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**NEGOTIATING THE AMBIVALENT CONSTRUCTION OF  
'COLOURED' IDENTITY, IN RELATION TO THE WORK  
OF MALIKA NDLOVU AND THE CAPE TOWN-BASED  
BLACK WOMEN'S WRITERS COLLECTIVE, WEAVE.**

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A Minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English

Department, English Studies

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University of Cape Town

2001

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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Date: 07/09/2001

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## **DEDICATION**

For my sister Shaeleen, who inspired my choice of topic. For Malika Ndlovu and the women of WEAVE.

University of Cape Town

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**Bibliography**

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**Fiona Tobin**

**Abstract**

This dissertation focuses on the work of writers for whom the nature of 'Coloured' identity is a problematic issue. ('Coloured' is the Apartheid term used to describe people of mixed descent living in South Africa). I base my analysis of their writings around 'Coloured' identity in postcolonial theory, in order to examine constructions of self and other.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the Black woman writer, Malika Ndlovu and the collective *Women's Education and Artistic Voice Expression* (WEAVE), of which Malika Ndlovu is a founder member. Chapter two uses a postcolonial lens to discuss constructions of identity. This chapter looks at the ways in which postcolonial theorists oppose Europe and the West as the centre, and the Third World as the periphery to that centre. I contextualise the manner in which Ndlovu and WEAVE reject and subvert ideas of self and other in accordance with postcolonial theory. This chapter also deals with Ndlovu's rejection of feminism in so far as it is a Western construct, speaking on behalf of all women. It concludes with the claim that postcolonial theory sheds light on a unique dimension in South African history, namely the ways in which colonialism and Apartheid created the category 'Coloured' for those who did not fit into the polarised Black and White division (which can be found in all colonised countries).

Chapter three gives a brief history of the developments of and resistance to concepts of 'Coloured' identity. In chapter four, I examine the relationship Malika Ndlovu has to the label 'Coloured' which was designated to her at birth; her rejection of such a label, and her chosen African identity. Chapter five examines WEAVE's collective writings. This chapter explores the ways in which the writers' work falls within the ambit of postcolonial literature, looking specifically at how they respond to colonial and Apartheid discourses. A brief concluding chapter summarises the main points and observations emerging from this paper, and indicates to evidence of the writers' ambivalence towards 'Coloured' identity.

I interviewed Malika Ndlovu twice, in March and in July 2001. Using open-ended questions, I was able to establish how Ndlovu grapples with the ambivalence inherent of people categorized as 'Coloured' in her work. I studied her published work, namely her play *A Coloured Place*, her anthology of poetry *Born in Africa But*, her radio program for BBC *Two Halves of a Whole*, WEAVE's self-published book *Ink@Boiling Point: Writings from the tip of Africa*, and newspaper articles written on her and the collective. However, apart from newspaper articles and the foreword to WEAVE's anthology by Desiree Lewis, nothing else has been written on the collective to date.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

...Something occurred for which the *plan* of imperial expansion had not bargained: the immensely prestigious and powerful imperial culture found itself appropriated in projects of counter-colonial resistance which drew upon the many indigenous local and hybrid processes of self-determination to defy, erode and sometimes supplant the prodigious power of imperial cultural knowledge. Post-colonial literatures are a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices

(Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995).

No, I do not stem from a long line of toothless fishermen and grinning flower sellers. I'm no tourist attraction spicing up the beach front. Neither have I or any of my immediate family been to Cape Town for anything other than a holiday and to see the mountain, like everyone else. Afrikaans is not my mother tongue, yet you will be amused as I'm to note that many of us were registered at birth as Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, or swept under the distinguished umbrella... Other Coloured. I am also not the knife-wielding-slang-chooning-dagga-rooking-club-crazy-adolescent-alcoholic-type. I am not the taxi-addict-hanging-out-of-windows-in-peak-traffic-to-let-everyone-being-deafened-by-my-amps-know-and-see-that-I-am-here-and-I-am-loud-and-there's-F-all-you-can-do-about-it-type.

Play-white? I couldn't even if I tried. Besides it's far more fashionable these days to be pro-black. And please, I don't mean African as it is, but pseudo-homey-nigger-lingo-baggy-jeans-and-jiving-hands-gangsta-black-into-rap-hardcore-rap-at-that-type. The female equivalent being the tough-and-sexy-beer-and-cigarettes-who-says-girls-can't-rap-so-dress-me-skimpy-cos-a-woman's-not-a-woman-without-a-man-type.

It's obvious that I'm not the nice-and-decent-get-me-to-church—so-I-can-strut-my-fashion-down-the-aisle-to-get-communion-oh-so-innocent-marry-the-boy-next-door-with-a-veil-over-my-face-cos-believe-me-daddy-I'm-still-a-virgin-at-twenty-five-type. My mother is not the babalaas-rollers-in-the-street-swear-my-father-for-her-Friday-nite-blue-eye-and-fat-lip-type. My brothers and sisters and I have never been the sit-on-your-ass-and-complain—it's-our-parents-it's-apartheid-this-new-government-affirmative-action-welfare-mentality-type.

I fought not to be the abandoned-and-pregnant-at-sixteen-give-up-my-dreams—cos-your-life's-over-and-education-doesn't-pay-so-I-better-just-get-a-saleslady-job-like-my-aunty-so-me-and-my-child-can-wear-nice-clothes-type.

All types! A frame created especially for you, by someone else. An outsider whose opinion matters more than yours or mine. But it's not what they see that robs us our identity. We betray ourselves. We play the part. We stick to what we know, malicious when one of us chooses a life beyond those confines. It takes courage to change your point of view and unabashedly do what your gut tells you

(Conning<sup>1</sup>, 1999:15).

One of the enduring myths surrounding the 'Coloured' people in Apartheid South Africa, was that the 'Coloured' people were a separate, ethnic collective, to be kept apart from Whites and Blacks alike. In her play *A Coloured Place*, playwright, poet and actor Malika Ndlovu, attempts to dispel the stereotypical myths that still linger concerning the so-called 'Coloured' people of South Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Malika Ndlovu has published her work under different names: Lueen Conning was used until 1999, Lueen Conning Ndlovu until 2000, and Malika Conning Ndlovu until 2001. She now goes by the name Malika Ndlovu. Bibliographic references will refer to the name under which her texts have been published. In my own text, I refer to her as Malika Ndlovu throughout.

It is my intention in this paper to explore the ways in which the work of the Black women's writers collective *Women's Education and Artistic Voice Expression* (WEAVE), of which Malika Ndlovu is a founder member, negotiates, rejects and in some cases accepts<sup>2</sup> the category 'Coloured'. Through their writings, we are introduced to the fascinating reconfigurations of 'Coloured' discourse, which I will trace through their poetry, prose and drama.

WEAVE is described by Ndlovu as the coming together of women to reinforce women's strength, voice and visibility. Its members see it as the collection of 'feminist' actions, which grew out of informal meetings and gatherings held to listen to, and learn from the literary efforts of others. Ndlovu explains, "we decided to start taking ourselves more seriously as there was so much talent amongst the collective" (March, 2001). Although the Cape Town collective had been sharing their passion for writing informally over a ten year period, WEAVE was formally initiated only in 1997.

The collective started out with eleven members, but due to the recent death of member Joan Baker, it is now reduced to ten. Some of the collective had belonged to the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) during the Apartheid era. COSAW was a national program which was supported by foreign funding and was aimed at promoting Black writers internationally. "When the core of COSAW dissipated for a number of reasons, many of the members felt disillusioned" explains Ndlovu (March, 2001). COSAW had been successful in helping Black writers connect with each other. It offered support to Black writers who were struggling to get their work heard. With the dissolution of COSAW, some of the Black women writers formed their own informal meetings to share ideas and affirm each other's work. "We learn from each other and help each other. Those of us who have studied, might offer valuable skills feedback and affirmation to others. We offer each other encouragement because most of the members have full time jobs and writing is a site of struggle; economically, politically and emotionally", Ndlovu says (March, 2001).

The collective was founded to promote the writing of Black South African women, in order to address the limited exposure of such written work. Membership is exclusive to Black women, as Ndlovu explains "if Black men were not published, then Black women were invisible"

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<sup>2</sup> Ndlovu accepts the term 'Coloured' only in the manner in which 'Coloured' people are full of 'colour' and beauty. There are however, members of WEAVE who call themselves 'Coloured' with pride.

(March, 2001). She believes, “now is the time for Black women to tell their stories and let their voices be heard” (March, 2001). To date, the collective has self-published its first anthology of writings called, *Ink@Boiling Point: A Selection of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Women's Writing from the Tip of Africa*, and is in the process of publishing a second, revised edition of the anthology. The collective is particularly interesting because of their collective re-definition of *their* identity and reclamation of *their* history and *their* stories. What is also of particular interest is how the collective responds to and subverts colonial constructs of self and other, in new and exciting ways.

I base my analysis of the collective as Black / ‘Coloured’ writers, in postcolonial theory, which I use to talk about notions of self and other. I examine ways in which the term ‘postcolonial’, and the various intellectual/cultural positions associated with it, can be used within the context of the contemporary Black writings of Malika Ndlovu and WEAVE, to establish whether their work falls under the rubric ‘postcolonial’ literature. Not unlike postcolonial literature, their texts call for the reconsideration and transformation of the concepts of domination and hegemony, and also of many other critical practices. The work of Ndlovu and WEAVE is distinctly postcolonial in that it is concerned with the abolition of all distinctions between centre and periphery, and all other ‘binarisms’, such as coloniser/colonised, Black/White, other/self, ‘West and the rest’, that are allegedly a legacy of colonial ways of thinking. Their aim is to reveal South African society in its complex heterogeneity.

Ndlovu takes a political position in relation to the term ‘Black’. She says “for me, everything that is not White, is Black” (March, 2001). Within the category of Black, the Apartheid government divided Black into the racial categories of Indian, Black and ‘Coloured’. This paper looks at the ways in which the so-called ‘Coloured’ people of South Africa were classified and categorised under Apartheid legislature, in terms of the Population Registration Act of 1950 and the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1967. Under these categorisations, I examine the ways in which Ndlovu’s play *A Coloured Place*, and her anthology of poetry *Born in Africa but*, shows the category ‘Coloured’ to be problematic for a number of reasons.

Ndlovu’s work contains themes of defining oneself in terms of one’s own criteria and recognising and transcending the boundaries of discursive constructs by rejecting the cultural

'boxes' in which Apartheid used to categorise people. A case in point is the manner in which her one-woman play, rather than accepting a 'Coloured' label, negotiates the meaning of growing up 'Coloured' in South Africa. She dares to redefine the discourse of mainstream 'Coloured' identity by saying, "Coloured is not always what it seems and I am not what *you* think I am, but what *I* think I am" (Conning, 1999:17).

I endeavour to explore the ways in which Ndlovu's work, in conjunction with WEAVE, attempts to record the stories of a people discriminated against under the colonial and Apartheid regimes, and to show the ways in which their work gives voice to the pain of invisibility, rejection, and the racist "umbrella" which puts people of different heritage, colour and religion into one category. I will be exploring the manner in which Ndlovu and indeed Weave's collective work, speak not of a "no-name brand, 'Coloured' identity" (March, 2001), but of a changing and dynamic people full of colour.

Apart from newspaper clippings, and the foreword to WEAVE's anthology by Desiree Lewis, there is no descriptive or critical work on the collective. I was fortunate enough to get hold of Ndlovu's published texts, radio programmes and interviews and was able to conduct two interviews with her. Due to the paucity of studies on the collective, and the rapid rate at which they are publishing and developing (despite the lack of support from the White male publishing industry), it would be my hope that this dissertation could in some ways be testimony to the urgent need for their stories to be told and heard. It is also my aim for this paper to add to the body of knowledge on Black women's literature, and to shed light on the sensitive nature of the Apartheid label 'Coloured'.

## Chapter Two: Postcolonial Theories of Self and Other

Postcolonial (countries) cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day... so the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures... What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive characteristics is that they emerge in their present form out of their experience in colonisation and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasising their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctly post-colonial...

(Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989).

The term 'postcolonial' carries a multiplicity of meanings of which Arif Dirlik in his chapter "The postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism" distinguishes three uses of the term. Firstly it is used as the literal description of the conditions in former colonial societies. "It should be noted, however, that colonies here include both those encompassed earlier in the Third World and settler colonies usually associated with the First World, such as Canada and Australia" explains Dirlik (1997:503). Secondly the term is employed as a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism, "in which case the usage of the word is somewhat more abstract in reference, comparable in its vagueness to the earlier term "Third World", for which it is intended as a substitute" (loc. cit.). Thirdly, the word is used to describe a discourse on the above conditions "that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions" (loc. cit.). It is the third meaning of the term that this dissertation is concerned with.

Postcolonial theory is said to be concerned with the question: "How does the Third World write 'its own history'?" (Dirlik 1997, 504), which is also the question Ndlovu and WEAVE concern themselves with. WEAVE's anthology deals with this question by excavating the writers' ancestral roots and writing about these roots with celebratory pride. Poems such as *Inheritance* by Shelley Barry, *Recognition* by Mavis Smallberg and *Cultural Fushion* by Weaam Williams, are but a few poems which bring to the surface the celebration of the themes of family and history. These pieces, explains Lewis, "reflect a reawakening of pride in who we are, shaped significantly by where we come from, particularly as South Africans" (2000:12).

Postcolonialism<sup>3</sup> defines a system which rejects the master-narratives that put Europe at its centre and the Third World at its periphery. A succinct examination of postcolonialism is offered by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997) in his chapter “Is the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonialism’ the same as the ‘post’ in ‘postmodernism’?”. He notes the emphasis postcolonialism has on historical engagement, drawing attention to how reality is shaped, and the human dilemmas and conditions resulting from imposed or foreign realities. Postcolonialism problematises meaning and reality by recontextualising them from the position of postcolonial discourse. This is done by exposing the workings of colonial discourse which create stifling subject positions. Appiah suggests that postcolonialism is strongly focused on humanism, on a commitment to people. It engages with notions of history, addressing who is included and who is excluded from history.

Although postcolonial writers engage with notions of history and with the social consequences of those histories, they do not posit neat solutions or definitive ideas regarding versions of histories and historical consequences. The search for original, authentic identity is problematised by postcolonial theorists, just as the idea of an idealised Third World, such as seeing the ideal future as the ‘lost past’, is also opposed. The project of WEAVE and Ndlovu is not to revive or invent pre-colonial indigenous subjects uncontaminated by contact with colonial culture, but to promote the idea of hybridity and multiple changing selves. In her poem, *Distinguished Umbrella*, Ndlovu celebrates a hybrid nation, full of colour<sup>4</sup>.

Postcolonial theory interrogates colonialism’s naturalised knowledge framework. It involves both a representation of and a challenging of colonialism’s understandings of the world. WEAVE’s work is distinctly postcolonial in that it is concerned with making visible the processes by which meaning in culture is produced and naturalised. One of the ways they do this, is by empowering Black women beyond their defined and restrictive subject positions. The writers’ work stresses the importance of past to present in terms of how the past directly impacts on the future. Their work envisages a way past colonialism, racism and patriarchy, a self beyond monolithic discourse, to a hybrid, many-layered subject position. They attempt to show how “otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference, when it is not given but re-created” (Minh-ha, 1997:418).

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<sup>3</sup> The hyphenated ‘post-colonialism’ has generally come to be accepted as the more literal definition of forms of resistance and challenges to the colonial system. While the unhyphenated ‘postcolonialism’ has come to be more suggestive of the critique of colonial discourse.

Theorist Edward Said views postcolonial discourse as the binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised, maintaining therefore that the position of the colonised is always in relation to the coloniser. 'Orientalism' is described by Said as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1978:1). He deconstructs Orientalism as a Western style for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978:2). The 'Orient' is placed as the other to Europe and the West, defined, described and delimited only "in its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (loc. cit.).

An important aspect of postcolonial discourse for Said is the dynamic between the coloniser and the colonised in terms of acquiring a subjective identity. Said views 'Orientalism' and the Orient as a colonial construct which does not in fact exist. However, the subject who has been 'fixed' as Oriental cannot ever free him/herself from it. Said explains "because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action" (1978: 3). Orientalism is repudiated by postcolonial theorists as that which constructs its subjects in terms of self and other, seeing the colonised as Europe's other, "reduced to an essence without history" (Dirlik, 1997:505). WEAVE stresses the urgency of a collective recall, to make visible the invisibility of their human experience, a historically oppressed experience.

In the collective's writings, we see how White rule has shaped the identity of the people of South Africa, and we witness the difficulty of conceiving of a 'free' South Africa beyond this. In WEAVE's selection of Black women's writings, we hear of a country poised on the brink of a new democracy, a new South Africa, but the optimism and sense of potential is often replaced by the feeling of cynicism towards the idea of national democracy and liberation.

In the poem *Pick a Ghetto*, Ndlovu is cynical about how liberated the poor really are in the new democratic South Africa. The previously disadvantaged may have political freedom, but they remain trapped by their poverty. We witness her scepticism in the lines "Now/<sup>5</sup> the law has changed/ apparently we are free/ yet the people stay/ attached to this desolate landscape/

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<sup>4</sup> *Distinguished Umbrella* is quoted in full in chapter four: Malika Ndlovu.

<sup>5</sup> The forward slashes used here represent line endings and line beginnings used by the author in her poem or prose. I have used them to shorten the poem or prose and to offer the reader the salient points of the poem or prose.

old Government/ dumping locations/ the people do not move/ what will it take to free them/ what do they need to free themselves” (Conning Ndlovu, 2000:178-182).

In *A Coloured Place* Ndlovu explores the human dilemmas resulting from certain imposed foreign realities, like Claudia’s attempt at straightening the African kink from her hair to conform with Western ideals of beauty. The writers’ visions of a new South Africa involves acknowledging how it has been born out of Apartheid South Africa, a country built on colonialism and segregation. This however, must not be confused with a betrayal of the democratic dream, but as the necessary and inevitable route of cultural struggle.

The writers’ work subverts Said’s postulation of the subject who has been fixed as Oriental never being able to free him/herself. Their writing is the battle ground for struggling against the dominant racial and sexist hierarchies in which they find themselves. In Ndlovu’s poem *Born in Africa But*, she consciously declares “born in Africa but/ a self made prisoner/ I release captivity/ I am free to unfold the sacred map/ no other will dictate my individual destiny” (Conning Ndlovu, 2000:4-5). By exposing and negating all ‘Coloured’ stereotypes in *A Coloured Place*, such as: “I do not stem from a long line of toothless fishermen and grinning flower sellers... Afrikaans is not my mother tongue... I am also not the knife-wielding-slang-chooning<sup>6</sup>-dagga<sup>7</sup>-rooking<sup>8</sup>-club-crazy-adolescent-alcoholic-type”, she defies and frees herself from the rigid subject positioning of the label ‘Coloured’.

Postcolonial theory is concerned with transcending the binary system of colonial discourse by exposing the dominant discourses at play. In the work of Ndlovu, prejudiced notions of the other are redefined in more positive terms. In poems such as *Wrapped Up*, Ndlovu incorporates the vernacular of the ‘Coloured’ people, a language that has been ordinarily othered as inferior to English and Afrikaans. However, her use of words such as “Hanging out with my bra<sup>9</sup>/ somme<sup>10</sup> chooning about the way South Africans are” (Conning Ndlovu, 2000:32-33) makes a statement on two fronts regarding ‘Coloured’ language. Firstly, by using the local dialect in her work, Ndlovu wants people to experience the witty, expressive language of the ‘Coloured’ people, a language she believes is worthy of recognition.

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<sup>6</sup> Talking.

<sup>7</sup> Marijuana.

<sup>8</sup> Smoking.

<sup>9</sup> Friend.

<sup>10</sup> Just.

Secondly, she hopes to dispel the Apartheid myth of a separate and distinct 'Coloured' culture, characterised by a separate and distinct 'Coloured' language. She makes the point that 'Coloured' culture and 'Coloured' language are an assimilation of many cultures and language styles. Ndlovu embraces the idea of culturally mixed and fluid identities.

Postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, stresses the productive implications of colonial discourse. He argues that cultural identities are never unified or total, but are always in dialogue with each other. Both domination and resistance therefore involve an exchange between dominant identities and cultures. The resultant 'hybridisation' creates a 'third space' of possibilities, as hybrid cultures and identities evade the oppressive binaries we associate with colonialism.

Ndlovu embraces this notion of culturally mixed and fluid identities in the last stanza of the poem *Wrapped Up*:

back on the road it somme just clicked  
 that whether it's savuka or r.e.m.  
 `nkosi sikelele or die stem  
 this division is mos kak en palavar  
 just makes us agro to each other  
 there's no reason to be stressed  
 this pot pourri means we've been blessed

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:32-33).

Ndlovu celebrates this third space which gives rise to a mixture of English, Afrikaans and Black identity. While Apartheid South Africa tried to be a country of pure races, separating different races to different areas, and banning sex and marriage across the colour line in the various *Immorality Acts* of 1927 and 1950, and the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* of 1949, Ndlovu celebrates a heterogeneous society with African, Eastern and Western influences. Indeed, the mix of Black, Indian and 'Coloured' members of WEAVE, works as an allegory of the hybrid encounter and is itself testimony to the liberating spaces they have created for themselves.

Gayatri Spivak (1988), in her chapter entitled "Can the Subaltern Speak?", concerns herself with how socially marginalised collectives of people such as women and peasants, have been written out of colonial history. The subaltern woman is a historically muted subject. Poor, Black, Third World women receive double displacement. They are written out of history and ignored. Spivak argues that the space of otherness is a silence.

By asking the question, “can the subaltern speak?”, she problematises the idea that intellectuals can speak for the subaltern and says that “the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as Self’s shadow” (1988:280). Spivak criticizes postcolonial discourse that silences the other by attempting to speak for it. She argues that the subaltern is in a hegemonic position in which it has no voice so that “the subaltern cannot speak” (1988:308).

Her argument provides a framework for thinking about how WEAVE’s writers have concerned themselves with the voice of the ‘other’. Coming from the position of the other, they assert authority over their subject matter and claim it as their own.

On the same premise, Anne McClintock (1997) argues in her chapter “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism” that, “No nation in the world grants women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state” (89). A postcolonial woman is, in a sense, a woman who has been colonised twice – by patriarchy and colonialism. Relegated to the position of other, women have been colonised by various forms of domination. Although Black men have been discriminated against under South Africa’s racist laws, Black women, according to Ndlovu “have been invisible” (March, 2001). Sara Suleri has written in *Meatless Days*, of being “treated as an ‘Otherness-Machine’ – and of being heartily sick of it” (quoted in Appiah, 1997:440). It seems that WEAVE’s writers have adopted the same attitude.

However, at the cross-roads between postcolonialism and feminism, discussions concerning feminist subject positioning have largely been focused on “the task of delineating a coherent and unified position for the female subject within the phallographic order of Western society. Such delineation has often been taken for a global reading of ‘Woman’” (McWilliams, 1991:103). Feminist discourse has been predominantly interested in gender difference, while trying to maintain a global sisterhood. Although the “oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries... that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries”, argues Audre Lorde (1981:99). Sally McWilliams explains that “Women of colour, however, are challenging what they see as a universalising (and a colonising) move by Western feminists to try to describe the position of women only along the Western philosophical and political lines without regard for differences among (and in) women” (loc. cit.).

Feminists such as Chandra Mohanty, Trinh Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak are more sensitive to the plight of Third World women. They see White feminists speaking for Third World women, rather than allowing women of colour to speak for themselves. Spivak argues that Western feminists and Third World scholars must be self-conscious of the ways in which they speak and represent Third World women. Sweeping statements about Third World women being “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, family-orientated, victimised” (Mohanty, 1997:258), may serve to reproduce Western women as educated and modern, thus reinforcing their privileged position.

Malika Ndlovu shares the same scepticism of White / Western feminism. She says:

Feminism is a dubious term, because someone from the United Kingdom talking about ‘us’ sisters does not fit. There is a big division between ‘us’. Many women of colour around the globe feel that we are not part of the feminist movement for many reasons. While I’m not saying we should have been, the idea of feminism has evolved in many different ways in different places. Someone who has books of theory on feminism is very different from a rural woman in India or Africa. It’s got to do with where you’re at, with your level of education, whether you were exposed to feminism as a theoretical and intellectual concept, or a historical concept. Someone in Africa may bow when the man enters the room and be at home with the fire and the children, but has a very clear place, and feels a strong sense of purpose with maintaining her family unit. This woman may not look at her role as a slave role, but as an empowering role. It’s all about the woman’s perception of herself

(July, 2001).

The female subject is a site of differences and women cannot be collapsed into a one identity, a sameness / or a representation of feminism as a coherent image. “Women as historical subjects are complex interactions of not only sexual, but also racial, ethnic, class, cultural and religious differences” explains McWilliams (loc. cit.)

While much colonial culture refused to deal with issues of gender inequality or abuse within society, many postcolonial authors have concentrated on the harsh realities of women in postcolonial societies. WEAVE’s writings show the need for a new, more consistent and realistic vision of women in postcolonial society. The collective’s project is to give voice to the personal experiences of women within the discourse of colonialism and patriarchy which attempts to keep women silent. The Black women writers transgress the space of female silence by writing women back into history by speaking from the female position that has been constantly marginalised and spoken for by others. Their work is concerned with the rethinking, repositioning and restoration of woman in terms of the past, present and future.

It is clear that these authors have learnt the lesson Kwame Anthony Appiah spells out, when he says

if there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by one another, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous, pure-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists

(1997:439).

This is the very lesson Ndlovu hopes to teach others through her work. “ ‘Coloured’,” she says, “is a universal term. There are no pure identities, we are all full of colour” (March, 2001). The existence of ‘indigenous’ subjects, uncontaminated by contact with colonial culture is a myth Ndlovu is quick to dispel. WEAVE’s writers are using their creative impulse to invert notions of centre and periphery to find a place for themselves, not in the shadow of Europe, but in the empowering light of themselves. This is constant with Appiah insights that,

In Africa’s cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty, despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability – African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literature, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music, and visual art all thrive

(1997:440).

In South Africa, colonialism and its sequel, Apartheid, had a unique dimension in South African history. Where colonial discourse, elsewhere set up binary divisions between two categories, namely White and Black, in South Africa, colonialism and Apartheid created a third category, namely ‘Coloured’, for all those who did not fit the polarised Black and White labels. Although Bhabha celebrates the hybrid ‘third space’ born out of the exchange between identities and cultures, occupying that space is a complex task for South Africans. What might superficially appear to be a third space (between Black and White), was created by colonisers and rarefied by Apartheid. Because this label was imposed, it has been interrogated, resisted and reinterpreted by Ndlovu and some of the WEAVE collective, who were placed in that third category.

### Chapter Three: The Construction of 'Coloured'

The major emphasis in this dissertation is on Black / 'Coloured' women writers. 'Coloured' identity is a concept born out of colonialism and Apartheid and since I am concerned with Black writers, the complexities to the term 'Coloured' need to be unpacked.

The use of the term Black / 'Coloured' is highlighted by Vernon February (1981) in his book *Mind Your Colour*, when he mentions that sometimes "the term 'so-called coloured' is used, and of late, the general tendency is to refer to 'coloureds' as blacks... There is however no consistency in the usage of the term black" (vii). Rosemary Ridd found in her 1981 study on the District Six Area, an area officially known then for its 'Coloured' population, that few people of the area would positively assert that they were 'Coloured'. Those who did so were mainly concerned with distinguishing themselves from Africans, whom they considered to be of lower social status:

But for the most part they reject the designation 'Coloured', insisting 'we are just human beings', 'we are all one people', or 'we are all South Africans'... When people do call themselves 'Coloureds' they generally quote it as a term used by Whites and institutionalised by the Government, as though they were using it in inverted commas

(Ridd, 1981:1-2).

The people of this area felt that 'Coloured' was a derogatory term which made them feel inferior to whites.

Being called 'Coloured', is something Ndlovu tries to avoid. She says in the book *Black South African Women - An Anthology of Plays*, "Relating myself to the term Coloured has always been a problem for me" (1999:7). Ndlovu does however consider herself 'African', while acknowledging that this is not a general 'Coloured' perception<sup>11</sup>. While interviewing people for her play *A Coloured Place*, Ndlovu found many 'Coloured' people who were and are proud to be called 'Coloured'. She herself "wanted the term to be obliterated from my vocabulary" (July, 2001).

She explains that:

a lot of Coloured people deny their African heritage. There is an aspiration toward white beauty although it is not overtly stated, but they furiously straighten their hair so you can't see the African kink, they still consider a straighter nose, thinner lips, lighter skin as beauty. And that's the aspiration. Apartheid still lives in our minds

(Conning, 1999:6).

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<sup>11</sup> In the same way, I do not intend to use my theories and readings about Malika Ndlovu and WEAVE, in order to make generalisations about all 'Coloured' writers, women and people of South Africa as a whole, but rather in order to examine ways in which these particular writers have responded to concepts of 'Coloured' identity. .

A 'Coloured' identity is rejected by Malika Ndlovu and many WEAVE members for being an identity largely inspired by racist thinking. It is an artificial category imposed upon a collective by the Apartheid government to divide Black and White. It is for this reason that the word is placed in inverted commas, to comply with their disapproval of the term, as it is used in a South African sense.

The history of the term 'Coloured' however, needs to be considered. Due to the vast range of physical characteristics among the 'Coloured' people, the Apartheid government could not give a satisfactory description of what constituted 'Coloured'. Instead of providing clarity, the Population Registration Acts brought confusion. The Apartheid legislators, unable to define who and what the 'Coloured' people were, defined the 'Coloureds' in terms of what they were not; namely, a people who were not White, not Black and not Indian.

Although these categories were made law by the National Government, racial categories can be traced as far back as the nineteenth century British colonialists. In 1865, the British administration experienced difficulty in categorising the Cape population into neat categories. "Cape society, when the British took over, was a society based on slavery" says Ridd (1981:4). In 1804 Captain Robert Percival records the amalgamation of colour in the Cape. He describes the people of Cape Town consisting of:

(t)he slaves from Bengal and the Malabar coast. Those of colour, descended from a connection between the Dutch and their slaves or black women. Malays from Batavia and the Eastern islands of India. The Buginese, half Malay and half African; the natives of Madagascar; those of the coast of Fuinea, called Caffrees and Africans of the interior part of the Cape of Good Hope; and lastly the Hottentots

(quoted in Ridd, 1981: 5).

Lady Duff Gordon, in 1861 describes the Cape population as the "most motley crew in the world" (quoted in Ridd, 1981:5). February explains that "the history of what is now known in South Africa as the 'Cape coloured', is one of miscegenation," and estimates that "during the first twenty five years of (the Cape's) existence, no less than 75 per cent of the children born at the Cape of slave mothers were half-breeds" (13). A European observer writing in the eighteenth century observes that:

The female slaves are ready to offer their bodies for a trifle; and towards evening one can see a string of sailors and soldiers entering the Company's lodge where they mis-spend their time... The company does nothing to prevent this promiscuous intercourse, since, for one thing it tends to multiply the slave population, and does away with the necessity of importing fresh slaves. Three or four of this admixture (for the daughters follow their mother's footsteps) have produced a half cast population – a mestizzo class - but a slight shade darker than Europeans

(quoted in February, 1981:13).

language is ours also, so also their customs and habits. They have no other country... Culturally we regard them as too brown<sup>14</sup>” (quoted in February, 1981:42).

In the need to define all South Africans according to a particular collective, section 1(iii) of the Population Registration Act 1950, stipulates that a ‘Coloured’ person means a person who is not a White person nor a Native. The ambivalence surrounding ‘Coloured’ is even more striking in section 1(xv) which states that; “ ‘white person’ means a person who in appearance obviously is or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured

Ndlovu’s character, Tracey toils with the dictionary definition of miscegenation in *A Coloured Place*. She says, “Miscegenation... They make it sound like a contamination, a flippn’ disease!” (Conning, 1999). Tracey goes on to ponder the existence of ‘Coloured’ people, in the lines:

What if God never made Coloured people? I mean, were there “cock-tails”, mixed people like us in the beginning? Let’s say there were these pure nations and they lived in separate corners of the globe and only after years of exploration, they discovered each other. (*Writing enthusiastically*)

Only He (*Referring to God*) knew that when these nations met they would start wars over territory, Earth’s gold and even the colour of their skin.

(*Talking to herself*) Now that’s where we would have come in, God’s answer, People who would form the bridge to prove that unity is possible. (*Writing*) We are the over-lappers, the people’s people, yes, Man’s creation! We are different but we are one. All over the world, but especially here and especially now, Coloured people represent a union... a blood-bond. (*Thinking aloud*) Instead we are rejected for not belonging to either clan and then what do we do? Reject ourselves. And our next move?

We start copying someone else’s image. Some of us follow the wit<sup>12</sup> ous<sup>13</sup>, clutching any piece of evidence that we’ve got a great-great-grandfather on that side. What about the rest of our roots? (*Writing*) We must uncover them and take pride in the richness of our blood

(Conning, 1999:12).

Here Tracey, a teenager, plays with the possibilities of what it might mean to be ‘Coloured’. In our interview, Ndlovu says “this country is built on Blacks and Whites hating each other, making love to each other. We South Africans are united in our struggles – no matter how different we look” (March, 2001). What Tracey discovers in the quoted excerpt, and indeed the point Ndlovu wants to make, is that Black and White are not as different as the legislators would have us believe, but that we prove through our genes, through our union, that we are one. However, there is a long history of writers being intent on maintaining ‘pure’ races, while writing about the sinfulness of miscegenation and depicting the ‘half-cast’ as a tragic figure. In her novel *Adam’s Rest*, Millin’s character, Miriam, remarks on half-breeds, saying:

There must be something wrong at the bottom. Look at their ancestry. It means a bad type of white man and a bad type of black woman to begin with. You yourself know, Janet, decent Kaffir women have nothing to do with white men... I have a feeling about colour as if it were a catching disease – perhaps it is – and I don’t want to be near it

[the] majority of the Coloureds... represent the western way of life in this country. They are mainly western in culture, social life, religion, and language, and are closely integrated into the western economy of South Africa. Territorially they are concentrated in the Western Cape which represents the oldest centre of western culture in South Africa... Although similar in way of life to the Whites, they form a physically distinct population collective, distinguished mainly on the basis of colour and other racial features

(quoted in Ridd, 1981:30).

Ndlovu speaks of her feelings of 'rejection' and being labelled a 'sell-out', because of her attendance at a White secondary school, *Convent High School* in Durban. She speaks about her shame at how her relatives put her white friends on a pedestal with a sense of pride "that one of *them* came to *us*" (March, 2001). Ndlovu speaks about the pain of 'othering', of placing people at polar ends of self and other, when she says "the pain of Apartheid was separatism. People never got to know each other. We were lied to about how different we were... I decided how big or small my world was going to be and not *they*; and *they* are not *they* but *us*. *They* are not as different as *we* think. We can't think in inferior and superior terms" (March, 2001).

In an interview, she speaks out against putting people into boxes. "We are the people of mixed descent. None of us are all one thing. We must resist being labelled" (March, 2001). She criticises the 'Coloureds' for having 'amnesia' about their African heritage, saying that she "vehemently identified with *that* side" (March, 2001). By considering herself to be African, Ndlovu claims a sense of Africanness, as she goes on to say, "Africa is our birth place, we are all Africans. It is a head space. The term 'Coloured', I once thought, was all I was, all I could ever be". Her conscious rejection of the term 'Coloured' is a way of liberating herself from how others see her. It is a way of thrashing out stereotypes. Being African gives Ndlovu a holistic way of seeing herself. "It made more sense to me to be African than anything else" she says (March, 2001).

The idea of a 'Coloured' community is rejected by Ndlovu, because community implies unity. She remarks, "I have issues with a collective 'Coloured' 'us' – we're not united by a culture, religion. We're not a cohesive collective. The only thing that bound 'us' together, was a law that clumped 'us' together. A community as I understand it, is that which binds people together socially and culturally" (July, 2001). Anthropologist Michael Whisson notes that:

it is the great diversity which lies at the root of the deep resentment felt by many people at being called 'coloured' and hence assumed to have more in common with all other people called 'coloured' than with non-coloured people of comparable social and economic backgrounds

(quoted in Ridd, 1981:3).

With such diverse genealogy, the lack of common cultural heritage or myth of origin, no 'pride of race', or home base of their own, there is little to bind 'Coloured' people into a collective.

The idea of a unique 'Coloured' community distinct from Whites, Blacks and Indians, was a lie sold to the 'Coloured' people by the National government to keep the 'Coloureds' off the voter's roll. The 'Coloureds' had no natural territory in South Africa, no separate language and no separate history. The 'Coloured' population was treated as marginal, displaced and peripheral in relation to the White population. The South African government falsely spoke of a 'Coloured' community in order to legitimate discriminatory practices and maintain existing inequalities based on the premises of community development.

Thornton and Ramphela (1988), in the chapter "A Quest for Community", identify the term 'community', as a political term. As they point out, the term is often used as a euphemism for 'race', 'ethnic collective', 'nation' or 'peoples' by the government, in order "to justify its insistence that since each is a distinct 'community' it must develop 'separately'" (30). By using different racial communities as a front, the Apartheid government applied a policy of 'divide and rule'.

It used the idea of 'community' in order to discriminate against people, by ensuring that the "various communities use their own resources to help themselves" (De Beer, quoted in Thornton and Ramphela, 1988:34). Thornton and Ramphela go on to explain how "the term 'community', applied at a national level, is used to divide resources into 'own' and 'general', thereby "disadvantaging the poor and legitimating existing inequalities" (loc. cit.). Therefore, if each 'community' had to provide for its own needs, the 'community with the least resources suffers the most, in comparison to those 'communities' subsidised by the government, which were the White communities.

"The boundaries of communities", note Thornton and Ramphela, "are symbolic and exist by virtue of people's belief in them. Only rarely and under unusual social conditions... are these boundaries marked by simple physical differences" (1988:38). It is this sense of forced, racist 'community' that Ndlovu, and indeed much of the 'Coloured' population resist. Although Nationalist party propaganda tried to cultivate a 'Coloured' nationalism, Ndlovu speaks of her alienation from the Cape 'Coloured' flower seller, 'Coloured' fisherman, 'Coloured' gangster,

'Coloured' taxi driver. "If that's what constituted 'Coloured', I got used to not fitting in" she says (1999:10).

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#### **Chapter Four: Malika Ndlovu**

Malika Ndlovu was born in the Durban area, and until the age of fifteen, she attended a 'Coloured' school. She later gained admittance to a private Catholic convent which accepted a few 'Coloured' pupils during the latter part of the Apartheid years, in an effort to 'bridge the cultural gap'. Ndlovu's acceptance into a mixed school led her peers to believe that she was a 'sell-out'. She remarks, "I wanted to achieve things that they didn't believe people like us could achieve... (I) started to go places that many Coloured people didn't go – like the theatre" (Conning, 1999:6).

Falling pregnant with her first son Rayne out of wedlock, she speaks of the disappointment her family and community felt at "yet another Coloured teenage girl pregnant, straight out of school" (Conning, 1999:16). Yet she "saw the arrival of my son as a sign for me to change direction. Together we made a new beginning. I went ahead with my career plans" (Conning, 1999:17). After school, she toured South Africa as an actor in the highly acclaimed Theatre for Africa Company. She then obtained her Performing Arts diploma from Natal Technikon. She now resides in Cape Town where she works as an Arts Project Manager for the Robben Island Museum, and is the full-time administrator for WEAVE.

Ndlovu testifies to having an ambivalent relationship with her play *A Coloured Place* and makes it quite clear that she does not want to be associated *only* as the 'Coloured' writer of that play. Yet, the idea of having a 'place of belonging' is central to her life. Her work is fraught with the theme of finding out where you come from, and she has herself been on many self-discovery journeys. "Everyone needs a compass to navigate through the unpredictability of life, and knowing one's origins creates a sense of belonging, even when things continually change around one" Ndlovu says (Mail & Guardian, December, 2000).

On her marriage to Thulani Ndlovu, Lueen Conning became Lueen Conning Ndlovu and on converting to Islam, she took the name Malika and dropped Lueen. Later she also dropped Conning. She preferred Ndlovu to Conning, as she felt no ties towards her distant White ancestry. By changing her name, she believes "I can detach myself from a past life". With the change of her name, Ndlovu actively asserts her belief that no system or authority can place you in a fixed and rigid category. Her name change allows for the fluidity of her identity as a

hybrid subject, thus reinforcing her notion that “no-one is ever one pure thing” (March, 2000) and that “the idea of a pure culture is something to resist” (Rushdie, 1981).

She speaks of her marriage to Thulani as a “re-union” and her conversion to Islam as a “reversion”, or return to Islam. Ndlovu’s initial resistance towards Islam, was one of dislike at the restrictive boundaries placed on Muslim women: “As a woman, I rejected a Muslim construct of women – I saw Islamic women as being restricted and uncreative”, but later she realised that “the thing I was running from, was the thing I had to face” (March, 2001). She then chose to rename herself in the Arabic name, Malika. As a recent convert to Islam, Ndlovu is creating such a ‘place of belonging’ for herself, with husband Thulani and her two sons.

Ndlovu speaks of her husband as someone who “dared to define (himself) by (his) own criteria, and risk not ‘fitting in’ with the pack” (Mail & Guardian, December, 2000). Thulani, for example, is the only Black stuntman in South Africa and is currently teaching and promoting a martial arts-based exercise form. The family has planted their roots in the ‘artist-friendly’, bohemian suburb of Observatory, in Cape Town, where they have bought their first home.

Ndlovu speaks of her relationship towards writing, as a ‘compulsion’ for writing, which started at the age of eight. She indicates that poetry was her first ‘place’ of refuge. She speaks of her frustration at not having drama as a subject at her ‘Coloured’ school in the 1980s. “There was no subject that related to art. English was my only source of expression. I was highly frustrated because I realised that there were so-called White schools or private schools that offered drama as a subject... I knew from an early age that I wanted to perform and that I was an artist” she says (1999:6). By keeping a journal, Ndlovu describes her creative journey of expression as not an idyllic one, but rather a process of finding one’s own voice:

Poetry for me began as an intimate and immediate journal of expression. Here was one place where I could whisper, sing, shout, mourn and mutter to myself in reflection, in states of pain or conflict and even moments of awe at the visions, the worlds this path of expression led me to. I could retreat and mentally roam free of the boundaries of what was expected of someone my age, my gender, my nationality at any point in time. Like a child on a bicycle, I have pushed my own boundaries and taught myself some tricks only through practice, passionate continuous practice and the nourishment of other poets’ work

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000).

As a writer, Ndlovu's reputation has not been built on one piece of work. Apart from producing the play, *A Coloured Place*, which was nominated for three FNB Vita awards in 1998, and has been published by Routeledge and UCT Press in *Black South African Women – an Anthology of Plays*, Ndlovu launched her anthology of poetry, *Born in Africa but*, internationally in Belfast in 2000. The publication is illustrated with the work of visual artists Berni Searle and Garth Erasmus. The final section of the anthology, entitled *Stage Dive*, is a recording of some of her improvised, performance poetry. Improvisation is central to the 'creative process', which Ndlovu believes has taught her to take more artistic risks.

Having the ability to work across media, in April of 2000 Ndlovu was commissioned to write and perform *Two Halves of the Whole*, a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) World Service radio programme - recorded on location in Amsterdam - about her experiences as a South African in Holland. She also created a video piece entitled *Bottled Up*, for the SANG/Transpositions Residency Project on Robben Island. In the same year she was featured as a guest poet at the *Between the Lines* Literary festival in Belfast. In October of 2000, New Moon Ventures - the Women Theatremakers collective initiated by Ndlovu, was invited to attend the Fifth Annual Women Playwright's Conference 2000 in Athens. The project that Ndlovu is currently involved in is the anthology of work by WEAVE entitled *Ink @ Boiling Point: A Selection of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Women's Writing From the Tip of Africa*.

Due to her theatrical background, Ndlovu expresses her need to extend her poetry beyond the page. Commenting on her play *A Coloured Place*, Conning says "I'd like the play to act as a mirror, as a truthful reflection of what it means to be 'Coloured'. I'd like to make people stop and reflect on their lives. I'd like to see it as part of a healing process, a way of finally finding an identity that we can be happy with" (March, 2001). Ndlovu speaks of her resistance towards the term 'Coloured', and her ambivalent attitude towards writing a play about 'Coloured' identity. The three months it took to write the piece, were not easy months for her because she had to break through her "fear of acknowledging the ugliness surrounding the term 'Coloured'" (Mail and Guardian, December 2000). As she says in our interview:

The last thing I wanted to do was write a play about 'Coloured' people. I was very defensive about being called 'Coloured'. It is an oppressor's term, a no-name brand term stuck on me. I thought I'm much bigger than someone else's label. I didn't want to be associated with the thing I'm not – a 'Coloured' writer. I didn't want to be the mouthpiece for the whole cloak of 'Coloureds'. Writing about the struggle of how you've been labelled, made me confront my fears.

(March,2001).

By confronting her personal demons through the play, Ndlovu rejects the uniform anonymity projected onto people by the label 'Coloured', and gives expression to her belief that "We ('Coloured' people) are not invisible, we are not all the same, and our histories are worthy of being recorded" (March, 2001). If the Cape 'Coloureds' have been ignored, then the Durban 'Coloured' population has been almost invisible, according to Ndlovu. She says, "All our lives we've struggled for an identity, falling between two major racial collectives. In Durban, we coloureds have had no unifying language, no documented history. My play is a testament to an almost invisible people" (March, 2001). Contrary to what most people think, Ndlovu says, "Durban is not populated only by Indians, Zulus and White surfers, but by 'Coloureds' too" (March, 2001).

The play is fraught with autobiographical material because of the paucity of documented and recorded history on the 'Coloured' people living in Durban. The responsibility of writing the piece made her aware of the enormous undertaking of writing and speaking on behalf of such a diverse collective of individuals. She expresses her wish for the viewers of the play: "I have reassessed what Coloured means for me and I hope that after you leave this space, you will be moved to do the same" (Mail & Guardian, December, 2000). Ndlovu remains hopeful that her own healing process could impact on the lives of others.

She recognises that "some people consciously thought that I was trying to stereotype 'Coloureds' in my play" (March, 2001). Ndlovu explains how she wanted to use all the positive and the negative stereotypes of what it means to be 'Coloured'. "I wanted the play to act as a mirror, I wanted people to come and see themselves. The play reflects for the first time what it means to be 'Coloured'. I wanted people to see themselves and either reject it, celebrate it, question it, moan about it, or deny it" (March, 2001).

Ndlovu interviewed White/Black/Indian and 'Coloured' people for the play, to obtain the myths surrounding 'Coloured' people. "I wanted people to ask questions about what it means to be 'Coloured', rather than just accepting what someone else says is 'Coloured'" (March, 2001). By placing a 'mirror' in front of people, she wanted to expose the "good, the bad and the ugly" (March, 2001), surrounding 'Coloureds'. She speaks about the difficulty in obtaining information on 'Coloured' people living in Durban, and the frustration with the invisibility of the "our history and our meaning" (March, 2001).

*A Coloured Place*, which is about identity, about the difficulty of defining oneself and the pain of segregation, contains a universal theme. Themes of segregation, discrimination and inferiority are themes that prevail all over the world. “I didn’t want the play to apply only to a South African context, but to many contexts. As an artist, it was important that the play moved from the personal to the universal” (July, 2001).

In *A Coloured Place*, Ndlovu gives a vivid account of her early years. Of her own family and life she uses the character *Zoë* to explain:

I was born where most of Durban’s Coloured population was born, Addington hospital. My family shifted about fourteen times before I was ten, but somehow we inevitably settled in a historically Coloured area, even after it was legal to live somewhere else. There were never any public signs saying Coloureds only, but like an unspoken law, you went to a Coloured school, a Coloured church, had mostly Coloured friends, listened to popular Coloured music and followed Coloured fashion... or else!

(Conning, 1999:16)

The character, *Claudia* speaks of her battle against her curly hair, associated with her African roots:

(*Imitating mother, she dramatises brusque combing and plaiting of a child’s hair.*) “Shame my child. Did God have to give you this unmanageable bush? Dammit! I just wish that you’d inherited your father’s hair instead of mine. It would make your life and mine so much easier. At least if you were a boy, you could keep it short and still look decent. Ay, but never mind. We’ll try and see what we can do about these phutu-plaits; maybe even try a new style or something. You’re still too young for us to start straightening it. Besides your scalp is too sensitive. But don’t worry, when you’re a bit older we’ll try some of that children’s relaxer. OK?”

(*Demonstrating*) You’d heat the comb by placing it over the hot coals in the fireplace or on a hot plate or primer stove. When it was ready, you’d wipe off any ash or dust, before getting as close to the scalp as bearable for the victim. With each stroke the numerous unwanted kinks per inch were ironed out...

Now for the rest of her life she’ll have to maintain that picture, I thought... she’ll never have to fear that her hair’s gonna “go home”. What a joke! Going home means going back to your roots, your natural state

(Conning, 1999:14).

Here, in a nutshell, we have all the complexities of the situation in which those classified as ‘Coloured’ in South Africa found themselves. This vignette in scene two, brings to the surface the human dilemmas resulting from certain imposed foreign realities of what constitutes beauty, status and respectability. We see how ‘Coloured’ children were brought up to deny their African roots, like the kink in their hair otherwise known as “croes hair, bushie hair, frizzy hair, peppercorns, a korrelkop, a kroeskop” (1999:13), and to aspire towards the slick, straight hair of their white counterparts.

This vignette is the prelude to many similar scenes in the play which deal with a number of issues. In the play Ndlovu also focuses on women's contribution to society, and abuse against women in the context of a colour-conscious South Africa. In scene five, Ndlovu highlights the endurance of 'Coloured' women, while at the same time critiquing it. In this scene, *Brenda* is crying out to her mother to break the cycle of violence and set a new example for her – other than one of 'sticking by your man' no matter what the consequences are.

*Brenda* says:

But Ma you can't go on like this forever. I can't. I'm spending my life being your bodyguard and he hasn't stopped hitting you in all these years. What makes you think he'll ever change? He doesn't even need an excuse these days. You just have to look at him sideways and he says you're asking for it... Look at you man, Ma, what are you holding on for? So one day he can hit you so bad that the stitches and ice-blocks won't even help. Is that what you want, Ma? And for what?

(*Defeated*) What do you think you teaching me, Ma? How to stay faithful to a man, even if it kills?

(Conning, 1999:18).

Later *Tracey* reflects on the role of her grandmother in the community:

Even before my granny died, our family used to joke about how we'd have to hire a stadium and the whole Mayville bus service, to cart all the people who'd insist on being at her funeral. Each with their own story of why they came from hell-and-gone to pay their respect, to this unforgettable woman. (*pause*) Yesterday the rain didn't stop them. Those who couldn't fit into the church stood outside with umbrellas. Others sat closely in parked cars, behind streaming windows, waiting for the procession to Stellawood cemetery...

How long will it take for them to forget her? Will her story be kept alive, after the sensation of this massive turnout and the drama of my grieving relatives becomes stale news? So many like my grandmother have their place in our history but there is no local museum or library that tells these stories. How can someone whose life meant so much, someone so big, be so invisible? This place she called home, the history of it that only she remembered, will die too. When our children look back, searching for where their stories began, will they turn and find this same emptiness?

(Conning, alternative ending to *A Coloured Place*, 1999:22).

It is this very 'historical gap', which Ndlovu intends filling with the play. Throughout our interview, she reiterates the important role women have in making themselves visible through the power vested in their voices. Ndlovu explains how she wanted the play to represent a mirror; she wanted to reflect all that was around her, all that she could see.

The language in the play is the Cape vernacular which has an Afrikaans grammatical base with a largely English lexicon. By incorporating the local dialect, she dismisses the myth of a distinct and unique 'Coloured' culture and shows a hybrid mix of South African culture and language. While slang or colloquialisms may have arisen out of a particular area, it is the assimilation of many cultures and styles which form indigenous language.

## \*wrapped up

somme chooning about the way south africans are  
we took a trek across the nation  
to sort of s-a-b-c the situation

you see, between bunnychow and boerewors  
between melktert and breyani  
there's a flavour that's our own  
between phutu and samoosas  
there's a taste we call homegrown

ag, with a chommie, beer and skyfs  
even hillbrow's not a bad place  
there's mos a space for every face  
we stopped to have a chitchat  
with a bunch of bhuddists on a mat  
we checked some happy clappies  
jusic, even they are lekker chappies  
then there was this auntie  
now she was on a different plak  
standing on the corner in a mini skirt  
gesuip, but still trying to push her luck

by now our beetle was sounding cronk  
so we pulled in at a trek  
to have our tjorrie checked  
by a man dressed like a quagga  
who thought we were soeking dagga  
so i got out and pulled up the hood  
and then he understood

back on the road it somme just clicked  
that whether it's savuka or r.e.m.  
`nkosi sikkelele or die stem  
this division is mos kak en palaver  
just makes us agro to each other  
there's no reason to be stressed  
this pot pourri means we've been blessed  
(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:32-33).

Sitting on her favourite rock once again the riverchild  
heard new and familiar stories rise to the surface like  
bones rattling at her feet, shells rattling deep in her  
sleep, till this riversong grew loud and strong.

## season of self

intangible  
invincible light  
burning into being

i am pregnant with her  
know she is here  
a different rhythm to my pulse  
seasons changing in my heart  
i am pregnant with her

in my cave she is chanting  
like wind in the trees  
on my graves she is dancing  
like a thundering sky  
naming my shadows  
reviving my dreams  
healer in my temple  
i am pregnant with her  
i chose her conception  
she chose my dimension  
she bleeds into me  
continuously  
my mirror  
my mother  
my sister  
my infant  
re- membering  
the infinite me  
(Conning, 2000:8).

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\* I have used lowercase where the author has done so and uppercase where the author has done so.

Although many Black writers have tended to write in standard English or Afrikaans (English and Afrikaans being the linguistic standard set by the education system during the Apartheid years and the yardstick for formal social acceptability and prestige), Ndlovu attempts to break down the language hierarchy by incorporating the local dialect of the people in some of the vignettes in her play. While many writers have used the Cape Town working-class 'Coloured' dialect as an identity marker, to 'other' it, as arising from an inferior level of education, Ndlovu subverts the idea that the local dialect is inferior, by incorporating it into her play, thus giving it recognition and value. "I used *Kaapse taal*<sup>16</sup> to show how witty and hilarious the 'Coloured' language is. I want people to be proud of their language" (March, 2001). By writing in hybrid language, she embraces the idea that South African people cannot be contained within fixed categories, but are rather culturally mixed and fluid identities and beings.

By using what is referred to as *Kaapse taal*, the mixture of English and Afrikaans, Ndlovu is making a political statement on society. She is in effect centrifugally pulling meaning, power and prestige away from the linguistic standard and placing it in the local hybrid language of the people.

In her poem, *Wrapped Up*, the use of indigenous language endows the poem with humour at times, as we can see in the stanzas 1-5. Ndlovu's political tone here is quite clear, our "pot pourri" nation in all its diversity, is no reason for division and discrimination, but union and celebration.

Writing, for Ndlovu, is a process of "listening to one's imagination," (March, 2001) a tool for expressing emotions. In the foreword to her anthology of poetry *Born in Africa but*, Ndlovu says; "Writing is a process of surrender and demands the deepest kind of listening. Over time I realised that what began as writing 'to myself' was actually writing 'from the self'" (2000). Recognising that the most powerful writing comes from listening, rather than the imposing of ideas, Ndlovu is committed, as a writer and performer to opening herself up to receiving ideas. As an artist, Ndlovu believes that she must be open to ideas in order to grow and expand spiritually and creatively. By writing from the self, she means that "true inspiration comes from a source much greater than the writer" (March, 2001).

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<sup>16</sup> Literally meaning 'Cape's language'. The term refers to the vernacular of mainly 'Coloured' working class communities in the Cape Peninsula and adjacent Cape Flats areas.

The anthology of poems *Born in Africa but*, takes the reader through a cyclical journey of disconnection and reconnection. Ndlovu's poems work through the themes of image, identity, body and fragmentation in a spiral fashion. She revisits themes and genres in a cyclical manner, adding on new perspectives each time. The theme of a self discovering its heritage, its meaning and its 'home' or centre, is revisited each time in new and exciting ways in the poems: *BBC Before Me*, *Alien in Amsterdam*, *Born in Africa but*, *Season of Self*, *For You*, *Daughters of the Sun* and *Lydia in the Wind*.

The narrative of the *Riverchild* links the poems together. Ndlovu expresses herself through the girl, Riverchild. By putting herself in the skin of her characters, Ndlovu is able to maintain a sense of universality in her work. "I always work from the personal to the universal" she says (July, 2001). Rooted in the personal, her work then reaches beyond the micro to the macro level and is able to reach far beyond the borders of South Africa.

The narrative of the *Riverchild* leads the reader into the poem, *Season of Self* which testifies to the reconnection of the spirit to the body as we can see in stanzas 1-3. The body is seen in relation to the 'centre', the home. "*Season of self* is about the need to retrace, reclaim, to take ownership of your own healing" (Ndlovu, July, 2001). At a personal and feminist level, the poem addresses women, whose value, Ndlovu argues, is often reduced to the woman's sexual capability. So she writes about women seeing worth in themselves beyond their physical bodies. At a macro level, the 'home' is South Africa. "True healing", says Ndlovu, "comes from an inner searching and reconciling. We cannot look to the government, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to solve our hurt. Each individual needs to take ownership of their healing process, and as an artist, you must go beyond what is physical" (July, 2001).

Continuing on the same theme, *For You, Daughters of the Sun*, Ndlovu speaks of the spirit and self being beyond all that which is earth bound. "Part of the healing process with coming to terms with one's identity is to trace one's history", Ndlovu believes (July, 2001). The poem is about "struggling with the fact that you feel bigger than this, but constantly reduced to this" (Ndlovu, July, 2001). This point is reiterated in *Born in Africa but*, in the lines: "born in Africa but/ living before and beyond/ a universe awakens in me" (Conning Ndlovu, 2000:4-5). Here Ndlovu explains that once the spirit breaks through the frame of how small it is believed to be, the universe awaits, and all boundaries may be transgressed.

## for you, daughters of the sun

enlightened by a flame  
we spoke in silence  
of wisdom written in our skies  
inscription by a guiding hand  
which those who chose  
to keep the vow  
have come to understand

beneath the stars we sat  
where no researcher laid his hat  
or mistook our sacred prophecies  
for babble of baboons  
i call myself to listening  
water knows its path  
riverbeds will reconnect the ones  
whose eyes have closed themselves  
whose words show they don't know  
whose tears spring form a source  
they can no longer see

that howling wind  
that crashing sea  
that breaking earth  
that starward tree  
all revelations of where the treasures be  
now the birthing has begun  
the spinning now unspun  
the turning of ways  
in which we walk  
in which we talk  
we will not stalk each other anymore

even our mother's voice  
our father's choice  
must find their resting place  
this age of great unravelling  
sons and daughters must embrace

echo mountain  
echo tree  
echo history to me  
echo shadow of light  
echo mystery of being

i dance this day of balance  
yes, everything that is below  
the soul is one  
the soul is all  
i recall this song of love

every story has its teller  
every story has its time  
(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:9-10).

## bbc before me

sitting in front of my colour tv screen  
for the time exposed  
to images the outside world  
ten years ago has seen  
intimate, brutal aspects of my existence  
bitter ghosts  
now resurrected in my chest  
such small cutting words  
exile, ban, unrest

sitting in a state library chair  
stare at a paragraph  
thick with the tone of fact  
another white male historian  
another authority on the nature of my family  
whose noble venture into the unknown  
has come to this  
the only document they say exists  
from which i must divine  
precious remnants of my regal blood

in this hall of muffled coughs, i sigh

i have raged about the silence  
i have cried about the violence  
i know i've shed this all before  
endless cycles of release resentment that i tell myself  
i've long since risen above  
me, in my meditation pose  
projecting myself over this chakra rainbow  
towards this conquering all-embracing  
concept of love

come elusive architect  
who metered dosage for this mind  
dictated what i should see  
when i should be blind  
fed a packaged history  
have stomached the last blank page  
blank tape  
blank face  
i want the aching  
absent  
bleeding truth  
in full colour truth

(Conning, Ndlovu, 2000:3-4).

*For You, Daughters of the Sun* addresses women of Africa, women of colour – the daughters of the sun. Her point is clear: there is beauty and power in being a woman coloured by the sun, as we see in stanzas 1-7. While unravelling her ancestry, history and memory of the home, Ndlovu does not romanticise a pre-Africa, uncontaminated by colonialism. The poem is about finding history in more places than just the history books, but also in the stars and riverbeds.

*For You, Daughters of the Sun* seems to be in contrast to *BBC Before me*, in which Ndlovu openly displays her anger at finding out that an enormous amount of her life and history lay documented in the hands of a foreign resource, the BBC. We see this in stanzas 1-6, where she describes the bitter sweet feeling of hearing an outsider tell her own story, of having more knowledge about her own life, than she does. However, Ndlovu recognises that anger and pain, in effect gives power to the oppressor, and so in completing her cycle, she comes back to the idea of rising beyond the body, to the spiritual, in order to claim ownership and power over her experiences.

On a personal and commissioned journey of tracing her own history, Ndlovu writes *Alien in Amsterdam* for the BBC, in which she has many questions. She speaks of the many contradictory feelings she experiences towards being in Amsterdam, so far from South Africa, and yet recognising so many familiar Afrikaans names and faces. She describes once again the bitter sweet feeling at seeing so many ‘mixed’ people cohabiting. This ‘umbrella’ effect is described by Ndlovu in her impressions on BBC radio, as both beautiful and painful. She sees beauty in seeing so many ‘colourful’ people together at one time, and pain, because historically the same was not possible for South Africa.

The theme of listening and “going within” one’s self to find the answers runs throughout her works, appearing strongly in the poem *Lydia in the Wind*. This is but one poem which brings to the surface the prominent theme of listening, healing, and the importance of filling in the historical gap through story telling. The intimation Ndlovu sends out is clear: through listening and questioning one discovers who one is.

*Lydia in the Wind*, is a many-layered poem. On the surface it seems to be dedicated to the slave, Lydia Williams, who was one of those emancipated in 1838. However, Anglican Priest

## Alien in Amsterdam

Will I ever peel this black and white  
veil from my eyes  
blinding polar view  
Dutch sites and scenes  
nauseatingly familiar  
boer faces, names and places  
a blurring recurring image  
die klein vasberade volk  
fixated with the fatherland  
violaters of one after another  
motherland

Against this dense city scape  
colours and shapes blend  
below a shadow-grey sky  
often i must step back  
resist being sucked in  
remember to look up  
knowing that in this very instant lies  
beneath the same awesome sky  
a magic blue free of shadows  
way across the equator  
in a city not built on water  
but where two oceans meet  
where the history of my world  
begins and ends  
wind woven  
polarised  
vine vallied  
intoxicating  
blasted and blessed  
Cape Town

25 to 42 degrees there  
some days maybe 10 degrees  
but most days below zero here  
same day  
one hours difference  
on the flipside of the equator  
two halves of the whole

There are no seasons here  
they import everything  
from almost anywhere  
for consumption  
gratification all year round  
shipping them in  
carting them out

like the Savannah giraffes  
or the three Asian elephants  
in the Amsterdam zoo  
cargo cut out of their cycle  
uprooted from home  
now part of a splendid display  
day after day after day

I try  
to balance the scale  
question veil upon veil  
though the silence hangs thick  
in contact our eyes make it clear  
no matter what how much we travel  
no matter how much we touch  
too much is missing

I speak  
they do not hear  
I am making african gestures  
not toward them  
but for them i think  
they think

I tell myself  
its no longer true  
there must be more  
we couldn't possibly be back  
at this invisibility black  
the abc boxing of humanity  
our weakest  
saddest  
lowest point  
even monkeys are more evolved  
(Conning Ndlovu, 2000).

## lydia in the wind

this wind is a wounded witness  
she will not be still  
not until we are listening

are we listening

will we recognise her  
circling the crevice  
between two worlds  
our reality and hers  
howling around this empty plot  
this hole in our history

can we hear our fears

this wind is a haunted woman  
she is wild with rememberings  
singing the truth and the tragedy  
of our buried heritage  
our slavery

if we do not know are we free  
she is held captive once again  
this time by a broken chain of events  
our degrees of amnesia  
the root of her dis-ease

her feet are bleeding  
from this haunting dance of grief  
she will only know relief  
when all our ghosts are put to rest  
when their stories are re-collected  
returned to their place of honour  
recorded in our history  
embedded in our memory

bring in the light of consciousness

who was she  
who were they  
who are we

and with this unveiling  
we see the awesome dimensions  
to this family  
we are unearthing the path of recovery

and in the questioning  
comes the who am i  
out of listening  
comes through you am i  
through you am i  
(Conning Ndlovu 2000:19-20).

Michael Weeder, who has traced the life-history of this ex-slave, says in the book *Slaves at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers*, “I see Lydia as representing a community of ex-slaves who contributed to the life of the church and society as a whole. More broadly, she stands for people who struggled their whole lives against injustice” (quoted in Cornell, 2000:30). “The story of Lydia – almost totally unknown and unrecognised today – represents the silent counterpoint to the known and recognised... part of our journey of faith and being” (Cape Times, December 1999), says parish priest, Luke Stubbs of St Phillips church. In the same guidebook Ndlovu says that *Lydia in the Wind* is “dedicated to the spirit of Lydia in all our peoples, stolen from their homes in other lands, bought and sold, incarcerated on this land... This poem is an honouring of the foundations of our extensive South African family and also to commemorate the day the prices were lifted from their heads, 1 December 1838” (quoted in Cornell, 2000:30).

In writing the poem, Ndlovu makes the point that the past is something which must be revisited. In order to form an identity, a coherent self, the silent place of the past must be explored. Stubbs notes that the work of historians aids the recollection of the past, but that it is also “the work of artists and writers and pastors and theologians through their increasing attention being given to slave stories, is helping to access this part of our past” (Cape Times, December, 1999).

On a deeper level, Ndlovu speaks out against the ‘amnesia’ many ‘Coloureds’ have towards their Black roots, and stresses the importance of re-collecting the past and restoring to honour the rightful history of a people. She speaks of looking to the past to find a sense of self, a sense of belonging and a sense of truth of where you have come from. “Most people do not know where they come from”, she says (July, 2001). Ndlovu reports eloquently her awareness of the danger of amnesia, of trying to forget a history that will not let the subject rest until all is remembered. By using *Lydia*, a feminine wind/voice, Ndlovu testifies to the determined spirit of women, for their voices to be heard and their stories to be told. *Re-turning* is another case in point. This poem traces the need to reclaim wholeness in order to find a sense of dignity and pride. She writes: “going within/ is a conscious step/ toward a deeper/ listening/ a decision to disconnect/ by turning inward/ returning the beam/ to its source” (Conning Ndlovu, 2000:13).

**distinguished umbrella**

coloured  
the word is out  
does the label stand  
can i stand the label  
coloured in  
coloured out  
what is coloured all about

so-called  
kleurling  
amakaladi  
bushie  
euro-african  
st. helena  
mixed  
mauritian  
malay  
korrelkop  
kroeskop  
darkie  
play-white  
other coloured  
cape coloured  
bastard  
bruinou  
bushak  
khoi-khoi  
san  
gazi  
outie  
stekkie  
lightie  
bra!  
coloured pride  
the great divide  
the face we show  
the roots we hide  
to escape the truth  
the fears inside  
black by day  
white by night  
stuck in the wings  
while the rest take flight

coloured  
rich combination  
blend of race  
face of nation  
oneday  
coloured  
a celebration

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:46).

University of Cape Town

*Distinguished Umbrella* insists on the importance and richness of one's roots. In the poem, Ndlovu plays with the word 'Coloured' as she says, "when it means people who have colour, referring to a richness, a diversity, then 'Coloured' is a great term" (July, 2000). She exposes the negative labels associated with 'Coloured' people and explores the celebration of a 'Coloured' identity of a different kind. She calls for the celebration of the richness of ancestry that will lead to a specific identity, rather than a blanket-identity. Ndlovu explains,

I see 'Coloured' as one day a celebration because it has been a term of such political weight and shame and a greyness. Those who didn't fit into neat categories were 'Coloured', the left-overs, the mixed, the half-breeds, and all the other negative associations which were put on 'Coloured' people. When I say 'celebrate', I mean find out what this grey/brown mass which has been projected at you is – it is not as simple as Black and White makes Brown – actually we have a wealth of ancestry and cultural influences. I come from a Zulu, Scottish, Xhosa, German and Indonesian background

(July, 2001).

These pieces reflect her desire to reawaken a sense of pride in heritage and history, particularly as Africans and more specifically as South Africans.

*Born in Africa But* captures the essence of Ndlovu's multifaceted disapproval of past and present South Africa and the tension which arises out of not knowing your own heritage, as she writes in stanzas 1-6 on the back of this page. She makes visible the trauma of being born in Africa but having been robbed of a heritage, robbed of a history, robbed of a culture and worst of all, robbed of pride. The anger of being born in Africa but "breastfed" another language, another religion, not an African language and religion, but a foreign Colonial language and religion. Ndlovu resents being born in Africa but having been fed lies, taught someone else's history and someone else's views of who you are. Born in Africa but not being called 'African', labelled 'Coloured', a racist, inadequate term. Born in Africa but robbed of all political rights, and classified as a second-rate citizen, a 'half-caste', 'out-caste' and 'motley crew'.

Malika Ndlovu is one of the few *published* 'Coloured' women in the literary scene. As February explains in his book *Mind Your Colour* (1981), "no doubt there are very real reasons why the 'coloured' woman in South Africa has not yet announced her presence on the literary scene. They are, after all, the nursemaids of the white kids... they are the ones who give birth to a generation of the enslaved" (174-175). Although February's book was written some twenty years ago, in 2001, the 'Coloured' woman may not have "announced her presence on the literary scene" for some very different reasons. Ndlovu speaks of the difficulty of getting work published in a still predominantly White male environment. As she explains, "if Black

**born in africa but**

born in africa but  
breastfed another mother tongue  
put to sleep on foreign lullabies  
praying for a jesus-heaven  
when i die

born in africa but  
into a designated cultivated patch  
flung far from the indigenous tree  
strategy for carving out my destiny

born in africa but  
mixed equals inferior,  
rearrange that exterior  
scorned for the secret  
exposed by my skin  
enslaving beliefs  
this child was bathed in

born in africa but  
i have died to  
the hiding  
dividing  
fearful deciding  
of what i am  
who i should be

born in africa but  
a self made prisoner  
i release captivity  
i am free to unfold the sacred map  
no other will dictate my destiny

born in africa but  
living before and beyond  
a universe awakens in me

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:4-5).

University of Cape Town

men writers are not published, then Black women writers are invisible” (March, 2001). It is for this reason, that WEAVE raised enough funds to publish their first book *Ink @ Boiling Point*.

University of Cape Town

## Chapter Five: WEAVE

women weaving

in the company of these women  
 i am humbled  
 i am inspired  
 i am healed  
 where living words bounce between us  
 the blood of our experience exchanged

in the company of these women  
 anonymous spaces  
 turned sacred site  
 willingly  
 courageously  
 we reveal our vulnerability

in the company of these women  
 i need not  
 and yet i can  
 cry for the sister i never had  
 for my mother's wounding recalled  
 mourn as my grandmother's face emerges  
 in another  
 honouring each one in mine

in the company of these women  
 i laugh  
 i play like my pre-teen self  
 i can lay my masks on the ground  
 synchronising  
 recognising  
 our flowing roles  
 in this tribe of she

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:21).

Desiree Lewis says of WEAVE's work, "the eclecticism of the writing demonstrates how the creative impulse can shift conventional barriers and create new ways of seeing, new ways of writing and, for readers, new ways of thinking about their world" (quoted in the *Mail & Guardian*, December, 2000). In the Foreword to *Ink @ Boiling Point: A selection of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Women's Writing from the Tip of Africa*, Lewis speaks of the past and present being constantly connected to this anthology. I will look at how the writings of WEAVE deal with a "collective recall", the myth of a reconciled South Africa, the relevance of the past to present, and indeed the variety of social, emotional and psychological experiences of the authors.

The collective's writings are highly politicised, due to the involvement many WEAVE members had in terms of their political liberation struggles. While some members were

incarcerated during the Apartheid regime, others resisted the racist laws through their writings and political rallying. As Andre Brink (1998) says in “Stories of history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative”, “All of us who have been involved in the transition from apartheid to what may become democracy have in one way or another been marked by early experience” (29). He goes on to explain that “at the very least, whether it happened consciously or not, if apartheid did not altogether curtail the imagination... it imposed certain priorities on a writer’s choice of themes” (loc. cit.). As result of Apartheid, the personal became the political. In other words, it became impossible to disentangle the personal from the public, “or story from history” (Brink, 30).

WEAVE’s Deela Khan, who was runner-up in the Nadine Gordimer Short Story Award in 1992 and who has produced numerous works, believes that her poetry is ‘engaged’ and full of ‘moral outrage’, “that attempts to be simultaneously personal as it is political” (Khan, 2000:257).

Shelley Barry, a playwright and activist in disability politics, who is currently based at e.tv, regards “writing as a means of conveying important social messages” (Barry, 2000:255).

Member Gertrude Fester, who has worked in government’s women’s organisations most of her life, including being a founder member of the United Women’s Congress (1986), the National Women’s Coalition (1990), as well as reviving the Federation of South African Women (1987), is currently a member of National Parliament for the African National Congress and Gender consultant to the Minister of Minerals and Energy. Fester’s published work includes both fiction and non-fiction mostly on women’s struggles. Her current research is on women’s struggles in the Western Cape (1980-1990) and on women’s survival strategies in prison.

Mavis Smallberg, a founder member of COSAW and participant in the Artist-in Residence program on Robben Island (1997), has had her work published in American, Dutch and German publications, as well as South African anthologies. One of her poems was selected for a Gift of African Thoughts, a limited edition anthology which was published as a tribute to Thabo Mbeki for his inauguration as the new State President in 1999. Smallberg’s other work includes being a testimony summary writer for the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

Member Weam Williams worked at a local non-government organisation in 1997 called Molo Songololo, while co-writing a research report for the Truth and Reconciliation Committee on the violation of children's rights during the Apartheid era.

Beverley Jansen, former municipal councillor and mayor, now works full time as a community development facilitator. She was a prize winner in the African Writers Competition in 1984 and the BBC / Heinemann Arts and Africa Poetry Competition in 1989. She has a short story published in a collection called *At the Rendezvous of Victory and other stories*.

Maganthrie Pillay is an unpublished writer who works as an independent Film and Television producer / director. She is currently working on *De-Railed*, her feature film debut. She has also produced and directed two theatre pieces including *Manje!*, created for the Arts Alive Festival in Johannesburg in 1994 at the Civic Theatre, and *Red Rituals* which was performed on Robben Island for International Women's Day in 1997.

Member Carmen Myles Raizenberg was part of WEAVE while she was living in Cape Town, but is now living in Durban where she is studying to qualify as a professional Aromatherapist.

Pat Fahrenfort is currently the Deputy Director in administration for the Ministry of Labour and is currently working on an autobiographical labour history. *My First Job* is the first chapter of the series.

Member Joan Baker, who recently passed away, was one of the "visionary founder members of WEAVE" (2000:254). Like Smallberg, Baker was a member of COSAW in the 1980s, and has had many short stories and poems published. One of her more recent works forms part of *A Gift of African Thoughts – a Tribute to the African Renaissance and a Celebration of the Inauguration of Thabo Mbeki*.

WEAVE's members share a "black consciousness" background, and perceive themselves as representing the missing element in a South African arena previously dominated by Whites and males. By treading the exhausting and frustrating path of self-publication, WEAVE hoped to shed the shackles of the White male publishing industry, through its first anthology of writings. While Ndlovu says politics is only one aspect of the collective's writings, other

## pick a ghetto

Wentworth, Newlands East, Marianridge,  
Sydenham so much like Bonthuvel,  
Athlone, Atlantis, Mitchell's Plein,  
Mannenberg, Ocean View and...and...

... Old Government  
dumping locations  
allocated plots for  
those who look like them  
not us  
speak like this  
skin like that  
not like us

Now

somehow  
we've watered down our rage  
the law has changes  
apparently we are free  
yet the people stay  
attached to this desolate landscape  
stuck in its festering holes  
the people do not move  
where to's  
whispering across their eyes...

where litter at fourth-rate shopping malls  
blows like all our sorrows  
in the turning blowing wind  
whilst those who seem to live  
under a different sky  
shudder in disgrace at the sight  
reading the horror headlines at night  
open mouths and shaking heads  
at the primetime flood of tv news  
fuelling the crime-and-violence-hype

And without a thought  
for the whys and hows  
the song we've all heard before  
comes puring from their lips:  
if they can live like this  
act like trash  
no wonder this country  
in the state it's in  
only getting worse  
under this democracy curse

And we who know  
there is only one sky  
see this masterminded trap  
the historical gap still bleeding  
into these breeding grounds

ripe for infection of the mind  
devastation of the spirit

Here

minds are moulded in rows  
not in classrooms  
but grey brick barracks  
called home  
the area  
the district  
the hood  
punctuated with graffiti  
screaming out a response  
to this reality  
hundreds of minds dying  
buying into the narrowest possibility  
of who they can be

Suffocation...

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:178-182).

aspects being feminism, poverty and abuse, it is apparent from reading WEAVE's collective writings, that their writings are all inspired and written within the context of the South African situation, then and now. If as Mikhail Bakhtin claims, all texts are shaped by their context, then WEAVE's writings are part and parcel of a South African context which has been predominantly based on political inequality and racial domination.

Investigating the response WEAVE had to Ndlovu's play, *A Coloured Place*, Ndlovu says, "the play brought to the surface our own stereotypes that we even had of each other. For instance, the 'Cape Coloureds' thought that the 'Coloured' population in Durban were all apathetic, inactive and on the side of the ANC (African National Congress), while the Durban 'Coloureds' thought the 'Cape Coloureds' were all slaves, saying 'yes baas, no baas'" (March, 2001).

The anthology is concerned with the relevance the past has to the future. With South Africa in the post-Apartheid age, these writings provide the link between past and present. Lewis says of WEAVE, "Avoiding the glib myth of a reconciled South Africa, the stor(ies) suggest that the prejudices of both the formerly oppressed and of the former oppressor are deeply ingrained. 'New' relationships don't simply happen; they are constructed painfully out of past ones" (2000:11).

Malika Conning Ndlovu's poem, *Pick a Ghetto*, is a case in point. Here Ndlovu is scornful of the "glib myth of a reconciled South Africa". In *Pick a Ghetto*, it is evident that Ndlovu does not wish to participate in cultural nationalist myth-making of a reconciliatory nature. She speaks her disapproval in stanzas 1-10 where she deals with the relationship between the past to the present and the class and wealth iniquities which were formed in the past, and which are carried over into the present. Ndlovu is concerned with the "head space" of so many hundreds of minds living in the Apartheid ghettos, still confined by their lack of opportunities and narrow possibilities.

The poem challenges the reader with questions about democracy and so-called freedom. Ndlovu questions the validity of freedom, in a country where people are still trapped by poverty, unemployment and restrictive opportunities. In the lines: "whilst those who seem to live under a different sky/ shudder in disgrace/ reading the horror headlines at night/ open mouths and shaking heads/ fuelling the crime-and-violence-hype", Ndlovu brings to the

## Our Blinded Eyes

Is our collective recall  
so brief and fragile  
that we unlearn  
so easily  
the lessons of our pain?

Is our collective confusion  
so great that we do not see  
the sleight of hand  
which attempts to sweep away  
the barbarous, brutal  
chronicle of our times?

do we fall so foolishly for  
exaggerated praise  
and political pornography  
that our eyes are blinded  
to the beggared anguish  
of those still wiping blood from  
township  
cobblestones?

We must remind ourselves and kin  
that history  
will judge severely those who  
lick droplets from empty wine  
goblets  
and masticate proverbial  
breadcrumbs  
from the tables of the monied  
masters

(Jansen, 2000).

## Inheritance

I come from people  
Who know how to cradle  
each other,  
Who grow flowers,  
Tell stories,  
Gather to share food  
from three legged pots  
People who have sung,  
danced, toyi-toyied  
Through pain  
Unrecorded  
Unacknowledged  
Unseen

But let this be heard  
(Barry, 2000:230).

## recognition

He made a bow that  
the Khoi and San had played;  
and in the playing of it, evoked  
the spirit of an ancient people.

I see them running across the vlei,  
over the hills, running. Always running.  
First they ran to hunt the elephant.  
Then they ran to save their lives.

Now we are running from ourselves.

You are the sons and daughters  
of a mountain, born from the earth,  
adjusted to the seasons,  
capable of travelling with the stars.

Is ja!  
That's us!

(Smallberg, 2000:239).

## Cultural Fushion

at peace with the world  
can it be?  
green peppers and danya  
my tribal consciousness  
travels to the distant Orient

pyramids of Mehndi  
faint breaths of cinnamon  
a citrus sensation  
tickles my aura  
a reminder  
of a not so far away land  
my mother's koeksisters  
her cultural pride  
Thursday nights' Thikr  
the songs of Allah  
delivered with tranquil eloquence

a daughter of Africa  
with roots in the Orient  
a harmonious bond between  
Asia and Africa  
has married in me

this affirmation  
fails to elude  
the fact of living  
in a western zoo

(Williams, 2000:62).

surface White Afro-pessimism, readily shifting the blame away from South Africa's discriminatory past, to the poor Black South Africans. With words like: "if *they* can live like this/ act like trash/ no wonder this country/ is in the state it's in", the rich (which are largely still White South Africans) ignore and reduce all previous political oppression (which has entrenched poverty to a large degree amongst the Black masses), down to the poor behaving like "trash".

Beverley Jansen's poem *Our Blinded Eyes* (dedicated to the Cape Flats), stresses the urgency of a 'collective recall' from past to present, while Gertrude Fester's short prose piece *A Night at the Nico*, openly admits the difficulty of transition in the 'new South Africa'. In the opening lines she observes that "there are so many tensions at so many levels. Even going out for an evening of ballet becomes a major trauma". The argument which ensues between Fester and the man sitting next to her, is about whether ballet should be given funding in order to survive or not. Fester's argument is in favour of seeing "something South African" when visiting the theatre, as opposed to something international, which the man argues in favour of. To end the argument Fester concludes "Our frames of reference are too different" (Fester, 2000:78).

One of the prominent themes in the anthology is the excavation of family and ancestral ties. Shelley Barry's poem, *Inheritance* deals with the invisibility of her people, a history simply not recorded in South Africa's history books, as we see in stanzas 1-2. The poem calls for visibility and recognition of the people from the Eastern Cape. *Recognition*, by Mavis Smallberg evokes and celebrates the Khoi and the San people - the "sons and daughters of Table Mountain" (2000:215). Smallberg encourages the celebration of culture, rather than the running away from one's culture. We see this in stanzas 1-5. *Cultural Fushion*, by Weaam Williams which can be found on the back of this page, considers the hybridity of a subject born in Africa, with roots in the East, living under 'Western' norms. She celebrates the hybrid and 'harmonious' bond of her cultural heritage, yet scornfully resents living in a 'western zoo'. In another poem by Williams, *Come Home* she poignantly calls for a re-writing and re-reading of 'forgotten pasts' and the 'forgotten martyrs' of slavery: "Those easily forgotten martyrs/ Captivated and exiled/ To and from/ This land of forever/ In vile rusty chains/ Painfully tortured/ to create the backbone/ Of a filthy / White monopoly" (Williams, 2000). Williams makes it clear that she is taking up a position of authority in relation to those who have previously oppressed her people. In contrast, Beverley Jansen's poem, *New Dawn*, is joyously optimistic about celebrating a 'new beginning'. The poem speaks of sending "celestial light/

from our majestic mountains/ and blood-spattered sands/ where spears once pierced/ Freedom-craving hearts/ To envelop the horror of yesterday”, and placing “lighted candles in sparkling crystal jars/ And clay calabashes/ To celebrate the beginning/ of a new dawn in our own existence” (Jansen, 2000). These pieces reflect a re-awakening of pride from where these writers come from, the influences and shaping their roots have given them, and who they are as South Africans.

Gertrude Fester shows explicitly through her collection of prison writings, that the past can never be sealed off from the present, as that which we can leave behind. In her poem *Mocking Birds*, she describes her experience of prison as a comparison to an animal in a cage in which people (in this case “mocking birds”) come to peer at her and mock her: “Why do you mock me, mocking birds? Cheerfully perching on the bars of my cage/ You flamboyantly flaunt your freedom/ Flitting from bar to bar/ Then you stretch out your wings and fly up/ into the open sky/ And I - / I stop jogging/ and cry”. She continues: “And you all sit in a straight line/ gleefully watching me/ An extended family’s outing to the zoo/ Watching the monkey doing her antics” (Fester, 2000). With macabre humour she ends the poem with the words: “It’s a pity you didn’t bring along a banana/ It would’ve made a welcome change/ to my sparse Section 29 prison diet”.

In *This is Reality*, Fester compares the scrutiny she receives from prison officials to the racist scrutiny Black people receive from the shop owner as they enter the shop: “For 24 hours a day I am watched, scrutinised/ perused – in case of some wrong move/ And immediately I think of when/ So-called Africans enter a supermarket or shop/ the floorwalkers are on guard! These are the people who steal! Their every twist/turn is carefully perused/ And here – my every twist is carefully perused” (Fester, 2000). Amongst the trauma of being in solitary confinement and watched daily, Fester’s poem *The Spirit Shall not be Caged – Pollsmoor Prison*, reflects a celebration of life, even in the face of social, political and emotional suffering.

Another prevalent theme running through the anthology, is the theme of words and writing in its many facets: the difficulty of writing (including the difficulty in obtaining financial and emotional support), the therapeutic value of writing, and the empowerment of writing. Deela Khan exposes the trauma many writers endure in the difficult process of writing. Trauma which is often hidden and unnoticed, is brought to light in *Woman in a Hailstorm*, where Khan

## The spirit shall not be caged – Pollsmoor prison

This is a celebration to LIFE  
To LOVE to the CREATOR of us all  
To the beauty of LIFE  
I want to sing shout dance whirl twirl  
teasing the sunlight  
My spirit effervesces champagne  
in finely cut crystal glass  
Mineral waters bubbling out of the bowels of the brown earth  
Sparkling, shimmering, glistening, glowing on the moon on azure seas  
I convert on hills, frolicking like young lambs  
I stretch my arms out wide  
I grow tall as trees  
I take a deep breath of beauty  
I embrace the whole world wantonly  
Becoming one with it-  
Mingling my mind  
Midst morning dews  
red sun  
turquoise moon

(Fester, 2000:71).

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observes a Mozambican woman's pain and struggle with writing and expression at a writing workshop:

She was sitting on a chair closest to the door as though it would help her to slip out, as stealthily as she had slipped in, almost completely unnoticed. Even though the people in the room were a vibrant collective of fellow writers, it appeared as though she was feeling displaced and did not wish to mix with us... Jay introduced us later that evening... "This woman's a promising new poet, you've got to talk to her"...

In the months that followed our initial meeting, we became friends but Ntombintombi could never tell me about her life in her war-racked country. She simply shrugged her shoulders and refused to speak about her inexpressible past... I asked her to walk into the conference room with me and suggested that she sit next to me. But she just stared at me with those dark-ringed hurting eyes and sank deeper into her chair like a child immobilised by unbearable agony... I felt rattled that none of the delegates in the room seemed to care about our hurting co-writer just outside the threshold...

I found myself wishing I could instil in her traumatised being the hope she perceived to be an intangible pipedream. Picturing her, in that beetle-drilled armchair, I sense a woman too heavy with death – a woman pirouetting on a precipice – a woman trapped in perpetual hailstorms... She is suffering from an overload of terror, hurt and rage. She had witnessed and was still witnessing too much destruction, too many wars... All I really know about her tragic biography was what I'd gathered from the images that seeped her disturbing poems and stories... The emotional sterility that haunted her prose seemed to reflect the immensity of her sorrow; the emotional damage she had suffered...

What does one say to a fellow being, who has suffered so much psychic and physical abuse; a co-artist whose agony is perpetually resuscitated with the flick of a switch, with the start of a dream? And though I trudged away with this disturbing image of the traumatised refugee, hurting fellow traveller, deeply depressed co-artist in my aching head, in my heart I was convinced that her resilience would carry her through and allow her, in her unique way, to contribute to making this war-besotted world a better place

(Khan, 2000).

Khan believes that suffering can be transformed into empowerment by using writing as a medium. Likewise, in poems such as Gertrude Fester's *The Spirit Shall not be Caged – Pollsmoor Prison*, Fester challenges the idea that suffering leads to silence, submission and humiliation. Lewis explains that, "Many of the stories and poems in the anthology try to unearth experiences and emotions that seem to defy language and verbal expression" (2000:12).

In the poem *A Plea to Poetry*, Fester uses poetry to maintain sanity while physically captive. She pleads to herself to "write on/ contain your mind/ hold onto your thoughts/ write them down", amidst the 'fascists' who "taunt you/ psychologically terrorise you/ psychologically pulverise you/ in this hell hole of hostility/ this cell/ closing in on you/ overwhelming you...", she continues on the importance of poetry in the lines "You paralysed, powerless in prison/ hold onto your life, to sanity/ soothe your tormented soul/ prod on/ to poetic purgation/ let

## To my other self

Poet, you celebrated your descent into  
the garden of flame. You trusted the dancing  
flames to fire your soul with the vision  
of poets past and poets future-  
But you awoke before your ascent  
from the red heart of the flaring pit.  
You could not see your image emerge  
with scarlet rainbow-tipped wings,  
a transformed thing.

Now you're wandering through crystal  
caves of mirrors that spill the mutilated  
images of our present time.  
You turn with the bloodied  
debris of bodies littering our blood-drunk country,  
perpetual wars devastating our continents,  
candy-coated cant of egoistic politicians  
and your gaze is scorched with a ceaseless  
dripping  
of  
blood...

You lament that you wonder whether your  
scourge of a voyage through fire and rain  
is worth the afflictions incurred. But,  
Remember, precious stones are birthed  
in the earth's subterranean hells.  
You chose this road poet-  
Persevere-

(Khan, 2000:28-29).

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Kalliope<sup>17</sup> inspire your spirit/ to soar the skies/ let your tears not dissipate your spirit/ let your pen, however slow/ empower you through poetry/ as your pen/ pours out your troubled thoughts/ jettisoned/ like/ flotsam/ onto paper/ so too/ shall strength be sieved into your soul/ slowly/ but surely” (Fester, 2000:33-35).

Editors Malika Ndlovu, Shelley Barry and Deela Khan, speak of the collective’s commitment to their “craft”, their dedication to writing. “Writing is a constant site of struggle” Ndlovu says (March, 2001), and all the contributors in making WEAVE are acknowledged for the strengths and encouragement they have given each other as writers. The members speak of the self-doubt and insecurity that goes with saying ‘I am a writer’. We see this in the words:

WEAVE would like to honour the contributions of all the people who, at critical phases of our individual journeys, affirmed our creativity and encouraged us to leap over that notorious chasm of self-doubt in order to openly say: I am a writer!

(2000:3).

Testimony to the support the women in the collective have given to each other is Malika Ndlovu’s poem *Women Weaving*, quoted above.

Though they have had difficulty getting their work published, the writers make it clear through their work that by taking up positions of authority, they are not only addressing other Black women, but also their historical oppressors. By challenging stereotypes and myths surrounding their birth rights, the women powerfully assert an independent ‘self’. Deela Khan writes a poem *To my Other Self*, questioning and celebrating the path she has chosen as a poet, her ‘other’ poetic self, that at times sees and reflects on painful things in a journey which leads her to wonder at times, whether the painful afflictions incurred by the poet are worth it.

As Black women, these writers have faced discriminatory and repressive treatment in a predominately White publishing industry, and therefore have had to take the route of self-publishing. Desiree Lewis explains, “As a collective excluded from the worlds of power and privilege that underpin creative writing, black women have had to overcome myriad difficulties” (2000:13). WEAVE defies mainstream consensus of what is literary acceptability and what is not literary acceptability. As the editors say, “We decided what was worthy of publication and have no shortage of reasons why this work should be widely and proudly distributed locally and internationally... and... through action... Black South African writers don’t necessarily have to depend on anyone but themselves to get their stories out, to develop

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<sup>17</sup> Kalliope is the Greek Muse for inspiring epic poetry.

## Encounter on a Chatsworth Bus going to Town

Middle pathed  
Coconut-oiled hair  
in the 90's  
Where does this guy come from?  
Slimy sensation just looking at red eyes  
and mustard jacket.  
Toothless grin does  
little  
for him  
to make him any more appealing  
to my senses  
yet he insists on irritating me  
Much effort not to be downright rude.  
(silent screams)  
Now he wants my number  
He would like to take me out.  
I said hello you see...  
To his mind  
one thing leads to another...  
  
Easy to reach up and squash his soft balls till they hurt  
and say  
Leave me be.  
but  
he may get turned-on-an-ol  
I have one more ace...  
How would you like it if someone did this  
to your mother?  
His shock and anger drives him away  
I wish he respected his mother and me more than that!

(Pillay, 2000:190)

## Caught under Love's Canopy

When you're caught in love  
Lines  
Boundaries  
blur  
A simple action  
electrifying  
A random touch  
remains imprinted  
Now  
an unforgettable gesture  
  
When you're in love  
Your minds passages  
are perfumed  
with dreaming  
memories  
fantasy  
There is no questioning  
of what is real  
or how much of a cloud  
these emotions  
sensations  
desires  
can be  
  
You're in love  
under its canopy  
Not much rises above  
this blissful blanket  
You are deep  
under this cover  
Yearning  
Seeing nothing but the glow  
and wonder  
of the Beloved

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000:192-193).

their talents and educate themselves by remaining dedicated to their craft” (Ndlovu, Barry, Khan, 2000:14).

The anthology testifies to the commitment of the writers to assertively speak their voices and their experiences amongst all the dominant voices which wish to drown them out and suppress them. “Now more than ever, women have so many indigenous stories to tell”, says Ndlovu (July, 2001). Insisting that the eleven voices in the anthology do not speak univocally about what is “often reduced to ‘black women’s experience’” (Lewis, 2000:11), the voices do however, give the reader insight into the private and individual experiences of the women writers.

Maganthrine Pillay makes visible the frustration of being harassed by a “slimy” man on a Chatsworth bus. We encounter her frustration in her poem *Encounter on a Chatsworth Bus Going to Town* stanzas 1-2. Deela Khan speaks of her enchantment with a fellow passenger on a train, in the lines: “you took my hand/ kissed it on both sides/ each finger tip as well/ I marvelled at the sound of our words/ you gave me your card/ who knows, one thing might lead to another-I cringe/ All the interesting fellows/ Are either, comely but gay/ touchingly too young or too old/ safely bound hand and foot/ to the marriage hearse/ or the most rascally womanisers!/ You’re another woman’s goods/ I’m no man’s delectable side-dish/ forbidden dessert-” (Khan, 2000). Shelley Barry’s poem *Reality Check* explores her feelings of jealousy in the lines: “she does her laces neatly/ she’s together/ Is that what appeals?/ her black shoes rhyming with yours/ It’s just a dance, just a dance/ you gonna say/ but I’m checking these black shoes/ stepping into lust!” (Barry, 2000). In *Caught under Love’s Canopy*, Ndlovu revels in her emotions of love, while Beverley Jansen takes the reader on a personal exploration of finding out who she is, in her poem *Who am I?*

Lewis believes that writing about these experiences is “an invaluable act of empowerment” (2000:13). The testimonial writing which is evident in many of the poems and prose, gives WEAVE’s work a sense of authority and power over its subject matter. By telling their own stories, they claim them as their own and assert their right to interpret their own experiences, as opposed to having these stories told by others. In Pat Fahrenfort’s prose *My First Job*, we witness the historically suppressed “I” become vocal and insistent, by reclaiming a rendition of her own experience:

**Who am I?**

Who am I?  
Am I who I am?  
Sometimes woman  
Soft  
Sensual  
Serene  
Or am I wild, trapped carnivore fighting to exist  
To survive  
Amidst my own confusion

Who am I?  
Am I who I am?  
Sometimes mother  
Tender  
Understanding  
Kind  
Or am I the embittered bitch  
Battling against the cannibalism  
Of my soul by others?

Who am I?  
Am I who I am?  
Woman, Lover, Mother,  
Tigress, bitch, confused  
Afraid of the commercialism  
Of the now, the then  
And the end

(Jansen, 2000:214).

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I am fifteen. The year is 1960. I live with my parents in a quiet township on the Cape Flats. My dad works for the city Council. Payday for him is at the end of the month. My mother is a machinist in a clothing factory. She gets paid on Fridays. Somehow, the money doesn't go very far. My two sisters, my brother and I are still at school. My youngest sister is two years old. As far as my mother is concerned, the girls should help by finding jobs. Her words never leave me: "Is 'n goeie job en die pay is oek goed". And the job? A factory hand at Cape and Transvaal Printers in Tiervlei...

I sit at the end of the machine in an uncomfortable position. My eyes are fixed on the spot where the books fall out. I catch each book as it drops out of the machine. My hands are beginning to show signs of wear and tear... The cuts between my fingers are sore. I'm too scared to say anything... the hours drag by...

Who of us are going to become permanent is a big question. Tension hovers in the air... As I receive my pay I am told that I have one more week to work. My sister is not asked to leave. I am disappointed

(Fahrenfort, 2000).

The anthology deals with new and exciting themes, which have not been dealt with before in such a manner; such as themes of everyday life and everyday experiences. Comic fragments that are often looked down upon and deemed inadequate subject matter for serious attention, are included in the anthology. In the prose piece entitled *Resident Rodent*, Pat Fahrenfort, a new home-owner, considers her interesting encounter with her new housemates – a family of marijuana - consuming mice! She explains:

And so I live alone and yet not alone. I reach a stage where a relationship is imminent. Whether this permanent resident rodent is the same one or not is no longer an issue. It occupies a fraction of the kitchen. The rest of the space is mine. What the hell, why agonise over a tiny mouse. Instead of going home to an empty house at least I am assured of some life, even if it is in the shape of a mouse... an object catches my eye. The object is a plastic bank packet. I pick it up. A "bankie" of dagga with a hole eaten into it. My, my, my. I inherited a housemate of a different species and I was having to support its drug habit. Suddenly everything falls into place: my lethargic housemate, its munchies, bravado and its sauntering, strolls through the house. Mousie had obviously been feeding on the dagga, which had to be responsible for its unmouse-like antics... Whoever left the dagga under the bath (the former occupants of the house were musicians), obviously put it there so it could be out of the way... The dagga is removed, as is mousie's permanent presence. My house is no longer attractive to mousie. The illicit treasures left and so did the consumer. The times I spend in doors are spent completely alone. I begin to feel a sense of loss. Mousie is either de-toxing or has OD-ed!

(Fahrenfort, 2000:118-120).

Lewis asserts that "it would be misleading to see these prose works as providing light relief from the seriousness elsewhere. What the anthology does is to break down the conventionally rigid barrier between what is acceptably literary and what is not. In this way it helps to open up paths towards a more expansive understanding of how multi-faceted meaningful social and personal experiences really are" (2000:12). These short pieces need to be read in light of their human relevance and centrality to life experiences.

**TEN YEAR-OLD VIOLENTLY RAPED,  
TWICE, TODAY**

A morning Newscast-now as  
Commonplace as Corn Flakes for breakfast-  
Do we cage our minors now  
To protect them against skulking predators-  
Those Blunted, sadists with such Human faces?

Lured by the respulence of dancing  
Daisy faces in a yellow-ebony, flame-red,  
Purple-white, pink-green ocean of wildflowers,  
Skipped a little girl, dreamy with the warbling  
Of birds, into the beckoning Spring-veld-

Oblivious of Danger, she frisked with fairies &  
Goblins between budding tree, bush and shrub  
In playful pursuit of a gold-green butterfly-  
Her magic was shattered as eyeless hands  
Crushed and splintered her dreamtime-

A heart, scraped free of human-kindness that could  
So recklessly scatter seeds of terror-  
Hands, enstranges from tenderness that could  
Make joy disintegrate into sorrow-  
Hurting torn bleeding  
A tiny girl tottered homewards-  
The dark shadow of a Person  
Falling across her path made bloodied  
Knees and confused arms freeze-  
Pleading eyes stared  
Icily into those of a Man.

It is only through untarnished innocence  
That our girlchild wants to perceive  
The male as grandpa, uncle, daddy,  
Cousin, brother, friend;  
But again, this Man was a predator  
Who hunts his own kin:  
She became his prey for a day-

So Very Young  
You had to live through two  
Whole deaths on a single day-  
How Deep are your Wounds?  
Was you Terror heard?  
How far into the future are your scars drilled?

**"DOUBLE RAPE: Ten-year-old girl raped twice  
in two attacks within hours at Suurbraak near Swellendam"**  
The Argus, September 30 1991, p2  
(Khan, 2000:115-116).

**No name brand**

She is a blur of a woman  
As cars pass by  
Checking the goods  
On the streetshelf  
She is drive-by-pussy  
Anonymous  
as a headless mannequin  
on display

She knows every curve and crack  
of the pavement  
marking her territory

While she waits  
waits  
waits  
For the car slowing down  
The lowered window  
The nameless man  
The open car door  
The transaction

Of  
Body  
for  
cash

On quiet nights  
She imagines being a queen  
Of sorts  
Commanding the streets  
Saluted by orange nightlights  
Forming a guard in her honour  
The pavement is her platform  
She is a deity on a street alter  
People pass  
and pay respect

Street queen  
Dreaming of taking back  
her pride  
Taking back the night  
(Barry, 2000:177-178).

The writers are concerned with the breadth of human experience, exploring a wide variety of social, emotional, political and psychological experiences. They explore topics as wide in range as learning how to drive, childhood and sisterhood, prostitution, rape, slavery and death.

In *Driving me Crazy* Carmen Myles Raizenberg explores her anxiety about driving. She humorously explains in the short piece:

It took me twenty years to obtain my driver's license. No, it was not a monumental bureaucratic blunder. Just a monumental amount of fear, self-doubt, lack of cash and dithering... My father reminded me that any woman worth her salt needed to be able to drive... "Don't worry," soothed a new acquaintance after hastily covering her shock at my disability, "you're not the only one. I know another woman who can't drive... my grandmother. She's ninety-five this year".

"Start the car", he ordered confidently. With trembling fingers and a hammering heart I did as I was told. I moved the stick to DRIVE. My eager foot detached itself from my fevered brain and pressed the accelerator. The car gamely jumped forward...

Oh no! Another driver on the road. Didn't they realise this was my first time out. Why didn't they just stay at home or use all the other available roads? Why, oh why did they have to sneak up like that behind me, in front of me, on the side of me?

... I suddenly realised that I had to turn left. Someone got lucky. I mounted the pavement, clipping their entire hedge in the process... My hour of terror was at a close... "See you tomorrow, same time," Mr Dalaglish called after me. I didn't think so

(Raizenburg, 2000).

Celebrating childhood "with a joy made palpable" (Lewis, 2000:12), Mavis Smallberg writes: "The rhythm of being ten is the/ Bounce bounce bounce? And the slap slap slap/ Of the thud on the road/ As you skip and you hop/ And you duck and you dive/ And you swing and you soar/ and you scream for more!/ the sight of being ten/ Is my mother all dressed up and beautiful/ Ballerina dress Aunt Winnie had made/ but oh! Most of all, was my/ First only doll with eyes that could close/ that I found on my pillow that/ Special tenth Christmas!" (Smallberg, 2000:53).

In *Headlines: Ten year-old Violently Raped, Twice, Today*, Deela Khan writes the language of violence, rape and suffering. By giving female suffering a voice, Khan creates a space for the female experience and voice to be heard. The poem transgresses the constructed rule that women must not speak of their suffering or the suffering of fellow women, but should rather remain silent and subservient.

Shelley Barry offers a utopian vision to the reality of the prostitute on the street in her poem *No Name Brand*. Barry elevates the role of the street prostitute to street Queen. By offering

this prostitute an alternative vision, Barry empowers her beyond her 'anonymous, headless mannequin' status that every other person driving past affords her. Barry's utopian image restores this woman's dignity and pride as we see in stanzas 1-8.

Although the anthology is to be read from a human perspective, the political tone which resonates from the collective's writing is apparent, from the language they use, stories they tell and political experiences they open up to the reader. Using "humour, pathos or outrage, they refuse to confine their imaginative vision simply to testifying to an oppression shaped by patriarchy, race and gender" (Lewis, 2000:11).

Ndlovu has identified two dilemmas facing Black South African writers working within associations like WEAVE. Firstly, she says "People operating as a collective cannot do so purely out of self-interest. There must be a point where they give back to the collective" (Mail & Guardian, December, 2000). The result of this consideration is what Ndlovu calls "restricted creativity through a perceived obligation to write for the masses" (Mail & Guardian, December, 2000). "There's a sense of responsibility in filling a historical gap in the collective. We don't come from a conditioning where you could write for the sake of pure indulgence. There's always some kind of social consciousness at wanting to leave something behind for other generations to learn about" says Ndlovu (July, 2001). In effect, the true voice of the writer takes a back seat to the wider concerns of recording the truth of the lives of the people. This however, depends on whether the writer has a social conscience or not.

The second problem is identified by Ndlovu as the White publishing industry's requirements for 'post-Apartheid' writing to be of a certain 'literary' nature. She responds to these problems by asking what and who determines literary value, and to question whether South Africa is really in a post-Apartheid era, and not simply in a post-election era.

WEAVE has certainly shed these shackles in its first anthology by granting the writers a creative license to write what they feel, without the sense of 'owing' to the wider society. "There's the feeling that on one level, we have the right as artists and individuals beyond being 'Coloured' or African or South African to write freely, to write from the spirit, to write beyond the historical, political and social conditions" says Ndlovu (July, 2001). She continues, "there's a feeling that we've earned it. The responsibility to always make political commentary and it being your only platform to speak at some point in history was a powerful outlet and

useful tool for change. But it also constricted and restricted the breadth and depth of people's creativity" (July, 2001). While many 'struggle' era poets and writers are stuck in the 'struggle' era and cannot find their way out, WEAVE's writers are attempting to express themselves in new ways, outside of the culture of writing previously confined to a certain political scope.

Yet, WEAVE's members share a 'black consciousness' background, and as active community members, these writers and artists are part of and in service of the community. WEAVE testifies to the manner in which its members find themselves positioned in dominant racial and patriarchal hierarchies, but continue to struggle against these, in hope of making an example out of their work to other women of colour, who may not be as confident in the potential their own work may have. Their collection of poetry and short stories attempts to rethink women's roles and women's subject positioning within certain discourses by taking women as the centre, rather than leaving women on the periphery.

The sense of community among women is invoked as an important aspect to healing, inspiring and learning from each other. There is a dialogical relationship between the writers' work. The writers respond to each other's work, are inspired by each other's work and reply to each other's work. An example of this can be seen in Ndlovu's words, "Gertrude Fester inspired my poem *Women Weaving* and I hope my poetry in return engages people dialogically, specifically Black women," (July, 2001). From this example we can see how the writers/speakers themselves become listeners who grapple with what they have heard, and in return respond to what they have heard.

Ndlovu speaks of women's roles as healers, and the power and nourishment vested in women to encourage each other. *Gigi's Hands* by Malika Conning Ndlovu, accounts for women's common suffering and capacity for personal growth through the support of the lineage of grandmothers, mothers and daughters:

I am comforted by her presence and the knowing tone of her gentle voice... I smile looking up into her eyes as she greets me again, asking my permission to work with my energies. Aloud she states her intention to embrace whatever may unfold, whatever she may be drawn into as part of the process of helping me... In the following moments I feel heat or a tingling sensation in certain areas of my body, this living landscape marked by my personal history. This is where I was born to live for this lifetime. I must come home, stop the running and the neglect.

... When we get to my womb area, Gigi lays her hands gently to rest. I begin to whimper, quietly at first, then more persistently. Where is this feeling coming from? I begin to cry, mouth closed, eyes streaming. We've hit on a wound, a place of great loss and I am grieving without even naming the cause. I sob, unable to control this tide of sorrow; it is more than

mine. My grandmother is here too. She is connecting with me. This time I am sure of it. I am connected with her...

Granny Paula died after giving birth to the twelfth child. In losing her mother, my mother lost something immense and within that same year, that aching absence, I was born

(Conning Ndlovu, 2000).

*Sister Act* by Carmen Myles Raizenburg, celebrates sisterhood as an experience worth more than 'money', 'beautiful bodies', 'brilliant brains' or 'personalities that transform whole nations'. Raizenburg takes delight in her four sisters:

The ways in which they affected me were many and varied. They ranged from the usual and the delightfully unexpected... So, many were the evenings when my younger sister and I would laze about in a tub full of warm water under the watchful eyes of the older ones... If my mother was too busy or too tired (or both) to hear my daily stories from the world of my school, teachers and friends and of course the politics of my little sister and I, my sisters provided an enthusiastic audience/ Now they are all grown up. And so are we. We have all travelled different roads and indeed, settled in different places... Sometimes we find the time to get together. Sometimes long periods elapse before we can... But the best thing is that we know we will be understood and accepted for the flesh and blood people we are. That's what sisters are about

(Raizenburg, 2000:211-213).

Texts such as *Black Bags* by Shelley Barry and *Sister of Sorts* by Gertrude Fester, are but a few poems which bring to the surface the persistent abuse of women. These poems look at gender-based violence in a bold and assertive manner. Barry recounts the physical and emotional abuse inflicted on her mother in paragraphs 1-3:

I have watched my mother pack her belongings into black bags so many times... I'd see how much it hurt her to separate the items of what stayed - and went... She had packed before. And each time it dug deeper. She often spoke constantly, through it all, trying to convince herself that this time was indeed the last... He would hate himself for her bloody nose. He would. She swore to me...

But at night the bedroom light would glare at odd hours. And I could smell the smoke, hear the stifled tears. I'd be awake, silent, almost scared to breathe, in case she realised that her mask of strength had fallen. I promised myself that nobody would ever hurt me in that way. How naively we make ourselves these promises. And yet, how often we still hold onto them when pain rips us open. Raw.

She held on to that memory of pain. Especially when he came to her in the early hours of the morning, in tears and filled with regret she so desperately wanted to see... She wanted so desperately to believe in his apologies. Even if she had heard "I'm sorry" so many times. But there was no clean slate, no wiping away the insults, degradation...

I'd think of them in their early days of their love... So many promises. Wedding vows, flowers, champagne and celebration. Then, she became a wife, something he possessed, as functional as his credit card. And when his home was deserted, without her flowers and her perfume and his bed was empty, he would come to her. When no amount of whisky could numb his pain, of who he was, of what he had become...

She had become so tired. Weary. Fragile. As if something was dying without warning. I prayed that she would have the courage to save us. She was my mother after all, the woman I had known for her dignity and grace... I watched her heart rip and tear, like black bags, packed too full... I could see that it tormented him to see us go, but soon enough, a fresh set of boxes and bags had moved in, that of a younger woman, with bright eyes and a shiny wedding band

\*Sister of Sorts

Me, obese, broad-hipped.  
A combination of genes, bad eating habits  
And a stringent diet of exercise,  
A surfeit of rich foods and optimistic diet pills,  
Courses sometimes costing more than your monthly  
budget.  
And you, and your diet  
Maybe mielie pap  
And mielie pap  
And mielie pap  
In this valley of Bizana called  
Greenville  
Where nothing is green save the bits of green errant  
plastic bags  
Which motley-colour the grey-brown desert landscape

Sister of Sorts, I say  
Sister of Sorts I ask  
Weighing up the stark differences between us  
Tearing apart any notion of sisterhood

Sister of Sorts  
You chained to a husband  
Chained by love or duty  
Or familiarity or tradition  
I - divorced breaking all family and religious  
traditions  
Divorced- a word mom still never uses...  
I  
With 15 years of spinsterdom, freedom and choices.  
You  
You could be my age  
Yet our experiences are written on a different page

Wife of  
A migrant miner  
Paralysed by the mine  
While extracting yellow gold  
Out of brown earth...

Sister of Sorts  
How does your husband  
Cope with his impotency of 25 years  
With his paralysed powerless legs?  
Does he in his anger and frustration  
Strike at you with his powerful fists  
Kick you with his tongue  
Murder you with his eyes?  
What do you do, Sister of Sorts,  
If or when he violates you?  
You did not, not like me,  
Divorce him  
When he struck at me.  
First he cried like a baby  
Promising not to ever do it again  
Until it became so commonplace  
Beating me like he changed his shirt.

Are you tied by tradition  
Or love or duty  
To a man  
A miner who gave his best years to sieve gold for  
Magnets  
They have now returned him to you, a broken man  
With a pension that sees you through for now  
But will never catapult you  
Out of the Marginalised Masses,  
The rejected rural,

The poorest of the poor?

Me, long hair flowing in vanity and  
Loose abandonment of new living,  
Unfettered by Tradition and Orthodoxy  
My new-acquired class affords  
Me,  
Woman, Unmarried, Marketable,  
My times not marred by children  
Glass ceiling cracked in small  
Spots for new heights,  
New horizons  
Only slightly... Within limits, you know

You, bound by Tradition and Poverty  
And probably a Chief who like a Demi-God  
Wallows in Heritage and Heirs

Yes, Sister of Sorts  
Our lives are out of sorts  
Out of Bounds for you  
Out of Choice for me  
Sister of Sorts with  
Children laughing, giggling with pleasure  
A source of joy, a blessing,  
Proof of your woman-ness, your womanhood  
Yet a sword in your heart when with tables bare  
And cups empty filling a distended belly  
When fevers are high and fearful  
And all you have is a hand of calm to doctor away the  
pain,  
Nurse the night away with unslept eyes  
And a caring smile

Sisters of Sorts, I say  
Sisters of Sorts, I pray  
When will our lives be  
Less out of tune  
Less out of sorts

When waters flow smoothly and evenly for all  
When sun rays and dew drops dutifully equally fall  
Sister of Sorts,  
On you  
On me  
Not for a fee  
But for life's laughing  
And celebration  
When children can be children in gay abandonment and free  
And gold id for all  
In our smiles and in our eyes  
And diamonds glitter  
And flirt in the sun

(Fester, 2000).

(Barry, 2000:92-94).

Fester compares herself, a woman not bound by children or tradition, to a rural woman whom she imagines to be bound by children, abuse and abject poverty. She comments on her official government visit to the 'rural areas, the poorest of the poor/ the marginalised masses' in *Sister of Sorts*.

WEAVE boldly and assertively speaks out by asserting their right to reclaim language, to rewrite history and recreate subject positions. WEAVE is in the process of creating liberating spaces for women of colour. They shatter the silence surrounding women, by weaving a tapestry of words that transcend social class and political identity. "By turns ironic, humorous and sad, this is writing that calls on us to undefine ourselves" (Fortune, 2000).

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## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

If our stories are left untold, our triumphs unheard of, our faces and voices unrecognised, there will be a hollow place where our pride should be. Our histories form the map that can lead these children to a coloured place, not rotting with division and inertia, but a coloured place of power and diversity that they will not be ashamed to call... home

(Conning, alternative ending to *A Coloured Place*, 1999:22).

The intellectual energy found in Malika Ndlovu and indeed WEAVE's work challenges the reader to new ways of viewing the world. One such way that I was challenged while writing this paper was that I became self-reflective and self-conscious about the inadequacy of language in describing a person satisfactorily, and conversely, the abundance of inadequate language and labels for describing people.

It also became apparent that there is disagreement regarding the meaning of the categorisation of 'Coloured'. For intellectual writers like Ndlovu, there is no 'Coloured' identity that she identifies with. In the place of a 'Coloured' label, she asserts an African identity and more specifically, a South African identity. The idea of a 'Coloured' community is also rejected by her and she sees the construction of 'Coloured' identity as an Apartheid construction, used to separate, other, and marginalise people. She calls for the celebration of a hybrid people and a nation full of colour.

However, as she says "I consider myself African. But this is not a general Coloured perception" (Conning, 1999:6), there are those 'Coloured' people who accept the identity 'Coloured' as that which is not Black. Historically, people classified as 'Coloured', were granted more privileges and social prestige over their Black counterparts who were seen as 'uncivilised' in Apartheid's terms. In this respect, as Ndlovu remarks "Apartheid still lives in our minds" (Conning, 1999:6), in that 'Coloured' identity is something to hold on to as that which is not Black, but closer to White.

In writing this paper, I did not want to reinforce negative categories or labels of race. I became aware too, of my own awkwardness in focusing on Malika Ndlovu as a 'Coloured' writer, when she clearly rejected being associated with the term. The paradox, however, lies in the fact that these writers call for the recognition of 'Coloured' history, yet at the same time negate a 'Coloured' identity. Ndlovu describes her disgust at the paucity of recorded 'Coloured' history in South Africa's history books and many of WEAVE's poems call for the

excavation of 'Coloured' ancestry, yet at the same time they resist the label 'Coloured'. The writers maintain a univocal call for visibility, in particular 'Coloured' visibility, and a desire to "fill in the gaps" of 'Coloured' stories, yet by negating the term 'Coloured' they seem to be perpetuating 'Coloured' invisibility. In effect 'Coloured' history will get swallowed up and pushed to the margins of a larger Black history.

However, what has come up with certainty throughout this paper, is the idea that subjects should form their own labels and identity, and not be lumped with an oppressor's label for who they are and what they are. The writers this paper has concerned itself with, have never proposed set or given truths on their subject matter, but rather re-workings of ideas to create new liberating spaces for not only themselves, but their readers too. These black women writers have challenged the reader to thinking about the persistent question: if South Africa has done away with Apartheid terms such as 'Bantu' and 'Native', why has the same not been done to the term 'Coloured'?

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