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Adam Levin

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The humanity of whiteness in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*

Adam Levin

African Centre for the Study of the United States, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

In this article, I will use a textual analysis of Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) as a framework through which to critique and expand upon the concerns reflected in current studies of whiteness. As I will observe, the field of Whiteness Studies offers an insightful lens through which to examine the constructions of whiteness, particularly with regards to how it capitalizes on Black identities and subjectivities. Yet, it does not address the different formations of white identity that may emerge when seeking out points of empathy and connection between Black and white individuals and communities. Through a specific focus on Magona's portrayal of the figures of the white "madam", the white liberal activist, and the white grieving mother in *Mother to Mother*, I will examine how the novel demonstrates the ways in which engaging with the humanity of whiteness can potentially illuminate these different formations of white identity.

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Introduction

In a testimony delivered at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission amnesty hearings, Ntombeko Ambrose Peni expressed a belief that the act of killing white people would make "the minority white people ruling the country [...] realize that [African people] wanted [their] land back" and that, subsequently, they would "give up [the] land back to the African people".¹ Peni's statements here were made in an effort to apply for amnesty following his actions in the murder of Amy Biehl, a young white American anti-apartheid activist who, between 1992 and 1993, came to South Africa to pursue her studies at the University of the Western Cape as a scholar in the Fulbright Program. On her final day in South Africa, Amy entered the impoverished township of Guguletu with the intention of giving friends she had made at the university a ride home. Identifying her presence as a threat, the community proceeded to attack Amy with Peni and three other Black youths delivering the final blow as they stoned and stabbed her to death.

CONTACT Adam Levin  leviaj@gmail.com

¹Qtd in Amnesty Hearings, Cape Town, 8 July 1997.

Amy's murder represented a particularly significant moment in South African history because it occurred during a period in which the country was beginning the transition from an apartheid state to a new, post-apartheid democracy. One of the most significant aspects of this transition was the ways in which it prompted a rethinking of whiteness and its meanings in the context of South African society. In her seminal work *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (2001) and essays such as "White Talk': White South Africans and the Management of Diasporic Whiteness" (2005), Melissa Steyn probes into the complexities inherent in constructing a white identity in post-apartheid South African society. In the latter essay, she offers a useful definition of whiteness and, subsequently, the meanings and values attached to it. Steyn writes that whiteness is best defined as "an ideologically supported social positionality that has accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during and subsequent to European colonial expansion".² It provides a "shared social space in which the psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of this privileged (position) are normalized, and rendered unremarkable".³ From the outset of post-apartheid South Africa's evolution, however, the "normalized" and "unremarkable" nature of white privilege was brought into question and challenged, particularly as the country underwent a transition from the white leadership of apartheid South Africa to the Black leadership of the New South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings heralded a specific moment where this position was interrogated as the nation-building processes it evoked, prompted a "substantial reframing of social identities".⁴ As a consequence of this, the ways in which whiteness was understood have fallen under scrutiny as, due to the political and social climate, it has been subjected to a push to "deconstruct the taken-for-granted privileges of being at the center of power".⁵

Within this framework, Steyn situates her own studies of whiteness in relation to the broader field of, what is known as, "Whiteness Studies". As an academic field of inquiry, Whiteness Studies first emerged within an American context via the works of African American writers and thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and most prolifically, Toni Morrison whose essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993) employs American Literature as a lens through which to explore how whiteness is constructed via its engagements with Blackness. In South Africa, Whiteness Studies has gained recognition through figures such as Steyn, sociologist Deborah Posel and literary scholar Leon de Kock.

In an interview with Mary West, Njabulo Ndebele offers illuminating insights into the possibilities Whiteness Studies presents for studying the nature of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. In the interview, Ndebele, whose seminal essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa" (1986) advocates for a South African literature that focuses on everyday realities as opposed to the country's political climate, reflects briefly on how a few South African post-apartheid

²Steyn, "White Talk': White South Africans and the Management of Diasporic Whiteness", 121.

³Ibid., 121.

⁴Ibid., 119.

⁵Ibid.

literary works represent contemporary South African whiteness. He places specific emphasis on Jonathan Jansen's non-fictional work *Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past: Knowledge in the Blood* (2009). This work presents Jansen's observations on the realities of white Afrikaner university students who, following the end of apartheid, had to learn to co-exist with Black students in the university space. Jansen's book examines this transition via the perspective of the white students, whilst also acknowledging the influence these perspectives had in changing and reshaping his own perceptions of Blackness. In his reading of this work, Ndebele observes how Jansen draws attention to the notion that there "isn't a single whiteness".⁶ Rather, "there is a multiplicity of 'whitenesses' which we don't understand because these differences have all been papered over by the official whiteness of apartheid, in the same way that apartheid papered over everyone who was black".⁷ This leads Ndebele to observe that "this view of a multiplicity of 'whitenesses' opens up new and fresh possibilities for dealing with South African questions of race, class and ethnicity".⁸ In this article, I plan to draw on Ndebele's observation as a starting point through which to examine Sindiwe Magona's representation of this "multiplicity of whitenesses" in her seminal work *Mother to Mother* (1998).

In this novel, Magona presents a fictionalized account of Amy Biehl's murder. The novel examines the events that occurred on the day of the murder through the eyes of Mandisa, the mother of one of Amy's perpetrators. Through a letter she writes to Amy's mother, Linda, Mandisa explains why her son, Mxolisi, murdered Amy. She does so by recalling the events that occurred on the day of the murder from three perspectives: her own, Mxolisi's and Amy's. In presenting her perspective, Mandisa provides the personal, political, and historical details which frame this event. She guides the narrative as her reflections consider how her own past shapes the present. She first details this past through a focus on the Guguletu community's communal wounds as she recalls the community's development, following the forced removals that caused her family to lose their home in Blouvillei. Within the communal narrative, she situates her own story of struggle, shaped by her race, gender, and economic status. In representing Mxolisi's perspective, she documents his movements on the day of the murder, tracing his actions back to a "resentment of three hundred years"⁹ that stems from a history of Black oppression. Though Amy's perspective is presented in less detail than that of Mandisa's and Mxolisi's, it remains pivotal to the narrative's events. Here, Mandisa presents her interpretation of Amy's movements on the day of the murder. As she writes to Linda, she attempts to create a bond of empathy between them based on their shared position as mothers who have each lost a child.

Apart from Amy and Linda, *Mother to Mother* also introduces the reader to a third white female character: Mrs. Nelson, a wealthy housewife who employs Mandisa as her domestic worker. Each of these characters presents a particular persona of whiteness. Mrs. Nelson is the archetypal white "madam" who depends on her Black employee to perform the domestic acts which inform her roles as a dutiful wife and

⁶Ndebele qtd. in West, "Responding to Whiteness", 117.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 224.

mother. Amy, in contrast, is the white activist who devotes her life to fighting against the white domination and exploitation of Black bodies. Linda is the grieving white mother, dealing with both the loss of her child and the difficult question of whether to forgive an act of Black perpetration.

By virtue of their whiteness, what unites these women is their position as “implicated subjects”. In his book *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019), Michael Rothberg defines the “implicated subject” as a figure who is “neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles”.¹⁰ Though “implicated subjects” are not “direct agents of harm”, they occupy “positions aligned with power and privilege”.¹¹ These positions allow them to “contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination”.¹² Ultimately, Rothberg suggests, “implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present”.¹³ By virtue of this definition, Amy, Linda, and Mrs. Nelson are each implicated in the “structures of inequality” that have created Black oppression in South Africa and, in the case of Amy and Linda, the United States. *Mother to Mother’s* portrayal of each woman’s approach to grappling with her position of implication challenges the notion of a “single whiteness”. The novel does so through its emphasis on exploring the humanity of whiteness.

Central to this exploration is Magona’s/Mandisa’s engagement with the process of “empathic repair”.¹⁴ As conceived by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, the term “empathic repair” refers to “a constant search for the emergence of human moments that can create a sense of solidarity and transcend old dividing lines that promote othering”.¹⁵ The ultimate goal of this search is to “recognise the humanity of others”¹⁶ in a manner which offers the prospect of transforming society and healing “historical ruptures”.¹⁷ In embarking on this search, Magona, through Mandisa, endeavors to find points of connection with whiteness. In doing so, she develops an understanding of whiteness that looks beyond its associations with perpetration and acts of “othering”.

At present, many studies of *Mother to Mother* reflect on the novel within the context of the TRC, examining it through the lens of the issues of truth and reconciliation which emanate from Biehl’s narrative. Meg Samuelson identifies how, in placing Mandisa’s voice at the center of the text, Magona brings into focus the absence of women’s voices at the TRC hearings.¹⁸ Stef Craps highlights how this emphasis on women’s narratives in *Mother to Mother* also illuminates the absence of, what he terms, narratives of “ordinary trauma” within the broader lens of the

¹⁰Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 1.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Gobodo-Madikizela, “Empathetic Repair after Mass Trauma”, 331.

¹⁵Gobodo-Madikizela, “Introduction”, 13.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Samuelson, “The Mother as Witness”, 127–144

hearings.¹⁹ To the best of my knowledge, however, no examination of the novel thus far has considered how whiteness is represented in the text.

A study of the representation of whiteness in *Mother to Mother* may appear to be dated, given the period of South African history during which the novel is set, and its year of publication. However, despite being set just prior to the establishment of South African democracy, twenty-nine years ago, the novel complicates the notion of a “single whiteness” more effectively than many recent works of post-apartheid literature. A novel such as Futhi Ntshingila’s *They Got You Too* (2021), which deals with similar themes to *Mother to Mother*, portrays whiteness as a site which continues to operate from a position of racial superiority and, consequently, a denial of its actions in shaping the racialized traumas of the past and present. This characterization implies that whiteness, in both its past and present iterations, is specifically defined in relation to the figure of the perpetrator. As with the issue of defining Black identities primarily in relation to victimhood, this characterization often tends to reject the humanity that lies behind whiteness and its represented types. I will propose that *Mother to Mother* offers a call to Whiteness Studies to contemplate meanings of whiteness that look beyond reductive categorizations in order to consider the state of humanity at its core.

Drawing on the theoretical studies of whiteness, posited by both South African and American scholars, I will develop my discussion by examining how Mandisa’s understandings of a “single whiteness” shift as *Mother to Mother*’s narrative evolves. I will first situate Mandisa’s initial understanding of whiteness by considering how she engages with the historical narrative of the 1856–1857 Xhosa Cattle-Killings which frames the text’s narrative. This will demonstrate how Mandisa comes to view whiteness, both through this narrative and her own experience of racial violence, as being constructed through the exploitation of Blackness. I will then observe how Mandisa translates this view of whiteness to her perception of Mrs. Nelson’s position as an “implicated subject” within, what is soon to be, post-apartheid South Africa. This will serve as an entry point through which to examine how Mandisa’s perceptions of Amy, and her activism serve to complicate her understandings of whiteness. This section will reflect on these perceptions through the lens of, what de Kock terms, a white “counterlife”.²⁰ As he defines it, a white “counterlife” is a life “divested of everything that has come to seem distinctively ‘white’ behaviour”, allowing for “whites to un-white themselves – to construct a counterlife that is one’s own anti-myth”.²¹ In examining Mandisa’s reflections on Amy’s white “counterlife” through her narrative, I will suggest that she, on one hand, notes its complexities, particularly in relation to how it is perceived in Black communities. On the other, she indirectly addresses how the media narratives surrounding Amy’s death have served to glorify the heroism of her white “counterlife” in a manner that obscures the very nature of her humanity. Consequently, in her recreation of Amy’s thoughts and movements, Mandisa restores to her the humanity that is lost to her in these racialized narratives. Building on this, I will finally, examine Mandisa’s engagement with Linda through her letter. Here the

¹⁹Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, 44–59

²⁰de Kock, “The Call of the Wild”, 18.

²¹Ibid.

shared experience of trauma and loss between the two mothers complicates Mandisa's understandings of whiteness further as she seeks solidarity with what she terms, her "sister-mother". Through depicting Mandisa's efforts to achieve this solidarity, Magona advocates for a process of "empathic repair" which recognizes both women's humanity. As with Amy, this process highlights Linda's humanity in a manner that is lost within the media representations of her persona.

Whiteness and the Xhosa Cattle-Killings narrative

In the introductory sections of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Morrison observes that an examination of literature within the context of the external and internal workings of race is significant in that a nation's literature is integral to the formation of the "cultural identities"²² of which it is composed. In the United States, she notes, the cultural identity produced within this literature, positions the white man as the defining figure of Americanness.²³ The dominance of American whiteness appears to erase American Blackness. Yet, Morrison demonstrates how whiteness is, in fact, constructed through its interpretations of Africanism, a term she uses to refer to the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify".²⁴ Morrison's analyses of a range of literary works, written by white American authors, illuminates how white perceptions of Africanness are integral in shaping whiteness and the ideologies which define it. In fact, whiteness comes into its very being through its interactions with Africanism. Though Morrison's essay is not referenced directly, there are clear synergies between her study of the relationship between Africanism and whiteness and de Kock's study of the dialectic between whiteness and Black "wildness". In his article "Blanc de blanc: Whiteness studies- a South African connection" (2006), de Kock proposes this dialectic as a tentative framework through which to situate Whiteness Studies within a South African literary context. Here, he observes that the ideologies of histories of colonialism and apartheid were formed through creating associations between Blackness and *wildness*, a term which implies "barbarism", 'savagery', 'uncivilized behavior'.²⁵ In "The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa" (2010), he explains this further when he suggests that whiteness is disguised as a "proxy of civilization",²⁶ the meanings of which are shaped through its "intimate relation to wildness".²⁷

In *Mother to Mother*, Magona positions the Xhosa Cattle-Killings narrative which guides the text's narrative and, consequently, Mandisa's perceptions of whiteness. A consideration of the connections between whiteness and Africanism and, thereafter, whiteness and "wildness" offers an appropriate lens through which to examine Mandisa's initial perceptions of whiteness, as established through her engagement with the history of the Xhosa Cattle Killings. The events that would lead to the Xhosa

²²Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 39.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 6–7.

²⁵de Kock, "Blanc de blanc", 187.

²⁶de Kock, "Call of the Wild", 16.

²⁷Ibid.

Cattle-Killing began in 1856 when Nongqawuse, a young Xhosa girl, experienced a vision of her ancestors returning to life, bringing new cattle with them.²⁸ In anticipation of their arrival, she was advised that the Xhosa people should “burn their crops and slaughter their cattle”.²⁹ Although the Xhosa people followed this instruction, the ancestors, ultimately, never appeared. The destruction of their livelihood resulted in approximately 40,000 Xhosas dying as a consequence of starvation. The survivors found themselves having to seek help from the British Cape Colony, placing them in positions of servitude to the colonists.³⁰ This resulted in the Xhosas losing their land to the colonial administration. The Chiefs’ lands were “seized for European settlement”.³¹ As Andrew Offenburger observes, the “pivotal Cattle-Killing Movement broke the back of the Xhosa nation and ushered in a new era of colonial expansion and domination”.³²

In reflecting on her childhood experience of learning about the Xhosa Cattle-Killings for the first time, Mandisa recalls a conversation between herself and her grandfather (Tatomkhulu). During this conversation, Mandisa and Tatomkhulu identify that they have been taught different interpretations of the Xhosa Cattle-Killings. The interpretation Mandisa has been taught is one in which Nongqawuse is deemed a “false prophet”.³³ This interpretation fits within the objectives of the Bantu Education system under which Mandisa is schooled. In documenting the trajectory of Bantu education from 1953 to 1970, Herman Giliomee notes that this system was implemented in order to prepare Black students to work as “semi-skilled labor”³⁴ within dominantly white areas where it was in high demand.³⁵ It also intervened in the political activities of Black youths, who were becoming increasingly militant against the actions of the apartheid government, by establishing discipline and order.³⁶ To meet these objectives, the Bantu school syllabus was developed in a manner that aimed to control and suppress “the intellectual and analytical abilities of black students”.³⁷ Consequently, Mandisa’s rendering of Nongqawuse as a “false prophet” alludes to how Black African identity, as portrayed in Bantu education’s rendering of South African history, was premised on the notion of Black “wildness”. As Melanie Walker observes in her 1990 study of history teaching in Bantu schools, the history syllabus’s focus on a “history made by whites”³⁸ positioned the oppressed as “‘background information’ to white settlement and capitalist development.”³⁹ They were predominantly depicted as an obstacle to the white man, doomed by their failure to recognize and validate his model of civilization. Because of this, they were defined by their acts of “wildness”, causing destruction that would inevitably lead to

²⁸Ashforth, “The Xhosa Cattle Killing”, 581.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Offenburger, “The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement”, 1428.

³³Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 188.

³⁴Giliomee, “A Note on Bantu Education, 1953–1970”, 192.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Gwala qtd. in Walker, “History and History Teaching in Apartheid South Africa”, 300.

³⁸Ibid., 303.

³⁹Ibid.

their downfall. Walker explains this further by quoting an interview with Black Consciousness Movement leader Steve Biko in which he states that, through Bantu Education, the Black man's history is explained "merely as a long succession of defeats".⁴⁰ It suggests that "the Xhosa were thieves who went to war for stolen property; the Boers never provoked the Xhosa but merely went on 'punitive exhibitions' to teach the thieves a lesson".⁴¹ As this implies, the white man's simplification and distortion of the Black man's role in his history left the Black man devoid of agency. This is because the "historical evidence" of his defeats suggested that he was unfit to govern the land. Simultaneously, it allowed the white man to prop up the image of himself as a figure of "civility", respect, and innocence. In both cases, it was the white man's exploitation of the notion of African "wildness" that acted as the force through which his historical narrative was shaped and gained traction and credibility.

These sentiments are reflected in Tatomkhulu's words as he criticizes the interpretation of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing narrative which Mandisa has been taught. As he observes, she has been taught this version by teachers who "are paid by the same ... government ... the same people who stole [their] land".⁴² Here, he implies that the teachers are being used by the apartheid government as mouth pieces to give value and credence to their ideologies. In placing emphasis on how the Xhosa blindly followed their "false prophet", they articulate the message that Black communities must remain obedient and passive if they are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. This, once again, serves to silence them, whilst conceptualizing white "civility". Recognizing this, Tatomkhulu retells the story of the Cattle-Killings in a manner which emphasizes the white enslavement of Xhosa bodies and the Xhosa people's active pursuits to fight against it. In his version of events, he stresses the motivation behind the Xhosa people's actions as he observes that they were motivated by Nongqawuse to slaughter their cattle and burn their fields with the promise that this would drive the white settlers (referred to as "*abelungu*" here) off their land to the sea where they would drown. Consequently, all who had died at the white settlers' hands would rise from the ground and, with them, would come a new beginning, a "promise of a return to the way of before, when the people with hair like silken threads of corn would be no more".⁴³ For Mandisa, this interpretation illuminates the extent to which the white settlers' limited interpretation of Black African identity in their depiction of South Africa history, obscures the realities of Black marginalization and oppression experienced under colonial rule. It also gives her insight into how the dominance of whiteness, its exploitation of the Black land, and its people and the malignment of Black history, have come to shape Blackness as a site of identity which is fueled by "a resentment of three hundred years". In turn, these insights also position whiteness as being inhumane, by virtue of its oppressive nature.

Mandisa expresses a fuller understanding of this inhumanity when she recalls how, during childhood, she beared witness to an act of land domination and, consequently, its impact on her community. At one point, she documents how her, and her

⁴⁰Biko qtd. in Walker, "History and History Teaching in Apartheid South Africa", 303.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 188.

⁴³Ibid., 193.

community are removed from their home in Blouvlei following the forced removals and land resettlements that occurred under apartheid. In describing Blouvlei, she refers to it as an “honest-to-goodness tin shacks place”⁴⁴ as she states, “Those were shacks we had built ourselves, with our own hands... built them where we wanted them, with each put together according to the wishes, whims, and means of its owner”.⁴⁵ This description resonates with poet Jason Allen-Paisant’s commentary on the connections between Black communities and landscapes which he writes about in his essay “Reclaiming Time: *On Blackness and Landscape*” (2021). As Allen-Paisant highlights in an analysis of his poem “Walking with the Word ‘Tree’”, Black families and communities “shaped the land, waited for its yields, saw their living as connected to the earth. They were not contemplators of scenery; their hands were *in* the earth”.⁴⁶ Whilst Mandisa does not refer to the “tin shacks place” in naturalistic terms, her emphasis on how her community built the shacks themselves, with their “own hands” presents a similar image of them as “shapers” of the land whose hands are “*in* the earth”. In furthering his commentary, Allen-Paisant connects whiteness to the landscape by linking this relationship to the perceptions of the colonizers in nineteenth-century Europe. During this period, the colonizers expressed the belief that the presence of nature was unneeded and that it could be “controlled, even eliminated”.⁴⁷ They believed that nature is “disorder, ‘dirt’, that which drags us down”.⁴⁸ Mandisa’s description of the white policemen’s actions as they arrive to tear down the community’s tin shacks, indicates a similar perception. She describes the policemen as “unruly children destroying a colony of anthills”.⁴⁹ The image of a “colony of anthills” connects the “tin shacks place” to nature more directly, creating a scenario in which the Blouvlei community’s natural world is invaded, “controlled” and “eliminated” by the policemen. In identifying the policemen as “unruly children”, she identifies the irony in how they consider whiteness to be the “proxy of civilization” when they themselves are capable of committing the same acts of inhumane, “uncivilized behavior” which they associate with Black “wildness”.

In this instance, it is apt that Mandisa describes her community’s new home in Guguletu as a “wilderness”.⁵⁰ This description appears to connect this home to the natural world. However, it is a form of nature which is cultivated in the white man’s image. In particular, she refers to the “brand-new brick houses”⁵¹ which populate Guguletu. In referring to the “glass windows, concrete floors, bare walls and hungry rooms”⁵² of these houses, she suggests that they create the perception that the community’s lives have “been bettered”.⁵³ However, the living costs to maintain their homes increase the working demands of families within the community. In meeting these demands, the community no longer has the freedom and agency to create their

⁴⁴Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Allen-Paisant, “Reclaiming Time”, 31, italics in the original.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 74.

⁵⁰Ibid., 75.

⁵¹Ibid., 76.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 75.

homes with their “own hands”. Rather, they must now seek work from white employers who place them in positions of servitude. Consequently, any opportunity they may have had to build and develop their land independently is squandered by their dependence on their white employers who, in turn, exploit their labor in their efforts to prop up whiteness as the “proxy of civilization”. In experiencing the impact of white dominance through these hardships, Mandisa comes to view the representation of whiteness within the Xhosa Cattle-Killing women employers narrative as an accurate exemplifier of how white identity should be understood and interpreted.

Gender, whiteness and domestic work

Mandisa gains a more intimate understanding of the workings of whiteness through her work as Mrs. Nelson’s domestic worker. Notably, as Shireen Alley suggests in her introduction to *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State* (2009), the figure of the white woman employer occupies a rather complex position within the binary between Black “wildness” and the white “proxy of civilization”. In this introduction, Ally refers to the work of 1970s Marxist feminist scholars who presented the argument that the domestic labor performed by women in their homes was an essential support for the production of a capitalist society.⁵⁴ Their function in producing household labor appeared to place all women on an equal footing with one another. However, Ally observes that 1980s scholarship drew attention to the fact that housework duties were not performed by all women. Rather, feminists identified an institution in which “primarily middle-class white women used their race and class privilege to, literally, buy their way out of their gendered responsibility for domestic labor”.⁵⁵ They did so through the employment of domestic workers who would relieve them of both their household cleaning and child-minding duties.⁵⁶ Irma du Plessis’ study of the metaphorical meanings inherent in the dynamic between (predominantly) Black domestic workers and their white women employers, suggests that, in the context of the nation-state in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the position and functions of the domestic worker are tied to both family and motherhood.⁵⁷ As metaphors, family and motherhood are crucial to establishing the image of the nation-state.⁵⁸ This is because they signify feelings of intimacy and unity between citizens, as well as how these citizens relate to one another within the broader social landscape. The act of domestic work, by its very nature, evokes these metaphors. Consequently, the position of servitude occupied by the domestic worker, du Plessis suggests, acts as a signifier of the power relations between Black and white South Africans during apartheid, but also, to an extent, in post-apartheid South Africa. More than this, her connection to the white woman employer, who is raising children, implies that the domestic worker is integral in conceiving of her employer’s image as a mother.

⁵⁴Ally, *From Servants to Workers*, 5.

⁵⁵Rollins cited in Ally, *From Servants to Workers*, 5.

⁵⁶Ally, *From Servants to Workers*, 5.

⁵⁷Du Plessis, “Nation, Family, Intimacy”, 51.

⁵⁸Ibid.

Although she reflects on the nature of domestic work in the context of slavery in the United States during the 19th century, Morrison's assessment of the kinship between a white woman slave owner and her Black female slave, via her analysis of Willa Cather's novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), may aptly apply to an analysis of how the Black domestic worker/white woman employer dynamic can be interpreted in relation to the tensions between the white "proxy of civilization" and Black "wildness". In her analysis, Morrison refers to the character of Sapphira, the slave owner, as a woman who possesses an identity that "rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation; whose privileged gender has nothing that elevates it except color".⁵⁹ She is only able to gain her substance and essence by shaping her identity in relation to her slave, Nancy, the "infantilized African [being] at her disposal"⁶⁰ who acts as the "surrogate black [body]"⁶¹ via which she constructs a self.

Morrison's description of Sapphira's gender as "having nothing that elevates it except color" is of particular interest here as it alludes to the complex position white women occupy in relation to the tensions between the white "proxy of civilization" and Black "wildness". On one hand, it implies that, by virtue of their skin color, white women are implicated in the systems and cultures which reproduce racism. On the other, however, it highlights how their gender connects them with their own experiences of "othering", marginalization, and oppression. Consequently, white women may be interpreted as figures of, what Rothberg refers to as, "complex implication". He uses this term to refer to those who do not possess a clear affinity with either the victim or perpetrator roles. Rather, they may exist within a complex binary between them. In addressing this binary, he uses the term "complex implication" to refer to "the experience of occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and perpetration".⁶² When considered through this lens, white women's experiences of gendered oppression possess a complicated relationship with what is both the gendered and racial oppression experienced by women of color. In South Africa, these complications are most evident in the domestic space where the engagements between white woman employers and their Black domestic workers, highlight the differences between the lived realities of Black and white women most distinctly.

In *Mother to Mother*, it is Mandisa's consistent awareness of the social and economic distinctions between her and Mrs. Nelson, that guide the ways in which she perceives her employer. Significantly, both Mandisa and Mrs. Nelson are mothers. Furthermore, because she is a housewife, Mrs. Nelson, like Mandisa, is intrinsically tied to the domestic space. Yet, the differences between their social and economic realities imply that they understand and navigate this space very differently from one another. For Mandisa, the home is a place of labor as she is charged with maintaining its upkeep and raising children within it. For Mrs. Nelson, in contrast, the home is a place which is central to maintaining a specific image of herself and her family. More than this, the space, as well as her domestic role, allow her to possess a sense of

⁵⁹Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 25.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 91.

empowerment and entitlement that she does not have in relation to her husband, the breadwinner whose position of employment and access to wealth, ultimately, govern the way in which she lives her life. Mrs. Nelson's desire to conceive of her home as a symbol of empowerment, is demonstrated in the manner she conducts her relationship with Mandisa. As Mandisa observes, Mrs. Nelson herself "never does any work around [the] house".⁶³ Nor does she completely invest herself in her role as a mother. Her main motherly duty is to take and fetch her children from school on Fridays, the day which her neighbor, who usually performs this task, is unable to do so. Mrs. Nelson's position of authority over Mandisa, allows her to "buy out" and impose both the cleaning and mothering duties onto her. In making Mandisa the "surrogate" body who performs the functions assigned to her gender, she conceives of herself as a good wife and mother by virtue of how she has responsibly hired an individual to maintain her home and care for her children.

In merely utilizing Mandisa as the "surrogate" body through which she constructs her selfhood, Mrs. Nelson fails to recognize how she is implicated within the political and social systems through which Black oppression and "othering" are formed. Her ignorance is demonstrated most explicitly through her disinterest in learning how to pronounce Mandisa's name. As Mandisa puts it, Mrs. Nelson refers to her as her "Mandy" as opposed to Mandisa because "she can't say any ... native names because of the clicks".⁶⁴ Within Black African societies, in particular, the act of naming is one that acts as crucial reflection of a person's cultural identity, and often connotes "personality characteristics",⁶⁵ as well as the "social reality of everyday living".⁶⁶ Consequently, by neglecting to learn how to pronounce Mandisa's name and bestowing an English name upon her, Mrs. Nelson indirectly strips her of a vital component of her identity. More than this, it is a naming practice which serves to objectify Mandisa in a manner not unlike that of slaveowners who would give their slaves English names as a further act of wielding control over them.

Mrs. Nelson's ignorance is implied further by her disregard for Mandisa's social and economic hardships. In Mandisa's lament at the start of the novel, she refers to how the white family she works for, at short notice, asks her to stay at their home to look after their children on weekends. In doing so, they fail to consider the repercussions their request has for both Mandisa and her children. Apart from being unable to contact her children to notify them that she will not be returning home, because there is no access to phones in Guguletu, she also cannot ensure that they are supplied with enough food whilst she is away. As Mandisa implies, Mrs. Nelson and her family's obliviousness to these hardships implicates them in the shaping of the events which eventually lead to Biehl's murder. By facilitating Mandisa's absence in her children's lives, their actions lead Mxolisi to steal a hen from his neighbors, with the intention of cooking and eating it because there is no food in the house. This seemingly simple act of disobedience, born out of hunger and desperation, is one that leads to more damaging acts of criminality and rebellion as Mxolisi fights to both

⁶³Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 28.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Olatunji et al. "Personal Name as a Reality", 75.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 73.

survive and seek revenge on the people he associates with the systems that have oppressed him. Considering this, Mrs. Nelson whose life predominantly revolves around frivolous activities such as shopping and eating out at restaurants, is, in fact, a dangerous figure. Her obliviousness toward how she both exploits and degrades Black bodies in her efforts to seek empowerment in the domestic space, is integral to the formation of Black suffering, oppression, and alienation.

Amy Biehl, the liberal activist, and the white “counterlife”

In her reflections on the Cattle-Killing narrative and, subsequently, Mrs. Nelson’s persona and actions within the domestic space, Mandisa propagates the notion that whiteness is inherently formed through the unacknowledged exploitation of Black “wildness” and the Black “surrogate” body. However, her understandings of whiteness are complicated through her portrayal of Amy, both in her capacity as a liberal activist, and as the victim of Mxolisi’s actions.

The notion of racially charged activism in relation to whiteness, particularly in South Africa, is both complex and contentious. De Kock refers to the positionality of figures such as the white South African activist in relation to the concept of a “counterlife”. The process of “un-whitening” that is essential to developing a “counterlife” occurs via an undoing of the notion that whiteness is defined by its opposition to “wildness”. Consequently, it requires an acknowledgment of its complicity with “wildness”, its “perceived non-self or anti-self”.⁶⁷

The efforts of liberal white South African activists to establish a “counterlife” came under scrutiny in Biko’s writings. In his essay “The Totality of White Power in South Africa” (1972), he suggested that, under apartheid, white liberals, or leftists, exploited Black suffering in order to alleviate white guilt. Simultaneously, they enforced their assumed “monopoly on intelligence and moral judgment”⁶⁸ to position themselves as “self-appointed trustees of black interests”.⁶⁹ For Biko, these activists’ belief that they were “black souls wrapped up in white skins”,⁷⁰ who identified with Black oppression, was inherently problematic. This was because, as Biko put it, “total identification with an oppressed group that forces one group to enjoy privilege and to live on the sweat of another, is impossible”.⁷¹ Biko’s essay suggests that the white “counterlife” of the liberal activist is inevitably shaped through the exploitation of a Black “surrogate” body. Furthermore, his description of white liberal activists as “black souls wrapped up in white skins” indicates that they are unable to identify and interrogate how, by virtue of their own privilege, they themselves are implicated in acts of racial oppression.

Biko’s observations in this essay provide a useful framework through which to assess Amy’s efforts at producing a white “counterlife” as a liberal activist in South Africa. In his book *Amy Biehl’s Last Home: A Bright Life, a Tragic Death, and a*

⁶⁷de Kock, “The Call of the Wild”, 8.

⁶⁸Biko, “The Totality of White Power”, 65–66.

⁶⁹Ibid., 65.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 67.

Journey of Reconciliation in South Africa (2018), a biographical study of Amy's life, Steven D. Gish offers a detailed account of her visits to South Africa, emphasizing her desire to learn about and engage with the lived experiences of Black South Africans. He draws particular attention to Amy's efforts at integrating into Black South African communities. Gish notes that her desire to gain an understanding of the everyday experiences of Black South Africans, was a key motivation in her decision to pursue a sociological research study of the role of African women in the country's transition to democracy, focusing specifically on how women aided the processes of negotiation.⁷² Under the Fulbright, Amy traveled to the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, to develop the research for her study. Whilst there, she chose consciously to live, work, and socialize in areas where she could interact with and befriend both Black and Colored South Africans, particularly the "ordinary black women at the grassroots".⁷³ In doing so, she endeavored to, amongst other things, learn African languages and make regular visits to Black townships, despite this not being a desired activity for white women to undertake. In reflecting on the ways in which she navigated the racial dynamics of South Africa, Amy wrote to a friend "I'm so glad to not be living with white people... It really changes one's experience. For instance, I can move around better with my black and 'colored' friends—so I go to black and colored clubs, visit people in black and colored areas... and I'm accepted because I'm with them".⁷⁴ The friendships Amy formed with Black and Colored women opposed the stereotypical notion that white women in South African society related to women of color merely as domestic workers.⁷⁵ As Gish writes, "In a country still divided by race, not only did Amy forget she was white, but so did many of her South African friends".⁷⁶

If Biko's line of argument is to be followed, then the assertion that Amy "forgot she was white" implies that she viewed herself as a "black soul wrapped up in white skin" who felt the oppression of her Black and Colored friends and, consequently, saw herself as part of their struggle. This perception is problematic in that, ultimately, Amy's white skin afforded her privileges that were inaccessible to her friends. This issue was compounded by the fact, as an American, she was a foreign outsider, attempting to establish a white "counterlife" in a country that was not her own. The suggestion that Amy endeavored to distance herself from both her whiteness and her Americanness suggests she may have been unable to address her own position as an "implicated subject" in the suffering of the oppressed groups she aligned herself with.

However, both Gish's book and *We Are Not Such Things* (2016), Justine Van Der Leun's investigative study of the Biehl family and Amy's perpetrators, indicate that Amy was very much aware of the complicated nature of her position as a white American woman in South Africa, engaging with the country's Black movements and politics. Gish quotes Jennell Jackson, Amy's former advisor during her time studying at Stanford University, who states that she "seemed to believe that when black and

⁷²Gish, *Amy Biehl's Last Home*, 60.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁴Qtd in Gish, *Amy Biehl's Last Home*, 97.

⁷⁵Gish, *Amy Biehl's Last Home*, 101.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

white women were together in the same organizations, the white women tended to dominate”.⁷⁷ Furthermore, she was conscious of the negative manner in which Americans were perceived in international settings, by virtue of the ways in which they would sometimes enter other countries with the aim of implementing solutions, despite having little knowledge of the everyday realities on the ground.⁷⁸ Consequently, she chose to support her South African colleagues by placing herself behind the scenes, as opposed to at the forefront.⁷⁹ In *We Are Not Such Things*, Van Der Leun, who takes a more critical look at the Biehl family, draws attention to Amy’s difficulties in presenting and navigating her racial politics in white circles and, thereafter, her own self-criticism of these struggles. She refers to an incident in which Amy and Scott Meinert, her boyfriend, who was visiting from the United States, went to a bar populated by white patrons. These patrons muttered disapproving remarks at Amy and Scott after noticing that they both wore t-shirts that displayed the image of Nelson Mandela’s face.⁸⁰ Whilst Amy ignored these remarks, when she returned to her car, she hit her dashboard and yelled out profanities. She was furious with herself for not defying the act of racism she had borne witness to.⁸¹

Through these details, Gish and Van Der Leun reveal Biehl to be a figure who dedicated herself to developing a white “counterlife” that worked against the prospect of “living on the sweat” of a Black “surrogate” body. However, those who were not directly acquainted with her, viewed her in relation to the persona of the privileged white woman who benefited from the exploitation of African land. In Peni’s testimony, he made the claim that, even if he and his fellow PAC members were aware of Amy’s work and her political ideals, her murder was inevitable because the PAC’s prime objective was to take back the land for the African people. Acting according to the slogan “One Settler, One Bullet”, they intended to do so through acts of violence which they would inflict on all white people, regardless of who they may be. As Peni put it, a “White person was a White person to our eyes”.⁸² Interestingly, in the same testimony, Peni was asked whether he would pursue the same action with struggle heroes such as Joe Slovo whose work and image he had prior knowledge of. To this, he responded by stating that activists such as Slovo and Ronnie Kasrils remained within their own areas. In doing so, they were deemed non-threatening white people who did not commit acts that could symbolize an intent to take away land from Black South Africans. Amy, in contrast, presented a threat precisely because she stepped into territory that was not her own. This suggested she possessed an affinity with the persona of “the settler”.

In *Mother to Mother*, Magona, uses this wrongful perception of Amy as an entry point through which to examine her white “counterlife” and the complications it creates for Mandisa’s understandings of whiteness. In her lament, which opens the novel, Mandisa, through her letter to Linda, consistently questions why Amy was traveling through Guguletu on the day of the murder. She asks, for instance, why

⁷⁷Qtd in Gish, *Amy Biehl’s Last Home*, 119.

⁷⁸Gish, *Amy Biehl’s Last Home*, 118.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Van der Leun, *We Are Not Such Things*, 60.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Qtd in Amnesty Hearings, Cape Town, 8 July 1997.

Amy would be “*taking her foot where she had no business? ... Was she blind not to see there were no white people in this space? ... That should have been a warning to her ... a warning to stay out*”.⁸³ In these words, Mandisa indicates that she shares Peni’s view that a “White person is a White person”, regardless of their background, and, therefore, should not set foot on Black land. Yet, as she reveals, her reason behind holding this view, in relation to Amy, is not because she sees her as a white “settler”. She is well aware of her efforts at living a “counterlife” that opposes this persona. In documenting Amy’s relationship with her three Black friends who she transports back to Guguletu, prior to the events which lead to her death, Mandisa speaks of her as a “very good friend, full of enthusiasm and eager to learn: the Xhosa language, the African dances, and the ways of the people here”.⁸⁴ Moreover, she also demonstrates an awareness of and consideration for the “problems her friends from the township face”.⁸⁵ Through this description, Mandisa portrays Amy in a sensitive and angelic light. Simultaneously, however, she balances the warm feelings she expresses toward her with a critique of, what she perceives as, her idealism. As she notes to Linda in her lament, “*To people like your daughter, doing good in this world is an all-consuming, fierce and burning compulsion. I wonder if it does not blinker their perception*”.⁸⁶ For Mandisa, this “blinker perception” is most explicitly highlighted by Amy entering Guguletu under the impression that her expressions of solidarity with the country’s Black communities will “un-whiten” her and, in doing so, protect her from harm. In Amy’s mind, she suggests, it is the authorities who present the true threat in that they may “*either hamper and hinder her in what she [is] bent on doing, or in some way stop her altogether from doing it*”.⁸⁷ Yet, as Mandisa implies, what Amy fails to realize is how the laws of segregation which have governed South African society, even toward apartheid’s end, have come to not only shape and guide the thinking of white South Africans, but also that of Black South Africans. Through the lens of apartheid thinking, the notion of a white person freely entering and navigating a racialized space which is not their own, signifies the same threat as that of a Black person committing the same action in a white dominated space. This is regardless of who that person may be. Therefore, to Mandisa, Amy’s perception that the “myths” of whiteness can be unmade within this space, is inherently misguided.

In connection with this, Mandisa recognizes that despite Amy’s objective to give voice and precedence to Black suffering through her “un-whitening”, her skin color inevitably privileges her within the hierarchy of suffering. As Mandisa puts it in her lament, “*And, if [my son] had killed one of the other women who were with your daughter, d’you think there would be all this hue and cry? He’d be here now; like the hundreds of killers walking the length and breadth of Guguletu*”.⁸⁸ In these words, Mandisa addresses the reality that within the emerging democratic South African society, narratives of white death and victimhood still possessed greater visibility and value than those of Black death and victimhood. Amy was aware of this. Referencing

⁸³Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 8, italics in the original.

⁸⁴Ibid., 18.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., 9, italics in the original.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

Steve Stedman, Amy's friend and colleague, Gish writes, "Amy was appalled at the distinct reactions of the media to violence in South Africa. 'White deaths', she said, 'involve individuals with families, friends, and, most importantly, names. Black deaths involve numbers'.⁸⁹ Notably, she remarked that if something were to happen during her stay in South Africa, she hoped she would be "just another nameless victim".⁹⁰ The irony, of course, was that not only was Amy not a "nameless victim", but also that she has since become a definitive and illuminating symbol for a range of different political and societal concerns that shaped the public consciousness of the newly emerging post-apartheid South African society. The high-profile response of the African National Congress (ANC) to Amy's death, for instance, portrayed her as a symbol of the dangers racialized violence posed for the country's impending democracy, highlighting the desperate need for their policy of nonracialism to be realized.⁹¹ Conversely, some suggested that the ANC used Amy's death to gain support against the Pan African Congress (PAC), their key opposition party, as it was students who formed part of the Pan African Students Organization (PASO), the party's youth organization, who were responsible for the attack.⁹² The ANC's Women's League deemed her as a symbol for how women were continuously victims of political violence.⁹³ Broader public opinion was divided on how to respond to Amy's death. Whilst both Black and white South Africans viewed her death as a symbolic threat to South Africa's transition to democracy, they did so for different reasons. For many white South Africans, it prompted and represented fears about their future in a country where, under Black rule, they felt at risk of becoming frequent targets of racialized violence.⁹⁴ Some Black South Africans, in contrast, feared that Amy's death would increase anti-Black sentiments, whilst others felt that the widespread public attention given to this event, signified the continuous marginalization and neglect of their own suffering. Despite these anxieties, however, Gish points out that many South Africans viewed Biehl's death as a "catalyst for peace and reconciliation".⁹⁵ They chose to use the tragedy as a "springboard for something positive—an intense march to democracy"⁹⁶ by seeking to emphasize the concept of non-racialism, an end to hate speech, and consequently, a peaceful transition into a new, democratic South Africa.

In each of these instances, what is notable is how Amy herself was constantly employed as a "surrogate" body whose persona and death were drawn upon and exploited to frame the country's broader concerns regarding racism and racial violence. Yet, here, the act of surrogacy occurs differently to the way it has occurred with the Black "surrogate" body. The white exploitation of a Black "surrogate" body results in the erasure of the Black body which becomes a nameless figure that is merely there to prop up the tenets of whiteness. In contrast, the exploitation of Amy as a "surrogate" body, resulted in her valorization. Her own voice and ideals may

⁸⁹Qtd. in Gish, *Amy Biehl's Last Home*, 164.

⁹⁰Ibid., 164, italics in the original.

⁹¹Ibid., 214.

⁹²Ibid., 215.

⁹³Ibid., 218.

⁹⁴Ibid., 225.

⁹⁵Ibid., 232.

⁹⁶Ibid.

have been lost in efforts to manipulate her narrative in order to support specific political and social ideals. Yet, the portrayal of Amy as a defenseless white woman who lived an admirable white “counterlife”, as well the notion that she was murdered by members of the community she was trying to help, ensured that both her name and persona were continuously recognized and remembered. Although it was never Amy’s intention, the popularization of her narrative, her victimhood and heroism, served to implicate her in the continuous erasure of the stories of Black suffering.

In light of this, Mandisa’s specific reference to the Black women in Amy’s car, who would not receive the same treatment as her if they were the victims of violence, is of great significance. In her conceptualization of intersectional theory, which highlights the social and legal marginalization of Black women in the United States, Kimberlé Crenshaw distinguishes between how acts of violence committed toward white women are interpreted in contrast to those committed toward Black women. In reflecting on issues of discrimination more broadly, she writes that by virtue of their “race privilege”,⁹⁷ white women’s experiences are considered to be integral to the “conceptualization of gender discrimination”.⁹⁸ In turn, the male privilege afforded to Black men implies that the nature of racial discrimination is defined by their experiences.⁹⁹ Black women’s combined experiences of racism and sexism place them in a position of, what Crenshaw terms, “intersectional disempowerment”.¹⁰⁰ This position implies that there is no discourse available to articulate the hybridized nature of their oppression. Relating this absent discourse to sexual violence, Crenshaw observes that, historically, the act of rape has been conceived as occurring between a “black [male] offender and a white [woman] victim”.¹⁰¹ This dynamic gives rise to antiracist discourses which fight against the “legal and extralegal violence”¹⁰² encountered by Black men. In turn, it also promotes antirape discourses that work to highlight and counter the violence inflicted upon women’s bodies. In both contexts, Black women are deemed relevant only in relation to how they “magnify”¹⁰³ antiracist and antirapist discourses. Their own experiences remain largely unrecognized as “neither the antirape nor the antiracist political agenda has focused on the black rape victim”.¹⁰⁴ Tellingly, in her study of the legacy of rape in apartheid South Africa, Sue Armstrong observes that, prior to the abolishment of the death penalty, the majority of Black men accused of rape crimes were executed if they had raped white women.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, no white man was executed for rape, and the rape crimes committed against Black women were treated as being less severe than those committed against white women.¹⁰⁶ The neglect of Black women’s specific experiences of violence under apartheid connects, more broadly, with the absence of their stories, most notably those presented at the TRC hearings. In referencing anthropologist Fiona Ross, Barbara

⁹⁷Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, 144–145, italics in the original.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 144.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰⁰Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”, 360.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 367.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 364.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵Armstrong, 35.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

Boswell, in her study of *Mother to Mother*, points out that “seventy-nine percent of women who testified before the TRC testified about the experiences of men”.¹⁰⁷ The absence of testimonies pertaining to women’s own experiences of apartheid is critical. This is not only because of the erasure of their experiences of violence. It is also because the impact of apartheid legislation was most keenly felt through the everyday experiences of Black women, many of whom occupied the domestic space in which apartheid’s social and economic hardships were most evident.¹⁰⁸

The desire to make her story visible, prompts Mandisa to present the text’s narrative, as she relates it to Linda, from her own perspective. However, in choosing to also reflect on Amy’s experiences on the day of the murder, Mandisa reveals a further objective: to portray Amy’s humanity, departing from the depiction of her as a “surrogate” body for South Africa’s social and political ideals. Notably, she never refers to Amy by name. In her letter to Linda, she refers to her simply as “your daughter”. In doing so, she endeavors to not frame Amy’s character through the lens of her whiteness or, in this case, her white “counterlife”. Rather, she intends to portray her as an ordinary woman who could be anyone’s daughter, regardless of her race. She highlights this intention further when she first introduces Amy as a character in the novel. In this introduction, she focuses particularly on Amy’s morning routine as she awakens, harboring hopes “for the day just born”.¹⁰⁹ As she focuses in on how Amy proceeds with regular activities such as showering and gulping down “cold-milk cereal ... [and] a slice of wholewheat bread. Toasted. Butter and a dash of Marmite”,¹¹⁰ Mandisa subtly highlights the characteristics of her persona. As she describes her, Amy is a spirited young woman with a lingering smile who possesses the enthusiasm of an “over-eager puppy”.¹¹¹ Nowhere in this wholesome portrait does Mandisa gesture to attributes of Amy’s race, privilege, foreignness, or activism. She also offers no further foreshadowing of how Amy will eventually become a murdered white victim of political violence. Instead, in these moments, she is defined primarily by her ordinariness. Consequently, she becomes an exemplifier not of a white life, nor a white “counterlife”, but, rather, a human life. In presenting Amy in this manner, Mandisa situates the tragedy that will befall her outside of the social and political realities from which it is born. By, ultimately, choosing to relate to Amy through the lens of her humanity, as opposed to her whiteness, Mandisa conceives of her as an empathetic figure whose relatability cuts across color lines. Perceiving Amy in this light becomes significant to Mandisa as she takes steps, through her letter, to establish an empathic bond with Linda in her capacity as Biehl’s mother.

Empathic bonding and empathic repair

Throughout *Mother to Mother*, Linda’s voice is never heard, nor does Mandisa attempt to highlight any of her characteristics and attributes. Yet, her presence is

¹⁰⁷Ctd in Boswell, *Black South African Women Writers*, 174.

¹⁰⁸Goldblatt and Meintjies qtd. in Samuelson, “The Mother as Witness”, 129.

¹⁰⁹Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 11.

¹¹⁰Ibid, 12.

¹¹¹Ibid.

consistently felt in the ways Mandisa relates to her through her letter. Mandisa clearly establishes the dynamic she intends to create between herself and Linda in a prayer she makes to God as she concludes her lament. In this prayer she speaks of herself as a “*mother with a mother’s heart*”,¹¹² indicating that she intends to use her and Linda’s shared experience of motherhood to connect with the “*hurt of the other mother*”.¹¹³ The complication in creating this connection is that it requires Mandisa to grapple with her own position as a figure of “complex implication”. In this instance, Mandisa’s identity is rooted in the Black suffering which led to Amy’s death. However, as Mxolisi’s mother and a member of the Guguletu community, she is implicated in his actions, a reality she must reconcile with as she states, “*People look at me as though I did it*”.¹¹⁴ This requires her to also, once again, reorientate her understanding of whiteness in relation to Linda. In this case, Linda is not a figure who exploits the Black “surrogate” body to bolster her own identity and position in the world. Nor is she one who aspires to live a white “counterlife” that seeks to construct its own “anti-myth” and address racialized suffering. Instead, she is a grieving mother who just happens to possess a white skin color. Choosing to view her from this perspective, Mandisa develops their interaction as one that occurs not between a Black mother and a white mother, but between two mothers who have both lost their children, albeit in different ways. Seeking out points of solidarity between “implicated subjects” and those who “suffer directly from [their] indirect engagements”,¹¹⁵ writes Rothberg, is a “necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a disengagement from implication”.¹¹⁶ Premised on this notion, Mandisa suggests that both she and Linda have lost their children not only due to Mxolisi’s violent act, but also to the symbols they have both now been reduced to as a consequence of the act. As Mandisa puts it, Mxolisi is now a symbol of “the blind but sharpened arrow of the wrath of his race”,¹¹⁷ whilst Amy is “the sacrifice of hers. Blindly chosen. Flung toward her sad fate by fortune’s cruelest slings”.¹¹⁸ In establishing the roles Amy and Mxolisi now occupy within the public consciousness, Mandisa invites Linda to engage in the process of restoring Mxolisi’s humanity within the narrative, just as Mandisa has attempted to do with Amy’s. Such a process exemplifies “empathic repair” as it is precisely the reparative search for “human moments” that Mandisa endeavors to engage Linda in.

Interestingly, in her writing of the novel, Magona chooses not to address the outcome of Amy’s narrative which, in itself, concludes with an act of “empathic repair”. The Biehl family chose compassion and, indeed, empathy over vengeance for Amy’s death. They elected not to oppose her perpetrators’ bids for amnesty at the TRC hearings. They did so to honor Amy’s own compassion for the people of Africa, but also because the young men were not born murderers. Rather, their acts of violence were shaped under the dire circumstances under which they lived. To honor Amy’s

¹¹²Ibid., 10, italics in the original.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 7, italics in the original.

¹¹⁵Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, 145.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 224.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

memory and support her vision for the country, Linda and her husband Peter, created the Amy Biehl Foundation which aimed to offer support to poor communities in an around Cape Town. In a further act of forgiveness, Linda and Peter also employed two of the perpetrators, Easy Nofemela and Ntombeko Peni, to work at the foundation. Their story was seen as the embodiment of the values of reconciliation and community that were highlighted by the TRC and within the vision for the New South Africa. Because of this, it received extensive local and global media coverage. Prior to the hearings, a large group of journalists, cameramen and photographers followed Linda and Peter as they visited the home of Evelyn Manqina, the mother of Mongezi Manqina, another one of Biehl's perpetrators. As Gish documents, the meeting occurred as a consequence of a video-recorded message Evelyn sent to the Biehls via a journalist she had contacted.¹¹⁹ In the message, Evelyn tearfully lamented that Amy was murdered "for no reason"¹²⁰ and that it pained her to realize that it was because of her son's actions that Amy would not be home with her family for Christmas. Moved by Evelyn's message, Linda decided she and Peter should visit her in support of their bid for "empathic repair". Linda broke the awkwardness of the encounter by embracing Evelyn, an act which was captured on camera.¹²¹ Following their visit, both Linda and Evelyn made statements to the media. Linda's statement addressed the need for racial reconciliation in South Africa, whilst also acknowledging an interest in learning more about Evelyn's story. As she put it, "I looked at her and wondered what her life was like, what she felt about her son and what he'd done".¹²² Evelyn's statement expressed praise for the Biehls, stating that their efforts to encourage "love and peace and reconciliation"¹²³ were a symbol of a new beginning for the Manqina family.

The encounter between Linda and Evelyn was clearly the inspiration for the narrative Magona constructs in *Mother to Mother*. In the novel, Evelyn's video message is substituted with Mandisa's letter which provides Linda with the insights she seeks regarding "what her life was like, what she felt about her son and what he'd done". However, Magona's approach to framing this narrative counters that of the media narratives produced around Linda's and Evelyn's encounter and, consequently, Linda's persona. In the media narratives, Linda and Evelyn were, like their children, reduced to symbols. Linda was at the forefront of these narratives as her determination to promote a reconciliation between the different racial groups, positioned her as savior. Evelyn was featured as a supporting figure who through both her presence and her words, appeared to prop up Linda's position of saviorhood. The clear emphasis on the racialization of this encounter served to, albeit unintentionally, gesture to a problematic tension between the "civility" of a white mother seeking to contribute to the country's processes of reconciliation, healing, and order in the wake of her daughter's death, and the Black mother who looked to her for both redemption and guidance in light of her son's act of "wildness". Consequently, their embrace was

¹¹⁹Gish, *Amy Biehl's Last Home*, 364.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., 365.

performative in that it simply conceived of them as representative figures of the values of forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity required to effectively shape race relations in the New South Africa. In depicting Linda and Evelyn in this way, the media narratives transformed them into racialized archetypes, as opposed to acknowledging their position as two individuals seeking “empathic repair” as they actively engaged in a search for “human moments” that create solidarity.

By not capturing this encounter in *Mother to Mother*'s narrative, Magona, once again, ensures that neither Mandisa/Evelyn nor Linda emerge as mere symbols for social and political ideals. Although Magona indicates that her primary objective is, through Mandisa, to restore the dignity and humanity to Black women's stories of apartheid, she subtly restores Linda's humanity through her silent presence. Like Amy, Linda remains nameless throughout the novel. This too emphasizes her ordinariness and, consequently, that she could be anyone's mother, regardless of their race.

As she contemplates the content of Mandisa's letter, she is not positioned as a potential savior who will bring an end to her and Mandisa's suffering through an embrace or another symbolic gesture. Rather, the elimination of the hierarchies between Mandisa and Linda, positions them as two grieving mothers who are united in their efforts to process and work through their grief in order to reach a state of “empathic repair”. Magona implies that this collaborative effort to achieve “empathic repair” is very often a difficult and challenging one for both mothers. When Mandisa, for instance, makes statements such as “*what was [your daughter] doing, vagabonding all over Guguletu... where she had no business*”,¹²⁴ she indicates that she herself has feelings of anger and resentment, attached to both the situation itself and the racial dynamics at play. Yet, in working through these feelings carefully and honestly and choosing to look beyond the meanings attached to Linda's and Amy's whiteness, she is able to engage and empathize with the “human moments” that define their roles as mother and child.

Exploring humanity within whiteness studies

Through my analysis of the representations of whiteness in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*, I have aimed to offer a critique of Whiteness Studies that highlights a significant gap within this field of study. In using Mandisa's perspectives of whiteness as a framework, I have demonstrated how the concepts and theories posed by literary critics such as Toni Morrison and Leon de Kock provide a valuable tool through which to gain an understanding of the workings of whiteness. These concepts and theories are particularly useful in demonstrating the ways in which whiteness is made through the exploitation of Blackness, as well as (in de Kock's case) the complexities of living a white life that counters this exploitation. Yet, what these critics do not address is the value that can arise in engaging with the humanity of whiteness through seeking points of empathy and connection. As a reading of *Mother to Mother* suggests, it is only through looking beyond characterizations of racial identities and racialized ideologies and, thereafter, engaging in a process of “empathic

¹²⁴Ibid., 8.

repair”, that the prospect of solidarity and societal progression can be realized and pursued.

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Notes on contributor

Adam Levin is a postdoctoral research fellow at the African Center for the Study of the United States which is based at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. His research focuses on issues of racial trauma, memory, and identity in works of Holocaust literature, African American literature, and post-apartheid literature. His work has been featured in publications such as *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, *English Studies in Africa*, and *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

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