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Devouring the Father: Family and Recuperation in *Triomf* and *The Native Commissioner*

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to account for the largely unprecedented vigour of white writing in post-apartheid South Africa. Though there are a number of contributing socio-economic factors, it argues that there is an inherent ambivalence in many texts written by white South African authors. Texts that are generally designated as ‘reconciliatory’ or ‘reconstitutive’ have a latent imperative. The ambivalence of these texts is exposed by my analysis of two prominent South African novels, Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf* and Shaun Johnson’s *The Native Commissioner*. Alongside this concern, is the fact that the white South African family, regulated and constructed by apartheid legislation, provides one means through which post-apartheid white identity can be anatomized. Therefore, the methodology of this thesis is a critical application of Freud’s Oedipal family structure and its attendant primal scene. Through this application we find that Van Niekerk’s novel is preoccupied with subverting patriarchal Oedipal structures. This is expressed by the dysfunction of the Benade family. One aspect of this subversion is the dissipating and illegitimate patriarch, and his unremarkable death. Mol, the mother, is analysed in terms of her disruptive and chaotic power, as well as her dispensation of narrative. The problem with Van Niekerk’s text is that it is incapable of suggesting a post-apartheid Afrikaner (white) identity. This is indicated both by slippages in her portrayal of Mol, and by her attempt to counter-position lesbianism as a viable post-apartheid identity. Therefore, the text exposes an anxiety about paternal authority, suggested by the patriarch’s death on voting day. Ten years later, I argue, Shaun Johnson attempts to recuperate this paternal white power in his text, *The Native Commissioner*. In Johnson’s novel, George Jameson is represented as a benevolent bureaucrat and a loving father. I argue that though Johnson attempts to represent George’s profession as encroaching upon the benign space of family. This is a false opposition in that colonial paternalism is implicit in George’s identity as a father. By focussing on the recurrent image of the garden, I proceed to indicate that this novel is primarily about negotiating the Oedipus complex. By reliving the conflict through narration, the narrator identifies with the dead father. In the Oedipus complex, identification results in remorse and guilt, enacting a transmission of power from father to sons. I argue that this text is latently invested in this transmission of power. This indicates that at the heart of the text is an imperative to recuperate the lost paternalistic white power which the narrator’s father represents. Therefore, through these analyses I show that the ten year trajectory represented by *Triomf* and *The Native Commissioner* latently enacts a process of loss and recuperation which concerns itself with white illegitimated power. This positions mothers in the novels as representing the illegitimacy of this power, and has the capacity to reflect on the ambivalence inherent in post-apartheid white narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

The Relevance of South African Families

A strong argument can be made for the distinctiveness and peculiarity of the South African family. This is because Apartheid legislation was directly involved in regulating its subjects' domestic affairs. When the National Party came to power in 1948, one of the first laws to be passed was the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), followed shortly by the Population Registration Act (1950), and the Immorality Act (1950). These three pieces of legislation sought to criminalise racial mixing and miscegenation. Only once these domestically-orientated laws were enacted did other discriminatory laws come into implementation. These were foremost aimed at imposing social control by restricting black peoples' right to free mobility (e.g. Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), Bantu Homelands Constitution Act (1971) and the Group Areas Act (1950)). The sequence of apartheid legislation reflects that regulating the domestic realm was one of the fundamental motivations for the social engineering that characterized the apartheid state. Though apartheid would inevitably leave its mark on both black and white families; maintaining and regulating the white family was of primary importance to its ideological base.¹

The 'purity' of the white family and its genealogy was the source of much anxiety for apartheid ideologues, because, as Saul Dubow notes, "[i]n South Africa the lived relations of paternalism which bound black and white together presented white supremacy as part of the natural order of things."² Whiteness had to be safeguarded from the degeneracy of miscegenation in order for it to retain its 'natural' dominancy.

In this way, the white South African family came to be constructed by the apartheid state. If families are considered "the primary social unit in any community", then they are also fundamental to the construction of personal and national identity.³ Considered within its

¹ Black families were adversely affected by migrant labour policies that were the direct result of the establishment of the homelands. The dislocation of black families is an interesting feature of the family under apartheid and is explored in works like Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort in Desolation* (London: Reprint Society, 1949). Unfortunately an exploration of black South African families falls outside the scope of this thesis.

² Saul Dubow, "The Elaboration of Segregationist Ideology" in *Segregation and Apartheid in twentieth-century South Africa*, ed. Saul Dubow and William Beinart (London: Routledge, 1995), 155.

³ Irene Visser and Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler, *Family fictions : the family in contemporary postcolonial literatures in English* (Groningen: Centre for Development Studies, University of Groningen, 2005), 5.

historical context, the white South African family is able to reflect the dynamic or conservative political impulses that continue to structure white identity.

Accordingly, examining the ways in which families are represented in literary texts allows for insight into the mechanisms underlying the public discourse of white identity in the new South Africa.⁴ This is important because the discourses on post-apartheid white identity are involved in renegotiating the position and status of whiteness.⁵ As Melissa Steyn notes, this renegotiation foregrounds a crisis for white identity: the loss of power, the incursion of impotence and insignificance,

People who staked much of their identity on their privileged whiteness are now subordinated politically, in a country that is defining itself as African, within an African context [...] Many of the underpinnings of white identity are being challenged; moorings that still largely hold whiteness in place in Euro-American contexts have been removed.⁶

While the political subordination of white South Africans is not necessarily evident in the South African Constitution, many white South Africans perceive their sense of subordination as a political reality.

Therefore families in texts by white South African writers can highlight the extent to which this renegotiation is taking place and how white South Africans are dealing with the loss of discursive power which informs their entry into a democratic and multicultural society. Whereas white writing prior to apartheid was invested in forging a tenuous sense of belonging to the land and country; post-apartheid writing is necessarily also concerned with the loss of “privileged whiteness.”⁷

Currently there is a considerable urgency to understanding these desires and anxieties within the South African literary field. Though eighteen years have passed since the end of apartheid, an imbalance in the number of novels published by black and white South African

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 131.

⁴ The binding of nationalism and family (which is suggested by the vestigial remains of apartheid attending on the South African family) has been the main focus of postcolonial literary criticism dealing with the family. In this approach the family represents the postcolonial nation insofar as the passing of the older generation represents the handing of power to a new political regime which is represented by the younger generation (Visser and Van Den Heuvel-Disler, *Family*, 5.)

⁵ Melissa Steyn, *Whiteness Just isn't What it Used to Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xxi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁷ This is the subject of JM Coetzee's volume of criticism, *White Writing*. Coetzee characterizes this literature as being “white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of a people no longer European, not yet African” (*White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* [Braamfontein: Pentz Publishers, 2007], 12).

writers has persisted. The relative dearth in published literary production from young black writers is also reflected by critical and public attention still primarily focusing on white writing. Critics have argued that the focus on white writers occurs at the expense of emerging young black writers.⁸ These issues are underscored by facts and figures about production and reception. Most of the South African literary prizes that have been awarded over the last eighteen years have been given to white writers. One such instance is the Sunday Times Fiction Prize. Since its inception, nine of the 12 awarded writers have been white.⁹

The above instance highlights the continued vigour of white writing. Though it could have been anticipated that the body of white writing would grow under the new dispensation, the particular strength of this area requires attention. A number of socio-economic factors including education, reading culture and financial security attribute to this trend, but how these factors may converse with the renegotiation of white identity still needs to be explored.

It is conceivable that for many white South Africans there is a strong imperative to produce literary texts, hinged on the need to reposition and renegotiate white identity. As Michiel Heyns notes, this is particularly the case because white South Africans are the ‘perpetrators’ of apartheid, and “narrative also serves as a means of reinvention for those people who inflicted the sufferings of which the victims speak.”¹⁰ Heyns designates these texts as operating within the “confessional mode” of South African literature. But significantly, he exposes the ambivalence embedded in the manifest reconciliatory claims of these novels:

Again the ambiguous term "come to terms with" raises the issue of the function of confession: to make the perpetrator feel more comfortable with his "evil deeds," or to bring him to some understanding of their significance?¹¹

⁸ This topic has not yet been given significant critical attention; though this trend is discordant within an era which hopes to be characterized by democratization and cultural diversity. Zakes Mda has bemoaned the number of times he has been asked about the scarcity of ‘good’ books by African writers, and as Sam Raditlhalo notes, this instance marks the persistence of racialised thinking in the literary or critical community: “It does indeed seem strange that [black] writers should have to convince their compatriots of the quality of their works and of their very presence.” (“A proletarian novel of the streets,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44.1 [2008]: 94). Furthermore, the topic has been obliquely raised, but not addressed. Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie discuss a recent conceptualisation of ‘post-transitional’ South African fiction, but note their own failure to discuss the issue of whether “current South African literature [is] racially marked” (“Conceptualizing ‘Post-transitional’ South African Literature in English,” *English Studies in Africa* 53 [2010]: 5.)

⁹ Recipients of the Sunday Times Literary Award are: Zakes Mda (2001), Ivan Vladislavic (2002), André P Brink (2003), Rayda Jacobs (2004), Justin Cartwright (2005), Andrew Brown (2006), Marlene Van Niekerk (2007), Ceridwen Dovey (2008), Anne Landsman (2009), Imraan Coovadia (2010), Sifiso Mzobe (2011), Michiel Heyns (2012).

¹⁰ Michiel Heyns, “The Whole Country’s Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46 (2000): 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Heyns suggests that these texts complicate and distort the context of victimhood. Therefore, rather than “confronting that culpability,” these texts may have the contrary effect of cultivating an uncritical acceptance of the crimes that they detail.¹²

Similarly, if white narratives are explicitly concerned with renegotiating white identity then they are also problematically engaged with the loss of power which Melissa Steyn highlights. This is implicit in Heyns’s work, which notes the centrality of the past in contributing to the ambivalence of the confessional mode, “like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, what contemporary South African fiction is most concerned with is the past, that past with which all white writers have such a troubled relation.”¹³ This relation to the past is both an individual issue of identity and one of inter-generational conflict. Within a psychoanalytic paradigm, it can be phrased in the following terms: how do these writers deal with a (paternal) authority which has, since the political change, become illegitimate?¹⁴

Therefore the hypothesis of this thesis is that the renegotiation of identity in post-apartheid white South African texts is ambivalently invested in recuperating power which was divested in the political changes of 1994. My analyses will indicate how the imperative to transmit and recuperate power arises and operates within literary texts. Though it is not within the scope of this thesis to assert a broad generalization, this imperative will be highlighted in two significant white South African novels that span over a decade from the inception of democracy.

These power dynamics will be analysed by critically applying Freudian Oedipal structures to the families in these novels. The application will initially test and critique the Oedipal framework, then use it to anatomize intergenerational conflict within the texts. This approach will indicate how these authors deal with the illegitimacy of apartheid power.

The selected novels for this study are *Triomf* by Marlene Van Niekerk and *The Native Commissioner* by Shaun Johnson. Published in 1994, Marlene Van Niekerk’s controversial novel was one of the first Afrikaans novels to be published within the new dispensation. It won the CNA literary award, the MNET prize and the Noma award for literature in Africa, and continues to be the subject of much South African literary scholarship. *The Native Commissioner*, published 12 years later, in 2006, received the

¹² Ibid., 42. Heyns also notes, “[t]he rite of passage novel characteristically privileges its protagonist and sees him or her as interacting with a coercive society in which guilt is incurred through entry into a culpability always already there and thus in a sense externalised and de-individualized.” (Ibid.,54.)

¹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴ This conflict may be positioned as analogous to the son’s rivalling of the father in the Oedipus complex.

Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Africa, the MNET prize and the Nielsen Booksellers' award. It was also recently prescribed as a setwork for Independent Examination Board (IEB) schools in South Africa. These novels, both significant in terms of the public recognition they have received, centrally depict the lives of two white South African families. The representations of these families expose a preoccupation with paternal authority which will be the subject of this dissertation.¹⁵

Freud's Oedipal Models and Generational Passage

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, posited the primacy of childhood experience in determining the psychological wellbeing of individuals. Family relations are therefore primary as they are considered "the secret of the individual."¹⁶ As Mark Poster notes,

The achievement of psychoanalysis is to unmask the illusion of individualism, of the self-contained, autonomous nature of personal experience and motivation. As an isolated unit, the individual is unintelligible to the analyst. The most personal and particular characteristics of the individual's inner life remain obscure, only becoming meaningful signs when they are traced back to the medically significant body of the family.¹⁷

The Oedipus complex, the cornerstone of Freud's theory, presents a model whereby the child is forced to perform its first act of sexual repression. The conflict arises because the son's first sexual desire is focused on the mother, with the father standing as an obstacle to their incestuous union.¹⁸ This initiates the beginning of an ambivalence directed at the father as the son regards his father with envy: a combination of admiration and hatred. This ambivalence is fundamental to the complex. Freud describes it as "[t]he ambivalent emotional attitude,

¹⁵ Marlene Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, trans. Leon de Kock (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1999); Shaun Johnson, *The Native Commissioner: A Novel* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2007). An objection to my choice of texts may be directed at my use of the term 'white' as erasing the distinction between the English-speaking white South Africans and the Afrikaans white South Africans that are represented in *The Native Commissioner* and *Triomf* respectively. It is certainly not my intention to deny the great ideological and cultural differences which attend these two cultures. In terms of their social participation under apartheid, English speakers were fairly prominent economically, but Afrikaners dominated the political sphere (Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* [London: Heineman, 1990], 47). There were also significant social divisions between these two groups, manifested in the emergence of separate schools, universities and institutions (Ibid., 217.) Despite these differences and divisions, it is undeniable that both groups would have benefited from discriminatory practices. Therefore, because the end of apartheid illegitimated much of the power ascribed to whiteness, many of the issues surrounding post-apartheid white identity are shared by the two groups.

¹⁶ Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (London: Pluto, 1978), 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: WW Norton, 1950), 129.

which to this day characterizes the father-complex in our children and which often persists into adult life.”¹⁹ Eventually the child has to repress his sexual urges towards the mother and internalize his father’s prohibition against incest. This results in the creation of the superego and initiates the child’s entry into society. Michael Billig describes the resolution in the following way:

In his imagination the son becomes the father: if he *were* the father, then he would be able to possess the mother. Thus, the son identifies with his father. The successful solution comes at a psychological cost. The child’s ego is split. Part of it becomes ego-ideal, or the superego, which is the imagined stern voice of the father, now internalized, as the child’s own stern voice of conscience.²⁰

Therefore, in his imagination, the son usurps the father’s role, and the potential of possessing the mother suggests that he has received a part of his father’s power. This highlights the point that insofar as identification is about internalizing the father’s law, it is also about acquiring power inherited imaginatively from the father.

Freud claims that the Oedipus complex is universal. “[T]he two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother [...] [coincide] with the two primal wishes of children, the insufficient repression or the re-awakening of which forms the nucleus of perhaps every neurosis.”²¹ In an attempt to substantiate the claim of universality, Freud provides his readers with a ‘primal scene’ which enacts the instincts of Oedipus in the transformations of primitive society. In the primal scene, the instincts inherent in the Oedipus complex may be explored in their basic form.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

²⁰ Michael Billig, *Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 106-107.

²¹ Freud, *Taboo*, 132. One of the problems with using Freud to analyse the family, lies in the lack of historicism with which Freud formulated the Oedipus complex. As Poster points out, the first of these is a bias for the bourgeois nuclear family which is never explicitly acknowledged: “Freud believes that these elements are not rooted in any specific family or social structure. Oedipus is universal.” (Poster, *Critical*, 17.) Upon analysis it becomes clear that “the privatized nuclear family is the major structural condition [of the Oedipus complex].” (Ibid., 21.) In this way, Poster criticizes Freud for a lack of historicism which quite insidiously obscures and “masks the social reality of the family.” (Ibid., 15.)

This criticism though, merely confirms that ideological and nationalist interests are thoroughly ingrained within the family. Even when an attempt to universalize the family has been made, and the family seems to be cleared of all socio-historical influences, ideology and nationalism still inform identity. Therefore, the Oedipus complex and primal scene are able, through their insufficiency, to provide the basis for understanding individuals in terms of greater contextual factors without dismissing individual identity altogether. In my discussion of *Triomf*, I address the ideological and ethnocentric foundations of Freud’s theories as Van Niekerk problematizes them in her novel. In discussing *The Native Commissioner*, I will also consider the value which paternal authority is imbued with when used in conjunction with ideas about “guardianship” in colonial and apartheid discourse. These discussions will then indicate how this feeds into a desire to recuperate this power lost through 1994’s political changes.

Similar to the Oedipal conflict, “the primal horde” is a small community which enacts the desire and restriction which the original conflict foregrounds.²² The father of the horde has a number of wives with whom none of his sons may couple. He is described as “jealously guard[ing] [the women] against other men”.²³ The censure against the union between the sons and wives is such that the younger males are eventually forced out of the horde to find their own partners and create their own communities.²⁴

Change occurs one day when the brothers who have been expelled come together to overthrow and murder the dominant father.²⁵ Freud notes that they murder and eat him. By eating the father, they identify with him. This identification, so fundamental to the original Oedipus complex, has two results: firstly, that they “acquir[e] a portion of his strength” – thus, power is transferred from the father to his sons.²⁶ Second, in conjunction with the acquisition of power, a sense of guilt and remorse emerges. This is because, similar to the child of the Oedipal complex, the sons of the horde felt ambivalently about the father.²⁷ This guilt manifests itself as an internalization of the restrictions that the father originally placed on the sons. Hereby the sons renounce incest, and the primal horde is transformed into an exogamous band of males that have equal rights, yet are subject to the restrictions of a totemic system (ie. the taboo on incest).

The significant difference between these two conceptualisations is that in the Oedipus complex, the father lives, but in the primal scene he dies. Though what is highlighted by both narratives is the issue of power: when the father lives, the son imaginatively usurps his role, and when the primal father is murdered, power is inherited by the sons who become his legitimate heirs. In this light, I consider both the Oedipus complex and its related primal scene as heuristic myths. These myths describe the power hierarchies inherent to patriarchal families. They also detail and attempt to understand generational conflict and the means by which power is transferred from parent to child.

By focusing on the dynamics between one generation and the next, the Oedipus complex also exposes the anxiety inherent in the generational inheritance and transfer of power. Peter Brooks highlights these questions of “legitimate authority versus usurpation [...]”

²² The primal horde is based on a hypothesis about the first social groupings of humans. This hypothesis was made by Charles Darwin after observing “the habits of higher apes” (Freud, *Totem*, 125.)

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

the interrelated questions of authority, legitimacy and paternity” which are fundamentally implicit in the Oedipus narratives and, I will argue, in the texts I analyse in this dissertation.²⁸

Furthermore, Patricia-Drechsel Tobin argues that generational passage is fundamental to the construction of narrative. This is because a sense of narrative is always already imbedded in our conception of family and genealogy. Tobin, in her narratological conception of the family in literature, describes this genealogical imperative as “the homologous congruity between time-line, family-line, and story-line.”²⁹ In this way, time, as represented in the novel, becomes analogous to the movement of generations. The genealogical assumption about time

is derived from the imputation of causality and purpose—and therefore, familial significance—to simple temporal sequence. Within the extended family the individual member is guaranteed both identity and legitimacy through tracing of his lineage back to the founding father, the family’s origin and first cause [...] By an analogy of function, events in time come to be perceived as begetting other events within a line of causality similar to the line of generations, with the prior event earning a special prestige as it is seen to originate, control, and predict future events.³⁰

For the purposes of this dissertation, this implies that the novelistic representation of families always suggests a movement in time. Hereby families are instrumental to understanding the anxieties and changes to which individuals have to adapt when experiencing political change. This is particularly the case when the change has a significant effect on self-perception and identity: “[a]long its generational continuum, the family reveals the processes of historical time as contests for sovereignty.”³¹ As will be reflected in the ensuing analyses, the death of the white patriarch is inextricably bound up with, if not contingent on, the political transition which rendered white political dominancy illegitimate.

²⁸ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 71.

²⁹ Patricia-Drechsel Tobin, *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), ix.

In this conception, one of the greatest imperatives within the emergence of the novel was that time came to structure the novel through what Tobin terms “the genealogical imperative” (Ibid., 5), so that time could be conceived of as a “linear unity” through which the beginning is united, or tied at least, to the end (Ibid., 5)

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

³¹ Ibid., 11.

Summary of Chapters

The methodology of this thesis is to apply critically both the Oedipus complex and the primal scene to the families represented in Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf* and Shaun Johnson's *The Native Commissioner*.

In *Triomf*, the dysfunctional Benade family does not correspond with Freud's Oedipal structures. The patriarchal hierarchy of the family has been disrupted because the family is incestuous. This distortion, I argue, manifests itself most clearly in the figure of Mol, the mother, who has violated the incest taboo.

Underlying this distortion of Oedipal hierarchies is an attempt to problematize and discredit the rigid classificatory practices of the apartheid government. Therefore the disruption of Oedipal hierarchies, performed along with *Triomf*'s disruption of apartheid racial classification, amounts to a subversion of the fixed identities which these systems attempted to produce. Other than highlighting the affinities between Freud's patriarchal structure and apartheid bureaucracy, I argue that Van Niekerk's project in *Triomf* is directly invested in toppling and subverting both systems of thought.

The analysis above culminates in a critique of *Triomf*'s subversive impulse. I highlight a number of slippages and mistakes, particularly in Van Niekerk's construction of Mol and her affiliation with lesbianism. These problems suggest that at the heart of this text is an anxiety about losing the authority represented by Afrikaner nationalism and the apartheid state.

It is from this basis of anxiety that *The Native Commissioner*'s latent preoccupation with recuperating this lost power emerges. In chapter two, the study begins with an analysis of the patriarch. His potency is based on a bureaucratic authority which is imbued with paternalistic assumptions about race.

Following this, the application of Oedipal models highlights the failure of George Jameson as a patriarch. This failure though, is then shown to be the result of Oedipal ambivalence, and the novel is re-read as a means through which the narrator symbolically 'murders' his father in an attempt to resolve the Oedipal crisis. Significantly though, what is foregrounded by the murder of the patriarch is not the attendant shame and guilt of identification. The narrative is invested in the contrary act of imaginatively usurping the father's role: the narrator's positioning himself as the dominant patriarch.

This repositioning suggests that the process of symbolically murdering the father is invested in the transfer of power suggested by Freud's primal scene. Lastly, I consider the

implications of this transfer of power in terms of the illegitimacy of white power in the new dispensation and discuss its implications for the ambivalence of white ‘reconciliatory’ narratives.

The conclusion will locate the study within the issues surrounding the South African literary field. I will then discuss the affinities and differences between these texts, contextualizing them within the historical trajectory which they map. This will be followed by the implications of this study and their relevance to the South African literary field.

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CHAPTER ONE: *Triomf*

Families in South African literature expose the power dynamics and effects of segregation on groups and individuals. Generally in literary analysis, the family is figured as a microcosm of society in which the socio-political situation is enacted and reproduced.³² This approach is an established practice in the analysis of postcolonial literatures, because the family is able to represent the clash between tradition and modernity, as both “the custodian of tradition and memory” and as a “reflector of social change.”³³ A similar approach has informed much of the critical writing on *Triomf* to date. It positions the Benade family as the eventual conclusion of segregation politics, figuring incest as the gross antithesis of miscegenation.³⁴ In this way these readings rely on the family as an allegory of society. Implicit in this critical practice is the idea that individual characters may be classified and thereby constructed according to their role in the family; a structure, which in turn is used to represent society.

In this chapter I would like to highlight a contrary imperative running through this text. Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf* presents a family which suggests that defying and frustrating the impetus to classify is central to the author’s intention. Classification as a practice was fundamental to the apartheid government’s project as racial classification was the primary lens through which power was refracted.³⁵ Parallel to this, Freud’s development of the Oedipus complex regards the family as both “the secret of the individual” and the seat of socialization.³⁶ It is this relation between the epistemological value of families as designating a way of understanding individuals and society, and its congruency with apartheid’s epistemological reliance on racial classification which is explored in my analysis.

Therefore, this chapter will argue that *Triomf* both resists an application of the Oedipal family template and contests and complicates apartheid schemas. Consequently, this dual subversion highlights the affinities between the two models. The remainder of my analysis will question the implications of this subversion for post-apartheid white South

³² Anne McClintock notes, “[t]he image of the family as the model of social order” competes with other discourses of understanding society, such as class. Through this representation authors “express [their] unease only in terms of biological decay” (*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* [New York: Routledge, 1995], 239.)

³³ Visser and Van Den Heuvel, *Family*, 5; *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ Matthew Brophy, “Shadowing Afrikaner Nationalism: Jungian Archetypes, Incest, and the Uncanny in Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*,” *Journal of Literary studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap* 22 (2006): 97.

³⁵ Deborah Posel, “Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa,” *African Studies Review* 44.2 (2001): 98.

³⁶ Poster, *Critical*, 2; Freud, *Totem*, 142.

African identity, critiquing Van Niekerk's counter-positioning of lesbianism as a model for a viable post-apartheid identity. In conclusion, I will highlight the implications of this failure.

This analysis begins with an application of a traditional Oedipal model through which family power relations can be mapped. Any designated family structure provides a basis which can be considered the origin for individual subjects, whether the origin is purely biological or also subjective. Through this origin a set of characteristics may be attributed to family members. In Freud's conception, the family structure is primarily hierarchical, with the child (through overcoming the Oedipus complex) submitting and identifying with the father who dominates both the mother and the children. By attempting to understand individuals through these relations, psychoanalysis (and psychology more broadly) attempts to classify and detect psychological deviance, governed by prevailing discourses and ideology.³⁷ Accumulating knowledge through classification forms the epistemological basis of the Freudian model of the family, as he notes, "[The Oedipus complex] constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses."³⁸ Therefore an application of this model exposes both Van Niekerk's subversion of the patriarchal, hierarchical family of Afrikaner nationalism, as well as the epistemologies which underlie both psychoanalysis and apartheid's construction of identity.

The Incestuous Family and Death of the Patriarch

Triomf follows the story of the Benade family, beginning a few months prior to, and culminating in South Africa's first democratic election. The novel takes its title from the Johannesburg suburb of Triomf, which was created by the apartheid government to accommodate poor white Afrikaners. The narrative takes place in this suburb, following the activities and experiences of this dysfunctional family in the wake of the impending political change.

The Benade family is composed of Pop, Mol, Treppie and Lambert. As the main characters of the novel, the narrative is focalised through each member of the family. Parallel to the build-up to the first democratic elections, is the anticipation and foreboding of Lambert's fortieth birthday. Underlying this, is the family's fear that he may discover "the

³⁷ This is underlined in the work of Michel Foucault who highlighted "the disciplinary role of psychology as a subjectifying form of power knowledge whose history cannot be divorced from the trajectory of corrective practices essential to modern power" (Peter Hook, *Foucault, Psychology and the Analytics of Power* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 2.)

³⁸ Freud, *Totem*, 157.

family secret”. The secret is that Pop, Mol and Treppie are siblings, though Pop and Mol claim to be distant cousins who are married.³⁹ This means that Lambert is the product of incest, and overtly to underscore this theme, Van Niekerk additionally has Lambert sleeping with his mother.

Under these conditions, if the family at Martha Street is drawn into an Oedipal model, then Pop is exposed as an illegitimate and disintegrating figure of paternal authority. Freud, drawing on Darwin, outlines the significance of the patriarch in primitive cultures, that “men, too, originally lived in comparatively small groups or hordes within which the jealousy of the oldest and strongest male prevented sexual promiscuity [incest]”. Contrary to this conception, Pop holds no such power and can stop neither Treppie nor Lambert from engaging in sex with Mol.⁴⁰ Presumably, this is because Pop is actually Mol’s brother, and being guilty of incest himself, lacks the legitimacy of Freud’s primal patriarch.

Pop is described as the antithesis of the powerful patriarch: the epitome of frailty, he is constantly sleeping, his nose always running. Furthermore, he is associated with a kind of weightlessness which implies his impotence and illegitimacy. When the family go to the Spur for supper, Lambert ends up carrying Pop on his back because he is not able to climb down the stairs himself. At this point Lambert remarks, “[g]ôts, Pop... you feel like you’re nothing but air.”⁴¹ The contradiction between Pop’s actual stature and the socially designated role of patriarch is also alluded to in his recurring dreams of whiteness, “[h]e feels light, as if he’s tumbling about inside a shell as dry as the wind, a great big droning wind full of white smoke.”⁴² Here the notion of the white patriarch, represented by a dry shell, is filled with nothing of substance. Pop’s reality as a father is merely a dissipating impression of an idea which is represented as fundamentally empty.

Pop’s sleeping and periodic dreams have the added function of suggesting a distortion between generations. Jacqueline Rose highlights the Freudian formulation of dreams which holds that “[d]reaming is a part of the – surmounted – childhood life of the psyche [...] a piece of infantile mental life that has been superseded [...] It is the living psyche, the soul, of the child that awakens in the dream.”⁴³ This suggests that Pop, characterized by his recurrent dreams of whiteness, regresses. In his vulnerability, he is more closely aligned to the status of

³⁹ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 174.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Totem*, 125.

⁴¹ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴³ Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 116.

a child than a parent. Furthermore, Rose notes that the uncertainty encoded in dreaming disrupts paternal authority,

could it be then that the greatest fear [...] is not the fear of not knowing, one loss of omnipotence, but another more tangible, more physical, the fear of slipping backwards [...] of turning – with awesome, hallucinogenic vividness – into a frightened child? ⁴⁴

The image of Pop as frightened child is further suggested by his cowering behind the bathroom door during Lambert's violent outbursts.⁴⁵ In light of this, it is significant that Pop is sleeping when he is murdered. The passivity which is suggested by his sleeping is not merely indicative of his impotence; it is an indicator of his being dominated by Treppie, his brother, and more significantly, by Lambert, his child.

Still, by inheriting the nickname "Pop" from his father, "Ou [old] Pop", by being the eldest child and being the fictitious husband to Mol and father to Lambert, Pop acquires the contingent title of patriarch. The suggestion is that his son, Lambert, will be the new patriarch. This is signified both by the fact that he inadvertently kills Pop, and by his name, "Lambertus" – he is the namesake of Ou Pop.⁴⁶

The Benades represent Freud's primal horde in reverse. Instead of a powerful father maintaining order, Pop has virtually no authority and is unable to wield even the most minimal power to institute his law as patriarch. This is depicted with great pathos in a number of scenes where Mol is being humiliated by Treppie, "Pop took his [Lambert's] mother's hand and gave it a squeeze, as if to say, don't worry, he knew she was just playing along for the sake of peace."⁴⁷ Pop is not able to offer any resistance to Treppie, though as the patriarch he is expected to protect his wife.

Lacking this paternal authority, the Benade family is on the verge of entropy. Disorder manifests itself in two ways: firstly in images of stray ants, bees and mice which appear in the narrative, confused and lost, having wandered away from their colonies.⁴⁸ Secondly, through the continual repair and destruction of the house: mirrors are fixed and broken, doors have holes shot into them, floor tiles are loose and clattering underfoot, the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 110. The fear of the father turning into the child is pertinent, not only in terms of the divesting of power, but in terms of the paternalist discourse of racism which underpins apartheid philosophy (this will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter two). If the patriarch is figured as the child, then the hierarchy which represents white supremacy is called into question.

⁴⁵ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 41.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22, 24, 35, 34, 36.

letterbox is continually reconstructed and broken down and holes are broken into walls which have been plastered to conceal significant cracks.

This pointless cycle of repair and destruction can be drawn back to Mol. As Freud notes “[originally] the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother’s womb.”⁴⁹ This connection is implied in the novel when Lambert states, “[h]e, Lambert, can tell you all about never giving up. In the end he gets everything fixed... It’s just his mother that he can’t get fixed up.”⁵⁰ Therefore, the sense of disorder appears to be lodged within Mol, who initially appears as the helpless and pathetic victim of the men around her. But if disorder is represented as a defining feature of the Benade household, then this indicates that Mol’s position is more complex than her victim-status would suggest.

The novel opens with Mol, “Mol stands behind the house, in the backyard. As the sun drops, it reaches between the houses and draws a line across the middle button of her housecoat. Her bottom half is in shadow. Her top half feels warm.”⁵¹ The division of light and dark located around Mol’s waist is suggestive, because this duality represents the ambivalence which is generated by her monstrous sexuality and her subversion of the domestic role. This ambivalence, visually represented according to the buttons on her housecoat, highlights the symbolic weight accorded to this item of clothing.

The housecoat frequently appears in the narrative; in fact Lambert bemoans the fact that Mol is always wearing it, “[s]he says she keeps it on so she won’t mess up her clothes... But he remembers seeing long ago, when Pop still wanted to, how she used to take the housecoat off for him.”⁵² A housecoat is an emblem for the mother as domestic agent. It is an item of clothing which is generally worn for housework, but this housecoat, Lambert notes, “smells sour, like the dishrags in the kitchen.”⁵³ The scent of the housecoat implies stagnation and rotting. Like the dishrags in the kitchen, it is an object which should be used to clean, but which is itself filthy. Therefore, it is not only redundant in terms of its designated role, but actually subversive towards the act it is supposed to perform. This is indicative of the Benade’s domestic situation as Lambert, who is suffering from heartburn induced by the diet of white bread, polony and coke, says “[h]e wishes his mother would cook something for a

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Rivere (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 28.

⁵⁰ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32.

change. Potatoes and meat and sweet pumpkin. But she's gone bad. Doesn't give a shit anymore. Just look at her kitchen."⁵⁴

Mol's slovenliness indicates a disruption of her designated role in the family. This is because domestic labour forms a significant part of the patriarchal nuclear family, particularly insofar as domestic (internal) labour is distinct from public paid labour. As Eli Zaretsky notes,

the organization of production in capitalist society is predicated on the existence of a certain form of family life. The wage labour system socialized under capitalism is sustained by the socially necessary but private labour of housewives and mothers [...] in this sense the family is an integral part of the economy under capitalism.⁵⁵

Zaretsky points to the creation of the nuclear family as one means by which patriarchy obscured the economic value of women's domestic labour, hereby diminishing the prospect of women achieving political (or economic) autonomy. Therefore, the oppression of women and relative elevation of men is dependent on the fact that domestic labour is performed for free, under the auspices of duty and sacrifice.

In the Afrikaner nationalist ideologue Geoff Cronjé's set of prescriptions for instituting racial segregation, he sets out a number of guidelines that should be followed by the Afrikaner nation. Specific focus is paid to the role of the housewife, as he notes, "*[d]ie vrou se toegewyde arbeid in die huisgesin het vir die volksgemeenskap op die lange duur meer waarde as enige beroepsarbeid wat sy daarbuite kan verrig.*" [The woman's dedicated work in the family has more value for the people in the long run than any professional work done outside the home.]⁵⁶ This emphasis on the value of domestic labour is elaborated upon when he impresses upon his readers that

Die Suid-Afrikaanse huisvrou kan oor die algemeen meer huishoudelike arbeid verrig [...] Niks is die moeite werd wat sonder opoffering verkry word nie [...] En verder, --arbeid is mos geen las nie. Arbeid is 'n voorreg en 'n plig, -- plig teenoor die arbeider self, plig teenoor sy huisgesin, plig teenoor sy volk, plig teenoor sy nageslag.

[The South African housewife can generally perform more household work [...] Nothing is of value that is gained without sacrifice [...] Moreover, labour is not

⁵⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁵ Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 25.

⁵⁶ Geoff Cronjé, *'n Tuiste vir die nageslag: die Blywende Oplossing van Suid-Afrika se Rasvraagstukke* (Johannesburg: Publicite, 1945), 244.

an irritation/ obstacle. Labour is a privilege and a duty—a duty to the labourer himself, a duty to his family, a duty to his people, a duty to posterity.]⁵⁷

“Sacrifice” and “duty” are positioned as integral to performing housework, and by implication to the role of the mother. This formulation has the distinct effect of imbuing the housewife’s domestic work with symbolic significance for the rest of the nation. Arguably, even in her slovenliness Mol does adopt this particular role, but only in terms of the sexual maintenance of the family. When she submits to her son raping her, her description is one of sacrifice, “[w]hat could she do? She lay down for him. She went and *lay herself down*. Housecoat and all.”⁵⁸ [my emphasis]

In this way the dysfunctional sexuality of the family is represented as the expression of Mol’s housewifely duty and sacrifice. It is not only that Mol takes ownership of the incest by claiming it as her duty, but that she expresses it in terms of Afrikaner nationalist ideology:

This was the way she kept them all together, Pop, Treppie, Lambert and herself. Cause they can’t do without each other. What would happen if something made them split up and they lost each other? They’d fall to pieces the whole lot of them, like kaffir dogs on rubbish heaps. *So she’d lain herself down for them.*⁵⁹ [my emphasis]

Mol’s description of herself as a martyr in the quotation above is a perversion of the ideological precepts of domestic labour outlined by Afrikaner nationalism. Presumably this is not what Geoff Cronjé had in mind. This subversion of the rhetoric of duty and sacrifice highlights Mol’s power and its relation to incest as a disruptive force.

Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the family, points out that “the family is the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance.”⁶⁰ For Foucault the family signifies both unmediated desire and societal norms (associated with what he terms “alliance”). In this way, incest is fundamental to its existence:

[within the family] incest--for different reasons altogether and in a completely different way--occupies a central place; it is constantly being *solicited* and *refused*; it

⁵⁷ Ibid., 226.

⁵⁸ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 41.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An introduction Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 108.

is an object of obsession and *attraction*, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot. It is manifested as a thing that is strictly *forbidden* in the family insofar as the latter functions as a deployment of alliance; but it is also a thing that is continuously demanded in order for the family to be a hotbed of constant sexual excitement.⁶¹ [my emphasis]

Though Foucault's intent is to indicate that incest provides the basis for the deployment of alliance, the above quotation highlights the fundamental ambivalence which characterizes its role in the family. In this way, his description resonates with Freud's account of taboo:

It is precisely this neutral and intermediate meaning—"demonic" or "what may not be touched"—that is appropriately expressed by the word 'taboo', since it expresses a characteristic which remains common for all time both to what is sacred and to what is unclean: the dread of contact with it... That fear has not yet split up into the two forms into which it later develops: veneration and horror... the objects of veneration turn into objects of horror.⁶²

We are reminded by Lambert's hatred of the housecoat (Lambert "hates the sight of housecoats") of the conflicted and ambivalent feelings which Mol inspires.⁶³ This is because the sexual relations of the family violate the incest taboo. But because Mol actually takes ownership of the incest, expressing it as her duty, Mol herself has violated the taboo. Therefore, Lambert's dislike of his mother is not the mere result of sexist misogyny. Rather it is a response to the power that his mother gains through her disruption and neglect of her domestic role, and relatedly because she is the sexual partner of all three men.

Mol's significance and centrality are further emphasized by her being the first and last character through which the novel is focalized. Her encapsulation of the narrative finds its parallel in her relation of the family history. Though Treppie habitually tells the family stories, he also continually reminds them of the fictions inherent in his narratives, repeating the phrase "it's all in the mind."⁶⁴ Treppie's ironic penchant for the truth is also suggested by his frequent hinting at Lambert's origins.⁶⁵ Mol's stories, though, attain a particular significance in that they narrate the family history. The family implores her "'Tell us a story, girl!' Then it's different. Then it's really the old stories they want to hear."⁶⁶ Narrating the

⁶¹ Ibid., 109.

⁶² Freud, *Totem*, 25.

⁶³ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 22.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 29; The first argument to break out in the novel is "over stuff in the sideboard's top drawer that he, Lambert, isn't supposed to see or know anything about" (Ibid., 23)

⁶⁶ Ibid., 42.

family story imbues Mol with an authority over the origins and history of the family that Lambert does not have in terms of furthering the family line. In this way, Mol is the primary dispenser of both textual and reproductive generative power, something which Lambert cannot do as a “genetic cul-de-sac.”⁶⁷ Mol notes, “[Lambert] is what he is. And he’s no good for marriage, ‘cause of the fits and everything. There’s a reason for it, of course. That’s something they all know. Except him. God help them the day he finds out.”⁶⁸ In this way, Mol is again more powerful than any of the men in the family, and this seems to be confirmed by the manner in which Pop (as the failed patriarch) eventually dies.

In Freud’s original conception, the death of the patriarch is a pivotal moment leading to the restructuring of primitive society, “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex.”⁶⁹ Peter Brooks describes these issues of paternity as “a principle embodiment of its concern with authority, legitimacy, the conflict of generations, and the transmission of wisdom”⁷⁰. As though an act of such symbolic value can only be ushered in through violence, Freud describes the murder of the patriarch as a “terrible and criminal deed.”⁷¹ Ironically though, Pop’s death occurs without any of the drama, decisive action or remorse which is meant to characterise the event.⁷²

Upon discovering the contents of the sideboard, Lambert collapses onto the chair in front of him, smothering his sleeping father. Completely unaware that his father is actually underneath him, he merely notes “it feels like he’s sitting on a bag full of sharp things” and “his feet keep catching on Pop’s shoes under the chair, like he’s tripping over them.”⁷³ Eventually Lambert breaks the sideboard over Pop’s head, perceiving only the covered back-rest of the chair and not his actual father sitting in it.⁷⁴

At the post-mortem analysis the family lies about the cause of death quite easily and without any remorse. Insofar as the patriarch is supposed to signify the conscience, law and socialization, the lying suggests that identification with the patriarch has not occurred. The

⁶⁷ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 65. In her discussion of the works of Henry Rider Haggard’s work, Anne McClintock highlights the colonial imperative towards what she terms “patriarchal regeneration” (*Imperial Leather*, 240). In imperial narratives this involves nullifying or neutralizing female generative power, in an attempt to “legitimi[ze] racial and gender poetics” (Ibid., 248). In *Triomf* the narrative embodies the opposite of this tendency: Mol is imbued with both the reproductive generative power of being able to produce offspring as well as a productive generative power which is generally associated with men, involving the dispensing of narrative.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁹ Freud, *Totem*, 156.

⁷⁰ Brooks, *Reading*, 63.

⁷¹ Freud, *Totem*, 142.

⁷² Ibid., 143.

⁷³ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 461.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 463.

Benades lack the shame or guilt attendant on the patriarch passing; significantly the attendant transmission of power which follows the death of the patriarch has also not occurred.

Treppie comically notes, “[s]hame... but at least he [Pop] still had time to exercise his vote”; hereby the link between the political change and the death of the patriarch is made explicit.⁷⁵ But rather than the death of the patriarch signalling a new era, as Freud would conceive of it, a “violent transition from the primal horde to the next social stage”, Pop’s death is wholly unremarkable.⁷⁶ Treppie merely exalts it as the beginning of the end, “One down, three to go!”⁷⁷

Classification and Authority

In considering Pop’s death, it is important to return to Lambert’s discovery of the “family secret” to think about how authority is encoded in the *Triomf*. “He scratches deeper in the drawer. Lots of old papers and other rubbish. Their IDs fall out from a plastic bag.”⁷⁸

Lambert, combing through the sideboard, is about to discover that his mother and father are in fact brother and sister. Before encountering the suicide note which will finally expose the secret, he finds the family’s identity documents. That Van Niekerk chooses to include bureaucratic documents in Lambert’s discovery of his origins is significant. They have been hidden away for their apparent power: to expose the true identities, and hence relations, of the Benade family. “Their IDs have been locked away in the sideboard for so long now that none of them remembers exactly when their birthday is.”⁷⁹ The notion that anyone could forget their birthday because they do not have an official document on hand inflates the value of bureaucracy for self-identification.

This is so because within the apartheid regime, bureaucracy seemed to be a determinant of identity. As Deborah Posel notes:

The Population Registration Act, passed in 1950, was an attempt to produce fixed, stable and uniform criteria for racial classifications which would then be binding across all spheres of a person’s life. Every citizen was to be issued with an identity document recording his or her race.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid., 469.

⁷⁶ Freud, *Totem*, 142.

⁷⁷ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 466.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 459.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 320.

⁸⁰ Posel, “Racial Classification,” 98.

This valorisation of bureaucratic documents as signifiers of identity is then in line with the apartheid government's "attempt to produce fixed, stable and uniform criteria for racial classification". In that racial identity was meant to inform all aspects of South African life, it is fitting that Lambert should discover these documents at the point when he discovers his true identity. But, significantly, Van Niekerk does not have the documents perform this function:

Quickly, he pages through their IDs. Lambertus Benade, Martha Benade, Martinus Benade. That's Treppie. Once or twice, when they all go fetch their pensions, and him his disability, he's asked them how come Pop's also a Benade. And each time Pop explains that he's from the Cape Benades and Mol and Treppie are from the Transvaal Benades.⁸¹

At the point when Lambert's true origins should be exposed by the document which allegedly has the power to do this, the narrative movement hesitates to indicate that the origination myth that Lambert's family has concocted for him still holds more legitimacy. These supposedly fixed and stable signifiers of identity have been degraded to mere pieces of paper. This marks the disjunction between the perceived value of classification and its real-life irrelevance in the text.

The tenuousness of apartheid classification is further highlighted by Lambert's encounter with Sonnyboy in the dumps. Sonnyboy appears as a particularly difficult character to position within apartheid schemata. He never discloses any specific name, "I've got many, many names" he tells a bewildered Lambert, "[o]ne for every occasion. But to you, my friend, I'm Sonnyboy, just Sonnyboy, plain and simple". When asked where he lives, he notes "[h]o, ho, here, there, everywhere. Sonnyboy, hy pola everywhere". With no definable name or fixed address with which to place him, Lambert enquires into his origins (race); after which Sonnyboy ironically responds saying "[j]y moet mos sommer aan my kan sien, hey, boss?". Lambert and Sonnyboy's conversation further exposes that Sonnyboy has been appropriating different cultural and racial signifiers for his own benefit in different situations. This manipulation of Apartheid racial classifiers is suggested with flagrant ease and Lambert notes, "[t]his is not a scared kaffir [...] This kaffir isn't afraid of anything."⁸²

In effect, that Sonnyboy has no fixed name, no visible racial type and no place of address makes him an anomaly for apartheid bureaucracy. With none of this information,

⁸¹ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 459.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 226, 227, 227, 226.

Sonnyboy's identity could never be secured within the confines of an Identity Document. Furthermore, there is no sense that Sonnyboy has any particular political affiliation, his disruption of the bureaucratic system is not politically motivated, "Red and green and yellow. Almost ANC, he thinks. Almost Inkatha. But not quite. He wonders what this yellow kaffir's case is. He's a different kind, this one."⁸³ Without any regard for punitive authorities or apartheid disciplinary structures, Sonnyboy evokes the elusive figure of Tsafendas, the man who assassinated Hendrik Verwoed:

[Tsafendas] had undergone name changes from time to time; he was neither white, coloured, nor black, but a "half-caste" Mozambican of Swazi-Portuguese descent with possible communist leanings. He emerges from the report as a person of no fixed abode, no fixed race or nationality, no reliable family ties, and variable psychiatric diagnoses. He drifted, mostly illegally, across countries and continents. Despite being on the "stop list" of the Department of the Interior he was, owing to bureaucratic incompetence, repeatedly able to sidestep prohibitions on entering South Africa, a failing severely castigated in the report [...] On the morning of the assassination Tsafendas bought knives at two separate shops; both were sold to him in contravention of the law [...] initially assumed to be operating with purely political motives—[he] had eventually been found unable to stand trial in view of insanity.⁸⁴

In this way, Sonnyboy defies the classificatory impulse both by being unclassifiable, and by having no particular political affiliation. This presents a political threat which is effectively more subversive than straightforward political opposition. Much like Tsafendas, it is the inability to position Sonnyboy within any classifiable subject position which makes him uncontrollable and ultimately dangerous to the apartheid superstructure. The tenuousness and unreality of apartheid classification and identity is exposed.

But what effect does this episode have on our understanding of Lambert and the Benade family? Leon De Kock, in his account of this episode, draws the conclusion that Sonnyboy is used as a contrast to Lambert and the Benade family. De Kock intimates that Lambert is incapable of seeing anything beyond his own white identity, "[h]e is trapped in a mirror-phase of self-identification. His white world has shrunk into its own self-willed, deep isolation."⁸⁵ But even though Lambert is incapable of classifying Sonnyboy, the episode ends with an exchange: Lambert gains a gun with which to "protect [his] girl", binoculars with

⁸³ Ibid., 224.

⁸⁴ Helen Laurenson and Sally Swartz, "The Professionalization of Psychology within the Apartheid State 1948-1978," *History of Psychology* 14.3 (2011): 256.

⁸⁵ Leon De Kock, "The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa," *English in Africa (EinA)* 53 (2010): 27.

which to “show [her] the city” and an mbira on which to play music.⁸⁶ Sonnyboy gets fifty Rand and Spur mealtickets with which to satisfy his comparatively simple need, hunger.⁸⁷ The amicable encounter leaves both parties satisfied and though Lambert is unable to classify Sonnyboy, this seems to have little bearing on the success of the encounter.

Clearly the problem with De Kock’s reading is that he works from the assumption that Lambert “is a proxy” for an “orthodox version of apartheid whiteness.”⁸⁸ Prior to this exchange, Van Niekerk has specifically portrayed Lambert’s distance from orthodox whiteness by including a failed encounter with two AWB recruits.⁸⁹ Additionally, the fifty Rand which Lambert pays Sonnyboy is gained from the NP representatives fleeing the Benade household in disgust.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the episode elicits apprehension as to what Lambert will end up using the newly acquired gun for. It is uncertain whether he will use it on his family, an unsuspecting inhabitant of Triomf, one of their quarrelsome neighbours or fumblingly, accidentally on himself.⁹¹ His encounter with Sonnyboy renders him more unpredictable than before.

Rather than this episode reflecting the insulation and isolation of white Afrikaner identity, it highlights the relative subversiveness of Lambert and the Benade family. In this way it exposes the extent to which Lambert is not the hyperbolic product of apartheid discourse, but rather its antithesis. This suggests that similar to Sonnyboy’s occupation of a fluid and marginal space, Lambert’s monstrosity and questionable origins grant him a similarly subversive subject-position.

The particular character of this similarity is suggested by Tsafendas’ incidental inclusion in Lambert’s painting earlier in the novel. In the painting, Lambert has hung his republic day medal on Tsafendas’ chest.⁹² The disjunctive juxtaposition of objects: the medal, representing Afrikaner nationalism, alongside the subversive figure of Tsafendas, suggests that Lambert’s monstrousness is perhaps as unsettling and inimical to the apartheid government as Tsafendas proved to be. But moreover, as Heyns notes, the republic day medal, as an object, would be “something that is bestowed upon him, not as an individual but

⁸⁶ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 232, 232.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸⁸ De Kock, “Call of the Wild,” 27.

⁸⁹ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 218.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁹¹ Ironically though, he merely ends up using the gun to shoot holes in the walls of the house (*Ibid.*, 439.) Through this futile action we are reminded of Mol’s associations with the house and the disruptive power which she is accorded.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 166.

as a member of a particular community.”⁹³ The disjunction of Lambert actually keeping the medal, but disregarding its broader ideological significance by placing it on Tsafendas, indicates that it is exactly the Benades’ existence within the white community that makes them threatening.⁹⁴

The implicit and explicit allusions to Tsafendas’s also highlight an undertone in the novel through which the Benades’ failure to correspond to the Oedipal structure can be understood within the broader structures of apartheid. In response to Tsafendas’ assassination of Verwoed, the apartheid government instituted significant measures towards professionalising and building psychological and psychiatric disciplines. This was an attempt to detect and thereby lessen the likeliness of mentally unstable individuals perpetrating these kinds of crimes. Laurenson and Swartz note that, “[t]his marked the beginning of a process in which the state would actively enlist psychology and psychiatry to help bring the dangerous individual under closer scrutiny.”⁹⁵

In this particular historical context, psychology emerges as a discipline through which potentially dangerous or dissident members of society may be detected, classified and removed from society. This imperative, though rather dystopian, reflects a similar imperative in Freud’s Oedipus complex. Because Freud considers Oedipus as the origin from which modern neuroses arise, by analysing the structure of the family, neuroses may be detected, classified and treated.⁹⁶

This highlights a similarity between Freud’s theory and that of apartheid ideology. Central to Freud’s analysis of primitive tribes (in his attempt to claim universality for Oedipus) is the idea that humanity stems from a common origin. As Freud notes in the justification of his project, “[a]n attempt is made in this volume to deduce the *original* meaning of totemism from the *vestiges* remaining of it in childhood -- from the hints of it which emerge in the course of the growth of our own children.”[my emphasis]⁹⁷ To paraphrase Freud’s project: originary cultures are explored in order to shed light on their manifestations in our (contemporary) lives. Much as Freud’s analyses in *Totem and Taboo* rely on manifestations of traits found in ‘primitive’ cultures, just so did Apartheid classification rely on a pure and unmediated origin through which race was thought to be reproduced.

⁹³ Heyns, “Confession and Narrative,” 57.

⁹⁴ I will return to this point later in the chapter.

⁹⁵ Laurenson and Swartz, “Professionalization of Psychology,” 256.

⁹⁶ Freud, *Totem*, 132.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

The following excerpt is taken from the 1938 Union of South Africa and indicates the focus on origin as a salient aspect of the epistemology used to validate both the need to classify and the classification itself:

Where a person is not *manifestly* white, or *manifestly* coloured, his true classification is generally determined, at any rate, in his own community, by his associations and general mode of life⁹⁸ [my emphasis]

Through the use of the adjectival construction “manifestly”, the classification of race relies on ‘manifestation’, the physical remnants of a particular racial origin or source. Furthermore, the inclusion of the phrase “general mode of life” in the union statement also implies a standard or model to which different cultures and races are seen to conform, of which domestic and family life form a significant part.⁹⁹

From this basis we can also understand why and how family history and origins became a fundamental concern for apartheid legislators. Racial origin carried the symbolic weight of justifying white dominance. This is reflected in an excerpt from a parliamentary meeting in 1950:

The White man [...] is the master in South Africa, and the White man, from the very nature of his *origins*, from the very nature of his *birth*, and from the very nature of his guardianship, will remain master in South Africa to the end.¹⁰⁰ [my emphasis]

⁹⁸ Cited in Posel, “Racial Classification,” 95.

⁹⁹ In light of this, it is not surprising that psychology was used by the apartheid government both to detect dangerous and disruptive agents, and also to justify the apartheid project: “Psychologists used their expert voice to invent the ‘primitive’ black, depicting them as the inferior ‘Other’ who needed to be ‘civilised’ and acculturated in the interests of industrial capital and segregationist ideology” (Mohamed Seedat and Sarah MacKenzie, “The Triangulated Development of South African Psychology: Race, Scientific Racism and Professionalization,” in *Interiors: A History of Psychology in South Africa*, ed. Clifford Van Ommen and Desmond Painter [Johannesburg: UNISA press, 2008], 87.) It is likely incidental, though interesting that Verwoed himself had been a professor of psychology at Stellenbosch University and later came to be labelled as “the architect of Apartheid.”

Psychology then seems to have been complicit both in terms of research and clinical practise. Peter Lambley notes that most psychologists in clinical practise used Carl Rogers’ client-centred therapy as the theoretical basis for their counselling (Peter Lambley, *The Psychology of Apartheid* [London: Secker&Warburg, 1980], 88.). This therapy relies primarily on non-involvement and value-neutrality on the part of the therapist, and Lambley notes disparagingly that within the context of Apartheid its effects were to relinquish the therapist of any need to address the negative political and social situation which apartheid had created: “it reduces the role of the psychotherapist and restricts him purely to helping the patient adjust to his situation, whatever that may be [...] The therapist’s task is to help him appreciate the limits imposed on him by whites, not to question the system or point out the errors.” (Ibid., 88, 89.)

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Posel, “Racial classification,” 98. The issue of paternal guardianship with regards to race will be explored in chapter 2.

But if birth and origin are integral to the apartheid project, then the Benades do not fit within the discourse. Lambert's contested paternity haunts the novel as the family attempts to stop Lambert from discovering that Pop and Mol are brother and sister.¹⁰¹ The conception of Lambert as a rupture in the discourse of racism is foregrounded. Jack Shear points out that Lambert's monstrousness acts as a "force that destabilizes the binary of racial privilege and racial inferiority."¹⁰² This is implicitly the result of Lambert's contested paternal origins (which of Mol's two brothers is his father?). The origins of the monstrosity are frequently alluded to as Mol accuses Lambert of being the child of Satan and often muses about Lambert's origins. "If Lambert takes after anyone, then it's Treppie."¹⁰³ The point is that Lambert may resemble Treppie, but he actually does not resemble anyone in the family. In this way the fundamental notions of 'manifestation' and 'origin' are betrayed.¹⁰⁴

The disruption of origin and manifestation reveals the extent to which racist discourses function on implicit assumptions about internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. By this reasoning, different races are all extrinsically diverse to one another (biologically, socially and psychologically), but internally within racial groups, more or less the same. This is reflected in the Carnegie Commission report of 1932 which sought to understand and suggest solutions for the growing poor white problem. It recommended greater segregation of races through differing wages and job opportunities. Underlying this report, Seedat and MacKenzie note,

was a deeper concern about the increasing social distance between poor whites and the more privileged sectors of the white community. These recommendations may be seen as an attempt to restore a sense of closeness and homogeneity among whites as a group [...] Privileged whites no longer tended to regard poor whites as their social equals. The growing gulf between the privileged and less privileged whites drew many poor whites towards blacks. However, closer relationships with blacks were not in the interest of the self-preservation of a people who assumed superiority and

¹⁰¹ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 118.

¹⁰² Jack Shear, "Haunted House, Haunted Nation: *Triomf* and the South African Postcolonial Gothic," *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* 22 (2006): 84.

¹⁰³ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ By implication, insofar as the Benade incest disrupts the oedipal family, it also disrupts the apartheid discourse of identity. Matthew Brophy interprets the destruction of exogamy as the eventual conclusion of segregation politics, the "grotesque antithesis of miscegenation" (Brophy, "Jungian Archetypes," 97.) This view is shared by a number of critics (see Louise Viljoen, "Postcolonialism and Recent Women's Writing in Afrikaans," *World Literature Today* 70 [1996]; Mark Libin, "Dog-angels in Wolf Time: Locating the Place of the Human in Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45 [2009]; and De Kock, "Call of the Wild". But in light of my argument surrounding the subversion of family, even if incest can be seen as the eventual conclusion of racial segregation, the fact that, as an act, it subverts the epistemology underlying this philosophy means that it does not function as an indicator of the effects of apartheid and instead stands as a rupture in the discourse.

dominance over blacks. In the interests of maintaining superiority, power and privilege it was vital for whites to bridge divisions in their ranks.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, the growing distance between the social habits of privileged and poor whites addressed in the Carnegie report attests to the falsity of the homogeneity/ heterogeneity claim, and it is evident that Van Niekerk specifically chooses to write about disenfranchised whites for this reason. This is the strength of Van Niekerk's representation of the Benades. As Mol notes, "[i]n their own backyard they do as they like, but to the outside world they always say 'Yes'."¹⁰⁶ Like Sonnyboy, they are not necessarily politically opposed to apartheid, their disruption is the haphazard disregard for fundamental first principles. This disruption is more effective than opposition through antithesis because it does not risk recreating or enforcing binaries.

Moreover, at no point can we definitively claim that the Benades are even representative of the poor Afrikaner population of this time.¹⁰⁷ The family is clearly distanced from privileged whites like the NP representatives ("The people in this house are scum. They make me sick to my stomach"), but significantly they are also considered offensive by other members of their closer community.¹⁰⁸ This is evident throughout the novel in their consistent fights with the neighbours, the disgusted looks they attract in stores and their visit to the Spur.¹⁰⁹ Given this perspective, it is unsurprising that the most aggressive response they are faced with is the designation of Lambert as existing abjectly outside the race divide, "[h]e's worse than a kaffir, the fucker."¹¹⁰

Therefore, the Benades are not only threateningly different (as a marker of the internal diversity of the white population) from privileged whites, but also from the underprivileged. Their disruption of the impetus to classify, both in terms of traditional Freudian models and

¹⁰⁵ Seedat and MacKenzie, "South African Psychology," 75-76.

¹⁰⁶ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ They certainly do represent the fears of the Carnegie report though. Treppie while arguing with a librarian, indicates that he has closer ties with black people than initially suggested:

He asked her if she remembered how jolly it was in Sophiatown's kaffir-shebeens. But no, she must've been too high-class to go there. Which was a pity, 'cause if he looked at her closely, it would've done her a lot of good to learn the foxtrot from a kaffir. That's where he'd learnt ballroom, Treppie said. From the kaffirs in Sophiatown, and for someone of his class it was an education all on its own. (Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 184-185)

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 91-113, 15, 87.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

racial classification, presents a subversion of the epistemologies which underlie both these systems of thought.¹¹¹

In subverting the impetus to classify, *Triomf* presents an anxiety about authority, specifically paternal authority.¹¹² This is encapsulated both by the actual death of the patriarch, but also by the tenuousness and unreality of apartheid bureaucracy.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the mistakes, slippages and ironies of Van Niekerk's subversion as represented in the Benade family.

Where Did the Lesbians Go?

Triomf presents the reader with a portrait of the death of paternal authority signifying the end of apartheid. This is achieved, as I have argued, through subverting the hierarchical structure of Freud's Oedipal model of the family and by contesting and complicating apartheid classificatory schemas. Through this subversion, Van Niekerk provides a nihilistic account of Afrikaner identity. The problem is that in this way *Triomf* is unable to suggest any particular place for the Benade family to inhabit in the new dispensation. Because of this, Van Niekerk's novel is only able to distance the author herself from Afrikaner ideology.

Because of her already ambivalent status, the problem seems most clearly expressed in Mol's transitional status. In her discussion of the section called "Fruit Salad," Brenna Munro's thesis, similar to mine in this chapter, is that "the family romance of white supremacy [...] obviously incompatible with the new dispensation [...] [was] well and truly

¹¹¹ In this manner *Triomf* can be placed in close thematic relation to other African literatures where madness has been used in order to disrupt official discourses. Flora Veit-Wild notes "madness is deployed as a literary means to subvert dominant structures of thinking and of ruling in the colony and post-colony." (Flora Veit-Wild, *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature* [Oxford: James Currey, 2006], 54) In *Triomf* a combination of the subversion of traditional Freudian psychology and apartheid ideology coalesce to subvert a mode of thinking and reasoning which could arguably have led to the establishment of systems like apartheid in the first place.

¹¹² Jacqueline Rose, in her analysis of *Totem and Taboo* considers the text to be primarily and problematically concerned with authority, "I want to suggest then that the most productive way to read *Totem and Taboo* is as Freud's dissection – albeit tentative and anxious – of authority." (Rose, *Psychoanalysis*, 136.) As Rose argues, there is a latent instability in Freud's anthropological thesis: "[i]t all depends – the problem we have seen Freud struggling with in *Totem and Taboo* – on whether you think psychoanalysis is a myth of progress, of civilised advance and advantage, a way of leaving something distasteful (primitive?) behind [...] Or to put it another way, is losing your authority – your distance, your normality, your belief in the logic of your own thought – something to be ashamed of?" (Ibid., 139.) In this way, even Freud's attempt to plot authority and progress is highly problematic and fraught. Freud provides a model whereby progress can be measured via the authority of each successive patriarch. But because this model is based on the remnants of cultures (manifestations) which are considered to be backward or regressive within the ethnocentric framework (origins), progress and authority come to be undermined. Therefore, considering the actual instability of these notions, Van Niekerk's investment in toppling them becomes a questionable affair in that the force of her expression comes to imbue these models and structures with a level of concreteness which they do not necessarily have.

buried by Marlene van Niekerk's celebrated 1994 novel *Triomf*.¹¹³ Her focus though, is on Van Niekerk's use of queer sexuality as an alternative to the Benade's "heterosexuality gone seriously awry."¹¹⁴

Munro provides a succinct description of this often cited scene in *Triomf*. In her words:

the adult son, hulking, barefoot, and unkempt, spies on their new neighbors, a sympathetic young English-Afrikaner lesbian couple, and narrates the scene of lovemaking he has watched to his family in a confusion of images of ice-cream, fruit, flowers, and licking. Their envy looking in on this lyrical lesbian domesticity situates the now tainted fantasy of white racial purity firmly outside the new order.¹¹⁵

Munro's contention then is that Van Niekerk does provide some indication of an alternative identity for white (Afrikaner) South Africans in the new dispensation.

Using sexuality to provide this alternative seems fitting in terms of the reading which this chapter has put forward. As Ian Barnard notes, "the policies of the pre-1994 South African government [...] prohibited public displays of homosexuality, criminalized private consensual homosexual sodomy, and banned pornography."¹¹⁶ In this way, both homosexuality and incest figure in this novel as states in which Freud's patriarchal family and apartheid's classifications and prescriptions of identity may be undermined. It seems significant then that the lesbians in *Triomf* live across the road from the Benades, suggesting a parallel between the two families, both of which undermine apartheid and the patriarchal family.

Lesbianism though, is figured in the text as a benign alternative to the Benade's subversion through incest. This is represented by Mol's response to the lesbians. Towards the end of the scene, after Lambert has described the sexual practises of the lesbians next door, Mol says, to the amusement of the men around her, "[w]ell, it sounds nice and soft to me." She continues, saying, "I wouldn't mind if it was only strawberries that got stuck into me. With ice cream in my mouth."¹¹⁷ None of the men listen to her and she thinks "[t]ry as she might in this house, no one listens to her. She's a woman alone here, that's for sure. She'll

¹¹³ Brenna Munro, "Queer Family Romance: Writing the 'new' South Africa in the 1900s," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15.3 (2009): 406.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 406.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

¹¹⁶ Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 29.

¹¹⁷ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 192, 192.

just have to accept it. Stuffing it with fruit salad. She smiles.”¹¹⁸ The chapter draws to a close with Mol looking longingly over at the house of the lesbians across the road.

Insofar as Mol’s admiration of the lesbians is expressed, the reader is also harshly reminded of the lack of fulfilment, unsatisfied desire and abuse which marks Mol’s current position in the Benade family. It is precisely the representation of the lesbian relationship as one of equality and mutual respect that suggests a subversive and yet positive identity for the white Afrikaner outside the precepts of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalist identity. This is confirmed by Munro when she notes, “perhaps it is precisely the difficulty of imagining the new South Africa through the usual metaphors of family that allowed gays to be written into the constitution as full citizens.”¹¹⁹ This utopian vision not only suggests an alternative positive identity, but also suggests a legitimate place for white (Afrikaans) South Africans in the new multicultural nation where victims such as Mol will be treated as equals and given a voice.

In this way *Triomf* suggests that lesbianism is a positive alternative to the abusive and unsustainable subversion which the Benades present. This is foregrounded on voting day. The Benades are having their house repainted white, a superficial gesture which can be read as an attempt to assert their racial superiority. The painting, though, will eventually result in a significant financial debt for the family. As the painting is happening, the lesbians are busy leaving Triomf, “[Treppie] said some people painted their walls white and others moved to greener pastures.”¹²⁰ That Treppie designates the place the lesbians are going to as being one of “greener pastures” suggests an alternative positioning for South African identity, as well as a viable and better future in the new dispensation.

Another way in which *Triomf* attempts to represent optimism for the 1994 political change is figured in Mol’s status at the end of the novel. The novel ends with Pop dead, Lambert in a wheelchair with an amputated foot, and Treppie with broken, crooked fingers.¹²¹ Mol says in her imaginary letter to Pop,

you needn’t worry, Pop, I won’t forget my driving lesson. Flossie’s over the hill now, but I practise the gears every night in Molletjie, here under the carport while the others watch the news. First, second, third, fourth, reverse. So I won’t be stranded one day if there’s a crisis here.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 193.

¹¹⁹ Munro, “Queer Family,” 406.

¹²⁰ Van Niekerk, *Triomf*, 466.

¹²¹ Ibid., 469, 470, 473.

¹²² Ibid., 473.

A sense of Mol's growing independence and mobility is signified by her teaching herself how to drive the car, particularly in the midst of both of the leftover men being pacified.¹²³ But what is evident is that though Mol thinks she can drive or thinks she is learning to drive, the reader is given no guarantee. She has only ever had one lesson. As the quotation describes, she is learning to use the gears, but without practising the clutch and accelerator, significantly the mechanisms which make a car move forward. Therefore, this empowerment exists only on the level of fantasy, and the promise of Mol's empowerment in the new nation fails.

This failure seems indisputably connected to Mol's violation of the incest taboo. In Van Niekerk's contradictory (and we may suppose, unintentional) representation of Mol, she presents Mol both as a victim, as well as a powerful and disruptive figure. As the central member of the incestuous family unit, Mol is the only legitimate originator of Lambert, a position which indicates her disruptive power in the narrative.

Significantly though, along with the fall of the patriarch, so also seems to end the incest of the family. As Mol notes at the end of the novel, "[Lambert's] boss of the house now, he thinks. But that's okay. *He can't corner her [Mol] anymore like he used to. Now she's faster than him. And she's glad, 'cause when he doesn't take his pills he's especially full of shit.*"¹²⁴[my emphasis] It appears that the remaining men of the family are no longer able to dominate Mol physically. Though in the same movement, Mol has lost any power which was ascribed to her through the incestuous arrangement and the violation of the taboo. This is echoed in Mol's learning to drive, as the patriarch who has passed away was also significantly the person who was teaching her to drive.

Compounding this sense of futility is the fact that the lesbians move out of Triomf on voting day. Once, a source of comfort or an alternative for Mol, they now leave her behind, to go to their "greener pastures."¹²⁵ Has the power (however ambiguous) that she gained through incest been replaced with anything vaguely concrete? In this way, it is the sense of disorder and chaos which Mol embodies that does not fit into the new multicultural discourse. Though Van Niekerk attempts to create a vision of the future, she is incapable of representing

¹²³ The significance of Mol learning to drive a car which was previously only driven by the men of the family, and which was called "Mol" because "all three of them rode her in any case" is indisputable (Ibid., 27.) Mol seems to be transcending her station as sexual object. With Treppie's broken fingers and Lambert in a wheelchair, the novel seems to end with her in the greatest position of power (Ibid., 472, 470.)

¹²⁴ Ibid., 470.

¹²⁵ There is also no indication of where the lesbians are going. Perhaps this is an indication of mobility, but the only passage or travelling which is mentioned in the text is the Benade's pipe-dream to move up north, and the mythologized Great Trek. Van Niekerk's inability to imagine a place for the lesbians also suggests the limits of the future she can represent.

any coherent image within the representational framework of this novel of what this future entails. The lesbians have to leave.

Effectively, though *Triomf* is invested in disrupting the Oedipal hierarchy and offering a queer model as an alternative; the affiliation between Mol and the lesbians, and the attempt to position Mol in any more meaningful position of empowerment is ineffectual. Though so much of the meaning of this novel is self-consciously intended, Van Niekerk's most hopeful vision fails in her representation of Mol.

Therefore, in Van Niekerk's endeavour to indicate that there is a place for figures like Mol in an affiliative framework, she inadvertently indicates that she cannot conceptualise the place of the Afrikaner in the new dispensation. It is this anxiety which dominates the end of her novel. Though her victims have been freed from the old paternal authority; they will not necessarily be free or freer in the new dispensation. At the heart of the novel, the latent anxiety emerges that there is no place for Afrikaner men and women.¹²⁶

In her association with the lesbians and Mol, we have to wonder whether part of the anxiety expressed in this novel does not inhere in Van Niekerk (who identifies herself as an Afrikaner lesbian) trying to create for herself, rather than her characters, a place in the new dispensation.¹²⁷

The gratuitous excess of *Triomf*, expressed through monstrosity, incest and slovenliness is a distinguishing characteristic of the novel. Excess distances the novel from the discourse of Afrikaner nationalism by unravelling the ideologies and values upon which it is based. But in doing this, Van Niekerk creates characters which, insofar as they reflect Afrikaner identity, cannot travel imaginatively beyond the confines of her novel. She is unable to indicate what the place of Afrikaner identity will be in the new dispensation. This

¹²⁶ This failure may in part be the result of Van Niekerk's use of a queer paradigm in order to displace Afrikaner nationalism and the racist ideology which informs it. Though queer studies, "disrupts dominant and hegemonic discourses by consistently destabilizing fixed notions of identity by deconstructing binaries" (E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, "Introduction: Queering Black Studies/ 'Quaring' Queer Studies," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson [Durham: Duke University Press, 2005], 5.), many critics have noted its political shortcomings. As Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson note, "the deconstruction of binaries and the explicit 'unmarking' of difference (e.g., gender, race, class, region, able-bodiedness etc.) have serious implications for those for whom these other differences 'matter' [...]" (Ibid., 5.) Therefore, Van Niekerk's use of lesbianism to represent a non-hierarchical inclusive civic identity, ignores the complexities and complicities of race, class and gender. As a representative symbol it seems inadequate, if not erroneous.

¹²⁷ As a description of a recent interview with the author states:

Van Niekerk explained that as an Afrikaaner lesbian, she has always been on the outside of the main arena and has therefore been privy to the dressage of women, noting that it is very difficult for men and women, particularly in the Afrikaaner culture, to grow in intimate relationships. ("Pen 2010", The Mantle, accessed February 1, 2013. <http://mantlethought.org/content/pen-2010-toni-morrison-and-marlene-van-niekerk-conversation-k-anthony-appiah>)

sense of hopelessness is noted by Jeanne Marie Jackson, “the ‘confession’ of Afrikaner transgression lies in its irrelevance to how meaning is generated in the family that represents this transgression and, by extension, for the reader who only has access to their experiences.”¹²⁸

For a novel which is meticulously constructed, these holes in the narrative suggest that Van Niekerk can go no further than to show dissipation. Though she intends for Mol to be the hero of her story, the latent anxiety of a loss of hierarchy inevitably becomes as much of a problem to Van Niekerk as it would be for the Afrikaner ideology she is attacking.

This fatherless-ness for Afrikaners (and I further extrapolate – white) identity foregrounds a sense of loss and anxiety which will lead to the nostalgia and recuperation of power which is at the heart of *The Native Commissioner* just over a decade later.

¹²⁸ Jeanne Marie Jackson, “Going to the Dogs: Enduring Isolation in Marlene Van Niekerk’s *Triomf*,” *Studies in the Novel* 43.3 (2011): 352.

CHAPTER 2: *The Native Commissioner*

In *The Native Commissioner*, Shaun Johnson explores the difficulties surrounding the guilt and complicity of white English-speaking South African identity. The novel was described by JM Coetzee as “a welcome step towards the reconstitution of the South African past in all its moral and political complexity” and by Njabulo Ndebele as “a novel of reconciliation through personal testimony.” It was received by the South African literary public as a novel which humbly grapples with post-apartheid identity issues, challenging dominant and hegemonic constructions of identity.¹²⁹

Johnson’s novel consists of two narratives: that of the patriarch, George Jameson, who is the native commissioner in question, framed by that of his son, the narrator, Sam Jameson. Sam reconstructs his father’s life through a collection of documents which have been assembled by his mother and stowed in a box. Considering the prominence of the father-son relationship in this novel, this analysis will focus primarily on the Oedipal conflicts inherent in the narrative. According to Freud, narrating (as a means of reliving/ re-experiencing conflict) may lead to the successful negotiation of the Oedipus complex, along with its attendant feelings of guilt and shame. Following this reasoning, Ndebele and Coetzee’s remarks on the reconciliatory and reconstitutive nature of this novel seem appropriate, and it is this perceived message of the novel which has led to its positive reception. My analysis, though, seeks to complicate this notion, by showing that the Oedipal crisis in this novel is primarily about identification between father and son, rather than the resolution of guilt. Through this lens, the latent dynamics of the novel are exposed and an anxiety about recuperating power is made visible.¹³⁰

The novel opens with Sam Jameson walking down to the cellar where he opens and begins exploring the contents of his father’s box. A description of the box that houses “something that changed everything in an instant and forever” provides the reader with foreknowledge of what the narrative will be leading up to: the death of Sam’s father “in a

¹²⁹ JM Coetzee and Njabulo Ndebele cited in “Endorsements,” Shaun Johnson, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://www.shaujohanson.com/endorsements.html>.

¹³⁰ Wamuwi Mbao also considers the latent dynamics of *The Native Commissioner* in an article about autobiographical fiction by white South African males. Mbao asks the pertinent question, “[m]ight one speculate, then, that there is a relationship between the loss of formal white political power, the challenge to white economic power, and the surge in popularity of nostalgic (white) literature?” (Wawumi Mbao, “Inscribing Whiteness and Staging Belonging in Contemporary Autobiographies and Life-writing Forms,” *English in Africa* 37 [2010]: 64). Mbao’s addressing of this question though, focuses rather on the crisis of belonging experienced in white South African identity politics rather than the underlying issues of maintenance and loss of power which is the focus of my analysis.

small suburban house on a summer morning in Witbank, South Africa, in 1968.”¹³¹ The provision of a specific terminus at the beginning of the novel provides the narrative with its intention and design, whereby the reader will piece together the inevitable misfortune that will conclude the narrative.

Peter Brooks convincingly argues that “the motor of narrative is desire”. In this conception, the readers’ desire comes from building “totalizing” and “ever-larger units of meaning.”¹³² This leads Brooks to conclude that “the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*.”¹³³ Within this framework, *The Native Commissioner*’s narrative structure suggests that the novel is primarily invested in reconstructing (detailing/ retelling) George Jameson’s death. Additionally, between various sections of the book, the narrator, Sam, interjects self-consciously either about his experience of the events described or his experience of narrating these events. The narrative interruptions suggest that *The Native Commissioner* is primarily concerned with the relationship between father and son. This focus highlights issues of authority, legitimacy and the transmission of power, suggested both by search for paternal origins and the death of the patriarch.¹³⁴ Through this arrangement, the reader is intimately drawn into Sam’s reconstruction of his father’s narrative, and made to feel sympathetic, if not complicit, in the suffering Sam experiences when his father dies. Most importantly, I will argue, the reader is drawn into the crisis surrounding inheritance within white post-apartheid South African identity.

My Father, the Bureaucrat

George Jameson is a bureaucrat. He starts his career as a clerk working for the Department of Native Affairs, moves on to become Native Commissioner, and then due to governmental changes, has his position changed to “Bantu Affairs Commissioner.” This final professional title forces George into a bureaucratic and magisterial role which is explicitly involved in instituting discriminatory apartheid laws. He finds himself trapped in the nefarious and impersonal structures of the new government, forced to betray his values and convictions. In contrast to these latter developments, the novel provides a particularly

¹³¹ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 4.

¹³² Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³⁴ Brooks argues that when dealing with biographical fiction, the reader unconsciously searches for a specific pattern whereby the son will inherit legitimacy and authority from the father which will in turn be passed down to the later generation (*Ibid.*, 88-89.)

idealised portrayal of the colonial regime. This is evidenced in the title of Johnson's novel; the designation of "Native Commissioner" is presented as being in accordance with the noble values and benevolent interest in black Southern Africans (specifically African language and culture) which George is presented as having.¹³⁵

What tinges this account with irony is that it obscures the fact that apartheid arose politically from structures which were already in place under colonialism. Clifton Crais notes that the bureaucratic procedures enacted by the Department of Native Affairs, under the colonial administration, aimed to "mak[e] the African world cognizable to the rule of a modern state."¹³⁶ To this end, the colonial state "sought mastery over Africans through the collection of knowledge about them and the world they inhabited" and "this process of growing state power began with colonial conquest and culminated in the authoritarian order that was apartheid, especially state controls over labour and the tribalism of separate development."¹³⁷

In this way this novel presents a significant parallel to the focus on classification and power which informs much of Van Niekerk's narrative in *Triomf*. Where *Triomf* draws attention to the mechanisms and anxieties underlying racial classification, *The Native Commissioner* portrays the evolution of the bureaucratic procedures and structures which would give rise to a system, which has reached maturity in Van Niekerk's novel. A distinct difference between these representations is that whereas *The Native Commissioner* personalizes the bureaucratic, providing the reader with a sympathetic 'insider's perspective';

¹³⁵ George is represented as an iconoclast insofar as his motivations for being a Native Commissioner clash with the actual purpose and practices of the profession. Considering the colonial government's interests in maintaining control, the information that Native/ Bantu Commissioners collected would have been determined by its instrumental value. As Melissa Steyn points out, the racial stereotypes which systems like apartheid and colonialism were premised on relied on a level of ignorance used to perpetuate racial myths (Steyn, *Whiteness*, 9.). Whereas much of the scientific and bureaucratic information which was collected had either the purpose of tightening white control or feeding racist myths, George becomes a bureaucrat simply because he is benevolently interested in African culture:

He had to cling to his dream of becoming eventually a professor of Zulu, or an anthropologist, or archaeologist; but those gentle pursuits would have to wait. He wrote out a job application to the Public Service; the Union Department of Native Affairs (Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 52.) And:

He had always said that in Africa there was the deepest duty to try to understand the *why* as well as the *what*, for what right did one really have to judge people according to one's own assumptions if you did not know theirs? (Ibid., 81.)

By representing a Native Commissioner in this way, Johnson highlights the perspective that apartheid as a structure was able to overwhelm the individuals who found themselves (inadvertently) trapped in it. This is part of the overt, manifest and explicitly stated message that Johnson wishes to impart. It is nowhere more clear than when Sam interrupts the narration to tell the reader, "I always remember the aphorism my mother once told me: if you could read the secret history of your enemies, you should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostilities" (Ibid., 30.).

¹³⁶ Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 68-69, 7-8.

Van Niekerk presents characters who exist on the fringes (or outside) of these bureaucratic systems. Where Johnson represents apartheid as impersonal, inevitable and inescapable, Van Niekerk presents it as untenable and fractured.¹³⁸

Significantly, *Triomf* problematizes the extent to which bureaucratic documents and practises may determine identity, illustrated by Lambert's discovery of the family secret following his reading of the family's identity documents. Contrastingly, for Sam to overcome the anguish of his father's death he has to sift through a box of bureaucratic documents. George Jameson's identity is embedded in these documents, suggesting that his identity does depend on bureaucracy. Additionally, George's identity as a father and provider for his family is inextricably and conflictingly dependant on his performance within the bureaucratic system. This is particularly pronounced in George's resistance to accepting the political implications of his profession,

He [George] told himself to get a grip on himself. After all, he had always said his work was for betterment, that the world was not perfect, that the advantages and advances of European civilisation could be shared without the destruction of Africa's own. He still believed this – *had to, he realised, for the alternative was chaos for his family* – but the truth was it also suited his missionary's mien.¹³⁹ [my emphasis]

Though not directly expressed here, George's greatest anxiety is maintaining financial stability and being able to provide for his family. The elision of this point though, suggests closeness between two facets of his life which would otherwise be considered distinct.

At the beginning of the novel, the box is described as containing a striking variety of different texts and documents.¹⁴⁰ Therefore it is significant that the documents which are actually 'reproduced' in the text tend to be bureaucratic (letters of appointment, testimonials, job applications, letters of promotion etc.). This suggests an interdependence between George as patriarch and bureaucrat which is not explicitly stated in the text. Additionally, the plot of the novel is arranged by bureaucratic exchanges, as the family is forced to move around Southern Africa according to where George is stationed.

Therefore, paternal roles are mitigated and linked to those of professional bureaucracy. As the political significance of his profession becomes evident, George

¹³⁸ In the conclusion I will consider this point further with regards to a distinct change in outlook which seems to occur within the ten years which separate these two novels.

¹³⁹ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 91-92.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

descends into a psychological instability which corresponds with a loss of authority within his family-context.

Paternalism and Politics

Paternalism has particular currency in this novel, manifestly because George is described as being anxious about his role and efficacy as a father to his sons:

George was beginning to think a lot more about the four boys he had brought into the world, and of what kind of father he was being to them. Secretly he felt he was not a *natural father*, though he was so fond of his sons, and they of him [...] he was himself perhaps not fully grown up, and might never be. But he could not fail as a father, even though he was not sure he was worthy of the role.¹⁴¹

In the above quotation, the narrator highlights an anxiety surrounding integrity and duty which George exhibits throughout the novel. We are made aware that the reason for his remaining in a profession which is starting to betray his liberal values is so that he can provide for his family financially. But of more interest are George's doubts about whether he is a "natural father". The notion of a natural father suggests an innate and unchosen authority in men who, within this implicitly patriarchal discourse, are predestined to dominate and manage the family. As Benedict Anderson notes,

In everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen. In this way nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage, and birth-era – all things one cannot help [...] To put it another way, precisely because such ties are not chosen, they have about them a halo of disinterestedness.¹⁴²

The "halo of disinterestedness" that Anderson refers to provides one explanation for why the family has been evoked in various contexts to justify the existence of various social hierarchies. This is pertinent to understanding how the white male was positioned as superior to women and children, as well as other racial groups.

It is within this framework that the image of the benevolent patriarch came to feature as a significant part of justifying colonialism and apartheid. Nederveen Pieterse highlights the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁴² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 131.

idea of “colonial paternalism” implicit in the phrase “they are just like children.”¹⁴³ In this formulation, white supremacy is cloaked in the language of benevolence. Jan Smuts in his Rhodes Memorial Lecture in 1929 expresses it as such:

‘The negro and the negroid Bantu form a distinct human type. It has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook’. However, as he explained to his English audience, ‘A child-like human cannot be a bad human, for are we not in spiritual matters bidden to be like unto children?’¹⁴⁴

What Pieterse highlights in this speech is the pertinent insight that “images of ‘others’ depended not upon ethnic differences but upon particular types of hierarchical relationships (of which colonialism is one).”¹⁴⁵ This rhetoric has historically been associated with white English-speaking South Africans, whom Allister Sparks describes as exhibiting a “blend of paternalistic benevolence and social distance to blacks.”¹⁴⁶ The notion of a natural hierarchy, though, is also fundamental to the Afrikaner nationalist ideology which informed apartheid:

[The Afrikaner] was historically bound to be the protector of the black man. The new policy [apartheid] should be introduced in a spirit of “responsible guardianship.” “It is the duty of the Afrikaner,” Cronjé declared, “to show the way in which the native must be led in his own interests and with a view to his own development.”¹⁴⁷

The above quotation is taken from Geoff Cronjé’s book, *A Home for Posterity*, considered the first statement of the emerging apartheid ideology. The title of this publication preempts the nuances of paternalistic authority which are suggested by phrases such as “responsible guidance” and “being led... to his own development”. Moreover, in the introduction to the book, Cronjé states,

*Ons wil vir ons nageslag tot in lengte van dae in hierdie land ‘n tuiste verseker; ons gun egter ook vir hulle [die Bantoeras] en vir die kleurlinge ‘n tuiste onder die suiderson*¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 104.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁴⁶ Sparks, *Mind of South Africa*, 49.

¹⁴⁷ Cronjé cited in *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁴⁸ Cronjé, *Tuiste vir die Nageslag*, 8.

[We want to guarantee a home in this land for years to come for our posterity; we truly also mean to provide a home for them [the Bantu] and for the coloureds]

The balancing of providing a home for future Afrikaner generations and providing a home for other race groups in the country is suggested by the use of the semi colon. This indicates that apartheid rhetoric presented the need to provide a home for future generations as co-dependant and contingent on segregation. Evidently this indicates a perverse sense of belonging rooted in exclusion and isolation. More significantly, it suggests that within this discourse, white men have to provide not only for their children, but also for black South Africans. This peculiar burden on the white patriarch is suggested both by George's recurring anxiety and his benevolence.

The emphasis on paternal duties, though, requires that there be a strong patriarch exercising authority and control, acting as the sovereign master of his household. In this way, George's role as a patriarch, conducting both his family and his house, exposes the latent mechanisms of Johnson's novel, which are more closely invested in white paternal power than its manifest 'reconciliatory' narrative may suggest. The recurrence of George's interest and investment in cultivating gardens throughout the text provides the reader with one means of understanding the conflicts and anxieties concerning these issues of control and authority.

Along with their prominence, gardens symbolically reflect the domain of the white English-speaking patriarch in South Africa. Gardening, as an act performed by the head of a household falls into the ambit of what may be termed "husbandry". Etymologically, this word originates from in the idea of a man caring for his household. It also denotes "the control and judicious use of resources" and the "cultivation or production of animals and plants."¹⁴⁹ The link between "control" and "cultivation" which the two uses imply, situates the patriarch as managing and disciplining wild and generative landscapes so as to make them useful and productive (or aesthetically pleasing) to satisfy a particular aim or need. George's approach to cultivating gardens seems to fall within this notion, as the household in Libode is described as having "acres of wild garden for George to tame."¹⁵⁰

Plants, particularly their roots, are established as a metaphor in the novel for white settlers attempting to settle in Africa, to provide a home for future generations. When George Jameson is born, the birth is described as signalling:

¹⁴⁹ "Husbandry," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/husbandry>.

¹⁵⁰ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 122.

that the Jamesons were staying, planting bulbs that would flower and trees that would provide shade only in future seasons. Impermanence was in the blood of the white settlers; it was the knowledge that the place they loved used to belong to someone else.¹⁵¹

Both Sparks and Steyn have noted the sense of dislocation of white English speaking South African identity.¹⁵² The analogy of a plant taking root expresses the desire of this group to establish themselves, and to justify their presence in the country. This passage suggests that to battle this impermanence and illegitimacy, the creation of children ‘born from the land’ as naturalised citizens could justify the presence of their parents. This notion is symbolically tied to planting and gardening within the novel.¹⁵³

Furthermore, as the discussion of husbandry suggests, these notions are inscribed with racialised ideas concerning authority and control which premise the legitimacy of the patriarch. In this way, the cultivation of gardens, and moreover the ‘cultivation’ of family take on political charge.

Within this context, George’s relation to the garden in the text is ambiguous. This is particularly because much of Sam’s description of his father’s relation to the family and garden are as spheres set apart from his professional life. After a brief discussion of the ordeal he experiences undergoing shock therapy, George consoles himself with what he calls “peaceful things”: “when I need to think of peaceful things I picture my fuschias and the garden at home and my family.”¹⁵⁴ As comparable entities, both gardens and families reflect fertility, nurture, discipline/control and legacy/permanence. These qualities, as I have argued, all find their root in the notion of ‘husband(ry)’. As suggested in the quotation about “peaceful things”, the garden and family are explicitly positioned as a means of escape for George from the conflict inherent in what he feels is the ideological betrayal of his professional life. Against this background, his garden (and by extension his family) are described as a refuge. “Let us live”, he instructs his family, “a quieter and fuller more selfish

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 50-51.

¹⁵² Sparks notes, “[t]he British settlers never cut ties with their country of origin the way the Afrikaners did, nor is their commitment to South Africa total and irrevocable” (Sparks, *Mind of South Africa*, 48.), and Steyn notes “[w]ith much closer ties to ‘back home,’ being ‘white’ for the British settlers was having the right to maintain a European frame of reference in Africa. In many ways the British remained psychologically more alienated from the African continent than the Afrikaners” (Steyn, *Whiteness*, 31.)

¹⁵³ This “fixation with establishing oneself as belonging to the land” (Mbao, “Inscribing Whiteness,” 69) is an established marker within white South African literature. Mbao outlines its literary prominence and discusses its complexities in his article.

¹⁵⁴ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 14.

but not self-centred life. The garden for me. That's where I belong."¹⁵⁵ In a similar vein, the omniscient narrator, slipping into Jean's voice, notes of her husband, "him with his uncomplicated love of gardens if nothing else."¹⁵⁶

Therefore, the public and domestic are presented as oppositions at various points in the text. Gardens and family are represented as a stated contrast to the complexities of the political situation of the country as they are reflected in George's work. In this view, these symbols establish an opposition where benign personal and familial interests come to be inhibited by insidious and dominant political doctrines through a neat dichotomy between public and domestic.¹⁵⁷ From this perspective, George is continually distracted from what would be fulfilling on a personal level by his professional interests. The representation of the personal and the public as exclusive spheres coerces the reader into perceiving George Jameson as a good father rather than as an apartheid authoritarian. This is often signalled in the text by his professional insecurity and political complicity deriving from a need to provide for his family: "He recognised with regret but self-knowledge that he was indeed a man of limited bravery. He comforted himself with the fact that the path he had chosen was, at least, the safest option for his family."¹⁵⁸ Here, George's domestic life becomes a means for justifying the passive stance that he takes with regards to his political complicity by continuing to work for the apartheid government.

But the symbol of the garden upon which this formulation relies is already flawed, already complicit in colonial paternalism. Consequently, the binary construction has to be forced onto the narrative. Hereby, the project of representing George's helplessness and benevolence, which are so central to the manifest message of the novel, can be recognised as being riddled with anxiety.

Paternal Failure

If the garden and family prove to be unstable symbols for representing the domestic as essentially benign and the public (professional and political) as nefarious encroaching sphere, then it is also pertinent that the notion of George as cultivator seems to be problematized through the novel. Firstly, George is unable to settle his family and provide a sense of belonging for them. Throughout the narrative, George is frequently forced to relocate due to

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵⁷ This dichotomy is significantly negated by my discussion of husbandry and colonial paternalism above.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 138.

his work. Therefore, instead of planting gardens where the “trees would provide shade only in future seasons”, he ends up planting gardens which are abandoned every few years: “[t]hey could not know how soon they would be journeying again, and so once more they set about trying to take root in strange soil.”¹⁵⁹

Towards the end of the novel, before committing suicide, George performs a last circuit of his garden:

Then he starts to traverse the small garden slowly, covering carefully every inch on its perimeter, starting at the loquat tree where the cats roll on their backs and present themselves for scratching. He passes the fuschias, the vines, the flower beds with their daisies, the jumping beans, the fruit trees; he passes and looks at every single thing he has planted in the close to three years of life we have lived in this place¹⁶⁰

Creating an inventory of what he has planted, and presumably, what he will leave behind, George is preoccupied with counting and tallying his achievements in these last moments. Even though he surveys everything he has planted, he still leaves the garden without any sense of value for his own personal investments. The immediate assumption is that this represents the depths of his depression at this point: that humans cannot adequately value what they have created in the midst of major depressive episodes. But effectively, in merely “passing” and “looking” at the items in the garden, the text foregrounds passivity and isolation. This would not have been the case, had George been touching the plants, watering them etc. George is presented as a mere observer in his own garden. Why, after the garden has come to represent so formidably the complicities and complexities of George’s domestic and political life, would George be represented so passively, so withdrawn from his own personally fraught domain?

The answer to this problem lies in George’s description, while in the mental hospital, of the family’s letters to him. He describes the garden back home:

He [his son Chris] says because of the storms every day the apricots are big and the peaches huge and the lawn is looking very green and class [...] apparently even the tiny little new trees have fruit on them. The old hacked about peach tree near the Goldman’s fence is laden with peaches and the plums are ripe too. My vines are sagging with big grapes.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 207.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 17.

This passage expresses a level of abundance and fertility which, though it may be suggested in some of the depictions of unadulterated African landscapes, is not present elsewhere in the novel. What is important to note, is that George is significantly absent from this scene of fertility. George is represented as a passive observer in the previous quotation because even though he may indeed have ‘planted’ this garden, its flourishing and growth is not (or no longer) dependant on him. Similarly, this loss of control or potency is registered in George’s anxiety about the homestead and his wife being maintained in his absence:

I said I thought I could read from her letters that she is enjoying working and being so busy. I said I was glad about that. Actually I hate the idea. I had always hoped my wife would play bridge in the afternoons and keep the home and family which is a big enough job.¹⁶²

These images register a disjunction, an anxiety in the text about George’s efficacy and potency as a patriarch. This manifests itself when George’s youngest son, the narrator Sam, slices his toe with his father’s spade one day while attempting to be a gardener like his father.¹⁶³ This episode suggests that there is a resistance on George’s part to relinquishing or passing down the agency which he assumes by being the cultivator of the garden. Cultivation is closely linked to George’s paternal dominance, and when Sam picks up the spade, his dominance is threatened. George’s resistance is figured by the spade metonymically acting as a substitute for one of the father’s limbs. Hereby, the father enacts violence upon his son in an attempt to withhold or safeguard his potency.

Oedipal Anxiety and Identification

These suggestions of usurpation and violence between father and son serve to highlight the Oedipal conflict which runs through the novel. George and Jean have four sons. At various points in the narrative the reader is made aware of their ‘trying’ to have a daughter:

[at Chris’s birth] they had been hoping very much for a daughter but were thrilled with their pretty new boy”, and [a letter from Ryan on Sam’s birth:] “So glad to hear it’s a healthy little boy. I suppose you are disappointed it’s yet another boy”; and from

¹⁶² Ibid., 22.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 135-136.

Jean, “It is at times like this [...] that you boys can understand why your father and I tried so hard to have a daughter.”¹⁶⁴

No conscious reason is provided for wanting a daughter, other than Jean’s suggestion that a daughter would be more appreciative of sophistication, but we can assume that every extra son challenges George’s authority as patriarch.¹⁶⁵ One way in which this is expressed is by each son representing a trait of George’s.

Pertinently, Sam embodies George’s liberal investment in Africa because the first words he speaks are Xhosa. When the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development visits the district, part of the success of the visit is suggested by the fact that “Sam was presented to the minister and did not misbehave.”¹⁶⁶ This arbitrary inclusion symbolizes that George has not voiced his own political views, his discomfort with the apartheid regime.

Ryan embodies George’s more cynical and darker side: “Oh my Ryan” Jean muses, “such a talented youngster but so troubled [...] and a danger to himself; I think he inherited all George’s fragile sensitivities, but none of his caution [...] he has a recklessness and a self-destructiveness that truly frightens me.”¹⁶⁷ Consequently, it is not incidental that these two sons should be the ones who most directly experience George’s death.¹⁶⁸

The description of shared traits suggests an identification with George, as the patriarch. This identification is a portent for the overthrow of the father. Note Freud’s description of the original overthrow of the patriarch:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually [...] Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength.¹⁶⁹

The quotation above highlights the importance of identification. Identification is suggested by the sons “devour[ing]” the patriarch and “fear[ing]” and “env[y]ing” him. This is highlighted

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 69, 101, 114.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 126, 128.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 208-210.

¹⁶⁹ Freud, *Totem*, 142.

in Johnson's novel both by the sons reproducing different traits of George's personality and by their proximity to his death. Ryan and Sam are the brothers who are most likely to succeed George.

As Edward Said notes, "[a] significant and influential aspect [of Freud's psychoanalytical theory] posits the potentially murderous outcome of bearing children, we have the unmistakable impression that few things are as problematic and universally fraught as what might have been supposed to be the natural continuity between one generation and the next."¹⁷⁰ Signalled by their similarities to George, the two brothers may (and are able to) come together with newfound strength that is equal or greater to that of the patriarch.

Identification is most evident in the description of the father shooting himself, replicated metaphorically with the two sons:

Of George: "He pulls the trigger. The bullet does what bullets do when fired at point-blank range into a human head"; Of Ryan: "Something bangs in his head too when he looks inside [his parents' room]"; Sam: "My eyes register a dark wet spreading stain seeping out from the bedroom carpet behind the closed door. Something bangs in the head of yet another Jameson just then."¹⁷¹

The threatening aspect of the sons is indicated earlier in the text when, after all four sons have been born, the family moves to Libode. Along with taming the wild and large garden, George concurrently pools his efforts into socialising his sons in a militaristic fashion with prescriptive impersonal rituals that they need to fulfil.¹⁷² Socialisation is one means by which George can maintain and enforce his role as patriarch. But as with the garden, his sons illustrate that this control is flawed. Ryan receives an art prize at school, depriving his father of the agency which he believes he should feel, "George didn't know whether to be proud, or ashamed that his son appeared not to need him – or even his permission. He ended up feeling both pleased and inadequate."¹⁷³

Given these Oedipal tensions, the disjunction between George's absence and the fertility of the garden can be resolved. *The Native Commissioner* has a notably segmented narrative structure. George's story, generally told from a focalised third person narration, is framed by a first person narration which introduces certain parts of the narration via Sam's experience of the events. This is interspersed with various archival documents, like letters

¹⁷⁰ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), 16.

¹⁷¹ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 207, 208, 209.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 116.

and articles. Consequently, the structure conflictingly emphasizes narrative unreliability (as we are actively forced to recognise Sam's volition as narrator through being told of his experience of narrating), even with the inclusion of archival material. The narrator, Sam, notes at the beginning and end of his narration, "I wondered if this fitting together of fragments was recreating real people, or a fiction of my own", and "[w]hether I have told it just as it happened – whether, in that sense, it is true – I do not know. It is my version, anyway."¹⁷⁴ Therefore the garden which flourishes in George's absence is not reliable, it is something which has been remembered or contrived. This highlights not the absence or impotence of a patriarch, but the narrator's need or desire to represent the absence of his father as fertile and positive.

This places the narrative firmly as one of resolving Oedipal conflict, with the garden acting as a space upon which the narrator may displace his repressed wishes. As Freud describes in his case study of "little Hans":

it became evident that he was struggling against wishes which had as their subject the idea of his father being absent (going away on a journey, dying). He regarded his father (as he made all too clear) as a competitor for the favours of his mother, towards whom the obscure foreshadowings of his budding sexual wishes were aimed.¹⁷⁵

This in turn, produces an altogether different reading of the book. The anxiety in this novel does not necessarily reflect George's anxiety about his dominance and potency, but rather Sam's ambivalence towards his father as the competitor for his mother's affection. This is suggested when Ryan is attempting to tell Sam that his father has died:

In the yard under the mulberry tree from which I feed my silkworms, my brother [...] looks at me and says [...]: Dad has gone away. Again? I say, quieter now but with tears streaming down my cheeks. He can't go away again, he's just got home. Where to this time? And for how long? And why are all these people here? Why are the police here? And where is Mom?¹⁷⁶

Corresponding to Freud's description of the child wishing for his father's absence, the ambivalence that Sam feels towards his father is reflected in his misinterpretation of what Ryan is saying. "Dad has gone away" is a standard euphemism or image of death, but Sam can only interpret this as his father being at the hospital. Additionally, this discussion is

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 45, 239.

¹⁷⁵ Freud, *Totem*, 129.

¹⁷⁶ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 210.

taking place under a mulberry tree, a symbol of fertility (particularly in that it provides leaves for Sam's worms). This indicates that Sam's misinterpretation of the phrase "gone away" is effectively a safe midway between George's presence and death. This 'leaving' is an absence which allows Sam the gratification of his sexuality (represented by the Mulberry tree which yields its leaves) without death. It is his guilt for actually wishing his father would die which makes him cling to the idea of his father's mere going on a trip, rather than the actual fulfilment of his repressed wishes. This is confirmed by his description of the box, "inside was the presence of absence which had shadowed my life."¹⁷⁷ The description of the father as both absence and presence is how Freud comes to assert the fundamental role of the Oedipal crisis in modern day society:

They hated the father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse... The dead father became stronger than the living one had been.¹⁷⁸

Freud uses this conception of the reappearance of the father, the psychic presence of his absence, as an explanation for exogamy. In this conception, the sons internalise their father's censure of coupling with the women of the tribe.¹⁷⁹ Symbolically though, it suggests that killing the father leads to an internalisation of his law and an acquisition of his power. The former of these presents itself as guilt, which feeds into the manifest 'reconciliatory' message of the novel. But as the emphasis on identification suggests, transmission of power is more significant to the novel's latent mechanics.

In this analysis, I have suggested that the narrative of this novel is centred on the Oedipal conflict. Sam symbolically kills his father through his narration of his father's story. This, in turn, allows him to kill his father in a way which facilitates identification with the white paternalistic power which his father represents. This unconscious imperative is present at the beginning of the novel where the narrator is described, "[o]ne morning it all started, I woke and sat in one movement. I remember the feeling clearly; it was as if I'd been propelled upright by a forklift."¹⁸⁰ The image of being "propelled upward" and sitting up straight is suggestive of a phallic erection, associated with notions of power. In Brooks' phrase, it is

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁸ Freud, *Totem*, 143.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 1.

“the tumescence of a self in a state of domination, an imperious and imperial self.”¹⁸¹ This will towards power at the outset of the novel provides the “textual energetics” as Brooks terms it, for the rest of the plot¹⁸². This confirms that on one level the novel is much more preoccupied with inheriting power than resolving feelings of shame and guilt.

Sam’s will to power is also evident at the end of the novel. As Brooks notes, “the telling is always *in terms of* the impending end.”¹⁸³ This is particularly evident in *The Native Commissioner* where the plot and action are premised by the knowledge that something disastrous will happen.¹⁸⁴ This foreknowledge presents George’s life as following an inevitable path over which he has little or no control, his death inspiring pity. George’s impotence is foregrounded, but significantly this is not where the novel closes. In the last few pages the reader returns to Sam’s first person narration:

Of course I wish my father could come back, so we could talk at last and perhaps see if we could find some of the answers together. But I know well that this is one thing I can never have, no matter how hard I work and run and fight in this life I have lived so ridiculously quickly and unreflectively. *I am a father now.*¹⁸⁵ [my emphasis]

Sam’s stating “I am a father now” suggests not only that he has children (and a wife), but more pertinently, that after having told his father’s story he is able to take on the role of the patriarch. This statement, at the end of these two musing and emotional sentences, is particularly assertive. Sam has usurped his father’s role and is now the dominant patriarch.

Transmission of Power and Inheritance

In the same way that the legitimacy and power of the patriarch and his role cannot be separated from the public issues of political power which surround the novel; similarly the Oedipal transmission of power cannot be relegated entirely to the realm of the domestic. The present tense framing of this narrative is situated in the new South Africa, with the narrator describing his experience of compiling his father’s story which is concomitantly also the story of apartheid. Therefore the Oedipal drive is not merely invested in the passing of power

¹⁸¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 51.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Van Niekerk also emphasizes the end in her novel through repeated discussions of the upcoming election and the hiding of the family secret.

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 242.

from father to son, but also the passage from apartheid to a democratic South Africa.¹⁸⁶ This is implicit when Sam notes, “it has allowed me to replace the shard that is my lost father’s reflection in the mirror of my country, and to begin to fill in the void it has been in my own.”¹⁸⁷

In terms of the narrative framing, George’s story is interrupted by the narrator at various points to describe Sam’s experience of narrating the story. In Patricia-Dreschel Tobin’s conception of time in what she terms “the genealogical imperative”, she equates the linearity of novels with the generational linearity of family.¹⁸⁸ Hereby the causality of events in a narrative is analogous to the movement of generations. This makes the present-time, first person interruptions in George’s story particularly significant. If the genealogical linearity of time suggests a particular cause and effect that equates origins with progeny or consequence, then Sam’s interruptions in the narrative suggest a disruption of the notion of inheritance and power passed down. What emerges is that this transmission has been disrupted and fractured. A rupture has been effected by the political transition, in that the bureaucratic colonial paternalism which informs George’s own brand of paternalism has been illegitimated. Crucially, the notion of political transition as a distressing experience is implied by its elision from the narrative. This suggests that the actual ordeal is only symbolically rooted in the father’s death, but inheres instead in 1994’s political changes.

Through the narrative framing, the reader is intimately drawn into the crisis of what Sam is to inherit from his father. Viewing this anxiety in a less sympathetic light suggests that the reason for Sam’s anxiety is the relative lack of power which he holds in the new dispensation. This is registered when the narrator claims at the end of the novel,

I realise how soft, at least materially, have been my generation’s adulthoods by comparison to my father’s – though in other ways, especially in the struggle for values and against shame and guilt, I think they have been just as hard and inconclusive; for we were left a wicked inheritance.¹⁸⁹

The transition of power from one white male to another has been disrupted as the dynamics of power have changed in the new dispensation. This change, which has resulted in the

¹⁸⁶ It is important to note that I am not claiming that this novel should be read as a simple allegory of political change. This would suggest that the transition from father to son be read as parallel to the transition from apartheid to democracy. This reading would be reductive. As my previous discussion of the garden suggests, the family is not an isolated and pure realm that only symbolically interacts with the politics of the day. It is closely connected, influenced and complicit in the political discourse.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 239.

¹⁸⁸ Tobin, *Genealogical Imperative*, 5.

¹⁸⁹ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 241.

“shame and guilt” which the narrator refers to, serves to complicate the Oedipal narrative in this novel. Sam’s inheritance has been “wicked” because, of the two effects of the death of the patriarch – guilt and identification, only guilt is legitimate within the new political discourse.¹⁹⁰

One way in which illegitimacy is represented is through the role ascribed to Sam’s mother in the narrative. Though the narrator claims to want to hear “the voices of my father and my mother”; the mother is clearly subordinated in the narrative. This is George’s story and not Jean’s. What is pertinent though is that the box, which houses the documents of George’s story, is referred to as “[his] mother’s box.”¹⁹¹

By the end of the novel, after having told his father’s story, Sam creates his own box:

When I finished, I laughed. I felt a dizzying lightness of heart [...] the door opened easily. When my eyes had adjusted to the light, I placed the sheets inside another box, in which there had been a mound of carefully ordered paper and memory trinkets I had been collecting all my adult life; my magpie’s work.¹⁹²

Contrast this description with the description of his mother’s box.

Inside was a rotting, fused mound of carefully ordered paper and memory trinkets kept closed for an adult life, *her magpie’s work*, capable of calling back the unknown dead. Powerful smells of age, confinement, solitude, inattention. Resentful colours had run into one another, inks no longer manufactured, dyes not fastened¹⁹³ [my emphasis]

The words and phrases which appear in both descriptions (“magpie’s work”, “memory trinkets” “mound of carefully ordered paper”) highlight dissimilarities between the two boxes. Jean’s box is described as something belonging to the dead, decaying and stagnant, something resentful and dark.¹⁹⁴ This description is not merely an indicator of emotional disturbance. The narrator’s need to include “her magpie’s work” in the middle of the

¹⁹⁰ The narrator notes, “I am a lawyer, a commercial attorney with a respectable practice, fairly successful I suppose by the measures of these times; but nothing really special or someone who will leave much of a legacy behind” (Ibid., 240.) The sense of inadequacy implied by “nothing really special” and not being unable to leave “much of a legacy” highlights the fact that Sam’s valuing of himself is relational. This comparison is with the past. He notes that “by the measure of these times” he is fairly successful. This conservatism suggests a longing for the position that he, as a white South African male, could have occupied. It was a glorious past.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 5, 239.

¹⁹² Ibid., 244.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹⁴ The description evokes Mol’s housecoat which is also described as decaying, representing stagnation and internalized monstrosity.

description suggests that the stagnation, decay and death are as closely aligned with his mother as with the disquieting past.

It is also significant that the box is referred to ambivalently as the “accursed and blessed box.”¹⁹⁵ This description, invoking the “veneration and horror” with which Freud characterizes the taboo, evokes the primal scene.¹⁹⁶ The overthrow and internalisation of the patriarch leads to the “two fundamental taboos of totemism,” one of which is the brothers’ resignation of the women who they killed the father in order to possess.¹⁹⁷ Freud posits this as the foundation of the incest taboo. The contradiction of wanting incest and yet renouncing it results in the ambivalent status of the mother.

It is notable then that the construction of the box is expressed as a murder. The retrospective narrative of George’s life ends with his wife, Jean, collecting her husband’s papers and placing them inside the box, “she takes the roll of tape and wraps it around the box; around and around and around as if to throttle it, cut off its oxygen.”¹⁹⁸ Describing the sealing of the box as a symbolic strangling suggests that the mother suppresses and attempts to stop the narrative which Sam will tell. Manifestly, this represents a traumatic silence which has shrouded George’s story up until Sam’s narration. But within the context of a rupture in power, the mother’s suppression of narrative takes on another dimension. The image of the mother as taboo has been heightened by the illegitimacy of white paternalistic power. It is only when Jean is on the verge of death, before she retires to an old age home that she gives the box to Sam.

Part of the reason for this, as Anne McClintock notes, is that gender dynamics have implicitly and integrally formed part of the racial hierarchies constructed under imperialism.¹⁹⁹ Within the precepts of a colonial paternalism that *The Native Commissioner* advances, any disruption of a hierarchy whereby the white father is sovereign threatens the entire structure. Thereby, Jean becomes the embodied figure of illegitimacy which he must battle against.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 242.

¹⁹⁶ Freud, *Totem*, 25.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 143, 143.

¹⁹⁸ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 236.

¹⁹⁹ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5.

Power and Narrative

Therefore *The Native Commissioner* presents the reader with two narratives: one manifest and one latent. Manifestly, the novel is about George's impotence in the face of the changing politics of the country. Latently though, the narrative is about his son, Sam's, potency as a white male in post-apartheid South Africa. This is suggested at the end of the novel when Sam notes, "[a]ll of it made me think about my own life [...] but I reminded myself this was George Jameson's story, not mine."²⁰⁰

Given that the latent energetics of the narrative are based on identification and power, the manifest narrative seems strangely disjunctive. Brooks notes this as a standard effect of narrative, comparing it to the psychoanalytic process:

The analyst, for instance, hears in the analysand's language the pressure *toward* meaning, which is never pinned down or captured since there is a perpetual sliding or slippage of the signified from under the signifier. Thus it is that language can "mean" something other than what it "says," can suggest intentions of which the subject is not consciously aware [...] Narrative is hence condemned to *saying* other than what it *would mean*.²⁰¹

But Johnson's vested interest in representing the father as benign and innocent in the manifest narrative suggests that the unconscious imperative underlying this text is to recuperate white power textually.

This suggests that some white 'reconciliatory' narratives enact a recuperation of power within modern day South Africa that their status as 'healing narratives' obscures. This invokes Michiel Heyns' discomfort with the contradictions of post-TRC confessional narratives and problematizes the warm reception which these narratives still receive.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Johnson, *Native Commissioner*, 240.

²⁰¹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 56.

²⁰² See Heyns, "Confession and Narrative."

Johnson has been particularly successful in the reception of his book. It has been prescribed as a set-work for IEB schools (IEB, *National Senior Certificate Examinations, Prescribed Works 2013*, 4). It also seems significant that the only two prescribed South African novels are *The Native Commissioner* and *Disgrace* (Ibid., 4)– two novels by prominent white South African males. Given that Eric Donald Hirsch considered the school curriculum as one means by which a society's national character could be defined (cited in Rosemary Ann Silverthorne, "Tradition or Transformation: A Critique of English Setwork Selection 2009-2011" [MA diss., University of Witwatersrand, 2009], 16), the ambivalence in *The Native Commissioner* may be somewhat worrying.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation originates from an ingrained discomfort with official and publicly sanctioned discourses, particularly as they are expressed within the literary field in South Africa. These discourses, which tend to designate books as being racist, anti-apartheid or reconciliatory, deny not only the ambivalence central to most literary texts, but also the complexities and complicities of post-apartheid South African identity. From this perspective, I have analysed two prominent white South African novels, both of which have positioned themselves as counter-apartheid narratives. They have to this extent been canonized for their apparently enlightened political motives. My analyses have attempted to determine where the established narratives they present fail, and to what extent these discourses attempt to cover up or work in the aid of less politically-benign anxieties.

Therefore, the central thrust of this thesis tracked a process of loss and recuperation which is evident in *Triomf* and *The Native Commissioner*, and which may characterize other white South African novels which could be considered transitional or post-transitional. I have also suggested that it is particularly the focus on recuperating illegitimate white power that has contributed to the unexpected vigour of white writing in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this light, the central finding of this study is that *Triomf*, published in 1994, suggests a sense of loss which *The Native Commissioner* attempts to recover just over ten years later. Therefore, though Van Niekerk's project aims to subvert the mechanisms underlying apartheid, her inability to represent any valid subject-position for post-apartheid white identity suggests a latent crisis in her text about white impotence. This sense of impotence is alluded to in her text by the disintegrating patriarch, and most notably, his unremarkable and anticlimactic death.

From this perspective, it is foreseeable that *The Native Commissioner* would be invested in recuperating this lost power. Freud's Oedipal structures posit that the death of the patriarch signals a transmission of power from father to sons. Given the inefficacy of this transmission as it is detailed in the patriarch's death in *Triomf*, the imperative in *The Native Commissioner* is to narrate the father's death in order to achieve a successful transmission. Though the narrator identifies the father's death as the distressing experience of the novel, the elision of any details of 1994's political changes suggests that the illegitimacy of white political power is the true locus of discomfort. I have argued that the death which *The Native*

Commissioner is mourning and attempting to restore is rather that of paternalistic white power, than that of George Jameson.²⁰³

Given this background, paternity and power emerge as fundamental concerns in these novels. Paternalism, already ingrained in colonial and apartheid discourse, is expressed by the familial inflection of white governance. This has two implications for my study: firstly, that an analysis of families focussing on patriarchal hierarchies can anatomise the structural mechanisms underlying the authority and legitimacy of whiteness. In this way I have created a method or lens through which texts can be mined to expose their latent dynamics. Secondly, that the paternal hierarchy of the family places the wives and mothers of these novels in a conflicting position whereby they distort and threaten established patriarchal hierarchies.

The maternal conflict with paternalism is firstly figured through Mol. Mol disrupts the hierarchical organization of the family by being the only legitimate parent of Lambert, being sexually involved with all the men of the family, and through domestic slovenliness. In *The Native Commissioner*, on the other hand, Jean Jameson is subordinated. She is most pertinently figured in the image of the box which houses George's documents, and is represented as suffocating the narrative when she closes and seals George's box. Both women are described in terms of Freud's taboo, ascribed with both "veneration and horror."²⁰⁴

In this light it is noteworthy that both women are figured as dispensers of narrative. Mol dispenses the family narrative and Jean creates the box of George's documents. This means that as mothers they are imbued not only with a reproductive generative power, but also with narratological generative power.

Though Mol is a powerful and disruptive figure, Jean's role in *The Native Commissioner* highlights the imperative to recuperate white paternalistic power.²⁰⁵ As discussed in chapter two, the narrator unpacks his mother's box (filled with his father's papers) in order to create his own box. In this movement narrative power is regressively shifted from the hands of women back to the hands of men. This suggests that the disruption of white patriarchal hierarchy that these women represent, both by surviving their husbands and by being the dispensers of narrative, aligns them symbolically with the new political dispensation. This argument is in line with Elleke Boehmer's discussion of "the gendered

²⁰³ This reading then creates a parallel between *Triomf* where the patriarch dies on voting day, and George Jameson's death in *The Native Commissioner* which obscures the illegitimation of white potency on the same historic date.

²⁰⁴ Freud, *Totem*, 25.

²⁰⁵ Mol, in this regard, is also the character most capable of representing Van Niekerk's inability to portray a place for Afrikaner identity post-apartheid.

configuration of the postcolonial nation [...] of the nation embodied *as* woman.”²⁰⁶

Therefore, mothers, presented ambivalently in the language of taboo, come to embody the disruption of white supremacy and patriarchy.²⁰⁷

The growing conservatism in these texts can also be tracked in the novels’ representation of colonial and apartheid bureaucracy and classification. As I indicate in my discussion of *The Native Commissioner*, colonial bureaucracy led to, and culminated in the oppressive structures of apartheid. Whereas Johnson represents the development of these structures, Van Niekerk depicts these structures in their full (disintegrating) maturity. The difference lies in how the novels represent these structures. Johnson provides a personal account, a humanization of these structures by having the reader sympathise with George Jameson. Van Niekerk presents apartheid structures as ineffective and arbitrary, showing the Benade family’s blithe disregard of them. If *Triomf* discredits the capacity for racial classification to have any bearing on identity, then Johnson’s novel reflects an inability to define white South African identity outside of the parameters of racial classification.

Therefore, I have highlighted what may be a conservative trend running through much of the white literature which is being produced in South Africa at the moment. I am aware, particularly as pertains to *The Native Commissioner*, that there are a number of explicitly stated multicultural and pro-African sentiments which may suggest that my reading of this novel is unsympathetic. What this reflects, though, is the ambivalence inherent in ‘reconciliatory’ white narratives. In that the mechanisms I outline are latent, these multicultural sentiments may be read as compensations for the concealed anxieties of the text.

Furthermore, I am aware that in order to claim the process of loss and recuperation as a trend, further research would have to be conducted to show its prevalence in the greater field of white South African writing. Within the scope of this thesis, it was only possible to hypothesize according to two novels. Another topic for further research is the representation of black South African families, particularly in the light of apartheid’s establishment of homelands and its migrant labour policies. A research project with this focus would be able to indicate to what extent Oedipal structures may be credible analytical tools, and may indicate why black writers have not yet established a steady foothold in the South African literary field.

²⁰⁶ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 3-4.

²⁰⁷ Further research could investigate the ambivalence with which wives and mothers are depicted in order to detect anxieties surround nascent multicultural nationalism.

If the Oedipal crises in these two novels are in fact indicative of a greater trend in South African writing, then the subsequent unmasking of the power dynamics underlying much white writing could effect important structural changes within the South African literary field. As Freud notes of the Oedipus complex, “It has not yet become clear, however, what it is that brings about its destruction. Analyses seem to show that it is the experience of painful disappointments.”²⁰⁸ Perhaps, as the Oedipal power dynamics of these texts attest, what the South African literary field requires is the exposure and acknowledgement of these painful disappointments.

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²⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” In *The Essentials of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2005), 395.

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