

**“Epochal Weaving”: Metaphors of Narrative and Metafiction in Marlene van Niekerk’s  
*Triomf and Afaat***

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**Declaration:**

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

December 2015

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines the use of specific narrative strategies, metafiction and metaphor in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (2004) and *Agaat* (2010). Each of these expansive novels are set in South Africa during the period of national transition to democracy in the 1990s, and explore issues related to ideological aspects of space, race, class and land dispossession. Throughout the thesis I highlight and refer to illustrations of "epochal weaving", a literary framework that is used to trace historical overlap between the narrative past and present. These depictions of "epochal weaving" in each novel suggest thinking about the capacity for literature to represent the multi-layered nuances informing national and historical contexts in South Africa and beyond in relation to personal, and lived experiences. My reading of metaphors in relation to the depiction of social space in *Triomf* focuses on city streets and the significance of repositioning marginalised spatial histories. The alternative landscape of Johannesburg's western suburbs that Van Niekerk recreates, evokes, in turn, the former history of Sophiatown, and seems to advocate imagining new ways for addressing the issues of neglected urban space. My close examination of *Agaat* traces specific metaphors of narrative and the novel's display of notions of metafiction, and Van Niekerk's reinterpretation of the literary history of the *plaasroman* from a post-apartheid perspective. In the final chapter I put *Triomf* and *Agaat* into conversation to display how Van Niekerk appears to weave national histories, embedded in each text, together through the physical and domestic space of the family homes. Through the metaphorical significance of mirrors, an object which overlaps in these texts, various images reflected in mirrors produce multi-layered reconsiderations of national and sociopolitical issues embodied in the lived experiences and memories of the characters. Framing my reading, this thesis adopts an international gaze to consider not only how the literary features and narrative strategies in Van Niekerk's fiction illuminate local issues related to cultural, historical, political and social contexts, but also create awareness about similar concerns that transcend national borders. In short, what South African literature, such as Van Niekerk's work, stimulates in a reader who encounters it in translation.

### Abstrak:

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die gebruik van spesifieke narratiewe strategieë soos metafiksie en metafoor in Marlene van Niekerk se *Triomf* (2004) en *Agaat* (2006). Beide van hierdie omvattende romans neem plaas in Suid-Afrika gedurende die periode van nasionale oorgang na demokrasie in 1990, en verken kwessies verwant aan ideologiese aspekte soos spasie, ras, klas, en landontneming. Deurlopend belig hierdie tesis en verwys na uitbeeldings van “epogale verwewing”, ’n literêre raamwerk wat gebruik word om historiese sameval na te trek tussen die narratiewe verlede en hede. Hierdie uitbeeldings van “epogale verwewing” in beide romans dui na ’n kapasiteit van literatuur om veelvoudige lae van betekenis en nuanse voor te stel, in verwantskap met die persoonlike en geleefde ondervinding, wat nasionale en historiese kontekste in Suid-Afrika en selfs wyer inlig. Ek interpreteer metafoor in verwantskap met die uitbeelding van sosiale spasie in *Triomf* en fokus op die stadspaaie en die belang daarvan om gemarginaliseerde historiese spasies te herplaas in nuwe kontekste. Die alternatiewe landskap van Johannesburg se westelike woonbuurte wat van Niekerk herskep in fiksie herroep in beurt, die geskiedenis van Sophiatown, en blyk om nuwe maniere aan te voer om kwessie aan te spreek aangaande verontagsame en dus vergete stedelike spasie. My nasporing van spesifieke metafore van narratief in *Agaat* raak ’n tentoonstelling van die roman se begrip van metafiksie asook van Niekerk se herinterpretasie van die literêre geskiedenis van die plaasroman vanuit ’n post-apartheid perspektief. In die finale hoofstuk plaas ek *Triomf* en *Agaat* in ’n gesprek om te vertoon hoe van Niekerk nasionale geskiedenis verweef en beide tekste word bespreek deur die fisiese - en huislike spasie van die familiewonings. Deur die metaforiese belang van speëls, ’n voorwerp wat opduik in beide tekste, word vele afspieëlings weerkaats wat veervuldige heroorwegings produseer aangaande die nasionale en sosio-politiese kwessies vergestalt in die geleefde ervarings en herinneringe van die karakters. Wat my interpretasie ook raam is my internasionale posisie en oogpunte. Ek oorweeg nie net hoe die literêre funksies en narratiewe strategieë in van Niekerk se fiksie plaaslike kwessies verwant aan die kulturêle, geskiedkundige en sosiale kontekste belig nie, maar ook hoe hierdie strategieë bewusmaking bevorder oor soortgelyke probleme in ander kontekste oor nasionale grense heen. Ek vra: wat stimuleer Suid-Afrikaanse fiksie, soos byvoorbeeld van Niekerk se werk, in ’n lesers wat dit in vertaling teëkom?

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## Introduction:

### Encountering Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat* at the University of Kansas

“There’s another story here. The world is large.”

(Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat* 575-6)

This thesis is interested in the relationship between narrative strategies employed in Marlene van Niekerk’s novels, *Triomf* (2004) and *Agaat* (2010).<sup>1</sup> In particular, it is focused on her use of metaphor and metafiction, and how these strategies can reconceptualise South African history and issues pertaining to race, space, class and identity in post-apartheid contexts. These notions are discussed and defined in greater detail below. Given the extravagant proportions of both texts, my close reading in each chapter focuses on selected metaphors identified in this introduction, and explores how they merge epochs together through notions of “epochal weaving”,<sup>2</sup> suggesting new and creative modes for illustrating historical overlap between South Africa’s colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid frameworks. Before delineating the outline of my methodological approach and preliminary research, I wish to elaborate on my choice of topic and the circumstances which led to my encounter with Van Niekerk’s fiction, because the context of my relationship to these texts are related to my experiences as an exchange student and the wider historical landscapes informing *Triomf* and *Agaat*. I consider these explanations important to emphasise the transcending significance of South African literature encountered in spaces beyond the country’s national borders, and what this suggests about narrative imaginings on a transnational scale.

While both novels are nationally oriented and culturally specific, I read them in translation as an undergraduate at the University of Kansas (KU), after a semester as an exchange student at Stellenbosch University (SU). In each of these novels, the author’s style, such as her use of rich imagery and nuanced narrative perspectives, generated dense textual settings in my imagination, which translocated me, on the one hand, to the western outskirts of Johannesburg, and the white suburb of Triomf, “here where Sophiatown used to be” (*Triomf* 2). While this thesis does not engage with the significance of Van Niekerk’s fiction in translation, Leon de Kock’s English translation of *Triomf* first sparked my interest in pursuing a study of South

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<sup>1</sup> I use the American editions of the English translations of each novel. *Triomf* (2004) is published by The Overlook Press, and *Agaat* (2010) is published by Tin House Books.

<sup>2</sup> This term is used throughout this research project, and an extensive definition is provided below.

African fiction. The novel's themes, as well as the translation from Afrikaans into English challenged my understanding of South Africa's diverse cultural contexts and history; the novel did not 'feel' English; it was 'from' elsewhere. In his article "Cracking the Code: Translation as Transgression in *Triomf*", De Kock explains that he tried "to create the sense [...] of a milieu, a class-based 'atmosphere' in the language that could approximate working-class Afrikaans *Triomf*" (25). *Triomf* depicts this environment through the alternating narrative perspectives of the "poor white" Benade family in the months prior to the forthcoming elections in 1994.<sup>3</sup> Lambert, Mol, Pop and Treppie Benade live in this suburb, and spend much of the narrative drinking brandy and Coke, and arguing about the state of the nation and their family. While I was familiar with the historical and cultural importance of Sophiatown through the music of Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, the Benades were an unfamiliar representation of working-class white Afrikaners that were relocated to the physical, as well as social margins of (white) apartheid society during the rise of Afrikaner nationalist politics. Through the Group Areas Act No 41 (GAA) (1950), which empowered the government to divide "urban areas into zones where members of one specified race alone could live and work" (Thompson 194), multiracial communities like Sophiatown, were bulldozed to make room for isolated enclaves, like *Triomf*, designed to maintain the 'purity' of each racial group. Pieces of Sophiatown leftover after its demolition abound the text, and serve as a reminder of the formerly vibrant community of artists whose rhythms surpassed the national boundaries of South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, cultural and literary scholar Meg Samuelson observes how this community was "the site of a burgeoning black urban culture" that became "symbolically synonymous with African

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this thesis I make reference to "poor whites" in my analysis of *Triomf*, which can be a culturally loaded term in South African studies. Hermann Giliomee, the prolific Afrikaner historian, notes in his book *The Afrikaner: A Biography of A People* (2003) that the term first appeared in the American south in the 1870s (315). The historian John Mason writes in an article about the photography of impoverished white South Africans, that the term "poor whites" was initially first used in South Africa by E.G. Malherbe, as part of the Carnegie Commission on the "Poor White Question" (Mason). Mason notes however, that there are negative connotations associated with a term like "poor white", which "implies that traditionally the European inhabitants have a higher standard of living" than other impoverished racial identities they were often compared to (Mason). Despite the negative connotations Mason points out, I use the term in this thesis as a way of illustrating the rigid intersection of race and class in South African social landscapes.

<sup>4</sup> David Coplan's historical work *In Township Sight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (1985), especially Chapters Six and Seven, provides an excellent overview of the cultural production of Sophiatown and musical compositions by the likes of Hugh Masekela, and Miriam Makeba. These two world-famous South African figures provided melodies to the soundtrack of the resistance to apartheid. Interestingly, both Masekela and Makeba collaborated with the musician Paul Simon, on his critically acclaimed—and scrutinised—album *Graceland* (1986), signalling, in many ways, a return to the rhythms and intonations of urban black South African music, and confirming the power of Sophiatown's cultural forces over thirty years after it was demolished. As I show in Chapter One, music plays an important role in rewriting the western suburbs of Johannesburg's spatial histories.



urbanity in South Africa and beyond” (“The Urban Palimpsest” 63).<sup>5</sup> As an international reader, the unreliable narrative perspectives of the Benade family, and the novel's broader themes of economic hardship, political failure and the struggle to make sense of the relationship between personal and national histories, contrasted with my own limited grasp of Afrikaner culture and language, and wider South African cultural and historical contexts that I was exposed to at SU as an exchange student.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, in *Agaat*, a text spanning over forty years from the beginnings of apartheid in 1948, to the newly post-apartheid South Africa in 1996, I was translocated to the De Wet family farm on Grootmoedersdrift, in the Overberg region in the Western Cape, “between Swellendam and Heidelberg [...] nestling against the foothills of the Langeberg” (*Agaat* 5). I travelled to this part of the Western Cape during my first stay at SU, and this dense novel used a variety of versatile imagery and metaphor, and captured a landscape I recognised. Though, the complicated and intimate relationship between Milla de Wet, a wealthy white woman who is dying of motor-neurone disease, and her former servant Agaat Lourier, who is ‘coloured’, challenged any insight into South African cultural and social contexts I thought I grasped during my semester on exchange.<sup>7</sup> Milla removed Agaat from her parents’ farm when she was young, and, because she did not have a child of her own (yet), cultivated her within the discourse of servitude, and (white) Afrikaner culture. Their relationship is defined by Agaat’s ambiguous racial positioning within the family and farmhouse; she falls into the category of servant, but is indeed treated as if she were Milla’s daughter. What interested me in this novel

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<sup>5</sup> What also gives the setting of the novel and the suburb of the same name symbolic and political power, is the location’s historical subversion of initial forms of apartheid. This is why in the context of South Africa’s forced removals, the demolition of Sophiatown features as a “notorious” display of the apartheid state’s power, as black South Africans had secured property rights to the land west of Johannesburg prior to the Urban Areas Act (1923), which “put an end to African purchases” of land (Thompson 194).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Edward-John Bottomly contends in his book *Poor White* (2013), a crucial source for my reading of *Triomf* in Chapter Two, that in post-apartheid South Africa, a strange “form of collective amnesia exists with regard to South Africa’s ‘poor whites’”, because white South Africans “are specifically depicted as never having been poor, or certainly not poor in large numbers” (13). This argument, in some ways, seems to confirm the multiple forms of isolation experienced by the Benades in the novel.

<sup>7</sup> I use inverted commas here to demonstrate my awareness of ongoing debates surrounding ‘coloured’ identity in post-apartheid South Africa. It is important to remember that ‘coloured’ is also considered to be a specific racial identity in South Africa; many find it offensive that the notion of ‘coloured’ is, in one way, interpreted as signifying mixed blood. The historian Mohamed Adhikari outlines in the first chapter of his book *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* (2005), why the association of ‘coloured’ and mixed blood is so problematic (19-28). An additional scholar focused on this debate is Zimitri Erasmus, whose book *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (2001), engages with the historical, social and political ambivalence informing ‘coloured’ identity formation in post-apartheid South Africa. Additional literature on this topic can be found in the collection of essays titled *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa* (2009), also edited by Adhikari. Although I do not continue my use of inverted commas throughout this research project, I do so here to demonstrate my awareness of the contentious debates informing the term.

were the cultural and geographical histories of the Overberg region embedded within the fabric of the text, that pointed towards the broader contexts of South Africa's history of land dispossession, racial others and issues related to post-apartheid identity construction. Additionally, I found Milla's (internalised) rotating narrative perspectives between the past and present to be useful for meditating on the politics of narrating lived experience. When I returned to the US and read this novel, each of the different metaphors Van Niekerk employs stimulated my memories of South Africa and prompted me to engage my first responses to *Triomf* in an academic framework analysing metaphor to show how cultural contexts can grow and be redefined through literary studies.

Thus, in this thesis, I want to emphasise a sense of my own alternative subject-positioning as an international scholar, and that my reading of each novel is located between the United States and South Africa, underpinned by a mixture of the known and unknown: *I know* that I approach these texts informed by experiences outside of South Africa, a country that is, ultimately, *unknowable* to me because I am not South African. Despite this paradox, there is, as Jakkie says in the Epilogue of *Agaat*, "another story here. The world is large" (575-6), and I hope my foreigner's gaze in relation to these texts will contribute to the archive on South African literature, and illuminate new ways of engaging white Afrikaans writing.

### **Preliminary Research**

As I alluded to in the opening paragraph, this research project is focused on exploring Van Niekerk's creative experimentation with narrative strategies that seem to suggest modes for rethinking the significance of historical, and sociopolitical contexts in fiction. My preliminary research was therefore geared toward representations of time and space in South Africa fiction. I encountered J.M. Coetzee's work on the South African *plaasroman* (farm novel) in his book *White Writing: On The Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), as an undergraduate at K. In his discussion of the *plaasroman* and C.M. van den Heever's farm novels, Coetzee describes how the genre sketches a mythical relationship between farmer and farm, which is illustrated through a variety of narrative devices and tropes employed to justify notions of land ownership and belonging (68-92). Coetzee's historical examination of the *plaasroman* and its significance in the production of rural Afrikaner cultural identities seemed to overlap with my own experiences as an exchange student, and my lingering memories of South Africa. To compensate for the difficulties of immersing myself in South Africa's diverse cultural contexts during the short time frame of a semester, I felt a strong connection to a landscape defined by

coastlines, mountains and vineyards in the Western Cape. These physical, and cultivated features of the topography, although beautiful, seemed to be the only things I remembered about South Africa, while I struggled to articulate the nuances that actually made my experience meaningful. Indeed, Coetzee asks in reference to early white writers in South Africa, what sort of “relation is it possible for man to have with rock and sun” (7). Nevertheless, Coetzee’s work thus propelled me to search for more complex literary infrastructures that moved beyond representing national and personal identity in relation to the physical landscape.

With this in mind, South African scholar Rita Barnard’s significant contribution to the study of social and ideological aspects of South African space, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007), provided an excellent entry point into a sociospatial analysis of Van Niekerk’s fiction. Barnard provides an extensive study of “the ideological and political meaning of place and spatial relationships” (5) in relation to important voices in South African fiction. As a South African scholar writing from the US, she suggests that “the long-distance view might be a productive one to adopt” (14) in a globalised landscape where geographical distances are minimised and rendered legible. Her book inspired me to think about how spatial metaphors can create alternative infrastructures for tracing cultural, literary, historical, political and social issues that inform the meaning of a particular place (5-8). For example, in the chapter titled “Of Trespassers and Trash”, Barnard discusses the political symbolism of racial groups figuratively framed as “trash”, or “things out of place”, which illuminated worthwhile points of departure for my close examination of spatial subversiveness in Chapter One (70-94). Barnard also elucidates on Coetzee’s fictional engagement with the “dream topographies” outlined in South African pastoral fiction, in his novel *Disgrace* (1999), and recommends thinking of this genre as a site of tension between “definitions, relationships, and responsibilities” (35). This tension similarly characterises Milla and Agaat’s relationship in the narrative present of *Agaat*, and in Chapter Two, I underline how specific spatial metaphors in the novel can be employed as strategies for reimagining how the *plaasroman* can be adapted into post-apartheid contexts. Although Barnard’s work is expansive, she leaves significant South African fiction out of her study. In fact, at the conclusion of the introduction to her book, Barnard invites other scholars to fill in these gaps by focusing on, for example, the work of Van Niekerk (14). Therefore, I decided to explore these gaps and investigate how urban and rural spatial histories underpinning *Triomf* and *Agaat* could be used as alternative landscapes for mapping broader South African cultural, historical and sociopolitical issues in a post-apartheid context. Throughout this thesis I focus on specific spaces in South Africa’s

historical and sociopolitical landscape, such as the white farm, the racialised suburb and private family home. Each of these spaces play a critical role in contributing to the social construction of class and racial identities, which are culturally enforced through the political architectures structuring them.

Exploring the relationship between South African spatial histories in *Triomf* and *Agaat* necessarily led me to scholarship on the creation of historical narratives. Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes about the power of history and its production in relation to a number of historical examples. He defines history in his book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), as either a “sociohistorical process or our knowledge of that process” (3).<sup>8</sup> To illustrate the difference, Trouillot often refers to the production of history as an ambiguous mixture of “what happened and that which is said to have happened” (3). Indeed, Trouillot’s conceptualisation of history as what happened, and what was said to have happened, captures the fact that in South Africa, “[h]istory remains a deeply contentious subject” (Coetzee, *Stranger Shores* 353). Trouillot’s definition of history is useful for framing the ways in which Van Niekerk’s skilful use of narrative strategies can be employed as vessels for reimagining historical contexts in fiction, from a post-apartheid perspective. In many ways, each of these strategies demonstrate how literature has, according to the scholar and poet Gabeba Baderoon, the “capacity to read absence and trace, treating the lessons of [...] fiction as serious textual sources” (22). *Triomf* and *Agaat* do indeed read into the national history of South Africa, but from divergent personal histories, which ultimately emphasises the importance of context (Trouillot 3-4). These novels contend with the context of apartheid and the histories underpinning the formation of it, and can be seen to adjust the reception of South African fiction, redeeming it from a narrow framing of people and place.

### **“Epochal Weaving” and Metaphors in *Triomf* and *Agaat***

My use of “epochal weaving” in the title of this thesis suggests highlighting techniques for representing history across time and space. Much of the focus of this research project is facilitated around understanding how South African pasts, in *Triomf* and *Agaat*, are questioned and reconsidered. Similar to the tendency for postmodernist art to employ the past to give the present “new and different life and meaning” (Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodernism:

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<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of Trouillot’s analysis of historical ambiguities, see his chapter on the Haitian Revolution of 1790 (70-108).

Parody and History” 182), so too do these novels use the past to question historical narratives. “Epochal” can be defined in two ways. Firstly, “epoch” indicates a period of time, and the political context(s) informing how this period is packaged as history. Secondly, the addition of the prefix ‘al’ creates a verbal action in relation to epochs; therefore, “epochal” highlights a relationship between contexts, as well as epoch making, and foregrounds how the author moves towards a merging of historical frameworks expressed as a continuous archive of Afrikaner pasts. “Weaving” signals an occupation with the creative process of writing, and narrative structure. Similarly to the double-meaning of “epochal,” “weaving” also functions on two levels. Firstly, “weaving” signals a narrative framework that tries to stitch together sociopolitical contexts in specific spaces before, during and after apartheid. Secondly, my use of “weaving” centres on favouring creatively-oriented narrative strategies that highlight points of intersection between the narrative past and present in *Triomf* and *Agaat*. These points of convergence suggest that the national history of apartheid ambiguously overlaps with the redefinition of personal histories in post-apartheid South Africa. Employing literature to reimagine how historical and sociopolitical contexts can be imagined from a post-apartheid perspective, is not possible without acknowledging, and considering the ills and bigotry of apartheid. Thus, my focus on “epochal weaving” incorporates the multiplicity of Afrikaner experience in South Africa and illustrates, through specific analyses of objects in *Triomf* and *Agaat*, how the novels similarly represent intersections between their respective narrative past and present in order to advance more continual, imaginative processes of growth across time and space.

Narrative strategy and technique can have a significant impact on history is interpreted. Samuelson writes about narrative strategies in an article about the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) framing of South Africa’s turbulent apartheid past.<sup>9</sup> While her focus on “formal structure and endings” is related to the influence and understanding of the social outcomes determined by the TRC, my use of “epochal weaving” is developed out of her definition of metaphors of narrative (“Cracked vases and untidy seams” 63). Like many others who have written about metaphors in relation to narrative, Samuelson conceives of narrative infrastructures, such as tapestries and weaving, as “metaphors of becoming rather

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<sup>9</sup> Leonard Thompson comments on the origins of the TRC in his book *A History of South Africa* (2000). He notes how, despite claims by then Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk that his government was not responsible for the increase in violence that characterised the early 1990s, “when Mandela appointed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Desmond Tutu” a network of politically motivated aggression and instigation was revealed “after three years’ work and thousands of interviews” (249).

than of being”, which “favour process and creative reworking over completion and complacency” (67). When imagined as an art form of becoming, literature has the similar potential to consider how the meaning of historical contexts fluctuates according to time and space. Moreover, in the context of South Africa, narratives of continuity may remedy the temporal schizophrenia characterising the reality that for many South Africans, “the past, the present and the future are not discrete wholes, with clear splits between them” (Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* 12). In light of narratives of becoming and Samuelson’s criticisms of the TRC, which I return to in Chapter Two, this research project isolates specific narrative metaphors in each text, and incorporates them into a larger, intertextual reading aimed at demonstrating how the architecture of “epochal weaving” traces historical continuity and overlap between multiple South African epochs.

Each of the specific metaphors selected for analysis are related to space. In Chapter One I trace the metaphor of narrative generated by walking through public streets. The gesture of walking suggests transition, and, as the scholar Megan Jones notes, “the kinetic potential of travelling as a kind of storytelling” (50). Chapter Two develops Van Niekerk’s use of different narrative metaphors much more extensively. This chapter specifically focuses on gardening, maps and mapping and embroidery, as alternative modes for reinterpreting South Africa’s colonial history of land dispossession, as well as the literary history of the Afrikaans *plaasroman*. In Chapter Three, my analysis focuses on the metaphor of mirrors, and the different types of reflections of national and personal histories in *Triomf* and *Agaat*. When put into conversation, these mirrors demonstrate points of relation that link the historical contexts of the novels together. Thus, these metaphors illuminate ways of imagining Afrikaner experiences in literature as part of a larger continual South African narrative of becoming. Before outlining the methodology of this research project, I turn next to the formation of Afrikaner class constructs and racial identities in relation to social and physical space. This discussion will help to demonstrate how the spatial theories discussed in the methodology illuminate the deeper historical and sociopolitical contexts *Triomf* and *Agaat* reimagine.

### **Race and Class in the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism**

Much of the analysis in this thesis stems from examining the formation of the ‘Afrikaner’ during the period of Afrikaner nationalism. Notions of race and class, which are discussed below, were pivotal to this formation. Throughout both novels Van Niekerk is intent on critiquing and reconsidering these origins. Writing about “poor whites”, Edward-John

Bottomly asserts in his book *Poor White* (2013), a critical source for my reading of *Triomf* in Chapter One, that the invention of an Afrikaner identity “started during the colonial period and carried with it the colonial [concept] of racial superiority” (96). According to the academic Melissa Steyn, Afrikaners during this period “contended with the more powerful forces of the British empire”, and their self-image “was forged within a mythology that celebrated the courage of a people who refused to be subordinated by the British” (147), which highlights how British colonialism played a fundamental role in defining an Afrikaner cultural and political identity. White Afrikaner identity was also formed in opposition to black South African ethnic groups. Deborah Posel, a sociologist who has written on a variety of South African topics, speculates on apartheid conceptualisations of race in her article about the afterlife of these categories. In the first half of the 20th Century, Posel says, racial categories and identities in South Africa were becoming increasingly unhinged as a result of rapid urbanisation. According to Posel, many whites grew anxious in this social and political environment that was, in the sphere of white South Africa, typified by *die swart gevaar*, or black danger, brought on by migrations of black and white South Africans to urban environments (52). Many “poor whites” who relocated to Johannesburg from the *platteland* for example, were unskilled, and had to compete for employment with black South Africans (Frederickson 234), which threatened “the fate of white supremacy” (Posel 52) in South Africa, due to the threat of emerging class divisions. This anxiety was compounded by the proliferation of multiracial communities containing hundreds of thousands of “poor whites” that had developed on the fringes of Johannesburg. These spaces complicated the seemingly fixed boundaries between the races. As Bottomly puts it, “Afrikaners could not be white, and could not certainly be white in British eyes, when so many of them were still lurking in the slums” (96).

Although working-class white Afrikaners were viewed pejoratively at the turn of the century, prominent Afrikaner nationalists began to promote a mythologised imagining of Afrikaner ethnic identity that included “poor whites” within the cultural notion of the *volk*. While the *volk* can, in one sense be defined “as a natural, pure and integrated entity” (Dubow 220), definitions ultimately vary. Bottomly comments that the term “has meant very different things at very different times—notwithstanding the fact that the *volk*, as such, did not exist until the late nineteenth century” (102). Part of Bottomly’s criticism of definitions of the *volk* stems from viewing the term “as a single, easily defined concept” that does not account for socioeconomic

complexity motivating behaviour (103-4). In this way, notions of the *volk* obscured deeply embedded class divisions that also affected (white) Afrikaner identity formation.

The development of the *volk* can be traced back to migrations to urban environments after the discovery of gold on the Witerwatersrand in 1886, and extensive droughts in the *platteland*. This migration in turn led to the creation of a class of “poor white” Afrikaners, which eventually blossomed into a serious political issue in the 1930s which the NP began to aggressively solve, through restoring racial ‘purity’ and implementing legislation forming the architectural shape of ethnic nationalism defined as apartheid (Bottomly 16). The historian Leonard Thompson notes during this highly politicised period between 1910 and 1948, categories such as “[r]ace and [c]lass coincided closely” (155). The issue of class eventually came to be understood as a divisive force for the unification of Afrikaners; colonial categories of race and representations of white superiority were intertwined within complex social hierarchies that were culturally enforced; and into the 1930s and 40s, the “poor white problem” reached critical proportions with “cultural and political dimensions as well” (Giliomee 324). In effect, “the ‘poor white problem’ assumed such proportions that it influenced the outcome of national elections” (Bottomly 13). In the *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* (1975), T. Dunbar Moodie highlights how “the poor white problem weighed very heavily” with Daniel Francois Malan—the first National Party (NP) president elected in 1948 (132-3). Much of the politicisation of race and class stemming from significant material poverty, was invoked by mining and labour industry tycoons, as well as leading nationalist politicians as a culturally galvanising issue (Frederickson 233). Thus, the aspirations of leading nationalists were tied to not only uplifting “poor whites” through labour initiatives, but also to preserving economic superiority as a means of maintaining racialised privilege.

Part of establishing a narrative of racial purity and a superior class of whiteness meant that the proponents of Afrikaner nationalism had to promote a cultural legacy with European heritage. Doing so required quelling “whispers of racial mixing in their blood” (Bottomly 95) that “poor whites” seemed to exemplify. Indeed, Steyn comments that in this formation of the *volk*, “Europe knotted into Africa” and any slave or mixed ancestry was “buried within white supremacist ideology” (148). Thus, in many ways, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism was spurred in response to the significant number of “poor white” Afrikaners displaying a contradictory image of whiteness. Importantly though, Steyn points out that significant forms of intersectionality characterised the creation of the ‘Afrikaner’. Early settlers in South Africa



brought with them a mixture of European heritages, which were further interlaced by slaves imported to South Africa from Dutch colonial missions in the east that led to the creation of a coloured identity. Mohamed Adhikari writes in his history of racial identity in the coloured community, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* (2005), that “Coloureds [...] have had an intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population” (2). Those subscribing to the ‘purity’ of the *volk* framed coloured people as dangerous, because they could infiltrate white society, and raise “the specter of racial degeneration” (Adhikari 15), a theme I return to in Chapter Three with regards to reactions from the broader community of white farmers in the Overberg to Agaat’s ambiguous positioning on Grootmoedersdrift. Van Niekerk seems to embrace the historical contradiction embodied by the *volk* in *Triomf* through her depiction of “poor whites”, and in *Agaat*, through the tension illustrated by Agaat’s positioning within the De Wet family. By understanding the different ways in which constructions of whiteness are underpinned by a rigid consolidation of race and class, which is furthermore contradicted by coloured identity, new trajectories for negotiating the future of Afrikaner identity formation emerge. These trajectories are based on inclusive images of intersectionality embedded within Afrikaner past experiences, and locating new co-ordinates for navigating South Africa’s nuanced present.

## **Methodology**

Because this research project is interested in examining Van Niekerk’s use of narrative strategies to reposition spatial histories, and reimagine historical contexts, the methodology I employ is organised around frameworks for narrating time, and creative ways for representing space in literature. As such, the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the literary chronotope, as well as the carnivalesque, were significantly useful to my analysis of the novels, and provide the foundation for my methodological approach. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), a collection of essays about the form and genre of novels, Bakhtin borrows from mathematics and defines the literary chronotope “almost as a metaphor” for illustrating “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Literary chronotopes fuse spatial and temporal indicators “into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole: Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” (Bakhtin 84). Bakhtin’s central concern with the chronotope is aesthetically visualising individual subjects “in relation to their temporal and spatial world”, as a way for comprehending human life within a geographical or physical space, at specific points in

historical time (Morris 180). In a South African context, the chronotope is a worthwhile theoretical lens to illuminate histories of space and time in literature, because it creates a narrative architecture that can be employed to map alternative historical considerations. I draw from this definition in Chapter Two in order to show how gardening, maps and mapping and embroidery can be thought of as alternative modes for gaining individual agency, and reinterpreting the rural histories embedded in *Agaat*.

In addition, Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, a term he elaborates on in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) in relation to medieval literature and its depiction of festivals and carnivals, was particularly helpful in framing my analysis of the social positioning of the Benades as subversive. The carnivalesque is a framework devoted to illustrating and parodying the passing of time and official forms. Bakhtin defines this term in the chapter "Language of the Marketplace", as "the drama of laughter presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world" (149). Importantly, each individual image of carnivalesque imagery "is subject to the meaning of the whole" (149). Although the carnivalesque is used to shed light on medieval festivals and unofficial forms, this theoretical framework is strikingly relevant to representations of the transformation from apartheid, to post-apartheid South Africa, because for many South Africans the relationship or connections to apartheid are not necessarily 'dead'. Notions of parody are also important to the carnivalesque. Hutcheon argues "parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity" ("The Politics of Postmodernism", 185), which aligns with Bakhtin's suggestions of carnivalesque imagery depicting both life and death, side-by-side; it seems as if lived experiences become more meaningful when one laughs at the universal equaliser of death. Drawing from the carnivalesque's parodic qualities, I take this definition in Chapter One and use it to contextualise the sociopolitical landscape permeating the suburb of Triomf, and the transition to a democratic epoch in South Africa.

Though the Benades' behaviour and experiences, which they display through vulgar racism and bigoted views of social difference, bring to mind the broader redundancy of Afrikaner nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa, they simultaneously embody the 'birth' of a new South Africa and transcendence of their personal histories of poverty, due to their peripheral social positioning. Indeed, fundamental to the carnivalesque is the notion of equalising hierarchies, and destabilising the power of official forms. As a literary device, according to Jones, "the irreverent spirit of the carnival, of flows and jokers, burns briefly but powerfully, overturning social hierarchies and imagining more radical and equitable relations" (45). I found

the carnivalesque to be suitable for imagining the social space of the public street in *Triomf* as a festive space. In this way, the novel celebrates the uncrowning of apartheid. As I show in Chapter One, the public space of the street parodies the homogenisation of Afrikaner nationalism internalised by the Benades, and opens up Afrikaner identity to new connections in time and space.

An additional component to my theoretical underpinnings in this thesis were spatial theories of power and subversion. The French philosopher Michel de Certeau's work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), a book about subverting the tyranny of everyday life, was fruitful for underlining walking as a powerful gesture. In the chapter "Walking in the City" De Certeau imagines walking as a spatial practice. He defines this spatial practice as pedestrian enunciation, in which a walker "actualises" the possibilities engendered by "an ensemble of possibilities" created through a spatial order (98). According to De Certeau, walking can affirm, suspect, transgress or respect spatial composition; in short, walking "'speaks'" (99), which in turn gives pedestrians power to subvert the ordering of relations in space by walking in counterintuitive ways. Part of this (mis)use, which I elaborate on in Chapter One, is located in heterotopic locations.

The philosopher Michel Foucault characterises heterotopias as "counter-sites" that are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (4). In heterotopic environments, the social ordering of people and the place they live in are "contested and inverted" (Foucault 4). A section of my reading of *Triomf* uses Foucault's definition of the heterotopia to expose the feeble underpinnings of racial isolation enacted by Afrikaner nationalism, and the necessity for reshaping identity in relation to similarities, not differences. In my analysis of walking as a metaphor for narrative in Chapter One, this definition was beneficial for illustrating how the Benades ironically move beyond the extreme degrees of isolation they face. I combine my analysis of walking with Jacob Dlamini's work on the sensory experience of townships in South Africa, to demonstrate how readers gain a sense of the Benades' peripheral stories and histories. De Certeau's notion of a "concept-city", a specific model for "conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties" (94), also served my reading of *Triomf*. I use this definition to imagine Johannesburg as it is depicted in the novel, as an apartheid "concept city". As a concept, this theoretical framework rethinks how the isolation fostered by racial separation in urban environments, was in fact part of an interconnected network of space operating in

specific time and place. It allowed me to envision the different methods for reimagining ways of using urban landscapes in transgressive fashion in order to promote a vibrant democratic South African culture.

Heterotopias can also be employed in discussions of mirrors. Foucault describes the potential for mirrors to create “unreal” spaces that, like physical heterotopias, invert multiple hierarchies (4). I develop my examination of mirrors in Chapter Three with Foucault’s work in mind, and also draw from Henry Lefebvre’s analysis of mirrors in his book *The Production of Space* (1991). Similar to Foucault, Lefebvre explores the potential for mirrors to reflect absence in social space, through what he refers to as “shadows” (186). According to Lefebvre, shadow images are mirror-images of the body, that reposition what is excluded from the (narrative) frame created through individual perspectives and subjectivities (186). I draw from these discussions of mirrors in Chapter Three to demonstrate how larger themes of love, death, poverty, the weight of history and cultural traditions are embedded within the locally-situated lived experiences of the Benades and De Wet families.

As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, my examinations of the novels select specific narrative strategies and metaphors to reinterpret historical contexts from a post-apartheid perspective. In order to punctuate my approaches to the texts, I begin each chapter with a different metaphor to frame my discussion. The postcolonial and cultural scholar Homi K. Bhabha writes in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994), that metaphor is an “innovative, and politically crucial” method for “[thinking] beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities” (1), which suggests that metaphor can both expose the limits of sociopolitical meaning, and, indeed, transcend these boundaries. With all of this in mind, in Chapter One my close reading of *Triomf* considers the significance of metaphors of narrative in relation to spatial histories in Johannesburg. This chapter imagines the Benades as the “waste wool” (*Triomf* 515) of white Afrikaner society, and illustrates how this social positioning engenders them with the ironic ability to string peripheral histories together. In my discussion of the novel Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque was useful for characterising the period of national transition that the novel is set in. By doing so, the spatial practice of walking as a subversive act, becomes an alternative mode for challenging the homogenisation of Afrikaner nationalism. Additionally, Foucault’s imagining of heterotopias provided a spatial framework for locating Lambert’s counterproductive movements on the peripheries of *Triomf*, and white society.

Chapter Two focuses on metafiction and metaphors of narrative in *Agaat*, and examines Van Niekerk's reinterpretation of rural histories embedded in the text. My close analysis of the novel is framed by Etienne van Heerden's notion of "compost", a term discussed in Chapter Two. Using Milla's rotating narrative perspectives, my readings isolate gardening, maps and mapping and embroidery. I trace their development in the novel as creative narrative strategies for utilising the "compost" of the pastoral tradition to reimagine the Afrikaans farm novel in post-apartheid South Africa. I draw from Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope to illustrate how the novel can be read as an extension of the *plaasroman* tradition the text seems to self-consciously locate itself within. The chronotope is also a worthwhile concept for mapping new historical connections in space through literary narratives. As such, Van Niekerk can then be seen to reinterpret the *plaasroman* by highlighting histories of land dispossession and the underwritten narratives of racial others in the South African farm novel.

Chapter Three looks at the physical and domestic space of the Benade home and the De Wet homestead on Grootmoedersdrift through the frame of architecture and carpentry. These two metaphors of narrative and writing highlighted the complex historical and sociopolitical architectures informing *Triomf* and *Agaat*. In this way, each novel can be read as mirrors of the political contexts they are set in. In this discussion I explore different mirrors placed throughout each home as heterotopic spaces of contemplation. I also trace how Van Niekerk seems to parody lingering threads of Afrikaner nationalism within post-apartheid contexts, in two illustrations of "epochal weaving" in the domestic space of the Benade and De Wet homes. These reflections provide divergent portrayals of (white) Afrikaner history and identity, and ultimately suggest that the more broader human experiences of love, loss, life and death can be rethought within the physical spaces human beings operate in, and tied together into new tapestries of inclusivity.

Thus, despite any complexities or nuances obscured by my lack of understanding Afrikaans, and my distanced subjectivity, I intend in this thesis to produce a meaningful discussion of Van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat* within the post-apartheid landscape of South African fiction. While each of these novels are from contrasting perspectives, *Triomf* and *Agaat* are similar stories illustrating a continuity of contradictory experience across the South African landscape, in various historical periods. In fact, in a conversation with Anthony K. Appiah and Toni Morrison, Van Niekerk stated that while "most people think the books are very different", she believes "the books are two different forms of camouflage of the same story, which is a family

story” (PEN International Discussion with Anthony K. Appiah and Toni Morrison). Taking the author’s words into consideration, what follows are discussions of interrelated narrative strategies interwoven into a spectrum of Afrikaner experiences that emphasise connections across time and space. As a framework for imagining how different spaces are linked together through narrative, “epochal weaving” is a concept that seems fit to trace more broader relationships between the African and North American continents. Certainly, “epochal weaving” provided a platform for contemplating my own sense of national ambivalence as an international scholar attempting to make sense of (translated) Afrikaans fiction. Therefore, I can only hope the chapters that succeed this introduction illuminate new, or alternative, ways for reading Van Niekerk’s novels, as well as for thinking about different modes for writing stories. As Treppie says in regards to the Johannesburg newspapers he frequently reads, one only has to learn to “spot the ‘similarities’” (*Triomf* 18).

## Chapter One:

### A Carnavalesque Revision of Social Space in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*

*He moves towards the edge of the pavement...*

(Van Niekerk, *Triomf* 77)

In negotiating the literary spaces of Marlene van Niekerk's fiction, and her portrayal of white Afrikaner identity, I focus in this chapter on the social space of city streets and marginalised locations, and the significance of the metaphor for narrative of walking in relation to spatial histories in *Triomf* (2004). Set in the white suburb of Triomf, directly against the backdrop of South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, *Triomf* details the daily lives of Lambert, Mol, Pop and Treppie Benade, whose rotating third-person perspectives guide the narrative. The use of different narrative perspectives highlights the fragmentary exercise of identity formation, and encourages readers to reflect on this complex process. Moreover, in this capacity narrative perspective become a useful tool for meditating on the politics of lived experience. Thus, in this chapter I investigate alternative modes of writing and narrating subjectivity in relation to space and the practice of walking, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and notions of irony and parody are referred to in the introduction of this thesis and further discussed in the methodology below. Additionally, this chapter considers the "poor white" context outlined by Edward-John Bottomly in his book, *Poor White* (2013), which was an important text for my analysis of *Triomf* and the social positioning of marginality the "poor white" framing creates for the Benades. This examination begins an exploration of different metaphors of narrative within the concept of "epochal weaving", a framework I employ to remap connections between historical epochs in South Africa, as discussed in the introduction.

In the novel, Van Niekerk reproduces the months prior to the 1994 elections in *Triomf*, from the vantage points of the peripheral "poor white" Benade family. The Benades first "came to the city as children with Old Pop and Old Mol", their parents, "[a]ll the way from Bloemhof" (*Triomf* 133) in the 1930s. Like many white Afrikaners impoverished because of drought and depression in the *platteland*, Old Pop signed up for "Hertzog's Railways Plan for poor whites", what he claimed was "the best thing an Afrikaner had ever thought up" (133), and the Benades

moved to Johannesburg.<sup>10</sup> The legacy of this migration is repeatedly illustrated and described through vulgar disputes over the ‘facts’ of the Benades’ multi-generation lineage of poverty. The Benades also engage in racially intolerant discussions about Afrikaner politics, the state of South African society and their preparations for Lambert’s birthday, which is the day after the forthcoming election. The incestuous origins surrounding this day are concealed from Lambert through fabricated stories explaining how “Pop was a distant Benade from the Cape” (192). Lambert suffers from epilepsy, most likely due to the incestuous context of his conception, and experiences a number of “fits” (241) throughout the novel. He eventually discovers the circumstances of his origin, and violently reacts in a fatal outburst that kills Pop. This alignment of personal and political histories in the text is significant because it points to the incestuous outcome of apartheid, and represents the recycling of the significant date of 27 April in South African political history: the date of the implementation of the Group Areas Act No 41 (GAA) in 1950, which mapped racially designated zones onto the social landscape of South Africa, and led to the creation of suburbs like Triomf (Thompson 194).<sup>11</sup> Van Niekerk seems to employ other historical nuances to link the isolation of the Benades with national forms of economic, cultural and political isolation experienced under the rule of the National Party (NP) during apartheid.<sup>12</sup> Part of their preparations for the election involve Treppie’s “Great North Plan for when the emergency came” (*Triomf* 65) and supposed chaos overtakes Johannesburg. Lambert fantasises that the family will travel “due north [...] To Zimbabwe or

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<sup>10</sup> This plan refers to J.B.M. Hertzog, a former Boer general and the second Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, and his governments’ involvement in state-sanctioned economic racial privileging in the 1920s. In *White Tribe Dreaming* (1988), a book he admits is not technically ‘historical’ (xv), Marq de Villiers traces the genealogy of the De Villiers family tree in relation to broader Afrikaner historical contexts, and notes how in the 1929 election “Hertzog won an outright majority” and “he set about putting the Afrikaner house in order” through “a nationalized iron and steel industry, a nationalised railway” and “a state monopoly of the new trucking industry” (267). These initiatives were part of a broader approach toward solving the “poor white” question.

<sup>11</sup> In addition, Van Niekerk creatively engages with the recycled street names of Sophiatown, now the street names of Triomf and the Benades’ dogs. As I mentioned in the introduction, Sophiatown was named after Tobiansky’s wife, the man who first owned the plot of land where Triomf is, and who sold properties to black South Africans before the Native Land Act (1913). Thus, it is not surprising that the dogs, Gerty and Toby, have been the focus of scholarship on the novel due to their explicit connections to old Sophiatown. Indeed, the first chapter of *Triomf* is titled “The Dogs”. Wendy Woodward writes about the Benade’s dogs and explores their potential as historical devices, or “mobile metaphors” (122) for “[representing] the only possible connection the Benades could have with Sophiatown” (98). Mark Libin, too, writes about dogs in the novel, and their metaphorical potential for locating the human. He draws a comparison between Lambert and his digging as a “feral species” (43). Alternatively, Jean-Marie Jackson examines the dogs in relation to the novel’s global significance, arguing that “these dogs (and mainly one dog named Gerty) represent forceful points of intersubjective engagement that defy the imposition of broader significance [...] outside the reach of most animal-studies criticism or the global narratives in which South African literature is typically absorbed” (344).

<sup>12</sup> Apartheid South Africa was the subject of a number of sanctions, due to a variety of competing international factors. Lindsay Michie Eades contends in her book *The End of Apartheid in South Africa* (1991), that “the pattern of pressure on South Africa to reform should be examined in the context of the development of international law and behaviour against racial discrimination” (83).



Kenya. Where you can still live like a white man” (*Triomf* 65). This imagined trip further into the African continent provides an ironic counter-image of migration that parodies a trend of white emigration during the 1990s, as well as recycle the narrative informing the historical significance of the Great Trek.<sup>13</sup>

The novelist Nadine Gordimer first wrote about the democratic possibilities of the public street in her essay “Great Problems in the Street” (1963). She writes that South Africa’s “great problems,” by which she means “the tens of thousands of Africans going about their city work but not recognised as citizens,” are, in fact, “alive in the street, and it is in the street” that “they have always been debated” (45). Gordimer was writing at a time in which the apartheid government was clamping down on public space in the the 1960s. Rita Barnard writes in her book *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007) about the context that Gordimer was writing in, and states that the apartheid “government’s draconian crackdown on resistance after the Sharpeville massacre” on 21 March 1960, “effectively ensured that ‘great problems’ would henceforth” be “forgotten and repressed” (45). Likewise, in *Triomf* the street is a place of intersection that counters histories of white Afrikaner homogenisation, and liberates social and cultural possibilities rather than closing them off.

In my close reading, I first contextualise the novel’s return to the “poor white” question, and show how this categorisation developed out of rural migrations from the town to the city, similar to the Benades’ own journey to Johannesburg. In addition, the discussion briefly traces the history of apartheid’s tendency to administer power “territorially” (Barnard 72) to address the implications of multiracial communities, and the positioning of “poor whites” living in them. The image of whiteness embodied by “poor white” Afrikaners, like the Benades, was, as I highlighted in the introduction, seen as an affront to preserving white supremacy in South Africa. Indeed, in her article about the subversive linguistic potential of *Triomf*, Nicole Devarenne states “[t]he Benades themselves are viewed as the ‘rubbish’ of Afrikaner society” (113). At the end of the novel Mol indeed describes the Benades as such: “[p]ieced together and panelbeaten [...] Throw-away pieces, left-over rags, waste wool [...] Things that get

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<sup>13</sup> The Great Trek is an important piece of the mythologised narrative of Afrikaner history conceptualised of by apartheid politicians. Thompson recalls how interventions by the British Empire in the 1830s encroached on socio-economic patterns of slavery in the Cape Colony. This process caused many Afrikaners on the eastern frontier “of all classes” to feel “alienated from the British regime”, and regard the British Empire “as responsible for all their misfortunes” (69). As a result, a “remarkable exodus” referred to as the Great Trek, ensued, and many Afrikaners on the eastern frontier sought refuge deeper into the interior of South Africa (Thompson 69).

thrown away” (*Triomf* 517). This metaphor of “waste wool” effectively captures the Benades’ social positioning within white Afrikaner society, because this “poor white” family disturbed the racial categories defining apartheid South Africa. Mol’s comment that they are like “waste wool” is significant to notions of “epochal weaving” and will be used in my exploration to demonstrate how the Benades are an unlikely vehicle for stringing together past and present historical contexts. Despite their impoverished inheritance, and the ways in which the apartheid state framed their social positioning within South African society, the Benades ironically use social space in counterintuitive ways, which emphasise the significance of marginal spaces in the formation of culture.

### **Methodology**

Keeping in mind Gordimer’s essay mentioned above, South African cultural and literary scholar Sarah Nuttall similarly thinks of the social potential of the street in the chapter “Literary City” from her book, *Entanglement* (2007). Writing about Phaswane Mpe’s novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Nuttall conceives of this space as an “imaginary infrastructure” that surfaces in fiction, and allows Refentse, the protagonist of Mpe’s novel, to transgress historical constructions of space in the Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow (39). It can be argued that the Benades likewise breach spatial histories in their use of the city through the contradictory pathways their walks in *Triomf* compose. According to Devarenne in her article about Afrikaner nationalism and the farm novel, *Triomf* is “a novel about urban life that presents the city as a place where ethnic and cultural divisions can be broken down” (640). With this in mind, I suggest one should view the ways in which Van Niekerk appears to use walking as a form of resiliency during the moment of South Africa’s transformation from an apartheid society to a democratic nation. The methodological framework I therefore assemble in this chapter is derived from Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, as well as spatial theories of power and subversion in relation to the “waste wool” of Afrikaner nation building. Although the social space of apartheid strictly policed interaction across racial lines, the city streets of Johannesburg produce an alternative infrastructure for mapping new Afrikaner subjectivities in post-apartheid fiction.

In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin examines the representation of festivals and carnivals in medieval literature. He defines the carnivalesque as “presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world” (149). This presentation, in which individual images are “subject to the meaning of the whole”, foregrounds “a contradictory world of

becoming, even though the [images] may be separately present” (Bakhtin 149). The “post-” in post-apartheid, seems to be a clear indication of the kinds of experiences that make living in, and studying South African literature—as *'n buiteland*—a contradictory and constantly unfolding undertaking. I found the notion of the carnivalesque to aptly signify the temporal setting of the novel; the dismantling of apartheid is placed alongside the birth of a post-apartheid South Africa, which exposes the limits and cultural redundancy of Afrikaner nationalism. The carnivalesque is also suitable for engaging with the fluidity of the transformational moment of the novel because of the inversion of hierarchies in the carnival. As Megan Jones puts it in her article about taxi cabs and storytelling from the collection of essays *Categories of Persons: Rethinking Ourselves and Others* (2013), festive imagery “overturns social hierarchies and imagines more radical and equitable relations” (45). The nature of festive environments takes the differences between people, and dissolves them in a collective crowd that is organised in its own way, “outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organisation” (Bakhtin 246-55). I draw from carnivalesque imagery in my close readings of the novel to illustrate how the metaphor for narrative of walking can accommodate the contradictory world of becoming that post-apartheid fiction must negotiate.

Although I briefly discussed the relationship between carnivalesque imagery and the technique of parody in the introduction, I extend this discussion in relation to the “poor white” context here. Parody has the tendency to both use and expose the limitations of fixed meanings. Linda Hutcheon comments on the role of parody in her article, “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History” stating that it is “a fundamentally contradictory enterprise” that “[installs] and [subverts] convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing to both their own inherent paradoxes” (180). Parody can also be thought of as “a branch of satire” that can be used to “exaggerate certain traits”, and its “purpose is corrective as well as derisive” (Cuddon 640). Despite subtle differences, irony and parody do share similar attributes. Hutcheon states in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) that parody, like irony, “is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative” (98). Although definitions of irony vary according to context, scholar Brian Nicol states that structural irony is “where what is said is undermined by the particular context in which it is said” (4). The goal of irony is to question the validity of fixed meaning by showing “that there is no such thing as fixed meaning: any meaning is pregnant with others and can be altered” through tone and setting (5). This definition seems to willingly lend itself to a variety of South African contexts, because the irony of post-apartheid

notions of unity and reconciliation, is that South African national identity is often fragmented and a completely different construct depending on one's perspective. This contrast was useful to me in this chapter because it allowed for a reading of walking in the novel as both deconstructing the limits of apartheid's racialised topography, and creatively rethinking ways of writing notions of belonging. I draw from Hutcheon's insights on parody, as well as Nicol's ideas in this chapter, to argue the novel reinterprets a history of cultural and social isolation employed by the state to police various degrees of separation favoured by Afrikaner nationalism. With all of this in mind, Van Niekerk adopts a postmodern tone in *Triomf* intent on parodying the eve of democracy from the peripheral perspectives of the Benades, which provides an ironic rereading of the historical moment of social and political transformation in South Africa.

Through the use of irony and parody Van Niekerk seems to employ city streets to create new social spaces, and encourage more inclusive processes of identity formation. Henri Lefebvre defines social space in his book, *The Production of Space* (1974), as "the outcome of past actions" and that which "permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (73). In this book Lefebvre attempts to reconcile the tension between physical space and mental space, which can readily be applied to post-apartheid South Africa. Although I elaborate on the historical context informing the patterning of Johannesburg's urban landscape below, the novel displays how the highly racialised and insular mental space of the Benades is in conflict with the physical spaces of racial difference surrounding them. Indeed, conceptualisations of social space are intimately woven into the social fabric of society. Lefebvre's definition was helpful for my discussion of city streets as important locations of continuity for rewriting social space in relation to Afrikaner identity formation in the novel.

One such way for political "waste wool" to gain agency is through the spatial practice of walking. Though, before defining this practice more thoroughly, it is necessary to first contextualise it within a framework of spatial authority. Michel de Certeau defines the spatial practice of walking in relation to the theoretical notion of the "concept-city" in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), a text that elaborates on strategies for eluding the monotonous authority of 'everyday' experiences. De Certeau understands the "concept-city" to be a political strategy of urban planning that exerts its power in "a totalizing" fashion (95). More specifically, a "concept-city" uses "a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties" in the deployment of territorial authority (94). The notion of the

“concept-city” is suitable for reading the urban landscape of Johannesburg in *Triomf* through a lens that underlines the territorial authority of apartheid. For example, the GAA, among a number of other legislative measures, utilised the concept of apartheid and enforced total segregation to redraw the South African map into racial areas. When imagined within the context of apartheid South Africa, the notion of the “concept-city” illuminates the interconnected ways in which race, in relation to physical space, profoundly complicated the social landscape of South Africa.

The pursuit of totalised forms leads to the simultaneous production of excess contrary to the intentions of the “concept-city”. This excess can, on one hand, be imagined in terms of physical space, through heterotopic locations. Foucault defines heterotopias, as was discussed in the introduction, as infrastructures that invert spatial hierarchies. The location of these sites exist in reality, but they are isolated and removed from everyday use (Foucault 3-4). Heterotopias are, in one sense, overlooked environments. When imagined in relation to South African urban landscapes, these spaces emphasise the significance of margins, and the necessity to navigate the margins of society in literature. This spatial framework is important to my close readings of the novel, because it foregrounds the potential for neglected environments to be perceived as discursive spaces to engage with rewriting white Afrikaner identity. When considered in the context of *Triomf*, heterotopias illustrate not only the utopic potential for powerful relationships indicative of a culturally diverse society like South Africa; heterotopias also reveal considerations for reimagining a more equitable South African social landscape, by suggesting that the kinds of egalitarian relationships necessary for transformation are to be found in places removed from the map of social relations.

An underside to the pursuit of totalised forms is that such endeavours also lead to the production of sociopolitical excess. De Certeau defines forms of sociopolitical excess as “waste products” created through “a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with” (94). This definition aligns with Mol’s metaphor of “waste wool” to describe not only the social positioning of the Benades within the hierarchy of white Afrikaner society. The production of “waste products” also illustrates the deliberate tendency for the framework of apartheid to dispose of individuals, groups and communities that could not easily be placed into rigid racial categories. Through spatial practices, however, the dimensions of social interaction defined by the “concept-city” can potentially be transgressed. With this in mind, a spatial practice can be defined by “tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field

in which it is exercised” (96). As a form of a spatial practice in resistance to the totalising city, walking “permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded” (De Certeau 95). The “element”, in this case, is the Benades as “waste wool,” and the role they played in the formation of white Afrikaner identity. Interestingly, Barnard observes in her work on the significance of political trash in South Africa that such imagery, as the Benades demonstrate, “is not readily disposed of and retains an explosive potential (74). In my readings of walking as a spatial practice, as mentioned, I also draw from Jacob Dlamini’s book *Native Nostalgia* (2009), about his childhood memories of growing up in Katlehong, a township south of Johannesburg. Dlamini writes empirically about townships in a chapter titled “The Sense of Township Life”. He explains it is critical for the grammar of transformation characterising post-apartheid South African discourse to focus on the sensory experience of townships as a way of overcoming a shallow framing of people as problems (118). While they do not live in a township, much of the Benades’ experiences of social space and memory retrieval is facilitated through their senses. My analysis below combines De Certeau’s notion of walking as a spatial practice with Dlamini’s sensory ideas, to illustrate how the Benades’ history of poverty can be imagined in layers, similar to cities, and that the processes of reinterpreting this history must necessarily compete with a variety of topographical frames. Thus, walking retains a sense of subversive potency because it allows individuals deemed excessive functioning within the “concept-city”, the power to choose relationships in social space that are contrary to the fixed meanings this territorial model produces.

Although the Benades are relegated to the perimeter of white Afrikaner society through their physical location in Triomf, it is through these characters that Van Niekerk seems to bring histories together through notions of “epochal weaving”. The development of “epochal weaving” in this chapter illustrates how poverty is passed down through generations as an alternative kind of birth right to that of the farm in the South African *plaasroman*.<sup>14</sup> Through their ironic potential to weave locations together by walking, the Benades illuminate how the ‘loose ends’ of apartheid can be reworked from the margins of Afrikaner society, as this is where the limits of identity formation are defined and contested. In this way, city streets are integral when imagined through the theoretical framework in this chapter, because they provide

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<sup>14</sup> The scholar Laura White writes about the ways in which *Triomf* challenges the pastoral imagery and themes so closely associated with the South African farm novel in her article “Renegotiating the land covenant in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf*”. Her analysis underlines how the novel “works within the *plaasroman* genre to challenge Afrikaner mythology” (85).

a contiguous space for conceiving of more egalitarian social relations. Therefore, my analysis of the novel draws from notions of the carnivalesque and heterotopic infrastructures, to frame how walking and the sense of history and space it can produce, challenge the homogenisation of Afrikaner society. In my view this signifies how the city can be framed as the pen, pages and the book; the people as walking pedestrians are the authors writing myriads of urban stories stitched together into an unidentifiable shape.

Since the carnivalesque deals with the death of the ‘old’ and birth of the ‘new’ simultaneously, I first examine Pop’s walk through a street in Braamfontein, a former working-class suburb of western Johannesburg. Pop symbolises the death of the ‘old’ order (this is confirmed through his death at the end of the text), and so does his experience in Braamfontein, which is heavily mediated through his senses. While his experience seems joyful, he lacks the ability to contemplate his emotions, and thus conceive of a grammar with which to imagine new social relationships with black South Africans. Next, I turn to Lambert’s visit to the heterotopic Martindale dump, and explore his conversation with Sonnyboy, a black South African with a complicated history of migration and cross-cultural adaptation. Their exchange portrays notions “epochal weaving” through the feature of a *mbira*, a musical instrument Sonnyboy gives Lambert.<sup>15</sup> This instrument Lambert inherits harkens back to a harmonica of Old Pop’s, which was inherited by Pop, and it symbolises a mode for Lambert to reinterpret the legacy of his family’s journey to Johannesburg, and their history of poverty through cultural collaboration. I additionally show how this peripheral space of the dump foregrounds the necessity for post-apartheid Afrikaans fiction to explore the margins of South African history, as a way of adjusting the trajectory of the present. Lambert thus becomes the locus of the novel’s exploration through temporal and spatial histories beneath the arid topography of Triomf. These analyses will serve to demonstrate how city streets can creatively string together the peripheral epoch of “poor whites” with the dawn of a post-apartheid epoch in South Africa, to discursively imagine new ways for narrating white Afrikaner subjectivities. When put into conversation, these two scenes illuminate the deconstructive, as well as constructive effects irony and parody can have in post-apartheid literature, through their reinterpretation of the “poor white” narrative. Moreover, putting these two scenes in conversation reveals this contradictory process of becoming through the contrasting images of Pop and Lambert, and

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<sup>15</sup> For a critical resource on the significance of music in *Agaat*, refer to Heinrich van der Mescht’s article “Marlene van Niekerk se idees oor musiek en die aanwending van verwysings daarna in *Agaat*”.

highlights how walking as a spatial practice can expose the threshold of Afrikaner nationalism in post-apartheid contexts. Finally, this conversation simultaneously gestures toward alternative processes and patterns for Afrikaner identity formation that revolve around introspection and reinterpretation.

### **‘So many strange, busy people’: Pop in Braamfontein**

In this section I turn to an examination of Pop walking through Braamfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg, whose history is intimately interlaced with “poor white” experiences.<sup>16</sup> I read this scene alongside the event of Lambert’s walk to the Martindale rubbish dump. In light of notions of the carnivalesque outlined above, my analysis will show how Pop symbolises the death of the ‘old’ South Africa, and how Lambert, strangely enough, when one considers his bigotry and incestuous origins, represents the birth of the ‘new’ South Africa and more comprehensive forms of identity creation. Indeed, the fact that Lambert kills Pop upon discovering the circumstances of his birth is a reflection of carnivalesque imagery interwoven into the novel. I first describe Pop’s character as being representative of fundamental Afrikaner nationalist ideology, then provide a close reading of Pop’s episode in Braamfontein, showing that his adherence to this discourse leaves him unable to articulate the sense of joyful dislocation he experiences.

Prior to tracing Pop’s experience in Braamfontein, I briefly paint a picture of his character in order to better illustrate how his inability to define his joyful feeling is a carnivalesque allusion to the death of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism. Although it is confirmed at the end of the text, there are many intimations of Pop’s impending death. For instance, at one point Treppie describes Pop as “too old. He just wants to sleep [...] Farmed out, dried up. A dead shoot” (*Triomf* 68), alluding to ways in which the Benades’ history of impoverishment is unable to sustain Pop. Indeed, Pop later says he is “dried up”, that is “blood isn’t warm at all” and that “his lips are so cold they look slightly blue” (165). He sighs when he says this, and Mol notices how it sounds “like he wants to blow out all of his breath” (165), signalling the suffocating consequences of Afrikaner insularity. Pop later comments that he feels like he is living in “a place he doesn’t know anymore” (98) foreshadowing his dislocation on the verge of a new

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<sup>16</sup> The suburb of Braamfontein, notes Bottomly, is where the majority of “poor whites” who had arrived in Johannesburg from the *platteland* settled (63-4). In fact, the broader spatial history of Braamfontein includes other communities of “poor whites” in the western areas, such as Vrededorp, Fordsburg and Brickfields; the “core”, Bottomly writes, “of Johannesburg’s Afrikaner white squatter camps before the turn of [20th Century]” (Bottomly 63).



epoch of democracy in South Africa. At the same moment, he questions where “he [ends] and Lambert [begins]” (98), indicating a kind of ambiguous awareness about the Benades’ legacy, which I return to at the end of this section. Pop’s character inherited much of his subjectivity from “his predecessor, Old Pop, whose central credo was that of Afrikaner unity and insularity” (Brophy 98). Treppie recalls that Old Pop, whose similar name to Pop shines as an alternative portrayal of poverty as a type of inheritance, used to exclaim, “[t]hat which belongs together, must remain together” which was “why he voted for Malan’s National Party in the 1948 election. Out of family instinct” because “[t]here was no other choice” (*Triomf* 139). Old Pop’s sentiment is evidence of extreme Afrikaner pride, and nationalist thinking. Mol and Pop, in fact, according to Treppie, also fell “hook, line and sinker for Malan’s story in ’48. Another Great Trek story [...] About how his party, the ‘Purified’ National Party, was depending on everyone to bring the Great Trek to its logical ‘conclusion’” (359) gesturing toward the ways in which “poor whites” were indoctrinated by Afrikaner nationalism to vote for a political ideology that intended to dispose of them. Nevertheless, in an unusual display of his affection for seclusion and separation, Pop explains that his favourite advert on television depicts a squirrel saving his acorns in a bank. What Pop likes about the advert is that “every animal has its own little place [...] That’s where they belong and everyone knows it, and they keep out of each other’s way” (196), emphasising the influence of apartheid’s intensively policed segregation creating various degrees of separation between people. As a representation of the family patriarch, Pop clings to the ideologies of isolation and separation espoused by Afrikaner nationalism. Moreover, he does not, as I illustrate below, question the framework of Afrikaner nationalism that has empowered his sense of self, because to do so would be to acknowledge the gaps in this inward-looking discourse.

Pop’s episode of walking in Braamfontein on Jorissen Street foregrounds how notions of the carnivalesque celebrate the death of the ‘old’ order, and readily parody the discourse of Afrikaner nationalism in relation to a ‘new’ post-apartheid epoch. When he woke up “and couldn’t pick up the smell of battery acid from Industria”, an industrial neighbourhood near Triomf, Pop “knew it was going to be a good day” (75), which foreshadows the good fortune he later experiences in Braamfontein. He stands “in front of Mol’s three-piece dressing table” and “carefully” puts his shoulder braces on, “out of the respect for the feeling” he had (75). This statement also emphasises the significance of Pop’s sensory experience, and how walking, when aligned with the senses can negotiate multilayered compositions of memories, much like a walker negotiates a city. As De Certeau puts it, a walker “makes a selection” in urban space,

increasing “the number of possibilities” and “prohibitions” in social space (98). Pop drives “Treppie to the Chinese in Commissioner Street” where Treppie sometimes works, but acknowledges that “today feels different” (*Triomf* 77), again foreshadowing how Pop is able to escape his “ideologically over-determined” (Devarenne 640) existence outside of Triomf in Braamfontein. Pop’s vague description of “a good day”, which I return to below in relation to the novel’s depiction of parody, signals his powerlessness to describe the changes he experiences on a day-to-day basis. Bakhtin reminds readers that the theoretical framework of the carnivalesque can be employed to “[depict] changes in history and time” (Bakhtin 234). In light of this, when Pop “drives home across the bridge”, ironically “back over *the railway tracks*”, he gets a feeling that “something’s about to happen” (*Triomf* 77; emphasis added). It is not without coincidence, I argue, that Pop drives over the railway tracks. This spatial transgression is a clear symbol of the Benades’ impoverished lineage, and alludes to the latent potential for spatial histories to contribute to the remaking of his Afrikaner identity, which Lambert more fully realises at the Martindale rubbish dump.

Once in Braamfontein, Pop parks his car on Jorissen Street, amidst what seems like a large multiracial crowd.<sup>17</sup> Pop explains that he is not sure “what he’s looking for” (77). In fact, he says that he is not searching “for anything. He just wants to feel the rush of people around his shoulders; he wants to look at their faces” (77) expressing his desire to see, and be seen within a crowd. Part of what gives walking its subversive capabilities is that a walker lacks a place: the experience of walking is “broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks)” that can be intertwined “and create an urban fabric” that eludes recognition (De Certeau 103). The crowd Pop wishes to be part of similarly contradicts the policing of apartheid’s racial categories. In addition, Pop’s sense of sight in this scene is vital to engaging with the carnivalesque transformation taking place in the novel, and it operates on two levels.

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Braamfontein is now considered one of the cultural hotspots of Johannesburg. Part of the rise of this suburb’s trendiness is due in large part to the Neighbourgoods Market, a farmer’s market open on Saturdays. Through food, this market draws a spectrum of people together into a crowd organised in its own style. Indeed, post-apartheid Braamfontein has even been inscribed onto the tourist map of South Africa through travel guides, such as in the author, chef and travel show host Anthony Bourdain’s series *Parts Unknown*, on CNN. During an episode filmed in Johannesburg in 2013, Bourdain ends his trip at Neighbourgoods Market with City Press reporter Percy Mabandu, and contemplates South Africa as a ‘Rainbow Nation’, as well as the multiracial South African crowd present at the market in relation to American definitions of multiracialism and/or multiculturalism. Bourdain concludes that although Americans like to think of themselves as racially diverse, there are still many degrees of separation limiting honest and equitable interracial relationships. I highlight this point here as a way to emphasise how (formerly) marginalised spaces can be reimagined as powerful locations for cultural, political and racial intersections. Present day Brooklyn in New York City, one could argue, is one of America’s most poignant examples of this kind of urban potential.

Firstly, he is more than likely engaging with other races in a more equitable social space—in the street—than usual, echoing the democratic potential Gordimer writes about in her essay. Secondly, Pop is also being seen by people other than his family. Removed from the isolation of *Triomf*, he is thus forced to negotiate his inverted subject-positioning within the racial hierarchy ordering South Africa. Though, having said this, Pop lacks the grammar for social change or transformation, which I show below. He puts money into a meter and walks “along the pavement” (*Triomf* 77), and experiences the social space of the street, as well as vague memories of his past, through his senses. As he walks he feels people “brushing against him as they pass. So many strange busy people” (77), illustrating his unfamiliarity with racial differences that characterise South African crowds.<sup>18</sup> Pop seems to lose himself, both figuratively and physically, on Jorissen Street, demonstrating the potential for walking to initiate encounters outside of the concepts defining the apartheid city.

While walking, Pop’s sense of sight continues to mediate his experience in Braamfontein, and seemingly highlights his family’s impoverished disposition. In a moment of structural irony related to his sense of sight, Pop puts twenty cents into a tin and receives “a sticker from the Association for the Blind” (77). He then sees people “selling vegetables and things on the pavement” and decides to buy a mango (77). By this point Pop has become dislocated in this social space; he walks away prior to paying for the mango, so “he turns around and walks back” to pay, “and lifts it to his nose” (77). The scent of the mango produces a vague image “from very away” (77), which can be read as an allusion to the Indian origins of mangos, and the Indian population in the western areas of Johannesburg.<sup>19</sup> Though, Pop manages to compare the smell to “[f]resh sheets hanging up in the sun on the farm, before ironing” (77), in a reflection reminiscent of a nostalgic framing of his past in the *platteland*. This memory briefly creates a moment of contemplation for Pop, in which he asks himself why the Benades “don’t ever buy mangos at the end of the month” (77). Pop’s inability to answer his question about the realities of his family’s economic destitution, despite the image it produces in his mind, can be read as a parodic display of his incapacity to engage in a process of introspection, and uncover the root of the question: Pop and his family do not purchase mangos at the end of the month, because they cannot afford them. This impoverishment ultimately stems from their

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<sup>18</sup> The prolific urban studies scholar Jane Jacobs, comments in her monumental work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), that “cities are, by definition, full of strangers” (30). It is perhaps this quality of strangeness that can make one feel isolated within sprawling urban environments containing multitudes of people.

<sup>19</sup> The western region of Johannesburg has historically had a significant Indian population, many of whom owned shops and employed working-class Afrikaners (Lange 53).

lineage of poverty, the broader context of which was written out of the historical narrative of Afrikaner nationalism, despite the active role “poor whites” played in its development, by building the very railway tracks Pop drives over upon entering Braamfontein.

Pop keeps walking, and his insular facade of Afrikaner nationalism begins to fade away. Once more he references some indefinite quality about his experience, though he cannot articulate it clearly. He says he has “that feeling again, the one he had this morning in front of the mirror” (78). As he walks along Jorissen Street, “Pop sees a black man with only one leg”, and “takes out twenty cents and throws it in the man’s cap” (78), depicting how his attitude towards racial difference has transformed within the multiracial crowd. The racial hierarchies organising mapped onto the social landscape of apartheid South Africa are dissolved in this carnivalesque crowd. Pop then arrives at an “Ithuba stall”, a retailer of South Africa’s national lottery, and recalls that “Lambert’s always reading from the papers how much money people win—widows, Post Office clerks, even tramps” (78). This allusion to gambling is a skilful reference by Van Niekerk that further expands the sense of poverty, like the wine bags Lambert collects at rubbish dumps, that the Benades embody. In their sociological study of the relationship between gambling and economic classes, Jens Beckett and Mark Lutter speculate that “disadvantaged socioeconomic positions are associated with higher states of tension, leading to compensatory patterns of behaviour” (1156-8). Gambling, they state, “is such a pattern” (1156). With this in mind, Pop unsurprisingly tries his luck despite promising Mol he would get “bread and milk” after giving Treppie a lift to Commissioner Street (*Triomf* 78). Pop “buys a ticket and puts it down on the counter so he can scratch”, though the black women working at the Ithuba stall must first “explain to him where to scratch” (78). While scratching the lottery ticket, Pop *sees* the black woman “smile a big smile at him”, and he thinks, “[n]ever in *Triomf* has he seen a black woman smile at him like this” (78) further emphasising the insularity of his “poor white” Afrikaner identity and place in South African society. After a string of “three fives” and “three twenties”, Pop is seemingly intoxicated by the spirit of the moment, and is coaxed into buying one more ticket: he scratches off “three fifties” (78-9). Though he does not count the money until later, Pop won “[s]eventy-four rand a few cents” (79). Pop does not push his luck any further. In a parodic display of solidarity among white and black South Africans, Pop exits the queue and wishes “a big black man” good luck, who “takes him solidly by the *shoulder*” (79; emphasis added). Pop walks back to his car, and struggles to get in because of his “trembling” hands (79). The parodic effects of this scene are depicted in Pop’s anxiety and shaking hands; this “feeling” of his illuminates the kinds of elation that can occur in fluid and

active social spaces. But Pop lacks the grammar to identify his emotions, and introspectively contemplate where they stem from. To do so, it seems, would be for Pop to acknowledge the pitfalls of Afrikaner nationalism, as well as the ways in which this ideology indoctrinated him and the Benades, and led to their intense segregation from other people.

Later that evening after Pop returns home from Braamfontein, he and the rest of the Benades go out for cool drinks, cigarettes and chips. Pop comments that he “feels like a new person” (87), showing the kind of social enrichment that can occur when one ventures into unfamiliar social spaces in South Africa. At one point, Treppie asks Pop about “a good day”, and what it must “feel like” (89). Pop responds that one can just “feel it in [their] shoulders” (89), which is a vague description of his experience on Jorissen Street that were well outside of his typical routine in Triomf. Afterward, the Benades also visit the Spur restaurant chain for desert. While dining, the restaurant manager comes to them, announcing that the Benades “are sitting at the lucky table”, and as a result, their bill was paid for by the restaurant (97). Moreover, the Benades are given “six free meal tickets worth fifty rand each” while “the whole Spur starts clapping” (97). These meal tickets reappear during Lambert’s venture to the Martindale dump, and underline how Pop’s carnivalesque afternoon in Braamfontein can be read as a celebratory illustration of the end of the apartheid epoch, although, his experience is incomplete, because Pop does not seem to recognise the constraints of his nationalistic outlook. Lambert, however, does appear to realise these ideological hindrances, and gestures toward merging his “poor white” inheritance together with the democratic possibilities borne out of the emergence of a post-apartheid epoch, in his visit to the Martindale dump. Indeed, while leaving the Spur restaurant, it is Lambert who “lifts” (98) Pop onto his back because Pop says his legs are “hurting” (97). Pop “pushes his head down [...] into the space between Lambert’s *shoulders*” (98; emphasis added), signalling the relationship between these characters. Pop experiences a flurry of emotions representative of equitable social structures and inclusivity in Braamfontein, though his inability to describe or explain his feelings can be read as a parody of the social elation that characterises the end of apartheid and South Africa’s transition to democracy; but from this parody is the display of the redundancy and severely restrictive framework of Afrikaner nationalism within post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, as the academic Catherine Botha puts it in her article on notions of home and belonging in the novel, the Benades seem to long for encounters with cultural and racial others (28), the social significance I elaborate on below in my analysis of Lambert and heterotopias. The irony of his sensory experience walking in the street sheds light on the boundaries of this ideology’s fixed meanings, and

foreshadows the significance of searching for alternative social spaces to create new social relationships.

### **‘Now we’re tuned’: Lambert, Sonnyboy and the Martindale Dump**

Lambert’s pathway to, and experience at the Martindale rubbish dump near the border of Triomf, similarly engages with irony and a parodic tone. As part of a symbolic illustration of the death of the ‘old’ and birth of a ‘new’ and democratic South Africa, Lambert’s experience takes the boundaries of Afrikaner ideology displayed by Pop, and reinterprets these limits through notions of “epochal weaving”. Although I hinted at Lambert’s incestuous origins at the beginning of this chapter, I feel it is necessary to contextualise this characterisation here. This will help to illuminate the irony of Lambert as the novel’s unlikely marker of national growth.

Due to the ambivalent context of his conception, Lambert is physically deformed. He has thin “skin around his shins”; he has “big” feet, and “thick” and “knobbly” ankles; his big toe nails “are long and dirty. One is growing in. His other toenails are thick and skew from all the knocks. Dog-toenails, Treppie says” (*Triomf* 183). Lambert’s “big hands” have “funny, bent fingers, some of them too short, with knobs on the wrong places” (243). Each of these descriptions punctuate how Lambert’s physicality is an alternative illustration of a whiteness deformed. He is also, as I have highlighted, epileptic. The realities of this neurological condition have symbolic value in relation to this chapter’s reinterpretation of social space, and Johannesburg’s spatial histories. Lambert’s epileptic episodes are linked to moments of introspection that are crucial to his character demonstrating a carnivalesque reworking of Afrikaner identity that mocks the deficiencies of Afrikaner nationalism, while simultaneously recognising the democratic potential embedded within South Africa. Although the Benades live on the peripheries of Johannesburg because of the necessity to (dis)locate working-class whites to “enclaves of poverty,” which was part of “the ethnic imagining of the ‘new’ Afrikaner *volk*” (Bottomly 16; italics in original), Lambert lives in a “den” separate from, but attached to, the Benades’ house (*Triomf* 295). He exists on the peripheries of his family, which is to say he is removed from the social landscape of Johannesburg, enabling the author to negotiate, and transgress the borders of social space through his character, in search of “more poignant [possibilities] of possible communication” across physical and social boundaries (Libin 45). Thus, it is from this isolated position, discarded from the city and his family due to his heritage and birth, that Lambert, as a physical embodiment of the death of the abnormalities of

apartheid's racial separation, motions towards modes for transcending class-based, as well as cultural boundaries arranging social space, in search of new connections beyond the urban borders of Johannesburg, and the national borders of South Africa.

Lambert's journey to, and his episode at the Martindale dump, casts light on different methods for imagining how social space can contribute to the remaking of individual subjectivities. He begins his walk moving "up Martha street, across Victoria and into Thornton" (*Triomf* 238) crossing over subjugated histories reminiscent of Sophiatown. Indeed, at one point, Treppie comments that he read "the streets here in Triomf were named after the children of the man who used to own the farm on which Sophiatown was built" (363), signifying one of the ways in which not necessarily the novel, but the urban landscape of greater Johannesburg displays overlapping historical frameworks. While moving through these streets Lambert catalogues the environment around him, revealing his counterintuitive use of apartheid urban space. He continues, and "turns left and walks past Triomf garage" (238). Although Lambert says there are "Volkswagen experts" at the Triomf garage that could repair the Benades cars, he explains that "the Benades prefer getting their parts from the Chop Shop in Ontdekkers" because they are "cheaper" (238).<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, "Ontdekkers" translates to "road of discovery" and signals the potential for urban environments to be conceived of in more inclusive ways, like the heterotopic location of Martindale dump as I illustrate below.

Despite the meaning of the word "Ontdekkers" (discoverers), the Benades regard this main thoroughfare of western Johannesburg with suspicion. At the beginning of the novel, Treppie explains it is "actually just Ontdekkers that separates them" from Bosmont, a coloured community near Triomf that, according to Treppie, "crawls with nations" (4), revealing how their white Afrikaner subjectivities have trouble reconciling racially 'different' physical spaces around Triomf. Incidentally, Bosmont also has a rubbish dump that Lambert occasionally visits, however "the fucken Hotnots always stare at him, like he's a fucken kaffir or something" (237). He admits "he doesn't know what their case is, and why they shout at him like that: What you looking for over here, whitey" (237), which can be read as an illustration of the tension characterising social environments in which racial differences are aggressively asserted

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<sup>20</sup> This statement illustrates how the Benades' socioeconomic reality, the likes of which Pop cannot imagine considering his constricting racialised framework discussed above, produces a supplementary space outside of the urban framework of isolation created by the GAA. In other words, the Benades do not always use the city in racially exclusive ways because doing so is too expensive.

and policed.<sup>21</sup> As a result, he chooses to go “to the Martindale dump. The one behind the old jail in Long Street” (238). In this way, Lambert’s walk and his choice of rubbish dumps “actualizes” some of the “ensemble of possibilities” represented by the “spatial order” of urban Johannesburg (De Certeau 98). Through the ability to make a selection between finite relations in space, Lambert illuminates how the spatial practice of walking can thread seemingly disparate locations together. What additionally gives Lambert’s walk through social space subversive power, is the sight of white poverty his character displays.

The sight of white poverty that Lambert represents as he walks, is magnified when confronted with political movements that attempted to preserve the ‘purity’ of white Afrikaner identity through extreme interpretations of nationalism. While Lambert keeps walking towards the Martindale dump, he encounters two members of the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) across the street from him. The two members of this right-wing group that “used swastika-like symbols and broke up government meetings” (Thompson 234), try to cajole Lambert into joining their ranks. After crossing the street towards the recruiters, Lambert comments that he is “not used to walking like this” and that “his one ankle’s starting to hurt already” (*Triomf* 240), in an allusion to the symbolic weight of the Benades’ intergenerational isolation and destitution that Lambert embodies through his deformities. His pain also illustrates how isolated in *Triomf* Lambert is. Immediately, Lambert notices how the two men dressed in “khaki pants and maroon berets” (239) begin to “look him up and down” (240). Their gaze, like those who stare at him from the Bosmont dump, unsettles Lambert. After a series of exchanges, he gets the sense the AWB recruiters “want to use him” (241) for their political aspirations. He responds, “[s]orry, gentlemen, I’m NP” (241), ironically using the indoctrination of “poor whites” by the NP political machinery to differentiate between minority groups. Due to Lambert’s inheritance of the rhetoric of Afrikaner nationalism, he interprets the AWB members to be different from his own nationalist views, and therefore as contradictory to his necessity for preservation. He similarly displays a reliance on isolation that also distinguishes Pop’s character, and his “[s]weet, sweet, sweet” (98) experience of the death of apartheid in Braamfontein. After being greeted by one of the recruiters, Lambert recalls how “Pop always tells him he mustn’t talk to strangers and he mustn’t trust them” (240) further emphasising Pop’s internalised belief in segregation. Lambert declares he does not “do

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<sup>21</sup> The scholar Lara Buxbaum, who has written extensively on Van Niekerk’s fiction, writes in her article about bodies on display in *Triomf*, that the perfunctory social methods apartheid employed as “ways of seeing others” can “justify and produce a certain being or mode of existence” (200).



kaffirwork” and these recruiters should “[t]ake [their] fucken AWB and stick it up [their] backsides” (243). Their responses demonstrate the rigid intersection of race and class in the formation of white Afrikaner identity, as well as the ambiguity surrounding white poverty in Afrikaner history. One of the AWB members says they should “[l]eave the rubbish alone [...] he’s just a piece of rubbish”, and the other comments he “really didn’t know you still got people like that around here” (243). These statements attribute to the fact that Lambert can, as a walker, “weave places together” (De Certeau 97), such as the enclave of poverty that Triomf represents, which would have otherwise remained separate from the rest of Johannesburg—and South Africa. Lambert, as the “waste wool” of Afrikaner nation building, eludes being placed into neat racial categories, because of the contradictory image of whiteness he represents. His impoverished presence and the intergenerational effects of poverty he displays, call into question notions of racial purity, and dissolves the convergence of race and class within the discourse of Afrikaner nationalism.

When he walks away from the AWB recruiters, Lambert, like Pop when the Benades leave the Spur, is slowed by fatigued legs. Although he “walks away, fast”, he is “limping” because his “knobbly” ankles “got sore from standing there so long” (*Triomf* 243) symbolising the physically inhibiting realities of Afrikaner nationalism the Benades faithfully flaunt, and Lambert embodies. Nevertheless, Lambert continues walking to the Martindale rubbish dump and engages with a carnivalesque reinterpretation of Johannesburg’s spatial histories of separation and subjugation through notions of “epochal weaving”. This location is significant because of the physical, as well as figurative, forms of trash it attracts. The reason Lambert visits rubbish dumps near Triomf is to collect “wine boxes” to store petrol for their “Great North Plan” (238). Michiel Heyns, novelist, and the translator of *Agaat*, writes in his article on recent white South African writing, how Van Niekerk draws on, and rethinks strong Afrikaner narratives, such as the Great Trek to cities (61), which is illuminated through this planned trip. These plastic wine bags are gathered so the Benades can flee Johannesburg and “get to the border” (229) after the forthcoming elections. According to Treppie, “petrol’s always the first thing that dries up when the shit starts flying” (244). This metaphor helps to expose the many ways in which people present themselves as trash, or are framed as such by systems of

oppression.<sup>22</sup> With this self-reflexive opportunity Van Niekerk navigates Lambert's route and the objects he gathers to re-use, appropriate and reinterpret Johannesburg's urban landscape.

Lambert's experience in the Martindale dump illuminates the potential for heterotopic locations to disable white Afrikaner subjectivity, and contribute to the remaking of the self. As Lambert approaches the gate of the dump he notices "a lot of kaffirs sitting and waiting for work" (245). These individuals are similarly located at the bottom of racial and social hierarchies. In this way Martindale can be imagined as a heterotopic location of deviation that not only collects the material rubbish of economic production. It is also a site that attracts social forms of "waste wool" characterised as "a class of superfluous men" (Mbembe 41). Heterotopias of deviation can also be defined as locations of "idleness" for "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (Foucault 4).<sup>23</sup> The Martindale dump also exacerbates Lambert's epilepsy. This condition is seen repeatedly in the novel before important experiences for Lambert. Prior to entering the dump, Lambert "has to wait for two container lorries to pass" (*Triomf* 245). The sounds of the lorries, "a hell of a racket," begin to affect Lambert, and he starts to hallucinate images of the lorries "[opening] up their jaws [...] Like they want to bite him with the teeth of yellow, dusty iron" (246). He describes a feeling of "pain shoot into his tail-end" (246), which by this point in the novel signals to the reader signs of an impending seizure. Prior to being rescued, "[f]oamy spit bubbles up inside his cheeks," and Lambert becomes anxious that "his mother's not here with her washing pegs" (246). His anxiety reveals the kinds of stigmatisation those with epilepsy face. Lambert though, is saved by a black man named Sonnyboy, who pulls Lambert out of the way of the lorry. When Lambert opens his eyes he is sitting face-to-face with a black South African "for what is probably the first time in his life" (De Kock 30). Sonnyboy's appearance confuses Lambert. He describes him as "sharp and yellow [...] But Lambert's not sure. [...] the man's legs are like broomsticks, with a string of beads around one ankle. Red and green and yellow. Almost

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<sup>22</sup> One such example of people being framed as "waste wool" can be found in the photography of Roger Ballen, who has been documenting white poverty in South Africa for over twenty years in his collections *Outland* (2001), among many others. While his photography provides a snapshot into a misunderstood context of post-apartheid South Africa, it does so by appealing to stereotypes of impoverished classes. Ironically, Ballen's portraits celebrate the strangeness of white poverty in a country where poverty is normative for tens of millions of people. Nevertheless, the subjects of white poverty in Ballen's photography are fetishised, at least superficially, for their marginalisation.

<sup>23</sup> In the South African cultural imagination, 'idleness' has played an important role in shaping race relations. The novelist J.M. Coetzee has a chapter about historical notions of "idleness" in South Africa in his book *Write Writing* (1988). He explains how words like "[i]dleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor" were deployed to characterise racialised vices, and create distance between the subject (18).

ANC, he thinks. Almost Inkatha. But not quite. He wonders what this yellow kaffir's case is" (*Triomf* 247). While this description of Lambert's is significant on multiple cultural and political levels, the ways in which Sonnyboy's compiled appearance complicates Lambert's (in)ability to categorically 'place' Sonnyboy, reveals how crippling apartheid's system of racial classification was. Interestingly to my close reading of this scene, this location explores the potential for people framed by systems of oppression as trash, like Sonnyboy, to subversively produce a counter-image to social forms of apartheid hegemony, illustrated by Lambert's racist bigotry. On the one hand, in this urban space "outside of all places" (Foucault 4), the difficulties Lambert experiences trying to 'place' Sonnyboy reflect the hollowness of Afrikaner nationalist discourse.

In this heterotopic space it seems Van Niekerk can manipulate cultural and social hierarchies ordering urban South African environments. Once upright and sitting, Lambert and Sonnyboy engage in a conversation that reveals the transgressive potential of heterotopias to engender "a sort of mixed, joint experience" (Foucault 4) in South African social space, that tries to, like De Kock observes, imagine what post-apartheid social relations might look like. After asking Sonnyboy where he lives, Sonnyboy says, "here, there, everywhere. Sonnyboy pola everywhere" (*Triomf* 250), touching on the ways in which the system of apartheid regulated and restricted individual mobility. Sensing his confusion, Sonnyboy pokes fun at Lambert, stating, "[y]ou're supposed to be able to tell just by looking at me, hey, boss" (251), acknowledging the racially hierarchy governing their interaction. Sonnyboy's lived experience is composed of border crossings and cross-cultural exchange, which represents a multilayered identity composition (De Kock 32). Lambert attempts to 'justify' his uncertainty to Sonnyboy through stereotypes that expose the limits of asserting cultural and racial differences, and simultaneously perpetuating the discourse of these differences. He explains to Sonnyboy, "you're too yellow [...] and you don't talk like a kaffir. Maybe you're just a Hotnot" (*Triomf* 251). Sonnyboy cheers, "[t]his whitey can't classify me" (251). Lambert instead asks where he comes from, and Sonnyboy says, "'I'm a Xhosa, I come from the Transkei, and some of us are yellow [...] That's why the bladdy Bushmen thought I was one of them, so I got a room in Bosmont right in among them'" (251) Sonnyboy's social and ethnic composition is a combination of several locations and environments in time and space, which temporarily interrupts Lambert's inability to classify him. These connections illustrate that lived experience is composed of pieces that are stitched together, and how important it is to think of ways for representing the relationships between seemingly disparate contexts as a means of adjusting

the trajectory of the future. Considering this, an alternative way for capturing connections in time and space in post-apartheid fiction is enacted by the objects Lambert and Sonnyboy exchange. This exchange illustrates how the framework of “epochal weaving” merges the historical and social context of the development of “poor white” Afrikaners and the Benades migration to Johannesburg, together with the democratising transformation of South Africa.

In the exchange below, Lambert additionally displays the celebration of the birth of a ‘new’ South Africa, to which notions of “epochal weaving” make possible a method for reconfiguring the interpretation of Afrikaner histories. Sonnyboy attempts to take advantage of Lambert, and asks if he would buy a revolver and binoculars from him. He explains to Lambert, “I need the money, man. I haven’t got a job. I live by my wits, you could say” (251). Lambert seems to feel empathy for Sonnyboy, responding, “[s]hame [...] ‘That’s bad’” (251). After Sonnyboy shows Lambert the gun, Lambert begins to display a kind of introspection about his identity, particularly his socioeconomic makeup. He says the gun is “too expensive [...] Just look at me”; he then “points to his clothes, his perished boxer shorts. He lifts up his arms so the kaffir can see the holes in his green T-shirt. ‘I’m also poor, you know’” (252). The carnivalesque spirit of the exchanges, which is amplified through a heterotopic lens, inverts the hierarchies shaping white Afrikaner society. Moreover, in this social space the carnivalesque themes of the novel are realised not only through Lambert’s ironic ability to contemplate his marginalised social positioning in relation to Sonnyboy.

Carnavalesque imagery is also more fully realised in the objects Lambert and Sonnyboy trade, which place the demise of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism side-by-side with the rhetoric of South Africa’s democratisation. Since he only has R50, Lambert offers the “six tickets” for the Spur that the Benades received while visiting the restaurant, after Pop’s “good” day (253). Indeed, Lambert thinks, “Pop’s luck is still rolling here today” (253) creating a thread between their experiences in Braamfontein and the Martindale dump. Lambert explains to Sonnyboy that he too, can go to “any Spur [...] In town. Blacks and Coloureds can go too, now. This is the New South Africa, remember” (253). He pitches the meal tickets within the discourse of South Africa as a ‘Rainbow Nation’ illustrating the kinds of social modifications taking place during the time of the novel. Sonnyboy then Lambert test the binoculars by looking at some writing on a container in the dump. He asks Lambert to read to him “what [Lambert sees] there” (255). Lambert reads: “[o]ne settler, one bullet’ [...] The letters have been scratched with a nail on to the rusted side of the container” (255). He feels threatened, and aggressively says to

Sonnyboy, “I’ll knock the shit out of you, kaffir” (255), revealing the shadow of Afrikaner nationalism still figuratively looming in the background. Sonnyboy though, uses the exchange to parody the soaring platitudes of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, exclaiming, “I love the NP, I love Mandela, I love Biko [...] So much love in this place, it sounds like fucken paradise” (255). In addition, he explains that he “‘can’t be bothered with all that shit, my man” (255), a statement that both mocks the grammar of post-apartheid South Africa, as well as foreshadow the reality that for many South Africans, despite the discourse of transformation, socioeconomic lived experiences remain largely the same.

At the end of their meeting the two characters exchange one last gift that provides a way for representing how the legacies of the Benades inheritance of poverty can be reworked. As a “bonus,” Sonnyboy gives Lambert what he says the “‘Boers call [...] a kaffir-harp. It’s like a Jew’s harp [...] We call it a *mbira*” (256; emphasis added).<sup>24</sup> Lambert repeats the word: “*umbiera*” (256; emphasis added). This contrast in pronunciation is significant on multiple levels through the ways in which it depicts the subtle consequences of asserting racial differences in relation to identity formation. Moreover, the mispronunciation of the word alludes to the deeply embedded racial tension underpinning each of their behaviour towards the other. Firstly, the parodic elements of this scene rest in Lambert’s inability to pronounce *mbira* correctly, which uses a stereotypical pronunciation of the prefix *m-* as ‘um’. This contrast proves to be symbolic of the ways in which cultural understanding through translation is fractured, but can be recovered through collaboration.

Secondly, the *mbira* gestures towards notions of “epochal weaving” by establishing a link between a harmonica Pop “inherited [...] after [Old Pop’s] death” (134), and the *mbira*. Pop inherited Old Pop’s harmonica because he “had a good ear and he had the beat” but, Treppie reveals, “he never played anywhere near as well as Old Pop” (135). In fact, Treppie remembers Old Pop as “a genius on the mouth organ [...] how Old Pop could keep a whole farmhouse hop-dancing with nothing but his mouth organ” (135). Old Pop mostly “played sad songs or Salvation Army tunes” (135) reflecting through music the economic impoverishment

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<sup>24</sup> In his book *The Soul of Mbira* (1978) Paul Berliner explains how across “black Africa” the *mbira* “has many regional names” such as “*sanzhi, likembe, kalimba*” (9). These names have many interesting linguistic connotations, and the “myriad forms in which *mbira* are found in Africa extend south to South Africa, north to Ethiopia and Niger, east to Mozambique, and west to The Gambia” (9). Moreover, Berliner summarises how “throughout Africa” this instrument is “performed in a variety of musical contexts, and can be “diverse in type, in function, and in musical style” (14-15), which demonstrates the adaptability of cultural forms, and the power of musical cultural collaboration.

characterising white Afrikaner experiences in the *platteland* prior to apartheid. With his great skill, Old Pop could play “full-mouth notes, with all kinds of trills and frills inbetween: majors on the out-breaths and minors on the in-breaths, the long notes stretched out on trills” (135) illustrating the potential for music—and, in a similar sense, writing—to reimagine contemporary, and historical contexts. The “trills and frills” and “jolly songs” Treppie remembers Old Pop playing “all the way to Jo’burg” to provide the Benades with “courage for the City of Gold” (135) demonstrate how the harmonica symbolises their family’s history of poverty. Indeed, after giving Lambert the *mbira* in the Martindale dump, Sonnyboy says that if Lambert practices enough, he “‘get a tune out of it some day’” (256) suggesting that the significance of the Benades’ memories of their migration to Johannesburg can be modified through the *mbira*. Through the framework of “epochal weaving”, learning how to play this instrument can be seen as negotiating new tones and musical phrases foregrounding the necessity for art forms to search for cultural similarities in the mapping of future post-apartheid trajectories.

The *mbira* Sonnyboy gives to Lambert is representative of certain possibilities of collaboration awaiting a democratic South Africa. When Lambert and Sonnyboy are introduced in the Martindale dump, they are forced to engage in a social interaction outside of the racial and cultural categories outlined by apartheid ideology. This location is characterised not only by its physical collection of waste, but also its potential to serve as a space that accommodates interaction between marginalised individuals and groups. Sonnyboy, unlike Lambert and Pop, is not characterised by his isolation; his movement, and his ability to continue moving is what allows him to narrate an alternative perspective. As an individual that is perpetually in motion, Sonnyboy “[lacks] a place” in relation to walking as a spatial practice (De Certeau 103). In light of this, the Martindale dump paradoxically becomes an environment that is destructive and constructive. This location deconstructs Lambert’s isolated, white Afrikaner subjectivity and compels him to construct a relationship based on sameness, not difference. With this in mind, I argue Van Niekerk employs Lambert’s pathway to Martindale dump as a creative alternative for imagining how social space can be framed, and thus practiced. This encounter encourages Lambert to examine his self in relation to a black South African, and symbolises the narrative potential for illustrations of “epochal weaving” to reinterpret historical South African contexts. Lambert is not ‘saved’ by the ideologies of nationalist rhetoric passed on to him through Pop; he is rescued by Sonnyboy, an individual subjugated by the same ideologies employed to control and limit his character, which suggests an alternate way of writing urban

environments “based on ideals of community” and the respect of difference, rather than “ordering it into a hierarchy” (White 86). The novel thus employs the prospect of a ‘new’ South Africa to both parody and thus promote this future (Hariman 247-8), and signal back to the layers of subjugation informing social relationships across boundaries, which merges historical epochs together. Considering Pop’s incapacity to contemplate and question the racial framework of exclusion he subscribes to, Lambert’s and Sonnyboy’s cheerful and parodic exchange of a few items illustrates how the carnivalesque imagery of South Africa’s national transformation, empowers notions of “epochal weaving” as a literary framework for reinterpreting historical contexts. It seems Van Niekerk explores methods for cultural collaboration as ways of meditating on the complexities of the past.

Through creative ways of writing about the lived experiences urban space, the novel suggests alternative modes for constructing the self that are not rooted in an “insularity which is destroying (internally) Afrikaner identity” (Brophy 104). This interaction represents not only a physical, but also a social embracing of otherness; and thus, it is through Sonnyboy, a black South African that lives in the culturally heterogenous location of Bosmont mentioned earlier in this chapter, that Lambert is rescued, and has a tender exchange with. Martindale dump represents a heterotopic environment because it cannot accommodate and reproduce the cultural and social boundaries dictating social relationships. Instead, it is an imagined location that welcomes the “rubbish” of society—Lambert as the “rubbish” of white Afrikaner society, and Sonnyboy, as a black South African reduced to “rubbish” under the ideological constructs of the apartheid regime—by celebrating the cultural possibilities intrinsic to a country like South Africa.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter thus showed how Lambert and Pop use Triomf and surrounding areas through the spatial practice of walking in relation to the senses and carnivalesque imagery. I showed how reading the novel within a carnivalesque context illustrates Pop’s character as an embodiment of the erosion of apartheid, and Lambert, oddly enough, as a marker of post-apartheid growth. Lambert also can be seen to allude to cultural collaboration and negotiation through notions of “epochal weaving”, and the relationship between the harmonic and *mbira*. In her writing Van Niekerk seems to emphasise peripheral characters and locations—like the heterotopia of Martindale dump—that allow for cultural collaboration and exchange to take place unencumbered by homogenous modes of thinking. In other words, social change or

transformation is, at best, marginal. Van Niekerk adopts a postmodern tone and parodies the mythologies of Afrikaner ideology in order to imagine the conditions required for a ‘new’ society. By focusing on the metaphor for narrative engendered by the spatial practice of walking and notions of the carnivalesque, this chapter showed how fiction can engage with the margins of history to advance modes for writing and rewriting spatial histories, and rethinking urban social spaces in South Africa. My development of the metaphor of “waste wool” foregrounds a quote from Etienne van Heerden’s University of Johannesburg (UJ) literary prize acceptance speech, which I begin the following chapter on *Agaat* with. Van Heerden speaks about the different historical contexts Afrikaans literature can engage with, using “compost” as an analogy. This correlation establishes a connection between the novels, which I return to in an intertextual analysis in the final chapter.



## Chapter Two:

### Metaphors of Narrative and Metafiction in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

...what remains of the mending and the making and the joining and the fixing...

(Van Niekerk, *Agaat* 323)

The previous chapter explored the significance of alternative infrastructures of social space, and repositioning marginalised spatial histories through notions of the carnivalesque in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (2004). I now turn to her second novel *Agaat* (2010), to analyse her reinterpretation of literary histories embedded in the landscape of this Afrikaans *plaasroman* (farm novel), through the narrative strategy of metaphor. While I elaborate on the significance of metaphors below, the novel begins and ends with a Prologue and Epilogue from the perspective of Jakkie de Wet, a white Afrikaner who lives in Canada that defected from the South African Defense Force (SADF) in the 1980s. Jakkie receives notice that his mother is dying, and describes his feelings of cultural and national alienation that ensued after he abruptly left the De Wet family farm, Grootmoedersdrift, “without greeting or explanation” (*Agaat* 1).<sup>25</sup> Although this chapter is not concerned with transnational themes, some of the emotions Jakkie articulates have resonated with me the longer I have lived outside of the United States (US). For example, he declares “parting” from one’s home “is no single act, it is like a trailing streamer” (1), calling attention to the mysterious ways past lived experiences continue to shape one’s perspective. With this in mind, the specific narrative strategies I isolate for my close reading of the novel motivated me to contemplate my relationship to the US, not as a personal thread that has been cut, but one that has been altered into a different pattern.<sup>26</sup> Thus, each of the metaphors isolated for close examination in this chapter suggest modes for narrating subjectivity as a continual process of becoming. In addition, this chapter considers how specific

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<sup>25</sup> While I do not discuss Jakkie’s narrative thread in this thesis, an extended discussion of this frame can be the scholar Jean Rossman’s article “‘There’s another story here’: Skewing the Frame in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*”.

<sup>26</sup> It is not surprising my research of Van Niekerk’s fiction, and in particular *Agaat*, prompted me to rethink my relationship to the United States as a narrative of becoming. According to the prolific anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, in their book *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (2013), the global ‘South’ has been thinking of individual identity as a process of becoming rather than being long before it has become a trend in Western discourses. In their research on Southern Tswana culture and social relations in South Africa, the Comaroff’s explain how Tswana identity is, and always has been mapped in a “socially fluid” landscape that leaves certain relationships undefined “because, in the normal course of events, they were growing, developing, becoming. As were the human beings involved in them” (55-6). With this in mind, the different narrative metaphors in *Agaat* illustrate ways for accommodating the ambiguity of allowing individual, as well as national memory, to grow and be reimagined in various contexts.

metaphors can be used as metafictional strategies to rethink the significance of the *plaasroman* in post-apartheid literature. These metaphors are read through Mikhail Bakhtin's literary chronotope defined in the introduction and further discussed in the methodology below, which provides a worthwhile framework for reinterpreting the Afrikaans farm novel.

Metaphors are versatile, and can play important roles in the development of narrative strategies. The novelist Etienne van Heerden who, like Van Niekerk, has broadened the scope of white Afrikaans writing in post-apartheid fiction, referred to (Afrikaans) language as “compost” in his acceptance speech for the University of Johannesburg Best Fiction Award for his novel *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (2008). For him, “compost” is a metaphorical site where *die heengaan en die nuwe groei*, the past and present/future ferment, to produce fertile soil for new imaginings (2).<sup>27</sup> When thought of in relation to genre, the metaphor of “compost” suggests thinking about the decomposition of the farm novel, and using the organic material as fertiliser for fresh fiction to emerge. Similar to representations of “waste wool” that were discussed in relation to the Benade family's social positioning in Chapter One, the notion of “compost” is thus helpful for framing my literary examination of *Agaat* as an archival engagement that nourishes a reinterpretation of history and literary traditions in the manure of metaphor. Van Heerden's use of “compost” also overlaps with notions of “epochal weaving”, a framework I use in this thesis to trace connections between South African epochs. In this chapter, I pick up the discussion of the *mbira* at Martindale dump from Chapter One, and extend it through a specific feather duster named “Japie” (*Agaat* 337) that illustrates how *Agaat* metaphorically brushes the dust off “old or redundant definitions of Afrikaans and Afrikaans culture in order to consider possibilities for new definitions” (Devarenne 642). Additionally, I show the historical and political symbolism of fresh spinach cooked in the narrative present of the novel, grown with the help of the “compost” produced by the narrative past.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Meg Samuelson writes about metaphors as a narrative strategy in her article about the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (1996). She writes how the TRC negotiated between recording multiple perspectives of

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<sup>27</sup> I paraphrase a Van Heerden's comments that his own novel serves as a space “*waarin die Afrikaanse taal 'n kompos word [...] waarin die heengaan en die nuwe groei van dinge stinkerig, ontbindend, heerlik voedsaam, maaiër*” (2). Van Heerden is, according to Leon de Kock, one of the leading voices in Afrikaans literature, and, like Van Niekerk, his work negotiates transnational shifts in Afrikaans writing (“Does South African Literature Still Exist?” 80).

the past, and conjuring a sense of reconciliation to move beyond the violence and injustices of apartheid. Samuelson, like others, argues this contradictory endeavour favoured “a single”, national sense of closure attempting to establish reconciliation as “the end of the journey of the unravelling story of the past” (64-5).<sup>28</sup> Samuelson’s criticism of the TRC’s narrative is useful to my close reading of *Agaat*, because the TRC was concerned with exploring how the turbulence of South Africa’s violent past should be narrated from a post-apartheid perspective. The novel similarly approaches this relationship through the narrative strategy of metaphor, and unlike the TRC, cautions against “the enticing mirages of fresh, clean pages” (Samuelson 64) that seem to characterise narratives of reconciliation. Samuelson goes on to discuss the potential for metaphor to reinvigorate historical contexts in South African fiction. In response to the TRC’s “insistence on closing the book of the past and opening new chapters” (64), she highlights metaphors for narrative, such as “images of tapestry and weaving”, to enrich the sense of South Africa’s complicated past. When employed to represent historical contexts continuing to shape the post-apartheid epoch, these strategies suggest writing stories of “becoming rather than being; they favour process and creative reworking over completion and complacency” (Samuelson 67). To this list I add images of gardening, which can (re)inscribe the landscape through the arrangement and growth of plants and flowers. This metaphor can accommodate South African writers’ attempts to grapple with ambiguous overlaps between the apartheid, and post-apartheid epochs, because gardening imagery offers an alternative literary space for discursively engaging with multiple historical contexts. I draw from Samuelson’s conceptualisation to illustrate how each of the of three metaphors isolated for my analysis suggest reading *Agaat* as a novel expanding the scope of the South African farm novel, by foregrounding more broader national and political contexts. Her understanding of metaphors for narrative was fruitful to my analysis in this chapter, in view of the fact that it stresses the importance of contemplation and revision—as part of a continuous process of growth—in relation to Afrikaans writing and history.

Negotiating the historical overlap between apartheid and post-apartheid epochs in literature, necessitates thinking about the framing of history as an ambivalent undertaking. In the

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<sup>28</sup> Jacob Dlamini also writes about the pitfalls of the TRC and its findings in his book *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (2014). Through the example of Glory Sedibe, a freedom fighter turned apartheid agent, Dlamini underlines how the TRC’s framing of “victims” and “perpetrators” downplays the complexities informing individual agency (15). Dlamini argues that to view Sedibe, who is also referred to as Mr XI, “as only a ‘victim’ is to hide from historical view his agency and to diminish his capacity to act” (15). I highlight this example to emphasise, and indeed foreground, the intricate relationship between historical interpretation, and historical framing.

introduction I referred to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work. He stresses the significance of probing illustrations of historical overlap to "discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others" (25) in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). This elucidation sheds light on the relationship between social and political contexts that inform the production and framing of historical narratives. In other words, historical interpretation is dependent on time and place, a condition that is relevant to studying the *plaasroman* from a post-apartheid perspective, because of how this genre, which I contextualise below in relation to *Agaat*, elaborated on "the invocation of an idealized [Afrikaner] past" (Warnes 72) that is specific to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the first half of the 20th Century. As an international scholar whose relationship to Van Niekerk's fiction was shaped by specific cultural contexts that had transcended the national borders of South Africa, and been translated into English, I was prompted to approach *Agaat*'s representation of the past and present through metaphors for narrative that seemed to not only bridge this gap, but these metaphors also embraced this historical ambiguity as stimulating discursive spaces to reimagine the literary potential for the *plaasroman* to be developed within post-apartheid contexts.

In *Agaat*, Van Niekerk seems to foreground her reinterpretation of the *plaasroman* with the relationship of Milla de Wet and Agaat Lourier. This relationship is stitched together through Milla's four narrative perspectives. While this section provides a summary of the novel, I elaborate on the significance of each narrative thread in relation to South African contexts below. Milla is a wealthy white farmer dying of motor-neurone disease being cared for by her former servant, Agaat, who is coloured (see footnote 3). Confined to a single bed, Milla is "locked up in [her] own body" (*Agaat* 18), and dependent on Agaat for her wellbeing in the final days of her life. The fact that Agaat is coloured profoundly shapes her relationship to Milla, and emphasises her ambivalent 'place' within the De Wet family.<sup>29</sup> For example, the scholar Antoinette Pretorius writes about Agaat's coloured identity in relation to representations of masculinity, and comments that Milla recognises the "interference" her upbringing of Agaat has created in her racial identity, but "does not realise that Agaat will also never be able to be associated with white people" (33). When Agaat was young, Milla took her

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<sup>29</sup> For scholarship on this topic, refer to Helene Strauss' article "...[C]onfused about being coloured': creolisation and coloured identity in Chris van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*". For a discussion on the representation of Agaat's coloured identity in the novel, refer to Loraine Prinsloo and Andries Visagie's article "Die representasie van die bruin werker as die ander in Marlene van Niekerk se postkolonaie *plaasroman* *Agaat*".

from Milla's parents' farm, Goedbegin, and brought her to Grootmoedersdrift, where Milla lived with her "attractive, witty and well-spoken" (*Agaat* 21) husband, Jak de Wet. She found Agaat "crouched in the corner of the blackened hearth with the knuckles of one hand crammed into her mouth" (546) in a back room on the farm. Milla was childless after twelve years of marriage which motivated her to take in Agaat and cultivate her within the discourse of white Afrikaner women, as if she were her own daughter.<sup>30</sup> Though, the intricacies of Milla and Agaat's relationship transform once Milla falls pregnant with Jakkie and Agaat is moved to "the middle storeroom" (30) behind the homestead on Grootmoedersdrift. This figuratively potent location outside of the farmhouse but connected to the farm is representative of labourers' quarters still seen on farms and behind suburban homes in South Africa. This space, similar to Lambert's "den" discussed in Chapter One, is located on the periphery of the homestead on Grootmoedersdrift, which emphasises Agaat's intimate relationship to Milla and the physical spaces of the farm, as well as her distanced subjectivity of servitude. The "middle storeroom" additionally illuminates *Agaat's* relationship to the *plaasroman* tradition "that prefigures it" (Van Houwelingen 96), highlighting how Van Niekerk navigates the literary history of the genre within the fluid context of South Africa's transition to democracy.

As I mentioned, the story of Milla and Agaat's relationship is skilfully stitched together through four narrative threads. The first narrative thread—set in 1996, two years after the end of apartheid—is from Milla's internalised first-person perspective. She has lost the ability to speak due to her deteriorating physical condition, alluding to the fact that the grammar of Afrikaner nationalism, as was illustrated in Chapter One, is redundant in post-apartheid South Africa. The second thread is narrated in the second-person, set in the past in Milla's memories, and recalls her relationship with Agaat. In this frame the novel is able to create a reflection of Milla's relationship to Agaat that encourages Milla to contemplate discontinuities in her memory.<sup>31</sup> The third thread is articulated in Milla's first-person diary entries she kept while

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<sup>30</sup> Milla's cultivation of Agaat is a topic extensively analysed in Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren's article "Examining the Servant's Subversive Verbal and Non-Verbal Expression in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*". Carvalho and Van Vuuren trace whether or not it is possible for an individual subjugated by an oppressive system, to use the tools of that system in subversive, and emancipatory ways. I return to this article in my close reading of images of embroidery later in this chapter.

<sup>31</sup> In his discussion with Van Niekerk and the translator of *Agaat*, Michiel Heyns, Leon de Kock comments that in his reading of the novel he was interested in the significance of the second-person narrative thread. He explains that he was "very struck by the use of the second-person" and how this framework allows one to "reflect upon yourself, but in fact [address] yourself" exposing "interesting gaps of self-ironising" (143).

raising *Agaat*, which *Agaat* rereads to her in the narrative present,<sup>32</sup> bringing to mind journals written during South Africa's colonial past.<sup>33</sup> Finally, in the fourth thread written in the first-person, Milla ponders her death in passages of poetry posing as prose, illuminating the power for fiction to explore the depths of the past, asking, for example, “*in what subterranean seams does history precipitate*” (*Agaat* 42; italics in original).<sup>34</sup> Through the use of this complex narrative structure, in which scholar David Medalie suggests it is “impossible” to decipher where the novel begins and ends (10), *Agaat* writes against fundamental notions of Afrikaner cultural nationalism interlaced into the *plaasroman*. With this in mind, Milla and *Agaat*'s relationship in both the narrative past and present, can be used to map and emphasise issues related to racial identity and land dispossession, as well as metaphor as a narrative strategy for excavating and foregrounding these themes.

I first revisit the development of the *plaasroman* genre in relation to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, to contextualise the cultural and political significance of the novel. As I show through the work of the prolific novelist J.M. Coetzee, in his book *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), as well as other scholarship on the genre, the Afrikaans farm novel is closely associated with a mythologised framing of white Afrikaner relationships to the South African landscape.<sup>35</sup> By revisiting the lineage of the *plaasroman*,

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<sup>32</sup> For criticism on this narrative strategy refer to scholar Louise Viljoen's article “Die dagboek as narratiewe strategie in Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat*”.

<sup>33</sup> One example of a South African travel journal is *Beschrywing van de Kaap der Goede Hoop*, or *Description of the Cape of Good Hope* (1971), written by François Valentyn, and edited by Dr. E.H. Raidt. Valentyn was a minister of religion, born in the Netherlands in 1666. He traveled widely between Dutch colonies through the Dutch East India Company. His journal provides a look into the origins of the former Cape Colony, descriptions of Table Mountain, “Lion Hill” and “Devil's Hill” (67), as well as the Company Gardens, which he describes as having “in abundance all the rarest trees from all four parts of the world” (99). As an international scholar, journals like Valentyn's, provided me a first-hand account of the perspective of the coloniser in South Africa.

<sup>34</sup> Although this chapter and research project does not engage with the relationship between the Afrikaans edition of the text, and the English translation, Van Niekerk suggests in her discussion with De Kock and Heyns, that Heyns' translation of these passages may be an example of “a huge gain” from the original Afrikaans text. She adds that Heyns' “poeticising power got rein [in those passages], and with remarkable effect [...] sometimes really beautiful, more beautiful than the Afrikaans” (147).

<sup>35</sup> It is not unexpected that much of the criticism of *Agaat* has focused on its relationship with the *plaasroman*. For a comprehensive analysis of *Agaat* as a postcolonial farm novel, refer to Prinsloo and Visagie's article “Grondbesit in 'n Postkoloniale Plaasroman: Marlene van Niekerk se *Agaat*”. One such way the novel reworks the Afrikaans farm genre is by foregrounding issues relating to gender, which are outside of the scope of this chapter. According to Coetzee, “in the farm novel we find women, in effect, imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast-function of giving food to men, cut off from the outdoors” (9). With this in mind, the scholar Eva Hunter writes about white women writers, specifically Antjie Krog and Van Niekerk, in post-apartheid South Africa. She argues *Agaat* “deconstructs the lineage of Afrikaans farm novels” by exploring not only underwritten notions of gender, but also “the enmeshment of white Afrikaner women within the web of race, class, and gender relations that ran through the structures of apartheid” (84). Cheryl Stobie writes in her article about the novel's

Van Niekerk utilises a genre previously employed to produce elaborate justifications of land ownership and belonging, in search of new grammars for imagining these notions in post-apartheid contexts. *Agaat* returns to some of the fundamental components of Afrikaner cultural nationalism, and through the novel's complex narrative structure presents the history of Grootmoedersdrift as fractured and subject to contestation. In doing so, the author seems to highlight the expendability of these notions when conceived of in relation to the South African farm novel, and instead underlines metaphor as a powerful narrative strategy for creating new themes in future pastoral fiction.

In my analysis of *Agaat*, I begin by illustrating how Van Niekerk, through Milla, seems to self-consciously address the subject of writing and narrative structure in the beginning of the narrative present. This discussion merely gestures toward the metafictional techniques *Agaat* later displays through embroidery and gardening. I then trace the cultivation of the garden of Grootmoedersdrift, in both the novel's past and present, in relation to Milla's cultivation of *Agaat* "much as one would a wild animal which has to be caught and transported" (Van Vuuren 95), and as a good servant "like a shiny share that shears with ease" (*Agaat* 189). The garden can be read as a metaphor of narrative for metafictionally reinscribing Milla and *Agaat*'s relationship onto the landscape, as well as the text itself. This examination of garden imagery is facilitated through mirrors located in specific places in the homestead, revealing the significance of framing in relation to historical interpretation. Next, I focus on the maps of Grootmoedersdrift as a metaphorical space for reconstituting South Africa's larger history of land dispossession. These maps remain relatively obscure for much of the text, despite their obvious importance as a narrative device, alluding to the still emerging significance of land reform in South Africa. Thirdly, I explore how the novel again comments on the notion of fiction through the art form of embroidery, a metaphor for writing fiction that is stitched, and re-stitched, together as a narrative of becoming. Images of embroidery are thus suitable for reimagining the fabric of the *plaasroman*, because it advocates for narrative forms that continue

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religious undertones, and how the intersection of gender and race "lends itself to a feminist postcolonialist interpretation" (59). In her article about nationalism and the farm novel, Devarenne points out how Van Niekerk has written a novel "explicitly concerned with writing South African women's experience", and "[she] digs up the misogynist foundations of the genre, exposing the link between a formative Afrikaner nationalist view of land ownership and the mistreatment of women" (72). Alternatively, Pretorius focuses on the character of Jak, and his uncomfortable embodiment, and inability to perform a hyper-masculine Afrikaner identity. She writes about Jak's "crisis of masculinity in the novel", which is displayed by the tension characterising his privately and publicly constructed masculine identities" (29).

sifting through literary “compost” and for complexities and nuances with which to reinvigorate the genre.

### ***Agaat* and the Afrikaans Farm Novel**

In this section I provide an abbreviated summary of the historical context informing the *plaasroman* to foreground how Van Niekerk’s use of metaphor gestures toward reworking specific features of the genre. The history and development of the Afrikaans farm novel was indeed partly aligned with Afrikaner nationalist aspirations. This genre gained in popularity during the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the early parts of the 20th Century, due in part to its promotion of a rural Afrikaner cultural identity. In *White Writing*, Coetzee locates the Afrikaans farm novel within the context of the *bauernroman*, a pastoral genre that emerged out of German nationalism between World Wars, and Romantic formulations expressing the relationship “between landscape and national character” (63). Coetzee defines this literary framework as sketching “a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the earth” (82). Christopher Warnes similarly writes about the *plaasroman*, outlining that “in the decades preceding the coming to power of the National Party in 1948”, the development of the genre can be understood as “nothing less than a fictional elaboration of a cultural ontology based in Romantic conceptions of the relationships between land and identity” (74). Afrikaans writers during this period deployed nationalist ambitions in literature while reacting to extensive droughts in the *platteland* and migrations to the cities, the cultural significance of which was elaborated on in Chapter One in relation to the Benades’ lineage of poverty. As Warnes observes, Afrikaans writers during this period felt “an increased motivation [...] to define and support the Afrikaner cause” through the *plaasroman* (72).

The resulting growth of the *plaasroman* drew from Afrikaner nationalism’s interpretation of a unified (white) Afrikaner past, and utilised the South African landscape to inscribe a mythologised framing of this history. Coetzee notes that Afrikaans writers were compelled to celebrate “the memory of the old rural values” supposedly ingrained into the fabric of (white) Afrikaner identity, and hagiographise ancestors “as men and women of heroic strength, fortitude, and faith, and instituted as the originators of families” (85). Within this advancement of a glorified past, the *plaasroman* played a critical role in justifying Afrikaner claims to the land, despite South Africa’s colonial history of land dispossession. Notions of land ownership and belonging were therefore important themes in the farm novel, and tied to a mythical sense of ownership established by previous generations working and tilling the land. The theme of



ownership “specifically addressed, and attempted to justify this narrative of assumed belonging to the land” (Van Houwelingen 95) by illustrating a naturalised relationship to the landscape. According to Devarenne, the *plaasroman* ultimately developed “into an ideologically important genre justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land” (627). Despite the portrayal of land ownership established over generations, this pastoral interpretation of the South African landscape, as a location for defining (white) Afrikaner identity, also led to the erasure of black South Africans, and their labour. Coetzee elaborates on the subject of black labour in South Africa, explaining that if notions of ownership were meant to be inscribed by each generation, then “Africa’s new heir”, by which he means Afrikaners, “not only perform but, more important, be seen to perform” (5) the tasks required of farming. The contradictory task of the silencing “the black man” is therefore, according to Coetzee, “the easiest of an uneasy set of options” (5) structuring the Afrikaans farm novel. Issues pertaining to the genre’s obfuscation and subjugation of black South Africans, in relation to histories of land dispossession and notions of establishing ownership and belonging, are at the centre of my reading of *Agaat*’s reinterpretation of the Afrikaans farm novel. Through the different metaphors isolated for my close examination of the novel, I illustrate how the nuances embedded within Milla and Agaat’s relationship, point toward these features of the genre, and address the literary history of rural Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South African pastoral literature.

## **Methodology**

My reading of *Agaat* focuses on Van Niekerk’s revisitation to the literary, as well as cultural and racial histories submerged in the *plaasroman*. Thus, as I have noted, the methodological framework employed for my close examination of the novel utilises Bakhtin’s notion of the literary chronotope. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), a collection of essays on notions of time, and theoretical concerns related to generic distinctions and narrative structure, Bakhtin borrows from the grammar of mathematics and defines the chronotope (“time-space”) as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). What distinguishes the literary chronotope is its ability to illustrate “spatial and temporal indicators [...] fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” in which time thickens and space becomes charged by “the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). He goes so far as to say that the chronotope “defines genre and genre distinctions” (85). In short, a literary chronotope is a method for representing the physical “time-space” of a genre and plot. I found the chronotope enlightening for tracing Van Niekerk’s

take on the *plaasroman*, because the novel's plot is propelled forward through various symbolic objects in both the narrative past and present that both characters are confronted with. The chronotope of the Afrikaans farm novel, which aligns narrative time with a continuous process of growth, demonstrates how these objects assume new significance due to the shifting power dynamics characterising Milla and Aagaat's relationship. In a broader sense, when thought of in relation to narratives of becoming discussed earlier, the chronotope also illustrates the ways in which *Aagaat* is a post-apartheid extension of the genre preceding it.

I also found the literary chronotope fruitful for developing my discussion of metaphor as a narrative strategy. While this theoretical model is ultimately related to genre distinctions, chronotopes can be employed to render the complex narrative structure of *Aagaat* legible. Each of the specific narrative metaphors discussed below contribute to the representation of Grootmoedersdrift as an example of a post-apartheid literary chronotope by highlighting the social and political relationships between the narrative past and present. Specific descriptions of the garden of Grootmoedersdrift, Milla's old maps of the farm and the Overberg, and Aagaat's skill with embroidery are interlaced and function as independent pieces of the chronotope of the novel. The garden is concerned with working—or writing—the soil as an alternative to South Africa's larger and complicated history of land ownership, the undersides of which are symbolised in Milla's maps. These documents illustrate a traceable genealogy of land ownership characteristic of (white) Afrikaner identity being constructed in relation to the landscape. As Coetzee puts it: the pastoral solution offered by the *plaasroman* answers “the question of how the white man shall live in South Africa”, which is by retreating “into rural independence” (83), closed off from the diversity of South Africa's cultural contexts. The art form of embroidery, when imaged as an alternative form of writing, can negotiate this contradictory relationship between land ownership and identity, and is suggestive of a creative method for reconstituting the farm novel in a manner that negotiates the transition from a pastoral promise to a political imperative (Wenzel 96). In the “time-space” of Grootmoedersdrift, the novel seems to compensate for its historical connotations by using metaphor to broaden the thematic concerns of the genre. By doing so, *Aagaat* offers a different portrayal of the farm novel through the social and political intricacies underpinning Milla and Aagaat's relationship that reinscribes the genre's inherent racial contradictions onto the post-apartheid literary landscape; it also underlines metaphors as capable vehicles for exploring the nuances and roots of the literary history of the *plaasroman*.

Embroidery and gardening are two metaphors in the novel which can be treated as discursive spaces for enlarging the scope of pastoral fiction in South Africa. In addition, they feature as metaphors of metafiction. In her book *Metafiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh situates the historical context of metafiction within postmodernist thinking, and elaborates on the literary significance of this theoretical conception of self-reflexive writing. Waugh defines metafiction “as a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to post questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (3). She later describes metafiction as a practice of creating fiction “to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (6). According to Warnes, *Agaat* is “a self-consciously literary novel” (82), underlining the novel’s metafictional qualities. For example, embroidery and gardening are two metaphors of metafiction with which *Agaat* can be seen to reformulate her relationship with Milla and their shared past on the farm. One such way she achieves this is through framing the garden of Grootmoedersdrift for Milla, who is confined to her deathbed. Waugh explains how contemporary metafiction “foregrounds ‘framing’ as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world, and of novels” (28), suggesting that the perspective of the reader plays a role in determining the impact of how a particular history is framed, and thus interpreted. With this in mind, the different frames *Agaat* recreates the garden in, highlight the politics of historical representation, and demonstrates the pitfalls for writing post-apartheid narratives of reconciliation through a “single frame” for charting the future (Samuelson 65). In addition, *Agaat*’s skill with embroidery is illuminated when thought of as a metaphor of metafiction. As a metafictional metaphor for narrative, *Agaat*’s various embroidery projects suggests paying closer attention to the gaps outside Milla’s alternating perspective, gesturing toward alternative fictional spaces outside the main narrative frame. Waugh’s definition of metafiction is worthwhile to my discussion of the novel’s creative display of metaphors of metafiction, because these are metaphors of becoming that suggest exploring the underwritten legacies of the Afrikaans farm novel. The metafictional impact of these metaphors, the significance of which I pinpoint in the first chapter of the novel below, illuminates how the fictions *Agaat* creates through gardening, and in particular embroidery, simultaneously call attention to the fictions Milla has created about herself, and her relationship to *Agaat*. The social and political tension embedded in this opposition shed light on the similarities between assembling historical narratives in frames, and the creation of fiction through perspectives.

### Self-Conscious Beginnings

In order to illustrate the broader metafictional undertones of gardening and embroidery in *Agaat*, it is first necessary to trace how Chapter One foregrounds metafiction as one of the novel's central themes. This section thus contextualises Milla's efforts to write down the beginning of her relationship with Agaat at the beginning of the novel. The ailing, sick and speechless Milla, whose body has nearly shut down, ultimately fails to write anything at all, suggesting that white writers in South Africa must create new grammars rooted in metaphor for writing post-apartheid fiction. With that being said, Agaat's experimentation with embroidery, and her arrangement of the garden of Grootmoedersdrift, which I develop in the following section, alludes to the kinds of creatively-oriented narrative forms that can adjust the concerns of post-apartheid pastoral literature. If, according to Heyns, *Agaat* "takes the *plaasroman* by storm" (138), it does so by self-consciously displaying its relationship to other farm novels in the genre, and dissolving its mythical underpinnings to make space for new definitions to be created.

While in her "sickbed" during the infancy of post-apartheid South Africa in 1996, Milla contemplates the "depths" of her relationship to Agaat, and discusses her trouble communicating her desires to see her maps as a result of her inability to speak (*Agaat* 9). Milla remarks that it will "be the end of me yet, getting communication going. That's how it's been from the beginning with her" (8). These difficulties Milla faces trying to articulate her wishes to Agaat, what she calls "a kind of retarded logic" in which her intentions are broken down "into the smallest intermediate steps" (10), symbolise the tension characterising South African conversations about the lingering effects of apartheid in the 'new' South Africa. Agaat, seemingly to compensate for Milla's inability to vocalise her thoughts, tries to enable Milla's capacity to express herself through writing. She thus "hailed out the clipboard" for Milla, "from the lowest half-empty rack of the bookshelf" (12), gesturing toward the depths of the *plaasroman* remaining to be explored in future writing, which *Agaat* explicitly takes up through metaphor. Indeed, on the shelves above the clipboard are a number of titles of farm novels, such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), reflecting South Africa's larger pastoral tradition, and *Agaat*'s relationship to it as an extension of the Afrikaans farm novel genre. Using a "contraption" from Dr Leroux, the doctor who visits Grootmoedersdrift to attend to Milla as her motor-neurone disease worsens, Agaat "straightened [Milla's] fingers and fitted it over [her] hand" (11). Milla describes how "the brown leather bands" of this contraption, "were tightened to the first hole

and the chrome wing nut was screwed in as far as it could go” (11), alluding to the constraints of the *plaasroman* in relation to its historical connotations. She also comments that the device “looks like a glove for handling radioactive waste” (11), referring to the idea of writing as a way for mitigating the half-life of apartheid in creative modes. These methods confront notions of disposing of the leftover material in locked rooms through, for example, “single” frames advocated by the TRC, in order to avoid contaminating post-apartheid South African contexts.

Milla though, comments on the shortcomings of the writing apparatus. She explains that like each of Dr Leroux’s “gadgets [...] it works for a while and then no longer” (11), signalling the political imperative for finding new forms for writing rural fiction in South Africa.<sup>36</sup> The author’s creative process is here signified through Milla’s inner-contemplation: “I looked at my hand. I braced myself. I gestured, pen please. And paper. I can’t write on air” (11), initiating the metafictional occupation of the novel. In this way, the text “displays its conventionality” to the farm novel, and “explicitly and overtly lays bare its condition of artifice” (Waugh 4) as a means of searching for other literary spaces outside of Milla’s narrative perspectives. Agaat assists Milla; she “placed the pen between [her] thumb and index finger [...] It was a laborious arrangement” (*Agaat* 13). This shared process of creating the conditions for Milla to write alludes to the fact that Milla’s narrative perspective in the present is literally shaped by Agaat.

Milla proceeds with her effort to write, and implicitly hints at the narrative structure of *Agaat*, which is stitched together around her for alternating perspectives. She assumes to know what Agaat thinks about her attempts, stating she “could see what [Agaat] was thinking. Haven’t you perpetrated enough writing in your life? That’s what she thought” (13). However, Milla, in similar fashion to Van Niekerk, accompanies the reader into the domain of narrative construction and the complex web of the plot, willing the words to take form on the page. Time lapses, then Milla begins, declaring, “[n]ow I must write. Now I must make it worthwhile. What I unleashed” (14). Her next reflection demonstrates Van Niekerk’s carefully planned beginning of *Agaat* by using the Prologue: “[t]o start”, Milla thinks, one “[needs] a preamble” because it “is just as important as the action itself [...] You don’t just blunder into a thing, you examine it from all sides and then you make an informed decision [...] all the while keeping an eye on the whole [...] That’s how you retain control” (14).

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<sup>36</sup> In her article on mapmaking in the novel, Gail Fincham speculates on the potential for embroidery, which I discuss later in this chapter, to map a “new language in which the protagonists communicate an alternative vision of reality” (132) related to rural South African cultural identities.

As she struggles to “gather” her “resources” (14), Milla navigates “the marrowy pulp” of her memories “for the beginning” (18) of her story. In an extension of Van Niekerk’s creative process, Milla explains she can only begin writing once she “can imagine fine threads in the uniform texture” and draw “together in strings, until they’re thick enough to plait, first three, then nine, then twenty-seven and so on. Three hundred and sixty-three” (18-9). The way Milla imagines the type of narrative framework she feels will accommodate the ambiguity of her “destiny” (10), mirrors the type of novel Van Niekerk has written. Despite her ambitious effort, Milla waits “for the right moment” to “[w]rite” (19). As she builds up her strength to communicate to Agaat her wish to see the maps, she draws “one leg of the m”, then the pen “slips” from her fingers “and rolls over the bedspread and falls from the bed [...] [Her] hand lies in the splint like a mole in a trap” (19). Her failure to finish the word ‘map’ seems to highlight Agaat’s rejection of the *plaasroman*’s framing of (white) Afrikaner identity being shaped in relation to the South African landscape. This ultimately forces Milla to find metaphorical grammars for crafting her story, to which Van Niekerk seems to offer embroidery and gardening as suitable metaphors. As I show in my analysis of the garden, and Agaat’s prolific ability to embroider her own story below, the complexities of *Agaat* become legible through Agaat’s experimentation with these metaphors that double as metafictional strategies for conceiving of how post-apartheid pastoral fiction can be written. By beginning the novel with notions of metafiction, the text seems to self-consciously guide the reader towards figurative spaces removed from Milla’s narrative perspective. One of these spaces suggestive of new beginnings, is the garden, where Agaat cultivates her own sense of belonging on Grootmoedersdrift.

***“sow everything, it’s my last garden” (Agaat 135)***

This section turns to an examination of the oppositional relationship between Milla’s cultivation of Agaat as a meticulous servant, and Agaat’s cultivation of Milla’s final garden. The garden is a physical space that underlines a connection between Milla and Agaat, similar to the Spur meal tickets discussed in Chapter One, that link Lambert and Pop Benade together. I first show from various entries in the diaries Milla kept while Agaat was young, how Agaat is framed as a passive topography for Milla to inscribe her authority through the narration of her singular first-person perspective. In these entries Milla describes the young Agaat insofar that she internalises her subservient role, acknowledges and reflects Milla’s power. The single frames created by each diary entry are then contrasted with the images of Milla’s last garden

that Agaat planted for her in the narrative present, which are assembled in multiple frames. While in bloom, Agaat recreates a representation of the garden for Milla to view in the room she is confined to, through a variety of frames that are reflected in a mirror. These frames and the particular perspectives they afford Milla gesture toward an alternative internalisation of the physical space of the garden that Agaat has created for her. Notions of framing are important in metafiction, because they highlight how “life” is constructed through frames (Waugh 29). I thus read Agaat’s maintenance of the garden, and the assembling of its imagery in frames, as a self-conscious demonstration of her agency that is enhanced through her contradictory framing as obedient servant and ‘adopted’ daughter. This contradiction suggests gardening as a metaphor for rearranging interpretations of the past in new patterns.

The development of Agaat’s character is filtered through Milla’s first-person perspective in her diary entries. In these passages, Milla describes herself as “the one & only influence even if it is indirect” (*Agaat* 246) in Agaat’s life. Milla’s tone in these entries reveals her intent on displaying her capacity to “discipline” Agaat, which she will not allow to “be subverted” (437). Shortly after rescuing Agaat in 1953 from her parents farm during the early years of apartheid when Agaat was four or five years old, Milla records in a number of entries how Agaat, who is also referred to as “the creature” (392), would act like “wild animals do, insects, when they feel danger threatening” (393). This description illustrates how Milla views the young Agaat as feral and untamed, echoing the types of master-servant discourses used to justify colonial expansion in Africa. At one point, Milla reveals that she would keep Agaat “locked up in the back” when Milla could not be with her; she even contemplates getting a leash for her, like a “[d]og lead with harness” (392), speculating on techniques for taming Agaat. During the early stages of her quest to make Agaat “human” (402) by cultivating her within the discourse of master-servant relationships, Milla struggles to get Agaat to eat. From Milla’s perspective in her diary entries, Agaat is framed as “black, dense, light, like coal” (393), or otherwise unresponsive to Milla’s presumed power. The notion of eating is significant because it demonstrates one of the methods used to encourage Agaat to internalise her subservient role on Grootmoedersdrift, and ingest Milla’s authority.

After the new year, in 1954, Milla takes Agaat to the doctor, after all the “trouble the last few days to tame her”, and he recommends she “be fed lots of spinach and liver” (399) in order for her stomach and intestines to heal and develop properly. As I mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, spinach in particular, is symbolic in Milla and Agaat’s relationship, as a marker of

internalising authority, and because it is grown in the garden.<sup>37</sup> Later in the year, after Milla has struggled to get Agaat to speak and acknowledge Milla's rules, she writes that if Agaat "doesn't want to talk to me properly face to face", thus reflecting the sense of internalised authority Milla demands of her, then Agaat "doesn't get food and she stays in her room. That's the rule. Two days now" (436). Milla also uses a feather duster named "Japie" (404) to metaphorically shape her, and nourish her authority over Agaat. In this way, food becomes a tool for Milla to extend her framing of Agaat's disobedience to conform to the shape of her imagination. Taking into consideration the vantage point created through Milla's first-person narration in the diary entries, her intention is to seem generous towards "the small, deformed, pig-headed, mute child in the back room" (480) who must learn to "[c]ount [herself] lucky [...] that [she] was chosen & kept on" (140). These early entries Milla keeps while raising Agaat, of which there are many more, provide a single frame of Agaat's character that seemingly tries to obscure her aggressive, and abusive behaviour toward the child.<sup>38</sup> By cultivating Agaat within the frame, and thus the framework of subservience, Milla sees Agaat as in need of discipline—and food—without creative agency.

One method Agaat seems to take advantage of in order to display her creative agency outside of Milla's perspectives, is through the garden of Grootmoedersdrift. Although Milla cannot see the garden due to her failing body in the narrative present, Agaat takes great care to show Milla "something, something that's outside and inside" (176) her narrow subjectivity and illuminate the contradictions of Agaat's agency as both servant and adopted 'daughter'. Before I examine this garden, I first elaborate on its history in order to contextualise its wider symbolic significance in the present. At certain moments during Milla's memories in the second-person, she reveals her desire for a particular kind of garden. Indeed, when Milla and Jak first moved into the homestead on Grootmoedersdrift in 1947, one year before the NP gained control of South Africa in a whites only election, Milla comments she "had great dreams" for the garden, "but they'd have to wait" (37-8). She mentions how this garden "was untidy and overgrown" (37), an allusion to the physical landscape as being in need of cultivation, much like her framing

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<sup>37</sup> While I do not elaborate on this significance here, I return to images of spinach in the following section to illustrate notions of "epochal weaving" tied to an inversion of colonial connotations of occupied land that is metaphorically fed to Milla.

<sup>38</sup> For a more general discussion on the pejorative connotations of single frames, refer to the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Ted Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story". In this talk, Adichie, whose award-winning transnational fiction continues to contribute towards rewriting cultural relationships between the United States and Africa, discusses how single stories can become the only stories, which lead to the production of stereotypes.



of Agaat. Years later in the narrative past, when Jakkie is a successful pilot in the SADF serving in Angola, Milla seriously considers planting a garden. She envisions an imagined “paradise [...] without equal” for which Jakkie can come home to “one day” (383), signalling the novel’s overlap with the *plaasroman*’s attempts at establishing ownership in a “natural right”, through the “stewardship” of the farm (Coetzee 88). Nevertheless, Agaat plays an important role in the arranging and planting of this garden in the narrative past.

Milla requires Agaat to read specific texts as part of her cultivation of Agaat’s subservience, as well as her (white) Afrikaner identity. In my discussion of embroidery later this chapter, for instance, I highlight two other important Afrikaner cultural texts in relation to Agaat’s identity formation: the *FAK-Volksangbundel* (1937), and *Borduur So* (1966). During the planning and preparations for the garden in the narrative past, “Agaat took the garden books to the outside room and made her own study of them” (*Agaat* 388). In the course of Agaat’s reading of these garden books, she would sit with Milla “at the dining room table and make recommendations and see to it that [Milla] planned it all in the finest detail” (388), foreshadowing Agaat’s own skill for arranging the garden she plants Milla in the narrative present of the novel. At this point in the text, the novel’s chronotope is illustrated in the physical space of the garden, which becomes charged by the progression of the plot (Bakhtin 84). In other words, this literary model, which I pick up again in my discussion of the representation of the garden in the narrative present, illuminates how Agaat’s arrangement of this space prior to Milla’s death is a physical reflection of their complicated, and layered past. As a result of the tips Agaat gleams from the garden books, Milla “had a strong pump installed at the dam” of Grootmoedersdrift, “and on Agaat’s recommendation had a reservoir built for the summer on the rise behind the house” (388), which illustrates Agaat’s awareness of the relationships between independent pieces of a larger system. Echoing Van Heerden’s metaphor of “compost” referred to at the beginning of this chapter, Milla remarks that there was enough “compost material” (389) for the garden’s soil gesturing toward the ways in which materials left-over from the past can be used to help invigorate the present—and future. Taking into consideration Agaat’s arrangement of the garden in the narrative present, the attention she pays to the compost “every morning”, because it should not “be too hot, otherwise it kills the microbes” (389), also alludes to Van Niekerk’s reworking of the literary history of the *plaasroman*, which is realised through Agaat’s interpretation of the garden Milla conceives of in the narrative past. The author too, appears to carefully retrace the literary history of pastoral literature in South Africa.

The plans for this garden are expansive and extensive. On “one page after the other”, Milla schematically represents “the structure of the terraces, wider and narrower for variation [...] the scheme of arches and arcades and trellises that would grant the visitor access to prettily framed pictures of the garden” (386), in ways that foreshadow the importance of maps and mapping discussed in the next section. These plans also reflect the complex narrative structure of the novel, and underline the metafictional undertones of the metaphor of gardening. Milla imagines the garden as “a bower of beauty, on a few hectares” instead of “a higgledy-piggledy farm garden” (383), portraying an alternative contrast of a cultivated—tamed—garden, with a wild, overgrown garden. Milla pictures “arcades of rambling roses and round ponds with fountains, garden rooms [...] with laid out paths and boxwood hedges and vantage points” (383), illustrating the self-reflexive ways she thinks of the garden, and how it will be framed from within its borders. While she wanted the design of the garden to be formal, as if it were “a story”, Milla wished for it be “informally planted”, like “a fragrant visitable book full of details forming a pattern so subtle that one would be able to trace it only after a while” (383). Her conceptualisation of the garden as a metaphor of a story, appears to signal Van Niekerk’s intention to employ the physical garden as a discursive space to cultivate new interpretations of the farm novel. Indeed, framing the garden as “a composition, a sonata with theme and developments and repetitions in varying keys” (383), highlights how the textures of Milla’s wishes for a garden reflects the texture of *Agaat*, as a novel in which the themes and development of the plot only becomes clear at the end of the novel.

Once Milla’s body has deteriorated to such an extent that she cannot move without assistance in the narrative present however, the garden becomes a physical space outside of the farmhouse *Agaat* maintains for Milla’s viewing pleasure. Milla instructed *Agaat* to “sow everything” because it was her “last garden” (110). *Agaat* then, “for three days on end sowed seeds and planted bulbs” (110), recalling the kind of subservient “drilling” (523) Milla discusses in her diary entries. She begins to speculate on *Agaat*’s perspective, and wonders if *Agaat* had “drawn a plan”, like they did in the narrative past, or if *Agaat* was “more higgledy-piggledy” (110-111), hinting, perhaps, at *Agaat*’s interpretation of the garden as a return to the “untidy and overgrown” origins of the garden in 1947. The garden *Agaat* arranges and plants for Milla at the end of her life though, is only accessible to Milla through images reflected in mirrors. In the narrative present, Milla experiences the physical spaces of the garden through a “three-panel dressing table” (15) *Agaat* deliberately positions for Milla. *Agaat* carefully adjusts the panels

of this mirror illustrating the relationship between the garden as a metaphor, and what this suggests about the politics of framing.

In the narrative present Aagaat produces a figurative mosaic of garden imagery for Milla to experience. At two separate points, Milla describes the representation of the garden she sees. During one instance, Milla notices how the angle in the mirror has been turned “towards the stoep side” (129), indicating Aagaat’s silent manipulation of how Milla experiences the physical space of the garden. She is astonished, and states the image in the mirror is the “best” she has “ever experienced the garden”, and, in fact, that this sight is “always” how she “imagined the north-east side could look” (129). In the narrative past Milla conceived of a pattern “of different shades of blue” (129) in an effort to depict the multilayered texture of colours. As an extension of the multilayered fabric of the novel, the garden Milla sees reflected in the mirrors with “[b]lue perennials, iris, agapanthus, hydrangea, bushes of kingfisher daisies, annuals sowed in the low borders every year” (129) is a metaphor of the interlaced consistency of the novel.

During a previous moment in the narrative present where Milla again discusses the garden, she explicitly comments on the complex composition of the garden in multiple frames. In this image, Milla notices a variety of physical spaces on the farm “framed by the dark purple of the bougainvillea” (*Aagaat* 110). She continues specifically addressing the notion of frames, highlighting that her perspective of the garden is different than Aagaat’s. Whereas Aagaat can “see the whole garden, framed in the purple”, Milla sees this space as “carved up and jumbled together in fragments in three panels [...] The central panel is brighter than the other two. The one that broke long ago” (110) during one of Jak’s abusive outbursts towards Milla, which had since been replaced. The power of this replaced panel is similar to the example of the cracked vase Samuelson refers to in her discussion of metaphors of narrative, in that the new panel is the “inheritance and the container of [her] legacy” (66) with Aagaat on Grootmoedersdrift. Keeping in mind the literary chronotope of the farm, when Milla tries to “imagine the bits left out, the avenues of agapanthus [...] the borders of gillyflowers and wild pinks and snapdragons and purple and white petunias that Aagaat sowed and had planted in the late spring” (110), Aagaat displays her influence on the narrative. She both enables and constricts Milla’s ability to experience the physical landscape, denying the relationship between land and identity mapped by the *plaasroman*. Aagaat’s arranging of the garden and the parts she deliberately leaves out is suggestive of metafiction, and also highlights her missing narrative. It furthermore calls to mind the fact that Aagaat’s lived experience on the farm transcends the single frame Milla

imposes on her, and is instead composed of several frames in the three-panel mirror she manipulates for Milla, suggesting that life, like fiction, is created through frames (Waugh 29). Although Agaat's sense of self was shaped by Milla, the garden and its reflections are an illustration of how Agaat can add to their story on the farm; it is also how we as readers might develop some kind of awareness of her character's autonomy. As Milla observes, the "fragments" of the garden "in the mirror are a reproduction, a repetition of another plan, in another format. As a map is of a place" (*Agaat* 112), suggesting Agaat's, by extension the novel's familiar cultivation of the landscape in a new way.

**"What is an age without maps?" (*Agaat* 69)**

I now turn to an analysis of Milla's maps of Grootmoedersdrift. Milla's maps are an important part of her identity, and her inability in the narrative present to communicate to Agaat her wish to see them suggests *Agaat's* turn from the symbolic framing of the relationship between land and identity in the *plaasroman*. Not surprisingly, the subject of maps and mapmaking in the novel has been extensively discussed. Gail Fincham writes about embroidery as a new kind of mapmaking free from patriarchal discourses.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Van Houwelingen examines the novel's "patriarchal response" to the farm novel genre through the author's rejection of the mythical relationship between land and identity represented in the maps.<sup>40</sup> Lara Buxbaum elaborates on Van Niekerk's revision of the genre's patriarchal framing of the alignment of identity and landscape, arguing Van Niekerk "[deconstructs] the map" in "grotesque detail" through Milla's loss of the control of her body ("Embodying Space" 37). My analysis in this section takes into account existing criticism on the subject and theme of maps, and expands Buxbaum's discussion on Milla's use of the word "occupied" (*Agaat* 88) in relation to the desire to view her maps until she is "satiated" (105). While Buxbaum rightly acknowledges the overlap between Milla's uncontrollable bowel movements occurring at the same time Agaat reveals the maps in the narrative present, she does not mention that what satiates Milla is food Agaat has grown, "from her vegetable garden" (331) on the occupied land. Agaat's feeding of spinach to Milla, which causes her to defecate on to her maps and desecrate their historical and literary connotations, echoes a diary entry from 1953 considered earlier in this chapter, that discussed the "spinach and liver" she was fed by Milla to ingest her subservient identity.

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<sup>39</sup> Fincham writes in particular, about the ways in which "embroidery in *Agaat* offers her opportunities as a writer for self-reflexion" (142).

<sup>40</sup> Van Houwelingen specifically highlights how Van Niekerk denies Milla's ownership of the farm through Agaat, as well as "the white Afrikaner's drive to cultivate the land and civilize others" (98).

Moreover, Agaat also reintroduces a feather duster Milla used to furthermore cultivate and shape Agaat's position of subjugation, to sweep the dust off Milla's maps, and the broader history of land dispossession they represent in the narrative present. The spinach and feather duster are thus symbols of "epochal weaving" in the novel, which pinpoint two pivotal moments where the inversion of the power dynamics characterising Milla and Agaat's relationship in the narrative present, intersects with Milla's cultivation of Agaat in the narrative past. Moreover, through the lens afforded by the literary chronotope, Milla and Agaat's shared narrative past and present are merged within these objects, which illuminates how fiction can trace alternative and uncomfortable symbioses between the past and present that continue to linger in post-apartheid South Africa. The chronotope also sheds light on the complexities informing contentious claims to land ownership and rights, a fundamental principle to notions of transformations.

Milla's maps are deeply embedded within her individual and cultural identities in the novel. The maps, and thus by extension the physical landscape they schematically represent, are, according to Milla's mother, "in Kamilla's blood" (24), illustrating the alignment of her identity with land. Indeed, Milla comments that she knows these maps "by heart" (24). It is perhaps not surprising then, that Chapter One begins with a brief description of where her maps are located, which foregrounds the kinds of multilayered interpretations the theme of maps and mapmaking offer in *Agaat*. At the beginning of the narrative present, Milla explains to readers her efforts to "catch" Agaat's "eye", and lead her "there, where the shiny black varnish of the box showed, *under* the pile of reading matter. *Under* the growing pile of little blue notebooks, *under* the *Saries*, *under* the *Fair Ladys*, *under* the *Farmer's Weeklys*, on the dressing table in front of the stoep door, there" (8; emphasis added). This brief description of the black box *under* the copies of *Saries*, *Fair Ladys* and *Farmer's Weeklys* that contains her maps, alludes to the cultural texts that shaped Milla's rural white Afrikaner identity. The wider significance of these magazines enforced the cultural production of Afrikaner identities in rural contexts that shaped class and gender roles, racial oppression and the justification of land dispossession in South Africa. As I show in my close examination below, the mythical significance of these maps Milla seems unable to obtain in the narrative present, suggests *Agaat's* revision of the *plaasroman's* sketching of (white) Afrikaner identity being formed in relation to the landscape.

The history of Milla's maps provide a traceable lineage of her family's ownership of Grootmoedersdrift that extends back to the initial expansion of the colonial frontier of the

former Cape Colony. In the narrative past, shortly after Jak “came to declare his intentions to [Milla’s] parents” (19), Milla’s mother “took out the maps and spread the papers of Grootmoedersdrift on the dining room table” (23) displaying the documents that serve to underpin their belonging to, and ownership of the farm. These maps illustrate Milla’s “birthright”, one that her ancestors “built up in the sweat of their brow” (24), alluding to the colonial mindset that framed the South African landscape as untamed, and in need of civilisation.<sup>41</sup> As Coetzee observes in his discussion of the farm novels of C.M. van den Heever, the context of which is echoed in my reading of the maps in *Agaat*, “the myth of natural right” elaborated by the Milla’s mother, depicts how “the founding fathers pay for the farm in blood, sweet and tears” (87). Milla’s mother proudly explains to Jak that this farm “had been [Milla’s] ancestral land for generations back in her mother’s line” (23), signalling Van Niekerk’s incorporation of framing of a mythical relationship to the landscape through the memorialising of the ancestors (Coetzee 86). This history of the maps also highlights an inversion of patrilineal structures of memory interlaced in the Afrikaans farm novel (Warnes 80), by foregrounding the experience of women. Her mother explains to Jak that Milla’s “great-great-grandmother farmed there all alone for thirty years [...] way before the days of Hendrik Swellengrebel” (*Agaat* 24), suggesting the farm’s connection to the history of colonial expansion in South Africa.<sup>42</sup>

As the narrative present progresses, and Milla grows increasingly frustrated by her incapacity to formulate her longing to see the maps, she seems to believe she will find solace in the metaphorical sense of authority the maps, and the practice of mapmaking evoke. She repeatedly explains to readers that she wants “to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the maps of my region, of my place. Fixed points, veritable lines [...] the distances recorded and certified” (34). Later in the narrative present, she similarly declares, “I want to see my ground, I want to see my land, even if only in outlines, place names on a level surface” (49), recalling the techniques, such as place names and distances recorded and certified, that are used to establish ownership.

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<sup>41</sup> The geographer Itala Vivan writes in her article about the relationship between Western maps and representing the African landscape, that Europeans gazes “contemplating Africa in colonial times created stereotypes of immobility and primitivism and that ideologically contributed to justify the ‘civilising mission’” (53).

<sup>42</sup> The South African historian Edmund H. Burrows writes in his book *Overberg Outspan: A Chronicle of People and Places in the South Western Districts of the Cape* (1988), that Hendrik Swellengrebel “was the only colonial-born Dutch governor of the Cape Settlement” (6). Burrows recalls in his other book, *Overberg Odyssey: People, Roads & Early Days* (1994), that the district of Swellendam, which is part of the Overberg region, was named after Swellengrebel in 1745, who served as the governor of the Cape of Good Hope from 1739 until 1751 (Burrows 44). The founding of Swellendam signals one of the earliest examples of land dispossession in South Africa, as well as an expansion of the colonial frontier between the former Cape Colony, and South African interior.

Without access to her maps, which are an extension of her identity and underpin her sense of belonging to the farm, Milla struggles to comprehend the isolation of her deteriorating body, and the state of social and political ambiguity characterising her relationship with Agaat, the boundaries of which are not clearly defined. According to Buxbaum in her discussion of the novel, Milla's "identify is rooted in the farm to such an extent that despite the fact that she is dying, imprisoned in her body, incapable of movement or speech, she recognises herself in the farm; it mirrors and affirms a sense of self that she has lost" (37). Milla asks, "[w]hat is fixed and where? What real", later stating if she "could once again see the places marked on the maps, the red brackets denoting gates" (69). These questions and desires suggest that the loss of her ability to "send [her] eyes voyaging" (49) motivates Milla to contemplate her love of the land "only when it is too late" and she is "threatened" (Coetzee 91) with losing her farm.

The tension surrounding the maps culminates in a shocking scene that sees Milla defecating on her documents. I elaborate on the significance of this moment in the narrative in relation to notions of "epochal weaving", and its wide colonial context below. Prior to the maps being revealed, Milla thinks to herself why Agaat would "want to disregard the maps" (*Agaat* 276). Later, she says Agaat, "for her own murky reasons [...] cannot find it in her heart to go and dig up" the "old maps" in "the sitting room" (282), highlighting how she seems to deliberately withhold the maps from Milla in an effort to empty her physical body of its connection to the landscape. When Agaat does finally bring out the maps, she first feeds Milla fresh spinach "from her vegetable garden of which she's so proud" (331). When read through notions of "epochal weaving", Milla's narrative past and present intersect through the physical image of the vegetables she is fed. The spinach Agaat feeds to Milla harkens back to the spinach Milla used to feed her so Agaat could ingest her authority. This spinach, along with a laxative Agaat deposits into Milla's anus, force Milla to lose control of her bowel movements, which aggressively challenges the relationship between identity and land. While Milla has wanted to see her maps to feel "satiated" with what she has "occupied" (88) on Grootmoedersdrift, it seems as though the growth and feeding of spinach also demonstrates how Milla can begin to address Agaat as a "'blind spot' on the landscape, in Milla's narrative, in apartheid cartography, and indeed, in the *plaasroman*" (Buxbaum 39). This spinach also symbolises a way for Milla to ingest food from Agaat's land, and internalise not only Agaat's autonomous agency in the novel. Agaat also forces Milla to take in spinach that metaphorically grew on occupied land, and ingest the broader histories of land dispossession in the region, and South Africa as a whole.

With Agaat in control of the maps, she forces Milla to confront their deeply embedded colonial connotations, and places the maps under Milla who has lost control of her bowels due to the spinach and laxative. Milla first defecates on the boundaries between “Bot Rivier to Heidelberg, the municipalities, the districts, the regions” (*Agaat* 335), gesturing toward rethinking the regional significance of land dispossession in the Overberg. Humiliated, Milla then asks for the maps of “the Republic and its provinces, the whole South, then I’ll darken for you the light of the world that the Dutch supposedly brought here on the *Dromedaris*” (336), which alludes to more general colonial contexts in South Africa, and the African continent.<sup>43</sup> In an additional display of “epochal weaving”, Agaat begins tapping on specific locations on the maps with a feather duster named, “Japie” (337). As was discussed earlier in relation to Milla’s cultivation of Agaat, “Japie” functioned as an extension of Milla’s authority that contributed to her shaping of Agaat’s character. However, during this tense moment in the narrative present, Agaat reintroduces the feather duster to again illuminate how Milla’s narrative past and present intersect with metaphorical significance. Beginning with the regional maps, Agaat “presses the point of the stick” on to a number of locations with the intention of finding a “a soft spot” Milla would “want to visit again. Hooikraal? Tygerhoek? Boschjesmansrug? Adderskop? Holgat? Van Rheenenshoogte” (337). Agaat also taps the feather duster on to old “battle sites. Farms, stations, towns. Beach hamlets. Wheat storages. Settlements” (337), among many other sights that hold significance in general rural Afrikaner histories. Milla remarks that Agaat is “inventing half the names” (337), calling attention to the fact that Agaat is displaying her power over the farm, and the physical landscape she is in control of. Indeed, Buxbaum writes that in this scene, “Agaat asserts herself and inscribes her own narrative into the earth, thus laying claim to a farm she will one day inherit” (39). This feather duster serves to weave multiple historical frameworks together. On the one hand it depicts how the novel, when illuminated through the literary chronotope, fuses the physical space of the farm and surrounding Overberg landscape, with the historical legacies of colonialism (Bakhtin 84). In other words, Milla’s desecration of the maps physically represents

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<sup>43</sup> Milla’s mentioning of the *Dromedaris* is by no means insignificant, and extends the novel’s retrieval of colonial pasts to the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652. Van Riebeeck rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 in a ship named, the *Dromedaris*. Although Van Riebeeck is a central part of Afrikaner, and South African history, this was not always the case. Wouter Hanekom who writes about two cultural festivals in Stellenbosch and Cape Town, highlights how the Jan Van Riebeeck Festival of 1952 was in part a response to the fact that Van Riebeeck “had very little place in public history” (34). Hanekom explains that an executive committee in Cape Town organised the cultural holiday (once celebrated on 27 April, made redundant post-1994) as “a symbol for creating and fostering national unity”, and recreated such events as “the landing of the *Dromedaris* (Van Riebeeck’s ship)” (34).



her loss of control of not only the farm, but also the mythical framing of the farm as a source for constructing identity. On the other hand, the feather duster symbolises how *Agaat*, in its specific and inventive use of regional place names and complex narrative structure, metaphorically links the histories of colonialism in South Africa, the expansion of the colonial frontier outward from the former Cape Colony and this post-apartheid novel.

***‘the mending and the making and the joining’*: narrative weaving**

In this final section, I closely examine the narrative strategy of embroidery as an alternative method for writing fiction. Milla first teaches Agaat embroidery when she is young, as a way to civilise her within the discourse of white Afrikaner women. Indeed, Fincham has argued that embroidered imagery, “as an art form is profoundly seditious because while it appears to endorse women’s roles within patriarchy, it can be deployed to unravel patriarchy” (139).<sup>44</sup> While this section does not engage with notions of gender in relation to embroidery, I wish to extend Fincham’s discussion, as well as Carvalho and Van Vuuren’s analysis of the subversive potential of this art form, by focusing on the metaphor as a distinctive narrative strategy of writing, and metafiction. As Carvalho and Van Vuuren observe, Agaat’s “embroidery has a representative quality and symbolic substance that belies its perceived frivolity” (50) that I read as a display of self-reflexive writing. The role of hand crafts as metaphors of narrative has been noted by many critics, such as Samuelson, whose discussion of these in reference to other novels and the power of revision was noted at the beginning of this chapter. For example, South African novelist Olive Schreiner writes in her book *From Man to Man* (1926) about “that torn bit of brown leather brace worked through and through with yellow silk” (323), by which she is referring to the metaphorical significance of needlework to write alternative stories. Drawing from Waugh’s theoretical discussion of metafiction, I aim to first summarise how Agaat is taught embroidery, and the significance of the “middle storeroom” she develops this art form in. I then discuss how Agaat’s cap and shawl, two projects she works on throughout the novel, suggest new ways of engaging with her (silent) narrative voice.

Embroidery is an important part of the formation of Agaat’s ambiguous cultural identity that oscillates between servitude and family member. Agaat learns the art of embroidering as part of Milla’s larger project of “[making] a human being of her” (*Agaat* 480) that serves to both

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<sup>44</sup> For an extended discussion of embroidery as an alternative form of story-making and storytelling, refer to Willie Burger’s article “Deur ‘n Spieël in ‘n raaisel: kennis van die self en die ander in *Agaat* deur Marlene van Niekerk”.

discipline Agaat, as well as acculturate her in the discourse of Afrikaner nationalism. Similar to forcing Agaat to memorise details from the *Farmer's Weeklys* in order to perfect her farming skills, so too does Milla instruct Agaat in methods of embroidery in an attempt to teach her the “age-old arts & rich traditions from the domain of women” (142). Needlework was also employed by Milla as way of disciplining Agaat, and keeping her “humble,” as well as “out of idleness” (143).<sup>45</sup> In the narrative past recorded in Milla’s diary entries, she recalls giving Agaat a copy of *Borduur So*, authored by Betsie Verwoerd, the wife of NP Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd.<sup>46</sup> Milla underlines part of the introduction for Agaat that reads embroidery is “the mark of a culturally conscious nation” (62); she then adds at the end of the entry that she wishes “this book provide [Agaat] with much pleasure yet in the empty hours of Gdrift” (63), alluding to the ways Agaat is marginalised as a subjugated character. She believes it will give Agaat something “to occupy hrself in the back there in the evenings” (80). She also believes teaching Agaat the art of embroidery will make her fluent in the cultural grammar of white Afrikaner identity. Milla shows Agaat “all the possibilities & showed her examples of our embroidered National art & the representations of our History the ships of Van Riebeeck & the distribution of the first farms on the Liesbeeck” (143), examples which illustrate how embroidery was used during the context of Afrikaner nationalism to refine the cultural endeavours of Afrikaner society. Milla teaches Agaat embroidering after Jakkie is born, and Agaat is moved to the “middle storeroom”. She wanted to teach Agaat about “the finer things in life,” and “[create] an atmosphere of true values” (142) in a space that is at once removed from the private space of the homestead, while intimately connected to it.

This room that is detached from the farmhouse is representative of the broader political landscape of apartheid South Africa. The “middle storeroom” is illustrative of the contradictory component of apartheid that sought to separate races, but keep them linked together. At one point in her diaries Milla records how Jak wanted “to nail shut the window” of Agaat’s room “because he doesn’t want to be confronted with a servant-girl’s bed every time he comes out

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<sup>45</sup> The notion of “idleness,” as it was applied to indigenous people in the Western Cape is, according to Coetzee in *White Writing*, a fundamental construct employed pejoratively to legitimise forms of subjugation of racial ‘others’ in the traditional *plaasroman* genre (Coetzee).

<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, prior to Jakkie’s Prologue, *Agaat* begins with an excerpt from *Borduur So*. In the introduction to this book, Mrs Verwoerd writes: “the beauty, the value of this book: that it was born out of love and inspires to love, that nobody can doubt. And with that a great service is done to the nation, for who feels for beauty, on whatever terrain, has a contribution to make to the cultural development of the nation” (xi). To begin the novel with this passage from this historically important cultural text, seems to foreshadow the potential for embroidery as a narrative strategy, and other hand craft practices in post-apartheid South Africa, to contribute to the development of South Africa’s multiple and diverse cultural contexts in a literary form.

of the kitchen door” (62), suggesting that apartheid’s spatial interventions ultimately challenged the varying degrees of separation fortifying white supremacy. The symbolic significance of this space also overlaps with the white suburb of Triomf and the Benades’ marginalised social positioning as the “waste wool” of white Afrikaner society discussed in Chapter Two. Afaat’s “place” in the “servant’s quarters” (173), is ironically juxtaposed with her being trained with tools relevant to the formation of white Afrikaner identity in the same way that the Benades flaunt the grammar of Afrikaner nationalism while existing on the fringes of that discourse, both figuratively and spatially. The space of the “middle storeroom” additionally enforces Afaat’s ability to move between the traditional forms of “fine decorative needlework & knitting & crocheting” (142), and alternatives she experiments with, and masters at the end of Milla’s life. From out of this middle—in-between—room Afaat blurs the racially infused class-based underpinnings sketched in the space of the farm novel.

Due to Milla’s instructions and education, Afaat becomes a skilful practitioner of embroidery, and other needlework crafts, which comes to form an essential part of her pseudo-parenting and private relationship with Jakkie. In one example of this relationship, Milla recalls how Afaat created “pillow slips on which she’d long ago embroidered white on white, The Good Shepherd, The Wise Virgin” for Jakkie’s “last visit” to Grootmoedersdrift (489), suggesting Afaat speaks to Jakkie through her embroidery. In fact, Milla remarks that Afaat embroidered these “for him so that he shouldn’t miss her too much at night” (490). She also “embroidered a christening robe for Jakkie”, which, in Milla’s opinion is “a bit of a tangle but it’s something quite exceptional” with its flowers “& bunches of grapes round the seams & the collar everything white on white [...] Must have taken hours & hours of work” (185), demonstrating the development of Afaat’s skill. Afaat’s abilities however, culminate in her “[w]hite on white [...] densely worked [...] jewel-like” embroidered cap (311), which is fundamental to her subversive utilisation of the art form. While her cap is a marker of her status as a servant, as a young girl Afaat continuously extended this cap as a means of displaying her ambiguous autonomy on Grootmoedersdrift, and the contradictory image of (white) Afrikaner identity she embodied. Indeed, during one of Jakkie’s visits home from boarding school, he comments that “every time he sees her the point of her cap is longer” (325). However, she keeps the project hidden from other people on the farm, and “nobody except Jakkie when he was small, was allowed to look at it straight on” (311), which again emphasises the location of Afaat’s narrative outside of Milla’s alternating perspectives, and her intimacy with Jakkie.

As a metaphor of narrative, Agaat's embroidered cap thus becomes a visual text emphasising her contradictory social positioning as both servant and 'adopted daughter'. For example, in the narrative present Milla wakes up from a nap, and notices Agaat "sleeping" (*Agaat* 310) at her feet. This image is eerily reminiscent of an obedient dog that Milla once imagined Agaat as, highlighted earlier in my discussion of her cultivation of Agaat. Milla notices "strips of sunlight" that illuminate "Agaat's cap from the side, from behind and from the front" (311). She describes how this cap in the back "is darkly lit in silhouette, and from the front etched in relief. Negative and positive simultaneously" (311), underlining how Agaat's embroidery is a reflection of her ambiguous role on the farm. Since she has never been able to look at the cap directly, Milla takes a moment to examine its contents. She notices "elongated shadow patterns" and "shadow-loops and lines" (311), suggesting that the significance of this work "lies in its use of texture rather than obvious adornment" (Carvalho and Van Vuuren 51). As Carvalho and Van Vuuren observe with regards to Agaat's cap, her narrative voice "is one that must be searched for among the layers of Milla's focalisation" (51), calling attention to the ways in which Agaat exists in the shadows of Milla's rotating perspectives. Indeed, Agaat seems to introduce "an element of strangeness and difference" (Rossmas and Stobie 22) into her reproduction of embroidered hand crafts. Milla also discusses "the ruffles and stipples and eyelets and crenellations of the embroidery", as well as the edges of the cap which are "bordered above and below with satin fillet and finished with crocheted lace-work" (*Agaat* 311). These observations, when thought in relation to metafiction, suggest that Agaat employs the art form of embroidery to both practice and perfect her servitude, while also self-consciously making a statement about the complexities informing her relationship to Milla as an 'adopted daughter' (Waugh 2). Agaat's utilisation of this contradiction allows for a reading of the novel that self-reflexively comments on the contradictions of racial others in the *plaasroman*. In the cap Milla sees a "trumpet-player" with "a pig's snout. And the beak of the harpist is that of a bat. A wolf, grinning, beats the tambourine. A baboon with balloon-cheeks blows the syrinx, a rat with tiny teeth hangs drooling over the lute" (*Agaat* 311). Each of these images stands in opposition to the cultural forms Milla teaches Agaat in the narrative present within the larger practice of cultivating her sense of identity, which I discuss in more detail below through the shawl she embroiders for Milla. Although these images on the cap are a "negative sign of Agaat's servitude, it is simultaneously a positive space of personal and well-guarded creativity" (Carvalho and Van Vuuren 51) that allows Agaat to write against white Afrikaner cultural forms by formulating her tricky supplanting of new forms. The cap thus becomes a space for Agaat to illustrate her compromised position on the farm, which she

achieves by mixing forms together, and imagining new possibilities out of the “compost” of embroidery, and its place within the cultural production of (white) Afrikaner society.

In addition to her cap, Aagaat devotes much of her time in the narrative present to embroidering a cloth for Milla to be wrapped in when she is buried. Milla mentions this piece in Chapter One, commenting that Aagaat sits for hours with her and embroiders “a big cloth [...] looks complicated” (*Aagaat* 14), which, in this early part of the narrative present, foreshadows Milla’s difficulties interpreting Aagaat’s behaviour. She also observes that Aagaat “counts and measures” the different parts of the cloth “as if her life depended on it, the whole cloth marked out in pins and knots” (14), signalling the novel’s more explicit metafictional undertones. Milla however, does not know Aagaat is harkening back to “her first embroidery lesson [...] For one day when she will have mastered the craft” (541), and is creating a shroud for Milla to be wrapped in after she has died. Later in the narrative present, Milla describes for the reader the progression of the cloth. She explains how Aagaat has been working on this piece for “eleven months. Started a long time ago, it seems, because one side had already been thoroughly worked” (66-7), highlighting the impenetrable, and multi-layered composition of the cloth. Although, as a narrative metaphor, embroidery illustrates a different kind of writing that is set apart by “its use of texture than obvious adornment” (Carvalho and Van Vuuren 51). In this embroidered piece Aagaat makes use of “dense and thick in white satin thread” with “an intricate combination of drawn stitch, and shadow stitch” (*Aagaat* 67) further demonstrating how Aagaat’s individual narrative is but a mere shadow in relation to Milla’s overarching alternating perspectives. The use of shadow stitches also illustrates the marginality of Aagaat in the narrative, despite her intimacy with Milla. Aagaat’s use of complicated stitches makes Milla think “she’d by now be able to add a few stitches to the embroidery book” (67), illustrating on a broader scale, the potential for old forms, such as the *plaasroman*, to be reinvented with great symbolism. As Aagaat excels with her embroidery, Van Niekerk is able to insert her authorial voice into the novel, and comment on strategies and techniques associated with writing.

The metaphor of embroidery lends itself well to narrative strategies, and especially metafiction, because it is similarly engaged with stitching and weaving plot lines together. Aagaat explains to Milla in the narrative present that the cloth she is creating for her, “contains all the stitches in the book [...] Diagonal ripple-stitch, odd wave-stitch, step-stitch, honeycomb-stitch, blanket-stitch, hemstitch, paving-stitch, wreath-stitch” (367-8), bringing to mind how *Aagaat* makes use of multiple narrative perspectives, metaphors, allegories, symbolism and/or

intertextuality to enhance the writing of this fictional narrative. Agaat mentions that there is “still a lot to fill in [...] filling-in patterns for drawn fabric work, shaves, ears of corn, stars, eyelets, flowers, diamonds, wheels, shadow-blocks” (368). Though, Agaat is wont to emphasise the remaining “parts she has to unpick and redo” (368), underlining the ways in which the metaphor for narrative of embroidery, as well as tapestries and other types of weaving as suggested by Samuelson, allow for revision, and in fact encourages contemplation. Indeed, in one of Milla’s interior monologues of poetry pretending to appear as lines of prose, she speculates on the images and themes of needlework, asking “*what remains of the mending and the making and the joining and the fixing*”, lamenting the fact that through embroidery one “*could sew could hem could fix could cast on stitches [...] reconcile the world with itself*” (323; italics in original). With this in mind, Agaat’s mastery of embroidery, and the mysteries surrounding its meaning and significance to Milla, point towards the ways metafictional writing “attempt to create alternative linguistic structures or fictions that merely *imply* the old forms by encouraging the reader to draw on his or her knowledge of traditional literary conventions” (Waugh 4; emphasis in original). Metafiction is thus not necessarily concerned exclusively with writers, but also readers. Therefore, Milla—and by extension, readers, both local and international—are forced to reconsider the conventions of post-apartheid fiction through the elusiveness complexities and nuances of Agaat’s narrative voice, most clearly expressed in her creative use of embroidery and its many stitches.

Embroidery as a metaphor of metafiction is further developed until the conclusion of the novel. When Agaat finishes the cloth she has been busy making for Milla, she “unfolds it” and “holds the big cloth before” Milla’s eyes (Agaat 487). In this cloth are “densely embroidered” depictions of significant events in Milla and Agaat’s lives (487), indicating Agaat’s reclaiming of these events as a means of adjusting their significance in the narrative present. For example, the cloth incorporates “[t]he shearing”, which reflects an earlier moment in the narrative past when Milla forced Agaat to shear her first lamb, and Agaat got “green splodge” on her dress (81), staining the outfit that serves as a marker of servant identity; another pattern captures a scene of “calving” that refers to Agaat’s extensive knowledge on cows and calving, as well as, and perhaps, more importantly, to when Agaat helped Milla give birth to Jakkie, and in the moment of labour agony Milla instructed Agaat to “just do everything you’d do with a cow” (151). The shroud Milla is to be wrapped in after she dies, additionally demonstrates the complexities of this convergence of indigenous history and white Afrikaner cultural art forms through the shroud’s utilisation of “the way of women” (487), a translation from the Khoisan

name for the Tradouw Pass.<sup>47</sup> This is a symbolic location within the text because it is where Milla gave birth to Jakkie and signifies Aagaat's ancestral history of indigenous inhabitants of the land. The manifestations of personal history can be seen to be intricately woven into the cloth; it becomes an archive of lived experience that includes "everything from here to the Hottentots Holland, all the scenes of Grootmoedersdrift" (487). As the images "swirl" and "twirl" (487) before Milla, and the reader, Aagaat's cloth mirrors the author's textual technique of stitching together, in words, a "history of South Africa" (487). As a form of art the embroidered piece is thus able to express the inherent inseparability of the past and the present, and the importance of constantly (re)evaluating this overlap. This ability illustrates how the chronotope of the farm, in which the spatial and temporal indicators are fused together and reimagined by Aagaat in the cloth she creates for Milla, functions as a discursive space for Van Niekerk to map new connections in the history and space of the farm (Bakhtin 84). The chronotope of *Aagaat* thus demonstrates how Aagaat's embroidery merges together Milla and Aagaat's lived experiences in the narrative past and present physically representing the inversion of the power dynamics underpinning their complex relationship. With this in mind, the cloth thus symbolises the trajectory of Aagaat's relationship with Milla. Aagaat's embroidery is the central underpinning—indeed, the primary seam—holding together the interwoven textual tapestry of Aagaat and of *Aagaat*'s narrative construction; it is an illustration of "neither place nor time. It's an embroidery of nothing and nowhere" (*Aagaat* 183) in stark contrast to the emphasis of 'here' and 'there' in the fixedness of maps that Milla craves, which was discussed above.

In conversation with Leon de Kock and Heyns, Van Niekerk discusses the translation of *Aagaat*, as well as some of the important themes and historical contexts that the novel is concerned with. Addressing the origins of *Aagaat*, she explains how she began with a knitting manual as a way of developing a cultural critique of Afrikanerdom (148). Though, this manual did not "have enough of the right vocab" (148) to create and explore the type of novelistic texture the author was searching for. Notions of embroidery however, which were extensively discussed above in relation to Aagaat's proficiency with the art form, seemed to embrace "the whole idea of improvisation in the figurative meaning of the word 'embroidery'", a metaphor that could be employed to self-reflect in the novel (148). Van Niekerk ends her comment by alluding to

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<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the title of the British edition of *Aagaat*'s translation is *The Way of Women*, suggesting the novel's self-conscious development of embroidered art forms as alternative textual landscapes.

the passage below, and makes it clear that the grammar and metaphor of embroidery “was about writing, really” (148). In a revealing passage that deconstructs the embroidery and writing processes, Aagaat, and by extension Van Niekerk, explains:

You fetch it and stretch it and tie it together [...] you prod it and prick it, you slip it and snip it, you slide it in cotton-thread frames, you hold it and fold it, you pleat it and ply it, you bleach it and dye it and unravel again, you stitch on the stipple, you struggle with the pattern, you deck it and speck it in rows and in ranks, in steps and in stripes and arches and bridges, and crosses and jambs of doors and of dams, you trace it and track it and fill it and span it and just see what’s come of the cloth, a story, a rhyme, a picture for the pillow, for the spread on the bed, for the band round the cuff, for the cloth on the table, for the fourth dress of woman (*Aagaat* 541).

This passage alludes to the durability and power of metaphors as a narrative strategy, to explore gaps in the knowledge of Afrikaans farm novel. In addition, the excerpt highlights how the strategy of embroidery in particular, stresses the importance of this metaphor for expanding the longevity of fictional forms and genres in South African fiction. Self-conscious fiction in many ways, allows authors the power to think about connections in time and space, between the past and the present, between different characters or narrative perspectives that might otherwise not yet be capable of being imagined in the frame of reality (Waugh 29). Keeping this in mind, at one point in her diaries Milla alludes to the robustness of words, explaining to Aagaat how each of the “things of the world are tied to one another at all points with words [...] & we know one thing through the name of another thing” (*Aagaat* 521), illuminating how, for example, metaphors can retain some of the cultural contexts and nuances that might otherwise be lost in the process of translation. She also mentions to Aagaat that “if you move one link they all move the possibilities are endless” (521), which suggests that *Aagaat*’s multi-layered texture is designed to be altered and reworked, in both local and was as international contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on Van Niekerk’s reinterpretation of rural histories submerged within *Aagaat*, a novel that is located within the genre of Afrikaans farm novels. My reading of the novel isolated specific illustrations of gardening, maps and mapping and embroidery as key images demonstrating the potential for metaphors to reinvigorate not only the *plaasroman* genre in particular, but South African fiction in general. These metaphors were read in relation



to the literary chronotope, which illuminated how Van Niekerk's novel is an extension of the genre, or "compost", it works within, through an emphasis on narrative forms of becoming. The framework of metafiction also underlined how this novel seems to self-consciously address Aagaat's shadow narrative, as well as the ways in which notions of embroidery and gardening call to mind the complex narrative structure of *Agaat*, which is subtly stitched together through the four rotating perspectives of Milla, and arranged in overlapping patterns between the narrative past and present. As a novel concerned with writing fiction, and gesturing toward the missing narratives of racial others and histories of land dispossession embedded in farm novel, *Agaat* embroiders a (new) story, a mirroring of the *plaasroman* that attempts to map an alternate reflection for South African literature and its future.

### Chapter Three:

#### Mirroring the Past, and “Epochal Weaving” in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* and *Agaat*

*Now they say they’re going to get their house in order, again. How I ask you?*

(Van Niekerk, *Triomf* 63)

The previous two chapters analysed Marlene van Niekerk’s two fictional novels separately. Chapter One traced infrastructures of social space, and marginalised spatial histories in her first novel *Triomf* (2004). Chapter Two examined Van Niekerk’s reinterpretation of rural histories submerged in the *plaasroman* through specific metaphors in her second novel *Agaat* (2010). With that in mind, this chapter puts *Triomf* and *Agaat* into conversation, and explores how the novels produce contrasting portrayals of national, as well as sociopolitical contexts during apartheid, and the transition to democracy and post-apartheid South Africa. The broader South African contexts embedded in the foundations of *Triomf* and *Agaat* are reflected in the physical features of each family home in the novels. Through notions of “epochal weaving”, a literary framework I draw from in this thesis to illustrate points of intersection between the narrative past and present, these features and the domestic space of these homes overlap. More specific sociopolitical milieux are recast in images of decay and shadows displayed in mirrors employed in both novels, which are read through Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre’s discussions of mirrors in relation to the body. These frameworks are again elaborated on in more detail below, and utilised to illustrate the way in which the narratives merge and reflect opposite representations of South African life during apartheid through interwoven mirror imagery.

I begin my analysis by highlighting specific physical features of each family home in the novels, in relation to the wider national and political climates *Triomf* and *Agaat* are set in. I first demonstrate how the decadence of the De Wet farmhouse in *Agaat* is reflective of the National Party’s (NP) political victory in 1948, and the implementation of apartheid. Next, I explore the dilapidated Benade home during the last months of apartheid, as an alternative illustration of the “poor white” historical context that shaped Afrikaner nationalism, and the abnormality of the development of apartheid. This juxtaposition creates a contradictory depiction of the development of apartheid by exposing histories of class and racial discrimination. I then turn to more specific descriptions of domestic space displayed in mirrors. Both novels feature this real and symbolic object, although the mirrors are located in two

different parts of each home. Mirrors thus underpin my investigation of this literary conversation, because they highlight how Van Niekerk seems to weave national and personal histories together. In Chapter One, I demonstrated how the Benade family's inheritance and lineage of poverty, is weaved together with the cultural possibilities underpinning post-apartheid South Africa, using the features an *mbira* Lambert Benade receives; and in Chapter Two, I outlined Agaat's inversion of colonial histories of land dispossession that sees Milla ingesting food grown from Agaat's (soon to be) farm, and through a feather duster with significance in both the narrative past and present of the novel, that excavates the *plaasroman*'s role in culturally reinforcing this history through a mythical framing of the past.

In this chapter, I examine historical overlap between a mirror in the bathroom of the Benades house that reflects the underside of Afrikaner nationalism, and a mirror in the De Wet farmhouse that alludes to the shadows of class and racial discrimination in broader South African historical contexts. In his article "Of Other Spaces" Foucault considers the significance of mirrors in his larger discussion about the importance of employing physical and figurative space(s) to redefine how history is imagined. As he observes, there exist certain spaces "that have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (3). As "a placeless place", the mirror creates "a sort of mixed, joint experience", which I discussed in my discussion of Lambert's encounter with Sonnyboy at the Martindale dump in Chapter One. I again return to this definition of a mixed experience in my discussion of mirrors, because "the standpoint of the mirror" allows one to trace their absence from the place where one is, since one can see one's self "over there" (4). In other words, the mirror produces a heterotopic site because while it exists in reality, the reflection it creates is not removed from that reality.

Although I discussed mirrors and their ability to foreground notions of framing in relation to historical interpretation in Chapter Two, I return to them in this chapter, and align my use of Foucault's theoretical framework in this chapter with other spatial theories engaging mirrors. The philosopher Henri Lefebvre similarly discuss mirrors and the shadows their reflections create in his book *The Production of Space* (1991). Lefebvre focuses on finding a grammar for bridging the divide between theoretical and physical space, and cites mirrors as object useful for conceptualising of the structuring of space, whether physically, or according to sociopolitical contexts (181-8). According to Lefebvre, a mirror can disclose the relationship between body and consciousness, because it displays for the body a sign of that body (185).

He defines a “shadow” as a “mirror-image” of the body’s “counterpart [...] it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens, or benefits” the body” (184). While he writes mostly about the context of Europe, when considering the politics of the national identities and histories can potentially signify depending on where one is from, the mirror seems like a universally effective tool for cataloguing the contrasts between what is expected of an individual, and what is experienced by an individual. I draw from Lefebvre’s definition of shadows in my close analysis of the reflections of mirrors in each of the private family homes not to comment on the corporeality of the bodies, but rather to signify how the bodies, as a text, reflect the social and cultural contexts underpinning the national and public domains that they are set in. Through these fluid spaces of intersection, I argue, Van Niekerk links the two spaces of each family house, and thus two different types of (white) Afrikaner identity together, to expose the intimate relationship between race and class in South Africa. On the one hand, the Benade home is plagued by cracks, leaks and missing floorboards, and these features of the home additionally threaten to reveal the Benade family’s personal history of incest, showing that their marginalisation is experienced on a national, and sociopolitical level. On the other hand, the domestic space of the De Wet household is organised in a strict hierarchy that employs race as a marker of class. Agaat, the De Wet’s servant and Milla’s ‘adopted daughter’, complicates this hierarchy by operating within the sphere of cultural production, and the space of servitude. Thus, the conversation *Triomf* and *Agaat* engage in, reveals how national histories of apartheid, and personal histories of racial and class discrimination contrast, and are in conflict with one another.

It seems Van Niekerk builds an alternative framework for conceptualising of not only Afrikaner lived experiences in a local setting, but also to contemplate more specific human issues that people deal with and experience. In the essay “On the rights of man and the rights of rocks” from his book, *Pots and Poetry and Other Essays* (1985), the South African philosopher Martin Versfeld writes about humanity’s relationship to the natural and physical world. In particular, Versfeld claims “notions of tilling”, like farming and caring for the earth, are related to the manipulation of words, and demonstrate “that good writing is good carpentry” (52). Versfeld’s use of metaphor to illustrate writing as a kind of narrative building is useful for imagining how Van Niekerk reconstructs specific cultural contexts within the domestic and physical space of each house. Just as I did in Chapter One, where my discussion of the marginalised social positioning of the Benades was framed by Mol Benade’s description of the family as the “waste wool” of white Afrikaner society, I similarly frame my examination of

national and personal histories embedded within the architecture of each narrative with Versfeld's metaphor of carpentry. With this in mind, Etienne van Heerden's metaphor of (Afrikaans) language as "compost", which I drew from in Chapter Two to situate my analysis of narrative strategies, seems to align with Versfeld's notion of "tilling", and using the materials of the past to design and build new architectures for contemplating personal histories in relation to national histories.

The African-American novelist Toni Morrison, celebrated for her novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), among many others, appeared in a conversation with Van Niekerk and the academic Anthony K. Appiah, at the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature in 2010. Morrison praises Van Niekerk for her use of "architecture" in relation to narrative construction, to "study where meaning really lies" (PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature 2010), suggesting the complexities of *Agaat* encourage contemplation of how narratives can be, and are created. Morrison spends part of the conversation focused on Jakkie's special relationship to Agaat, because Agaat—not Milla—first develops a motherly intimacy with him. The relationship between white child and black 'nanny' is one that is deeply inscribed into the sociopolitical fabric of the southern part of the United States (US).<sup>48</sup> As an African-American writer Morrison seems to approach *Agaat* from a perspective shaped by the racial architecture of the US, designed to aggressively police African-American impoverishment. This perspective empowers Morrison's fiction, which explores the nuances of the historical legacy of slavery in the US in relation to memory and trauma, as well as themes related to gender identity and beauty. An examination of the architecture of Van Niekerk's narrative construction, as I discuss in my close analysis of the novels in conversation below, demonstrates how each family home becomes a reflection of the nation. I found Morrison's praise of Van Niekerk's writing fruitful because it alludes to the figurative architecture of the social space of the private South African home being underpinned by the foundation of racial hierarchies that are socially constructed, and culturally enforced. The idea of a narrative as a form of architecture underlines how Van Niekerk's work attempts to reshape traditional cultural forms by revisiting the past through literary remodelling.

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<sup>48</sup> See Barbara Blouin's evocative book *Like a Second Mother: Nannies and Housekeepers in the Lives of Wealthy Children* (1999) for an extensive oral history of white and black experiences in relation to raising children, especially in the southern part of the US.

### **Home as Reflection of National Contexts**

In this section I turn to an analysis of specific physical features of the De Wet homestead on Grootmoedersdrift, and the Benade house in Triomf. These representations provide opposing reflections of the apartheid epoch through the grandeur of the Overberg, and the ruggedness of Johannesburg. This contrast also provides a background for more specific discussions of sociopolitical reflections in mirrors examined later in the chapter. I first contextualise the De Wet farmhouse and the restoration it undergoes in 1947, the year before the NP was elected to power, as a mirror displaying the architecture of Afrikaner cultural nationalism. In the following years of apartheid, this architecture allowed the NP to deploy its power territorially, which saw the remaking of communities, like Triomf, directly on top of the rubble of places like old Sophiatown. When the Benades moved to Triomf from Vrededorp, in 1961, South Africa became a republic after gaining independence from the Britain, and as a nation, grew increasingly isolated from the global political landscape. These conflicting memories, of South Africa's independence and the destruction of Sophiatown, demonstrate how the Benade family is "particularly and peculiarly haunted by the spectral mythology that sustains apartheid thought" (Shear 71). The Benades are similarly marked by isolation, and as I show after my discussion of the De Wet homestead, the physical features of their home, and their discrimination within the community, further emphasise their lived experiences on the fringes. The reflection of this multilayered illustration of marginalisation captures the nightmarish realities of sustaining the political system of apartheid, by portraying the destitution of the Benades.

### **Grootmoedersdrift**

The De Wet homestead was restored as a wedding gift to Milla and Jak de Wet in 1947. As was alluded to in Chapter Two, this house is located near Swellendam, in a region that facilitated the expansion of colonial frontier of South Africa in the 18th Century. The first settlers on Grootmoedersdrift planted the "wild fig avenue" leading to the front door, and staked out the foundations of the home in "lynx-hide ropes" (*Agaat* 24). Prior to recalling the renovations of the home just before the beginning of apartheid, Milla struggles to swallow porridge *Agaat* feeds to her in the narrative present. She is reminded of "the sluice in the irrigation furrow" on Grootmoedersdrift, and "the water damming up, a hand pulling out the locking-peg and lifting the plate in its grooves, letting through the water" (35). This modern image comprises part of the farm's mechanisms to properly irrigate itself, and contrasts with Milla's inability to swallow, signalling the dismantling of her relationship to the farm. The

narrative shifts to her second-person perspective and memories of the farm, and begins with the renovation of the homestead. She remembers the “team of Malays from the Hermytk” that her Mother hired to do the work, “because the type of work “was in their blood” (38), alluding to the generations of coloured farm workers that have maintained significant parts of the agricultural and manual labour in the Western Cape. Agriculture, and the farms dotting the Western Cape are, like mining operations in Johannesburg, some of the only employment available, creating lineages of manual labour.

These workers also replaced part “of the stoep staircase that had crumbled away,” and “fashioned air vents in the jerkin-head gables so that the new roof could air properly” (38). Additionally, Milla recalls details about the sitting room, for which “Pa managed, on his last legs, to get hold of some yellow-wood beams from an old house” (38) in Swellendam, illustrating how the broader histories of land dispossession in the Overberg that made farmers wealthy, stays within white families and literally underpins new homes. Under this was a “spacious underfloor area with proper vents broken into the foundations” and “the spaces dug deeper for storage” because, according to Milla’s mother, one “can never have enough storage on a farm” (38). While this a practical function to Milla’s mother, the expansive storage areas beneath the house reflects the accumulation of material wealth; but in a figurative mode, this spacious underfloor area that houses the cultural and economic capital of the De Wet family, also illuminates the historical shadows of racial subjugation and exploitation of labour that made that wealth possible. Interestingly, Milla describes how her mother “carted out all the rubbish from the cellars” by sorting through “the stuff to be got rid of [...] to be put in the storerooms behind the house” (38). The middle storeroom is the one Agaat lived in for much of her life. In my close examination of the mirrors and the sociopolitical reflections of the private family home they produce, I illustrate how the shadowy legacy of Agaat’s relegation to the storage room is amplified by her ability to compromise the discourse of white Afrikaner culture imposed on her.

Each of the specific renovations Milla retrieves from her memory builds an architecture of out of the colonial, and apartheid contexts of white supremacy in South Africa. In her article on *Agaat’s* relationship to the Afrikaans *plaasroman*, Caren van Houwelingen observes that the De Wet “farmhouse is presented not merely as a space for intimacy and belonging, but also as one furnished with the paraphernalia and baggage of white power and privilege” (104). In Milla’s memories of the renovation, she also mentions that the house was fitted with symbolic

objects from her childhood, and parents house. She specifically describes how “two little doves under the overhang of each gable, the secret adornment of which you’d been so fond of ever since childhood, were touched up” (*Agaat* 38). Additionally, the front door of the homestead “was sanded down and painted green”, and fitted with “an old copper doorknob and lynx-head knocker from Ma’s heirloom trunk” (38), symbolising how the original materials used to demarcate the foundations of the home were reimagined and shine proudly on the front door. These details of the homestead, like the old maps, trace the legacy of their ownership of the farm, and show how features of this space display her family’s lineage. While I discussed the metaphorical significance of maps in relation to Milla’s identity in Chapter Two, these maps gesture toward larger national and global contexts.

One reason in particular that Milla wants to see her maps of the farm and surrounding region is because it provides an alternative display of her wealth as a farmer, relative to others farms in the Overberg. Before her physical condition had completely deteriorated, she instructed Agaat to put the maps “in the sideboard [...] They belong with our records” (132) even though she demanded most everything else be carted out. As I show later in my analysis, the Benades also lock away important documents about the truth of Lambert’s conception in the side board. Milla’s command to lock away the maps demonstrates her attempt to disengage with the histories they selectively represent. The most local, and specific of these maps, is the one “with little painted pictures of all the special places on the farm. That map was the most original of the collection”, which Milla “found amongst [her] heirlooms after Ma’s death” (132). This map, and the maps traced below in progression of their expansion of geographical scale, are part of a continuous heirloom of belonging and ownership Agaat will eventually assumes once Milla dies. Next was the map outlining “the old transfer-duty map with the boundaries and beacons” (132), signalling the types of documentation used to represent legitimate ownership of the farm. There were also the “district maps” that Jak “ordered from the district council” displaying the fact that “Grootmoedersdrift was the biggest farm in the area and had the best soil commanded the best grootbos, fynbos and water catchment area” (132). Lastly, Milla mentions a map of “the whole of South Africa, and a world map, Jakkie’s school maps” he and his father would use to draw “the exact proportions and location of Grootmoedersdrift darted with dovetailed arrows” (132). These same maps function as reflective counterparts of the colonial enterprise, and are used as schematic representations of the gaps between national and personal histories (Lefebvre 184). They are also suggestive of the novel’s larger themes of power and intimate relationships. Locked into the sideboard, the maps become embedded into



the framework of the homestead for much of the narrative present while Milla cannot voice her desires later to see them. With the maps and thus by extension her family history inaccessible for much of the narrative present, Milla's failing body becomes a mirror-image—touched and viewed by Agaat, and the reader—that is an intersection point between former white ownership of Grootmoedersdrift, and Agaat's future ownership of the farm.

### **127 Martha Street, Triomf**

Alternatively, the Benade family house in Triomf did not yet exist when the NP came to power in 1948. In the same way that the De Wet home provides a reflection of apartheid as a grandiose ethnic nationalist dream, the Benade house, in contrast, reflects the dystopic realities of this dream through a family that is impoverished, isolated and neglected by the state. The physical features of the home show how, as the scholar Louise Viljoen puts it, “apartheid failed even those it was ideologically designed to benefit” (“Postcolonialism and Recent Women's Writing in Afrikaans” 71). As a result of this, there is a lack of a traceable lineage to establish a shared sense of belonging and ownership. Prior to the forced removals of Sophiatown, the Benades lived in Vrededorp—and prior to this, they lived in the *platteland*. The town of Vrededorp is notable for its counter-image of Afrikaner ethnicity and/or whiteness (Lange 32). In a fictionalised reimagining of the razing of Sophiatown, the broader context of which the NP's seizing of public space in the 1950s (Barnard 45), Mol recalls how in “February '55”, the state “took away the first bunch of kaffirs”, and that she “could hear things break to pieces when the bulldozers moved in. Beds and Enamel basins and sinks and baths and all kinds of stuff. All of it just smashed” (*Triomf* 2). While the De Wet homestead disposes of its redundant materials in storage under the floor boards, the Benades and the South African underclasses they represent, have no space to shed the baggage of their personal histories. Instead, the ground beneath Triomf is fertilised with the subjugated and submerged histories of black South African lives erased from the landscape. Indeed, Lambert Benade describes the earth as “very hard here in Triomf. Packed hard. It's all just bricks and cement from the kaffir-houses” (224), pointing to the wider significance of the layers of suppressed histories caused by forced removals that sit beneath swaths of private property in South Africa. Throughout the novel, the pieces of Sophiatown Mol remembers, repeatedly resurface and penetrate the Benades daily lives. Mol is of the opinion that the Benades are “not exactly on top of things. They just muddle through the rubble” (193) in their lived experiences as the “waste wool” of white Afrikaner society.

Many descriptions of the home given by the Benades and other characters conjures up images of decay and deterioration, calling to mind the writing device Milla uses at the beginning of the narrative present of *Agaat*, that reminds her of an object used to handle radioactive waste. Despite the dilapidation, the Benade home experiences many quick fixes. The repairs are mainly systemic, and are related to the same foundations renovated in the De Wet homestead. In the beginning of the novel, Mol worries about an approaching rain storm, because parts “of the roof’s corrugated strips have come loose. Every year a few more [...] Leaks. Just leaks all over the place” (10), highlighting the supposed ‘storm’ of democracy that threatens to disrupt the shaky underpinnings of the Benade house on 127 Martha Street. The leaks in the roof stand in opposition to the new thatched roof discussed earlier. Later on a Saturday night Lambert becomes annoyed with neighbours having a *braai*. He spontaneously decides Mol must mow the lawn, which he hopes will upset the whole of Triomf”, because he “set the blades so the revs run nice and high”, and he “put too much oil in so the machine comes out smoking blue” (107), suggesting the Benades are not close to their neighbours, and that Lambert is reacting to the marginalisation they experience in Triomf. Despite this effort, Treppie ridicules Lambert, causing Lambert to throw “a spanner [...] in Treppie’s direction” (109). This spanner “hits the wall and falls on to the blocks” and creates “a big hole in the wall” exposing “hairline cracks all around it [...] Big cracks running in all directions” (110). Later in this scene, after the police show up and similarly comment on the “rubbish” under the Benades roof, and how the house is “falling to pieces”, Pop looks at the cracks with Mol, and remarks that “under the paint they go on and on, invisible to the eye. Once it gets going, a crack in plaster is something that keeps running” (124), illuminating how the shadows of the deteriorating context of Afrikaner nationalism reveal their fractal and tragic allegiance to the party that abandoned them to poverty. The decay of their home, with its cracks and leaks, points toward the gaps in the system of apartheid, and the collapse of Nationalist politics. It also points toward the cracks in their family history; the pictures Lambert excavates from the sideboard confirming his incestuous origins threaten to topple the Benade home, illustrating on a larger scale how national contexts inform, and to some extent underpin private homes.

The theme of poverty as a kind of inheritance, which was discussed in Chapter One, is similarly reflected in the Benades attempts to fix their home, and remodel their personal history outside of the framework of their national history as “foot soldiers” (149) for elections. Near the novel’s end Lambert is given a test about the mechanics of refrigerators, and how to repair them. He is expected to carry on with the (failed) family business of repairing refrigerators.

Before administering the test Treppie reflects in a brief speech, on their “whole story here together”, and specifically mentions the “walls full of plaster cracks”, a “roof that leaks on to [their] heads”, and the “floor full of holes” (381), demonstrating how the Benades, despite their meagre circumstances, desperately try to maintain their (failed) humanity as the “waste wool” of a white Afrikaner society that has discriminated them into isolation. According to Lara Buxbaum who has written extensively on *Triomf* and *Agaat*, “[t]he Benades are an insular family and very rarely stray from their house at 127 Martha Street” (“Give the people what they want” 210), suggesting that the social discrimination the Benades experience is culturally enforced by the hierarchy of white Afrikaner identity, locating them at the bottom, in the “rubble”. These descriptions provide a portrayal of Afrikaner culture and whiteness in opposition to the robustness of the De Wet homestead on Grootmoedersdrift. In contrast to the ventilation of the De Wet home, the Benade house is closed off, giving the impression that national and personal histories are impossible to separate.

Layers of discrimination constrain the reflection of the Benade family house, and insulate their personal histories of incest, and poverty. During a Guy Fawkes celebration, Mol goes out into the street to light a firecracker. She hesitates though, and “turns back to the house”, but it “is dark and closed. She can see the cracks on their outside walls in the light of the street lamps. The house is just a shell” (*Triomf* 281), hinting at the dangers of exposing their history of class and racial discrimination. The cracks also suggest their family’s own personal history of incest will be exposed, which foregrounds how the Benades embodiment of marginalisation is multilayered. This image Mol describes demonstrates how the Benades narrative perspectives hold a mirror to the state of Nationalist society and politics. These reflections bring together the multiple layers of their “spatial environment” of marginalisation (Lefebvre 186), underlining the fact that economic disparity does not exist in isolation, but is instead linked to other sociopolitical structures. In an alternative example about service delivery, that points toward broader contexts impoverishment characterising reality for millions of South Africans, the Benades discuss their difficulties receiving electricity. The Benades live in a suburb of stagnation, which in part is due to the neglect of civil services. Mol explains how their “electricity’s always been bad here in Triomf”, and that the municipality workers call it “[a]n overload problem” (286). Treppie refers to this problem as a “sub-economic disease. It is meant to remind you who you are and where you live” (286) pointing out the realities of the Benades lesser socioeconomic positioning. He is referring to the Benades as representations of “poor white” Afrikaners relocated to the western region of Johannesburg. Treppie reminds Pop that

“the people of Triomf are the state’s own people. And the houses were built by Community Development” (286). Treppie also highlights “how all of the gardens behind the prefab walls are full of the Gardening Department’s leftover aloes” (288), a second interpretation of “poor white” Afrikaners as “waste wool”. He says their ineffective service delivery is “a matter of structure [...] Triomf is a place where the state’s hand washes the other, and then it says you mustn't come and point fingers, it’s all in the family” (288). The reflections demonstrate how the Benades are paralysed by the ideologies of apartheid they cling to because their existence is made possible by government initiatives; the same government that attempted to mask the alternative reflection of whiteness embodied by “poor whites” during the rise of Afrikaner nationalism.

### **Mirrors as Reflection of Sociopolitical (class) Contexts**

This section turns to more specific reflections of sociopolitical contexts in the private spaces of each family home. I focus on the metaphorical significance of mirrors and how these objects prompt introspection concerning the cultural and sociopolitical shadows these reflections produce. As was mentioned above, shadows are mirror-images, or shifting points of intersection that mediate the representation of the body (Lefebvre 184). A conversation between the novels highlights overlapping imagery of mirrors, and illustrations of “epochal weaving” that show how the novels are, in fact, two versions of the same family story. These mirrors are located in two different spaces of each family house; these spaces are weaved together, which merges Milla’s deteriorating wealthy body together with the destitution of the Benades, and their stigmatised bodies. Once linked, I then conclude my analysis by examining different confrontations the Afrikaner public have with Milla and the Benades racial and sociopolitical shadows. These confrontations, while specific to shifting Afrikaner identities during the fluidity of national transition in the 1990s, are just as much about US contexts of urban inequality and failing schools, police violence and legacies of slavery that continue to exacerbate unresolved racial tension in that country. In this way, the illustrations of “epochal weaving” in *Triomf* and *Agaat*, through their creative narrative architectures, demonstrate how fictions can function as literary candles illuminating uncomfortable realities in the human condition.

### **The Benades**

The mirror in the bathroom of the Benades house provides an alternative reflection of their destitute circumstances, their personal histories of poverty and incest, and the crumbling

environment(s) they—and many South Africans—live in. When Mol and Pop decide to take a bath one evening, Pop “takes the mirror out of the bath” and “carefully places it on top of the bathroom cabinet” (*Triomf* 288). He puts a candle in front of it and says to Mol, “‘now there’s double light’” (288), alluding to the metaphorical potential for mirrors to reflect the body “in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (Foucault 4) of the glass. Pop notices how “the light of the candle” brightens the spot where “the bone in the middle of his chest stick out. Under his throat, and on both sides of his neck, are deep hollows where it looks like there’s not enough skin” (*Triomf* 290). The hollows and lack of skin he describes points toward his physical embodiment of an abnormal whiteness in relation to the strict hierarchy of white Afrikaner racial identity. I return to, and discuss notions of “epochal weaving” more extensively below, but the glow—and reflected glow—of the candle illuminates how the narrative architectures of these novels intersect through the figurative space created by mirrors. The shadowy reflections of the Benade and De Wet bodies and their personal histories, as well as the constrained physical spaces they are located in, are an overlapping point of intersection penetrated and shaped by the cultural reproduction of white Afrikaner society (Lefebvre 184). This illustration of “epochal weaving” suggests thinking about how cultural and national expectations play a significant role in building individual subjectivity.

Specific depictions of bodies are difficult for the Benades to ‘face’. After they wash in the bath, Mol and Pop walk through the den to check on Lambert. In the light of the candle Mol notices “a deep hollow between [Lambert’s] eyes. It looks like his face was assembled from many different pieces” (*Triomf* 296), suggesting that Lambert embodies the Benades’ broader history of their migration from the *platteland* to Johannesburg, and existences on the fringes has rendered his face inaccessible. Additionally, at one point Pop wakes from a dream of “white smoke” (259) and is confronted by the realities of the dream of a ‘pure’ white race. The scholar Matthew Brophy writes about Jungian archetypes in *Triomf*, and contends that “Pop’s dream of pure whiteness is a dream of apartheid—a utopian vision quickly morphs into a vision of the apocalypse upon waking” (106). I wish to add to Brophy’s comments by reading into the contrast produced by this vision and the reflection Pop sees in the mirror when he wakes, as a reflection of the shadows cast by his, and his family’s history of poverty and incest.. After waking he walks to the dressing table and catches “sight of his face in the cracked, middle mirror”, Pop sees “dark holes where his eyes should be, and the white point of his nose” (*Triomf* 259) in a image punctuated by the inaccessibility of his shadowy face. The absence of personal intimacy Pop experiences while looking in the mirror, is created through the heterotopic

inversion created by the mirror (Foucault 4), which allows Pop, for a brief moment, to discover his absence from this dream of institutionalised white superiority.

### **Milla's Mirror**

Having looked at mirrors in *Agaat* in Chapter Two, and its significance in relation to framing and historical interpretation, I now here turn to the mirror in the room Milla is confined to, and similarly engage with the cultural and racial shadows hanging in the reflections she faces. The mirror *Agaat* left in Milla's room recalls experiences from her narrative past, which foregrounds how points of "epochal weaving" produced by mirrors in both texts demonstrates how the reflection of South Africa's past, illuminates the cultural shadows of the post-apartheid present. She comments it is like a "museum piece" (*Agaat* 15), suggesting mirrors have the potential of reflecting and tracking changes in one's growth and development. In light of the fact that museums are places where interesting or historical objects are stored, Milla's observation that "the candle flame and its yellow glow, the shadows" in this mirror that emphasise the importance of this object as a kind of historical archive.

For example, at one point in the narrative present after the beautiful reflections of the garden discussed in Chapter Two have dimmed, Milla struggles to make sense of the "candle flame and its yellow glow, the shadows" (137). She realises that the shadows produced by the candle in the mirror are now "the things reflecting in the three panels where the garden has now darkened" (137), like an alternative portrayal of her legacy on Grootmoedersdrift, illuminated by her body's incapacity to speak and move. Milla then asks "does a mirror sometimes preserve everything that has been reflected in it" (137), contemplating the power of the mirror to display her exclusion from a space that she previously controlled. Van Houwelingen discusses how this mirror deconstructs Milla mythologised relationship to the landscape (98). I take her comments further, and show how the darkened images of her room she sees in candles, disclose her painful memories and struggles to acknowledge the ways in which her life has been socially constructed by white Afrikaner society, and culturally enforced by the broader expectations of this community. Although the context of their memories are different due to the sociopolitical contrasts between Milla and Pop's bodies, their personal experiences maintaining the embodiment of Nationalist discourses are weaved together in the space of the mirror. In other words, this mirror illustrates how societies are defined, and how these borders are policed to ensure their reproduction across time and space. While looking into the mirror Milla says she feels "[s]hrunken away from the world [she] created" (*Agaat* 137) on Grootmoedersdrift, and

thus the relationship between land and identity in the dim doubly-reflected light of the candle. The reflection in the mirror challenges Milla's personal history as owner of the farm, because there is nothing to reflect, only "bygone moments" and "many tears for nothing" (137). The candlelight exposes Milla's apprehension towards acknowledging the shadows looming behind her dominant narrative perspective, and her relationship with Agaat, who she abuses and cultivates in the grammar of white Afrikaner culture.

This same three-panel mirror is intimately connected to Milla's relationship with her husband, Jak, and the power struggle these characters engage in throughout the novel as they compete to embody socially manufactured identities they are expected to perform. Prior to attending a New Year's Party on Framboskop, a neighbouring farm and "big party" (533) expressing a lavish gathering of wealthy farmers in the Overberg region. Milla describes her relationship to Jak, how she would leave "everybody free to indulge in their flights of fantasy around Pretty Jak de Wet", because her job was to camouflage" (89), or protect the shadows of his incompatibility to perform a dominant Afrikaner masculinity (Pretorius 30). Milla had just received news she was pregnant after twelve years of marriage; she "smiled at [herself] with red lips in the mirror" (*Agaat* 91), displaying a kind of confidence she feels in finally getting pregnant, and fulfilling her role as a culturally refined white Afrikaner woman. Although, Jak, "inspected himself from all angles in the mirror" (91), illustrating an insecurity with the discontinuity between his inability to perform specific roles, and the attention he receives because of these expectations. After attending the party on Framboskoop Jak violently confronts Milla about her outspoken behaviour during dinner, in which she equated unpracticed farming techniques (which she thinks Jak displays) with "beating" one's "wife every night" (95). He and Milla have sex, and she watches in the mirror: her and her "shadows" (97). Jak though, rejects their shared image reflected in the mirror, so he "grabbed a footstool with one hand and threw it at the mirror and shattered it" (97), seemingly confirming the heterotopic qualities of mirrors as capturing the unreality of specific contexts (Foucault 4). Later in the novel, in a passage from Milla's memories narrated in the second-person that illustrates overlap with uncomfortable images reflected in the Benade mirror, Milla "looked at [herself] in the bathroom mirror. The damage of years of demolition work was visible already" (*Agaat* 287). Milla becomes disturbed by the images, admitting she "did not want to look at [herself] for too long. [She] did not want to see what lay right under that voluptuous radiance. [She] was amazed that [she] could produce such an image at all" (287). Looking at herself in the mirror for long could reveal how she manipulates Jak's masculinity to suit her duties as an Afrikaner woman,

because the performance of his hyper-masculine perspective “relies on the invasion and subjugation of her body” (Pretorius 36). Thus, Milla also seems to be aware of her own inability to completely assimilate into the context of white Afrikaner women, the cultural and political tension of which is displayed in her relationship with neighbouring farmers, and in particular, her friend, Beatrice. I return to this relationship in more detail below, in relation to the ambiguous social positioning Aagaat creates for the De Wet’s relationship to the wider Overberg farming community.

### **Private Spaces and Sitting Rooms: Reflections of the Public Domain**

In this final section I turn to the private space of the sitting room in *Triomf* and *Agaat*. The sitting room, where cultural attitudes and values are first learned, is an ambiguous part of the domestic space of a home, because it is the most public part of this private space. Thus, as a borderline and culturally performative public/private space, this room is, similar to the Benade and De Wet characters and their experiences of negotiating the relationship between their personal and national histories, shaped by the same social narratives constructing the hierarchy of white Afrikaner culture during the context of apartheid. However, these spaces in each family house challenge social convention, and instead representing personal and national histories as merged, suggesting that the lived experiences of human beings does not always neatly overlap with either their public, or national histories.

I first illustrate Milla’s relationship with her friend, Beatrice, who lives near Grootmoedersdrift, and represents in both the narrative past and present of *Agaat*, the voice of the broader wealthy Overberg community of farmers that repeatedly question Milla’s relationship to Aagaat. Near the end of Milla’s life, Beatrice visits Grootmoedersdrift, but is disturbed by the state of the room Milla is confined in, and Aagaat’s new authority over her room and body, for what it contains with its symbolic objects is at once familiar, and equally disturbing and unfamiliar. She is perturbed by the shadowy contents of Milla’s room and body that disrupt her neatly drawn division between her national history as a white Afrikaner woman, and personal history as wife to her husband, Thys. In the next example, student political canvassers come face-to-face with the “poor white” shadows of Afrikaner nationalism at 127 Martha Street, and are forced by the Benades through an impromptu performance mocking their loyalty to the Nationalists, to acknowledge the Benades deformed embodiment of whiteness as *part* of South Africa’s national historical narrative. Each of these illustrations, while specific to Afrikaner cultural contexts, are also reflective of human issues of struggling



to make sense of the relationship between personal and national histories, as well as how the content and significance of the past can be transformed through the form it is presented in. These confrontations seem to dissolve the barrier between social constructs and the cultural performance of these models, revealing that individual subjectivity is formed and negotiated between private spaces, and the public performance of social identity.

Much of Beatrice and Milla's friendship is shaped by the confines of the private home, and the ambiguous sitting room of this family space. Beatrice is Milla's "friend from schooldays" (*Agaat* 41), and their relationship is representative of the social and cultural community of wealthy Afrikaners in the Overberg region. From Milla's perspectives, her relationship with Beatrice seems strained by the constraints of the archetypal Afrikaner "properly made up wife," a thought Milla has while putting on her wedding dress (40). The "squared-off, folded-back, the freshly covered wife" (40) that Milla refers to signals the types of camouflage women provide for men in patriarchal societies, by portraying themselves as passive participants in the masculine public domain. For example, while discussing their husbands in the sitting room, in an implicit confirmation of the fact that in these kinds of societies, women only seem to gain agency through men, Milla confides in Beatrice about Jak's treatment of her, such as "the dragging across the cement and the scratches and the bruises and how it had gone over the years" (100), which illustrates Milla's lack of respect for the conventions of the sitting room as an extension and alternative reflection of the private space of the home. Beatrice hesitates to respond, signalling her unwillingness to engage with the underside of private patriarchal life, and gets up to leave. Milla stops her however, stating "it's your turn now, you talk to me now" (100), illuminating how Milla desires feedback and confirmation of her 'place' within the realms of white Afrikaner women and culture. She noticed how Beatrice "clammed shut, how the defensiveness came over her [...] More than defensiveness, disgust, judgement. Of you, not of Jak" (100), echoing the sideboards similarly employed in both *Triomf* and *Agaat*. Beatrice and Milla as white Afrikaner women, are expected to "camouflage" (40) their husbands, steeling the contradictory boundaries demarcating public and private life behind 'polite' conversation. Beatrice thus responds, "I shall never talk out of the house" (100), demonstrating how the social conventions of this space are learned and performed as a means of maintaining a neatly compartmentalised separation of private, and public life.

Once Milla's physical condition has deteriorated to such an extent that she can no longer observe the separation between private and public life, visitors like Beatrice and Dr Leroux,

Milla's doctor that attends to her medical needs in the final months of her life, display contrasting reactions to the symbolism of the sitting room on Grootmoedersdrift in the narrative present. During one of Dr Leroux's routine visits to Grootmoedersdrift, he comments on the state of the room Milla is in. He asks Agaat about "all these things lying here" (179), alluding to objects symbolic of Milla and Agaat's life on the farm that she has placed and locked in the sitting room. Agaat explains that it is "[j]ust some old stuff", and how she "kept it all in the cellar. Now she's asking to look at it all again, her little things from long ago" (179). Dr Leroux reads the scene wrongly; Milla detects the "suspicion in his voice" (179) as he nods to Agaat's descriptions. Milla believes Dr Leroux does not grasp the symbolic weight of the objects in the room because he "is a bit unpolished [...] He's improper" (179), alluding to his lesser positioning in the hierarchy of white Afrikaner society he functions within. The contents of Milla's room are later illustrated by Jakkie in the Epilogue, and reflect how the sitting room contains all of the important objects that defined Milla life, and her relationship to Agaat. He gains access to the sitting room, which is "the only room in all the house that was locked, the only room in all the house that had a door" (564). In this room Jakkie finds "[d]resses and hats, mirrors, watches, maps, photos," and he "picked up the objects and put them down again, the skull of a buck, of a baboon, a lizard's skeleton, a ram's horn, a trocar and cannula" (565). He continues: "[t]here were my varnished birds' eggs in a bowl [...] Oupa's old telescope with which Ma taught me and Gaat about the stars [...] There were butterflies pinned to green felt [...] a bag of compost, jars of soil samples, a wire clipper," among many others (565-6). These different objects, each embedded with a sense of his personal histories, reflect South Africa's larger and more complex engagement in the public domain, to reckon with the legacies of apartheid through the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC, as I discussed in Chapter Two, was designed to apply a narrow frame on the narrative of the past, seemingly disregarding the sociopolitical nuances and cultural variations that separated personal and national histories, and empowered apartheid as the "racially promiscuous" system it was (Dlamini 14). With this in mind, each of the objects Jakkie describes, refer to foundational experiences he has while growing up on the farm, and seem to complicate his relationship to Grootmoedersdrift and the broader colonial and apartheid histories underpinning this space.

Alternatively, Beatrice visits this sitting room in the narrative present before Agaat has a chance to lock everything away. Her reaction to the contents of the room, Milla's body and Agaat's new authority over the farm disrupt her newly formed post-apartheid subjectivity.

Once in the room, she announces herself to the silent Milla, “Thys’s wife [...] Me, your nearest neighbour to whom you told everything about your life” (*Agaat* 225). Milla however, remembers that what she “told her at that time about Jak wasn't news to her,” and that she “was just a mirror for her, the darting glance, the shame, the repressed rage” (225), highlighting how the questioning of Afrikaner social values in the context of the Overberg, meant acknowledging that experiences of cultural alienation were real. Beatrice quickly grows uncomfortable during her visit, a feeling she reveals to Milla she felt before visiting. She says she “spoke to Agaat on the phone this morning”, and that Agaat “asked if I would stay with you in the morning. But then she didn’t sound altogether together to me [...] You can never know what the creatures will get up to” (227). Beatrice too, explicitly refers to Agaat’s cultural and racial ambiguity, adding, “I don’t mean Agaat of course, I mean the others” (227), alluding to the fact that Agaat contradicts the whiteness she embodies and performs. Milla comments that Beatrice appears “[n]ervous, uncomfortable with me”, that she “can’t face it [...] So much embarrassment on the face, so much fear and aversion, all at the same time” (228), pointing toward the reflection of Afrikaner cultural identity Milla’s dying body represents and reminds Beatrice of.

But, like earlier in their relationship when discussing their husbands, Beatrice cannot question the situation in the sitting room. Milla makes her “eyeballs quake,” which frightens Beatrice so much she phones Thys, exclaiming, “I have to get out of this house, it gives me the creeps” (234), highlighting the ways in which the state of the sitting room interrupts her separation of public and private life. Beatrice seems to reject the decayed image of whiteness portrayed by Milla in bed, and the house she is confined to. The dismantling of institutionalised white supremacy, which is reflected by Milla’s failing body, brings together public and private spaces, and speaks toward the paralysing consequences of dismissing overlap between these spaces, that Beatrice displays in her discomfort (Lefebvre 186). Although Beatrice trusts Agaat, the fact that she is not ‘purely’ white, and thus ‘purely’ Afrikaans is disruptive to her. Beatrice’s encounter illustrates how Van Niekerk weaves epochs together in the hopes of remaking the past. In other words, while Milla’s mother emptied out the house in the narrative past when it was restored in 1947, Agaat has refilled the room with artefacts and objects embedded with new significance and symbolism. Through notions of “epochal weaving”, which illustrate moments of narrative overlap, the space of this room is used to illustrate how Van Niekerk critiques the past through new imaginings. Beatrice, similarly to the TRC and its conclusions about South Africa’s past, would rather keep the sitting room on Grootmoedersdrift closed off, just as many in this post-apartheid epoch advocate for moving on from the past. As a reflection

of the shrivelled ideology informing Afrikaner nationalism, Milla jokes about her dysfunctional body, which is in many ways an allusion to the dysfunctional structure of the Benade home. This joke can be read as Van Niekerk's call to open up this room and others like it, in light of disregarding the past, and expose us to the necessity to rethink and restore its shape. The Benades also confront visitors to their home, but with the baggage of their "poor white" past, which is represented by the cracks and leaks defining their home, and protecting their personal histories of incest and cultural 'impurity'. Unlike Agaat, who has the capability to lock away the important objects in the sitting room, the Benades are unable to do so, exposing inability for personal and national histories to be separated.

Two university students canvassing for the NP and the upcoming elections in 1994 visit the Benades in Triomf. These students are, like Beatrice, confronted with the shadows of Afrikaner nationalism within the context of national transition, in the public and private space of the lounge. Just before the students arrive Mol wakes from a nap to "a knocking noise against the wall [...] No wonder. They're busy knocking a hole into the foundation" of their home (*Triomf* 146), in an allusion to the shaky underpinnings of Afrikaner nationalism and its history Van Niekerk exposes in this confrontation in the sitting room. A beehive had been discovered under the foundation of the Benade home, and Lambert wanted to remove it. Eventually, Lambert, Mol and Treppie are forced to hide under Mol's housecoat to avoid a swarm of bees that had gathered on top of them. Mol remembers something Lambert "had read in *Beeld* about mad bees in Pretoria" (145), which she believes will remedy their predicament. Lambert read how "in Pretoria the bees had swarmed under the foundations of the Union Buildings", and that those bees could kill you; that after "two hundred stings, you were brain-dead" (145). Seemingly unaware of the political sharpness of her comment, Mol says that the Union Buildings are "apparently full of brain-dead people. On every floor. Ministers, deputy ministers, typists, tea boys, the lot" (145), signifying how proponents of Afrikaner nationalism cannot think as individuals, but as members of a larger political entity. Mol's solution alludes to the significant ways in which gaps and cracks in structural foundations can be taken advantage of; in this case, a swarm of bees were hovering "around the vent, there near the foundation" (142). Van Niekerk sets up the encounter between the Benades and "those two from the NP" (141) in the lounge, and like bees, the Benades swarm the canvassers with their lived experiences of poverty and neglect as a challenge to the recycled narrative of mythologised salvation deployed by the 'new' National Party.

In the passage, a space of transition between the private space of the home, and the ambiguous location of the lounge, Mol stops and listens to “the sound of people talking [...] It’s the NPS” (147). She hears Annemarie, one of the students, say, “[t]he people in this house are scum. They make me stick to my stomach” (147).<sup>49</sup> Jannie, the other student, tries to console Annemarie, and explains that they “must think strategically [...] The main issue is to keep having a say in what happen, and if we can do that with the votes of this lot, then it’s a say no less [...] The issue is language and culture. No more and no less” (148). Annemarie though, asks “but what kind of culture will you find on this property” (148) alluding to Benades social positioning as “waste wool” outlined in Chapter One. Jannie confirms as much, stating people like the Benades “are our foot soldiers in the election. They’re right at the bottom of the ladder and they feel threatened. They’ll buy anything we tell them” (149). The Benades however, and especially Mol, resist and mock the NP representatives by pointing out the hollowness of their words and political ambitions.

Throughout the duration of their visit, Mol echoes to snippets of conversation between the students that she overheard. Following Treppie’s comments that the Benades will go to heaven with “the name of God [...] spray-painted” onto their foreheads, Mol contributes “without any frowns” either” (151). If not, she says, they “won’t be suitable for the New South Africa, or for heaven. No culture on this property, just waste material” (151), emphasising her family’s lower class disposition to self-consciously claim this identity, and overcome its stigmatisation. Mol’s opinion is a subtle but searingly critical take on their social positioning as political fodder. Once settled into the lounge, Jannie begins explaining their position more thoroughly. They want to preserve “the higher things, and have a say over them. Our language, and our culture” (152). The Benades become fixated on the notion of culture. Annemarie and Jannie, who is mockingly referred to as “Blazer” (152-3), gesturing toward the homogenisation of white Afrikaner identity, equate securing “the finer things in life” with “the right to our culture”

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<sup>49</sup> Van Niekerk extends the metaphor of bees further in this scene. The students speculate where Mol is, and Jannie, the other student, says she is probably “lying in the back here somewhere. Befucked. Bee-fucked” (*Triomf* 147). Through my own cultural immersion into Afrikaner cultural contexts I came to the realisation that, even in translation, Van Niekerk’s clever word play is retained in De Kock’s translation. Jannie makes a pun on the Afrikaans word, *befok*, which, in translation, has multiple meanings; firstly, *befok*, translates to “angry”, “cool” or “crazy”, so in one sense, Jannie is making a joke about the “crazy” women (Mol), and her family. This is confirmed when Annemarie playfully reprimands Jannie, stating that he “shouldn’t make fun of illness” (148). Secondly, in translation, “befucked”, or “bee-fucked” may also allude to the students’ awareness of the inbred origins of the Benade family; and thirdly, in translation the pun relates back to the larger context of the scene, in which a swarm of bees were angered and retaliated, as well as forms of class and racial discrimination the Benades experience throughout the novel as “waste wool”.

(153). Again, Mol self-consciously critiques their ambiguous definition of “culture,” adding, “[c]ulture for the backvelders—Klipdrift and Coke and crock cars” (153), which alludes to the students’ earlier comments about the Benades impoverishment. Her definition of culture uses the combination of brandy and Coke, a stereotypical image of impoverished South Africans and alcohol abuse, to depict the Benades “poor white” identity as supposedly not being as culturally refined as theirs. So, Treppie asks for a proper definition of “culture,” and “Little Blazer” says, “how did Prof. van Rensburg put it, culture is the, er, complex product of a creative, er, socially determined grasp of nature, er, such as historically determined by a language and a religious community” (153). Treppie demonstrates the empty framework supporting this definition, responding, “watch how I determine this Coke by grasping the Klipdrift” (153). His silly example sheds light on the emptiness of the NP’s political and cultural rhetoric; by clinging so dearly to the preservation of their language and culture the NP insulated Afrikaners to the extreme degree displayed by the Benades.

Treppie then recounts a story from the Benades past that additionally highlights the narrow ideology informing Annemarie and Jannie’s politics, as well as extend the criticism of the Afrikaner educational system during apartheid. He explains how a “month before [South Africa] became a republic”, Mol was requested “for an ‘audience’ with the principal, ‘cause Lambert didn’t want to do his work. And how he smelt bad, and how he was ‘indecent’ with little schoolgirls” (154). The principal, Treppie remembers saying, “felt he could make a diamond from even this piece of coal” (154), underlining Lambert, and the Benades “poor white” circumstances. Treppie says that “Triomf” then, “should have been named after that principal, ‘cause anyone who thought a school was like a mine must also think bulldozing kaffir rubbish was some kind of great victory” (154). Treppie highlights the intent of the apartheid state to ‘purify’ “poor whites” by isolating them in white suburbs, such as Triomf when in reality, this intention was itself impure; the Benades were relocated to Triomf in order to renovate the representation of respectable (white) Afrikaner society, and black South Africans who would be exposed to the foibles of institutionalised white supremacy (Bottomly 49). By merging this historical framework with the anticipation for a post-apartheid ‘new’ South Africa, she illustrates that the ‘old’ South Africa was not underpinned by ‘high’ minded ideals (such as the *volk*), but rather by the broken pieces of black, and other marginalised communities like “poor whites” destroyed in the name of white supremacy.

Van Niekerk continues to merge historical frameworks together in the Benade lounge by challenging the narrative of ‘purity’ interwoven into Nationalist ideology. Treppie extends his deconstruction of the NP canvassers ideologies when Mol says, “[t]here’s always a light at the end of the wagon-trek” (*Triomf* 156) referring to the ways in which Nationalist politicians, like D.F. Malan, invoked the Great Trek as a means of galvanising Afrikaner support of apartheid. This invocation was symbolic of new frontiers for Afrikaner identity during the culmination of nationalism in 1948, despite the Benades experience of “misery,” through the form of “the depression and [their] mother who coughed herself to death from TB. And our father who hanged himself by the neck in a Railways truck” (155-6), suggesting that not all Afrikaners experienced the same mythologised framing of the past. Treppie says “[i]t was the same bladdy story in ’38, and again in ’48 [...] There’s always a light at the end of the wagon-trek. They never said there’s a gun or bread or a factory or a trading license at the front of the wagon” (156). “No,” he says, “always a fucken light, a column of fire, a Spirit, a Higher Idea, an Ideal of fucken Unity or something. And that’s cause we’re all supposed to be from the same culture” (156). Treppie, is highly critical of this, asking, “[w]hat kind of a fucken thing is that” (156). The NP students are disturbed, and want to leave, but Treppie says to them “you’ll stay to the very end. Here with us, with our roof above our heads” (156). Eventually the students leave, and the bee-catcher returns, explaining that the bees in the foundation of the house are “nice and tame from the smoke” (159), alluding to the ways in which the Benades, like bees in a hive, subdued Annemarie and Jannie with their self-conscious performance that reclaims their deformed whiteness in an attempt to be recognised as human. The Benades, like millions of impoverished South Africans, represent the difficulties of redefining personal histories at the bottom of social hierarchies, because these lived experiences are made possible by political systems that deploy marginalisation for power, rather than trying to solve the structural conditions deeply embedded into locations characterised by national histories of poverty.

## Conclusion

This chapter focused on a number of reflections in mirrors, and the family home as a microcosms mirror of broader national contexts in Van Niekerk’s *Triomf* and *Agaat*. The significance of the home as a reflection of the nation, as well as the Benade and De Wet bodies as reflections of specific sociopolitical contexts were shown to alternatively represent the transformations of personal histories in the face of South Africa’s transition to a post-apartheid society, or more general redefined historical imaginings. On the one hand, the conversation between *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and the ways Van Niekerk weaves the separate physical spaces of

these novels together through illustrations of “epochal weaving”, reveals how cultural continuity, whether in South Africa or in the US, seems to exist in unlikely locations. On the other hand, the various reflections produced by the physical spaces of the Benade home in Triomf, and the De Wet farmstead on Grootmoedersdrift illuminate the difficulties of reconciling the relationship between personal and national histories. Despite one’s ability to forge a new path, or retain some kind of relationship to lived experiences in the past, these contexts appear to shift and adjust according to new cultural, and sociopolitical contexts in time and space.



## Conclusion:

### Reflections on “Epochal Weaving”

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate how different narrative strategies and metaphors in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* (2004) and *Agaat* (2010) have the capacity to reimagine and merge Afrikaner, and South African historical frameworks together through my discussion of illustrations of “epochal weaving”. While I elaborate on the significance of “epochal weaving” in relation to broader contexts throughout this thesis (and briefly recap below), I understood this research project to be important, especially as an international scholar, for tracing alternative connections in time and space in Van Niekerk’s post-apartheid Afrikaans fiction. This thesis is also worthwhile for thinking about how her work, as an example of South African fiction in translation, surpasses the country’s national boundaries.

The specific metaphors of narrative and other techniques examined in each chapter illuminated ways for imagining how the interconnectedness of different spaces can be narrated in literature. In my introduction I maintained my position as an international reader and scholar that was approaching Van Niekerk’s fiction in translation. By undertaking this thesis I wanted to confront my lingering feelings of nostalgia for the South Africa I came to ‘know’ as an exchange student, and to dig deeper into the many diverse cultural contexts that make this an exciting and strange place to live. While I did not focus on the underlying translational or transnational value of these texts in this thesis, I elaborate on this issue here to offer parting comments on how cultural nuances can be recovered through literary techniques. I also introduced how post-apartheid issues related to ideological aspects of South African space, race, class and history are relevant to my discussion of alternative frameworks for narrating time in literature. Due to the fact that the settings of Johannesburg and the Overberg feature so strongly in *Triomf* and *Agaat* respectively, I wanted to engage these issues through excavating their histories from the fabric of the texts and physical landscapes. In my close analysis of the novels I thus explored how Van Niekerk makes use of metaphor and narrative strategies to weave physical locations together across historical contexts, and map new connections in time and space.

In Chapter One, I focused on *Triomf* and analysed the act of walking as an alternative metaphor for stringing together marginalised spatial histories. I relied on ideas from the work of a range of space and cultural theorists, like Michel de Certeau’s book *The Practice of Everyday Life*

(1988), and Michel Foucault's spatial infrastructure of heterotopias. As a result of social discrimination because they embody a whiteness deformed, the Benades are forced to use the western suburb of Triomf in ways counterintuitive to their social positioning in white Afrikaner society. Although this "poor white" family is ultimately constrained by their inheritance of poverty and the bigoted ideologies they have been indoctrinated by, their behaviour in city streets alludes to the street as a transformative topography for rethinking Afrikaner identity construction through a carnivalesque rereading of social space, drawing on the notions as discussed in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984). In addition, my analysis showed highlighted the potential for heterotopic spaces, such as warehouses, rubbish dumps or neglected environments on the margins of societies, to be reimagined as locations of cultural and individual growth. Through forms of collaboration that are made possible in the kinds of environments characterised as heterotopias, the framework of "epochal weaving" displayed how the features of a *mbira* alludes to both the cultural legacies of old Sophiatown and the "poor white" histories of western Johannesburg. The *mbira*, a musical instrument instantly recognisable and suggestive of broader African contexts, demonstrates the cultural possibilities of the metaphor of walking to reimagine how urban spaces are conceptualised of, and utilised in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter Two provided a close reading of *Agaat* and the literary histories submerged in the genre of Afrikaans farm novels that Van Niekerk excavates through metaphors. As I showed in my discussion and debates with relevant criticism on the *plaasroman* and the narrative strategies of metaphor, as well as Patricia's Waugh work on metafiction in her book *Metafiction* (1984), this novel is self-consciously located within the *plaasroman*, a genre it reworks from a post-apartheid perspective, in order to foreground issues related to race, class and colonial histories of land dispossession in South Africa. I again drew from Bakhtin and his notion of the literary chronotope to illustrate how the structure of the text rotates between Milla's narrative past and present, suggesting that post-apartheid South Africa contexts are more intimately informed by their apartheid counterparts. The chronotope was a helpful lens for mapping new connections in history and space, because this concept represents the passing of time aesthetically in literature. Images of maps and processes of mapping, which feature throughout the narrative present, were thus emboldened by the chronotope, for reimagining how broader issues related to land dispossession can be related to post-apartheid debates on land reform, and engaged with in fiction. The discussion of colonial histories in the novel also extended the examination of "epochal weaving" through fresh spinach and a feather duster directly linked

to the cultivation of servitude and the landscape. These objects symbolise moments in the complex web of the novel where the narrative past and present are merged and overlap. I also focused on garden imagery and the art form of embroidery as alternative spaces for recovering individual agency and narrating not only racial identities underwritten in the *plaasroman*, but also gender identities that were outside the scope of this thesis. My analysis of gardens and embroidery drew from notions of metafiction to illuminate how Van Niekerk's use of metaphors of narrative seems to self-consciously reflect on the politics of framing in relation to historical interpretation, and how narratives of becoming can accommodate South Africa's unfolding colonial and apartheid pasts.

In Chapter Three I put *Triomf* and *Agaat* into conversation to explore more significant notions of "epochal weaving" and historical overlap between these texts. While both novels are set during the transitional period of the 1990s, these texts reimagine the historical epoch of apartheid from different narrative perspectives in Gauteng and the Western Cape. These divergences, which I explored through specific physical features and the domestic space of each family home in the novels, illustrate possible threads for tracing cultural continuity between historical epochs in South Africa. In my close reading of the home as a mirror of the nation in *Triomf* and *Agaat*, I contrasted the decadence of the De Wet homestead in the Overberg, with the dilapidated Benade home in *Triomf* through Foucault's extensive discussion of heterotopic spaces, as well as Henri Lefebvre's work on mirrors in relation to social space from his book *The Production of Space* (1991). My focus on the physical features and domestic space of each family home illustrate how the novels are connected by the historical context(s) they are set in. In other words, Van Niekerk appears to rebuild South African historical contexts, like a carpenter, through the Benade and De Wet households. The contrasting descriptions of grandeur and decay I discussed in my analysis of these homes and the political environments they are set in, illuminate new cultural and historical connections in time and space that can be imagined in post-apartheid fiction. *Triomf* and *Agaat* are, in many ways, two different novels. Though, when they are put into conversation with one another, it becomes clear that these texts are self-consciously engaged in a discussion about excavating and confronting South Africa's multi-layered past.

Unsurprisingly, in the course of my research, I encountered some challenges and difficulties on the level of translation, both in relation to the Afrikaans translations of the novels into English and lack of translation of existing criticisms, reviews and interviews with the author. The

translation of the novels into English no doubt affects a foreign reader's interpretation and understanding of specific local contexts informing these novels, which are dependent on the nuance of Afrikaans as a language for retaining much of the symbolism and political potency Van Niekerk manipulates in her critique of Afrikaner cultural and history. Nevertheless, these moments of misunderstanding and feelings of disjointedness led to more enlightening self-discoveries in my own research, and personal experience of navigating the nuances of a new culture and language. These moments were anyway mediated through Van Niekerk's creative use of metaphor. Because metaphor implies the use of symbolism to create and convey meaning, the significance of these instances of cultural confusion served to both highlight my distanced subjectivity as an international scholar, as well as promote the use of metaphor in search of other forms of cross-cultural translation.

As I mentioned above, much of my frustration in critically engaging the novels and the academic discourses surrounding the novels, stems from the fact that important criticisms are only available in Afrikaans. Although this issue is more of a reflection of my own linguistic shortcomings rather than a critique, my regret is voiced because translated criticism might have shed additional light on the process of reading Van Niekerk's fiction in global grammars of translation and transnationalism. I was thus only able to develop a glancing awareness of existing Afrikaans scholarship on the novels, which left me wanting more out of my research experience.

Having said that, I end with parting comments on the significance of "epochal weaving" as a framework for conceiving of more fluid and flexible connections in time and space. Although I chose to focus on specific instances of cultural and historical overlap in Van Niekerk's fiction, I also could have drawn from notions of "epochal weaving" to develop the transnational implications of my reading of these novels, and other areas of critical research. I decided against this because of the limits and scope of this thesis, but the practice of 'peeping' in particular, seems like a fascinating context with which to engage these novels in translation, with interpretations shaped from afar. These novels, although translated, seemed so specific in their characterisations, stylised use of language, descriptive imagery and complex themes of family, power, love and the lingering presence of the past in the present that it felt like some careful mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar. In this way, *Triomf* and *Agaat* resist national borders; this endurance, though, is what I believe opens them up to transnational interpretation. This resistance of national borders seemed to be confirmed in Van Niekerk's nomination for the 2015 Man Booker

International Prize, which will continue to expose new readers to her fiction. Van Niekerk's fiction does not only cater to South African readers or simple understandings of South Africa. In future, I hope to develop my literary research in relation to the notion of "epochal weaving" and to pursue further research on how (South) African literature speaks across local and national cultural and historical boundaries.

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