the present and to answer to or to legitimize the needs and conditions of the present”. Her two novels, *Triomf* and *Agaat* undertake exactly this: in order to “make sense of the present”, they revisit and “critically reinterpret” South Africa’s apartheid history.<sup>39</sup> At the heart of her project stands the notion of a present engagement with the past – an imaginative and revisionist intervention that “consider[s] possibilities for new definitions and new constitutions” (Van Niekerk “Afrikaner” 141) for the future.<sup>40</sup> Van Niekerk has criticised South Africa’s processes of “establishing ‘a non-sexist, non-racist democratic South Africa’”, describing them as not very different from “simply covering a very sick person with a nice warm blanket and believing our duty done” (142). It is for this reason that she revisits the past – particularly of the white Afrikaner – and engages with history through a mode that Walder calls “postcolonial” nostalgia, a style of historicising that commands an ethical engagement with the past by connecting “what

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<sup>39</sup> Louise Viljoen investigates the ways in which recent novels by Afrikaans women writers have engaged with postcolonial theory in South Africa. See her essay, “Postcolonialism and recent women’s writing in Afrikaans”.

<sup>40</sup> Van Niekerk’s nostalgic recreation of an Afrikaner past in *Agaat* can be associated with Duras’s articulation in *The Sea Wall* of a type of “nostalgia for the future” (Walder 71), a type of longing for the establishment of a better, or ideal society.



you remember with the memories of others, colonisers and colonised and in-between” (*Postcolonial* 14).

Part of Van Niekerk’s rewriting of the *plaasroman* is an engagement with Afrikaner cultural fictions, which she does in a nostalgic – yet consciously reflective – manner. Here one is reminded of Boym’s concept of “reflective” nostalgia, a form of reminiscence on the ambivalences of home, and the forms of belonging associated with it that refuse the recuperative, consoling work of restorative nostalgia. In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk deals with Afrikaner nostalgia by expressing it, reflectively, through her use of the *plaasroman*, thus enabling her to open up various doublenesses veiled by the original format of the genre. Memory of home characterises Milla’s almost restorative reflection on her past on the farm, while it also functions as a narrativising tool to tell the ‘story’ of Afrikaner history. Throughout the text, Milla’s Afrikaner subjectivity is depicted as a ‘story’ or narrative which, as she remembers it on her deathbed, interlinks with the story of Grootmoedersdrift, as well as the *plaasroman*’s mythological narrative of ‘home’ and belonging, carrying with it the ideological weight of Afrikaner identity and culture.

By exploring the themes of history, memory, and home, Van Niekerk asks the questions: can a painful and oppressive past be revisited in a meaningful way? Does re-presenting the past signify complicity with it? Van Niekerk’s answer lies in her use of a critical form of thinking about home (in various senses), one that remembers and combines details of the everyday and the personal, together with the political and public. *Agaat* argues that the recognition of complicity, combined with an awareness of its entanglement with the quotidian, might become the basis of a radical reinterpretation of the past. A rethinking of apartheid that aims to produce “new perspectives” on white Afrikaner culture and identity can only be effected, she argues, by “interpreting the past”, through remembering “old or redundant definitions and institutions of Afrikaans and Afrikaans culture” (Van Niekerk “Afrikaner” 141).

*Agaat* is set against the backdrop of Afrikaner history in South Africa, specifically the beginning, climax and end of Afrikaner nationalist politics in the mid to late twentieth century. The narrative stretches across a period of more than fifty years, starting roughly in 1948 (which

marks the inception of South Africa's Afrikaner nationalist government and formal apartheid, as well as, ironically, the birth of Aagaat in the novel [Buikema 311]), and ending in the late 1990s, coinciding with the end of apartheid and Milla's illness and death from Motor Neuron Disease, symbolising "the exhaustion of farmland and the decline of Afrikaner hegemony" (De Vries qtd. Buikema 311). Most of the narrated time in the novel revisits and reflects on a prosperous time within the history of Afrikaners' position in South Africa during apartheid, and engages the social and political position of a white minority "in a country that is redefining itself as African, within the African context" (Ginwala et al, qtd. Steyn xxii).

In *Aagaat*, Van Niekerk investigates this political, linguistic and cultural grouping by locating its mythological origins within the *plaasroman* as narrative and text. She demythologises and deconstructs the relationship between white Afrikaner identity and subjectivity and its relationship to the land and the space of the farm, reading it through the (problematic) intimate relationship established between Milla and Aagaat. The novel depicts how the white (creole) female protagonist is slowly dying from Motor Neuron Disease. Milla, slowly wasting away, is mute, immobile and has to be fed and cleaned: this part of the text runs parallel to the other side of Van Niekerk's story – that of Milla taking care of Aagaat as a child. Apart from mediating the intimate relationship between the two central characters, the sick, white female body serves a number of functions through the narrative. It registers Milla's physical alienation from her property: unable to assert any form of corporeal agency, she is estranged from the spaces of her home and the farmland. She is thus unable to fully inhabit her property, and fails to influence, and lay claim to her position as white landowner. While registering her inability to uphold acceptable standards of white propriety, her sick body also marks her as a politically inactive subject as her ability to assert herself as a wealthy and empowered white Afrikaner slowly diminishes. In this sense, Van Niekerk foregrounds the sick female body to signify Milla's systematic loss of political power – in her relationship with Aagaat, as well as in the broader context of South African politics.

The text takes on the form of an interior monologue, shifting between Milla's first-person narration, and the second person, illustrating a type of subjectivity split between various times and places. Milla's voice furthermore takes on the form of a stream-of-consciousness, while it is

later ventriloquized by Agaat as she reads Milla's diaries.<sup>41</sup> This continual splitting of the white subject's self-reflexive and self-aware gaze is employed in the novel as a medium through which Milla's white subjectivity, as well as Agaat's racially marked subjectivity, are represented. Milla's perspective as protagonist and white subject is presented as an ever-present and watchful gaze. The text is further framed by a prologue and an epilogue in Jakkie's voice. For Prinsloo and Visagie, Jakkie represents a figure that consciously breaks away from his bonds with the space of Grootmoedersdrift, as well as his Afrikaner national identity (Prinsloo and Visagie 78). Van Niekerk thus frames the novel with a rejection of Afrikaner politics – Afrikaner national identity and its ownership and cultivation of the land as mythical 'home'. In the text, this political gesture ultimately reaches a climax when Milla passes the land on to her coloured servant, Agaat, and not her son. It becomes clear that the text is inflected by a nostalgic reflection upon, as well as return to, the farm – a return that not only recreates 'home', but is also critical of the tenets underlying it.

In both her novels, *Triomf* and *Agaat*, Van Niekerk portrays Afrikaner political power by employing the farmland and the white family home as symbolic of the white state during South Africa's apartheid past and the decline of Afrikaner nationalism after the political transition of 1994. Whereas Van Niekerk's earlier novel, *Triomf*, depicts the poor white family's envisioning of South Africa's postapartheid future (that also inaugurates the decline of white power), *Agaat* explores the female narrator-protagonist's nostalgic gaze upon her white, Afrikaner past. As a form of *plaasroman*, *Agaat* responds to Afrikaner culture and nationalism in a way that also portrays the unspoken inconsistencies of white power in South Africa: the instability of its civilising mission and taming of the land, and the ways in which its hegemonic, coercive power cracks at the seams, always threatening to implode. In these novels, the author interrogates the politics of place and placement within the South African political (and natural) landscape by focusing particularly on the intimate space of the home, in which she creates a symbolic refiguring of white Afrikaner nationalism's attempt to create a closed-off and homogenous white state. *Triomf* and *Agaat* share a similar interest in whiteness and its relationship to place: they

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<sup>41</sup> For Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren, Agaat's ventriloquizing voice performs "the reproduction of the dominant ideology" and thus shows her to possess no "effective" or "unproblematically audible" (Ashcroft et al. qtd. Carvalho and Van Vuuren) voice "above Milla's perspective" (41).

represent the decline of white, Afrikaner power as disintegrating, ominous houses and diseased bodies, presented to the reader from within the intimate domestic sphere.

The ethical and political underpinnings of *Agaat* are illustrated through Van Niekerk's use of the *plaasroman*, a genre which Van Niekerk's novel "deconstructs", "rethinks" and "takes [...] by storm" (De Kock "Intimate"138). This enables Van Niekerk to engage in "a conscious act of revisionism" (140), and allows her to depict the ways in which interconnections of the public and private, political and personal permeate the relationship between Milla and Agaat as well as everyday life on an Afrikaner farm. Scenes of exploitation, together with the white female protagonist's awareness of her complicity, are paired with a detailed depiction of the (seemingly) apolitical details of everyday life within the intimate space of the home. The spaces of the farmland and the family home are two important locations within which the author explores the making of Afrikaner identity and its explicit connections with political domination over the African landscape and (other) subjects. On the cultivated landscape of Milla's family farm, Grootmoedersdrift, and in the intimate space of the farmhouse, Milla, as white Afrikaner, becomes dependent on the labour of others who live and work there – most prominently her coloured servant, Agaat. Through her ambivalent use of the form of the *plaasroman*, Van Niekerk explores – in ambiguous ways – the history of an Afrikaner woman and her relationship to her farm and servant. The author shows how the establishment of a white Afrikaner identity is predicated on the presence and silencing of racial others, enabling her to reveal the inner workings of power, even in intimate and personal relationships.

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk mediates this exploration of entangled histories and injustices, but also Milla's fond memories of her life on the farm through a type of nostalgia that shapes the events depicted in the narrative, as well as the form in which it is presented. Milla's reflection on her life is nostalgic, yet her memories of her life on Grootmoedersdrift constantly foreground the ambiguous and even unpleasant events in her past. Van Niekerk's use of the *plaasroman*-genre is similarly ambiguous: while it relives a certain Afrikaner past, it also critiques and revises it through foregrounding the role of women and racial others in it, thus conforming to what Boym coins as "reflective" nostalgia. By "using the tensions of the system against itself", it becomes clear *Agaat* unravels the "discourses of exclusion that characterize Afrikanerdom" (Warnes 130).

It furthermore investigates the intersections between categories of race and gender so as to probe the connections between white feminism, white landownership in (post)colonial South Africa, and the problematic of white subjectivity and its relation to ‘non-white’ subjects.

While Van Niekerk illustrates the white subject’s alienation from herself and her surroundings primarily through Milla’s paralysed body and split voice, diffusing white political power can also be effected by employing the concept of *creolité*. One way, therefore, of shoring up the internal alterity and estrangement at the heart of Milla’s white, Afrikaner subjectivity is by employing the conceptual category of *creolité*. While enabling the author to critique Afrikaner culture and Afrikaner national identity, it also deconstructs ideas not only of racial purity, but more importantly in Van Niekerk’s novel, cultural purity. *Creolité* thus allows a recognition of an internal otherness, and facilitates “encounters with blackness” (Nuttall 58-9). Through this lens, culturally “pure” Afrikaner identity is revealed as a subject position that bars Milla from establishing an inter-subjective relationship with Agaat and the others on the farm.

Whereas Duras’s and Rhys’s novels entangle the separate positions of the racially ambiguous other with the position of the racially “pure” (white) Self in the figures of Suzanne and Anna, in *Agaat* these binary positions are separately mapped onto Agaat and Milla. Here, the colonial space of apartheid South Africa enables Milla to access the material and social privilege and power associated with whiteness. Within this ideological framework, Milla is able to adopt the place of a privileged, white citizen, a position that categorises non-whites as the racially “marked” Other, while at the same time also masking the creole undertones of Afrikaner culture. Van Niekerk illustrates how the heterogeneity that founds Afrikaner culture and identity was persistently masked in order to conform to apartheid ideology’s insistence upon the separation of cultural and racial groupings. For this reason, Milla is implicated in an ongoing process through which ideals of coherent and autonomous white Afrikaner identity are upheld.

*Creolité*, apart from marking the inherent contradictions in ideas of pure race and culture in the novel, also functions here as a subject position within which Milla would be able to establish an intersubjective relationship with Agaat, a position from which they would be able to recognise each other as mutual subjects. Van Niekerk illustrates how the failure to embrace forms of

alterity within – made possible through a more “creolised” understanding of Afrikaner identity and culture – and hanging onto ideas of homogenous whiteness can inevitably lead to estrangement, and social and political paralysis. Portrayed through scenes featuring the sick white body of Milla, and moments of thwarted communication between the women, Milla’s sense of estrangement from the people and spaces around her seems to reach its “logical end” (Devarenne “Nationalism” 640) in her death – a point that announces the end of white Afrikaner nationalism and cultural exclusivity.

#### **4.2. *Agaat as plaasroman*, white Afrikaner nationalism and the farm as mythical ‘home’**

Afrikaans language and culture has historically established itself through a particular engagement with its spatial and geographical context. Linked to this was the process of developing an Afrikaner nationalist identity, associated with “a national future in Africa”<sup>42</sup> and expressed notably “in terms of a unique relationship to the South African landscape” (Coetzee 174). In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, J.M. Coetzee writes that the Afrikaner understood and conceptualised a space “to which he claim[ed] to be native” (174), yet was not – a theme specifically addressed by the historical *plaasroman* genre. As a work that writes back to the Afrikaner farm novel, Van Niekerk’s (anti-) *plaasroman* responds to this connection between Afrikaner identity and the land, and the ways in which the farm-space came to stand for a mythical cultural ‘home’.

In his study, Coetzee engages with the different forms of white settler writing in South Africa and their relationship with, and representations of, the African landscape and its indigenous peoples. Of particular use to this study is how he maps the inception and development of the *plaasroman* during the early twentieth century – an Afrikaans genre that represents the Afrikaner’s relationship with the land – and locates its roots within European romanticism, the German farm novel (the *Bauernroman*) and the conventions of Western landscape painting. In the *plaasroman*, Romanticism and its conceptualisation of man’s relationship with nature is

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<sup>42</sup> In her novel, Van Niekerk writes, of course, towards a different kind of national future, one standing in opposition to the Afrikaner ethnic nationalism to which Coetzee refers.

combined with the German nationalist underpinnings of the *Bauernroman* to produce a form of writing that became “an ideologically important genre justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land” (Devarenne “Nationalism” 627).<sup>43</sup> Developing out of literary modes that foreground “the myth of the return to the earth” (Coetzee 79), an unfettered, pastoral lifestyle, and reacting against English-language anti-farm novels such as Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, the *plaasroman* inserts the Afrikaner subject not within unmapped nature, but rather in the cultivated landscape of the farm. Coetzee revisits the early Afrikaans farm novels of C.M. van den Heever in order to excavate the ideological underpinnings of the *plaasroman* and its association with the development of Afrikaner nationalism. He notes how Van den Heever utilised the idea that “man’s truth” can be “recovered” in nature (a particular characteristic of the Romantic mode) in such a way as to transform symbolically the natural landscape into the space of the farm. In this way, the thesis that “the Afrikaner will lose his independence and (eventually) his identity” once he loses his claim to the land was produced (110).

During the early twentieth century, Afrikaans poets were encouraged to depict “evidences of a ‘natural’ bond between volk and land”. This led to their producing patriotic works which “naturalised” white Afrikaners’ land-ownership by moulding Afrikaner identity upon the characteristics of the natural landscape itself. Through a pastoral mode, the *plaasroman* managed to lend “credibility to a story about Afrikaners’ rural origins that provided an illusion of continuity in South African history and a description of an unchanging Afrikaner identity” (Devarenne “Nationalism” 627). The *plaasroman* was able to embed this “unchanging Afrikaner identity” (juxtaposed to the deliberately *changing* identity during the political transition) within the natural landscape so that white ownership of the land assumed the characteristics of a type of “natural” bond. Among other features of the natural landscape, “wide horizons” came to depict “an expansive future”, while stretching panoramas signalled “freedom of personal and national destiny” (Coetzee 61). In this way, the farm novel came to cast the farm as a space that located the Afrikaner’s history and lineage, concretising nationalist Afrikaner identity and its symbolic bond to the African landscape (108-109).

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<sup>43</sup> Van Niekerk’s reappropriation of the *plaasroman* is somewhat similar to Duras’s revisioning, in *The Sea Wall*, of the propagandist narrative of an exotic colonial existence she helped to forward in *L’Empire Francais*.

While the farm novel positioned the inviting natural, or already cultivated, landscape in a way that affirmed Afrikaners' racial, cultural and national identity, it also placed various subjects at the narrative margins. In her book, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, Rita Barnard paraphrases Coetzee's assertion that "the chief occluded element" in the South African pastoral is "the labor of the black worker, whose inscriptions of and claim to the land constitute [...] the genre's embarrassing blind spot" (10). For Coetzee, the *plaasroman's* silencing of the servant and the invisibility of his or her labour represents the difficulty with which it "integrate[s] the dispossessed black man into the idyll [...] of African pastoralism" (71-72). As the *plaasroman* centres on the white Afrikaner's toil to cultivate the earth (providing simultaneously the justification for the Afrikaner's usurped possession of the land), the worker is erased from the "scene": "the black man", Coetzee writes, is reduced to "a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then" (5). If the genre banished the black worker from the main narrative scenery, it also relegated women to the margins. The *plaasroman* was therefore, as Nicole Devarenne argues, a framework that sanctioned "colonial subjugation" not only through "the disenfranchisement of blacks", but also through "the disempowerment of women" ("Nationalism" 267). *Agaat* addresses these "occluded element[s]" by deliberately foregrounding the coloured female worker and by placing two female characters at the centre of the narrative. Van Niekerk's novel therefore implicitly shows how the white Afrikaner's possession of the land and presence on the farm are fraught with ambiguities, dispossessing and silencing (although to different degrees) black servants and women. Symbolising the undoing of naturalised white, patriarchal landownership, the integration of the worker and women into the pastoral mode – as *Agaat* so clearly highlights – become a representational difficulty, even a scandal.

For Barnard, the place of the colonial subject in modernity is synonymous with Freudian neurosis (or repression) and the uncanny: this relationship, she writes, is addressed by Lars Engle's argument that white South African fiction is often characterised by a form of neurosis, and that these works are "perpetually engaged in recording the return of the repressed, in seeking out what lies at the limits of its own epistemological frame" (Barnard 47). In order to critique and subvert the genre, Van Niekerk revisits and reinterprets the imperatives put forward by the *plaasroman*, doing so by rendering visible what has been abjected from its epistemological



structure. *Agaat* is a text that simultaneously writes back to, and against, the mythological justifications for racial and gender inequalities in Afrikaner culture, and the ways in which they were immortalised in the *plaasroman*. In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk forces the genre to confront its moral and ethical underpinnings, enabling her to interrogate Afrikaner nationalism, whiteness and patriarchy. *Agaat* has been described as a feminist inversion of the genre (Prinsloo and Visagie 77) as it replaces the sovereign and autonomous white patriarch with the body of the protagonist, a paralysed and mute female body that slowly wastes away. By positioning a matriarchal history at the centre of the narrative and foregrounding the relationship between the two main female characters, Van Niekerk negates the idea of the powerful white Afrikaner subject, standing at the heart of this historical genre. In this way, the author also addresses the question of white Afrikaner power. Van Niekerk thus clearly employs Milla's white diseased body to symbolically break down the power of the white apartheid state, while simultaneously investigating the power relationship established in the intimate relationship of the two women. A feminist revision allows Van Niekerk, moreover, to address other questions relating to power and race. Milla's story and her matriarchal ownership of the farm (Heyns "Irreparable" 126) is critically off-set by the history of a coloured female subject – a figure to whom Milla bequeaths the farm (Prinsloo and Visagie 80), and through which the author disrupts a pattern of (post)colonial landownership. The novel becomes a postcolonial farm novel (72) as Van Niekerk shows how the *plaasroman*'s conceptualisation of Afrikaner identity and the farm was underscored by an intersection of race and gender politics.

Coetzee writes that "[e]very return to the farm tends to be a version of pastoral, sharing in the anxiety of (high) pastoralism about the moral justification of such a return" (74). Yet while Van Niekerk's *Agaat* returns to the farm, it vividly addresses the inconsistencies of the genre by placing them at the centre of the narrative, and even inverting them. *Agaat* is an extremely critical rewriting of the traditional *plaasroman*, and can be grouped with a substantial body of revisionist *plaasromans* that, since the early 1960s (Prinsloo and Visagie 86), sought to "define their political projects in opposition to the traditionalism and (proto)nationalism" enshrined by the *plaasroman* (Devarenne "Nationalism" 633). One such a revisionist text is Etienne van Heerden's 1986 novel, *Toorberg* (translated as *Ancestral Voices*), described as a "counterdiscursive *plaasroman*" (Warnes 121). Christopher Warnes notes that in an anti-farm

novel such as Van Heerden's, there occurs a jarring between "the novel's politics and the generally conservative nature" of the genre from which it develops and against which it writes (121). Although Devarenne argues that *Agaat* is a "feminist and anti-nationalist work" ("Nationalism" 642), it is, like Van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices*, also bound to the conservative traditional *plaasroman*-genre that prefigures it. How, then, does one unveil the underlying misogyny, racism, and assumed ownership of the land within a genre "designed exactly to naturalize or obscure" (Warnes 121) those elements? Warnes, borrowing the term from Linda Hutcheon, calls this type of novel a "complicitous critique" (124), a form of fiction that intends to "detoxify [...] cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (Hutcheon qtd. Warnes 124).

Via Van Niekerk's critically nostalgic rewriting of the *plaasroman* and its function of narrativising Milla's Afrikaner history, *Agaat* addresses a key element of the genre: owning, and taking ownership of, the land. Van Niekerk shows how white Afrikaner identity is explicitly linked to propriety, privilege and material property – notably the cultivated land of the farm, and the farmstead. While the normative link between whiteness and property is problematised in *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Sea Wall*, in *Agaat* it is clearly established. In the model proposed by the *plaasroman*, the establishment of the farm emerges out of the Afrikaner settler's interaction and relationship with the natural landscape, and for Coetzee, this act of inscribing the earth is closely associated with the project of self-establishment. Cultivating the landscape becomes an act through which the Afrikaner subject, through self-negation, aligns himself with his forefathers and his culture. The individual is transformed into a representative of his lineage: "to actualize the self", Coetzee notes, the Afrikaner has to "yield up his individuality in a devotion of labour to the past and future of the farm, which is nature inscribed with fences, walls, buildings, boreholes, irrigation channels, and signed above all with the scars of the plough" (99). Labour and cultivating the farmland ("hack[ing] it out of the primeval bush" [85]) thus bind the subject and his forefathers to the farm.

Coetzee's depiction of Afrikaners' relationship to the farmland might also be applied to conceptualise their relationship, as a particular national grouping, to the country. It becomes clear that this fraternity of Afrikaners seemed to "hack" a shared cultural identity out of the

landscape and surroundings within which they found themselves. For Benedict Anderson, such a familial relationship between people with a shared outlook – a nation – is an “imagined political community” (Anderson 5) connected by a “deep horizontal comradeship” (7). Anderson notes further that before the underlying ideological and cultural ideas of this community are transformed into an official nationalism, the group – most often a dominant social group – is usually “threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community” (101). Van Niekerk’s novel is placed against the background of the history of a national Afrikaner identity, which was built on the linked ideas of cultural and racial homogeneity, and an approach to space characterised by domesticating the untamed landscape. Establishing a national, Afrikaner identity thus meant to own the earth and to enter into a relationship with it by cultivating it, and became the central feature of the *plaasroman*-genre. Inscribing the natural landscape with the plough was to inscribe the identity of the Afrikaner community on it, to mark and transform the earth so that it serves as a constant reminder of one’s culture and heritage. In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk depicts the Afrikaner’s approach to the land through Milla’s relationship with the landscape of Grootmoedersdrift – an interaction that is both intimate as well as violent. The land becomes an object, something which Milla domesticates: at the same time, this domination of the land is also transformed into a personalised project. Thus, while the earth of Grootmoedersdrift is cultivated and controlled, it paradoxically also holds the potential to affirm Milla’s Afrikaner identity. In this way, the cultivated earth is the necessary precursor to the establishment of Milla’s Afrikaner identity.

Owning the landscape of the farm – transforming the natural land into a cultivated and mapped piece of property – is thus central to the process of establishing a national white Afrikaner identity. Van Niekerk shows how, in the novel, these elements are closely intertwined: subject and place interconnect so that Milla is not only part of the space of the farm, but the farmland of Grootmoedersdrift also forms part of her consciousness (Prinsloo and Visagie 78). *Agaat* illustrates in detail how the Afrikaner state established itself by sanctioning and taking control of physical space as part of its project of establishing a national identity. Closely associated with owning property, Milla’s whiteness continually establishes itself in relation to her farm, and particularly through its cultivation. In the novel, this is illustrated through scenes where Milla associates her female body – even describes it as – the (matriarchal) farmland of

Grootmoedersdrift. Wasting away in her bed, she is barred from walking on, and seeing, the farm, and imagines her body as “a clod in a field, a shallow contour” (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 102). The landscape of the farm and the objects on it almost become her (female) body: “*I am fallow field*”, she asserts, and asks, ““*who will gently plough me on contour plough in my stubbles and my devil’s thorn fertilise me with green-manure*”, “*who will harvest who shear who share my fell my fleece my sheaf my small white pips*” (35). She also likens her diseased body to sick or bad land: she sees herself as a “*sick merino sheep*”, as “*exhausted soil*”, “*fallow land full of white stones*”, a “*blown-up cow and acre of lodged grain*”, “*rusty wheat*”, and a “*drift [...] in flood*” (423).

Part of Van Niekerk’s response to the patriarchal underpinnings of the *plaasroman* is her depiction of Milla’s almost-reciprocal relationship with the farmland. Standing in contrast to male writers’, narrators’ and/or characters’ ‘husbanding’ of the land in the traditional *plaasroman*, Van Niekerk explores the making of Afrikaner identity – via the land – through the two symbols of the map and the mirror. Needing affirmation of her position as a landowner, Milla turns to the maps of the farm as she lies paralysed in her bed. She expresses her desire to see “the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the maps of *my* region, of *my* place. Fixed points, veritable places, the co-ordinates of *my* land [...] on dotted lines, on the axes between longitude and latitude. I want to see the distances recorded and certified” (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 40, *my* emphasis). Lying in her bed and unable to work on – taking ownership of – her land, Milla describes (in the narrated present) the maps as a code that would remind her of *her* region, *her* place, *her* land. On the map, her place is mapped and known as natural pieces of land are transformed into a host of signs such as “little blue vein[s] with [...] red bracket[s]” that indicate crossings, bridges, rivers, the backyard and the farmhouse. These spaces are places “to clamp [her]self to” as she seeks in the maps those representations that would confirm her position as a powerful, white Afrikaner landowner. Through “an incision, a notch, an oculation” (40), she believes she might ground her sense of self, while simultaneously inscribing the land with the mark of her Afrikaner culture, which the novel portrays in conjunction with the political transition. Van Niekerk illustrates this by showing how Agaat delays Milla’s reunion with the maps of Grootmoedersdrift. Thus, through Agaat, Van Niekerk denies Milla’s ownership of the

farm, and the white Afrikaner's drive to cultivate the land and civilise others, while simultaneously rejecting the know-ability of the natural landscape through the maps.

Van Niekerk's articulation of the maps in the novel also ties in with her use of the *plaasroman* genre. Graham Huggan writes that the map is specifically associated with colonial discourses, and that its deconstruction effects a "disidentification from the procedures of colonialism" as well as "other hegemonic discourses" (411). Itala Vivian, discrediting the mimetic qualities of the geographical map, asserts that the map is "a representation, or rather a metaphor" (49), and likens it to a narrative. Both narrative and map, she argues, "adopt fictional techniques and a strategy of veiling/unveiling leading from cartography to cryptology" (50). In *Agaat*, the map as code functions in a similar way: the founding element of white land-ownership – the alienation of the Other from the landscape – is veiled at the same time as the map is also a representation of the white Afrikaner's ownership of the land. The idea of the code – glossed as a system of representation communicating inherent meaning, or a set of behavioural standards accepted by a group – becomes an important symbol in *Agaat* for the ways in which Milla's Afrikaner identity is established. The map as code functions less as a mimetic representation of Grootmoedersdrift than as a symbolic representation that signifies Milla's Afrikaner identity as landowner. Van Niekerk's novel thus deconstructs the map, in conjunction with its interrogation of the establishment of a national Afrikaner identity. By revealing, through the *plaasroman*, Afrikaner national identity as a mythical narrative, the novel also implicitly shows its claim to ownership of the land – concretised by the map – to be a mirage. In this sense, Van Niekerk's novel questions the grounds upon which white Afrikaner national identity is established. The novel thus reacts against the models through which white colonials and settlers have approached and appropriated alien landscapes, and, as such, disagrees with "European landscape iconographies to the task of describing [...] colonial territories" (Barnard 8).

Similar to the identity-affirming potential of the maps is the mirror that stands in Milla's room. Within this space – associated with Milla's diseased white body – the mirror reflects the garden outside "sharper" and "clearer than a garden can be" (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 153), bringing it into the interior space of the room. Lefebvre writes that the mirror "is an object [...] which informs us about space". Moreover, he notes that this "imaginary" yet "quite real" sphere "discloses the

relationship between me and myself, my body and consciousness of my body” since it “transforms what I am into the sign of what I am”. In this sense, he asserts, the mirror not only “reproduces and displays what I am” but also “signifies what I am” (Lefebvre 186). Usually employed to reflect the body (functioning, in a psychoanalytic sense, as a “confrontation with the self” [Burger 184]), the mirror, as Van Niekerk shows in this part of the novel, reflects not Milla’s body and face, but her property: the contained space of her garden-farm (Coetzee 4) outside. Through the mirror, Van Niekerk thus “discloses the relationship” (Lefebvre 185) between Milla’s sense of self and the image of the garden reflected in the mirror. We read how Milla’s garden/farm becomes a crucial marker of identity: the act of looking at her land, she insists, should “satisfy” her “with what [she] [has] occupied here”, because without her world “inside” her she will “contract and congeal” (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 105). Like the maps, the mirror’s representations of the farm are therefore explicitly identity-affirming, functioning in such a way that she symbolically becomes her property.

The scenes in the novel featuring the representational artefacts of the mirror and the maps articulate the cultivated earth of the farm as both an object upon which Milla’s domination is enacted, and a landscape that holds the power to affirm her identity and cultural heritage. Charted, mapped, inscribed and re-presented, the land and the representations thereof form, as the novel shows, a crucial part in the establishment of Afrikaner identity. Because the white female protagonist lies paralysed in her bed, the maps and mirror enable her think about her Afrikaner identity, yet only through her imagination and memory. Rehearsing and imaginatively remembering her property, history and culture, Milla is compelled to narrativise the making and development of her identity as a white female subject, rehearsing also implicitly the narrative of white Afrikaner identity. Through the maps, which depict the farm in abstract form, and the mirrors, reflecting Milla’s neat garden outside, we see how white Afrikaner identity frames the ordering and cultivating of the land with a form of ownership and belonging.

Via its interaction with the landscape, Afrikaner nationalism, as articulated by the *plaasroman*, attempted to recode white Afrikaner creolité as autochthonous. However, what Van Niekerk’s narrative shows is the ambivalence of white Afrikaner subjectivity and its place in (post)colonial South Africa. Throughout the text, the establishment of nationalist, Afrikaner whiteness

continually confronts the problem of ('raced') others within the same landscape – an encounter that undercuts the assumed autochthony of white Afrikaner subjectivity. The difficulties of this project are even further highlighted and destabilised when we see how Afrikaner whiteness persistently places itself in opposition to black and coloured subjects. Whiteness studies provides a useful point of engagement with the ways in which Van Niekerk articulates white Afrikaner subjectivity in her novel. Although developed in the United States, theories of whiteness, when applied to the South African context, facilitate thinking about race and narratives of belonging – two important themes which are intertwined in Van Niekerk's novel.

In *Agaat*, Milla's white (female) subjectivity marks colonial ideas of a pure, essential racial category, signalling also a type of unmarked racelessness. During the section in the novel featuring Milla's past (signifying also her political power), her whiteness is shown as a "subjectivity without properties" (Dyer 38) - a pure, almost generic category that is racially unmarked. The novel shows how it establishes itself in opposition to Agaat's "wildness", "barbarism" and "uncivilised behaviour" (De Kock "Blanc" 187): placed in opposition to Milla's 'civilised' whiteness, Agaat is presented as the raced other, a figure whom Milla aims to cultivate and domesticate – as she does the African land. Agaat's 'wildness' is particularly illustrated in one scene in the novel where Milla walks in on Agaat in her room. Seeing Agaat without her cap for the first time, Milla is unable to stop gazing at her. Milla describes Agaat's "unkempt" hair as it "radiate[s] in combed-out peaks from her head", making her "look feral", and set in stark contrast to the "otherwise tidy room like a conspiracy against everything in league with daylight and subordination" (Van Niekerk 461). The novel also places Milla's whiteness in opposition to the coloured Agaat's racial otherness and physical deformities – in particular her "crumpled paw" (403), "long jaw" and "bulbous eyes" (474). It is however during the novel's articulation of the political transition that Milla's white body becomes increasingly marked and visible, coinciding with the loss of her position as a powerful white Afrikaner.

Van Niekerk's novel reveals various elements that undercut white Afrikaner narratives of belonging – one of which is the place and role of black labour. *Agaat* shows that establishing Grootmoedersdrift as a cultivated land crucially depends on the labour of these subjects, and addresses this "occluded element" (Barnard 10) at various points in the text. Throughout the

novel, Van Niekerk rehearses the ways in which the presence and voices of black workers continually interrupt the *plaasroman*-narrative and its association with white Afrikaner nationalist ideology. While the text provides detailed descriptions of Agaat's tasks in the home and on the farm (her labour here being the most prominent characteristic of her transformation from family-member to servant), it reduces the labour of other black and coloured workers to a few singular instances. The almost-occluded element of the black and coloured servants and their labour nevertheless resurfaces throughout the text – a type of unveiling that Agaat reasserts through her association with the workers. At one point in the novel, Milla contracts the labour of black convicts to dig up the bones and carcasses of dead cows on the farmland. While Milla passively observes “the shaven heads of the men as they moved stooped down in a slow phalanx” (232), Agaat defiantly leads them in singing (ironically, in the language of the religion of white Afrikaners) Christian hymns that lament their “dark'st disgrace” as a “nation that grieves” (233), stooped in the “depths of desolation” (232). The convicts, together with Saar and Lietja (the other coloured workers on the farm), “weep” and “wail”, “dragging it out with that lugubrious bending of the notes that the brown people could give to a song”. Milla interprets their singing as a “battle hymn” (233) directed at her as it stands in opposition to her white, Afrikaner heritage and its efforts to civilise both the land and its subjects.<sup>44</sup> The way in which Van Niekerk highlights the labour and suffering of black and coloured workers in this particular scene in the text shows how Milla's farm narrative reveals what the traditional *plaasroman* successfully veils. Moreover, it illustrates in detail the types of complicity implicated in a radical feminist revision of the traditional genre.

Van Niekerk's novel simultaneously ascribes to and explicitly subverts the tenets of the *plaasroman* – specifically its scientific and clinical approach to the landscape. The patriarchal authority of the tradition *plaasroman* is replaced in the novel with a matriarchy on Grootmoedersdrift: yet, similar to patriarchy, the matriarchal lineage which Milla represents also engages with the natural landscape through processes of mapping and cultivating the land. The imperial endeavour – traditionally associated with Western manliness, the penetration of virgin

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<sup>44</sup> The defiant presence of Agaat and the other black and coloured labourers on the farm signals Agaat's alternative approach to the natural landscape, standing in opposition to Milla and Jak's systematic control and cultivation of the land. Cheryl Stobie writes that Agaat's strange dances and interaction with nature represent an “animist or pantheist” (Stobie 65) understanding of nature.



land and the civilising of ‘others’ – is here interestingly figured as a specifically feminine project, asserted most prominently by the name of the farm.<sup>45</sup> At the head of this process stands the female protagonist, her maternal heritage (all the owners of Grootmoedersdrift had been women), the process of cultivating the natural landscape (one is reminded of metaphors such as “mother earth”) and, of course, the name of the farm. During a New Year’s Eve party on a neighbouring farm, Milla gives a defiant speech on farming wherein she juxtaposes “scientific”, “barbaric” farming methods with older systems that “respect” the “rhythms of nature” (110, 113). In an attempt to explain her contempt for the new, “scientific” farming methods – such as those Jak, her husband, practices – she draws an analogy between the soil of the farmland and the feminine body. Describing the land of Grootmoedersdrift as her own body, she asserts that “[i]f a farmer clears and levels his land year after year it’s as good as beating his wife every night” (114), thus associating Jak’s management of the land with his violent behaviour towards her. For Milla, farming is an activity that is “all about synergies”, a “subtle” “game” to be played with nature where “[e]verything is important [...] the smallest insect, even the mouldering tree” and “the deepest stone in the drift” (87).

Even though the novel can be seen as a feminist rewriting of the *plaasroman*, the author portrays Milla’s interaction with the landscape and the other as a domineering and patronising project. As a woman engaging in a (traditionally) Western and masculinist project, Milla realises however the inherent contradiction of her farming. Although Milla’s methods are placed in stark opposition to Jak’s exploitation of the land, they are also ambiguous as they infantilise the natural landscape – an approach that resembles Milla’s adoption of Agaat as child, and her process of casting her as racial Other. As she reads her father’s farming manuals detailing “the deterioration of the veld in our country & the exhaustion & ill-treatment of the soil”, Milla states that the practice of cultivating the earth is something that Agaat should be taught. She writes in her diary that Agaat “must also learn the old ways & the care of the defenceless earth, the little pans & the vleis & the ‘tortisses’ & how we must protect it all against the onslaughts of so-called civilisation because how many centuries does it not take for mother-rock to crumble & disintegrate to soil & then humans come along & destroy it through avarice and carelessness”

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<sup>45</sup> Jakkie translates “Grootmoedersdrift” in the prologue as “[g]ranny’s [f]ord” and “[g]ranny’s passion”; the international imprint - “The Way of the Women” - also signifies a maternal/female history or histories.

(75). By glossing it as “so-called civilisation”, Milla expresses here not only contempt for efforts to cultivate the earth, but also irritation with the self-important and patronising projects of the colonising endeavour. However, although she launches an attack on “so-called civilization”, it is also clear that her argument for reinstating “the old ways” infantilises the earth, claiming, maternalistically, to protect the “defenceless” “little pans” and “tortisses” against “onslaughts”. Similarly to those civilising missions she despises, Milla, in turn, perpetuates a form of controlling the earth that patronises and “protects”.

Throughout the novel, Van Niekerk shows how Milla’s approach to the land is freighted with difficulties and ambiguities. Nature often ‘retaliates’ as the farm animals often become sick, and at one point Milla’s cows, infected with “botulinus germs”, start to eat pieces of metal, carrion and carcasses – something Agaat ascribes to a fundamental “lack in the soil” (251). The farm – here representing white ownership of the land and its control and regulation of the natural landscape – is aligned with an unnatural force marked by signs of decay. Later in the narrative, signs of decomposition surface when Milla steps onto a rotten cow’s head infested with “writhing” maggots (511).

The ethical problematic that underscores Van Niekerk’s critical rewriting of the farm novel is reiterated on a smaller scale when Milla realises her complicity in exploitation on the farm. Milla is confronted with the “destitution” of the workers on Grootmoedersdrift, and describes the farm as an ambiguous space that leaves her unable to “act rightly and justly” (293). The dubiousness of the colonial mission is also extended to symbolise the white Afrikaner’s domination of the land: Milla expresses her doubts about (white) farming in Southern Africa when she describes Afrikaners as “a little group of people at the southern tip of Africa in the process of totally destroying” the natural landscape. We see here how symbols of motherhood and femininity – metaphors of nurturing and preservation – now become associated with dominating, white Afrikaner political power and its “taming” of the land and its peoples. In some ways, then, Milla’s feminised approach to the land becomes just as corrupt as Jak’s brutal behaviour towards her, his racist views of Agaat, and his unnatural (“scientific”) farming methods.

Van Niekerk's revision of the *plaasroman* can be seen to reiterate and rehearse, as well as "undermine" (Van Niekerk qtd. De Kock "Intimate" 141) some of the political themes underscoring the genre. The novel shows how a reactionary feminist reinterpretation of the *plaasroman* might be complicit in the colonising mission. However, it is also through the author's mimicry that she interrogates western feminism's complicity in the imperial project. Van Niekerk ends her novel with a crucial and powerful resolution. Milla bequeaths the farm to Agaat who, as Prinsloo and Visagie argue, could be seen as a possible descendent of the Khoi – the original owners of the Grootmoedersdrift landscape (73). With this strategic political move, the author symbolically undoes the patriarchal, sexist and racist underpinnings of the traditional genre, destabilising the notions of Afrikaner nationalism and white political power in South Africa, while also problematising the complex relationship between Milla's (Afrikaner) identity and white landownership (76).

#### **4.3. The unhomely home: intimacy, the everyday and estrangement**

Van Niekerk's use of the *plaasroman*-genre is strategic: she illustrates not merely the Afrikaner's relationship to the land, but also the inner workings of the white Afrikaner family, which allows her to unveil the interconnections between the public and private, the political and the personal. Barnard has argued that representations of the space of the white, family home – illustrated in the work of white South African novelist, Nadine Gordimer – are "ideologically productive" as it reproduces on an ordinary and intimate scale "dominant social relations" (44). In both her novels, Van Niekerk explores the inconsistencies of white, colonial/apartheid subjectivity against the historical narrative of white Afrikaner nationalism, and the political transition. In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, she places her critique in the intimate space of the family home, a symbolic position from which she can interrogate the inner workings of a white state. In an interview with De Kock and Heyns, Van Niekerk has asserted that her "main thrust and main obsession" in writing *Agaat* was "the workings of power in intimate relationships" (De Kock "Intimate" 141). The novel illustrates the intimate and caring relationship between Milla and Agaat as a form of interaction that is explicitly shaped by the workings of violence. Repeating Milla's caring of Agaat's infant body, so too does Agaat subject Milla's disease-

ridden body to intense scrutiny. She cleans it meticulously, controls and systematises it, and cures every possible bodily function and/or ailment. In the text, this gesture interrogates and questions the tenets of whiteness as it not only mirrors Milla's scientific control of the farm landscape, but also exceeds the standards of 'white' propriety and respectability to an almost fantastical level.

Van Niekerk also explores the ambiguity of white Afrikaner subjectivity, and its relationship to cultural and racial others, by foregrounding the intimate space of the white family farmstead. In *Triomf*, the disintegrating physical structure of the Benade family's house allows the author to articulate the "logical end" (Devarenne "Nationalism" 640) of white Afrikaner nationalism and cultural homogeneity. In *Agaat*, however, Van Niekerk probes the interior of the farmstead and hones in on the ways in which the politics of Afrikaner nationalism shapes the everyday events within the family home. In his influential essay, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary", Njabulo Ndebele rejects the spectacular political nature of many South African novels, arguing in favour of a literary movement where "the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest" (Ndebele *Rediscovery* 52). This, he argues, would enable novelists to rediscover the "necessary detail[s]" (46) of the ordinary. Recently, Ndebele has altered his conceptualisation of the ordinary to a vision of the everyday that is "inflected by or supplemented with intimacy" (Samuelson). This intimacy, as Meg Samuelson notes, is however "not a cosy one" (Samuelson). Perceiving home and intimacy as "the shared experience of homelessness" and "the fellow-feeling of loss" (Ndebele "A home" 28), Ndebele understands intimacy as characterised by "uncanny recognitions and shifting certainties" (Samuelson).

In many ways, Van Niekerk's *Agaat* sketches an image of a type of unhomey intimacy. The novel is filled with the details of everyday tasks, becoming a nearly encyclopaedic catalogue that lists daily, household objects (including embroidery, farming and cooking). The narrative furthermore illustrates Agaat's movement from room to room as she relocates from bedroom to bedroom, and in order to complete household tasks within different spaces in the white farm house. While Van Niekerk depicts details of everyday life in minutiae, her focus on the quotidian is also underscored by both Milla's and Agaat's problematic histories in and around the house. *Agaat* politicises the personal and the private, and as such joins Ndebele's rejection of the

spectacular in favour of a piercing yet uncomfortable examination of the everyday. While it may seem that the private and public, and the personal and political are placed on oppositional axes in his theory, Van Niekerk's novel shows however that they are explicitly enmeshed – an awareness of which transforms the homely into the unhomely, and estranges the familiar. The novel deliberately employs the everyday to shore up the political edge of normal tasks and events: through this, Agaat's mundane household tasks signal her uncomfortable position as exploited coloured worker, while the objects that fill the white family home index the precarious privilege and material wealth of the white Afrikaner.

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk illustrates the intimacy of the home not as a place that facilitates belonging and feelings of being at home, but rather as “a hotbed of unfulfilled desire, failed investments and projects going nowhere, cold-heartedness, violence, revenge and tyranny” (Buikema 320). Van Niekerk depicts this by characterising the spaces of the farmstead (like Duras) as death-like environments. Milla's bedroom stands at the heart of the family home, and is a space within which her body lies wasting away. From her confinement, she sees her bedroom as a “chamber of death”, “filled [...] with the signs of [her] end”, a space within which “nursing-aids [...] promise no recovery” and “are applied to the polite dismantling” of her body (152). Here, she likens her death (her “dishevelment”) to evaporating “[d]ust”, “[w]ind” and “[a]sh” (369), while Agaat's meticulous care of her body feels like the process of “embalming” (531). Later, when Milla's son, Jakkie, returns to the farm following his mother's death, he feels her bedroom emanating “a sweetish miasma of mortality” (279).

Despite the ambiguity of the fact that the Grootmoedersdrift farmstead is permeated by images of death, we see nevertheless how Milla persistently attempts to repress alien elements by controlling its symbolic borders. As in *Triomf*, *Agaat* retains the structure of the white family house as a symbol of homogenous white power that closes off, categorises and excludes others, and is characterised by an obsession with the fear of cultural, political and racial contamination. The farmhouse in *Agaat* is also crucially underscored by the labour of workers – an element which, throughout the novel, appears on the margins of the narrative. Early in the novel, the author describes how a “whole team of Malays” are contracted to help with the restoration of the house. They are hired to lay wooden floors throughout the Grootmoedersdrift farmstead because,

as Milla's mother asserts, "bricklaying and carpentry are in their blood" (45). The labour of these workers – together with the other (non-white) servants – enables, of course, the establishment of the farm house as physical structure, as well as a symbol of white hegemonic power.<sup>46</sup>

Barnard, writing about the private spaces of the home in Gordimer's work, argues that the space of the house can be understood as "ideological apparatuses, in very much the Althusserian sense of the term". She writes that houses "are the means by which individuals are 'interpellated' as subjects: the means by which individuals are trained so that they will 'know their place' in the social hierarchy, and so that, from these 'places' they in turn will help to reproduce its structures" (49). In this sense, the white family home can be seen as the "quintessential colonial space" because of its rootedness in apartheid's policy of racially segregated housing (48), functioning according to a strict system of placement and displacement. What Barnard refers to as "knowing one's place" during apartheid – one's awareness of one's race and of the places that are available or prohibited to you – is illustrated in Van Niekerk's novel. We see how the racial others on the farm, as well as Agaat, are positioned on the outskirts of the farmland and the house.

Barnard argues that the white family home must be approached in close connection with its "prototypical and repressed other", the township house, "a place that has remained unseen [...] by many, if not most, white South Africans" (49). In *Agaat*, processes of exclusion and containment shape also the spatial organisation between the white family farmstead and the servants' hovels on the farm. Illustrated through the opposite spaces of the farmstead and that of the servants' shanties, we see how apartheid functioned through the strategic placing of people and their dwellings. On the periphery of the Grootmoedersdrift farmland are the servants' disintegrating "hovel[s]" – houses whose walls crumble and roofs leak (Van Niekerk 73).

It is also inside of the white family home that Van Niekerk registers the mechanisms and effects of exclusion and control. A rigid system of organisation frames Milla's control of her house, and consequently shapes the ways in which Agaat is placed in relation to the intimate space of the

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<sup>46</sup> With this description of Malay labour, Van Niekerk marks creole cultural forms, and implicitly signals the history of slavery in the Cape, showing their contribution to the establishment of systems of racial classification.

farmstead. The spatial separation of white wealth and coloured poverty is both illustrated and complicated by the spaces to which Aagaat is relocated as a child, as well as the numerous spaces within which she is placed as a child-turned-servant in the white family house. We first encounter Aagaat in the shanty with her family on Milla's mother's farm, crouching in the hearth; she then moves to Milla's white family farmhouse as a child, followed by another relocation to the outside room (an old storeroom transformed into a make-shift bedroom). During Milla's illness, Aagaat eventually sleeps in the liminal space of the passage in the house. Although Milla notes there are "many rooms in the house" (Van Niekerk 21), Aagaat nevertheless refuses Milla's gesture as a refusal of incorporation into the house – something previously denied her. Van Niekerk shows how Aagaat's physical placement in relation to the intimate space of the white family's home (in-between the interior of the farmhouse and the workers' hovels) portrays her metamorphosis from a family member to a servant – an ambiguous role that excludes her from both the servants on the farm, as well as the white Afrikaner family.<sup>47</sup> This physical transition replaces Aagaat's childhood sense of belonging with physical and cultural estrangement, and provides the reason for her bitterness towards Milla.

One of the most prominent examples of Milla's control over the interiority of the farmstead is represented by Aagaat's bedroom. Attached to the home, yet excluded from its interiority, Aagaat's bedroom occupies a liminal space situated in-between the farmstead and the workers' shanties. Milla writes in her diary that she "[h]ad hoped that with the move to the outside room [Aagaat] would throw in her lot with the others [...] so that she can learn to know her place" (166). Milla understands Aagaat's relocation from her room in the farmhouse to the backroom as not only a physical movement from the intimate, interior space of the house to the impersonal space of the outside room, but also as a transformation that signifies Aagaat's metamorphosis from a type of "play-white" family member to a racially Othered servant.

When Aagaat is included in the intimate white family home, she is not only interpellated as a potentially legitimate citizen, but is also trained to become a simultaneously white and coloured (Other) subject. For Aagaat, 'knowing one's place' implies making a transition from a

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<sup>47</sup> Aagaat's ambiguous placement within and outside of the house and the family structure resembles the position of the nineteenth-century governess, an issue addressed by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*.

(potentially) white subject to a coloured servant: although Milla's inclusion of Agaat in her home can be seen as a revolutionary (though problematic) gesture, it is also the necessary precursor to Agaat's exclusion. The liminality of Agaat's room becomes a symbol for both her rejection by white hegemonic power and her ambiguous position within the apartheid social structure and racial hierarchy. It symbolises her (abstract) position as a creole in-between races, cultures and social groupings as she is estranged from both the coloured servants of the farm and the privileged white family of which she was once part. Agaat's movement from centre to periphery within the spaces of the house is thus seen as coterminous with Milla's on-going project of "civilising" her – a process that can only leave Agaat ambivalently between belonging and estrangement, within a physical space linked to and separated from homeliness and belonging.

Milla's relationship with Agaat – a type of interaction within which Agaat, like the landscape, is systematically "civilised" and domesticated by Milla – is particularly encapsulated by the novel's illustrations of Agaat's storeroom-bedroom. Symbolically storing away or hiding Agaat's racial and cultural otherness from the propriety of the white home, the storeroom-bedroom in which Agaat sleeps is outside of, but still connected to, the farmstead. Her room becomes an ambiguous space that draws into question "white culture's bourgeois morality" (Wicomb 146): containing Agaat's personal belongings, it also upholds the ideals of white propriety and purity towards which Agaat, under Milla's 'guidance', is supposed to strive. We read how the room is whitewashed (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 36) and filled with white bedding, embroidered, white cushions, and scrubbed-white objects: a space that performs Agaat's exclusion from the house. This space, within which her servant's outfits hang neatly in the cupboard, literally re-presents and continually rehearses her transition from family member to servant. Although her name (meaning "good" [487]) signals purity and propriety, the room is nevertheless the centre of her exclusion from the family and the intimacy of the home. It is however in this in-between space that she is able to express her own identity and history. Her fireplace – the place where Milla found her as a child – comes to represent Agaat's own personal 'creation myth', standing in juxtaposition to the *plaasroman* narrative that underscores Milla's (hi)story. Here, Agaat is able to recreate and reassert her own history – her "unkempt self" (461) – with decorative pebbles, shells, plants, and other natural objects.



In opposition to Agaat's "unkempt self" stands Milla's obsession with cleanliness, propriety and fear of contamination. Her insistence upon a spotlessly clean room is presented together with one that Agaat always wear white-starched uniforms, similar to the servants in "a smart Dutch house" (125). This obsession rehearses imperial discourse's fear of disease, and characterises the farmhouse of Grootmoedersdrift as a European, colonial house whose testament to white propriety exists side-by-side with a fear of contamination. One specific scene in the novel that articulates the white family's fear of disease (signalling also their dis-ease with the white state) occurs when Agaat provides the servants' children with de-worming medicine. Agaat's internalisation of white propriety frames her reaction to the "bawling" children: accusing them of "wiping [their] arses with [their] hands", she scolds them for their "black muck-mongering", and tells them that they are infected with "[p]auperworms" (287), after which she "fiercely" washes her apron (289). Cleanliness and disease are further placed in opposition to each other through Van Niekerk's depiction of the two spaces of Milla (and her family's) white farmhouses and the dwellings of the farm workers – one within which Milla finds Agaat as a child. The white propriety of the farmstead is eclipsed by Agaat's original childhood home, smelling of "rotten piss, of vomit, of old sweet liquor" and "unwashed human bodies" (656).

Images of Milla's estrangement from the home space, and of the systems of displacement at work in and around Grootmoedersdrift, are employed by Van Niekerk to illustrate how white property and landownership are underscored by the presence and labour of racial others. Agaat is initially alienated from belonging to, and owning, the farm, and her position within the farmstead is furthermore indicative of her in-between position as neither completely a family member, nor completely a servant. While Agaat and the other servants share an almost similar positioning in relation to the white family, senses of estrangement are not only characteristic of their experiences. As a dying, white Afrikaner woman, Milla is also estranged from her surroundings: confined to her bed because of Motor Neuron Disease, her paralysed body bars her from inhabiting her home, denies her access to the farmland, and renders her mute. For her, the white farmstead is transformed from a family home into an unhomely space where she is immobile, while her interaction with the farmland is reduced to nostalgic memories. As Milla's body and Agaat's "out of place"-ness (to borrow Ian Baucom's phrase) dispose them "outside" or "beside" themselves (Butler *Precarious* 26) physically and psychically, we see how Van Niekerk explores

the strangeness of the everyday through the two women's shared dislocation. "Undone by each other" (23) in different ways, Milla and Agaat come to share a type of intimacy through which they find a form of 'home' through their shared homelessness (Ndebele "A home" 28). Their displacement and precarity thus become the "tie" (Butler *Precarious* 22) which binds them together. Sites over which they have either lost, or never had, control, the house and the farmland are shown to be ever-present reminders of Milla and Agaat's loss of power and/or identity, reminders of their estrangement from each other and the spaces they inhabit.

#### **4.4. *Agaat* and nostalgia: narrating the self, narrating a nation**

Many critics have argued that the process of recovering a shared past can be a creative and interventionist process (Ndebele "Memory" 21; Brink 37; Walder *Postcolonial* 141). Walder notes that recalling history means to recreate, to remember, to preserve and to write (*Postcolonial* 141), while for Benedict Anderson the emphasis in the writing of a history of a national group lies in the idea that it is "imagined". The making (or re-making) of a nation is thus an active and creative project, resembling also the narrativising and writing process. The idea that history could be seen as a story that fuses the personal and the public is particularly expressed in Walder's contention that personal memory – one's life-narrative – is analogous to the narrative of a community. For the individual, however, this process implies an inevitable sense of estrangement: out of this alienation, Walder argues, "emerges an identity which, because it cannot be simply remembered, must be narrated" (50). It is perhaps from this sense of estrangement that nostalgia emerges. Confronted with the interconnections of the private and public, personal and political, the subject actively constructs a narrative that runs parallel with a grand historical narrative. Two narratives – the one personal, the other public – are thus simultaneously present: nevertheless, the subject might either fail to see, or refuse to interrogate, the entanglement of those narratives.

In *Agaat*, the two streams of a personal history and a national, Afrikaner history (placed parallel to a South African history) are explored through memory, while Milla's nostalgic look upon her past registers the difficulty with which she attempts to integrate both streams. Thus, *Agaat*

presents at the same time scenes of the quotidian – Milla’s memories of (apparently) innocent everyday tasks – and scenes that carry extreme political weight. In his book, *Native Nostalgia*, Jacob Dlamini addresses the difficulty with which national narratives and personal histories sometimes do not correlate, leading him to ask: what does it mean when a black South African nostalgically asserts he had a “happy childhood” under apartheid? (19). He asserts the thoroughgoing ambivalences of nostalgia in postapartheid South Africa, noting in particular Afrikaans. “Afrikaans”, he writes, “was (and is) the language of black nostalgia” (140), simultaneously the “language of the oppressor” and part of tsotsitaal – “the language of hipness, jazz and urban blacks” (135, 137). Walder conceptualises this nostalgic ambivalence as “the source of a double perspective”, one that links intimacy and complicity, the personal and political. While this double view is encapsulated in the contradictory narratives that exist simultaneously within a given time and space, it also signals for Walder a division between, on the one hand, the gaze upon the self as actor in the past, and on the other, the awareness of the self as a passive spectator in the present (*Postcolonial* 9). The doubleness of the nostalgic gaze therefore implies not only the personal – the self’s occupation with her own memories – but also the political, a possible awareness of one’s placement in history, and the ideological meaning of past events.

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk presents such a historical doubleness through her use of voice. We hear Milla’s narrative voice jostling throughout the novel between various points of view: first person, second person, and stream-of-consciousness. Articulating Milla’s feelings of unhomeliness and estrangement from her property and her white, propertied self, Milla’s voice conforms to what Nuttall has described as a type of split gaze (63). In order to deconstruct (and therefore, destabilise) the assumptions of white subjectivity, Van Niekerk employs perspective in such a way that her protagonist’s narrating voice separates from itself, performing a type of psychic splitting. Although Milla is placed at the centre of the novel, the perspective from which her (hi)story is presented oscillates between different perspectives and tenses. While lying in bed (in the present tense), Milla speaks from a first person-perspective, while she recalls her past in the second person, and, at times, seems to transcend her body as she speaks in a stream-of-consciousness style (presented in italics). Through this form of estrangement from the self and its particular history, Van Niekerk shows how Milla dissociates from her identity and her life

narrative. In this way, the author severs the ties between the notion of an autonomous identity and a coherent and chronological narrative, thus diffusing the political power associated with the white Afrikaner and its claims of one, singular national history.

It is in particular Milla's diaries which inadvertently channel the opposition between her personal history, the history of others, and that of the country. Re-presenting Milla's life, they, in a very literal sense, 'write up' the entanglement of her life with that of the farm, as well as with Aagaat's alternative narrative. Walder links the imagining of a national community to a form of textuality. He notes that it is similar to the genre-form, and that the invention of the self similarly follows a narrative pattern. Based on the idea that identity is constructed by memory – a notion proposed by John Locke (Walder *Postcolonial* 35) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Walder "Remembering" 425) – narrativisation can be seen to take place "through and by means of time" (35), relying on the self's insistent project of "constant[ly] editing and re-editing [...] memories" (Brink 30). Through imagined or remembered events, "sets of relations" such as the public and the personal, and history and story, fact and fiction conflate and integrate, so that one's personal and national identities are "ultimately predicated on memory" (30). The South African novelist and critic, André Brink makes it clear, however, that stories consistently imply an awareness of the processes through which they were narrativised, and that, together with textualisation, they become "almost indistinguishable" from history and memory (38, 32).

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk writes into the novel Milla's awareness of her life-story as being a narrative: her life is both written down in, and contained by, the narrative of her diaries, while her memories of her past slowly unfold. Milla's personal life, her position as part of a matriarchal lineage of farm owners, South Africa's apartheid years, as well as Aagaat's life-story are combined within this narrative. The convergence of Milla's personal history and the history of a people (the Afrikaner volk) is illustrated as Milla narrates and rehearses her life (from different narrative perspectives) from the confines of her bed. It is exactly at the moment of reflection – of an intense nostalgic look upon her past – that her voice is transformed from the first person to the second. While narrating within the present, her reflection on the past becomes the platform through which her sense of self is split. This alienated gaze upon herself, her home and the farmland thus struggles to conflate the past with the present (the space and time from

which she narrates). This impasse within Milla's psyche illustrates the problematic of integrating the personal and political, and the private and public. Her alienation from her home and farmland thus comes as the result of this stalemate: for Milla, it becomes impossible to integrate a past of white privilege with a period within which she is confronted with the loss of everything that characterised her as white and Afrikaans.

The novel closely links remembering and nostalgia with a textual form, presented by the author through the textuality of the printed novel itself, the novel's intertextual relationship with other *plaasromans*, and the diaries that contain Milla's life-narrative. One of the most prominent examples of a form of textual narrative is Milla's description of her body. Her white female body undergoes a range of transformations throughout the novel, but it is most notably presented in the novel as elements associated with the narrative of an Afrikaner nationalist identity. Milla's stationary corporeality symbolises her identity as Afrikaner as it "acts like a text" (Buikema 320). Turned into a metonym for her life-story as it is narrativised and textualised in her diaries, her body becomes a "turned-open book" as she lies in bed. "I page myself to the outside", she states, so that "[t]he sounds of the late harvest come to inscribe themselves in me" (Van Niekerk *Agaat* 103). Later, while Agaat meticulously cleans her, Milla describes her servant as trying to "reveal something of [her] inner being" (333), as if to unlock a meaning.

Van Niekerk's textualisation, via her protagonist, of the white female body, engages not only in rewriting the 'creation myth' of Afrikaner culture, but also implies an engagement with the banal and the everyday. The farmhouse becomes the main locus for this, and in this space, the author shows the explicit entanglement of the quotidian with the political. The Grootmoedersdriif farmstead is presented as not merely a space for intimacy and belonging, but also one furnished with the paraphernalia and baggage of white power and privilege. It is exactly through a depiction of the details of everyday life that the ambiguities inherent in a domineering political system are unveiled. In the novel, the details of household objects and the logistics of everyday tasks point not only the influence of politics upon the lives of ordinary people, but also signals the ways in which a central hegemonic power employs structures of placement to control and categorise the human beings within its structure. Van Niekerk's depiction of the political undertones of everyday life leads her to portray the white family home – symbolic of a white

state – as well as the Afrikaner-owned landscape, in extremely negative terms. The text revisits Afrikaner tradition and its links with South Africa's apartheid past in order to relive the everyday privileges of white Afrikaner subjects, but also explicitly calls it into doubt. Employing reflective nostalgia to bring into relief Afrikaner culture and its embeddedness in apartheid ideology, it simultaneously uncovers details of everyday life that seem to escape the confines of the political. In this way, Van Niekerk shows how the personal and the political are interlinked, and articulates the necessity of revisiting the quotidian details of the past in order to envision a future narrative. The dissimilarities between Milla's personal history and the history of apartheid in South Africa consequently address the ambivalence of memory and the making and writing of historical narratives.

Van Niekerk's text reveals that a form of complicity might always be a possibility when critiquing the narratives of the past. She revisits the farm novel, however, to partially reinstate the politics of the genre, but only so as to unveil the unspoken inconsistencies that saturate it. The contradictions that shape the form in which *Agaat* is presented do therefore not destabilize or diminish the effect of the novel's ethical thrust, but rather acknowledges the importance of revising the narratives of the past. Through its critically reflective nostalgia, the text is careful not to herald the inequalities of the past and recognises the instability and open-endedness of historical narratives – especially those predicated on the prosperity of some and the suffering of others. Subverting a highly politicised and contentious version of the past thus means for Van Niekerk to revisit it nostalgically and re-present it with suspicion. *Agaat* echoes Walder's assertion that it is only by "identifying with the wretched of the earth" – by keeping in mind those that are marginalised by grand cultural and national narratives – that "[t]he traumas of history may [...] be overcome" (*Postcolonial* 164). Through Van Niekerk's unveiling of the complexities, ambiguities and problems characterising the relationship between the white Afrikaner protagonist and her coloured servant, the novel argues in favour of a renewed – creolised – conception of Afrikaner identity. Ultimately, Van Niekerk's vision in *Agaat* is one that is aware of internal alterity, registering shared (and varied) senses of homelessness, and the multiple ways in which the self is entangled with the other.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

Comparing different text such as *Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat* requires one to read via and across various literary histories and traditions. I have done so mainly in order to highlight the various ways in which whiteness is shaped by, and establishes itself, in the (post)colony. Foregrounding white creolité, the novels present articulations of white subjectivity that stand at odds with the uniform models advanced by whiteness studies in the United States. In *Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat*, Anna, Suzanne and Milla embody alternative forms of whiteness that represent not a European universal, but rather a subject position explicitly marked by multifarious cultural interactions, as well as physical locations outside of imperial spaces and places.

Founded upon and shaped by many kinds of displacement, creole whiteness, as the novels articulate it, is characterised by forms of alienation, and thus places itself in opposition to racial others and ‘legitimate’ forms of whiteness. We see, however, how the protagonists attempt to erase signs of otherness, hence engaging in elaborate performances (or attempted yet failed performances) of ‘proper’ whiteness. As the texts reveal, Anna’s, Suzanne’s and Milla’s encounters with otherness inevitably detangle “official fictions”, “material trajectories” and the “privileges and access to power” (Nuttall 58-9) that imperialism and colonialism, together with the field of whiteness studies, associate with white subjectivity. Employing creolité as an in-between “third” concept has, I hope, encouraged a critical rethinking and conceptual destabilisation of the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have presented and activated whiteness, and the ways in which whiteness has to date been theorised.

*Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat* join each other through their ambiguous placement in-between different historical and ideological moments in different parts of the colonial world. Both Rhys’s and Duras’s novels emerge out of twentieth-century imperialism and (post)colonialism, thus articulating a politics of the interregnum. Rhys’s work, appearing in

1934, and Duras's, published in 1950, are set in, and reflect upon, a time during which colonialism had not yet been abandoned, but which saw the systematic dismantling of the structures of British and French imperialism. Both novels articulate – sometimes ambivalently, sometimes in complicitous ways – a reaction against imperialism. Similarly, in *Agaat*, Van Niekerk places her narrative in the mid to late twentieth century – a period in South African history that, as she makes clear, featured white Afrikaners holding on to “European assumptions of racial and cultural superiority” (Steyn xxiii), while also seeing the dismantling of a white minority rule.

Anna, Suzanne and Milla, like their authors, embody particular intersectional identities, while also speaking from, and to, the (post)colonial space. Writing in the early twentieth century, Rhys and Duras textualise the ambiguous experience of fluctuating, and being stuck between settler and native cultures, revealing, through the existential and social unease of Anna and Suzanne, a form of cultural ambiguity in the particular colonial and imperial landscapes. The establishment of a heterogeneous creolised culture – intimated and revealed, but not fully achieved in these texts – is fully represented by Afrikaner culture in Van Niekerk's *Agaat*. While both Milla and *Agaat* are culturally creolised, it is however the ambiguous ethics of Milla's relationship with her adopted child/servant that takes centre stage. The cultural uneasiness represented in Rhys's and Duras's texts is replaced in Van Niekerk's with Milla's personal sense of ethical ambiguity as an Afrikaner standing at odds with, while to some extent reproducing, the ethics of apartheid ideology. Linked through the ways in which they approach the problematic of white creolité in the (post)colony, the novels thus show creolité to imply forms of not only cultural ambiguity, but also political ambivalence. As a category that simultaneously reiterates and deconstructs colonial binaries, it foregrounds fundamental forms of ambivalence and shows how conceptual uncertainties also influence the performance of whiteness and femininity in different locations. Rather than monochrome and un-propriated, whiteness is revealed by Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk to be a subject position sensitive to, and inflected by, various social, historical and political forces.

In the novels, the resistance marked by white colonial creolité is exceptionally ambivalent. Produced by different colonial contexts, Rhys's, Duras's and Van Niekerk's novels are, like the



creolité they foreground, established and shaped not only by “what is native and alien”, but also by what is “negotiated and imposed”, and thus “born out of conflict and compromise” (Begam and Moses 4). This is reiterated in the protagonists featured, as well as the politics underscoring the novels as they both adhere to, but also express a resistant politics that functions to delegitimise the “Western imperium” (Appiah 122). *Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat* clearly occupy an unhomely space in-between the colonial and the postcolonial through their depiction of the ambivalence of creole cultures and subjectivities. Prefigured by, and employing as a starting point the complex and varied “interaction[s] between imperial culture” and a variety of “indigenous cultural practices” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1), the novels join one another through the ways in which they are born out of, shaped by, and articulate the cultural struggle between opposed white and ‘non-white’ cultural groupings. The texts consequently plot the ways in which the central characters navigate native and alien histories and opposed political and cultural elements so as to establish their subjectivity and agency within colonial spaces and places.

While produced out of the subject categories of whiteness, creolité and femininity, the protagonists are also presented as (novelistic) constructs in textual frameworks, having to navigate their surroundings and immediate social contexts – often reaching compromises that shape their sexuality in ambiguously positive and negative ways. Anna, Suzanne and Milla embody different, yet linked, reactions to the fundamental influence of space and time upon the subject. In their works, Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk interrogate the problematic of establishing white creole femininity within the (post)colony, and seem to ask: how does one establish oneself in problematic imperial and colonial contexts? They present as answers the options of falling into physical and emotional passivity (*Voyage in the Dark*), the possibility of reaction and rebellion (*The Sea Wall*), or, as in *Agaat*, by envisioning a matriarchal social context – a novelistic vision sensitive to the difficulties of such a political inversion of patriarchy.

What is clear is that multifarious ambivalences – in the shape of subjectivity, cultural, political, and textual form – permeate these works. Recognised as a “dynamic process that holds within it an ability to entertain dual perspectives” (Burrows 12), ambivalence in postcolonial writing has been seen as a “provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination” (Gilroy 1). A

form of political defiance is exhibited in the authors' choice and remakings of genre and form, yet their novelistic reinterpretations also involve various duplicities. Rhys's text stands somewhere in-between the modernist and the postcolonial novel, while Duras's novel both foregrounds and repudiates her pro-imperialist sentiments in *L'empire Francais*. For Van Niekerk, also, a radical revision of the *plaasroman* implies rehearsing some of its traditional elements, which marks a form of complicity.

Interestingly, the authors insert their protagonists in texts that conform to, but also destabilise, characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*. Abel, Hirsch and Langland identify a 'female' (or anti-) *Bildungsroman* that challenges the "male norms" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 11) of its traditional nineteenth-century form. In this type of novel, female protagonists must often "chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it", oscillate between realising the "crisis of inner concentration and direct confrontation with society" and "succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive 'normality'" (12-13). The ambivalences shaping the textual frameworks therefore also influence the presentation of the female protagonists as characters. The chapters thus investigate, together with their subjectivity, the white creole women as novelistic constructs. Rhys's and Duras's texts reiterate the female *Bildungsroman*'s specific link between sexuality and the process of establishing subjectivity. Anna's and Suzanne's development as characters is centred on their initiation into sexuality – a physical, psychical and social event presented in the texts together with their attempts to assert forms of agency. In *Agaat*, however, Van Niekerk positions Agaat's development as female subject alongside Milla's in such a way that the white protagonist's narrative subsumes her servant's. *Agaat* can thus be seen as the story that might have been, but is not, Agaat's *Bildungsroman*.

Rhys places at the centre of her text a marginal figure, and we see how this structural reorganisation does not secure very successful forms of agency for Anna. She walks aimlessly through the streets of London, moving from one apartment to the next and from lover to lover, struggling to assert herself and continually overcome by the cold and bouts of hallucinations. Rhys's deliberate revision of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* cannot successfully secure political representation for Anna, and in this way, the protagonist announces a departure from the

figure of the ‘legitimate’ white, urban imperial citizen. In Duras’s *The Sea Wall*, similarly, Suzanne also struggles to assert her identity and independence unambiguously. She appears not only as the pawn within her family’s attempts to negotiate upward mobility, but it is also in the colonial city that she fails to present herself as a ‘legitimate’ white colonial. Her stroll in the Haut-Quartier, during which she tries to assert herself as a white, wealthy colonial woman, ends in an anti-climax as she suffers from an emotional and psychic breakdown. At the end of the novel, her attempts to transform her dependence upon her family into independence fail, and she leaves her home under the guardianship of her older brother. Finally, within the traditional structure of the *plaasroman*, we see how Van Niekerk positions a paralysed, ageing and dying white woman – who is fully dependent upon her creole servant and caretaker – at the centre of her narrative. In *Agaat*, Milla lies paralysed in her bed, unable to fully inhabit the family farmstead, traversing its spaces only through her imagination, hallucinations and memories. The end of the narrative closes with the protagonist’s death, while the farm is bequeathed to Agaat.

Although written within different textual forms, and speaking to varying literary traditions, the novels offer comparable answers to the problem of feminine subjectivity and agency in patriarchal and imperial contexts. While Van Niekerk’s protagonist’s physical passivity almost matches Rhys’s Anna’s emotional passivity, she also presents an alternative. Here, Van Niekerk replaces an oppressive patriarchal society with a matriarchal one. In this novel, the question of female subjectivity is not centered on the defeat of a given ideological system, but is rather founded on the difficulty of establishing a new system without repeating the wrongs of the past. In her text, Van Niekerk implicitly asks: how does the female subject establish herself once patriarchy is replaced with a matriarchal ideology? And should – and could – this political system be passed on to create a “new” South Africa? What Van Niekerk’s, Rhys’s and Duras’s novels reveal is an engagement with different, and often conflicting, political arguments. This type of political duality also underscores the characters’ actions as they have to reflect on the fact that they occupy two opposite political positions at the same time. The authors’ different answers to the problem of female subjectivity tell us that Anna’s, Suzanne’s and Milla’s white creolité embodies a “terrain of shiftingness” and the coming together of “forms of complicity and resistance” (Whitlock 349). Instead of portraying it as a subject category that disables all attempts toward agency, the texts show white creolité rather as an indicator of the ways in which

universal (European) forms of ‘whiteness’ and subjectivity fail to speak to white subjects in colonial contexts. Arriving at particularly ambivalent compromises in their attempts to assert independence and agency, Anna, Suzanne and Milla – as expected – eventually fail to conform to the characteristics of the autonomous and coherent (white) Enlightenment subject. The characters’ ambivalence in relation to subject categories, spaces and places and national identity, allows the reader, however, to reconceptualise and rethink the legitimacy associated with the white European Subject.

An important part of my study has been a discussion of the extent to which the three authors conceptualise displacement. While Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk understand white creolité, by definition, to articulate a form of displacement, they also illustrate it, in differing ways, through careful engagements with physical places and spaces. The authors extend the multifarious ambivalences and paradoxes associated with white creole femininity to the physical spaces of the family home and the natural or cultivated landscape. In this way, the novels present home-like spaces as locations of extreme estrangement. Placed in *Agaat* as a beacon of white property, privilege and propriety, Milla’s white farmhouse ironically becomes the site where she is unable to feel at home. The symbolism of the white family home is also parodied in *The Sea Wall*, where the impoverished creole family’s home is presented as a disintegrating wooden bungalow. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys goes a step further: she deliberately does away with the space and symbol of the family home altogether, portraying her protagonist as she walks the city streets of London, or moves from one hotel or rented room to the next, as she emphasises her displacement. A sense of unbelonging and unhomeliness is furthermore extended to the natural and/or cultivated landscape. In *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat*, the cultivation of the natural landscape is explicitly linked to the characters’ and their families’ desire to establish ‘legitimate’ national identities. In Duras’s text, Suzanne’s French settler mother, despite her continued failures, tries persistently to transform the infertile salt plain into a rice plantation by erecting barriers against the Pacific, and thus rid them of the stigma of being ‘bastard’ white colonials. In *Agaat*, Milla also maps and cultivates the farmland, while in *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna’s family history of plantation owners in the Caribbean underscores her crisis of national identity and belonging when she travels to London. It becomes clear that, through the central characters’ ambiguous relationships with interior, exterior, private and public spaces, material locations help to

simultaneously institutionalise and reveal the instability and discontinuities of the colonial project. Emotionally and/or physically homeless, always travelling and never settling, or unable to feel at home in their houses, the white creole women represent an impasse in colonial ideology's placement and organisation of subjects according to physical place.

In order to illustrate the protagonists' unhomey displacement, Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk employ various techniques to stage and illustrate the characters as split subjects. Different types of fragmented narratives are thus produced, reiterating the uncanny quality of the subject categories from which Anna, Suzanne and Milla speak. Their voices, and the positions from which they speak, encompass the split white gaze, the mental interweaving of interior and exterior spaces, the lack (or difference) associated with the female subject (juxtaposed to the masculine Subject) and the (real and abstract) spatial and cultural ambivalence of creolité. The authors represent this splitting through the mechanics of the texts themselves. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys pairs Anna's mental vacillations between England and the colonies with a fluctuation between the first and third person, and for Milla (in *Agaat*) the traversal of different mental spaces (such as that of her past, present, and that of hallucinations) is also accompanied by a change in focalisation and register. While *The Sea Wall* is presented throughout by an omniscient narrator, it is significantly Suzanne's movement from the intimate, private space of the home to the public space of the colonial city that announces her frantic psychic breakdown in an important scene in the middle of the text. As they remember scenes from their pasts, or project their feelings onto their material surroundings, the protagonists combine external realms with the interior spaces of their minds. Through different depictions of real and mental spaces, as well as the fluctuation between different speaking positions, the authors thus illustrate the ways in which various forms of displacement and unhomeliness might produce a type of "double consciousness" (Gilroy x). Not completely situated within, or speaking from real or conceptual 'homes', Anna, Suzanne and Milla are shown to be characters with troubled affiliations, experiencing crises of personal and national identity that insert an "inescapable fragmentation" (35) at the heart of their attempts to be and feel 'at home'.

The novels' gestural linking of whiteness, creolité and femininity with conceptual and physical displacement produces in the main characters a nostalgic desire for home, homeliness and

belonging. While each of the three texts is saturated with nostalgia, it becomes clear that Anna's, Suzanne's and Milla's search for a mythical home becomes the "mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility" (Boym xvi). Via their conceptual and categorical unhomeliness, the protagonists are implicated in struggles to not only find spaces of representation, but also, perhaps on a more concrete level, spaces where they can feel at home, and to which they can belong. Through their failed attempts, the texts crucially link the conceptual insecurity of white creolité to a form of unhomeliness. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna's memories and hallucinations play out either in the landscape of her Caribbean home, or in the realms of her dreams, the latter featuring in particular the oceanic space of the Atlantic. In *Agaat*, Milla's memories of her past feature the intimate spaces of her home and the contained, cultivated landscape of Grootmoedersdrift, while her hallucinations take place in an intangible dreamscape where various objects, spaces and emotions are foregrounded. If the three novels' engagements with nostalgia express a longing for the past, they also gesture towards the establishment of a new form of being in the future. For Van Niekerk, this is heralded by presenting *Agaat* as a landowner; in *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna's abortion closes off a nightmarish dream, and in Duras's narrative Suzanne and her brother dreams about a more prosperous existence in the city. We thus see the blurring and disintegration of the boundaries between time and space as nostalgia "charts space on time and time on space" (Boym xviii).

As my discussion of the three novels have shown, the characters' nostalgia furthermore provides an insight into the ways in which their subjective experiences, together with their narratives, fuse different, and often oppositional, spaces and times. A combination of "two images", nostalgia fuses the locations of "home and abroad", links the differences between past and present and introduces a longing for a different time (Boym xv), and integrates "dream and everyday life" (xiv). Via the force of nostalgia that permeates the novels, we have seen how the texts juxtapose and fuse often oppositional images and concepts. In this way, the imperial home and the colonial elsewhere, and the present, past and future integrate and also, in some instances, invert. Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk depict their protagonists' emotional voyages into the past, joined by accompanying illustrations of imaginative relocations to other times and spaces. The homes Anna, Suzanne and Milla inhabit are therefore transformed into spaces of unhomeliness and alienation, while 'the elsewhere' is transformed into a romanticised and unlocalizable place of

belonging. Through this kind of interpenetration of the individual and place, and the subject and history, the nostalgic inflections of the novels reveal how “personal and collective memory” is interwoven and how “the individual biography” is “the biography of groups and nations” (xvi).

Illustrated through images of the uncanny, and themes and instances of estrangement (from others as well as from the self), white female creolité is presented in the three novels as an impossible subject position through which the establishment of bonds of belonging are severely problematised. Rhys’s novel shows the difficulty with which the interstitial place of unhomeliness and the crisis of affiliation may lead to complete disorientation and inaction, while Duras’s text shows the ambivalence of the white creole’s social, geographical and political place within colonial ideology and landscape. Van Niekerk’s novel indicates, however, the ways in which the place of cultural and political ambivalence may lead to the establishment of a particular culture intent on establishing its own identity, while simultaneously facing the difficult process of asserting it in relation to racial and cultural others.

Through the protagonists’ ambiguous status as heroines (who, unlike nineteenth-century realist heroines, often struggle to portray forms of *Bildung*), the authors rethink what it means to be an imperial or colonial subject, and reject those ‘legitimate’ categories through which individuals are interpellated. The protagonists’ split subjectivities reveal that it is perhaps not by looking at the extent to which they become ‘autonomous’ or establish agency that ‘value’ in a literary character should be sought, but rather by interrogating what a character-subject represents physically and conceptually. The strength of Anna, Suzanne and Milla – as fictional characters and representatives of alternative white subjectivities – lies in the ways in which they reveal the duplicitous nature of ‘true’ homeliness, ‘essential’ identity and ‘real’ belonging. Via their protagonists’ nostalgia, Rhys, Duras and Van Niekerk show how the ideas of home and belonging, together with essential categories of subjectivity, are “unlocalizable” (Murdoch “Rhys’s” 268) concepts. Ultimately, this unveils a more encompassing problematic – one that extends beyond the unstable indeterminacy of creolité and/or the always-already hybridized nature of ‘essential’ European cultures and identities. *Voyage in the Dark*, *The Sea Wall* and *Agaat* reveal a foundational difficulty that characterises the experiences of many human subjects:

the Kristevian strangeness and otherness that persistently recur when the subject encounters not only familiar surroundings and others like herself, but also the stranger within.



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