

# Re-Externalizing the Revolution

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Young women and the neoliberal re-ordering  
of race, class and gender

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## **Compulsory Declaration**

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

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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*The thinking through and writing of this thesis would not have been possible without a number of individuals.*

\*

*My parents. Thank you for your love and support. I know I turned out very differently from what you expected and I have not always made your life easy; but still, you have always been there for me even when it was from a place of non-understanding. Your unconditional love always gives me strength. I love you.*

\*

*Lennon Mhishi. Thank you for having been my friend since 2009; for 'dealing harshly with my whiteness'; for your patience; for all the times you listened to me and gave me advice; for making me laugh even when I was crying.*

\*

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\*

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\*

*Mudiwa. Thank you for making me laugh; for reminding me that it's ok to just have fun sometimes; for accepting every fiber of my being and for giving me something to look forward to. I wonder what the future will bring...*

\*

*The participants. Thank you for participating; for sharing; and for your trust. I hope I do not disappoint.*

## **Abstract**

My research interest can be framed as an investigation of how the contemporary neoliberal re-ordering of race, class and gender is negotiated, resisted or embraced by (young) socially mobile women at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Through a qualitative mixed-method approach consisting of nine semi-structured, open-ended interviews with ten women and auto-ethnography, I wrote into existence counter-representations to the currently hegemonic – mainly northern-based – representations of neoliberal femininities.

The Literature Review provides an overview of existing scholarship on neoliberalism, its intersection with postcolonialism and lastly neoliberal subjectivities/femininities. Given that neoliberalism as an ideology affects all areas of life, the two methodology chapters explore feminist epistemology in relation to neoliberal cooption. Additionally, by taking into account neoliberalism's attendant ideology of non-racialism, I explore the effects of my own white subject position, the world view it affords me as well as how my whiteness affected the encounter with the participants and subsequent representation of their narratives.

By utilizing discourse analysis and by reading the interview transcripts through a lens that allowed me to identify the tension and relationship between the two main neoliberal ideals of freedom and responsibility, I assembled the 'data' into two main clusters. The first cluster – Bodies and Heterosexuality, subdivided into two chapters – broadly explores gendered socialization and the (ab)use of gendered socialization by the neoliberal project as well as the participants' representations of their engagements with male bodies. The second cluster – Education and Freedom – locates the reasons for the participants' wish to become socially mobile/educated; the performances/techniques the participants embrace in order to be able to construct race and gender as choice and concludes with the claim that true human liberation will remain unfinished in neoliberal environments characterized by inequality, non-racialism as well as ideologies of choice and agency which neglect systemic analysis.

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# *Introduction*

‘Re-Externalizing the Revolution’ – the title of this thesis – emerged from the discourses I am surrounded by on a daily basis; discourses which require subjects gendered as men and women to change themselves, to self-manage, to self-responsibilize and to make it against all odds. Sheryl Sandberg, in her highly popular book, asks women to ‘internalize the revolution’, to ‘lean in’<sup>1</sup>, to make themselves ‘subjects of transformation’<sup>2</sup> instead of attempting to understand and change oppressive structures; namely, neoliberalism and its gendered, raced and classed manifestations. The call for men and women to become active citizens is global with local manifestations. In a South African magazine, women are addressed with the following words:

“While we have made significant progress, I believe that it is necessary to ensure that women across all industries seize the opportunities available in the workplace. Women need to acquire education, secure employment and explore their entrepreneurial flair to get out of poverty and oppression.”<sup>3</sup>

The above quote makes apparent the link between neoliberal discourses and subjectivity; however, most neoliberal critiques in South Africa focus on policies and the economic effects of neoliberalism and scholarship exploring the link between subjectivity and neoliberalism is still mainly produced in the global North. I thus started this project with the realization that the individual – the subject – is at the heart of the neoliberal project. However, there was a range of

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<sup>1</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, WH Allen: New York, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cristina Alcade, “Feminism and Women’s Control over Their Bodies in a Neoliberal Context: A Closer Look at Pregnant Women on Bed Rest”, *Feminist Formations*, Volume 25, Number 3, Winter 2013, pp. 33-56, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Publisher’s *Most Inspiring and Powerful Women Magazine* 2012 / 2013

possibilities for an engagement with the discursive power of neoliberalism: the media, commodification of bodies, development, etc.; yet, I was – due to my personal biography as well as previous research – drawn to the meaning of higher education for socially mobile subjects and specifically subjects gendered as women. I set out to interrogate the meaning of ideas about choice, agency, responsibility and freedom in a South African neoliberal landscape characterized by a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor. Thus, the specific interest in women can be located in the realization that neoliberal discourses about self-empowerment as well as success strongly focus on young women; and specifically young, socially mobile black women who have been defined as group worthy of ‘investment’.

South African women are, through these neoliberal discourses, asked to create their own opportunities, to become successful and failure to do so – as the above quote implies – constructs one as lazy and thus responsible for one’s own failure. The ten participants I spoke with for this project are women who as mobile subjects are subjects on the brink of inclusion into a growing black middle-class; however, even though in many ways ‘freer’ than generations of black women before them, the participants face new (structural) challenges due to the ascent of neoliberalism and its accompanying re-organization of race, class and gender. This re-organization specifically manifests in educational environments and given my own presence at UCT it was only natural to speak to women within this space. Education has, historically and now in a neoliberal context, always been based on certain forms of exclusion and thus led to normalizing an individualized outlook which tells people to be active about their own life without worrying too much about others who do not make it. However, what is new about the neoliberal context is the presence of

contradictions, the ability of neoliberalism to exclude and include at the same time.<sup>4</sup> The participants belong to this previously excluded group – given their race, gender and class background; however, the meaning of this ‘inclusion’ is not as straight-forward as might appear at first.

The exact source of my interest in neoliberalism and its effects on gender, race and class is difficult to locate. Given my academic background in Economics, International Studies and for the past two and a half years, Gender Studies, I see this project as a coming together of these disciplines which have intellectually shaped me; but also, this project needs to be read as an attempt to make sense of my own past and present (and future) life, my whiteness, gender and class (mobility). This thesis, and the process of creating new knowledge, speaks in various ways to the course of my life, specifically over the past one and a half years. I have conceptualized, thought through, written – and to a large extent – lived in this project.

Starting out with a theoretical interest in neoliberalism, I soon came to realize that neoliberalism could not be theorized without paying close attention to its effects on race, class and gender. Given my embodiment, I was interested to find out how other women experience and live their gender, race and class in neoliberal(izing) contexts. The embodied nature of research is taken seriously; and hence, my own embodiment as well as the embodiment of the participants form an integral part in my analysis of neoliberalism. Yet, after some time, I also realized that neoliberalism takes on a very specific form in South Africa due to the country’s historical trajectory and it thus also became necessary for me to look at the intersection between neoliberalism and postcolonialism. These theories of neoliberalism, postcolonialism and their

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<sup>4</sup> Jean and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”, *Public Culture*, Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 291-343, p. 298.

influence on subjectivity and specifically femininity are explored in the Literature Review. However, the Literature Review also helped me to identify gaps and areas of interest which further guided my own research process. I was specifically taken aback by the recognition that scholarship on neoliberal subjectivity within a South African context and its mediation by gender, race and class is still largely lacking even though this is an important area of research.

The two Methodology chapters are of utmost importance to this project which aims to not only be a political but also an epistemic intervention. Specifically, three key ideas are addressed: the operation of certain subjects as normative; the racial nature of modernity and the co-option of feminism, as a political and epistemic project, by neoliberalism. Given that my epistemology is one which takes gender and race seriously, I had to explore my whiteness as well as the effects of this subject position on the research in-depth. It thus became apparent that this kind of epistemology influenced by feminism, critical race studies as well as anti-capitalist theory, is one which constantly interrogates, one which takes nothing for granted. I conducted nine semi-structured, open-ended interviews with ten women but also used auto-ethnography as a method in order to be able to be highly self-reflexive and explore my relationship to the participants throughout the project. This mixed-method approach proved extremely helpful in the writing process as it allowed me to interrogate how the white subject – myself, the researcher – is implicated in the construction of black subjects, the participants. Methodology Chapter One and Two consequently explore this embodied nature of qualitative research specifically within neoliberal environments characterized by ideologies of non-racialism.

By employing ‘discourse’ analysis and auto-ethnography, I identified two key areas I wanted to think through: (1) Bodies and Heterosexuality and (2) Education and Freedom. These themes emerged by reading the conversations between the participants and myself through a lens which

enabled me to identify the tension and relationship between two key neoliberal concepts: responsibility and freedom.<sup>5</sup> However, once these two thematic clusters were identified, it became apparent that these two key concepts needed to be traced back to various discourses and historical developments; and that neoliberal ideology appropriated these concepts and – in the process – re-signified them.

The first cluster – Bodies and Heterosexuality – was in the writing process further subdivided into two with the first part – Chapter Four – addressing gendered socialization and specifically the ways women’s bodies are responsabilized in the process of growing up within the space of the heterosexual family; and how this traditional responsabilization of female bodies is used by neoliberalism. Chapter Five then addresses how women’s bodies are compromised in heterosexual relationships as well as the difficult process of negotiating and maintaining – internal and external – heterosexual desirability. The second cluster – Education and Freedom – subdivided into three, addresses: (1) the space of the family not only as integral to the making of gendered, raced and classed subjects; but also, the making of aspirational subjects; (2) the discussion – introduced in Chapter Four – on transcending the gendered and raced body is again taken up in the context of education as a tool to initiate and negotiate this transcendence and (3) the last part then, by bringing the previous chapters as well as the sub-themes together, argues that human emancipation will remain an empty promise in neoliberal contexts characterized by non-racialism, heterosexual and gendered demands on women as well as by the emphasis on internal/individual change and the negligence of the need for structural change.

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<sup>5</sup> Aihwa Ong, “Boundary crossings: Neoliberalism as a mobile technology”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 32, No. 1, Jan., 2007, p. 4.

In the words of Sara Ahmed, I have, for the past two and a half years been engaged in an ‘ethnography of words’; certain words captured my interest – choice, responsibility, freedom, agency – and I have been “following them around”<sup>6</sup>. At times, these words, in their neoliberal manifestation, made me feel highly uncomfortable and angry; yet, realizing that they had different meanings and material effects before their co-option, I sometimes managed to make peace with them again. To create knowledge through an epistemology which allows the researcher to take embodiment, and representations thereof, seriously has thus allowed me to write a critique of the neoliberal project from the representations of the raced, gendered and classed bodies of women which were generated through my research process.

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<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Feminism is Sensational” at <http://feministkilljoys.com/2013/10/03/feminism-is-sensational/>, accessed 5 April 2014.

# *Chapter One*

## *Literature Review*

“How do we theorise the multifarious manifestations of global neoliberal rationalities in Africa, complete with their attendant constructions of gender and sexual politics?”<sup>7</sup>

Social relations have been reconfigured by neoliberalism – and accompanying notions and ways of being – in the past few decades. This Literature Review sets out to locate my study within the existing literature on neoliberalism and postcolonialism, subjectivity as well as studies on (young) women. I start off by historicizing neoliberalism specifically in a South African context and provide definition(s) of neoliberalism as an economic / political ideology and then move on to review literature on how neoliberalism creates new subjectivities paying attention specifically to literature on gender and race in a postcolonial/neoliberal context; given the realization that neoliberalism and attendant subjectivities do not exist in a vacuum. This review is thus made up of a number of interconnected themes which grew and expanded in the course of my ongoing research.

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<sup>7</sup> Amina Mama, Call for Contributions Feminist Africa Issue 20: Pan-Africanism, Editor: Amina Mama, at [http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/attachments\\_news/call\\_for\\_contributions\\_feminist\\_africa\\_issue\\_20.pdf](http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/attachments_news/call_for_contributions_feminist_africa_issue_20.pdf), accessed 6 October 2013.

## **i. (Neo-) liberalism**

A review of literature on neoliberalism is not complete without summarizing the work of scholars such as Wendy Brown, David Harvey, Nikolas Rose and Aihwa Ong whose writings are influenced by Michel Foucault's work from the 1970s on neoliberalism as a governmental rationality. The salience of Foucault to the writers I engage with cannot be denied; however, and with the knowledge that neoliberalism as a political and economic system takes on unique forms depending on a country's historical and current context, a specific focus is on South Africa, the location of this research project. This means that this Literature Review specifically engages the intersection between neoliberalism and postcolonialism and how this intersection mediates understandings and performances of race and gender. Foucault's insights are thus being considered through the above-mentioned as well as other contemporary scholars as this current research is more relevant to neoliberalism's restructuring of race, class and gender in a South African context.

### **Historical development: From liberalism to neoliberalism**

Liberalism was born through capitalism, through a rising bourgeoisie.<sup>8</sup> Traditional liberal values, such as individual autonomy and self-fulfilment and the view "that the good society should allow each individual the maximum freedom from interference by others."<sup>9</sup> However, liberalism, like most political philosophies/theories – is not static; but rather, moves with the times and occasionally makes compromises through an incorporation of its critiques.

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<sup>8</sup> Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers: New Jersey, 1983, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Neoliberalism has its roots in liberal ideology. Liberalism emerged during the French and American revolutions which occurred in opposition to monarchy. Originally, liberalism as an economic theory – major liberal economic theory was developed by Adam Smith – stated that wealth is created within a country through free (meaning, no government interference) trade, competition and enterprise. Over time, liberalism changed and governments were allowed to intervene at certain historical moments; however, the world is again experiencing a move toward deregulation: neoliberalism.<sup>10</sup>

Countries which adopt neo-liberalism are basically restricting the state's authority by emphasizing market-led 'development'<sup>11</sup> over state-led 'development'. Neoliberal ideology claims that markets are more efficient than states in bringing about 'development' given that markets are supposedly neutral and thus do not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, class, etc... Governments which are going through a neoliberal restructuring process increasingly privatize essential services such as health care and education and work towards creating a conducive environment for business through liberalizing and deregulating capital, goods and labour markets.<sup>12</sup> Consequences of these policies are often gendered in that women are being more negatively affected than men.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Bishop, *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People*, Zed Books: London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2002, p. 159.

<sup>11</sup> I am not comfortable with the word 'development' and it is hence used in quotation marks. I put this feeling down to the fact that the hegemonic understanding of 'development' is Eurocentric and capitalist as well as largely silent on gender as well as race and their structural manifestations. If gender is taken into account, it is located within a gender mainstream as well as gender expert approach which exposes the appropriation/theft of 'gender' by technocrats. Additionally, I concur with el Saadawi that "[t]he word 'development' means neo-colonialism, robbing people's economic and intellectual riches in Africa, Asia and Latin America." (el Saadawi in Desiree Lewis, 'Discursive Challenges for African Feminism', *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, 2008, 20: pp. 77–96, at [http://www.questjournal.net7volXX7Quest\\_XX\\_Lewis.pdf](http://www.questjournal.net7volXX7Quest_XX_Lewis.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, "Chapter 2 – Liberalization and Deregulation: The Route to Gender Equality? ", in *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, 2005, p. 26, at

Aihwa Ong's work provides an overview over analytical concepts and analysis of the neoliberal project and thus serves as a foundation/introduction for the study of neoliberalism.<sup>14</sup> Ong distinguishes between two analyses of neoliberalism: Neoliberalism with a capital N as a broad analysis on a structural (economic policy) level which, however, neglects the distinctiveness of different countries in which neoliberal transformations occur. Instead, Ong suggests an analysis of neoliberalism as "a technology of governing 'free subjects' that co-exists with other political rationalities."<sup>15</sup> According to Ong, neoliberalism

"[...] has been defined as a mode of 'governing through freedom' that requires people to be free and self-managing in different spheres of everyday life – health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, etc. There is also a stress on responsibility at the community level, and new requirements of self-responsibility by individual subjects. Neoliberalism as a governing by calculation suggests new relations between the governing, the self-governed and the space of administration."<sup>16</sup>

Ong stresses that neoliberalism is not so much about the re-organization of (global) markets but about managing a country's population. Thus, neoliberalism as a technique aims to transform a country's elite into self-managing and responsible subjects.<sup>17</sup>

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[http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentid=E551AD2D6642E2B0C1256FB1004B5419&parentdoctype=documentauxiliarypage&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/%28httpAuxPages%29/E551AD2D6642E2B0C1256FB1004B5419/\\$file/GE\\_04Chap2.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/httpNetITFramePDF?ReadForm&parentid=E551AD2D6642E2B0C1256FB1004B5419&parentdoctype=documentauxiliarypage&netitpath=80256B3C005BCCF9/%28httpAuxPages%29/E551AD2D6642E2B0C1256FB1004B5419/$file/GE_04Chap2.pdf), accessed March 2013.

<sup>13</sup> "Some of the key challenges that feminist analyses pose to conventional approaches to structural adjustment can be highlighted in the following way. The first has to do with the reconceptualising of "the economic" to take account of women's unremunerated work in food production and processing, child-care and housework. Structural adjustment policies overstretch women's time and labour in two main ways. One is by increasing women's productive activities: women spend more time working or taking on additional jobs due to economic need and as a strategy for household survival. The second is through reproductive burdens, in that women have to compensate for cutbacks in social services by additional care-giving activities." Charmaine Pereira, "Between Knowing and Imagining: What Space for Feminism in Scholarship on Africa?", *Feminist Africa*, Issue 1, 2002, accessed at [http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa\\_1\\_feature\\_article\\_2.pdf](http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_1_feature_article_2.pdf), on 5 February 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Aihwa Ong, "Boundary crossings: Neoliberalism as a mobile technology", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 32, No. 1, Jan., 2007, pp. 3-8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Wendy Brown, another major contemporary theorist of neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivities, states that

“[...]in order to comprehend neoliberalism's political and cultural effects, it must be conceived of as more than a set of free market economic policies that dismantle welfare states and privatize public services in the North, make wreckage of efforts at democratic sovereignty or economic self-direction in the South, and intensify income disparities everywhere. Certainly neoliberalism comprises these effects, but as a political rationality, it also involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state.”<sup>18</sup>

For Brown, neoliberalism cannot be equated to an economic or political ideology but rather: “a political rationality is a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship. A political rationality governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains.”<sup>19</sup> According to Brown, neoliberalism does not influence non-economic spheres through a leakage but is imposed on these spheres deliberately. In her article, Brown continues to outline the main features of neoliberalism. Firstly, neoliberalism operates on the assumption – hence ‘neo’ – that free trade, free markets and entrepreneurial subjectivities are already the norm and thus largely achieved considering that they are included in political, economic and juridical texts.<sup>20</sup> The second feature of neoliberalism as a political rationality is that it has become normative in that both the economic as well as the political spheres are increasingly dominated by market rationality. States thus implement

“a host of policies that figure and produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for "self-care"-their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions, whether as welfare recipients, medical patients, consumers of pharmaceuticals, university students, or workers in ephemeral occupations.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 6, 2006, pp. 690-714, p. 693.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 694.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

And lastly, the rise of a technocratic group of politicians can be witnessed, turning governance into a business-like venture. Even though Brown's article is located in an American context and analyses neoconservatism and neoliberalism, one can see many commonalities between her descriptions and the South African context (see below). In the latter part of the article, Brown speaks about a neoliberal conception of freedom which equates democracy with the existence of formal rights and voting.<sup>22</sup> This text is immensely helpful in placing South Africa as a neoliberal state.

Jean and John Comaroff's research has been helpful in locating the emergence of neoliberalism in world political and economic developments and through introducing key challenges researchers might encounter when trying to understand the current historical moment. Neoliberalism's effects are understood in a holistic way by critically reflecting on the redefinition of the nation-state, civil society, democracy, empowerment, class, gender and race. The essay is meant to serve as an introduction to the vast contradictions inherent in the present moment.<sup>23</sup>

“We seek, here, to interrogate the *experiential* contradictions at the core of neoliberal capitalism, of capitalism in its millennial manifestation: the fact that it appears both to include and to marginalize in unanticipated ways; to produce desire and expectation on a global scale (Trouillot 1999) yet to decrease the certainty of work or the security of persons; to magnify class differences but to undercut class consciousness; above all, to offer up vast, almost instantaneous riches to those who master its spectral technologies—and, simultaneously, to threaten the very existence of those who do not.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 703.

<sup>23</sup> Jean and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”, *Public Culture*, Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 291-343, p. 293.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 298.

The article starts off by defining consumption and its changed meaning. Consumption has become the measure of success, health and the postmodern person is often understood to be a “subject made with objects”<sup>25</sup> and thus the authors’ state, consumption has become the “privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity [...]”<sup>26</sup>

Most importantly for my research, the article makes frequent references to the meaning of liberation under neoliberal conditions. The dismantling of communism and the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism “held out the prospect that everyone would be set free to accumulate and speculate, to consume, and to indulge repressed cravings in a universe of less government, greater privatization, more opulence, infinite enterprise.”<sup>27</sup> What has to be interrogated here - and what I aim to do through my research - is the meaning of these ‘freedoms’ (also to be explored further in the next part of the review).

Of relevance to my research project is also the discussion of the changed significance of race, gender and class.<sup>28</sup> Additionally – and this is discussed further in the next section as well as methodology chapters – the decline in the significance of class as a uniting factor has led to the increased uptake of the feminist slogan ‘The personal is political’ and in fact, the authors contend, “[t]he personal is the only politics there is [...]”<sup>29</sup> This is in line with the increased emphasis on constitutionalism and rights language to achieve equality and ‘empowerment’. Thus, there is no “right to earn or to produce, only to possess, to signify, to consume, to choose.”<sup>30</sup> The authors call this development “the renaissance of procedural democracy, a

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.,p. 330.

‘universal human right’ that transposes freedom into choice by offering empowerment through the ballot’.<sup>31</sup>

### **Neoliberalism in South Africa: Postcolonialism meets Neoliberalism**

*“For a time it looked as though racism had disappeared. [But] this soul-soothing, unreal impression was simply the consequence of the evolution of forms of exploitation. [...]*

*The habit of considering racism as a mental quirk, as a psychological flaw, must be abandoned.”*

- Frantz Fanon<sup>32</sup>

Within the South African context, one cannot avoid noticing how postcolonial messages intersect and collude with neoliberal ideology. Notions of choice, freedom and independence are consequently not only located within (neo)liberal but also postcolonial discourses and it is thus important to set up the tension between these two discourses and by so doing illustrate how young women move within these colluding and competing discourses/ideologies. How then is it possible to start interpreting decolonial possibilities through an anti-capitalist feminist lens? Also, how have decolonial narratives been hijacked by capitalism?

The work of Nigel C. Gibson has been very helpful in conceptualizing South Africa as a postcolonial state given that his work uses Frantz Fanon, black consciousness thinkers and a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, Grove Press: New York, 1964, pp. 37-38.

Marxist lens to make sense of South Africa post 1994. Specifically two texts have been extremely helpful in locating South Africa ideologically and in showing the historical/political development from apartheid to ‘post-apartheid’.<sup>33</sup> I summarize the key points of these two articles and illustrate how Gibson’s theorization – especially of freedom – is crucial to my own theorization of the current historical moment.

“The Pitfalls of South Africa’s “Liberation”, written six years after the first democratic elections, asks many uncomfortable questions and does not provide simple answers. The major exercise the text engages in is to reflect on the question of why so little has changed in post-apartheid South Africa and especially, what has happened to promises of freedom. Gibson engages critically with the way(s) freedom and responsibility are defined/have been re-defined by the ANC’s implementation of neoliberal policies and thus explores more radical definitions specifically by looking through a Fanonian humanist lens. However, he does not blame the uptake of neoliberalism on the West and its institutions (IMF, World Bank) alone but rather on the fact

“that the long and multifaceted struggle in South Africa, which raised many questions and contained many political tendencies, did not create a sufficient culture of discussion and political education and thereby, in Gramsci’s terms, an ethical idea with enough power to challenge the dialectics of a limited transition within the context of a hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism and globalization. It is precisely this type of political education that was not undertaken.”<sup>34</sup>

A more radical humanist freedom has hence not been realized in South Africa since humanism lost in the battle of ideas. Quoting Fanon, Gibson states that in most post-colonial societies, people get lost in the idea of freedom from colonialism – in this case apartheid – neglecting to realize that without structural change exploitation can also ‘wear a black face’ and Gibson thus

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<sup>33</sup> Nigel Gibson, “The Limits of Black Political Empowerment Fanon, Marx, ‘the Poors’ and the ‘new reality of the nation’ in South Africa”, *Theoria*, August 2005, pp. 89 – 118 and “The Pitfalls of South Africa’s “Liberation”, *New Political Science*, Volume 23, Number 3, 2001, pp. 371 – 387.

<sup>34</sup> Nigel Gibson, “The Pitfalls of South Africa’s “Liberation”, *New Political Science*, Volume 23, Number 3, 2001, pp. 371 – 387, p. 376.

argues “that black political emancipation in South Africa is not full emancipation because it leaves the state of human emancipation unfinished.”<sup>35</sup> What I value immensely about Gibson’s work is that it acknowledges the progress achieved in South Africa without excusing the status quo. Such a conceptualization is needed for this project in which I spoke to black women who have clearly benefited from constitutional changes; however, his theorization enables me to make sense of their positions in relation to freedom. Later on in the text, he states:

“formal political equality and universal suffrage are seen as enormous steps forward in the prevailing scheme. But it is the prevailing scheme of things—the South African state (inherited from apartheid) and the disciplining whip of capitalist neoliberal globalization—that remains the determinant.”<sup>36</sup>

This idea, that a neoliberal state remains the determinant in people’s lives, that the political settlement in a way overshadows the economic settlement, is immensely helpful for my project. Gibson also looks at how ‘race’ is being used by the ANC government and states that even though the language of race is employed, race is not viewed as a ‘political phenomenon’ but instead, racial discourse happens, most of the time, divorced from a capitalist critique.<sup>37</sup>

Research conducted by Zimitri Erasmus at the University of Cape Town further proves the value of using a Fanonian conception of race in a post-1994 context.<sup>38</sup> Amongst other things, Erasmus shows how black students are still moving through the educational environment with internalized racial inferiority in this supposedly post-race context. She ends the text with the following call to action:

“Post-apartheid South Africa is hungry ground for a critical humanist path toward promised freedom. This path demands fierce hope and perpetual vigilance. It has no route

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<sup>35</sup> Nigel Gibson, “The Limits of Black Political Empowerment Fanon, Marx, ‘the Poores’ and the ‘new reality of the nation’ in South Africa”, *Theoria*, August 2005, pp. 89 – 118, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> Z. E. Erasmus, “Living the Future Now: ‘Race’ and Challenges of Transformation in Higher Education”, *SAJHE*, Volume 20, Number 3, 2006, pp. 51-63.

for the anti-politics of resignation, indifference and denial. It demands living the future now.”<sup>39</sup>

David Theo Goldberg’s book *The Threat of Race – Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* and specifically the last two chapters were extremely helpful for thinking about race in neoliberal/postcolonial South Africa. Since 1994, South Africa has focused on building a united nation, on building unity out of racial, class and in general, historic divisions. In order to forge a united citizenry, after 300 years of colonialism and apartheid, the new, postcolonial South Africa has adopted the notion of nonracialism which aims to eradicate race and racial thinking. According to Goldberg, nonracialism has meant three things:

“First, it is a commitment to the claim that race has no reality, races do not exist, they are social fictions explaining nothing. Second, there should be a commitment to a singular nationality as unifying attachment, no matter the number and kind of subsumed groups. And third, nonracialism signals the commitment to negating racism and its effects, purging race from the explicit commerce of the state, and committing in principle and in practice to universal citizenship.”<sup>40</sup>

Citizens of the new South Africa have a right to be free from race. However, freedom from race in a context in which the material conditions were and continue to be shaped by one’s race. Thus, “effective nation-making too often presupposes forgetting, forgoing of the memory of past injustice as prelude to living together.”<sup>41</sup> South Africa, a new, modern, postcolonial and neoliberal state has adopted the principal function of most modern states, to manage its citizenry. The time of the emergence of the ‘new’ South Africa, coincided with a time in which the welfare state/caretaker state was, throughout most of the world, being replaced by neoliberal forms of governance. This has consequently also meant that “South Africa has now been fully reinserted

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>40</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race – Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2009, p. 318.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 308.

into the geopolitical economy and its contemporaneous reordering of race.”<sup>42</sup> However, and as reflected in the Literature Review, neoliberalism has not meant a disappearance of the state but rather, a change in the state’s functions and actions and modes of power. Thus, the embrace of nonracialism needs to be viewed in this light, in a shift away from race to an emphasis on individualized merit; away from structure to agency.<sup>43</sup>

Later on in the chapter, Goldberg looks at the way choice has been socially constructed within the new South Africa as deracialized. Thus, South Africans of any race now have multiple choices available when it comes to where they want to work, go to school and university, consume, etc. However, he concludes that this is less about having the choice to be free than “the freedom of choice, this latter liberty is all about affordability.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, in line with Grant Farred, Golberg states that what we are currently experiencing in South Africa is ‘the pretence of choice’, of choice being there as a possibility as long as one’s material conditions support this choice. He goes further to say that:

“This pretence of choice perfectly characterizes the neoliberal condition. It is choice within the limits of one’s means and networks, one’s inheritance and education, one’s class and gender, all which are racially marked if much less deeply and directly determined than under apartheid.”<sup>45</sup>

Henry Giroux points out that the question of how neoliberalism has framed/constructed racial discourses and practices has not yet been addressed sufficiently by scholars.<sup>46</sup> As outlined by Goldberg, he also states that we are currently witnessing a discourse of nonracialism which supports and gives credibility to the neoliberal project.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>46</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial”, *Communication Education*, Volume 52, Issue 3-4, 2003, pp. 191-211, p. 198.

However, not only race but also gender has acquired new meanings in a postcolonial, post 1994 neoliberal South Africa. This last section hence explores the work of African feminist theorists whose work addresses the re-organization/re-imagining of gender (and race) in post-colonial/neoliberal contexts.

An ethnographic study of Manenberg by Elaine Salo focuses on the meaning of young women's gendered citizenship in relation to "time as lived, (through space); not synchronically or diachronically but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences." Salo opens with this quote by Achille Mbembe to illustrate that

"these poor young women's experiences of material deprivation and social violence place them in a 'time' that cannot be considered to be modern in terms of the linear narration of modernisation. For if we are to equate the quintessential modern moment with peace and stability, then how can we be living in the African modern paradise that most in the West perceive South Africa to be, at least by economic standards? How then do these young women, and other members of their community, make sense of this location, at once within the 'modern' and yet forever not a part of it; forever yearning for it?"<sup>47</sup>

Salo, by narrating the story of Lindsey, a young woman residing in Manenberg who was raped, makes visible these multiple temporalities as lived on the periphery and negotiated by young women. Additionally, the critique of modernity she puts forward in the article has been very helpful given that this project is also one that questions the official (historical) narrative of modernity. Looking at post-Apartheid South Africa, Salo states the following:

"In the post-Apartheid, neo-liberal narrative of modernity, with its emphasis on non-racism, non-sexism and legislated equal access to the economic market, the 'New South Africans' are constructed as the brave new, 'nonracial' entrepreneurs with equal opportunity in the marketplace, who are 'free' to explore relations across erstwhile constraining racial and spatial divides. Yet what happens when this linear narration of neo-liberal economic progress comes up against the continued material constraints of economic deprivation and spatial marginality?"<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Elaine Salo, "Coconuts do not live in Townships: Cosmopolitanism and its Failures in the Urban Peripheries of Cape Town", *Feminist Africa*, pp. 11-21, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Pumla Gqola, looking at the meaning of empowerment and gender discourses, states that:

“discourses of gender in the South African public sphere are very conservative in the main: they speak of ‘women’s empowerment’ in ways that are not transformative, and as a consequence, they exist very comfortably alongside overwhelming evidence that South African women are not empowered: the rape and other gender based violence statistics, the rampant sexual harassment at work and public spaces, the siege on Black lesbians and raging homophobia, the very public and relentless circulation of misogynist imagery, metaphors and language.”<sup>49</sup>

Gqola criticizes the exclusiveness of this empowerment discourse, the lack of structural critique and the attempt to assimilate women into the currently existing order. Additionally, she describes the continued presence of the public/private divide in which women are only empowered in public places, such as work as well as educational spaces, whereas the private sphere remains largely unchanged: “Outside of work, the dominant gender-talk is that women must adhere to very limiting notions of femininity.”<sup>50</sup> Gqola also points out the contradictions between having a progressive legislation and the continued unfreedoms women face in terms of movement, safety and sexuality. These words are very important to my project as one can again see how freedom is gendered; how, depending on the body through which one lives, certain freedoms are accessible and others continue to be (systematically) denied. Below, I quote at length because the following words are very important for this project:

“Revolutionary work is always hard work, as Steve Biko (1978) also taught us. With his comrades in the Black Consciousness movement, they left us a legacy which teaches us that what we think about ourselves, how we feel, how we function in the world can be unlearned. Psychological liberation matters. We need psychological liberation from violent masculinities and the cult of femininity — to learn to engage as partners across

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<sup>49</sup> Pumla D. Gqola, “How the ‘cult of femininity’ and violent masculinities support endemic gender based violence in contemporary South Africa”, *African Identities*, 5:1, 2007, pp. 111-124, p. 115.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

genders, to respect women's bodily autonomy and entitlement to sexual and other pleasures. We need to disown violence everywhere except in self-defence."<sup>51</sup>

However, as I want to claim in this thesis, psychological liberation has been appropriated by neoliberal discourse, in which one is supposed to free oneself from race and gender, to construct race and gender as choice (see above).

Desiree Lewis, in a text entitled "Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms", looks at a number of themes which are important to this project: the importance of paying attention to discourses and words; the re-structuring of higher education as well as Gender Studies as a field; rights discourses and the appropriation of feminism by the neoliberal and postcolonial state.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, she states that paying attention to how discourses operate and sanitize radical political vocabulary should not be seen as an indulgence; but rather, needs to be conceptualized as characteristic of our current time.

### **Feminism – from a difficult marriage with Marxism to a dangerous love affair with neoliberalism**

In the 1970s and 1980s one could still hear public debates about in the interconnectedness and troubled relationship between Marxism and Feminism.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy was debated within the (global?) feminist movement. And even though this debate was mostly silent about issues of race, it generated much needed insights and critique.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>52</sup> Desiree Lewis, 'Discursive Challenges for African Feminism', *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, 2008, 20: 77–96. [http://www.questjournal.net7volXX7Quest\\_XX\\_Lewis.pdf](http://www.questjournal.net7volXX7Quest_XX_Lewis.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Hester Eisenstein, "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization", *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, No. 3, The Deep Structure of the Present Moment, July 2005, pp. 487-518, p. 488.

However, as Eisenstein claims, today we need to also ask: “in what ways [...] the contemporary women’s movement facilitated the growth and spread of corporate globalization?”<sup>54</sup> The text is useful to this project in that I am taking this question seriously; however, I also need to strongly highlight what disturbed me about this text.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the article, it can be concluded that the noun ‘women’ stands for white women given that whenever the author acknowledges differences, women are further marked through adjectives such as ‘black’ and ‘immigrant’. So even though there is a certain progressiveness to the text in that differences are acknowledged, white woman as universal is not decentered. White woman represents the norm. This troubled me in that this linguistic move also plays into capitalism/neoliberalism. Hence, throughout this dissertation, even though taking Eisenstein’s insights into account, I also write against the notion of the normative white woman.

Nancy Fraser also writes about the entanglement of feminism with capitalism.<sup>56</sup> The aim of her essay is to “revive the sort of socialist-feminist theorizing that first inspired [her] decades ago and that still seems to offer our best hope for clarifying the prospects for gender justice in the present period.”<sup>57</sup> Fraser interrogates how neoliberalism and second-wave feminism are entangled and how/why feminism flourished under neoliberalism. She claims that neoliberalism changed the content of feminist ideals. According to Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (quoted by Fraser), capitalism remakes itself at certain historical moments to incorporate its critiques. It

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> In the methodology chapters, I argue that this project needs to be viewed as a political as well as epistemic intervention into neoliberal discourses and materialities.

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History”, *New Left Review* 56, March/April 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

was thus that state control was replaced by flexibility and freedom which led to the development of the “masculinist romance of the free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual.”<sup>58</sup>

The above theorists reminded me of the importance to write a feminist thesis which is highly aware of the danger of appropriation and which exposes the ways in which capitalism has thus far managed to appropriate revolutionary projects/movements.

## **ii. Subjectivity**

Given the above literature, I realized that by failing to take the continuing importance of race seriously, I would be supporting the claims of neoliberal ideology postulating that race has lost meaning and instead, hard work and personal choices are what determines one’s life trajectory. As shown above, neoliberalism pushes discourses of classlessness and racelessness. How then does race continue to define femininity in neoliberal South Africa? How does race influence choice as well as ideas of success and empowerment and how does race intersect with class and gender? Below, I review literature on racialized femininities in an attempt to explore how contemporary socioeconomic realities influence notions of black (and white) femininities. This involves an overview of literature on modernity and postcolonialism. This part is then imperative in illustrating that class and race and the intersection between the two continue to shape choices and opportunities for young women.

Many young black women in South Africa continue to be structurally disadvantaged by poverty and racism. Race continues to shape available opportunities and choices for the performances femininity. Motsemme emphasises the “historical violences in which these young women’s

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

subjectivities are embedded” and states that “we must revisit what it is we mean by [...] ‘choosing life’.”<sup>59</sup> However, in as much as the category of young women cannot be essentialized neither can the category of young black women but instead, one needs to use an intersectional theory of young womanhood that takes race, class, gender, location, etc. into account. However, as mentioned in the previous parts of the Literature Review, ‘blackness’ and its performance has taken on a variety of new meanings in post-apartheid South Africa. Posel points this out by referring to the “eroticization of liberation” in which “[p]opular magazines targeting the aspirant black elite, and advertising campaigns aimed at black consumers, craft the message that blackness – and the newfound freedom to be and assert a stylish blackness – is sexy [...]”<sup>60</sup> Additionally, young black women’s sexuality is much more framed within discourses of danger and HIV/AIDS and thus pathologized to an extent that white women’s sexuality is not. A question to be explored with my research is thus if the new successful form of femininity is shaped in the image of white-middle class femininity which would imply that young black women’s actions aspire to embody this specific racialized and classed form of femininity.

### **Young women as neoliberal subjects**

*I am torn between seeing myself and the three other young women as autonomous, as being empowered and in control of our contraceptive choices*

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<sup>59</sup>Nthabiseng Motsemme, “‘Loving in a time of hopelessness’: on township women's subjectivities in a time of HIV/AIDS”, *African Identities*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2007, pp. 61-87, p. 63.

<sup>60</sup>Deborah Posel, “Sex, Death and the Fate of the Nation: Reflections on the Politicization of Sexuality in Post-apartheid South Africa”, *Africa*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2005, pp. 125-153, p. 132.

*and as completely regulated; but, I am also aware that it is more complicated than that – much more.*<sup>61</sup>

“It seems to me that exploring the relationship of changing forms of political organization, social relations and cultural practices to changing modes and experiences of subjecthood and subjectivity are among the most important and urgent tasks for critical intellectual work.”<sup>62</sup>

For Gill, such research is vital for gaining an understanding of agency, power and ideology. Even though her article is geographically located in the West (United Kingdom) and intellectually in media studies, she points out important intellectual as well as conceptual challenges which apply to my research. Gill illustrates that studies on subjectivity are very few and instead, the focus has been mainly on discourses. This has led to an intellectual gap concerning language and analytical tools which could be used to explore how social and cultural paradigms are internalized. However, Gill also highlights that notions of subjectivity which use the notion of an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ need to be deconstructed and questioned; in fact, they are emblematic of the lack of conceptual tools.<sup>63</sup> According to Gill, the concept of ‘culture’ has recently been reduced to “a mere epiphenomenon, rather than seeing it as a collection of practices that can and do have real, material effects.”<sup>64</sup>

Theoretically, the study of subjectivity needs to be temporarily situated at the shift from studies emphasising women’s victimhood to studies paying increasing attention to women’s choices,

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<sup>61</sup> This excerpt is taken from my Honours Dissertation entitled *Controlling to be free?! Young Women’s Bodies, Contraceptive Choices and the Quest for Freedom* (2012). During the research and writing process, I experienced for the first time the theoretical dilemma of being caught between notions of victimhood and agency.

<sup>62</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times”, *Subjectivity*, 2008, 25, pp. 432 – 445, p. 432.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.

agency and autonomy. Gill questions the extent to which “these terms offer analytical purchase on the complex lived experience of girls and young women’s lives in postfeminist, neoliberal societies.”<sup>65</sup> Also, Gill urges us to think about the consequences that attributing women’s behaviour to autonomous choices has for feminist politics. Specifically the fact that such a conceptualization of young women plays into neoliberal notions of an individual’s responsibility for her own life, her successes and failures (explored further in methodology section).

In the last part of the paper, Gill focuses on neoliberalism and its effects on subjectivity. She states that neoliberalism “has shifted from being a political/economic rationality to a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres. Neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating.”<sup>66</sup> In neoliberal times, “power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation.”<sup>67</sup> According to Gill, neoliberalism is gendered in that women are the ones who are increasingly made to self-regulate/discipline/manage.

There are multiple dangers in attributing all actions and choices – even those detrimental to women – to increased agency. This leads to situations where “women are asked to act as if this is

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<sup>65</sup>Rosalind Gill, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times”, *Subjectivity*, 2008, 25, pp. 432 – 445, p. 435.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 442 – 443.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 439.

I observed these processes of resistance and negotiation in my Honours research. The young women – myself included – spoke about the dislike for a certain contraceptive, their internal struggles and the final acquiescence as it seemed to be the only responsible option we have.

freely chosen and as if they are agents.”<sup>68</sup> For denial of agency would be equated to victimization.

Jessica Ringrose is one of the major theorists on neoliberalism and young women’s education. She identifies the prevalence of a “new seductive narrative about girls’ educational and workplace success, where girls have become a metaphor for social mobility and social change.”<sup>69</sup> She highlights how these neoliberal discourses construct notions of successful girls that are highly contradictory in that young women have to embody masculine and feminine traits.<sup>70</sup> She analyses – within a British environment – how neoliberalism and liberal feminism have become entangled and in fact, how neoliberal discourses make use of liberal feminist vocabulary and goals.

“The reasons why liberal feminism has been taken up in the public sphere are complex, but relate to the way a liberal ethos for a de-raced and de-classed ‘women’ who is to secure individual rights and choose to become ‘somebody’ reconciles completely with a neoliberal programme of individualization, autonomous self-hood and self-responsibilization for either success or failure in globalizing contexts of marketization, insecurity and risk.”<sup>71</sup>

What has become more and more apparent to me in the course of my on-going literature review is that liberal feminism has paved the way for the emergence of a neoliberal feminine subject. This is especially true for government discourses about the empowerment of girls and young women. The South African government uses seemingly empowering language in neoliberal discourses and thus re-signifies the meaning and content of these words.<sup>72</sup> Most importantly

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<sup>68</sup>Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2011, p. 205.

<sup>69</sup> Jessica Ringrose, “Successful girls? Complicating postfeminist, neoliberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality”, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4, July 2007, pp. 471–489, p. 472.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 474.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 480.

<sup>72</sup>F. Miraftab, “Making Neo-liberal Governance: The Disempowering Work of Empowerment”, *International Planning Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4, November 2004, pp. 239–259.

though – and as analysed in the previous part of this Review – neoliberalism does not only resignify liberal feminist vocabulary but emancipatory vocabulary in general (liberatory and spiritual vocabulary). For this research project, this means that I have to pay heightened attention to language, analyse the politics of language.

“By reducing notions of empowerment and participation to individualized and economic change, neo-liberal governance depoliticizes the emancipatory concepts; meanwhile, to seek legitimacy for its acts, it adopts a socially concerned posture of social upliftment that politicizes decisions that government technocrats, policy makers and planners have traditionally claimed as mundane and technical. These sorts of double move—depoliticization/politicization; inclusion/exclusion—are an important feature of neo-liberalism, highlighting the paradox of its policy processes and framework.”<sup>73</sup>

As explored above, the South African government employs neo-liberal discourses in a strategic way. Empowerment discourses are now used to transfer the responsibility of governments to the individual (woman) and thus subjects are ‘forced’ to self-regulate.

(Neo-)liberal values are circulated within South African society through various discourses. In relation to sexuality and contraception, health education campaigns are at the forefront.

According to Posel:

“Sexuality is presented as a site of rational, individual choice and agency – an opportunity for empowerment and ‘healthy positive living’. And the health education campaign is an effort to constitute an essentially modern sexual subject, one who is knowledgeable, responsible, in control, and free to make informed choices [...].”<sup>74</sup>

I claim further that this new sexual subject is gendered – as discourses are specifically aimed at women – raced, classed and neo-liberalized.

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>74</sup>Deborah Posel, “Sex, Death and the Fate of the Nation: Reflections on the Politicization of Sexuality in Post-apartheid South Africa”, *Africa*, Vol. 75, No. 2, 2005, pp. 125-153, p. 134.

Most literature on young women and neoliberalism focuses on education, consumerism, upward mobility, development and sexuality.<sup>75</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff are the editors of a volume of 20 essays entitled *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. The introduction to the volume succinctly outlines the major concepts listed in the title. Neoliberalism is placed historically by identifying its origin in the 1980s in the USA and UK and subsequent spread through international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>76</sup> According to the authors, “[n]eoliberalism is a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising.”<sup>77</sup> One of the major focus points of the edited volume is the relationship between neoliberalism and gendered subjectivities. A variety of issues are explored ranging from beauty practices, consumerism, media and sexuality; however, none of the studies is located in an African context and none uses auto-ethnography as a method. There is hence a gap in the current literature on neoliberalism and young women that my research aims to fill.

Another Volume of essays entitled *Future Girl – Young Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, by Anita Harris, also explores the subjectivity of young women in Western contexts. Harris states that young women have been (discursively) constructed as the ideal subjects of this neoliberal era. However, this ideal embodiment of neoliberal values in young women is always threatened and

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<sup>75</sup> Jessica Ringrose, “Successful girls? Complicating Postfeminist, Neoliberal Discourses of Educational Achievement and Gender Equality”, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4, July 2007, pp. 471–489; Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2011; Louise Archer, “The new neoliberal subjects? Young/er academics’ constructions of professional identity”, *Journal of Education Policy*, 23:3, 2008, pp. 265-285;

<sup>76</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

thus two kinds of young women exist: the “Can-Do” Girl and the “At-Risk” Girl.<sup>78</sup> Like most analyses of subjectivity under neoliberalism, Harris highlights that “[s]tructural disadvantage is recast as poor personal choices, laziness, and incompetent family practices.”<sup>79</sup> Methodologically, she highlights that monolithic conceptualizations of race and class are not helpful in understanding young femininities. Neoliberal messages reach young women in a number of ways and places; however, educational and work spaces are the major sites in which neoliberal messages are received and where young women are “managed into a new female subjectivity of self-disciplining, individualized success.”<sup>80</sup> Harris concludes by stating that discourses about responsibility, choice and effort are meant to “enlist young women into the service of the new economy.”<sup>81</sup>

In order to criticize the formation of neoliberal subjectivities within educational spaces and to offer an alternative to neoliberal narratives of subjectivity, I have found the work of Paulo Freire as well as bell hooks – who makes frequent references to Freire – useful.<sup>82</sup> Both offer tools to think about what education as the ‘practice of freedom’ would mean and are thoroughly radical in their stance. Freire has also been extremely helpful in making sense of the relationship between agency and structure:

“To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people. The objectivistic position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism, which postulates people

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<sup>78</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl – Young Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Routledge: New York, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>82</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Books: London, 1996; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994.

without a world. World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction.”<sup>83</sup>

As this Literature Review has shown, neoliberalism reorganizes understandings and experiences of race, class and gender. My research interest can thus be framed as an investigation of how these re-orderings affect young women at the University of Cape Town who, being from working class backgrounds, are framed as success stories. Additionally, through this Literature Review, I came to realize that this project also needs to be an epistemic intervention given that neoliberalism appropriates and voids radical words and concepts of meaning. Neoliberalism’s effects on knowledge production are thus taken up in the next two chapters.

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<sup>83</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Books: London, 1996, p. 32.

# *Chapter Two*

## *Methodology I*

“The challenge to any non-black academic is to put an end to white innocence, viz. to dare face and bear one’s structural involvement in and profiting from the reproduction of black social death and to work towards its undoing.”<sup>84</sup>

Methodology Chapter I addresses the study’s methodological/epistemological framework, specifically investigating the use of feminist research methodology to explore subjectivity, as well as my own positionality and the problematic epistemic ground I have been walking on. I thus locate myself as a white, able-bodied and heterosexual woman who is geographically dislocated and narrate how this dislocation has led to a critical questioning of white civilization, modernity as well as notions of universality. Given that thinking and writing through this thesis has involved an exposure to a great amount of theoretical literature, which made me realize that methodology is thoroughly political, I decided to divide the methodology section into two chapters in order to accommodate and make accessible the multiplicity of ideas and theories. The second methodology chapter thus describes the different methods I chose to collect data, the

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<sup>84</sup> Sebastian Weier, “Consider Afro-Pessimism”, Draft.

advantages and challenges of using a number of different qualitative research methods as well as a description of how the collected data was analysed.

From the beginning of the research process, I realized that I require a methodological framework which not only witnesses the operation of neoliberal discourses and messages but one that actively interrogates. Being located in Gender Studies, I knew that this methodological standpoint would be a feminist standpoint. To theorize this feminist epistemology as well as methodology appeared straight-forward at the beginning of the research process; yet, once I started moving and living in this project, I realized that ‘feminism’ and its attendant epistemology as well as methodology also need to be problematized and continuously questioned (as does every revolutionary project). Below, I thus outline what have become the ‘general’ principles of feminist research and then, in the next part, I start to trouble these assumptions by reading them against black feminist theory/critiques of whiteness, neoliberal subjectivities as well as my own positionality. In the process, I try to reflect on a number of questions: What does it mean to undertake feminist research at the current historical moment? How are neoliberalism and feminist theory entangled?<sup>85</sup> And how is gender, as an analytical as well as epistemic category, implicated in neoliberalism as well as the past and present project of racialization?

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<sup>85</sup> This entanglement has already been explored in the Literature Review; however, in the two Methodology Chapters, I pay attention to the epistemic entanglement/co-option.

## **i. The study's methodological/epistemological framework**

### **Feminist epistemology**

Feminist epistemology can broadly be defined as the different ways of knowing which specifically highlight women's experiences and take into account women's social position within society. It also positions women as agents of knowledge instead of merely objects of knowledge production. Feminist epistemology has thus exposed the limits and biases of (white) male-centered approaches to knowledge production in which (white) men's experiences have been universalized. Feminist epistemology consequently brought about a certain epistemic rupture by challenging notions of universality as well as previously normalized 'ways of knowing' (such as quantitative methods and notions of objectivity). However, Patricia Hill Collins states that historically and also contemporarily,

“what we have is a quantitative, abstract, objective macrosociology symbolizing the hard sciences – the male, the White, the subject, the universal – juxtaposed and defining itself in opposition to a qualitative, contextualized, interpretive microsociology referencing the “soft” sciences – the female, the Black, the Other, the Different.”<sup>86</sup>

Ways of knowing have thus been challenged but are – to a large extent – still caught in a male-defined binary attributing more value to (white) male-centered ways of knowing. Additionally, given that hegemonic feminist theory emerged from a white, western theoretical framework, the first generation of feminist thinkers became guilty of the same universalizing narratives they accused white men of. Hence, white, mostly middle-class, women universalized their experiences and as a result, their scholarship suffered from their privileged position within

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<sup>86</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1998, p. 104.

society. Hill Collins thus states: “elites possess the power to legitimate the knowledge that they define as theory as being universal, normative, and ideal.”<sup>87</sup> She concludes that people who have previously been excluded from knowledge production – people of color as well as white women<sup>88</sup> – are supposed to create knowledge according to the standards of the dominant groups.<sup>89</sup> Epistemology and power are thus inseparable; certain knowledges are created to maintain and hide really existing power structures and thus, knowledge has often served the economic as well as political interests of the bourgeoisie in the past and present.

At the beginning of this project, I embraced gender theory (colour) blindly. As the literature review has illustrated, this project clearly identifies the limitations of traditional approaches to knowledge production about neoliberalism and neoliberal femininity. Hence, I knew that my use of feminist epistemology, as well as of the category of gender, needs to be deeply investigated as well as showing an awareness of the history of the appropriation of feminism as a movement and as an epistemological approach. Below, I thus list the three main principles of feminist research, sourced from a reading of Jennifer Brayton’s “What Makes Feminist Research Feminist? The Structure of Feminist Research within the Social Sciences”<sup>90</sup>; but instead of taking them for granted, I throw them into a certain existential crisis by reading them against three works of Sabine Broeck<sup>91</sup> as well as Black feminist theory/epistemology. The reasons I specifically chose

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. xiii

<sup>88</sup> Even though white women are often also understood as a historically disadvantaged group, the pairing of white women and people of colour is not meant to equate these forms of exclusion. I am aware that men and women of colour as a group and white women as a group have been excluded for different ideological purposes.

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1998, p. xx.

<sup>90</sup> Jennifer Brayton, “What Makes Feminist Research Feminist? The Structure of Feminist Research within the Social Sciences, Retrieved April 15, 2008, from [www.unb.ca/PAR-L/win/feminmethod.htm](http://www.unb.ca/PAR-L/win/feminmethod.htm).

<sup>91</sup> Sabine Broeck, “Re-reading de Beauvoir ‘after race’: *Woman-as-slave* revisited”, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 2011, 14: 1&2, pp. 167-184; “Property: White Gender and Slavery”, *Gender Forum*, Issue

Broeck's works are: (1) Being introduced to her work finally offered me someone I could identify with given that she is a white German woman (although older) whose work addresses topics I am interested in and (2) how she deals with her white positionality specifically when engaging with work produced by Black feminist scholars:

“Talking about the challenge of Black Feminism entails, of course, a problematic stance for a white feminist like myself, and a German at that, who needs to steer clear of ventriloquism or unbidden translation. Instead I want to speak here as a white feminist scholar who considers herself an *addressee*, a *spoken-to*, of the epistemic challenge which Black Feminism has posed to any critical theory of transatlantic modernity—in my case, white Gender Studies.”<sup>92</sup>

The remainder of this first part thus undertakes this critical reading of feminist epistemology. The first principle common to feminist research is an analysis of power relations. Secondly, Brayton states that: “Research must serve the interests of women instead of being a tool to support the dominant masculine world view.”<sup>93</sup> And thirdly, feminist research involves taking women's standpoint in the world seriously by grounding women's experiences in the wider historical and socio-economic context.<sup>94</sup> All these points are valid and certainly essential to feminist epistemology. However, I want to trouble and stretch the above points against the above-mentioned readings and against a history of feminist appropriation.

Given the existence of numerous feminisms and accompanying epistemologies, power as a concept is theorized differently according to the ideological orientation of the feminist scholar. Surely, every feminist epistemology theorizes patriarchal power; yet, the ways in which this is

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14, 2006; “Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique”, *Gender Forum Issue*, Issue 22, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Sabine Broeck, “The Challenge of Black Feminist Desire: Abolish Property - A Remembering”, Keynote address, Ninth International Conference of the Collegium for African American Research, Black States of Desire: 2011 CAAR Conference in Paris, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6,

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

done and the goals of this theorization vary significantly. Producing knowledge about women and from women's experiences thus largely depends on the questions one asks and on one's taken-for-granted assumptions/ideology. Through reading Broeck's work<sup>95</sup>, power, patriarchy, and gender as conventionally understood, are all thrown into crisis. Also, one of the major insights gained from her writings is a knowledge of what it means to write about 'the other', of being careful of not falling into the trap of universalizing one's experience as well as realizing one's implication – as a white person – in the project of modernity. Power, through Broeck, can thus not be thought of without racializing the concept. Stretching Brayton's concept then, a way of knowing that acknowledges the centrality of power, needs to racialize, gender and class power.

Brayton's second point, and admittedly one of my favourite principles of feminist research, orients feminist knowledge production towards the project of changing the social reality of women, and hence provides the connection between knowledge production and praxis/political action. This point is complicated when I begin to consider my own privileged positionality. Given the centrality of this point, I investigate the meaning of being a white woman in relation to knowledge production throughout this project. As Methodology II illustrates, producing knowledge about black women through and from a white body is highly problematic to say the least. However, through an engaged and often painful reading of Broeck's as well as afro-pessimistic work, I realized that following this second principle, the only 'right' kind of knowledge to produce is knowledge which deconstructs my own whiteness. By this I mean the necessity to deconstruct and expose universalizing narratives – and neo-liberalism is currently

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<sup>95</sup> Sabine Broeck, "Re-reading de Beauvoir 'after race': *Woman-as-slave* revisited", *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 2011, 14: 1&2, pp. 167-184; "Property: White Gender and Slavery", *Gender Forum*, Issue 14, 2006; "Enslavement as Regime of Western Modernity: Re-reading Gender Studies Epistemology Through Black Feminist Critique", *Gender Forum* Issue 22, 2008.

one of the hegemonic ones being discursively constructed – as well as create knowledge that can be helpful to a feminist project that often takes cross-racial solidarity on too easily.

### **Racializing gender and universality – tracing the genealogy of gender (as an analytical lens)**

In this paragraph, before moving on to Brayton's third point, I want to specifically look at gender given its centrality to feminist epistemology. From numerous readings over the last two years of being a Gender Studies student, I define gender as a social construct which divides humans into men and women based on biological difference and then ascribes different social roles to these genders. Also, I do not see this gendered division and resultant social positions as arbitrary but rather ideological. To stretch my employment of feminist methodology, I have to add, that my ways of knowing are not only informed by gender and a superficial add-on approach in terms of race and class; but rather, through a reading of power and gender as ideological. By this I mean that power is a structural force which builds systems/societies which benefit those in powerful positions and marginalize those in inferior positions. Again, given that this is a project which produces knowledge about women as neoliberal subjects, I have embraced an anti-capitalist standpoint to expose the multiple structural connections between gender, race and class.<sup>96</sup> Also, towards the end, my thinking and thus epistemology started to be influenced by the introduction to afro-pessimism which started to trouble my reading of gender. In order to be able to build my argument for a racialization of gender, I include a short paragraph on afropessimism mainly structured around a paper written by Sebastian Weier in which he gives a general overview of

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<sup>96</sup> I chose the word 'embrace' as my reading of Marxist theory is still in its beginning stage.

afropessimism and then moves on to illustrate how afro-pessimistic thought can be used as an analytical lens by white researchers.

In short, afro-pessimism claims that people racialized as black are still not human given that they are criminalized, denied rights as well as often still live in townships/ghettos and this in Orlando Patterson's words equals 'social death'. Thus, according to Frank B. Wilderson, people racialized as black are structurally excluded from society in that they are not only defined as criminals but also as welfare dependents and thus generally as an obstacle to progress and as inactive members of society.<sup>97</sup> As an epistemological project, afro-pessimism aims to produce knowledge and create political change; meaning, "[i]t's aim is to deconstruct an epistemological blind spot in large parts of the humanities and social sciences that risks confusing hypervisibility and invisibility [...]." For example, what does it mean that black (male and female) bodies are hypervisibilized as 'objects' of research; does this visibilization mirror black lived reality? However, afro-pessimism is also heavily invested in thinking through language and to what extent black ontology is representable through language. One is thus confronted with the following question: "how is the impossible and invisible black subject narrated and how is the white subject imbricated in this?"<sup>98</sup> To this end, Weier lists a number of points towards the usefulness of an afro-pessimistic methodology for white scholars; namely, (1) used as a means to challenge anti-blackness in academic<sup>99</sup> as well as other spaces; (2) problematizes assumptions of dialoguing across the racial divide<sup>100</sup>; (3) creates consciousness around the impossibility of renouncing one's whiteness and accompanying social capital as well as (4) helping one to question one's academic interests in the study of black people which "easily turns into

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<sup>97</sup> Sebastian Weier, "Consider Afro-pessimism", Draft, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> See also: Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Incognegro*, South End Press: New York, 2008.

<sup>100</sup> See also: Andile Mngxitama & Aryan Kaganof, *From a Place of Blackness: A Correspondence Between Andile Mngxitama & Aryan Kaganof*, Sankara Publishers: Melville, 2013.

protoracist condescendence in its brute simplicity.”<sup>101</sup> I have found these points useful and even necessary in this research project and I investigate and think through them throughout this thesis but especially in the second part of this chapter.

Thus, keeping the above in mind, and adding Broeck’s scholarship on white gender studies, I realized that most gender epistemology is caught in the dilemma of only visibilizing white gender difference.<sup>102</sup> Broeck’s scholarship, influenced by afro-pessimism as well as post-slavery studies, exposes how gender as a category has been embraced by white women in order to demand freedom; in order to move from an object position to a subject position and this was done against a third term, the black slave.<sup>103</sup> Gender, then, as a modern term, is fully imbricated in the modern project of slavery and denial of black humanity. Broeck’s work needs to be read as a radical critique of modernity<sup>104</sup> and accompanying universal(izing) narratives. Given the scope of this project, I cannot sufficiently engage with her work and epistemological consequences for gender studies; however, it was important for me to expose the racial nature of the term given that I use gender as an epistemological/analytical lens to look at black women’s lives.

To elaborate on Brayton’s last point, my epistemological approach includes a grounding of women’s experience in the current historical as well as political context. Again, depending on one’s positionality and political/ideological orientation, taking this principle into account, different scholars will produce largely different bodies of knowledge. Again, speaking about ‘women’s experience’ can lead to falling into the trap of universalizing specific experiences and thus committing epistemological violence and ‘useless’ knowledge. Throughout this project, I

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<sup>101</sup> Sebastian Weier, “Consider Afro-pessimism”, Draft, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Sabine Broeck, “Re-reading de Beauvoir ‘after race’: *Woman-as-slave* revisited”, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 2011, 14: 1&2, pp. 167-184, p. 167.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>104</sup> For Mbembe, slavery, “was the event through which Africa was born to modernity.” Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001, p. 13.

have attempted to write against universalizing my own experience as well as creating knowledge which deconstructs universal western discourses (e.g. neo-liberalism). The next part looks specifically at epistemological challenges in the current neoliberal times we live in. This chapter can thus also be read as chronological in that I first exposed/racialized modernity as well as gender as a modern discourse and below, I look at how this discourse, as well as other feminist concepts, have now been appropriated by neoliberalism. Again, the epistemology employed here is one that constantly questions, the past and the present, the political and the economic.

### **Feminist epistemology in neoliberal times: “The personal is political”**

In a paper entitled “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique”, Chandra Talpade Mohanty asks the question: “[...] what happens to the key feminist construct of “the personal is political” when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal?”<sup>105</sup> The main argument of the article is that postmodernism and neoliberalism have led to a depoliticization of radical theory, of anti-racist and systematic epistemology. Early

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<sup>105</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, Summer 2013, pp. 967-991, p. 971.

However, it is also important to acknowledge here, that the personal can still not be politicized in all contexts. Sylvia Tamale, writing about sexual rights in the context of Uganda, states the following:

“The silence around sexual rights within the Ugandan women's movement may be attributed in part to the taboos surrounding all sexual matters in our society. But the HIV/AIDS pandemic has in many ways flung open the doors on sexuality. In particular, it has forced into the open the myths and secrets in relationships and identities that are often silenced or taken for granted. For women's rights activists, “the personal” has never confronted and intersected with “the political” in so explicit and bold a fashion as it has with contemporary issues of sex and sexuality. Although many of us in the women's movement still find it difficult to rid our consciousness of the “taboo web” that dims our understanding of the intrinsic link between sexuality and women's oppression and subordination, the process of disentanglement has begun.” (Sylvia Tamale, “Out of the Closet: Unveiling Sexuality Discourses in Uganda”, *Feminist Africa* 2, 2003, at [http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa\\_2\\_standpoint\\_3.pdf](http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_standpoint_3.pdf), accessed 30 April 2014.)

on, I realized that this research project is not only a political but also an epistemic intervention and Mohanty's text confirmed that my methodology/epistemology also needs to be looked at through a neoliberal/racial lens. Neoliberalism affects all areas of life and hence, it also affects feminist epistemology as well as already shown in the Literature Review, the feminist movement as a whole. Mohanty's conclusion that "only the personal and individual are recognizable"<sup>106</sup> is thus taken into account throughout this thesis. Structural critique has thus not only disappeared from most people's vocabulary but has also been strategically neglected in recent feminist epistemology and hence, again, the hegemony of a (neo)liberal feminist project can be felt. This silencing of structural critique within academia needs to be questioned and additionally, one needs to ask whom this absence serves. Neoliberalism as a project has thus even managed to dominate knowledge production and anyone researching the topic of neoliberalism in good faith is required to pay increased attention to how one's methodological/epistemological framework contributes to a neoliberal – gendered as well as racial – project. To counter this trend, it was important for me to apply a structural lens throughout thinking through and writing this thesis. Thus, below, when addressing the methodological choice of auto-ethnography, this topic is taken up again.

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<sup>106</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique", *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, Summer 2013, pp. 967-991, p. 971.

## ii. My Positionality – writing through and against whiteness<sup>107</sup>

“[...] even as whites take the time to theorize the complexity of whiteness, revealing its various modes of resistance to radical transformation, Black bodies continue to endure tremendous pain and suffering.”<sup>108</sup>

After being involved in this research project for some time, I realized that I had to embrace my white identity in order to conduct this research. I started out with a feeling of being tired of race and I tried to run away from race – for some time. The ability to run away and hide from race can only be read as a manifestation of my white privilege and I came to realize that only by embracing my white subject position could I carry out this research in good faith. I started to look at the connections of neoliberalism and race and thus, my epistemology is – as already illustrated above – heavily influenced by applying a racial lens to look at myself, the participants and the relationship between us. Below, I first provide some insight into my positionality – who I am and some information about my life as well as previous research – and then move on to what it has meant to embrace my white identity in relation to epistemology and this project in general.

I am a young white woman, a hybrid being, a feminist, a daughter, a sister, a working-class child now turned researcher, a militant reader, a friend, an aspiring writer...<sup>109</sup> Born and raised in Germany, but having made South Africa my ‘home’ for the past six years, I am also dislocated geographically and (sometimes) culturally and have picked up ways of thinking, performing and

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<sup>107</sup> Whiteness denotes not only an externality – white skin – but specifically the internal organization of feelings, behaviors, norms, etc. Whiteness is thus not static but constantly in process.

<sup>108</sup> George Yancy, “Whiteness as Ambush and the Transformative Power of Vigilance” in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Maryland, 2008, pp. 227 – 250, p. 229.

<sup>109</sup> A few months ago, this list would have also included ‘aspiring academic’, however, due to increasing disenchantment with the academy, I am not certain anymore if this space is still my preferred location.

being here and there – hence, hybrid being that fits in nowhere. I grew up in a Catholic environment but have become an agnostic due to increased frustration with organized religion. I am continuously searching, transforming and (re)making myself. I am sometimes happy and sometimes sad and often angry and I feel that my most important task is to conceptualize the contemporary, shed light on the challenges and joys of young women through politicizing the landscape(s) of my everyday life and by so doing bring about change. I know how taxing, exhausting critical reflection can be as it requires one to constantly question one's own values, decisions, behaviour. It sometimes exposes my complicity in acts – on a global and local scale – that I think I am opposing. I do this research to understand myself and my life better. And thus, to a large extent, I research to be able to live. Like many young people of my generation, I constantly feel insecure – in my beliefs, aspirations and financially. This is – to a large extent – due to the social world I live in: A neoliberal world; a cruel world; a world in which profit is often valued more than human life; a world that only pays lip-service to equality but continues to enforce racist, classist and sexist policies.

I often think my sensitivity to inequality has been fostered by being born in a working-class family. I knew very early on that I and my achievements were defined in light of my class background. In the eyes of many, I have managed to climb socially, to transcend my background. However, the internal contradictions and feelings of guilt and confusion that have come about through this bold social climbing are not visible to many. Reflecting on social mobility, I wrote the following on my blog:

*What I am actually trying to say is this: the more I move from my class background to this new, middle-class, academic life, the more I feel that I am losing my roots; or even actively, deceptively (?) denying them - hence the 'fooling' - The fear, the sheer absurdity of having forgotten how the bottom of*

*the mountain looked and felt like before I engaged in this bold social climbing.*<sup>110</sup>

I am currently geographically located in South Africa, more specifically, Cape Town. In line with Bennett and Pereira, I understand researching as a political process which I set out to document and analyse.<sup>111</sup> In the same edited volume, Karabo Mohlakoana-Mosala writes:

“[...] the future of strong feminist research in sexualities and gender in our contexts demands that we begin to tell personal stories, where ‘the personal’ means not simply experiences ‘outside’ the academy, but also those within it.”<sup>112</sup>

My research takes place in both domains, in fact, due to my location, my project tells both stories out of necessity and thus hopefully contributes to the literature in this field. Therefore, my choice of method, the writing and selection process and the continuous reflexivity are all political activities shaped by my location in this country in which the past cannot be divorced from the present. In the words of Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall, South Africa has since 1994 “seen an entrenchment of material inequality and in many, though not all sectors, an accompanying re-racialization and balkanization of society.”<sup>113</sup> Bystrom and Nuttall thus argue that South Africa needs to be viewed through both a neoliberal and a discrete historical frame.<sup>114</sup> Achille Mbembe also states that:

“every age, including the postcolony, is in reality a combination of several temporalities. In the case of the postcolony, to postulate the existence of a “before” and “after” of colonization could not exhaust the problem of the relationship between temporality and subjectivity [...]”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> ‘Reflections on Belonging – Through the Lens of Class and Race: Two Narratives’, at

<http://themakingofanintellectualwoman.blogspot.com/2012/09/reflections-on-belonging-through-lens.html>

<sup>111</sup> Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira, “Introduction: Sexualities and Gender: Research Methodologies and the Questions which Compel Us” in *Jacketed Women: Qualitative research Methodologies on Sexualities and Gender in Africa*, Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira (eds.), UCT Press: Claremont, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> Karabo Mohlakoana-Mosala, “Challenging Research, researching Challenges: Feminism and Activism in Lesotho” in *Jacketed Women: Qualitative research Methodologies on Sexualities and Gender in Africa*, Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira (eds.), UCT Press: Claremont, 2013, p. 34.

<sup>113</sup> Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall, INTRODUCTION, *Cultural Studies*, 27:3, 2013, pp. 307-332, p. 308.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>115</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001, p. 15.

Thus, both the neoliberal and historical frame and the notion that different temporalities co-exist are applied throughout this research. Given the context of this research, and my daily life in this country that has officially embraced narratives of ‘rainbowism’ and nonracialism, I have to make sense of race. But also, this research is written at a time when I have decided to leave this country partly due to reasons linked to race.

My current location – the University of Cape Town – is being restructured in neoliberal terms as are most aspects of our public and private lives. Education and knowledge are being refashioned in ways that emphasise outcome-oriented goals such as financial rewards and number of publications. Academics are required to be flexible and responsible. As an emergent young academic (?), I am caught in these developments and indeed, I am currently finding myself wondering if I can ‘survive’ in this space.

This research aims to fill the gap in the theorization of the influence of neoliberalism on young women’s subjectivities in a South African context. Through my Honours research, I discovered the need to conceptualize young women’s heterosexual relationships and contraception in neoliberal frameworks. Through an analysis of my own contraceptive life and the lives of three other young women, I realized that we – as young women<sup>116</sup> – self-regulate our bodies by viewing ourselves as (neo-) liberal subjects who are rational, free and responsible for ourselves in relation to ‘managing’ our fertility. I thus claimed that young women use contraception as a form of feminine performativity in neoliberal times.

Researching also means living and by this I mainly mean that in the process of writing this Master’s thesis, my private life continued to unfold and influence my views on being a white

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<sup>116</sup> My honours dissertation was still written through the comforting notion of gender commonality across race. I applied an intersectional analysis; yet, I have come to realize now that my approach to race was rather naïve.

foreign woman in a South African space. When writing the proposal, I was almost exclusively focused on the new, neoliberal forms of femininity without being aware how much conventional norms of femininity still structure ‘us’, how hard it is to escape them and again, how these conventional norms have to be viewed as raced, as manifesting differently in black and white female bodies. This surfaced in the conversations and consequent analysis but also in a specific incident in my private life. I have often wondered why my awareness of gender could not always help me to perform against and not fall victim to conventional norms of femininity with regards to respectability, shame and men.

Against my wildest expectations, I found myself in more than one violent situation with a man that I trusted and cared for at the time. I did not manage to leave him immediately, but instead continued to forgive him and find excuses for his behavior. I also did not find understanding in my surroundings and felt more often than not alone which also contributed to finding comfort and understanding with him. Afterwards, I reflected a great deal on these events and I was more often than not lost and unable to pull myself together. This episode made clear to me that gender-based-violence (GBV) is something that can affect everyone, that is something one cannot easily get out of and it also made it clear to me that gendered socialization plays a big role in this; that no matter how much I am aware of dominant constructions of gender and in this case violent masculinities, I am still caught up in gendered behavior.

As already illustrated above, in line with feminist research epistemology, I do consider research as an embodied process and I believe that one’s positionality largely informs the questions one asks and the answers one hopes to find. It has thus been important for me to elaborate on my positionality in order to now move on to describe what embracing this positionality and

specifically my whiteness has meant in the process of producing knowledge; how my (approach to) epistemology is informed by my whiteness.

In the first part of this chapter I outlined feminist research principles and illustrated how my epistemological approach has been influenced by the work of black feminist scholars, afro-pessimism as well as the work of Sabine Broeck. The process of creating new knowledge has thus also been a process during which I continuously needed to restore a union between mind, body and spirit. I sometimes had to take days of rest, when my body and spirit were low, burdened by what I had read and thought through – specifically in relation to my white subject position. Conventional texts/theories about epistemology remain largely quiet about issues of embodiment and emotional well-being and I found support in bell hooks' work.<sup>117</sup>

When I originally drafted a proposal for this research, I was silent about the issue of race. In retrospect, I realized that I had reached a point of emotional unwell-being and a confusion as to how to perform my white body in the South African context. My body was tired, depressed and often filled with pain.<sup>118</sup> But I also came to realize that these feelings needed to be interrogated and that this interrogation of feeling can be a way to gain self-knowledge as well as knowledge about society. In the words of hooks:

“I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend what was happening around me and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory a location for healing.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994.

<sup>118</sup> I do not aim to construct this pain as equal to black pain. In fact, the pain which results from coming to terms with one's privileged position and the inability to escape it is very different from the process of coming to terms with the realization of being in the position of the oppressed.

<sup>119</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994, p. 59.

My hurt and pain were caused by a coming of consciousness to the meaning of whiteness and to wearing a white body in this world. I have now started to conceptualize this coming to consciousness as similar to the five stages of grief: denialism, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. But also, I believe that within these five stages there is a forward as well as a backward movement and I feel that I am constantly rotating between depression and acceptance because I do not yet completely know how to work from a position of acceptance; I do not yet know how to use my whiteness productively to bring about change, or in Fanon's words, to end the world as we know it. This thesis is a manifestation of this. It is written through embracing my white identity; yet, I do not consider this to be a static position. Thus, in the process of creating knowledge, I was also often plagued by a sense of committing epistemic violence by trying to make sense of the words spoken by the black participants. But after discovering the above-mentioned texts/theories, I was able to live in and think through my feelings. I had to embrace my whiteness and all that it entails in order to conduct this research. Consequently, throughout this thesis, I interrogate my white subject position as well as my relation to the participants.

To conclude this first methodology chapter, it has become visible that an engagement with feminist epistemology as well as the categories of gender and race, has led to a process of personal interrogation as well as the development of a certain caution. To a certain extent, disenchantment with a color-blind or add-on approach to feminist epistemology and gender studies in general can be felt. However, I embrace this feeling of disenchantment as well as confusion and pain as a productive space from which to produce knowledge which challenges and thinks against notions of universality which often still means universality based on white experience and reality.

# *Chapter Three*

## *Methodology II*

### **i. Qualitative Methods**

In Methodology II, I elaborate on the qualitative research methods I chose (auto-ethnography and research journal; semi-structured interviews) the advantages and limits of each as well as the challenges encountered by using/mixing these different methods. Additionally, I introduce the participants and reflect on what it has meant to engage with these women (this self-reflexivity is present throughout the thesis). And lastly, I write about my approach to analysis of the collected material and again about the challenges and feelings experienced during this process.

#### **Auto-ethnography and research journal**

*I am not a novice to this neo-liberal discourse, having gone through three years of studying economics as part of my Bachelor degree. My dislike and even disgust for what I was being taught and supposed to believe was heightened year after year till the climax was reached: A semester-long course in Managerial Economics. I was meant to learn how the main objective of any business should be – has to be - the maximization of profits. How the achievement of this objective justifies the retrenchment of so-called units of labour. How monetary incentives are what these units of labour need to be*

*productive. It all did not make sense to me. I was lost in a world I could not recognize. I know now that this world is 'our' neo-liberal world.*<sup>120</sup>

I was made aware of the auto-ethnographic approach while working on my Honours Dissertation.<sup>121</sup> According to Denzin, this methodology involves turning the "ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self experiences occur."<sup>122</sup> I hence aimed to start with the self and move out...using the personal to reflect/comment on the economic, political and social. Analyze my own subjectification to neoliberal discourses and then move outward to look for the sources of these messages and analyze their workings on myself and other (young) women. The auto-ethnographic methodological approach is often criticized for self-indulgence and as a way to draw attention to oneself. Also, some may wonder what could be so special about my life for it to be written about it in an academic space. Personally, when reading academic texts, I am always delighted when a writer includes a personal narrative. Not only does it break down the theoretical and 'objective' nature of a text, but it also adds warmth to an otherwise 'cold' text.<sup>123</sup> It makes visible the author's embodiment and thus makes it possible to consider his/her social reality. As a feminist researcher, auto-ethnography can thus be understood as an alternative way to create knowledge by deconstructing a number of binaries (binaries need to be theorized as a way in which the Western world has structured itself): private/public, emotions/rationality,

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<sup>120</sup> Auto-ethnographic narrative taken from a research essay entitled "Dream or Reality: Women's rights in a neoliberal economic (dis)order", written for an Honours course in 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Thank you Professor Jane Bennett ☺

<sup>122</sup> Norman K. Denzin, "Performing [Auto] Ethnography Politically", *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 25, 2003, pp. 257–278, p. 260.

<sup>123</sup> The writings of bell hooks are an example of this.

objective/subjective, body/mind, etc. I cannot divorce my academic life from my personal life; in fact, the two intermingle to such an extent that they flow into each other. Auto-ethnography is thus a tool for me to illustrate this inseparability.

However, I still love theory and often experience the joys that come from understanding a difficult theoretical text. Thus, I hope to counter the criticism aimed at autoethnographic writing as neglecting theory.<sup>124</sup> The text I aimed to produce is hopefully able to “demonstrate how theory might ‘dance’ with the personal in autoethnographic writing that is powerful, evocative, and theoretically sophisticated.”<sup>125</sup> However, with my writing I was also highly aware not to sanitize/de-politicize oppression and the various systems of domination.

As I have sufficiently outlined in the Literature Review, neoliberal discourses aim to individualize and self-responsibilize young women and therein lies the danger of using auto-ethnography, it can be seen as an individualizing method that can easily neglect the existing differences between young women – race, class, location, etc. – and thus support neoliberal ideology (already addressed above). One of the challenges of using auto-ethnography as a method – strong focus on myself – was certainly the danger of paying insufficient attention to differences amongst women. There is hence a strong need to theorize ‘young women’ in an intersectional and contextually alert manner. This is why I explore my whiteness and the outlook on the world that this whiteness produces in-depths. Am I indeed supporting a methodological individualism? I thought it was too early to answer this question in the proposal and thus, in the course of my research, I had planned to document the challenges of this methodology and how it works against/or for an individualistic ideology. Broadly, it wanted to raise questions as to how

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<sup>124</sup>Susanne Gannon, “The (Im)Possibilities of Writing the Self: French Poststructuralist Theory and Autoethnography”, *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodology*, Volume 6, Number 4, 2006, pp. 474-495, p. 476.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

the second-wave feminist slogan, ‘the personal is political’ might have been re-signified by neoliberal discourses (see section on neoliberalism in Methodology I). Additionally, according to Denzin, “[t]he need for a civic, participatory social science, a critical ethnography that moves back and forth between biography, history, and politics has never been greater.”<sup>126</sup> This is especially true for a study on neoliberal femininities.

### **Semi-structured interviews and the category of (young) women**

In addition to my own auto-ethnographic narrative, I spoke with ten women between the ages of 21 and 37. I used this approach in my Honours research and found it to work extraordinarily well.<sup>127</sup> However, for this extended project, I moved away from an exclusive focus on interviews and instead also increasingly embedded material collected during the conversations in wider societal discourses (see section on discourse analysis below). I hence set out to do research which analyses the representations of the lived experiences of young women and thus reflects on the meaning and negotiation of young feminine identities in neoliberal contexts. The final text thus weaves together my personal narrative and the participants’ representations of their experiences into a larger socio-political analysis of neoliberalism in South Africa; showing specifically how neoliberalism re-signifies discourses and embodiments of race and gender.

In the Literature Review, I have already discussed research on young women and subjectivity in Western as well as African contexts. Thus, in this part of the methodology section, I want to

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<sup>126</sup> Norman K. Denzin, “Performing [Auto] Ethnography Politically”, *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 25, 2003, pp. 257–278, p. 260.

<sup>127</sup> A relatively small number of participants allows me to engage with their words in-depth and, in combination with autoethnography, I can reflect on their experiences and mine.

further explore the category of ‘young woman’ and specifically how this category is used in my research. The aim was to interview ten young women with a working-class background. After a long period of reflection, I decided to ‘find’ these young women in the university – UCT – space. Within the South African context, university spaces need to be conceptualized as newly democratic spaces in that they are more accessible to students from various class and race backgrounds; however, young women also occupy a contradictory and challenging position within these spaces due to their racialized and gendered bodies. For Bennett and Reddy:

“The territory they negotiate as gendered and sexual people is one fraught with opportunity, challenge, anxiety, and excitement, and it is one which constitutes much of the “informal curriculum” of any higher education institutional culture.”<sup>128</sup>

Women have been formally granted access to academic spaces and their intellectual capacities are seen as on par with those of their male counterparts; however, young women continue to move within these heteronormative spaces and – physically as well as emotionally – violent surroundings.

The decision to recruit participants in relation to the occupation of a common space (UCT) and class background (working-class) was reached due to the fact that neoliberal narratives claim the possibility of social mobility and thus the irrelevance of class. During the search for and conversations with participants I realized that it would be easier to look for students who can be described as first-generation university educated. Class is not a category widely used as a source of identity anymore and this can obviously not be thought through outside the context of neoliberalism. As the Comaroffs state, neoliberalism manages “to magnify class differences but

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<sup>128</sup> J. Bennett, and V. Reddy. “Feeling the Disconnect: Pedagogies of gender and Sexuality in South African Higher Education”, *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 2009, pp.79-92.

to undercut class consciousness”<sup>129</sup> Also, flyers I distributed on campus did not work and I thus used a snowballing method to find participants. The process of finding and interviewing participants started in May 2013 and was only completed in early November 2013. This long period of time was due to a number of factors: (1) realization that flyers were not useful and thus I started to directly speak to students who then often referred me to someone they knew who matched the category, (2) a prolonged stay in Germany; (3) the amount of literature to be read and (4) the need to maintain my emotional well-being. However, I do think that the slowness with which I collected material proved to be helpful as I had the chance to reflect in-depth after each conversation and to read widely on the topics that emerged.

In line with Valerie Walkerdine, I understand education as a prime site for the production of women as neoliberal subjects.<sup>130</sup> However, most texts on neoliberal femininities are located in the global North and hence do not analyse race or its continued / renewed (?) importance. Additionally, the problem I faced – namely, the intersection of neoliberalism with postcolonialism – was not addressed in any of these texts; however, they still proved useful after being aware of their limitations. Young women in in these neoliberalizing spaces are experiencing the change from

“external regulation to technologies of self-regulation in which subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for their own regulation and the management of themselves is understood as central to a neo-liberal project in which class differences are taken to have melted away. The neo-liberal subjects the autonomous liberal subject made in the image of the middle class.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup>Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John L., “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”, *Public Culture*, Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 291-343, p. 298.

<sup>130</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, “Reclassifying Upward Mobility: femininity and the neo-liberal subject”, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2003, p. 283.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 239.

Young women in university environments – especially if from a working-class background – are often celebrated as success stories and as proof that current liberal educational gender and race equality policies are working. McRobbie coined the term ‘free market feminism’ in this regard to illustrate how girls and young women “have become the poster boy for the neoliberal dream of winning, and ‘just doing it’ against the odds.”<sup>132</sup> However, for young women – especially from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds – to succeed in neoliberal environments, they need to master “its spectral technologies.”<sup>133</sup> Hence, through the semi-structured interviews with the participants I tried to explore these technologies with which they self-manage their bodies and lives as well as how notions of self-responsibility in relation to failures and successes have been internalized. I thus explored a number of themes (contraception, sexual relationships, family and societal expectations, definitions of freedom, success and failure).

Gill states that in neoliberal times “power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation.”<sup>134</sup> I observed these processes of resistance and negotiation in my Honours research. The young women I interviewed – myself included – spoke about the dislike for a certain contraceptive, their internal struggles and the final acquiescence as it seemed to be the only responsible option. I again hoped that the conversations and the use of auto-ethnography would bring to light these processes and thus the way neoliberalism works on women’s lives and bodies.

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<sup>132</sup> Jessica Ringrose, “Successful girls? Complicating postfeminist, neoliberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality”, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4, July 2007, pp. 471–489, p. 484.

<sup>133</sup> Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John L., “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming”, *Public Culture*, Volume 12, Number 2, Spring 2000, pp. 291-343, p. 298.

<sup>134</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times”, *Subjectivity*, 2008, 25, pp. 432 – 445, p. 439.

My Honours research identified the need for a temporarily infertile body in the university space. It exposed how women see themselves as self-managing neoliberal subjects that are solely responsible for their failures and successes.<sup>135</sup> Anita Harris writes:

“the regulation of sexuality for middle-class girls has to be understood as part of a wider regulation of their achievement and academic success. Nothing is allowed to obstruct the academic path – certainly not motherhood, which is seen as the ultimate failure.”<sup>136</sup>

In South Africa, young motherhood and teenage pregnancy is a fairly common occurrence and extensively covered in the media and through other texts. Women are thus constantly reminded of the danger their body poses (see Chapter Three).

I was not certain which topics would arise during the interview process as I wanted to keep the interviews conversational and also encourage the participants to direct questions at me. This project thus sets out to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) What subject positions do neoliberal discourses make available to young women? And what role does class and race play in options for neoliberal femininity?
- 2) What constitutes the desired neo-liberal woman? And how are we, as young women, vital to the success of neoliberalism?

I started the conversations by introducing myself and the research topic. I then outlined why I have chosen this specific topic and introduced challenges and contradictions of being and performing young femininity which I experience. This included an outline of my social background and the resulting sense of non-belonging I sometimes experience in certain spaces.

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<sup>135</sup> Stephanie Alexandra Lux, *Controlling to be free?! Young Women's Bodies, Contraceptive Choices and the Quest for Freedom*, Honours Thesis, African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 2012.

<sup>136</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl – Young Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Routledge: New York, 2003, p. 23.

The participant was then asked to introduce herself – age, family and social background, area of study. Given that the conversations were semi-structured, I used the questions below as a guideline; however, each conversation developed its own dynamic and thematic focus.

- 1) What sacrifices do you think you had to make to be where you are now: a student at UCT?
- 2) What challenges do you encounter? From family? Society? Boyfriend?
- 3) In your opinion, what does it mean to be a successful woman?
- 4) How would you define (personal) failure, success and empowerment?
- 5) Do you think your background – class, race and nationality – has had an effect on your life? Have these factors influenced your choices?
- 6) Do you think you are free to determine the path of your life? Is your current life situation a result of your choices?

The audio-recorded conversations were transcribed and often, while transcribing, I already wrote down my first responses as well as questions and feelings into my research journal. Some of these research journal entries can be read within this thesis. Below, the participants are introduced and I have selected two excerpts from my research journal (a third excerpt can be found in Chapter Six) in order to document, make visible and politicize the research process.

### **Participants (in conversation)**

Lindiwe, who was studying for an Honours in Public Policy and Administration at the time I met her, has spent the first 21 years of her life in Western Cape and grew up in Khayelitsha where her family still lives and where she returns irregularly for visits. Lindiwe and her siblings were raised by a single mother who, after having suffered from a stroke, had only a Disability Grant to look after her family.

Mpho grew up in a small village in Limpopo and both her parents went to a teacher's college and thus, she stated, education had always been highly valued in her family. She described her upbringing in the small community as being very sheltered from the outside world, as living in a bubble. Mpho is the first daughter of four.

Mbali and her younger sister were raised by a single mother in Johannesburg and she is currently a Masters student in African Studies with a Bachelor's degree in Film, Media and English. Through luck – being present at the right place at the right time – she managed to be invited for an interview which then led to her entering a very expensive private school in a suburb in Johannesburg. Mbali and Zethu (see below) are the two participants most grounded in religious discourse.<sup>137</sup>

Amanda, 33 years old, doing a Masters in Chemical Engineering, grew up in Johannesburg and Swaziland. She is one of six daughters. She attended high school in Swaziland and moved back to South Africa to do a diploma. Amanda said that her educational trajectory had never been straight forward and after having experienced a failure – she failed Matric – early on, her determination to be successful only became stronger. She thus went from a diploma to a B Tech,

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<sup>137</sup> The scope of this thesis did not allow me to investigate the meaning of religion in neoliberal contexts.

a B Sc and then to UCT to do a Masters degree. After her diploma, Amanda also worked for some time.

Buhle is 22 years old and was, at the time of the interview, doing a Bachelor's degree in Politics, Philosophy and Gender Studies. She grew up in Durban and has thus far spent two years in Cape Town. Buhle was unofficially adopted by the white family for which her single mother worked as a domestic worker. The family sent Buhle to a private boarding school and due to her exceptional academic achievements she made the choice to come to UCT.

Xoliswa grew up in Khayelitsha and is, with her 22 years, the youngest daughter of her parents. At the time she started attending a public high school in Khayelitsha, both her parents were unemployed. Out of her four older siblings, only one sister finished matric. Xoliswa got involved with an organization from UCT and through them she was awarded a scholarship for her undergraduate studies. Xoliswa is holding a Bachelor's degree in Biology and currently busy with a postgraduate degree.

Patricia, 21, is majoring in Media and Writing and English Literature and Gender Studies. Originally from Eastern Cape, she has lived in Durban, Johannesburg and now Cape Town.

Cindy, 22, from Queenstown, is currently doing a Masters degree in Public Health. She grew up with both her parents but her father has been unemployed for some time and her mother is thus the sole financial provider. She is the first in her family to attend university with her older brother holding a diploma.

Zethu is 28 years old, mother of a one-year old daughter and, at the time of the interview, had just finished her first year of her Bachelor of Social Work degree. She started working – as a call

centre agent and then quality assessor – immediately after Matric but then had the wish to ‘go further’ and thus decided to go to university.

Lebo is 37, a divorced mother of two, and doing the same course as Zethu. She also worked – at an insurance company for 10 years – before resuming her studies.

A critical reading of the transcripts showed that it is more appropriate to call my engagement with the participants ‘conversations’ than ‘interviews’. This is due to the fact that I also shared personal information and there are certain negotiations the participants display in relation to how they interpret my interests. All participants need to be viewed as highly educated in the South African context; however, only two – Xoliswa and Cindy – can be imagined and imagine themselves as political agents. Thus, throughout the analysis chapters, they surface as exceptions in multiple ways. I was also highly aware that the conversations took place between women racialized differently, myself, the researcher, racialized as white and the participants as black. In most conversations, it was thus myself who introduced the topic of race. This could be read as a manifestation of neoliberalism and its attendant ideology of nonracialism and its commitment to the erasure of race (also see Literature Review).<sup>138</sup> I am also highly aware that speaking across the racial abyss, too much gets lost and one has to wonder if communication is even possible.<sup>139</sup>

Below, I provide two excerpts taken from my research journal in order to highlight and describe and contextualize the conversations between the participants and myself and to start highlighting the problematic of black-white ‘dialogue’ as well as the politics of embodiment.

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<sup>138</sup>David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race – Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> See also: Andile Mngxitama & Aryan Kaganof, *From a Place of Blackness: A Correspondence Between Andile Mngxitama & Aryan Kaganof*, Sankara Publishers: Melville, 2013; bell hooks, “Chapter 7”, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994.

### **Excerpt # 1**

*On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2013, a sunny autumn day, I waited for my first participant in front of Pick'n'Pay on the busy Main Road in Rondebosch. We had arranged the meeting via phone conversations and smses and I was very excited to meet this young woman whose contact details I had received through a friend. So while I was waiting, excitement built up and I went over my interview questions again, wondering if they were 'working' and again becoming quite uncertain about my research project.*

*At about 13. 15 pm, Lindiwe – dressed in grey sports shorts and a black t-shirt and wearing her hair in long dreads, exactly the way she had described herself on the phone – walked towards me and apologized for being late while giving me a big hug. I was immediately taken by her open and confident personality and she invited me to do the interview in her room not far from the Main Road. (She insisted on this invitation even after I told her that I planned to take her to a nice cafe and talk over coffee and muffins.)*

*So we walked, in fast steps, up the hill and started talking. She told me that she had just come from the gym hence her clothing and that she got caught up in a conversation with a friend. I told her that I used to run but that I had stopped when moving to Cape Town and then somehow never got back into the routine. I told her where I was from and for how long I had been living in South Africa and what I was studying at UCT.*

*We arrived at her house, a place she shares with 11 other girls, and she opened the Security Gate. She asked me, hurriedly, to wait in the open living space area while she quickly 'fixed' her room. I sat down, looked out the window with its beautiful view on Devil's Peak and started unpacking my laptop which I would be using for the sound recording. After about five minutes she came down, fetched me a glass of water and we walked up to her room. By this time I had already realized that she was a very determined young woman who was very confident about herself and her life.*

*We walked up to the first floor on which her room is located and she opened the door to a bright, clean and very personal room. Her single bed pushed against the right wall, in front a white carpet on which a bed side table with flowers and a framed picture. Opposite, a neat desk on which I could see some papers and books. She sat down on the desk chair while I let myself fall on the bed, spreading my laptop, interview questions and Moleskine notebook around me. I felt instantly comfortable in this space and I was glad that she had suggested inviting me to her*

*personal space. I gave her the consent form and assured her that her name would be changed in the final write-up thus guaranteeing her anonymity.*

### **Excerpt # 2**

*I spoke to a woman [Amanda] who – so far – is the oldest participant and with her, issues around success and marriage/partnership came to the surface. I met her in the postgraduate research wing in the library where she had booked one of the rooms for our conversation. I had met her a couple of times before: the day she was introduced to me by a friend as a potential participant in my research and then when we bumped into each other now and then in the library or on campus. We thus did not know much about each other.*

*She sat down opposite me on the big white table where I had placed two muffins, my laptop for recording and a coffee and notebook plus pen. The atmosphere was relaxed and I felt that a great and interesting conversation lay ahead. She had her long dreads tied up in a huge bun and wore a jeans shirt underneath an orange sweater. Her face, natural, no traces of make-up visible. Her look, open and curious.*

*What struck me as interesting in our conversation was that during the interview I could feel that she was uncomfortable talking about issues of race with me. I put that down to me being white and her black and her fear of offending me. However, this dynamic completely changed after the official, recorded conversation. While packing up my laptop we continued talking and she asked me why I had come to South Africa and I told her about my student exchange and my stay with host families in two townships in Joburg. She was positively surprised by this fact. And, in a way, I was granted an insider status. We exchanged numbers and promised to meet up soon to talk more about life and my experience.*

I use these two excerpts to think about: (1) what it means to be invited to a participant's private space almost as if I were a friend and (2) what it means to be interpreted/read by a participant. Both these points illustrate the embodied nature of research as well as the boundaries that may or may not be crossed and hence, in general, I attempt to reflect further on the challenges of qualitative research. Point one and excerpt one speak to the politics of intimacy and privacy while doing research. Even though I only met Lindiwe once, for the conversation, I was treated

by her as a friend; I sat on her bed during the conversation and she granted me an insight into her private life which in turned also helped me to reflect further on her words. At the time of the conversation, Lindiwe lived with a group of international students and this living arrangement was somehow linked to her scholarship. Unfortunately, I do not have detailed information on this, but this fact, and the politics of space that emerged often during our conversation highlight the process of negotiation Lindiwe has to go through while crossing multiple physical as well as cultural boundaries.

Point number two and the excerpt which summarizes my encounter with Amanda illustrate that as a researcher one is also read by the participant; one is being gazed at and interpreted which then has consequences in relation to the topics spoken about as well as silences. Our bodies were thus not only materially present in the room – as bones and flesh – but also historically and symbolically. And this led to the situation in which race was a complicated and uncomfortable subject in the conversation. And even though Amanda, after I (verbally) brought up the topic, started talking about it, I could see she was uncomfortable and probably also expected me – and rightly so – not to understand what it means to live as a black woman. My white body thus stood symbolically for lack of knowledge of black lived reality. But also, as I address throughout this thesis, speaking about race without bad faith has become difficult in a ‘post-racial’ world.

Both these excerpts also illustrate that discourse analysis, based on material collected during interviews, is a research method which completely denies time and hence, denies different possibilities for understanding. Hence, the challenge I faced due to my choice of methodology was that my analysis of participants’ representations is almost exclusively built on the one to one-and-a-half hour encounters; the exception being Xoliswa with whom I have also been interacting privately since September 2013.

## ii. Unpacking textual material through discourse analysis

To analyse the material, I used discourse analysis following the criteria as defined by Van Dijk.<sup>140</sup> Before outlining these criteria, I want to look at the implication of naming this kind of analysis discourse analysis. According to Fredric Jameson,

“[...] the conceptual framework of discourse analysis – [...] allowing us [...] to practise ideological analysis without calling it that [...] and calling it ‘discourse’ suggests that this dimension is potentially unrelated to reality and can be left to float on its own [...]”<sup>141</sup>

Reading the above words made me aware that I cannot always replace the word ideology by discourse and that this substitution of words again plays into neoliberal language; meaning, depoliticized language. Hence, in this thesis, gender, race, class and neoliberalism are all named as ideologies. Throughout this thesis, I thus often write discourse/ideology to highlight and write against the de-politicizing trend of discourse analysis.

To come back to the criteria provided by Van Dijk, I first read the conversations by paying attention to thematic content. I thus came to divide the material into two broad thematic clusters and both clusters make apparent that old and new co-exist, intermingle and are in a dialectic relationship with each other. The two thematic clusters were selected due to an interest in the tension between responsibility and freedom. Identifying these two main themes was a long process because I was troubled for some time by the fact that norms of conventional femininity emerged stronger than I had expected. As already outlined in the Literature Review, neoliberalism is a “mode of ‘governing through freedom’ that requires people to be free and self-

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<sup>140</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1998, p. 92.

<sup>141</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and the Market” in Slavoj Zizek (ed.) *Mapping Ideology*, Verso: London, 2012, pp. 278 – 295, p. 282.

managing in different spheres of everyday life – health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, etc. There is also a stress on responsibility at the community level, and new requirements of self-responsibility by individual subjects.”<sup>142</sup> The neoliberal moment can consequently be described as a moment of tension, in which subjects are required to constantly negotiate freedom and responsibility. The first analytical reading of the conversations was thus done through the lens of responsibility and freedom and the tension between the two, within and across the conversations. What emerged was that the female body is a body heavily invested with responsibility and that certain responsibilities contribute and others take away from the women’s possibilities of living their freedom, some of these responsibilities are old and others new. Secondly, this analytical reading showed that certain ideas had become common sense (ideology) whereas others were still being negotiated by the participants. The identification of ideology was thus the second step in the discourse analysis. I specifically identified neoliberal as well as gender and racial ideology and how they are in relationship to or in contradiction with each other. Thirdly, Van Dijk emphasizes the importance of looking at the origins of these discourses/ideologies, e.g. under which social as well as political conditions these ideologies were developed and by whom. This third point surfaces in the analysis chapters but has also been highlighted in the Literature Review.

What became interesting as I applied the above criteria and started to conceptualize and write the three analysis chapters was that two participants differed significantly from the other participants and I came to realize that this was due to them having access to counter discourses/communities. Thus, as I read the themes through the epistemic framework introduced above, I also came to

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<sup>142</sup> Aihwa Ong, “Boundary crossings: Neoliberalism as a mobile technology”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 32, No. 1, Jan., 2007, pp. 3-8, p. 4.

read the themes against these two participants and this helped me to expose the ideological workings of neoliberalism as well as conventional femininity. Additionally, following the principles of feminist research, I tried to make visible how each discourse/ideology is implicated in reproducing current power relations and this helped me to identify who benefits and who loses from these ideological reproductions.

Another important aspect was to read the conversations not only for what was being said but also for the things/topics which were not spoken about. Specifically, the numerous silences around the topic of race and thus race was brought up myself in most conversations. It could be argued that participants could have spoken to me more openly about race if I were black and we can thus again see a limitation in this research. My positionality, the whiteness of my skin, could have worked as a silencing mechanism. I think this also illustrates that this project de-centers/destroys assumptions of racial commonality by theorizing the difficulties of thinking/writing about black women from a white standpoint. Towards the end of this project, I came across bell hooks notion of ‘analytical ways of knowing’ and knowing through lived experience. For hooks, a combination of the two is preferable but analytical ways of knowing cannot be negated by not having had the experience.<sup>143</sup> I thus embraced this notion of analytical ways of knowing and thus concluded that many silences were due to currently hegemonic ideologies and the values and ways of speaking that they foster.

I also considered it as important to put a heavy theoretical emphasis on the female body as bodies have, traditionally, been excluded from analysis and knowledge creation; and to challenge the normativity of the white (male) body. The participants’ words – as well as my own voice in

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<sup>143</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994, p. 89.

the conversation and in this text – could not be divorced from the bodies from which these words emerged. I thus paid significant attention to the way(s) in which the participants represent their bodies; specifically in regards to race, sex and gender. To live as a woman, to move in different spaces and interact with different people, is still strongly mediated by the body one wears – in its racialized and gendered form. The participants’ bodies could all be – simplistically – described as female, black and heterosexual; however, as the analysis below shows, these social ‘markers’ are again mediated by family, heterosexual relationships and the politics of space. Throughout this dissertation, the body is also viewed as a surface and a form that is shaped by different discourses/ideologies and when talking about the neoliberal body women wear at times, I came to understand this body as a shape that can be molded by embracing and performing neoliberal values and to understand more deeply how bodies constitute a certain materiality of neoliberalism.

Additionally, there was a need for these ‘clusters’ given that I realized that in as much as the participants used some neoliberal vocabulary and ascribed to some of its ideals – and molded their bodies accordingly – it also became apparent that discourses and practices of conventional femininity are still very strong in the participants’ narratives. I thus begin the first analytical chapter by showing how the young women’s bodies materialized in the environments and conditions of heterosexual families, including the arrangements of care and custody of children with single mothers.

While reading the transcripts carefully, I also realized that most participants were reluctant to speak about their relationships with men and this was shown through verbal expression as well

as tone of voice and mood changes. This ‘sticky’ area thus drew my attention and I interpreted the participants’ reactions in relation to freedom/unfreedom and I saw that women’s experiences with men were more often than not a zone of danger to freedom; this danger can be understood to be rooted in two areas: (1) the fertile body and the consequent threat of pregnancy as an end to their ability to achieve personal freedom and success and (2) the ‘compromised’ body, a term I use to describe the need to make compromises when in relationships with men and the resultant loss of autonomy/freedom. I also attempt to make sense of this ‘compromised’ body through the lens of gendered upbringing and socialization.

An awareness of race and gender has, throughout the analysis, made a separation of topics difficult. How to discuss gender without race? How is the process of becoming gendered infused with race? And given that most participants have lived in two different organizations of race: (1) institutionalized racism (apartheid) and (2) a state-mandated nonracialism (post 1994). This problematic of making sense of the construction of these gendered, racialized and classed subjects is described – by Wendy Brown – as “one of the central problematics of feminist inquiry today”.<sup>144</sup> As already noted, this project which had from the beginning a specific focus on neoliberal subjectification, is constantly been in danger to overlook, underplay, ignore other forms and sites of power, different forms of gender regulation as well as discourses/ideologies.

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<sup>144</sup> Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2005, p. 123.

### iii. Ethics

*This project can in many ways be understood as an attempt towards finding an ethical location, an answer to the question of how to be moral and political in this neoliberal world.*

This is how I started the ethics section in my proposal; however, now, this research has also, more and more, turned into an attempt to find an ethical position as a white woman, a white researcher, as someone sealed into whiteness. The choice of topic and methodology has been envisioned as first steps in the search for these locations. I have found a guideline in Denzin's "democratic-socialist feminist agenda"<sup>145</sup>:

"This agenda queers straight heterosexual democracy. It is always relational, temporary, and historically specific. [...] This agenda asserts capitalism's fundamental incompatibility with democracy, while thinking its way into a model of critical citizenship that attempts to unthink whiteness, and the cultural logics of white supremacy. [...] It sets as its goal transformations of global capital, so that person's may begin to 'truly live as liberated subjects of history' (McLaren)."<sup>146</sup>

In regard to my involvement with the participants, I made sure that their feelings and safety were not hurt in the 'quest for data'. Thus, participants were not be pushed to talk about issues they felt uncomfortable sharing.<sup>147</sup> Also, their anonymity was guaranteed by changing their names and other factors by which they could be identified.

Questions relating to ethics have been addressed throughout the methodology chapter: (1) the use of reflexivity to break down and expose power relations and to acknowledge existing differences

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<sup>145</sup> Norman K. Denzin, "Performing [Auto] Ethnography Politically", *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 25, 2003, pp. 257–278, p. 261.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> I was confronted with this problem for the first time during my Honours project when one of the participants mentioned having had an abortion. However, she did not want to speak about it further due to the emotional pain she still felt.

between women; (2) the recognition that as a feminist researcher I understand subjectivity as embodied and thus influenced by my experiences (3) the power dynamics of cross-racial dialogue as well as interpretation of black women's experiences through a white lens.

# Chapter Four

## *Bodies and Heterosexuality*

*"We teach girls shame. "Close your legs. Cover yourself." We make them feel as though being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think. And they grow up — and this is the worst thing we do to girls — they grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form."*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie<sup>148</sup>

### **Introduction**

Bodies and Heterosexuality broadly deals with the emergence of the participants' gendered bodies and according to the participants' representations, these gendered bodies were brought into existence through discourses as well as a variety of practices and forms of gender regulation first within and later on outside of the family space. What became apparent and what I already

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<sup>148</sup>Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'We should all be feminists', at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc), accessed 10 January 2014.

theorized in previous research is that women's bodies start to emerge and are more and more "responsibilized" as well as policed, with the onset of the first period.<sup>149</sup> This part thus illustrates how women become gendered subjects within the confines of the family which I theorize as patriarchy's main institution; additionally, in the context of this research, the family is understood as an important institution for the functioning of capitalism in relation to the work of social reproduction traditionally done by women. Gqola also points out the contradictory characteristics of this space called home by stating that "[h]omes are both sides of affirmation and battlegrounds because they are always affected by power expressed through race, class, sexual orientation, religion, gender or geography."<sup>150</sup> Gender is imagined here as theorized by Butler as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"<sup>151</sup> and this emerges clearly in the analysis below.

I begin the analytical part of this chapter by describing how the participants represent the coming into being of their gendered and racialized bodies within the space of the heterosexual family but also, how participants now view and represent the way(s) they live gender and race. I then continue, in the second part, to describe how the participants' bodies are entangled in numerous relationships and how this compromises their bodies and possibilities for (bodily) freedom. In the process of doing this, I discuss the means these young women employ to transcend their bodily unfreedom; namely, constructing gender and race as choice. And I again address this in Chapter Six in relation to education and freedom.

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<sup>149</sup> Stephanie Alexandra Lux, *Controlling to be free?! Young Women's Bodies, Contraceptive Choices and the Quest for Freedom*, Honours Thesis, African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 2012.

<sup>150</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola, *A Renegade Called Simphiwe*, MFBooks Joburg: Sunnyside, 2013, p. 77.

<sup>151</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988, pp. 519-531, p. 520.

## On the menstruating body and role models

For most participants, the start of menstruation was connected to feelings of shame and guilt and engulfed in secrecy. This secrecy manifested either in attempts to hide their blood-stained panties or bedding or in at least hiding the development from siblings and fathers. This can only be made sense of by locating the source of these feelings and actions in an already gendered subject. Gender and subjection is something I have been pondering about for many years and maybe the search for the origins of my own gendered being is the reason that I decided to study gender. As already noted above, I have found answers – and more questions – in Judith Butler’s work as it directly addresses power and subjection.<sup>152</sup> When remembering the onset of their period, participants were already gendered and thus external power had already “assume[d] a psychic form that constitutes the subjects self-identity.”<sup>153</sup> The participants’ words below illustrate Butler’s notion of power and how power works through a subject. One can thus see that gendered power had, by the onset of their periods, already created gendered subjects and that they had internalized power to the extent that they had already made it their own and acted it out in their own actions.<sup>154</sup> The participants’ younger selves were therefore already aware that the female body with its biological functions is commonly regarded as a source of shame and guilt, as something dirty and re-iterated these beliefs through their actions. Thus by their early teens, they had already internalized a patriarchal view of their own bodies. Additionally, it became clear that the onset of a girl’s period leads to a re-investment and re-organization of the mother-daughter relationship. Some mothers were also uncomfortable with the situation and, even

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<sup>152</sup> However, Butler’s theory is often abstract and universal and has, for these reasons, been critiqued by Sabine Broeck, “Property: White Gender and Slavery”, *Gender Forum*, Issue 14, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

though they provided the necessary sanitary products, they spoke as little as possible and mostly, when the topic was discussed, the young girls were warned to be more careful in their engagements with boys. This shows that mothers have also been constituted by gender and that they act out this gendered behavior accordingly by enforcing gender regulation and thus often function as gate-keepers of patriarchy. The actions and discourses described above can be traced back either to the experience of teenage pregnancy within the family or community:

“I never had an open conversation with my mother about sex other than, Do you see all the pregnant girls passing by outside or whatever... I had such a bad relationship toward my sexuality because of the way sex was such a taboo.” (Mpho)

“Because I remember **when I was 11 years old, that’s when I first had my period**. I came back from school and my sisters called me in and they sat me down, I remember it was **like a caucus**. My sisters, my cousins, I was there in the middle of the round and the first thing they said to me was to **stay away from boys**. Coz now that you have your periods, if you have sex with a boy you can have a child.” (Mbali)

“And I went home and then changed. It wasn’t such a happy thing. And my mom sat me down and said, Ok, this means that **your body is changing, now you need to take responsibility for your body every month**. And she was like, Yeah, just let me know so I can buy things for you. And then she is like, Your body is going to change, your breasts are going to grow, you are going to be a woman. [...] And also, ja, what was really surprising, my mom is really protective. When you get dressed, you close the door. She was like, Do not let anyone see you, naked! You go out of the bathroom, you wear a towel now. You don’t walk around the house in your underwear anymore. That’s not something you can do. So yeah, **there were also a lot of rules that my mom put down as soon as my period started**. ” (Buhle)

Zethu: [...] for my parents, I know like in my family, **once you start your period, they assume that you are doing things**. [...]

Me: So did you then eventually, you said you ended up doing the family planning?

Zethu: Yeah, I had to. I had to. Even though I was not sexually active. I had to. **To show respect to my family**. I think they were more worried about when I start doing those things. Or maybe it is the right thing to do. And I actually think in some families it is still happening, even today. When the young girls start their periods as a matter of, no, no, no, no, they must go for family planning.

Reading the onset of a girl's periods through the lens of freedom and responsibility, one can observe an increase in (bodily) responsibility and a decrease in (bodily) freedom. Rules and warnings are increasingly voiced and thus, the girls' agency decreases. Menstruation is thus represented as being associated with loss of control and choice in relation to one's body – bodily unfreedom – and often experienced as a nuisance. Thus, gender is more and more performed in relation to surrounding threats – by male bodies and gazes – and notions of responsibility. What can also be concluded from the conversation snippets above is that the female body is a body heavily invested with guilt – a guilt that can only be redeemed through responsibility and consequently, I started to think of responsibility as having a moralizing function.

These conversations also need to be read in a context in which teenage pregnancy and 'unplanned' pregnancies in general are seen as failures. A failure, that molds a girl's/young woman's body and thus physically signifies to everyone that she has failed. This failure is then manifested in the threat to future success, specifically in regards to education. Some of the participants spoke about this and Buhle provided a story of her friend who has had the same opportunities but in Buhle's words: "she didn't use that opportunity and we are in different spaces at the moment." Her friend is now two years behind her in terms of education (see Chapter Six). One can see that Buhle constructs freedom as the choice to actively and responsibly take up opportunities and her friend thus failed to act out her freedom. This conception of freedom is a neoliberal conception in that the free subject is a responsible, active, neoliberal subject. Looking closely at my exchange with Zethu, it can also be observed how traditional femininity is engulfed in discourses of respect. Her body and the decision to go for family planning are constructed as a performance which shows respect for her family. In this

context, she thus completely lost her agency, as notions of respect required of her to follow the demands of her family – “Yeah, I had to. I had to.” Additionally, this clearly paints the power relations within her family given that as a young woman she has to show respect to elders through acquiring a responsible, speak temporarily infertile, body. Reading this further, one can also embed this representation in notions of honour. An ‘unplanned’ pregnancy would lead to embarrassment in the family and probably even to judgment within the community. This illustrates how girls’ and women’s bodies symbolically stand for a number of things and how their bodies are thus, in a sense, claimed by families and communities.

What also struck my interest, especially since I did not hear it for the first time, is that often, pregnancy is considered a greater threat than HIV/AIDS. I tried to make sense of it by looking at the fact that pregnancy is a far more immediate threat to a woman’s future than HIV/AIDS. Also, the latter can now be treated and lived with given the medication available; whereas a pregnancy, once it is too late, cannot be aborted, the failure will show in the shape of the body, is visible to everyone, beyond control.

Given how participants represented the way(s) their families dealt with the onset of their period, I was also interested to find out how the women now view their bodies and specifically menstruation. Looking closely at the conversation between myself and Mbali:

Me: And then just one more question in terms of menstruation. How do you deal with it, do you think it is annoying, distracting, or... do you think it is something sacred?

Mbali: I haven’t had this conversation before.

Me: What, about periods?

Mbali: Ja, just about how you phrase the question, I have never had, except the conversation I had with my sisters at the age of 11, but anyway. **I see the value of going on my period but I do find it annoying.** It’s the after-effects, the the, and as you grow

older they change. So I get annoyed by the emotional roller-coaster rides that I go through. And I never remember going through that at a young age until like now. Where I am sometimes cranky **and then there is the feeling tired that annoys me because I am like not productive you now, I want to go sleep and ... so that's what I find annoying. Just what comes as a result.**

As the above exchange shows, not only has Mbali not really spoken about her periods with her female friends; the menstruating body is more often than not perceived as a nuisance, as something that holds women back by making them less productive. This strikes me as interesting – even though it doesn't surprise me anymore: I have heard it too many times, felt it myself too many times. As women, many of us have become removed from our bodies. They are just shells that we live in without knowing them intimately. Knowledge of one's body is not seen as something valuable in a patriarchal culture, in a culture in which women's bodies are still sources of shame and guilt and unfulfilled desires. Patriarchal cultures do not allow us or prevent us from normalizing the fact that there is nothing wrong to give one's body rest, to re-connect and care for one's body while on one's periods. Instead, we think we are doing something good for our bodies if we exercise extensively (see below). Also, to avoid this loss of productivity, more and more women suppress their periods through the use of the Pill or the injection.

Many participants stated that they hate their periods and accompanying mood changes and pains.

“I hate it. If I could stop it... if I was confident enough to take those other pills I would... I hate my period because it is such an annoyance. I mean why do we have to go, every single month, through this process? Number one, besides the fact that you have blood coming out, it comes with, for the three days prior, I feel fat and moody and what not and it is just horrible. I don't like having it, I don't think I have ever met anyone who does.” (Mpho)

“Or I sometimes get guys saying to me, What's wrong with you today? Are you on your periods? You are just throwing tantrums. And I was actually on my period and I thought, ok, they see that I am on my period. So, it will make me feel even more shy.” (Amanda)

Menstruating bodies are perceived as bodies defined by loss of control. And loss of control and choice is represented as an unfreedom. Amanda's fear that the menstruating body is visible through her actions is also interesting and again illustrates the shame associated with this particular body. Since the beginning of (white) feminist scholarship, women's control over their bodies has been a central topic<sup>155</sup>; however, this topic is now re-organized by neoliberalism and its value system in which "the subjects of transformation are individual women, rather than the system that constraints and devalues women."<sup>156</sup> As expored below, several techniques are used by women to take back control over their bodies and thus re-gain a sense of choice and freedom; these techniques are: physical exercise, hormonal contraception and menstrual suppression.

Some of the women thus selectively 'take care' of their bodies:

"I love my independence and I especially love taking care of myself." (Mpho)

"How do I take care of my body? First of all, I am an educated woman and I am exposed to the politics of being fat and slim defining beauty, you know? And I want to be slim... I ... what am I trying to say? The society politicizes our bodies. Fat, is not attractive and **slim is the best way, you look responsible, eating healthy.** So with my body, I feel the need to look sexy, that means jogging, gymming, eating healthy." (Lindiwe)

"But I think we [Cindy and her boyfriend] decided on that [condoms] primarily because I told him about my concerns about the effects contraceptives would have on my body. And I was telling him that for the last two years **I have been working hard on my body** in terms of eating right, going to the gym quite a lot. And I have been doing that consciously for the past two years." (Cindy)

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<sup>155</sup> Control and ownership of women's bodies has also been a central topic of black feminist scholarship; however, the need to address this topic did not only arise from patriarchal ownership of black women's bodies but also from a construction of black bodies as property (see for example: Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers).

<sup>156</sup> M. Cristina Alcade, "Feminism and Women's Control over Their Bodies in a Neoliberal Context: A Closer Look at Pregnant Women on Bed Rest", *Feminist Formations*, Volume 25, Number 3, Winter 2013, pp. 33-56, p. 34.

These participants represent their bodies as bodies that are being ‘worked on’ and ‘taken care of’ and this brings me to the significant focus many of the participants have on exercising and creating a certain desirable body (taken up again in the next chapter). Looking through a lens that takes the material effects of neoliberalism into account, I looked at these slim, exercised bodies as a materiality of neoliberalism. Thus, even though embodiment – often represented as a zone of unfreedom (see above), can also be used to make visible ‘invisible’ things – responsibility, hard work and class (mobility). The body offers a shape that can be moulded by practicing neoliberal values. According to Julie Guthman, “[t]he pursuit of an often unexamined social value of “health” is, in a way, the sine qua non of neoliberal responsabilization.”<sup>157</sup>

“But I was seeing the benefits and people were seeing the benefits. And yeah, I think I just learned to love my body. And maybe because **I learned that I actually do have control over it**. So I learned that if I want to change something then I have to do something about it.” (Patricia)

The body previously located as source of loss of control and unfreedom – gym experiences showed Patricia that she can actually control her body and thus, if she can control her body she can also control everything else and is thus free – to be responsible/to be in control means to be free. Lindiwe, Cindy, Mpho and Patricia are proud of their bodies, of the control they have (re-gained) over their bodies and the sense of freedom this control gives them. I want to make sense of this by looking at their statements through the lens of liberal feminism, of a feminism that has located women’s oppression in their bodies and postulates that the taking of ownership over one’s body leads to women’s freedom and I think this discourse needs to be viewed very critically. However, living in and through a female body myself – even though a body racialized into whiteness – I do see value of taking ownership of one’s body, of feeling power over this

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<sup>157</sup> Julie Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies”, in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (eds.) *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 187 - 196, New York University Press: New York, 2009, p. 193.

body which is so often disempowered. But still, I cannot stop this uncomfortable feeling growing in my body in response to this discourse. This is the reason why I stated above that women ‘selectively take care’ of their bodies and this healthy, well-trained body is a certain performance and thus it symbolizes things such as responsibility and hard work. A body out of shape is more often than not viewed as a lazy body. But this selectivity is the source for my discomfort. As already stated, this control and taking care is supposed to lead to a body that can perform well in the (oppressive) structures we move in. And again, as women, we make ourselves the subjects of transformation instead of transforming the structures that oppress us. I think here, I should also introduce a short discussion of agency, and how agency has thus far been viewed by the participants. It already becomes obvious that agency is most often equated with individual choice, a series of choices. These choices are most often represented as divorced from context; but choices are always embedded within already defined contexts and thus these choices are actually much more unfree than represented by the participants. The notion of choice, as so many other things, has been de-politicized and this de-politicization can only be understood by making sense of it through our neo-liberal environment. The female body stands for loss of control and unfreedom and yet, participants have discovered that there are choices and means available to (temporarily) escape this unfreedom.

Returning to the participants, Lindiwe does not only practice a heavy exercise regime, she also uses contraceptives to suppress her periods. Buhle, whose words can be read below, also uses the contraceptive Pill:

“[...] and looking at my friend who fell pregnant, from that day onwards, I told myself that that is not going to happen to me. So, you kind of take, **I have kind of taken the responsibility to be on the contraceptive Pill.** I have been on it for a year now and that

is just for in case anything happens. **It's just something for myself that I am responsible.**” (Buhle)

I want to look closely at the two sentences I highlighted in bold. Buhle has seen in her surroundings what teenage pregnancy can do; specifically through the experiences of her mother and friend. She thus makes sense of her choice to use the Pill by saying that it is something she does for herself, to prove to herself that she is responsible. Responsibility is thus practiced for herself: neoliberal self-responsibilization. I think this can only be made sense of by taking the old – conventional femininity – and the new, neoliberal femininity into account. As shown above, responsibility has always been gendered and an investment of responsibility in the female body has been integral to gendered socialization; however, what neoliberal femininity has added to this idea of responsibility is that now, young women want to feel responsible as it also invests them with morality. The take-up and active practice of self-responsibilization is now part of the performance of gender. Buhle thus locates the decision to be on the Pill as an active choice and in a certain way, I feel that she does this divorced from context. Throughout this dissertation, I view choice as a social construct and according to Žizek:

“We know the standard situation of the forced choice in which I am free to choose on condition that I make the right choice so that the only thing left for me to do is to make the empty gesture of pretending to accomplish freely what expert knowledge has imposed upon me.”<sup>158</sup>

I think in many cases the decision to use hormonal contraceptives is such a forced choice as it is represented as the only right and responsible choice. Many of the participants used these words when speaking about their use of contraceptives; however, they still construct themselves as freely-choosing subjects. I thus wondered if as ‘women’ ‘we’ believe in our own pretensions given that ‘we’ can feel empowered that way.

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<sup>158</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Verso: London, 2009, p. 63.

In the exchange below, Buhle narrates how she came to be on the Pill and again we see that the word responsible is being used:

Buhle: Well, firstly, Lisa spoke to me about it. She was like, Don't be stupid, go on the Pill, don't fall pregnant. And it's just something we would always speak about in the car.

Me: In the car?! (*We both laugh*)

Buhle: The thing is that my own mother wouldn't speak about it. It's, it's different. She would speak about me rather not having sex at all, whereas Lisa is more accepting of the fact that, Ok, she is over 20, probably be having sex, mmhmm, and so, **rather be responsible about it** than be preaching the whole abstaining thing. So yeah, so I went on it last year. Firstly, because I had dysmenorrhea, so it was to control my period pains, to just control my cycle and make it regular. And then I decided, you know, I also need it for something called family planning even though it is not really family planning<sup>159</sup>. (laughs) So yeah, that's how I found out about it.

The above exchange between Buhle and her foster mom illustrates how young women – when granted the freedom to have sex – can do so only by living in responsible bodies. However, Buhle does not only use contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancies but they also help her to re-gain control over her body, to experience painless periods in regular cycles. This illustrates that there is a heavy emphasis on planning and control which I again want to locate in the discourse of liberal feminism. Also, one can see that certain responsibilities contribute to women's sense of freedom or that sometimes there are certain preconditions to enjoy freedom; in this case, only a responsible, temporarily infertile body can enjoy a certain sexual freedom. What is interesting here is that Buhle – through having a biological (black) as well as a foster mother (white) – is exposed to two different versions of responsible behavior in relation to sexuality: the former thinks that young women should not have sex at all and the latter is more accepting of the fact that young women are sexual beings but they have to be responsible sexual beings.

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<sup>159</sup> As seen in Buhle's words, family planning is a heteronormative concept that does not speak to most young women.

We can thus see that the participants have learned early on that a good female body is a responsible body and by using hormonal contraception some of the participants practice self-responsibility and are thus performing a new normative neoliberal femininity. So even though hormonal contraceptives often re-organize women's bodies externally, they also have an internal effect in that they allow women to take back control over their bodies and this control then leads to an increase in their sense of freedom. I thus identify the taking of hormonal contraceptives as well as exercising as two ways to escape the unfreedom of embodiment. In the third part of this chapter, I look closely at a third way; namely, the construction of gender and race as choice and this is then again taken up in Chapter Six by closely looking at education and freedom.

Enter the role model discourse:

*“Usually, when people talk about the “strength” of black women .... they ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation.”<sup>160</sup>*

The last point I want to discuss in the first part of this chapter is the notion of ‘role models’ which was mentioned frequently in many of the conversations. Again, I looked at that ‘thing’, the role model, through the lens of freedom and responsibility and I realized that this frequent uptake of the discourse of role models can be explained by viewing them as someone who embodies/lives freedom and success and responsibility, someone who is a successful ‘subject of transformation’<sup>161</sup>. As illustrated throughout this project, change is often individualized and

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<sup>160</sup> bell hooks, accessed at <http://processedlives.tumblr.com/post/63458268019/usually-when-people-talk-about-the-strength-of>, 10 January 2014.

<sup>161</sup> M. Cristina Alcade, “Feminism and Women’s Control over Their Bodies in a Neoliberal Context: A Closer Look at Pregnant Women on Bed Rest”, *Feminist Formations*, Volume 25, Number 3, Winter 2013, pp. 33-56, p. 34.

freedom lies in people's actions, in breaking the cycle of poverty through hard work/through taking responsibility for one's life and body and making it against all odds. Again this can only be understood by embedding it in a (neo-)liberal context. Embodiment and physical surroundings are represented as unimportant, the mind needs to be freed from destructive thoughts through role models. The role-model discourse is also again taken up in Chapter Six in relation to education.

Most participants view their mothers as 'role models' in two ways: (1) in a positive way, celebrating their mothers' strength and trying to embody that strength as well and (2) in a negative way, in trying to avoid the mistakes made by their mothers. The words of Lindiwe illustrate both points very clearly:

"I wouldn't say the female body is an obstacle. It's just that it is **a vessel that needs to be taken care of**. So if you gonna do something... like with us females, we have to be responsible. The mere fact that my mom was left with seven kids to raise and the man just decided to leave and all these kids belong to one man, it just shows that, you... you have to clean up after someone. That is why I was saying to you that I need to get an elephant tattoo that symbolizes my mom because that's who we are as females. We always have to clean up after someone. **Our load is never heavy for us to carry**. I wouldn't say it's an obstacle but it's a vessel that needs to be taken care of all the time."

Lindiwe shows that a black woman's body means responsibility for oneself and others. But she also invests the female body with strength, with an ability to carry heavy loads. I have heard this discourse about the strong black woman from a variety of media – movies, books – but also when speaking to black women. But reading bell hooks words, given a system of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, do black women have a choice other than to be strong in the face of the numerous systems of oppressions they are subjected to? Writing these lines, an uncomfortable feeling creeps up on me again; how can I write about the strength of black women, criticize this discourse that is not part of my life? I reflect on what has been done to the

black female body throughout history and again I reflect on the failures of white women in the feminist movement, on how often black pain is equated with white pain, on the empty notion of celebrating a common womanhood when commonality, to put it bluntly, is a lie. By taking care of her body, Lindiwe can maintain her bodily freedom and independence. Lindiwe takes hormonal contraceptives that suppress her periods and she therefore lives through a temporarily infertile body and we can observe here how taking responsibility increases freedom. The freedom to not be consumed by family responsibilities like her mother. So even though she admires her mom's strength, she has also learned from her mother's life and wants to avoid finding herself in the same situation.

Lastly, I want to claim here that the fact that women have, traditionally, been responsible for families now makes it easier to responsabilize them for the neoliberal project and women are thus very important to the functioning of such a project. Given that black women have had to carry more responsibility historically, I also started to wonder if black women are easier to responsabilize than white women and consequently, easier to recruit into the neoliberal project.

We can thus see, that the bodies of young women are discursively constructed by three discourses: (1) the discourse of conventional femininity and its emphasis on respectability and responsibility, (2) the discourse of the strong black woman and (3) a new – what I call neoliberal femininity – which builds on already internalized notions of responsibility and, as explored later, emphasizes that gender and race lose meaning, are non-existent, if one is responsible in one's pursuit of education as well as hard-working.

## Transcending the gendered and raced body I

“[...] coz sometimes **you just chose to, gender and race**, I have generally taken the stance to not even consider it because once you consider it, you let it **dominate** a lot of things. Now, you start seeing when someone is discriminating against you because you are so focused on it.” (Mpho)

“Because I remember when I was eight, I was able to interact with my mom’s friends from work and they were all white and I didn’t see it as that. But at 16/17, I was aware of the fact that I am black. And not because I had had bad experiences, you know but I was just conscious of it at that age so it made things awkward for me and I regret that because I feel that I would have gained so much more from the relationship **if I had not allowed myself to be...**” (Mbali)

“I think I am free, I am very much free. I feel like I can do anything, I am not limited by anything. It’s just up to me. The resources are there. It’s just up to me, as I said, **because I am a black woman, I have to work extra hard for it.**” (Amanda)

“my second challenge, I would say, would probably be towards the end of primary school and high school, when **I started seeing race**. I think before that it had never been a factor. I had never seen myself different from the next person and it came when I had a crush on a [white] boy and I couldn’t understand why he...” (Buhle)

Throughout the conversations, the majority of participants put a heavy emphasis on freedom of the mind; maybe because they realize that the raced and gendered body cannot be free, that embodiment always means being defined by the ‘outside’, being policed by the ‘outside’. I wonder if this construction can be read as a silent recognition that real freedom could only be achieved through structural change. This unfreedom brought about by their specific embodiment has been proven to them through their gendered socialization which – one must remember – cannot be made sense of outside of race. This part of the chapter addresses how gender and race, as framed by neoliberal discourses, have been internalized by the participants. It also illustrates how choice and freedom are socially and ideologically constructed and thus this part of the analysis attempts to deconstruct the participants’ understanding of choice and freedom. As

already outlined in the Literature Review, the intersection of race and neoliberalism is still an area in which little research has been done but the work of David Theo Goldberg, Henry Giroux and Chandra Mohanty has been very helpful in making sense of the participants' narratives.

Subjectivities are not only formed by current discourses such as neoliberalism but also informed by one's location and history. Thus, neoliberal discourses are not imposed in a 'clean' environment but are colluding with and rubbing against other discourses; or in Mbembe's words, time as lived consists of multiple temporalities.<sup>162</sup> Given South Africa's history of racial apartheid, the way race is currently imagined and lived can thus not simply be explained by looking at neoliberalism; however, as a hegemonic ideology which (re)structures our world and ourselves, neoliberalism – as shown in the interviews and analysis below – has an influence on how participants talk about and experience their racial(ized) and gendered bodies.

In an attempt to escape their bodily and psychological unfreedom, race and gender are constructed as choice by the majority of participants. In the words of Giroux, in a neoliberal context one is meant to believe that “race is only as important as you allow it to be”<sup>163</sup> and this sentiment is clearly expressed in the quotes placed at the beginning of this last part of Chapter Three. Physical markers internalized are represented as things that lead to unfreedom and thus one can actively choose not to internalize these things and remain free. Race and gender are constructed not as ideological structures but as individual prejudices and choices; as something purely internal rather than internal and external. This was especially prominent in my conversation with Mpho. As her words above illustrate, she has chosen not to consider race and gender and later on in the conversation, she told me that for her it is about : “Not, getting

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<sup>162</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001, p. 15.

<sup>163</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial”, *Communication Education*, Volume 52, Issue 3-4, 2003, pp. 191-211, p. 198.

emotional and thinking, Oh, my gosh, you are discriminating, No, sometimes it's just, don't add oil to the fire, you know." So even though Mpho admits that race and gender do exist, she does not think that getting 'emotional' is an effective way to deal with it; but rather, one should use the opportunity to improve the other person, to take responsibility to change the other person. Race and gender are again portrayed as individual prejudice, not as structural. One has the responsibility to change these prejudiced individuals and to liberate them from their prejudices.

Mbali also portrays race as a choice – or rather, she thinks that being highly conscious of race has prevented her from taking certain opportunities. Thus, for her, not race as such is the problem, but the way one perceives it and how one chooses to act in response to its existence. This is in line with Amanda's statement that as a black woman she just has to work extra-hard but if she does that then she can achieve anything. I also want to make sense of this statement through the lens provided by Giroux; according to him, under neoliberalism "freedom becomes an exercise in self-development".<sup>164</sup> All of these participants are involved in this exercise (to be further outlined in Chapter Six) and too much attention to racism and sexism slow down this project of self-development.

*It is interesting how, when locating her first experience of racism, Buhle looks through a very individual lens: the falling in love with and rejection by a white boy. She didn't see racism in her mom working for a white family. In her losing her mother tongue. In her having to rely on the charity of a white family.<sup>165</sup>*

I wrote the above while transcribing my conversation with Buhle. Back then, I was startled, I was confused; whereas now, I think I understand. As I highlight throughout this thesis, the personal and individual is the only area that is accessible to women who are engulfed by an

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Research journal entry: *Sunday, 29 September 2013*

hegemonic neoliberal discourse.<sup>166</sup> There is a certain lack of literacy for reading structural power relations and this has led to an invisibilization of structure and thus an absence of structural critique. But additionally, I have also come to think of the construction of race as prejudice and choice as a mechanism of self-preservation. To admit the existence of a white supremacist world is surely more painful than to believe that individual people are prejudiced; individual change seems easier than structural change.<sup>167</sup>

My conversation with Amanda was very interesting given that she is one of the few participants who are highly aware of race and the material construction of race in South Africa's history:

“I think they still haven't come to see what makes black people to strive because there is so much that they carry. **You have to take care of your family, your children**, at the same time that there isn't any support in the work environment that you receive. You have to strive for connections and stuff. Whereas for a white person, the connections are always there. They always receive you and stuff.”

Amanda thus clearly sees that being racialized as black means no freedom but lots of responsibility for oneself and others. However, even though she was throughout the interview highly aware of this fact, she never put forward a structural critique of the system of white supremacy but rather, is of the opinion that “black children have to strive”. And I consequently came to the conclusion that even though it seems as if Amanda does not discursively construct race as a choice, she does. I wonder about the reason for this lack of structural critique and again, I think there is a general lack of access to counter-discourses/ideologies which could develop a certain critical consciousness. And thinking can only change if we can change the language

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<sup>166</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, Summer 2013, pp. 967-991, p. 971.

<sup>167</sup> This notion is a re-occurring theme throughout the thesis.

being used. As well as again an issue of self-preservation, of just wanting to live without constantly being reminded of racism.

At this point, I think it is again important to write self-reflexively about the discursive move of constructing race as a choice. Given my embodiment, I cannot claim to be able to have an insight into what it means to live in this world in a black female body. No matter how much I read and think about it, it will never be my reality and thus making sense of this has been highly problematic for me. And I am here specifically writing against the notion of “the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy”<sup>168</sup>; the notion that black and white suffering can be equated within a white supremacist system. A few times, while typing these lines, I wanted to write that I understand the participants’ decision to view race as choice but I do think that would be paternalistic and wrong.

I want to introduce the self-reflexive paragraph below with Mphos’ words:

“depending on the kind of environment that you come from, you can end up having this **poverty-mindset**. Where... some people it’s really just that they don’t know that they can do it or they **haven’t given themselves permission to want these types of things**. I know a lot of people that say, UCT is for people like you, not me. But, you know what is this, it’s bullshit!” (Mpho)

Coming from a working-class family, I know how paralyzing internalized views can be and I also often catch myself still thinking in such a manner; for example, I wonder if I can really do this, be a scholar, a thinker and if I have a right to be in this space. I often feel that I am not good enough. But to free one’s mind and thus mobilize and love one’s body is hard. Also, I believe that a freeing of one’s mind needs to be accompanied with the aim of understanding/changing the system that produces this mind-set taking into account that experience produces

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<sup>168</sup> Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery”, *Social Text* 103, Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer 2010, pp. 31 – 56, p. 5.

consciousness. Given that this project is not only an exploration of (neoliberal) femininity but is also intended to be read as a critique, I realized that a struggle against the neoliberal, capitalist system needs to be accompanied by a struggle against white supremacy. Writing this thesis has thus often felt like walking on a thin rope, where only a thin line on which I can plant my feet exists and that I could fall at any moment.

Throughout this thesis I argue that race is saturated with responsibility but not freedom. This is my reading of race which has developed in conversation with friends and through readings and observations of social relations around me. The next paragraph is an auto-ethnographical account of my reading of race; of how my whiteness is responsibility but not freedom. I do speak about myself here for various reasons: (1) to racialize the white body and thus in order to attempt to subvert the norm that whiteness is and (2) because I cannot write about what it means to live in a black female body. This narrative also attempts to make sense of race in a neoliberal South Africa in which a discourse and praxis of nonracialism has become hegemonic.

This morning, I arrived in the postgraduate lab at UCT and watched a show called *The Big Debate* addressing the question: Has the Rainbow Nation project failed in South Africa?<sup>169</sup> Most white people speaking and voicing their opinions did not acknowledge the fact of white privilege, of the social capital their white skin affords them in a society that is still anti-black<sup>170</sup>/white supremacist. They do not take up the responsibility that comes with that skin colour; they do not address the brutal history of which we are all a product. Instead, they claim the freedom to define themselves, substitute the real narrative of white skin with their narrative

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<sup>169</sup>The Big Debate, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpLFdtSNwpU&feature=youtu.be&a> , accessed 13 February 2014

<sup>170</sup> The notion of an anti-black world is drawn from afro-pessimistic scholarship.

of white pain, exclusion and supremacy. But as long as the material conditions in this country and in fact, throughout the world, have not changed, we cannot write the narrative of our skin. We have to throw this white ink away! As addressed earlier, freedom in South Africa is rooted in many discourses: freedom from apartheid, political as well as economic freedom but the word freedom has also been commodified. Is used for multiple and mostly capitalist purposes and in the process, it has been voided of meaning. There is no freedom in racial self-definition. Whiteness speaks louder than words. However, the majority of white people have convinced themselves that 1994 has erased the past.

Why is this responsibility not taken up in a context in which citizens are responsabilized? In which responsibility has become a value that fills one with morality? I locate the reason in the fact that the discourse of white responsibility is a counter-discourse to the rainbow nation narrative, to non-racialism and as explained above (and highlighted in the Literature Review), the embrace of the discourse and practice of nonracialism marks the moment at which a nation is accepted into the neoliberal world.<sup>171</sup> Race is thus responsabilized differently; black people do not have the privilege to escape the responsibility that comes with race whereas most whites can construct a false reality in which race is made meaningless. They can live their whiteness in bad faith. Also, through reading Mohanty, I realized that:

“Neoliberal governmentalities discursively construct a public domain denuded of power and histories of oppression, where market rationalities redefine democracy and collective responsibility is collapsed into individual characteristics.”<sup>172</sup>

Thus, the discourse of racial responsibility, being a collective responsibility, is not heard, or rather cannot be understood. This lack of understanding can again be traced back to a lack of

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<sup>171</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race – Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2009, p. 311.

<sup>172</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, Summer 2013, pp. 967-991, p. 971.

counter-discourses that could enable white people to create a critical consciousness, a literacy of reading structural power. However, as much as there is a lack of counter-discourses, they do exist. Marxist as well as black radical writings are available. Specifically for whites who are educated and have economic as well as social capital, these readings are accessible. Hence, white arrogance cannot be excused by referring to white ignorance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter illustrates that participants' conceptions of freedom and responsibility in connection to their bodies and relationships are all infused by discourses and material effects of race and gender and I thus conclude that freedom and responsibility are both raced and gendered. What the conversations highlighted is that far from being atomized/autonomous neoliberal bodies, the participants are still heavily rooted in different relationships – mainly: mother-daughter and heterosexual. I realized that far from embodying (neo-)liberal subjectivity, women's bodies are still largely formed within and through these relationships. Given that all ten participants are heterosexual women, their relationships to and conflicts with male bodies are integral to how they talked about and define freedom and responsibility and this topic is discussed in the next chapter. Relationships to mothers also emerged in all interviews as very important and formative and the two participants who are mothers themselves (Zethu and Lebo) continued this trend. One can thus conclude that the neoliberal discourse is only selectively adopted by the participants, that they are in a constant process of negotiation.

The above has also clearly illustrated how early (gendered and racial) socialization into responsibility is being used by the neoliberal project. This has also been interesting to me as I tried to make sense of how the old – gendered socialization – and the new – neoliberal socialization – co-exist, feed off each other; how they are, to a certain extent, in a dialectical relationship. This thought materialized after reading an interview with Silvia Federici in which she states: “World Bankers and other economic planners have discovered women as economic producers because they believe that women can be more easily controlled given their responsibility toward their families.”<sup>173</sup> I think this statement can be extended by adding that women have not only conventionally been responsible for their families but also for their bodies to a much greater extent than men. Hence, this statement made in connection to micro-credit schemes can be applied to my research in that neoliberalism in general uses conventional norms of femininity to push its agendas. As seen above, the onset of a girl’s period leads to an increase in discourses of responsibility and growing up in heterosexual environments, girls are surrounded by responsible black mothers who are represented as strong and provide for their families against all odds. Women’s responsible bodies, as this research shows, are thus integral to the functioning of neoliberalism. And this last point is explored further in Chapter Six. Also, this chapter has made visible: (1) the absence of counter-discourses/ideologies to neoliberalism or an absence of the skills needed to read these counter-discourses and (2) the attempt to pervert the self in order to achieve bodily freedom and freedom of self-definition, neoliberalism and color-blindness are embraced.

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<sup>173</sup> “Silvia Federici, “On capitalism, colonialism, women and food politics”, at <http://www.politicsandculture.org/2009/11/03/silvia-federici-on-capitalism-colonialism-women-and-food-politics/>, accessed 3 February 2014.

# Chapter Five

## *The compromised body – women's bodies in heterosexual relationships*

*'You can't have everything your way, and not expect to be lonely, at least some of the time.'*

*After that they both fell silent for a while.*

*'No, you can't, Esi,' Opokuya said, as if there had been no pause. 'No matter what anybody says, we can't have it all. Not if you are a woman. Not yet.'*

*'Our society doesn't allow it.'*

*'Esi, no society on this earth allows that.'*

*'Oh Lord.'*

*'I know I am beginning to sound disagreeable. But I thought it was clear that whatever other faults he may have, which of course I wouldn't know about, Oko loved you and wanted your marriage to work.'*

*'On his terms'*

*'It had to be on someone's terms.'*

*'Why not on mine?'*

*'Why are you being so childish, eh? Our people have said that for any marriage to work, one party has to be the fool.'*

*'And they really mean the woman, no?'*

*'Naturally.'*

*They both burst out laughing again.<sup>174</sup>*

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<sup>174</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes – A Love Story*, Heinemann Publishers: Oxford, 1991, p. 59.

With the above exchange between two friends, Esi and Opokuya, two of the main protagonists in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes*, I find a theoretical entry into this chapter: The compromised body – women's bodies in heterosexual relationships. Esi, a young professional woman, left her husband due to his demands on her time and in general the compromises the marriage required of her. After a prolonged period of tension in the marriage, one morning, Oko forces himself on Esi – in an attempt to re-assert his challenged masculinity? – and this gives her a final reason to leave him and re-gain her freedom. The above scene takes place the evening of the marital rape in a Hotel Bar to which Esi had decided to go to have a drink and reflect on her situation. By coincidence, she runs into her best friend Opokuya. I had forgotten this scene and honestly, when I read the book for the first time six years ago, heterosexual relationships and the demands they make on women, were not yet a reality for me. I did not chose to re-read the book with my research in mind, but coming across these lines and Esi's compromised body, I could not prevent myself from thinking about the participants' representations of their heterosexual relationships and their bodies within these. Relationships mean, more often than not, compromises. Compromises which throw 'women' back into gendered roles and take away from some of the new freedoms 'we' have acquired as 'women'; and given that these freedoms can be so easily taken away illustrates that real freedom for 'women' would mean destroying all systems of oppression rather than reforming them.<sup>175</sup> Below, I show how the participants' bodies are compromised in heterosexual relationships in two ways: (1) in term of choices and ambitions and (2) in relation to one's fertile body.

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<sup>175</sup> I understand calls for reform as a sign that the major traits of a system have become commonly accepted; meaning, they have become natural/unchangeable.

There was a need to create a separate chapter on the topic of women's engagement with men as the imaginary presence of men was obvious in all conversations. This was even true for Mbali who has thus far not had a sexual relationship. This presence of men in the women's representations thus deepens the meaning of unfreedom which is experienced through being a heterosexual female. Additionally, in analyzing the conversations, I realized that the topic of men and sexuality was one that, when it came up, could be spoken about easily and I made sense of this through the commonality of performing heterosexual femininity; even though I do not mean to suggest here that this terrain is not racialized. It becomes obvious below, that the figure of the boyfriend is more than a constraint on accessing and living neoliberal freedoms; yet, surprisingly, representations of this constraint were largely free of rage. I also decided to further challenge the neoliberal assumption of the autonomous subject by showing that women's heterosexual bodies are constantly connected to male bodies through gazes, relationships or purely through their existence in a patriarchal world.

## **Compromised choices and freedoms**

“Whereas when I am in a relationship, I have to sacrifice a lot, I have to compromise. But I think I haven't been able to do that.” (Xoliswa)

“I remember I had a boyfriend when I was at home. And the dynamics changed. When you have been to university and you have all these experiences and now it's like, obviously you are not expected to stay the same but a person who has had the same will stay the same. And so it was quite difficult for me to engage with that. You know this attitude about how I have changed. And you have to make an extra effort to sort of seem humble. Which is so fucking annoying. For me, it's it's like everything has to be toned down. And I am very outspoken and I am very opinionated. And fortunately I found out that I was a feminist and that put a name to what I was. [...]

I have grown and I have different ambitions and dreams and I like those dreams, those dreams make me feel alive and there is no way that I would give them up for any man. If a man comes into my life, he must fit into it.” (Cindy)

As stated above, relationships with men were identified as a sticky area as the participants were often reluctant to talk about them. However, when they did, men were often described as a threat to freedom and relationships as compromising possibilities of and access to freedom. Again, even though I do not aim for representativeness, through literature as well as discussions with friends, I have come to realize that many ‘women’ feel compromised by relationships in many different ways and due to different contexts. The following beautiful words by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie paint this picture of the modern compromised woman very clearly: *“For a brief irrational moment, she wished she could walk away from him. Then she wished, more rationally, that she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power without his trying; need was the choicelessness she often felt around him.”*<sup>176</sup> I love these words. After reading them for the first time, I sat back and could feel thoughts moving through my body. I have felt this choicelessness. I have, in the past, also given up something of myself for a man. Also, women’s heterosexual relationships – and specifically their engagements with the male body – cannot be thought outside of contraception and negotiation of contraception in these relationships (as already analyzed in the previous part and further analyzed below).

The conversation with Amanda was one of the few in which relationships with men were discussed substantially. This might be due to the fact that Amanda is already 33 years old (the second oldest participants) and thus, her words show that she has reflected a lot on the failure of

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<sup>176</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Fourth Estate: London, 2009, p. 101.

her past relationships and the possibilities of entering a new relationship which she defined as diminishing given her age.

Amanda: [...] So, my relationships, I would say, ja..., the guy I was with at the time, he felt intimidated. ”

Me: How did he show that?

Amanda: Like, trying to put me down, that’s the first thing I would see especially when I told him that I am going to do my Masters.

The exchange above, as well as other parts of our conversation, shows that her engagements with men have been saturated with power relations. Men usually feel intimidated by her and try putting her down (also represented in Cindy’s quote). She also talked at length about her friends who are already married and how marriage and children have become all there is in their lives and how they now do not aspire to more. One can thus clearly see that Amanda views relationships as compromising women’s freedom and their quest for success. Her definition of success can be described as masculine success in the workspace, whereas having a family, being a stay-at-home mother is viewed as a failure to use one’s potential. Again, this can only be read through a capitalist-patriarchal lens in that capitalism for its functioning needs to de-value the work of social reproduction and thus this work is not paid and hence no remuneration within a capitalist system means this work has no value.<sup>177</sup> But what was interesting as the conversation went on was that Amanda generally still subscribes to very patriarchal views:

“But we must also know our boundaries as women. This is where I stop. I can’t interfere in that. And you know, as they say, women are submissive. We will always be the neck and the man is the head. Yeah, as women it actually mustn’t get in our head that now we

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<sup>177</sup> I was reminded here of the feminist demand of payment for housework in order to attribute value to housework as well as expose the importance of housework to the functioning of capitalism. This feminist demand has largely been forgotten, has been erased by a hegemonic (neo)liberal feminism.

are successful and we can control men and stuff like that. No, we must maintain our femininity. I must submit to my husband. But he must also hear what I need to say.”

I found Amanda’s statements very contradictory and difficult to make sense of. She was the participant who was caught in the most contradictions between new and old forms of femininity. When I asked her if she thought – given her current independence and level of education – she could ever ‘submit’ to a man again, she replied:

“It’s gonna be challenging. That is why I say now, for me, now I have to look for someone who is more educated than me. Finding someone who is less educated is gonna be a challenge and I don’t think we can actually get on well, Actually, chances of me now finding a man are slowly becoming slimmer.”

Even though ‘being a woman’ is a fluid category for Amanda, it is a fluidity that has its limits as she views femininity as natural rather than as a social construct which can change over time. Thus, success and education are now clearly something she thinks women can embrace; however, only if it does not lead to the loss of being a woman, if women are still able/willing to submit to a man. The above discussion illustrates the politics within heterosexual relationships and specifically how a neoliberal performance of femininity challenges conventional power dynamics between men and women. (Further explored in the third part of this chapter.)

Cindy, by identifying as a feminist, has access to and is able to perform a different form of heterosexual femininity and to engage differently with men. She states that a man needs to adjust to her life and not the other way around. In contrast to Amanda then, Cindy has access to a non-hegemonic form of femininity and has, through feminism, found a community that allows her to stick to this performance of femininity even though it is not the norm. Xoliswa talked about the sacrifices and compromises and states these demands on her life as the reason for currently not being in a relationship. Both Xoliswa and Cindy can thus be viewed as performing a counter-hegemonic femininity as they value their independent lives and want to make them meaningful

by following their own passions and dreams. For both, the creation of a life outside of the space of heterosexual demands has become important. However, both accounts also illustrate that the imaginary male body is, every now and then, on their minds and that this presence is understood as making demands to compromise.

Looking at these three accounts, one can see that in contrast to Amanda's idea of femininity as 'natural', Cindy and Xoliswa take their right to define what kind of femininity they want to perform. However, I think it also needs to be pointed out that both are about 10 years younger than Amanda and hence, one day, they might not be able to protect their body from engaging in compromises.

Coming from a home in which my mother decided to be a stay-at-home mother for over ten years, I have also early on decided to create a life outside, and in addition to, the space of the heterosexual family. However, I think it is important here to think further about how heterosexual femininities are raced. As *The Feminine Mystique*<sup>178</sup> illustrates, the wish and even need to have a meaningful life/career is something that often comes from a privileged space in which income-pooling is not required. Whereas many black women in South Africa were raised by mothers who had to work and thus the desire to work is not necessarily rooted in a history of women who were not participating in the workforce; but rather, some of the participants could be said to differ from their mothers in that – through their education – they can aspire to jobs that were often not available to black women historically.

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<sup>178</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin Classics: London, 2010.

## **The self-responsible/temporarily infertile body – another compromised body we wear**

*The threat of pregnancy. The notion of falling behind through falling pregnant. Behind? What about the knowledge gained – about oneself, one's body and another human being – through pregnancy? Why is this form of knowledge still belittled? Why can't we see these women as powerful? Why can't young mothers be powerful?<sup>179</sup>*

Women's bodies are compromised in other ways as well. In earlier research, I concluded that fertile bodies are undesirable in young women's heterosexual relationships and that the desired body is a temporarily infertile one. As explored in the previous chapter, young women use a variety of means to prevent pregnancy; however, issues around negotiation with boyfriends over which contraceptives to use did not surface as strongly as they did in the Honours project. Upon reflection, I concluded that this might be due to the general trend that those relationships to men were a sticky area throughout the nine conversations. Below, I provide an overview of the women's views on contraception in heterosexual relationships. Since writing about this topic for the first time, I have been intrigued by it, as I perceive it to be an important space in which to analyze contemporary gender relations, its attendant power dynamics and performativity of heterosexuality. Within conversations about contraception and the use of certain forms of contraception, gender relations are thus (re)constructed and sometimes challenged. I previously looked at contraception through the lens of freedom and domination, as a technology that allows 'us' sexual freedom but also something that tends to responsabilize 'women' much more than men, something that has become part of performing a certain form of middle-class femininity.

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<sup>179</sup> Research Journal Entry: *Sunday, 29 September 2013*

Given the limited scope of an Honours project, I was unable to locate the source for this easy taking-on of responsibility by ‘women’, but now, having reflected on this in the first analysis chapter, I realized that as ‘women’, ‘we’ are responsabilized from an early age through gendered socialization and as a result ‘we’ tend to take on different responsibilities much easier. But again here, I think it is necessary to question to what extent responsibility and gendered socialization into a responsible body can be understood as raced.

“But just because I am on contraceptives doesn’t mean that I am not using condoms. I am always using condoms. Because I have had people that were close to me die from AIDS, so I am very and I told you, I take care of myself... **I am a very responsible sexual being.**” (Lindiwe)

Lindiwe, throughout the conversation we had, constructed herself as a very active subject, a subject that is responsible and in control of her (reproductive) life. I think this sense of control and responsibility is very important to her given that she grew up in an environment that was defined by lack of control, by unfreedom – the space of the black township.<sup>180</sup> To be a responsible (sexual) being means to her that she has transcended the mindset of the people she grew up with and thus it is an integral part of this new middle-class femininity she is performing.

Buhle: I am on the Pill but I don’t tell the guys that I am with that...

Me: ...so, you are still using condoms?

Buhle: Yes! I rather not let them know because then they are ok with not using a condom. And also because you never know what else you could pick up.

Me: Exactly!

Buhle: So, I’d rather not let them know. Let them worry if anything happens (*laughs*).

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<sup>180</sup> The topic of township spaces and politics of these spaces was also a re-occurring theme in the conversations; however, I decided to not take this topic up given my positionality and resultant lack of authority to speak about and theorize this space.

Again, Buhle illustrates that she takes the contraceptive Pill for herself; however, in contrast to the earlier statement she made, one can conclude here that this self-responsibilization is also located in a general mistrust of men. For Buhle, keeping her taking of the Pill a secret from her sexual partners gives her more power in negotiations over condoms. I think this is a very profound statement as it illustrates that there is still an imbalance in power between Buhle and the men she has sex with which is reflective of the power dynamics in patriarchal societies. Not being honest, not letting them know that she is on the Pill, is thus a performance she uses to be able to make her own decisions, to be not compromised in the negotiations. Also, the statement, that she would rather let them worry in case of condom breakage or other accidents shows that the secret gives her even more power afterwards and without wanting to put words into her mouth, I would say, it also gives her a certain joy in that now, for once, the man has to worry whereas she, the holder of the secret, can remain worry-free.

In contrast to Lindiwe and Buhle, Xoliswa admits that she is not always responsible when it comes to protecting her body:

Me: So how was your experience when you were using the injection? When you told a guy...

Xoliswa: ... you were most likely not to use a condom. I think the intention behind using contraceptives is to prevent pregnancy and not necessarily HIV.

Me: So you think in a way pregnancy is a bigger threat than...?

Xoliswa: I think so. Even with me. When I used contraception. A lot of times, I used to have sex without a condom. And I would be ok with it because I know that the bigger problem is not to have a child.

Me: Why do you think that is?

Xoliswa: Ok. You are still young, you are unemployed. And in my case my parents are unemployed and they are probably going to beat me up. Like in a township, there is a lot of teenage pregnancy. You see people getting pregnant with nothing so I wouldn't want to experience that. It's a bigger, it's the end of your life and then you get reborn

again. It's quite a huge responsibility. Especially now. My cousin, we are both 22 years and she has a kid. And when she fell pregnant, she was not working and the whole family now had to work to get, to make sure that the kid grows up, nappies and everything. I don't want to put myself in those shoes.

As stated already, pregnancy is a more immediate threat to freedom in that it is visible very quickly and because children mean even more responsibility. I have heard this sentiment not only from the participants but also from friends and I guess, after critical self-reflection, I have experienced this myself. Given that 'we' live in structures that require us to be responsible, 'we' try to put off or brush away other responsibilities, the one's 'we' can avoid. Also, the responsibility for a child leads to an interruption in one's progress. Xoliswa is also highly aware of what having a child means given the material conditions which surround her. The example of Xoliswa also strengthens Buhle's case and reasons for not telling her sexual partners that she is on the Pill. It illustrates that a temporarily infertile body leads to loss of power in contraceptive negotiations with men and consequently to a decrease in bodily safety.

The above discussion illustrates that choices, freedom and responsibility for women are, more often than not, relational and embodied and hence cannot be thought of outside the politics of race, class and gender. This reality is in plain contradiction to the (neo-)liberal utopia of the free, autonomous subject; however, as the two parts 'Transcending Bodily Unfreedom' in Chapter Four And Six illustrate, women try to achieve this disembodied subjectivity – constructed as universal by neo-liberal discourses/ideology – by transcending their gendered and raced bodies.

## **On the responsibility to perform desirability**

“Yes, there is a contradiction because education gears us towards independence. But the one thing, the one thing that our careers will never give us is the compliments that we are women. Women and men, two different species. As much as education makes you independent, listen, I need a man to be loved. No physic.. listen, I don’t need him to financially provide for me because I can do that myself but I need... I want to be under someone’s shoulder, that’s what I need...” (Lindiwe)

“Yes! I feel like I am too much for men. I really do and you know, my aunt was telling me this whole strength and being super-woman is not going to work in your favour if you want to get married. You are not going to find a husband and I said I don’t care and she said that, Yeah, you don’t care because you are 23. Get to 30! But I don’t know, at the moment it’s fine. I don’t want to be with someone who can’t handle.. and I am not going to dumb myself down for a boy.” (Mpho)

As addressed in the previous chapter, many participants selectively take care of their bodies through exercising as well as ‘eating right’. In this last section, I thus want to explore how performing desirability is linked to freedom and how the undesirable body is represented as unfree. Again, applying a historical lens, one notices that women have largely moved away from subverting and rejecting demands to police their bodies. Having been called a feminine feminist many times, I started to wonder why the adjective feminine needs to be used to further define the kind of feminist I am (externally) and I realized that many people, when hearing feminism, think about women who do not shave their legs and underarms and who in general do not easily embrace mainstream feminine beauty ideals. I am thus a feminist who has hair only at the right places, as I was once told by a man.

Thinking further about desirability, heterosexuality and freedom, I again realized that this is an area strewn with contradictions. Given the representations of gender the participants put forward, I concluded that gender is often portrayed as choice in that it is only as important as one allows it to be; that through this construction, participants are able to free their minds from their bodies. However, when thinking further about heterosexual desirability, it became apparent that the participants' words and bodies often represented a certain aspiration to being desirable, to perform a desirable form of heterosexual femininity. Through the construction of gender as choice – women can now represent their performance of desirable femininity as freely-chosen. However, I want to look at heterosexual desirability here as being internal as well as external. Internally, one can – according to post-contexts – free oneself from gender; however, this does not have to translate into an outward appearance of genderlessness/androgyny. It also needs to be stated here that the current moment is a moment in which the visual has become highly important and to a certain extent, the participants and I live our embodied lives in an image-based culture. The visual – be it representation of women in adverts, on TV, in magazines, etc. – has led to a re-imaging/re-signification of the meaning of the body as a surface. Hence, heterosexual desirability can only be thought through by keeping this in mind. Traditionally, desirable femininity was linked to sacrifice, care and emotional work in general. Participant's representations above have made visible that they now chose to create a meaningful life – in differing degrees – outside of the space of the heterosexual family. So can one think about a connection between the dismantling of internal heterosexual desirability and the increased emphasis on external heterosexual desirability? And, could this be read as an attempt to preserve the feminine? I want to reflect further on these questions after introducing a quote by Butler:

“The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine

term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practice of heterosexual desire.”<sup>181</sup>

Heterosexual desire depends on differences between the feminine and masculine. However, how do we make sense of this desire in contexts where women, in order to be successful, have to adapt and assimilate into masculine structures? Could a new responsibility be present here: the responsibility of heterosexual women to preserve heterosexual desirability? And again, how is this process and this contradiction infused with race given that differently racialized women go back to different histories of desirable femininity? However, given that heterosexual femininity is still linked to making the ‘perfect match’, is this ‘choice’ to be desirable really so strange?

Lindiwe has, to a certain extent, challenged internal heterosexual femininity by getting an education, by being independent and by performing a – in many ways – different form of femininity to the one she is surrounded by. This change has been met with reactions from her brothers who feel challenged in their masculinity; however, as her words at the beginning of this part illustrate, she still wants to feel like a woman and only a man can bring this about. Feeling like a woman is thus connected to being desired by a man. As stated in Butler’s quote, this desirability depends on differences between men and women.

Mpho’s quote narrates a conversation between herself and her aunt. I make sense of this conversation through introducing a description of ‘the new South African woman’ by Pumla Gqola. In her recently-published book, *A Renegade Called Simphiwe*, Gqola lists the external and internal characteristics that the ‘new South African woman’ is supposed to have according to hegemonic representations of femininity in the South African media.<sup>182</sup> Gqola then continues to

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<sup>181</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge: New York, 1990, p. 24.

<sup>182</sup> “The ‘new South African woman’ is a working woman. She has a career, is ambitious and driven. She has smooth skin, straight, shiny hair and tastefully manicured nails. That means that she either has light coloured acrylic

point out the dangers inherent in such a construction of normative femininity and at some point addresses the relationship between workplace success and the need to remain desirable to men: “Professional women are always advised that overachiever women are threatening to men, and that therefore, women should get out of their way to remain desirable to men.”<sup>183</sup> This is exactly what happened to Mpho. Gqola then concludes that women “are constantly bombarded with a narrow framework of femininity and family life.”<sup>184</sup>

Coming back to the theme of freedom, heterosexual desirability and performances of femininity, it becomes clear that this ‘new’ femininity combines – and expects of women – to, on the one hand, follow new scripts, become educated and successful; but on the other hand, to preserve ‘the feminine’ in order to remain desirable to men. This new normative femininity thus requires women to stay within “a narrow framework of femininity and family life”<sup>185</sup> but also, to create a meaningful life outside of this space without bringing the outside life back into this private space. Women’s bodies and their freedom can thus be seen as compromised given that they need to follow and combine contradictory scripts. Or, maybe one of the questions this project has generated is: Can women only gain freedom through the destruction of gender differences or, can women be freer, in and through their differences?

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tips or pastel coloured nails. Occasionally she has a stronger colour on her nails, but never one that shows too much character, so deep reds and all greys are allowed but yellow has excessive personality. Her brow is shaped by waxing, threading or tweezing so that the end of her brow is aligned to the outer eye corner. She has hairless armpits and knows where to get a Brazilian, a Bollywood or a Hollywood wax but she does not talk about it. She speaks neither too loudly nor too softly, and fluently in English. [...] She is assumed to be heterosexual, aspires to marriage in her late twenties, two cars in her household and travel outside the continent. [...] This woman does not just believe in women’s empowerment; she lives it. She is not a feminist because she rather believes in feminine power and does not think that women should act like men. [...]” (Pumla Dineo Gqola, *A Renegade Called Simphiwe*, MFBooks Joburg: Sunnyside, 2013, pp. 57 -58.)

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

Amanda has accepted that she might already be outside of this 'narrow framework' given her age and education level. Cindy and Xoliswa have both consciously tried to move outside of it. Lebo is already divorced and currently a single mother of two and wants to focus on her future in which she does not see a men any time soon. Zethu has also recently been separated and currently her family is looking after her young daughter. Cindy and Patricia are both in long-distance relationships. Buhle, Xoliswa, Lindiwe and Mbali were single at the time of the interviews; even though the first three spoke about occasional one-night stands.

## Chapter Six

### *Education and Freedom*

“Of course I entered college hoping that a university degree would enhance my class mobility. Yet, I thought of this solely in economic terms.”<sup>186</sup> – bell hooks

“The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.[...]

The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources (20 percent of the world’s peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth’s peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North paralleled by that of overpopulation on the part of the dispossessed poor, still partly agrarian worlds of the South — these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.” – Sylvia Wynter<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup>bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994, pp. 181-182.

<sup>187</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument”, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337, pp. 260 – 261.

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, addressing the second cluster, I look closely at education and freedom with the aim of showing how education is represented by the participants as a means to achieve freedom as well as success and illustrate how in the process the participants' notions of gender and race are changed and re-signified. I investigate to what extent the participants equate (academic) success with freedom and again, I pay close attention to representations of the body as a zone of engagement with freedom. How are the participants' gendered and racialized bodies organized in the university space compared to the home space (see Chapter Four) and what does this mean for performances of gender and race? The UCT space is theorized here as a space in which aspirant young women/socially mobile subjects are to be found.

This chapter is subdivided into three parts; each speaking to different aspects around education and freedom. The chapter starts by looking at the participants' motivations to become educated – and to illustrate this, I go back to the space of the family – and how this is again mediated by responsibility and freedom. Also, I demonstrate below how becoming educated is now part of successful femininity and how certain ways of speaking, dressing and performing one's body are used to show this (also see Chapter Four). It thus becomes obvious that gender and race are an integral part to the formation of these neoliberal femininities; even though gender and race are constructed as irrelevant in neoliberal discourse. Below, I make visible the contradictory position that the women find themselves in while trying to negotiate conventional norms of femininity and new expectations they are engulfed by and how in the process they push back certain gendered boundaries; but also, how they are crippled by their socialization and thus, I illustrate the fluidity/boundedness of femininity. Thus, what becomes apparent is that this new, neo-liberal femininity is a femininity based on flexible performances: women are required to perform

differently in different spaces and to go through many negotiations in their everyday lives.<sup>188</sup> The chapter ends with a discussion of education represented as a means to achieve freedom within the current order. Freedom, as an idea and specifically as an ideological concept, is interrogated and I argue that through participants' narratives it becomes clear that freedom is not an institutional guarantee but rather, freedom needs to be theorized as something that is embattled every day and I thus conclude that education (and financial independence) alone does not lead to a substantive form of freedom.

Given that university spaces are microcosms of the larger society, the UCT space needs to be embedded within the wider South African context and historical narrative. Yes, throughout South Africa post-1994, legalized apartheid has been abolished; however, power is not only to be found in judicial texts but in the whole structure of society. As outlined in the Literature Review, post-1994 South Africa has followed a neoliberal path and thus, education and educational spaces – prime sites for the formation of citizens – cannot be viewed outside of this neoliberal restructuring. Consequently, I situate my analysis of the conversations within a clear critique of neoliberalism and its effect on education(al discourses). As apparent in the educational trajectories of the participants below, “[...] education markets are marked by selection, exclusion and are accompanied by and situated within the rampant--indeed, exponential--growth of national and international inequalities.”<sup>189</sup> Tertiary education is thus a priori exclusionary; yet people who fail to get access and consequently to become successful are painted as irresponsible and lazy. Additionally, bell hooks work has been helpful in theorizing the university space and

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<sup>188</sup> Gill states that in neoliberal times “power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation.” (Rosalind Gill, “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times”, *Subjectivity*, 2008, 25, pp. 432 – 445, p. 439.)

<sup>189</sup> Dave Hill, “Educational Perversion and Global Neo-Liberalism: A Marxist Critique”, *Cultural Logic*, at <http://clogic.eserver.org/2004/hill>, accessed 19 November 2013.

specifically in making sense of how gender, race and class dynamics play out within this space.<sup>190</sup>

## Family - or, on how the aspiring subject is made

“To be an empowered young woman is to have, to be empowered is... for me... is to have a key to access the opportunities that are presented by the world. And by having a degree I am empowered. By having an education, ... you see... my English is failing me now... **I am mentally liberated to interact**, to stand for what I do. That’s what I understand by empowerment. But beyond the education, there is someone behind me today that is the reason for who I am and that is my mom. I have the opportunity of being empowered because of that woman because the attitude that I have is from her, you know what I am saying. Before I could even stand and say, ok, I can interact with the world, my mom has been the best parent ever.

The family socialisation is very important. So with me, what pushed me to go for education was my situation at home. I looked at all those **flaws**, and all those bad experiences and there should be a better place to be than this. And I decided to break the chain, the cycle of poverty, I would say that **the state of mind is very important**. But there will always be certain **aspects**, certain **things** that will limit you. So I don’t know, I really don’t know, but... with me, I think background plays a very important role and with me it’s also a certain attitude to life.” (Lindiwe)

“You live in a household where maybe you live with your gran and your mom and your dad was never there and the only pictures of success or the only stories that you’ve heard, have gone a certain way and you you put yourself in that frame. And the language people use, Yeah, but that’s not for someone like me. What’s someone like me? **It’s this attitude, it’s a certain mindset that take much to break** because if you have only ever live in that little community, you’ve never left, never seen what life is like [...]” (Mpho)

“I know challenges, I know failure, I am much stronger than the person to whom everything was given. If you tell yourself and you know what you want, you can actually achieve it. [...] Actually coming from a disadvantaged background has made me stronger.” (Amanda)

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<sup>190</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994.

“And everyone doesn’t really see the point of going to university. Coz not a lot of us from a township background go to the university anyway.” (Xoliswa)

Family does not only form the gendered, raced and classed subject (see Chapter Four) but also influences one’s aspirations and dreams and belief in oneself. Most participants did thus refer to their families as the source of their aspiration and determination. Again, this was often located in the discourse of the strong mother (the strong black woman) and the role model discourse in general but also, I want to theorize the family as a space in which a certain psychological/mental freedom can be fostered; namely, certain ‘attitudes’ and ‘mindsets’.

Looking at the quotes above, the participants’ words illustrate that they are aware that the social environment shapes people’s aspirations and dreams and constructs the way people see themselves, their mind-sets. Both Lindiwe and Mpho emphasize the importance of someone’s state of mind and this brings me back to mental freedom as a precondition to other freedoms. Mpho stated that many people she knows think that university, “that’s not for someone like me”; meaning, I don’t see people like myself in these spaces and hence I don’t belong there. Again, most participants acknowledge that one’s environment affects how one views oneself and one can thus say that there is a realization that material conditions matter. However, even though this reference to people’s material conditions and how they structure dreams and aspirations is admitted – which could be seen as in conflict with a neo-liberal narrative of the free, unencumbered subject; in conflict with neoliberalism’s emphasis on agency and negligence of structure – most participants also believe that this mindset can be overcome – broken – without changing material conditions. In fact, looking closely at the words chosen: “flaws”, “aspects that limit”; one can see that this linguistic basis does not allow participants to engage in a structural

critique. Words are de-politicized, divorced from material conditions and hence change becomes possible without changing one's surroundings. This is possible for some of the participants through an embrace of the role-model discourse; role models who have shown that the odds – 'flaws' – can be overcome, that even though structure is constraining, with hard work and dreams and ambitions, one can still 'make it'. Hence, as discussed in the previous analysis chapters, participants tend to view themselves as subjects of transformation. Participants who went to public schools and are from disadvantaged homes, emphasized strongly that parental emotional support and parents as role models are the reason for their change of mind, for being able to break out of an oppressive mindset. The engine of social change is consequently located – again – in individual people and not in a transformation of structures and thus material conditions; individual mindsets need to be broken and not structures. This can only be made sense of by locating the discourse in a post-1994 context in which all calls for a radical transformation of society have been painted as utopian. In the words of Andile Mngxitama:

“Consistent in their thinking, which is de-raced and de-historicised, the two parties position education as the panacea for all our societal ills. The DA sees education as central to its project of an ‘open, opportunity society’. Having abandoned any claims to historical accounting and reparations, Azapo burdens the victims of our racist history with the responsibility of change through getting themselves educated.”<sup>191</sup>

In line with neoliberal discourse, the participants have internalized this responsibility. A responsibility that does not only affect them but also their larger family as (explored further below) education thus not only increase one's sense of freedom in terms of offering a larger pool of choices than are available to less educated women, but also increases responsibility at the community level which in turn, is perceived by most of the participants as taking back some

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<sup>191</sup> Andile Mngxitama, *New Frank Talk 1: Why Biko Wouldn't Vote*, 2009, p. 20.

newly-acquired freedoms. Thus, education leads to a simultaneous opening up of freedoms and a new constraint on these freedoms through freely-chosen or expected family responsibilities.

Lindiwe and Amanda also state that their determination originates in wanting to improve their lives, in wanting to transcend the conditions around them. Both of them discursively represented harsh material conditions as factors which pushed them, which made them stronger instead of discouraging them and one can conclude that these participants have realized that strength is something that is needed to navigate current social/economic and political reality. But again, I want to think about the idea of strength as racialized; applying a historical lens, and repeating the question: have black woman not always needed strength to survive the multiple oppressions they live through? The fact that participants have not been discouraged by their circumstances, by the realities in the communities they come from, can also be explained as being rooted in a South African discourse in which freedom is supposedly available to all. One needs to remember here that 'freedom' is a word heavily loaded with meaning and needs to be located in at least two discourses: (1) freedom achieved through democracy post-1994 and (2) neoliberal freedoms of choice and self-invention/autonomy. Thus, believing in the neoliberal narrative of meritocracy/opportunity society and hard work has helped these participants to nurture hope and ambition. Realizing this made me uncomfortable again given that I cannot – and somehow refuse – to see anything good in the neoliberal narrative. However, even though one cannot deny the force of structural impediments, role-models show that these impediments can sometimes be overcome. I thus think that the role-model discourse is far more ambivalent than I first assumed. I came to accept that there is nothing wrong with being inspired by someone; yet, I do not think that we can generalize from these few exceptions who manage to 'make it'. And again, one needs to remember, that in order to legitimate itself, the current order has to allow some people

to be socially mobile and successful (By order I refer to politico-economic order but also to Wynter's conception of the idea of the human; so we can see that role models can be regarded as legitimizing this idea of the human as universal). The mistake to make is thus to think that if these exceptions can make it against the odds, everyone can. One needs to remember the ideological function these role-models play to legitimize and stabilize the current neo-liberal order. I think once role models are understood as ideological agents, one can be inspired by them and this understanding will avoid a construction of oneself as failure should one not be able to be 'successful'. In fact, neoliberalism as a system needs a social construction of failure as personal failure for exposing systematic failures of neoliberalism would allow the system to be criticized. Thus, people who have made it will always be hyper-visible.<sup>192</sup>

To elaborate further on the role-model discourse, I gained significant insights from Hill Collins who writes the following about role models in the US context:

“[...] poor black women allegedly fail to get ahead because they lack images of what is possible. Conversely, middle-class black women who refuse to serve as “role models” for their less fortunate sisters also garner blame.”<sup>193</sup>

And she concludes:

“[...] an overreliance on “role-modelling” as a path for black female empowerment seems shortsighted, because images of both groups obscure institutionalized power relations.”<sup>194</sup>

Thus, one can conclude that role model discourses do not only serve to legitimize the current structure and hide real structural factors but also, the role model discourse responsabilizes women

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<sup>192</sup> In a way, one can compare this to the election of Barack Obama as the first black president: By having reached this position, narratives of a post-racial America can now base themselves on his success and a post-racial nation becomes constructed as a social reality. Obama thus acts as an ideological figure representing/legitimizing a bigger ideological order.

<sup>193</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1998, p. 41.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

even further. Consequently, I claim that all participants fulfill an ideological function of legitimizing the current neoliberal structures in South Africa. They are used as symbols and thus symbolic change is celebrated and in the process, the need for structural change invisibilized. Written out. Erased. Seen more broadly, we have moved from a time of collective struggles for freedom to a time of individual struggle (this is largely true for black radical as well as feminist movements). Individuals are thus celebrated as role models, called on to inspire others and cultures of collective organizing, which have been elemental to, for example, the overthrow of apartheid, destroyed.

To put the analysis of the participants above in perspective, I want to substantially engage with Patricia's representation of her family's influence on her view of education; read Lindiwe's Mpho's, Xoliswa's and Amanda's representation of education against Patricia's. Patricia, by far the wealthiest participant, comes from a home in which her parents, despite only having matric certificates, have ventured into being entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial subjectivity is one of the main neoliberal subjectivities as entrepreneurs embody self-reliance and self-responsibility and active creation of their own opportunities. Her parents, in Patricia's view, have thus lived in a way that suggests that hard work is enough, that one does not need a degree; one is free as long as one puts in hard work and is responsible for one's own life and – the creation of – one's choices. Due to her parents' material circumstances, Patricia describes her growing-up as very sheltered and this gave her space to follow her various dreams and passions.<sup>195</sup> Thus, for her, university, the sheer presence in this space is a form of freedom and below she elaborates on the reasons for coming to university:

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<sup>195</sup> However, as described in the previous chapter, Patricia's sexuality and gendered performances have been policed heavily.

“Firstly, because it is far away from home and I wanted to experience things by myself without my parents, you know telling me, giving me instructions. I wanted to experience some sort of freedom. Coz at home, I didn’t do much at home, go to school, do my homework, weekends I’d be with my mom. And I think I wanted to go out there and kind of be thrown into the world because I mean I am very optimistic, I got huge dreams so I just saw it as an extension of me being this adventurous person. So I think that’s what made me decide to come here.”

Patricia defines the freedom that comes with being at university as spatial; she does not need a freedom that is based on the creation of opportunities as she already has opportunities and choices and was even encouraged by her mom to follow her passion for art instead of going to university. She thus talks about freedom from parental interference and freedom found in living by herself for the first time. Freedom to her is thus also the escape from gendered regulation within and through her family. As shown in Chapter Four, due to her mother’s teenage pregnancy, her sexuality and relationships to boys/men have been heavily policed. Consequently, she views this new responsibility for her own life and body as practicing freedom. Reflecting on people from more disadvantaged places/homes, she says the following:

“Especially because of context, where someone comes from. Someone who is disadvantaged, who hasn’t had the opportunities that I have. Who only knows one certain way of life. **They only see that and live within a bubble and don’t see beyond that.** Some people don’t have goals. Some people just wake up because they are alive. Because they don’t have anything driving them to do something so I feel like it sometimes takes someone else to come and inspire you, to empower you.”

The above illustrates that Patricia is highly aware of how important her family background has been to her life trajectory and to how she views life. Social background is thus a space in which dreams and ambitions as well as an optimistic view of life is fostered. Again, Patricia does not talk about structure but instead she refers back to the role-model discourse. She views it as possible that someone can be empowered by another person. And by empowered she means freed from self-imposed (mental) restraints in contrast to structural constraints. In order to

highlight this point, I decided to re-write Patricia's above statement (marked in bold): [...] "They are only allowed/able to see this bubble and have no way, structurally, of seeing beyond that." Through this re-writing, I clearly expose Patricia's construction of an active neoliberal subject by applying my own structural lens. Also, the statement that "[s]ome people just wake up because they are alive" makes me think of the idea of the living dead. But also again of afro-pessimism and its concept of social death.<sup>196</sup> But again, Patricia does not say that the current system produces these living dead who are placed on the margins of mainstream/white bourgeois society.

One can again see that the role-model discourse as embraced by the majority of the participants is very sanitized and de-politicized but also grounded in a certain construction of dependence. The need to have a role-model to inspire means that one is dependent on this person; but also, it points to a certain idea of luck as not everyone can find/is found by a role-model. I wondered if this idea, looked at through a postcolonial lens, carries traces of a white savior discourse.

The above part has illustrated how important the family space is in fostering ambitions and determination. The role-model discourse was again hegemonic and role models were often parents – either for their success or for their ability to remain strong in difficult conditions. Additionally, I have introduced the idea that believing in the neoliberal narrative of hard work and meritocracy can give students much needed psychological support and hope.

However, given that this chapter specifically looks at the construction of femininity within educational spaces (high schools as well as universities), I want to highlight, that the role-model discourse is not only located within the family/private space but also pushed within educational

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<sup>196</sup> Sebastian Weier, "Consider Afro-pessimism", Draft, p. 2.

institutions and hence a certain kind of normative femininity is being constructed. Mpho, who was given a scholarship to an expensive and prestigious private school in Johannesburg highlighted how the school would organize talks by ‘successful’ individuals:

“Just bring in people, great people, all people who have done great things so that’s how they instilled this notion... and also, through you know, like, seeing the women, the kind of women that have come out of Rodean. We have an alumnae society and so you learn about girls that were previously Rodean girls that are now CEOs or... so that’s how they instilled that notion that we could do great things.” (Mpho)

Given that the space in which these successful individuals were formed is a highly exclusionary space and a space in which the majority of people already have abundant social as well as financial capital, one can only conclude that this discourse silences material conditions and in general the conditionality of success in an unequal neoliberal society as well as, going back to Wynter’s quote at the beginning of this chapter, a certain kind of human is constructed as universal.

I thus conclude this first part by highlighting that the black women’s presence in the UCT space surely reflects the changes South Africa has undergone since the end of apartheid; however, this should not let us forget that the majority of the poor in South Africa are still black; that black women are still the victims of patriarchy as well as white supremacy and capitalism and that their presence in formerly white spaces is often only accepted if they ‘act white’, if they assimilate to already established (white) norms. This part highlighted the importance of families and the rootedness in the role-model discourse of most participants. I started making sense of this through an ideological lens as well as through an embrace of ambiguity. As highlighted earlier, one does not ‘race’ in a neoliberal framework but this can now also be extended to say that one does not ‘class’; that is, race and class are not used to make sense of people’s success. And

again, Mohanty's words come to mind, people are not allowed/educated to see beyond the personal and individual.<sup>197</sup>

## **Transcending bodily unfreedom: gender and race as choice II and the problematic of race-based policies**

“It’s just a constant battle, I feel like as a women **we just have to keep proving ourselves**. You know what, I can do it. Which, you know, defeats the point of education because you have to keep proving yourself to people which don’t even care. ” (Lindiwe)

“Because one of the reasons that actually made me come and do my Masters, because of the environment where I was working it was mostly male and they had their PhDs and stuff. So whenever we had a meeting and I had ideas and stuff, they weren’t taken that seriously or **I wasn’t taken that seriously**. So, I said to myself, Is it because I am a woman and worse, being black, that I am not taken serious? Then, I thought, let me just go back to school. When I told them that they actually couldn’t believe it. I actually asked for a bursary from my work and they said no... you could see that they were blocking me in every way they could. So yeah, I would say that for me it has disadvantages. Although most people would be saying, Wow, you are doing your Masters and you are black in a male-dominated industry. A woman, there will be opportunities for me but it hasn’t worked for me. I feel like I am at a disadvantage that I am a woman. I am actually even educating myself, I am independent, I feel like it is actually having more disadvantages for me. But at the same time I still want to push... *(laughs)*. **And that won’t limit me to actually achieve what I want to achieve.** ” (Amanda)

“I didn’t chose to be born a woman and I was born a woman and I love that and I don’t want to be a man. I like my femininity, there is nothing wrong with that. But people can objectify you because of your body and it can be not so great! When you feel that **it takes so long for someone to respect or to give you the amount of necessary respect.**

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<sup>197</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Transnational Feminist Crossings: On Neoliberalism and Radical Critique”, *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, Summer 2013, pp. 967-991, p. 971.

Just because they have to validate you first, you know... And that's the problem with BEE that I have, that now, **I have to prove myself, Oh, did she get into university because she is a black woman?** ” (Mpho)

Embodiment and specifically functions associated with the female body are, by the majority of participants, associated with being unfree (see previous chapters) and thus many, later on in their lives, started to celebrate mental forms of freedom. To mentally free oneself from and to not become emotional about sexist and/or racial discrimination is seen as at least maintaining one form of freedom and this is one of the ways through which the young women understand education, as a means to prove themselves and their capability and re-gaining freedom through self-definition instead of being defined according to one's racialized gender and thus as a group; namely, as black South African women. I feel that the emphasis on the need to prove oneself can be viewed as no freedom as it means living up to someone's expectation and thus leads to a form of assimilation. The analysis and thoughts below also need to be read as a critique of the currently hegemonic construction that freedom can only be achieved in liberal-capitalist democracies.

In this second part, I illustrate the social/neoliberal construction of first race and secondly, gender as choice. I want to theorize this first space as a space of collision between postcolonialism and neoliberalism and by so doing illustrate how the black consciousness narrative of psychological freedom has been – to a certain extent and in a very limited form – appropriated by neoliberal discourses. This appropriation constantly led to a reduction of psychological freedom as sufficient instead of its place in black consciousness thinking as a stepping stone to the achievement of total liberation. Before continuing to explore mental/psychological liberation, I want to clearly state that this part – after the first draft version

had been written into existence – troubled me a lot due to: (1) my still rather superficial knowledge of black consciousness; (2) my a priori complex relationship to this philosophy given my white embodiment. Hence, this part needs to be read as an exploration, a thinking out loud. Reading it as such, I hope that the pairing of neoliberalism and black consciousness – and the claimed ‘relationship’ between the two – can be valued as experimental as well as offering a different lens than the one used in most western writings on neoliberalism. I understand Biko’s writings as having enabled a move into the individual subject by focusing on the meaning of individual consciousness. In *I write What I Like*, Biko defines Black Consciousness:

“[...]the only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality. The first step is therefore to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into this empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of “Black Consciousness”.”<sup>198</sup>

Taking this “inward-looking process” into account, it becomes obvious how a neoliberal narrative which disallows systemic analysis could easily adopt this part of Biko’s project as it support the neoliberal idea of individual versus structural change.<sup>199</sup> Wilderson thus states:

“empowerment predicated on black consciousness can only impact/liberate the black at the level of preconscious interest and at the level of unconscious identifications; but not at the level of structural positionality.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like; a selection of his writings*, Ravan: Randburg, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>199</sup> Biko, however, was not quiet about the system – and the interconnection between structure and agency - within which black people found/find themselves:

“The fact that apartheid has been tied up with white supremacy, capitalist exploitation, and deliberate oppression makes the problem much more complex. Material want is bad enough, but coupled with spiritual poverty it kills. And this latter effect is probably the one that creates mountains of obstacles in the normal cause of emancipation of the black people.” Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like; a selection of his writings*, Ravan: Randburg, 1996, p. 28.

<sup>200</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, “Biko and the Problematic of Presence” in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson (eds.) *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, pp. 95-114, p. 111.

Neoliberal capitalism has been quick to appropriate any project focused on internal versus structural change. This is also illustrated below in relation to gender and liberal feminism. Thus, neoliberalism managed to change projects starting with internal change to projects stuck within this internal change and hence freedom could be redefined as being brought about by and within individuals instead as freedom of a collectivity. Most revolutionary movements – if not all – emphasize the importance of mental liberation as a precondition to full liberation. bell hooks, talking about Paulo Freire’s work, states the following:

“Because the colonizing forces are so powerful in this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, it seems that black people are always having to renew a commitment to a decolonizing process that should be fundamental to our lives and is not. And so Freire’s work, in its global understanding of liberation struggles, always emphasizes that this is the important initial stage of transformation. That historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstances. [...] many times people will say to me that I seem to be suggesting that it is enough for individuals to change how they think. And you see, even their use of the *enough* tells us something about the attitude they bring to this question. It has a patronizing sound, one that does not convey any heartfelt understanding of a change in attitude (though not a completion of any transformative process) can be significant for colonized/oppressed people.”<sup>201</sup>

The importance of psychological/mental freedom cannot be denied. Certain subjects, be they black, female, working-class battle with/against mental enslavement; even though these oppressive thoughts manifest differently and as we can see, need to be viewed as intersectional in relation to the participants. Thus, myself, even though I am constantly battling against the gendered and classed thoughts, due to my white skin, I still have one form of social power/capital and thus acceptance and confirmation in educational environments that are still largely white dominated. Also, I step into a certain white intellectual tradition which black

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<sup>201</sup> hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994, p. 47.

people do not necessarily feel a connection to.<sup>202</sup> But it is important that even though, like the majority of the participants, I view psychological liberation as important, I am in agreement with Cindy and Xoliswa, who battle against psychological liberation as well as structural domination/power. I am reminded here of an interview with Pierre Bourdieu in which he states the following:

“My trajectory may be described as miraculous, I suppose – an ascension to a place where I don’t belong. And so to be able to live in a world that is not mine I must try to understand both things: what it means to have an academic mind – how such is created – and at the same time what was lost acquiring it. For that reason, even if my work – my full work – is a sort of autobiography, it is a work for people who have the same sort of trajectory, and the same need to understand.”<sup>203</sup>

A mental understanding of one’s life trajectory – specifically for mobile subjects – is of utmost importance. But if aiming for total freedom, one needs to avoid getting stuck in this first stage. Looking at the quotes at the beginning of part one in this chapter, one notices that when talking about mental liberation and mindsets, participants do not talk about race (with the exception of Xoliswa). Feelings of inferiority are not placed within a white-supremacist/anti-black world. Again, it could be claimed that participants have internalized that one does not ‘race’ in a non-racial/neo-liberal South Africa. However, internalized notions of racial inferiority and their rootedness in a white supremacist ideology cannot be divorced from the development of such mindsets that think that UCT is not for people like me – speak, black people with township

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<sup>202</sup> My connection is a troubled one. However, what I want to emphasize here is that even though most white scholarship in the past – and also in the present – was/is race, class and gender biased, I am still made aware that white people are producers of knowledge. And all white people are instilled with this awareness from an early age – consciously or unconsciously. Black people, on the other hand, and I have often been told this, are largely confronted with narratives of defeat and black inferiority.

<sup>203</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton, “Doxa and Common Life: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton”, in Slavoj Zizek (ed.) *Mapping Ideology*, Verso: London, 2012, pp. 265-277, p. 272.

In the first methodology chapter is also shared a reflection on my class background and of the attempt to make sense of class mobility.

background. When looking at this statement closely, Biko's statement: "The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed"<sup>204</sup> came to mind and thus again, my belief in the importance of mental liberation was affirmed. However, as stated above, the majority of the participants do not take the next necessary step which is to locate these oppressed minds in ideological systems; speak, neoliberalism, white supremacy, patriarchy. I put this down to several factors: (1) the majority of participants do not have access to counter discourses to (neo-) liberalism (2) the emphasis on agency and individualization and thus silencing of structure and (3) non-racialism.

I have already discussed non-racialism and the discussion is continued below in conjunction with access to counter-discourses by the two participants who I have identified as 'exceptions'; or rather, politically conscious/politicized subjects. I thus discuss point number two, individualization, in this paragraph, starting with a quote from Anita Harris:

"From one perspective, this process of individualization creates opportunities for forming oneself independently of traditional ties [...]. It carries with it the promise of choice, freedom and real autonomy. However, apparent opportunities for self-invention and individual effort exist within circumstances that remain highly constrained for the majority of people."<sup>205</sup>

To perceive oneself as a free agent, an agent that can be free if one fosters the right mind-set is empowering and gives one a certain sense of freedom. I understand this wish to be free and this social construction of freedom and choice as individualized. But I think what we are dealing with is more often than not the pretention of choice and freedom. Whereas, as we saw in the previous chapters, gendered socialization is still heavily regulated, education and specifically university education creates an illusion of freedom. Young women can start forming themselves much more independently from their parents; however, universities are still highly exclusionary spaces. And

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<sup>204</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like; a selection of his writings*, Ravan: Randburg, 1996.

<sup>205</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl – Young Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Routledge: New York, p. 5.

thus, in line with Harris, individualizing discourses invisibilize and thus legitimate structural constraints. Additionally, as Harris later adds, “personalizing responsibility for success conceals the investment of global capitalism in the maintenance of systemic inequality.”<sup>206</sup>

As mentioned before, this research project – not only being an auto-ethnography but also an illustration of the lived/embodied nature of research – is thus highly aware of current popular discourses. A book and TED talk by Sheryl Sandberg<sup>207</sup> became difficult to avoid at the time of the research and even though the discourse is about Western women by a white Western woman, I could not not discuss this book and the ideas it puts forward here. I reached this decision because not only does Sandberg discuss women and their relation to the workplace but she does so from a highly liberal/accommodationist standpoint. A review of her book thus states the following and illustrates how her discourse is firmly grounded in neoliberalism and its attendant values:

“Sandberg does not deny that workplaces and political organizations are sexist. She writes that barriers to women in power are both institutional and internal, but **her focus is on changing internal barriers because they are more malleable than external ones** (“We can dismantle the hurdles in ourselves today” [p. 9]). Her advice to women boils down to three points: she encourages women to seek out and pursue all opportunities for career development (“sit at the table”), to demand that their husbands take equal responsibility for housework and childcare (“make your partner a real partner”), and to minimize any disruption of their careers posed by maternity and motherhood (“don’t leave before you leave”).”<sup>208</sup>

What I immediately realized was the reference to and emphasis on internal change which is also present within the participants’ representations; here portrayed as something that is easier to

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>207</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, “Why we have so few women leaders” at [http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl\\_sandberg\\_why\\_we\\_have\\_too\\_few\\_women\\_leaders](http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders), accessed 10 February 2014; Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, WH Allen: New York, 2013.

<sup>208</sup> Christine Williams, “The Happy Marriage of Capitalism and Feminism”, *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, 2014, 43, pp. 58-61, p. 58.

change than structures. It is a call for self-responsibilization, for women to choose to not stick to gender scripts; as if one's socialization can be shaken off easily. And again, these sentiments were apparent in most of the conversations. Also, in the Literature Review, one can see the development from liberal to neoliberal feminism and I realized the extent to which these notions are global<sup>209</sup>; how this western neoliberal discourse/feminism has taken root in South Africa. Additionally, the book addresses the issue of positive discrimination (in terms of gender): "In keeping with neoliberalism, her book promotes the free market—and not government policy—as the best route for getting women into positions of power." One can thus conclude that participants, by viewing UCT's race-based policy as well as BEE, as additional burden, that they are firmly grounded in neoliberal ways of thinking.

As stated from the onset, it was important for me that this project is a critique of neoliberalism, written from and through the bodies of young women. As this thesis shows, women's body contours can be read as ideological contours: slim, infertile bodies that chose not to be internally raced or gendered within public spaces. Thus, UCT's transformation policy of giving preferential access to black students is perceived by the majority of participants as a certain unfreedom:

"In South Africa, it's just one thing you can't ignore. Race is very important. There mere fact that when we **have to tick our race.**" (Lindiwe)

"And that's the problem with BEE that I have, that now, **I have to proof myself, Oh, did she get into university because she is a black woman? [...] if you are black you are put into a certain box** until you can be taken out as one of the good blacks, whatever that means. It has made it easier if all you want is to get a job but if you really

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<sup>209</sup> There is a wealth of scholarship on the local/global debate. Mbembe, for example, states that African societies "are rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized. From a narrow methodological standpoint, this means that, from the fifteenth century, there is no longer a "distinctive historicity" of these societies, one not embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination. Therefore, dealing with African societies' "historicity" requires more than simply giving an account of what occurs on the continent itself at the interface between the working of internal forces and the working of international actors. It also presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it.", Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001, p. 9.

value merit, being respected for what you can do and having the right credit given to you for what you have done then it has really worked against us. And the mere fact that when you have this type of conversation, it has to come up, oh, we are not just hiring you because you are black.” (Mpho)

I located the source of the above words in the fact that to have to tick one’s race is a certain force and there is thus no freedom in self-definition available. Self-definition, the possibility of the freedom to constitute oneself through one’s work and effort are very important to the majority of participants. This is so in regards to gender as well as race and as already stated, I located the source of this sentiment in (neo-) liberal theory and its definition of freedom as “freedom from interference either by other individuals or by the state.”<sup>210</sup> However, I argue that this is an illusionary freedom; in white supremacist patriarchal structures, (black) women have no freedom of self-definition. Instead, one is caught in an endless loop of attempts to prove oneself, to prove one’s value in structures which de-value/deny one’s value. (White) women, trying to not ‘get emotional’ about sexism, or, as (black) women, about racist as well as sexist discrimination is thus not psychological freedom; the need to prove oneself will always remind one of one’s apparent inadequacy. Consequently, the source of the internalized sexist/racial gaze is not destroyed/attacked. And as long as this source remains intact, black women will remain “overdetermined from without” and Fanon continues: “I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance.”<sup>211</sup> Thus, no matter how much black women assimilate into white neoliberal culture, their skin colour still leads to an externally imposed definition. Additionally, Mphos’ statement can be read through an afro-pessimistic lens. Looking at the part of the quote I highlighted in bold, one can conclude that blackness is a priori constructed as bad, as problematic and only once one proves one’s worth, one is taken out of the ‘dark’ box and seen

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<sup>210</sup> Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Rowman & Allanheld Publishers: New Jersey, 1983, p. 174.

<sup>211</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press: London, 1986, p. 20.

as good (white?); meaning, through hard work, one can redeem one's blackness to a certain extent/temporarily.<sup>212</sup> In a talk between bell hooks and Melissa Harris Perry, bell hooks, talking about black people in the US, states that they still believe that "they can live as assimilated black people in this bourgeois world."<sup>213</sup> She also talks about cognitive dissonance and that one wants to believe that equality and democracy are real. And this thus goes back to the point previously made about self-preservation.

I thus want to locate the origin of the participants' views within a context in which narratives of 'the rainbow nation', nonracialism and liberal feminism have become hegemonic and all of these discourses need to be viewed through a lens of white normativity. Giroux refers to "the privatization of racial discourse"<sup>214</sup> when he mentions that racism is not perceived anymore as a structure but rather as something some individuals practice, racism is reduced to individual prejudice. However, what was interesting in some of the conversations was, given that UCTs quota system is one of the remaining systems that have race inscribed into e.g. selection criteria, this system was viewed by some as being a burden as they now have to prove that they have made it despite being black. Black women's access to university is often experienced by themselves as a form of 'un-freedom' in that their access/presence is seen as based on having the right skin colour and gender. Thus, being black within a university space means to constantly

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<sup>212</sup> Sebastian Weier, "Consider Afro-pessimism", Draft, pp. 1-2.

<sup>213</sup> Black Female Voices: bell hooks & Melissa Harris-Perry, at <http://new.livestream.com/TheNewSchool/blackfemalevoices>, accessed 12 January 2014.

<sup>214</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial", *Communication Education*, Volume 52, Issue 3-4, 2003, pp. 191-211, p. 198.

prove one's right to this space. It is a certain form of assimilation already critiqued by Steve Biko.<sup>215</sup>

This policy is thus, viewed through a (neo)liberal lens, perceived as an unfreedom, as something that disturbs the meritocratic order in which one's achievements are due to (self)responsibility and hard work. However, due to the fact that race has become 'privatized', the continued existence of white supremacy remains hidden. But, to go back to the presences of silence around race, I want to argue here that I think this is only partly true that they did not emerge because of my white embodiment for I think factor one, no access to counter discourses, is quite strong. Thus, in the part below, I introduce the two participants that could be described as 'exceptions' throughout the project. Through their representations, once can start seeing the power that neoliberal discourses of choice, equality, non-racialism, etc. have if they are the only discourses available to a person.

### **Cindy and Xoliswa – politically conscious/self-politicized subjects**

“I think for me, my biggest issue, number one, I am in full support of the race-based policy. Primarily, number one, I am a beneficiary of that policy. Looking at my history and my schooling history, I would never have been able to be at university had it not been for that race-based policy. Because there are **mitigating circumstances** that prevent people from coming to UCT and be able to **be competitive**. And for me, it's quite ignorant of UCT to not take into account the structural issues **within** our education system. It's a very blind form of transformation.” (Cindy)

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<sup>215</sup> “Does it mean I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by Blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of Blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up and maintained by Whites, then YES I am against it.” (Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like; a selection of his writings*, Ravan: Randburg, 1996)

“But here, at varsity, for me it was clear man, I know where I come from and I don’t like being in uncomfortable spaces. So when I got here, luckily, people I became friends with are people who have a similar background as me. **I never had problems trying to fit in, you know.** So most of the people I have met throughout varsity are people who have the same background as me. And who are kind of determined to break through, whether... it doesn’t matter. Ok, I don’t have the money but I am going to make a plan.”  
(Xoliswa)

Both, Cindy and Xoliswa, have been ‘exceptions’ throughout this project. I explained this by defining them as subjects who see themselves and live as political subjects. Cindy makes sense of herself and the world through being a feminist and Xoliswa as a black consciousness activist/black radical. Both of them thus have access to and embrace counter-discourses and theories; they have managed to define themselves outside/on the margin of a (neo-)liberal discourse. However, I do not try to claim here that both of them have somehow escaped the system; as this is an impossibility. Yet, due to their political consciousness as well as politicization they differ in many respects from the other participants. Consequently, I started seeing Cindy and Xoliswa as having acquired a certain literacy of (systemic) power. Thus, Cindy can find justification for a race-based policy by being highly aware of the politics of race in this country and the opportunities it affords some and denies others. Having gone through a public school system, experienced the absence of teachers due to alcoholism, the lack of substitute teachers and consequently being awarded an average mark instead of a mark that would have reflected her hard work, she knows that meritocracy does not – cannot! – exist in an unequal society. She thus justifies a race-based admission policy by referring to structural factors and unequal education. However, even though Cindy definitely challenges and criticized UCTs ‘blind form of transformation’, I realized that she is still rather ‘lenient’. This becomes very apparent when looking at the words I highlighted in bold: some circumstances lessen people’s

ability, to come to university to be competitive and she points to structural issues within the education. Being competitive and the re-course to the need for reform in terms of new policies or rights are very liberal ideas: the attempt is to reform the current system, to give it a more human face. This shows, that even though Cindy has access to a counter-discourse – feminism – and is active in politics at UCT, she is still to a certain extent infused with ideas of the hegemonic discourse; if this is conscious or unconscious I do not know.

Xoliswa's words above are important because they reflect her active decision not to assimilate and illustrate that she has realized that assimilation is impossible. One can see that Xoliswa is highly aware of race and its intersection with class and she actively rejects to assimilate into the UCT (white) culture. bell hooks who theorizes the intersection of class, race and gender says the following about students with working-class backgrounds:

“To avoid feelings of estrangement, students from working-class backgrounds could assimilate into the mainstream, change speech patterns, points of reference, drop any habit that might reveal them to be from a nonmaterially privileged background.”<sup>216</sup>

Reading the world through a black consciousness lens, Xoliswa does not experience estrangement as an issue. She knows where she comes from, what that means, does not change or try to change her accent or to hide her background. But I am also aware that for some of the other participants this option of actively rejecting assimilation might not be available as they are not part of a group that provides them with strength and a certain sense of belonging and support. Xoliswa and I have spoken a lot about the meaning of being at UCT with a working-class body and I have realized how privileged my position still is in comparison to hers. In a way, my whiteness and nationality overshadows my class background. Another friend of mine who identifies as a radical black feminist and Xoliswa have opened my eyes to the racialized nature of

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<sup>216</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, Routledge: New York, p. 181.

UCT; an environment in which a lot of marginalization and silencing takes place. I remember an incident which illustrates this: I was on the shuttle with my friend and a group of black students ran out of the shuttle, speaking loudly in Xhosa and the black girl sitting opposite us said, “Wow, they are so ghetto” in her ‘private school accent’. I thus realized that Xoliwa’s words must be read as a critique of the university space as supposedly democratic, as a space that gives everyone an equal voice as well as a sense of belonging; by exposing UCT as a space structured through certain middle-class, bourgeois values that everybody is supposed to adopt to become acceptable/respectable. However, Xoliswa, as her presence at UCT illustrates, is also not able to completely de-link herself from neoliberalism or liberal education.

Xoliswa, with whom I have been attempting to build a ‘friendship’ which takes into account race and its consequences, defines herself in relation to black consciousness thought and black radical thought in general. Both of us have reflected on this ‘friendship’ a lot and in line with bell hooks, I would say we agree that:

"Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy. For it is the ever present reality of racist domination, of white supremacy, that renders problematic the desire of white people to have contact with the Other."<sup>217</sup>

Here, I want to theorize how an encounter between differently racialized women could look like when outside of colour-blind (neo-)liberalism – when “not based on denial and fantasy” - and offer an alternative that is more ‘authentic’. On the day after the conversation, I wrote the following research journal entry (and this entry again highlights the embodied and lived reality of research):

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<sup>217</sup> bell hooks, “Eating the other: Desire and resistance”, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* , pp. 21–39. South End Press: Boston, 1992, p. 371.

*And yesterday, I talked to a young woman I have met about two weeks ago through common friends. We met in artist circles which has given the whole encounter and conversation an interesting and beautiful flair. I met her at a friend's studio where a couple of people gathered to go together to the different galleries participating in the Open Thursday's event. At first, we did not speak much, and only later, while sitting in a bar in Long Street, already loosened by alcohol, did we commence a conversation that led to me asking her to be a participant in my research. I was worried she would decline as she is part of a blacks-only movement inspired by the black consciousness thought of Steve Biko. But, I guess through the events of the night and maybe my behaviour around her and her friends, I gained the necessary trust and she agreed. Before the conversation, we met once more at an arts event which made us talk more and maybe, this will be the beginning of a new friendship.*

*The conversation took place in my room in a shared-house in Observatory. Again, a rainy, cold day. I met her in Lower Main where I had found protection from the wetness in the Somali tuck shop by the corner. I stood in there and was surrounded by men. I felt their eyes on my body, felt their attempts to create eye contact. I looked down, wondering, getting lost. Then I saw her, packed up in a huge grey coat, hoody on her head and a thick colourful scarf. We walked down Trill Road and into my house. Not having eaten lunch, I had prepared food, oven chips and pita bread and a chilli dip. We ate together in the kitchen, talking about the last time we saw each other, both of us regretting having drunk too much. I tried to keep the conversation away from anything that I might want to ask her/find out during the official conversation and this reminded me again of the artificialness of these conversations. When to start or stop recording? What about the conversations before and after? So we ate and talked and laughed and then moved from the shared kitchen to my room in order to be in a more intimate space in which we would be freer to discuss certain topics.*

*We sat down on my bed, both holding cups filled with warm tea in our hands and I pressed the record button! I enjoyed the conversation and I sure learned a lot. I become aware again of how fortunate I am to be able to do this research, talk these amazing young women.<sup>218</sup>*

Since writing this entry, I want to claim, my consciousness has evolved through exposure to literature and people as well as self-reflexivity in that I can see the one-sidedness of the exchange and by viewing this friendship as much more complicated than I first assumed. But Xoliswa's reading of race, grounded in black consciousness thought, disrupts and challenges the readings of the other participants and is clearly situated in a critique of white supremacist capitalist

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<sup>218</sup> Research Journal Entry, 20 September 2013.

patriarchy. Again, one can see the power a counter-discourse to neoliberalism and its framing of race and gender can have in constructing a different subject and different interactions.

Xoliswa also puts forward a critique of the notion that economic independence would lead to freedom by saying the following:

“I think I have always had this, trying to solve this puzzle of being in-between both worlds. Coming from a very poor background, coming to university, there is a greater opportunity of having a very professional career and how you bridge the gap [...] But throughout the process of being a university student man, I am discovering a lot about myself. And also this new dimension of radical politics opens a new reality for me to sit down, interrogate. **Because the reality now is that you go to university, you graduate, you find a job, you become a professional slave.** And then you probably invest in your kids’ education and then you die. I mean this is not a reality I am imagining. So **how do I still use this suppressing capitalist system to achieve my own interest?**” (Xoliswa)

Most of the participants have a positive view of their educational capital leading to economic capital and in turn an increased (sense of) freedom. Xoliswa’s words let me to reflect on the possibilities of ‘women’s freedom within the current global order and through a de-politicized, mainstreamed liberal feminism. I thought of the words of Betty Friedan that: “For women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence.”<sup>219</sup> And also, that in a capitalist/neo-liberal world, freedom in one’s choices and actions is dependent on one’s economic capital. Within these structures, according to white, middle-class second-wave feminists like Friedan, women’s freedom depends on their economic independence (from men?). This last part is thus an exploration of the participants’ representations of education as a means to gain good employment and ‘freedom’.

Education, as has been illustrated throughout the analysis chapters, is represented by the participants as a means to become socially mobile, to acquire class mobility and to live a ‘better’

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<sup>219</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin Classics: London, 2010, p. 520.

life than their parents. I have illustrated above that participants locate their wish to get educated in their home environment, in positive role models as well in aspiring to transcend the often bleak material conditions around them. Also, education and hard work and dedication are represented as means which would enable the participants to define themselves; instead of being defined from the outside and consequently, education is represented as a tool that can lessen the importance of one's race and gender.<sup>220</sup>

The emphasis on education – in public as well as the participants' discourses – has also been exposed as firmly rooted within the neoliberal notion of transforming oneself. Thus, race-based policies, even though they are to a certain extent outside of mainstream neoliberalism, are still firmly rooted in trickle-down economics as they only aid in the inclusion in systems instead of bringing about systemic change. I have exposed the many discourses that embrace internal change as opposed to internal and external change by – rightly recognizing – that internal exchange is 'easier' or at least perceived as more tangible; however, as Xoliswa and other participants have noted the need to 'proof' oneself, one's right to be in a certain space, has not disappeared.

The participants, with the exception of Xoliswa and to a certain extent Cindy, all perceive education and the inclusion into the labour market that this educational capital promises, as a

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<sup>220</sup> Of course education as a tool to lessen the importance of race and gender goes beyond neoliberal discourses. The discourse is connected to histories of colonialism and attempts to create 'Black Englishmen' as well as the notion that specific kinds of education could produce 'better natives'. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes the following:

“On the first day of school my teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave each of us an English name and said that thenceforth that was the name we should answer to in school. This was the custom among Africans in those days and was undoubtedly due to the British bias of our education. The education I received was a British education in which British ideas, British culture and British institutions were automatically assumed to be superior. The educated Englishman was our model; what we aspired to be were 'black Englishmen', as were sometimes derisively called. We were taught-and believed-that the best ideas were English ideas, the best government was English government, and the best men were Englishmen.” (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, London: Abacus, 1995, pp. 13-14)

pathway to the achievement of freedom. Without having access to counter-discourses – feminism(s) and black radical thought – their definition of freedom remains firmly rooted in the freedom to be able to choose, to buy, to consume and to be able to support and lift-up one’s family. This is in line with Goldberg’s assessment of the state of freedom in post-1994 South Africa, that one does not have the ability to choose freedom but “the freedom of choice, this latter liberty is all about affordability.”<sup>221</sup> Hence, participants – except for Xoliswa – have embraced and work towards this limited form of freedom as defined by neoliberalism. Below, in the concluding remarks, I draw all the strings together to argue that the state of human liberation in a neoliberal world will remain unfinished.

### **Concluding remarks: Human liberation -- Unfinished!**

“If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom.”<sup>222</sup> - bell hooks

“you still have to be part of those people and there is a struggle there because for my family... my brothers feel not men enough, they feel intimidated by my success. They pick stupid fights, they... that’s why I said I need to be cautious of my opinions, of what I say... I am not saying anything because I am just avoiding conflict and things like that.” (Lindiwe)

*Transcribing the third interview, I am taken aback by the extent to which Western and white values are celebrated by the participant. I start thinking again about reading up on postcolonialism, of the postcolonial mind. I notice again how the participants thus*

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<sup>221</sup> David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race – Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2009, p.312.

<sup>222</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge: New York, 1994, p. 29.

*far have all aspired to get 'the best' education and how the best is often connected to material equipment, to a facade, to maybe pseudo-intellectual/educational institutions in which price of education is equated to quality of education.*<sup>223</sup>

In this last part, I bring the different narratives together to illustrate how and speculate on why the participants' unfreedoms remain. This is done through an intersectional analysis of gender, race and class. Even though women are more and more socially constructed as neoliberal subjects who are granted rights, are free, have choice and are self-realizing, this construction is often divorced from the reality in which women's bodies move. Reading this through Wynter's lens of 'ethnoclass Man vs. Human Struggle'<sup>224</sup>, it becomes apparent that experiences of ethnoclass man have become universal and to bring about real freedom, the well-being of all humans needs to be guaranteed. As illustrated throughout this thesis, freedoms gained within a neoliberal socio-economic framework are freedoms dependent on specific forms of responsibility and self-management. They are also freedoms which instead of challenging systems of domination and the conception of who is human, are stabilizing these structures/conceptions by requiring young women to voice their new articulations of themselves as subjects of freedom through assimilation rather than subversion. The freedoms the participants spoke about – sexual freedom, freedom to pursue one's education and choose one's life partner – are thus freedoms that can easily be taken away as they have been granted within a structure built on inequality and exclusion.

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<sup>223</sup> Research Journal Entry: *Thursday, 11 July 2013*

<sup>224</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

Students interviewed are, throughout this thesis, understood as socially mobile subjects, subjects on the brink of inclusion into the (black) middle class. These mobile subjects are portrayed, by the ruling capitalist elite, as examples of transformation and progress and as a result used to justify the ANC's chosen path of 'development'. However, even though most participants have attempted to assimilate and work hard, their narratives expose that they are caught up in endless attempts to prove themselves. Neoliberalism and its attendant discourses have managed to make invisible counter-discourses which could help these women to make sense of this constant need to prove themselves; and hence, only Cindy and Xoliswa are able to structurally criticize the current forms of transformation; without being able to completely constitute themselves outside of these discourses. Education, which in Paulo Freire's and bell hooks' view, should be about 'the practice of freedom', has been co-opted to manufacture subjects that can serve the current neo-liberal order. This order, being highly flexible, has recognized that (black) women are needed to extract the highest possible surplus value. (Black) women are easily responsabilized due to – as analysed above – bodily as well as family responsibilities; are less likely to speak out and assert their rights due to gendered socialization and have the wish, after centuries of exclusion, to finally be seen as full human beings. (Black) women are thus eager to prove their worthiness, through hard work and education. The above has illustrated, that bodies are – physically and mentally – manipulated to fit into and be productive in the current structures.

The participants' presence at UCT, 'the best university in Africa', is hence understood as a form of inclusion and provides hope – for the participants and their families – for a better life. But in line with hooks and other radical feminists, I do not believe that women can be free unless all forms of oppression and domination are destroyed. I think the participants' representations of their lives and challenges have made this clear. The ten participants and I, in different ways, can

never be fully free to define ourselves as long as white supremacy, racism, capitalism and patriarchy are not dismantled. My project has shown, that due to my whiteness, I am ontologically a priori unethical; it has illustrated that black-white dialogue is, if not impossible, at least highly difficult. But also, the women's and my voice clearly represented that our bodies are only accepted if we work on them, change them. Our sexual freedom, even though supposedly there, is still being challenged from many sides and if available, our bodies need to preferably be temporarily infertile. Pregnancy looms as a constant threat. Men are still often caught up in notions of masculinities that do not allow women to define themselves and hence, the participants voiced the demand placed on them to compromise.

# *Conclusion*

New counter-hegemonic representations matter! I conclude this thesis by establishing a connection between the new knowledge I presented and Wynter's call for the unsettling of the currently hegemonic overrepresentation of a specific conception of the human<sup>225</sup>; in this case, neoliberal subjectivity. I have been troubled throughout the writing of this thesis. This sense of being troubled grew to an extent that I sometimes did not know what to do anymore. Was I looking at this topic through the right lens? Was I doing justice to the lives of these women? Was I drawing upon diverse representations of ten different women's experiences of selfhood simply in order to re-homogenize 'them' into exemplification of what neoliberalism offers in terms of 'choice', 'freedom', or 'humanity' for young black women? Many nights, I lay in my bed, eyes open, unable to find sleep. But I realized that even though there might be numerous flaws in my analysis, this project is a step in the right direction. Not only did my rigorous analysis of the interviews I had with my interlocutors suggest that their representations of subjectivity could never be wholly contained by neoliberal values, nor by notions of young black women's "homogeneity" as a group, but I have also faced a struggle with ideas head-on, felt the pain, but also – at many moments – I felt joy creeping up on me. I think this project has proven numerous things: research can no longer be divorced from living; subjectivity needs to be analyzed, a

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<sup>225</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

researcher cannot stand outside of research given that one's positionality within this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy determines the questions one asks, the selective blindness one suffers and the issues one is passionate about. And the outcome of rigorous research cannot be anticipated by the heft of theoretical arguments. I can say that this research project has brought about immense intellectual as well as personal growth. I have had to interrogate myself intensely throughout the process: my life, my socialization, my whiteness and its attendant privileges. Often I felt that I am committing epistemic violence against these women I was writing about.

However, after being urged to complicate this feeling of epistemic violence further, I also realized that I was given permission to use the representations of their lives for my research and that this agency must be respected. Bearing this in mind, I was urged to reflect on another question: Why is the old story [of white writing/theorizing on black subjects] so powerful? Throughout my time in South Africa, my best friend has always cautioned me to not fall into the trap of the white liberal. And hence, writing this paragraph, reflecting on epistemic white-on-black violence, I also know that this can easily turn into self-pity. I consequently came to think of this problem, of white researchers writing about the neoliberal reorganization of race as something for which there is a lack of theoretical tools. During my year of high-school in South Africa, I was made to believe in the fiction of the rainbow nation. However, during the years of my Bachelor degree I started to be exposed to wider interactions which revealed the complexities of racial being in South Africa to me. I was introduced to people who opposed the official narrative that all that is needed is for black people to have visible signs of money, and we have arrived at "reconciliation". But mainstream society, as well as mainstream educational spaces, only have pockets of these counter-discourses/ideologies and hence, most people's assumptions

of racial reconciliation are never seriously challenged; and this manifests again differently in people racialized as black or white.

An analysis of black and white women's representation in the current economic order matters and unfortunately these analyses are still too few. However, through this project, I hope that I contribute scholarship that can be useful in making sense of women's lives, women's new-found (newly-won?) freedoms. I tried to tease out the difficulties researchers – black and white – might experience while closely looking at the contemporaneous neoliberal re-ordering of race and, in my case, specifically racialized femininities. The theories introduced in the Literature Review have guided my entry into the topic of neoliberal femininities; however, racialized femininities mediated by neoliberal discourses within a South African context cannot be explored without crossing disciplinary boundaries.

As my analysis has shown, neoliberal discourses affect many aspects in women's lives in regards to how they represent and think about their bodies and thus the agency and the forms of agency they believe themselves capable of. Additionally, I have illustrated that as contemporary subjects, the participants as well as myself, are infused with neoliberal imaginings of ourselves, others and our surroundings. My analysis of the participants' representations has also demonstrated how they negotiate, adopt and sometimes resist these imaginings; however, most importantly, I have shown that the tools to resist and imagine oneself and others differently are largely absent. Thus, future feminist scholarship needs to focus on providing and thinking through tools which could increase women's literacy when it comes to reading power; we need to work towards re-externalizing the revolution. This however should not lead to forgetting the importance of individuals and individual's consciousness: the two have to work side by side again, internal as well as external attempts at liberation need to be re-united.

Methodologically, this thesis could be described as experimental given that in order to tease out neoliberalism's contradictions, I decided to read its hegemonic universalizing master narrative against black radical feminism, anti-capitalist critiques, afro-pessimism and in general feminist scholarship which refuses to accept whiteness as well as capitalist values as standards. Through this reading, I was able to expose liberal feminism's investment and contributions to the neo-liberal class/race project. Additionally, through using my own biography, I was able to further illustrate how neoliberalism racializes femininities under the banner of non-racialism.

This project has hopefully worked against the overrepresentation of the "present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human"<sup>226</sup>. I have academically written into existence the representations of the struggles of black South African women as well as myself, which constitute counter-narratives to the current representations we are surrounded by and meant to believe in. I conclude with Wynter's words: "any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of this overrepresentation [...]"<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337, p. 260.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

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