

Abortion and Agency in Recent Southern African Fiction

Caitlin Erinna Stobie

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis argues for the formation of reproductive agency in creative abortion narratives, exploring the representation of gestating bodies and foetal forms in fiction by southern African writers Wilma Stockenström, Zoë Wicomb, Yvonne Vera, and Bessie Head. Their aesthetic treatments of reproductive ethics are seen primarily through the lens of new materialist theory, which challenges conventional, individual-based notions of human rights and power by asserting that *all* matter holds agency. This project contends, however, that the texts at its centre anticipate and exceed supposedly recent or renewed feminist interests in materiality – not only by exploring contemporary discourse and metaphors surrounding abortion as either a confirmation of a woman’s ‘right to choose’ or an ethically unwarranted termination of human life, but further by questioning teleological understandings of development, growth, and time. Considering queer ecocritical perspectives in a counterbalanced triangulation between new materialism and postcolonial studies, it is argued that the primary texts are critical of the traditionally linear model of chronology and its role in normalising both literal gestation and the metaphorical reproduction of the post/colonial nation. Recent southern African fiction illustrates that abortion is neither tragic nor the termination of a life or story. Rather, terminations of pregnancy in these fictional materials challenge repronormative discourse and present a range of creative alternatives to tropes such as those of ‘the Mother Country’, ‘Mother Africa’, or ‘the birth of a nation’. This thesis counterposes contemporary postcolonialism and materialist feminism, seeking to further the intersections between two fields with visionary potential while also

attending to aesthetic and formal explorations of agencies and desires as expressed by the texts. Considering writings from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, it reads locally situated abortion narratives for the contemporary postcolonial feminist theories they embody, melding traditional beliefs with materialist views to transform southern African futures.

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Introduction: Birthing Metaphors

I

SAFE ABORTION / PAIN FREE / SAME DAY / CALL NOW

In contemporary South Africa, these words may be found plastered on any public objects ranging from lamp posts to litter bins. Promotional flyers by traditional healers make similar claims alongside promises to ‘bring back lost lover[s]’, enhance penis length, and more. The supposedly painless abortion is often named first: most convincingly, perhaps, in a list of fictive achievements. Growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, I did not know what to make of the posters that appeared routinely in city centres and shopping malls. State school sex education classes in the 2000s were more concerned with circumventing HIV/AIDS through alphabetised slogans (Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomise) than discussing what happens if and when contraception fails. Sometimes adults spoke in hushed disgust of ‘*those* adverts’ when they materialised in historically white suburbs. Generally, this was the most my peers and I read about the topic. We did not know there could be other forms of abortion beyond the metaphorical backstreets. And, to many, the termination of pregnancy was not something that we should be informed about.

South Africa’s clandestine advertisements belie the fact that the country has one of the most liberal abortion laws in the world. Passed in 1996, the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy (CTOP) Act states that all women have the right to access safe and legal terminations of pregnancy for free at government hospitals or clinics during the first three months of pregnancy. Abortion is also available under certain

conditions with a doctor's consent from 13 to 20 weeks of gestation, and there is limited access for extreme circumstances after 20 weeks. The 'trimester system' was ostensibly developed as a form of compromise to appease liberal pro-choice activists and conservative anti-abortionists: it is tolerant of abortion, but only for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (when a developing zygote, which is referred to as an embryo up until the eleventh week of gestation, is generally considered to hold less agency than a foetus). Yet a 2005 study in the *International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology* revealed that more than half of a sample group of 46 women who underwent illegal abortions in South Africa did so because they were unaware of the current law (Jewkes *et al.* 1236). It is very likely that these women would have been exposed to information about illegal abortifacients instead of free government services.

Analysing South African, Zimbabwean, and Botswanan fictional materials, this thesis traces creative formations of abortion from the late 1970s to the 1990s. It focuses on texts by Wilma Stockenström, Zoë Wicomb, Yvonne Vera, and Bessie Head. The women in this study render creativity as a literal and symbolic force in their narration of social injustices; biological formations in their artistic forms are utilised to question the very nature of agency and materiality in southern Africa. I understand agency as the embodiment of personal and political desires rather than a teleological will for action or drive for power. My methodology interprets materialist feminism as a philosophy directing us towards the notion that all agencies matter, instead of positing that there is a scale of worth or comparative value between different subjectivities. New materialism emerged in the 1990s,

positing a theoretical ‘turn’ to considering the significance of matter and often operating in conjunction with philosophical posthumanism: that is, the anti-anthropocentric critique of human relationships with nonhuman organisms and materials. Yet new materialism’s reliance on Anglo-European philosophies means that the field’s supposed novelty is often asserted without considering perspectives originating beyond North America and Europe. Engaging critically with terms from postcolonial theorists and the new materialists – who are interested in recognising agentic capacities beyond the binaries of human/nonhuman, organic/inorganic – I consider both traditional worldviews and the influence of colonial ideology upon southern African regions. Importantly, and contrary to many contemporary associations with terminations of pregnancy, the fiction in this study asserts that abortion is not the denial of a future. These formations of agency not only precede new materialist conceptions of the zygote and gestating environment, but also exceed such theory through creative experimentation with transgressive, and locally situated, alternatives.

This project is preoccupied with the concept of representation as *formation* in various senses. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the importance of informing the public and causing them to question what is normalised (or stigmatised) by received wisdom. Formation also evokes the momentous history of feminist movements and rallies: people assembling and marching to transform restrictive policies. It further calls to mind writers’ creative approaches to tackling such subject matter through literary forms. Significantly, all senses apply in times of political upheaval against patriarchal control, when censorship threatens to silence authors

writing against normative views. It hardly needs explaining that transitions from racist regimes to postcolonial independence in southern Africa would stage this politics of representation in a number of ways. Southern African fiction treats abortion as a political and ethical issue, involving discussions of collective as well as individual agency in a social and historical context in which both of these are severely curtailed. The texts in this study are also consumed by the concept of transformation, particularly when challenging traditional associations of sexual reproduction and biological growth with personal development. Their thematisation of literal creativity (through environments and ecologies) transforms received wisdom positing that physical growth and procreation necessarily yields positive results. There is another sense of creation embedded here too: abortion is a source of potential creativity for the woman who writes autobiographically about, or in the wake of, the procedure.

It is important to emphasise that this study refers to the fictions at its core as postcolonial rather than decolonial. Although my historical scope broadly aligns with moments of decolonisation in southern Africa, not all of the texts were written or set during these periods.¹ A second and related point is that the authors engage with both Eurocentric literature and traditional beliefs; the environments, metaphors, and metonyms that they centralise are distinctly southern African, but are often rendered with reference to Anglo-European literary traditions. Thirdly, while my

¹ While postcolonial and decolonial theories share the objective of decolonisation, Walter D. Mignolo notes that many studies in the former field are indebted to works emerging during the poststructural and postmodern turns such as Edward Said's 1978 text *Orientalism* (Mignolo 55), whereas decolonial thought is intertwined with trajectories of 'dewesternization', which are often driven by searches for "new meaning[s]" (xxiv). Throughout this thesis, I am critical of the valorisation of novelty – not only for its connections with literal matters such as abortion or natality, but also its linkages with 'new' materialisms and nationalism.

textual analyses do adapt the work of several postcolonial theorists, most of these critics are male and do not address gender and sexuality in their writings. To a certain extent, and in cases where such frameworks fail to consider gendered oppression, I am using southern African fiction *as* feminist theory. It remains unclear how the “new humanity” that decolonisation movements promote may move beyond homogenised definitions of ‘man’ (Mignolo 52). This is particularly apparent when they fail to account for gendered issues of embodiment and materiality that disrupt teleological models of progression (such as the liberationist narrative of development from colonial state to decolonised nation). I am more interested in aesthetic coinages that are critical of humanism and legal personhood such as Bessie Head’s ‘the new African’, a metaphorical figure who melds her affirmative and political stances on agency with an ethics of refusal (as I discuss at length in my final chapter). Thus I interpret the prefix in ‘postcolonialism’ as marking a hiatus rather than a complete and clear break, thereby avoiding tropes such as the ‘birth of a nation’ that is free from colonial influences. Similarly, Head and the other authors in this study experiment with a continuum between the humanism of postcolonial politics and posthumanist theorisations that unsettle anthropocentrism. The texts create playful subversions of uneven social structures to attain reproductive agency. Furthermore, they provoke notions from both schools of thought in order to counterbalance associations of agency with humanist personhood, on the one hand, and apolitical abstractions about embodiment on the other.

Agency is a term which recurs in postcolonial scholars’ works to describe political power and freedom. In her 2010 monograph *Postcolonial Agency: Critique*

and Constructivism, Simone Bignall argues that “historical discontinuities mark shifts in public modes of *agency*”, a term she uses to “describe the relation through practice, of desire (will), power (authority) and subjectivity (use of reason)” (11; original emphasis). While I am inspired by Bignall’s contestation of linear chronologies, and particularly her association of agency with desire, there are several points at which our analyses diverge. As the humanist undertones of her statement suggest, postcolonial analyses often consider agency equally alongside the ‘reasoned’ capacities of a subjective agent. My use of agency is distanced from the concept of subjectivity or issues of access, although the historical analysis in this introduction shows that the latter are often congruous with violations of reproductive agency. It also strives to move beyond the human realm of political power, an association of the term that postcolonial analyses such as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s tend to privilege (31). Rather, I connect agency with materiality, or biological perspectives on interconnected embodiments, arguing that it figures for both ethico-political *and physical* desires. Formulating a continuum of material desires, I tackle a problem of agentic representation that exists for many postcolonial interventions interested in materiality – and particularly for postcolonial ecocriticism, as noted by Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (72–75).² There is also an interest in disrupting teleological narratives of development in this continuum-model of agency. In his 2003 essay “Necropolitics” Achille Mbembe argues, through Paul Gilroy, that death is representative of agency (39). I am interested in pursuing the temporal entrapments underlying this statement, since my

² Cilano and DeLoughrey show how ecocriticism risks misrepresenting the agency of indigenous peoples and their representations of nature, particularly in settler colonial contexts including South Africa, and they follow Graham Huggan in arguing that postcolonial perspectives on ecocriticism are thus not ‘new’ so much as ‘renewed’ (Cilano and DeLoughrey 72).

understanding is that agency encompasses desire as defined by both biological sciences and materialist theories of ‘becoming’. This continuum of material and metaphorical desires is used to chart differences between ‘local’ and ‘imported’ world-views on abortion in the primary texts.

On her personal website, historian of sexuality Lesley Hall curates an extensive list of “literary abortion[s]” (Hall 1); it is decidedly more a collation of data than literary analyses, but still crucial for anyone interested in the topic. As with several popular surveys of literary terminations of pregnancy (Wilt 1990; Weingarten 2011; Bigman 2016), however, Hall’s study focuses on Anglo-American literature from the twentieth century: the overwhelming majority of catalogued authors are white and/or women. The exclusion of race from such discussions may not be the result of oversight, but rather deliberate omission stemming from the desire not to speak for women of colour. Yet in her landmark 1986 essay “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion”, Barbara Johnson reads abortion as an event that triggers anxieties surrounding one’s identity in terms of gender and race, as well as one’s artistic identity. “For a black woman,” she notes, “the loss of a baby can always be perceived as a complicity with genocide. [...] Yet each of these poems exists, finally, *because a child does not*” (Johnson 36; original emphasis). She focuses on the technique of apostrophe, or narrative address by a first-person speaker, to argue that many poetic abortions animate the foetal addressee (29-30). According to this reading, abortion as a literary theme does not symbolise the binary opposition of life and death, but rather marks a site of generative potential for rewriting masculinist literary traditions and notions of personhood or subjectivity.

Johnson's study is truly inspirational in several senses. Firstly, the essay is still utilised in contemporary fields such as queer theory and the medical humanities. In their debut monograph *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), Mel Y. Chen responds to Johnson's claim that "The poem can no more distinguish between 'I' and 'you' than it can come up with a proper definition of life" (33), noting there are parallels between her argument and the ethical thrust of new materialism's treatment of both life/liveliness and death (Chen 235). Even more stimulating crossovers remain to be made. I am struck by Johnson's rejection of binary categories while still centring on identity politics, and how this echoes Achille Mbembe's approach when he asserts that successful analyses of postcolonial power relations "need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance vs. passivity, autonomy vs. subjection, state vs. civil society, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, totalisation vs. detotalisation" (103). In short, Johnson's aesthetic analysis bridges ethical interests (such as those of the new materialists) with reminders of political realities (as exemplified by postcolonial theory).

Despite my admiration of Johnson's approach, I am uneasy about some of the lexicon in her argument. Taking a Lacanian perspective on the 'mother' being personified through address (rather than treated as a person), she concludes her aforementioned article as follows:

It is no wonder that the distinction between addressor and addressee should become so problematic in poems about abortion. It is also no wonder that the debate about abortion should refuse to settle into a single voice. Whether or not one has ever been a mother, everyone participating in the debate has once been a child. (38)

Although Johnson's findings are persuasive, the words 'mother' and 'child' are jarring when used to discuss foetal growth; further, this project is not interested in framing a 'debate' about women's agency. From the outset, then, it is important to explicate some key terminology surrounding abortion, since different activists and political groups use varying terms to normalise their own moral beliefs. Following guidelines from the BBC, Reuters and other organisations collated by the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion, I use 'pro-choice' to describe people who support abortion access and 'anti-abortion' for those who are against it. I refer to the gestating figure as a pregnant woman (and/or person),³ instead of a mother (to-be). Predominantly I use the word 'foetus' and, more rarely, 'embryo' or 'zygote'; the former is generally understood to be most developed, while the latter two are used in earlier stages of pregnancy. All three are based on scientific models of gestation rather than emotionally-charged misnomers like 'unborn baby' or 'unborn child'. One final distinction is that some refer to any and all aborted fetuses as 'unwanted'. Not only is this not always the case – as, for instance, when a planned pregnancy results in fatal foetal abnormalities – but it also presupposes a pregnant person's motives and erases any feelings of ambivalence, conflict, or despair. To avoid the possible misinterpretation of another's agency, I use 'unsupportable' for pregnancies that are not carried to term.

Several of the above phrases that I have critiqued are prime illustrators of natalism: the normalised view that childbirth and childrearing is an integral

³ The latter term includes trans* individuals who do not identify as women but are still capable of becoming pregnant. My reason for not using this term throughout is that all cases discussed in these fictions involve cisgender women.

component of the human condition, whether this is for nationalist, eugenic, or purely instinctual reasons. Queer theorist Lee Edelman interrogates this socially accepted impulse by terming it ‘reproductive futurism’, a concept I discuss in depth in chapter 4; I, however, will refer to natalist ideals through the framework of repronormativity. Like other normative models (heteronormativity, cisnormativity), repronormative discourse operates under the assumption that sexual reproduction is a natural and desirable process. The word ‘repronormativity’ shows how natalism often works in conjunction with heteronormative and cisnormative ideology: by assuming that all women want to be mothers; by constructing reified models of married mothers and fathers living in nuclear families; by asserting that any and all procreation is the ‘gift of life’, even if it is the result of rape or incest; and so on. There are thus clear intersections between many forms of oppression based on one’s gender and sexual identity, and one’s reproductive agency. For the purposes of this thesis, intersectionality implies that the ethical and the political are intertwined. Similar to much of the discourse surrounding abortion, intersectionality originates in legal theory (Crenshaw 167). Interrogating aesthetic formations of abortion, however, I use it when discussing queer triangulations between new materialist and postcolonial feminist thinking. Dorothy Roberts notes in her study of race and reproduction in the American slave trade that “books on racial justice tend to neglect the subject of reproductive rights; and books on reproductive freedom tend to neglect the influence of race” (4). This study is mindful of Roberts’s and other black feminists’ critiques of a lack of intersectional nuance in literature on “procreative freedom” (4). Furthermore, it takes seriously the implications of her observation that

books thematising ethical issues are both political tools and aesthetic forms to be analysed.

The reader will notice that I deviate from the common parlance of reproductive freedom, favouring reproductive agency instead. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, when using the former term, it is unclear whose liberty is being referred to: that of the pregnant woman, healthcare providers, or society in general. Secondly and more importantly, the rhetoric of freedom often contains an ironic conundrum. This humanist tenet is almost always associated with liberal ‘pro-choice’ thought, which in turn often involves more discussions about when and how to abort rather than whether this is an appropriate solution out of the various options that are available to a woman. This is hardly the fault of those who support reproductive freedom; given the fact that the termination of pregnancy remains a taboo topic in most parts of the world, it is important not to give the impression that one is influencing women’s decisions when circulating information to raise public awareness. Yet the fact is that dissociations of abortion from discussions of ethics often result in *limitations of choice*, per se, as women remain unconvinced that abortion really can be not only safe and legal, but also ethical. It has already been established that South Africa is theoretically one of the most supportive environments for abortion access, but backstreet and illegal operations remain rife in the country because of failure to regulate conscientious objections by doctors, nurses, and midwives, inequalities in access to services, and misleading information on governmental reproductive healthcare (Amnesty 4). The concept of choice is thus easily co-opted by conservative anti-abortionists and illegal abortionists alike to the detriment of women’s health and agency.

There are inevitably both discrepancies and overlaps between traditional customs and modern attitudes towards reproductive agency. Although abortion has historically been accepted by some tribes in Africa to circumvent premarital pregnancies,⁴ there are also overriding patriarchal valuations of lineage and biogenetic kinship which would resist the modern notion that the decision to terminate a pregnancy rests solely upon a woman's consultation with health professionals. It is also important to note that many national Bills of Rights, which were formed in the wake of colonial human rights violations, are designed to enshrine the sanctity of all human life. In light of this fact, it becomes easier to understand how many southern African states may utilise the World Health Organisation's definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellness, while simultaneously neglecting to consider the importance of pregnant women's mental health; the anti-abortion position contends that neo-colonial violence can be prevented by imbuing each person with equal rights, regardless of their age or biological development, including zygotes and embryos that would not survive outside the uterus. Yet this perspective ignores the reality that it is ambiguous whether a foetus truly holds agency as a capacity to desire. While some frame the termination of pregnancy as morally wrong (the murder of a person), others insist abortion is a neutral action (the removal of foetal tissue).

⁴ The website *4000 Years for Choice* features a timeline "Celebrating the Roots of Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice". I am critical of the rhetoric of 'roots' throughout this thesis (particularly in cases involving materials like tubers used as herbal abortifacients), and equally wary of the troubling term 'African', which risks erasing a huge amount of differences between cultural and geographical contexts. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that only two entries on this timeline refer to African indigenous abortion practices: African American slaves' use of cottonwood plants as abortifacients, and northern African exports of a plant with abortive qualities called silphium dating back to 300 BCE. For more on such practices, see Roberts (1997).

Much like postcolonialism/s, new materialisms are wide-ranging and often interdisciplinary, but it is generally understood that the physicist-turned-critical-theorist Karen Barad is largely responsible for kickstarting scholarly interest in the idea that matter and meaning intersect. I discuss Barad and other well-known new materialists in detail later in this introduction when considering the role of metaphor in her writings. Crucially, metaphor is also central to the abortion scenes in the primary texts, which represent and exceed ‘real-world’ equivalents of abortion narratives through experimental expressions of agency. New materialists such as Barad complicate agency by using it as both a verb and a noun; unlike postcolonial theorists, they often avoid the related term ‘agent’, arguing it is myopic and individualistic. As two internally differentiated fields, new materialism and postcolonialism appear to have very different understandings of agency and (human) life. Whereas postcolonial theorists are generally committed to centralising the human agent who holds or does not hold power, new materialists are mostly concerned with moving beyond humanist constructions of personhood – and sometimes, worryingly, the political implications thereof. Yet both new materialist and postcolonial perspectives use agency in a visionary sense, arguing that it can be utilised to shape the broader ethico-political landscape and create different futures. Throughout this study the two fields counterpoint one another to create both a political and aesthetic critique of abortion and reproductive agency. To this end, I am inspired by Clare Barker’s and Stuart Murray’s adaptation of Edward Said’s “*democratic* criticism” when ‘disabling’ postcolonialism (62; original emphasis), exploring a critical approach that is sensitive to both the experience of disability and the histories and specificities of postcolonial contexts. Synthesising approaches from

the medical humanities and postcolonial criticism, Barker and Murray not only acknowledge how vital it is to discuss the broader environment when writing of health (70), but also gesture to the participatory possibilities of culture and critique in Said's formulation of "democratic agency" (72). Reproductive agency is utilised throughout this thesis to form a shared vocabulary focusing on individual and collective desires in postcolonial environments. Within this common ground lies the potential to reorient respect for foetal agency without equivocating it with humanist definitions of 'personhood': in other words, interpreting serious harms to health in a woman-centric way.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in demonstrating intersectional and political linkages between feminist science studies. Serpil Opperman (2013) shows how philosophical posthumanism, ecocriticism, and feminism are related, while Angela Willey (2016) advances the postcolonial potential of feminist materialism. My approach is unusual for a literary study, utilising queer ecocriticism to temper the potentialities of new materialist thought and southern African fiction. Feminist and queer approaches are central to the primary texts in that many of the authors' characters and metaphors express dissatisfaction with heterosexual gender roles and question linear models of development. The very narrative forms of the texts defy the repronormative logic of growth underpinning colonialist expansion and nationalist allegiances. My framework's triangulation with queer theory thus shows how new materialism and postcolonialism need each other and may operate best on a continuum. Postcolonial perspectives keep discussions of materiality grounded in geo-political specificities and challenge them to resist generalisations about 'Africa' – or, indeed, the very

prospect of a ‘new’ reproductive agency. With its emphasis on intersectionality and historical movements against social inequality, queer ecocriticism resists importing the concept of agency to southern African environments, considering instead that similar metaphors for agency emerge in various socio-cultural contexts due to shared struggles against the linear temporal logic of patriarchal inheritance. Feminist and queer perspectives in postcolonial studies and new materialism thus interrogate how metaphors inform repronormative thinking about who or what is included and excluded, about the internal-external dialectic that materialist feminists challenge. I, in turn, am interested in how literature about abortion may transform repronormative metaphors to focus on reproductive agency instead.

The vocabularies of both new materialists and postcolonialists can rapidly become axiomatic or sanctimonious. I use them to modify and counterbalance one another, allowing room for playfulness and transgression: abortion is nothing if not a serious issue, but political grandstanding around the topic has often compromised its complexity while reducing its representational poetics to a purely moral concern. This is not to dismiss moral studies of abortion, particularly feminist monographs such as Ann Furedi’s *The Moral Case for Abortion* (2016). Rather, I am interested in pursuing Jeannie Ludlow’s provocative contestation that feminist discourse about terminations of pregnancy tends to centralise traumatic narratives (32), thus only normalising one type of abortion, when the reality is that unsupportable pregnancies may occur for a plethora of reasons, falling along a continuum from the tragic to the mundane. The model of a continuum also relates to the topic of abortion itself. Voluntary terminations of pregnancy are often rendered in strict terms as either immoral acts or affirmative demonstrations of women’s power. The reality, however,

is that abortion quite literally involves both death and life, fear and desire, refusal and affirmation. What one feels personally about the topic, furthermore, does not necessitate what one would stipulate all people should do in the case of terminating a pregnancy. Distinctions between the internal and external when discussing abortion therefore apply not only to the biological realm of the foetus and gestating figure, but also to varying ethical positions that shift according to a plethora of environmental, political, and social factors.

First and foremost, this is an aesthetic project rather than a sociological study; yet it is crucial to remember that these artistic works encompass political and social issues. This project is concerned with taking a critical approach to ethical subject matter through literary theory. To date, no one has performed an extensive analysis of abortion in this genre of literature, and specifically at this sociohistorical moment. My thesis also utilises new archival findings from the papers of Bessie Head and Yvonne Vera, two authors who are taught and read as exemplary leaders in the field of southern African feminist fiction. Published in 2018, Rachele Chadwick's *Bodies that Birth: Vitalising Birth Politics* signals the prescience of counterpointing new materialist approaches with culturally specific feminist perspectives in southern Africa. Chadwick's is a sociological approach to the politics of representation in South Africa. There is a fascinating and moving section in her monograph where she collates birth stories as fragmented poems and narratives of resistance (131). Building on this provocative melding of political and aesthetic forms, I consider similar subject matter – for abortion and birth are both terminations of pregnancies – but with a literary-theoretical line of inquiry. Literature allows one to reconceive temporality, to navigate between different states

of being and nodes of maturity, and thereby to challenge received wisdom about correct models of 'development'. In literature, a beginning does not always constitute renewal, or establish a marker of difference. It may also be conceived as repetition: the recurrence of a phrase, image, or idea. This conception of culture as reflecting upon normative models of growth has particular resonance with the historical traumas addressed in recent southern Africa fiction.

The texts in this study take a variety of forms: a translated novella; a Bildungsroman composed of interconnected episodes; a short novel; and stories that appear as both standalone tales in collections and scenes in novels. Clearly, the authors are engaging with short literary forms in their own ways. Each of the texts has a distinct materiality, but when comparing them it is important to recognise that there is an overarching tendency towards brevity, an attraction to the abrupt. In these moments of interruption, we are confronted with more than the mere imaginative function of literature. Reasons for seeking abortions in the texts revolve around questions of agency but also sustainability, poverty, biological exhaustion, and more. Some of the protagonists already have children, while others have fears about racial identity and genetic lineages. The women in these stories have artistic and career aspirations that would be suspended by motherhood. Finally but no less importantly, there are some instances where no reasons are ever articulated for a termination of pregnancy. Inasmuch as each author writes at least one 'abortion scene', there is the sense that abortion is an absent referent that also informs the remaining pages of

their fictions.⁵ Instances of brevity and ambiguity shape the political meaning of their entire works.

In her moral study of abortion, Ann Furedi cites several examples from Europe to argue that “In truth, contraception does not and cannot prevent abortion” (Furedi loc. 542). This rings equally true in the context of southern Africa. Unless society reaches a utopian future where contraception never fails, we are faced with the present fact that abortion may be used as birth control, particularly in socio-cultural contexts where women are dissuaded from using condoms or taking hormonal contraception. Southern Africa has a particularly vexed history of contraceptives: birth control may be seen as a reproductive right by some, but to others it is synonymous with racist population control (see Brown 1987: 269; Kaler 2003; Klausen 2015). This is a point that antinatalists such as philosopher David Benatar fail to appreciate when discussing abortion and related procedures. Citing a plethora of ‘pro-choice’ male scholars, Benatar takes the presupposed position that coming into existence is always a harm and goes on to argue that if a foetus only develops agency late into gestation, then “The *failure* to abort is what must be defended” (133; original emphasis). Benatar’s astonishing omission of critical perspectives by women illustrates the insidiousness of a supposed liberalism that dictates strict moral imperatives without considering women’s material realities. More startling is his failure, as a scholar situated in Cape Town, to account for associations of contraception and abortion with eugenics (as they were in southern Africa during the twentieth century, a point which I will discuss at length later in this

⁵ Here I am refashioning the term ‘absent referent’ first popularised by feminist-vegetarian theorist Carol J. Adams, whose groundbreaking monograph *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) is referenced in my textual analyses in chapters 1 and 2.

introduction). The flaws in Benatar's argument demonstrate that oversimplified abstractions and moral imperatives cannot suffice in the southern African context. Women still face various hurdles to accessing reproductive healthcare, even following historical moments of democratisation and independence. Southern Africa is thus a particularly useful context for demonstrating the reach of agency as an ethical and political tool. With women either being urged to procreate (by colonialists or African nationalists) or being chastised for doing so (by antinatalists or conservatives), it is undeniable that the personal *is* political. Bodily forms – whether that of the gestating person, or that of the developing foetus – are thus integral to discussing broader ethico-political issues.

Just as there are many ways of achieving an abortion – medically, surgically, accidentally – there are equally diverse ways of writing the topic into literature. Interests in this study often overlap or intersect: there are recurrences of tragedy in Stockenström and Vera; iterations of desire in Wicomb and Head; experiments with intraspecies agencies in Stockenström and Head; and instances of ecological metaphors in Wicomb and Vera. All of the authors are critical of nationalism and humanism, utilising conceptions of agency to unsettle the masculinist associations of power when discussing reproduction in postcolonial settings. Time figures in many ways in all the authors' works. First, and most obviously, there is the constant awareness that chronology determines the agentive potentiality of the foetus (and whether or not it is even referred to by that word instead of another). Narrative time is also evoked through staggered and experimental forms, the repetition of fear and trauma in discursive time, or preoccupation with supposedly feminine cyclical

rhythms (and instances where these repetitions fail or are interrupted). Multiperspectival queerings of chronology are also evoked by Stockenström, Wicomb, Vera, and Head. These queer moments triangulate and temper new materialist imaginings of non-biological kinship with culturally situated understandings of belonging that acknowledge biology's importance. Finally, it is crucial to emphasise that commonalities between all these texts exist because of a shared time of writing. Yet the historical specificity of this project does not curtail its theoretical impetus. Southern African women's writing not only anticipates but also troubles current ethical issues facing feminist materialism, such as the indeterminacy of the animate/inanimate binary and (non)sentience. The geographical parameters of this study, and of the texts at its centre, reflect the ambiguity of the nature-culture dichotomy which troubles both new materialism and postcolonial theory. Instead of asserting a preference for one strict theoretical model, the texts in question exhibit points of confluence between both for what is a forward-looking conception of reproductive agencies.

II

“[S]he watched red blood trickle through her fingers thinking, That is my new name, baptised in blood.” – Zoë Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987: 131)

In what is seemingly the only existing article to date focusing exclusively on abortion in fiction from Africa, Nancy Rose Hunt names Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* alongside four other feminist novels which she reads for social and historical traces of terminated pregnancies (279). Graham Huggan perceptively

notes that there is a tendency for collections or comparative studies of ‘African’ literature to employ the “anthropological fallacy” (50); many lack cognisance of sociological specificities, failing to pay attention to individual novels’ forms, ironies, or ambiguities. Trained as a historian, Hunt counterbalances the anthropological view by providing an overview of social scientific literature. She proceeds to read the five novels “*as artefacts*: sources of new evidence embedded in complex narrative forms”, arguing that the point of her approach is not to create a window on ‘the real Africa’, but rather “to show how much the novels *tell*, while implicitly posing a set of questions that the social scientific literature has not even begun to *ask*” (Hunt 281; original emphasis). Hunt reads the culmination of Vera’s novel as the protagonist’s decision not to repeat the process of seeking an abortion (297), a point with which I disagree; I present an alternative reading of *Butterfly Burning*’s themes, and particularly the novel’s final scene, in chapter 3. Yet Hunt’s conclusion is remarkably insightful and invites further investigation: “If we read – and teach – [such novels] *not* as reflections of the social, but as constitutive objects, we will necessarily devote more attention to their formal and structural elements and thus to *how* they pose selves in formation” (302; original emphasis). Her utilisation of the word ‘formation’ here is particularly striking, given the emphasis on forms which I read in other southern African women’s writing about terminations of pregnancy. While our frameworks differ – mine, for instance, avoids associating agency with the individualist subjectivity of ‘selves’ – I agree that fiction seems closer to developing critical approaches to abortion than social theory itself. I would go further and argue that the novelists in this study ask questions which literature and theory informed by the hard sciences (biology, genetics, physics) routinely avoid.

Nonetheless, it is important to provide some historical information about the texts and contexts in question before experimenting with this concept.

Social histories of abortion in southern Africa differ greatly depending on the countries, policies, and normative ethics in question – yet studies of the medical procedure rarely reflect culturally situated nuances. Many articles on southern African states’ abortion laws from the late 1970s and early 1980s reveal *white settlers’* normative attitudes towards termination of pregnancy, particularly in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Botswana. A well-cited 1981 article by Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens asserts that “Commonwealth African jurisdictions display a range of laws from the prohibitive to the more liberal” (60).⁶ It is later revealed, however, that these supposedly progressive laws may involve the inclusion of more clauses or grounds for termination but are still largely concerned with preventing abortions from being induced unless absolutely necessary. The implication here is that the provision of such services on demand would exceed the expectations of even the most ‘liberal’ campaigners for women’s reproductive agency, thus normalising the stigmatisation of abortion. Cook and Dickens observe that Zimbabwe is one of two Commonwealth countries to have a conscience clause (72), which allows doctors or other medical staff to refuse to assist with performing an abortion for personal reasons; the country’s ‘advanced’ attitude towards medical personnel’s ethical stances, they posit, is indicative of an “evolution” from basic law to a more nuanced understanding of reproductive health (62). The social Darwinist

⁶ Importantly, South Africa was not included in their study; although the country was formerly colonised by Britain, global controversy surrounding apartheid meant that it was forced to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Nations in 1961. South Africa only re-joined the Commonwealth in 1994.

undertones of this evaluation simplify the restrictive conditions which lead to such legal parameters.

There are greater issues at play than Cook and Dickens's chosen vocabulary. The origins of Zimbabwe's Termination of Pregnancy Act – first passed in 1977, and still operational in the present day – reveal it is one of the most restrictive laws regulating reproductive health in southern Africa. The Act was passed before the country gained independence in 1980, and is thus grounded in Roman-Dutch Common law, a product of the Rhodesian government's conservative, Christian ideology. Abortion is conditionally legal under Section 4 of the Act, which states that a pregnancy may only be terminated if there is risk that the foetus will be born with congenital, mental, or physical defects or if the woman's life or physical health is endangered (Mbanje 3). The mental health of the pregnant person is not deemed worthy of consideration. Yet, with extramarital pregnancy often resulting in expulsion from school or employment (as exemplified in *Butterfly Burning*), it remains evident that illegal abortions will continue to be sought by women for reasons other than those detailed in the 1977 Act.⁷ Supposedly advanced laws may therefore result in restrictive legal praxis, such as the regulation that at least two doctors' consent must be obtained before an abortion can be performed. The result is that many women in contemporary Zimbabwe seek illegal abortions at the risk of illness or death. Brooke R. Johnson, Singatsho Ndhlovu, Sherry L. Farr, and Tsungai Chipato report that approximately a fifth of so-called "maternal deaths" in

⁷ As Vera and the other authors in this study concentrate on terminations of pregnancy in their fiction, I focus solely on abortion rather than related reproductive health issues such as family planning and the insidious politics of population control. For a meticulous overview of the wider context of contraceptives in Zimbabwe, see Amy Kaler's *Running After Pills: Politics, Gender and Contraception in Colonial Zimbabwe* (2003).

Zimbabwe from the late 1980s to early 1990s were as a result of complications from unsafe abortions (195);⁸ furthermore, nearly five percent of the participants in their study on postabortion family planning intervention and education died (201). With a history of missionary schools and imperialist outreach programmes, Zimbabwe remains a predominantly Christian nation. Considering both this colonial legacy and traditional cultures which evaluate foetuses as more important than those who give birth to them (Mbanje 19),⁹ it remains unlikely that the Termination of Pregnancy Act will be revised – or even revisited – in the near future.

Yet the history of abortion law reform in South Africa shows that autochthonous Zimbabweans may be justified in viewing the supposedly voluntary termination of pregnancy with suspicion. Canadian historian Susanne M. Klausen's recently published monograph, *Abortion under Apartheid: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Women's Reproductive Rights in South Africa* (2015), traces the discrepancies between black and white women's access to health services between 1948 and 1991. Crucially, Klausen refers to Zoë Wicomb's novel *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* to illustrate how women of colour under apartheid could not (or did not) necessarily approach abortionists of their own race (39) – a clear indicator of fiction's capacity to document material realities of the vulnerable, particularly during times of political

⁸ Characterising the dead women as parents suggests that their foetuses had a legal status of personhood, even if they had not yet developed anthropomorphic characteristics such as a beating heart. The classification of abortion-related deaths under this term is therefore illustrative of a tendency for the medical profession to overdetermine the agency of zygotes from the moment of conception. Furthermore, much like the term 'reproductive freedom', the words 'maternal mortality' are ambiguous: they could be interpreted as referring to the deaths of women who gave birth, women who miscarried or sought abortions, or all pregnant women (and, potentially, the foetuses they gestate).

⁹ In repronormative traditions, such as the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, it is generally understood that a woman's predominant societal purpose is to have children. If both baby and mother face the risk of health complications after delivery, caretakers tend to prioritise stabilising the former's health. Importantly, however, this phenomenon is not exclusive to southern African communities. A recent piece of investigative journalism from the United States found that an emphasis on neonatal care has resulted in exponential growth of the number of women's fatalities resulting from pregnancy and childbirth complications. For more on this, see Martin and Montagne (2017).

extremism and censorship. Klausen elucidates how unequal power relations between different racial groups allowed misogynistic discourse and law-making to flourish. Her analysis is outstanding in its dedication to discussing a range of racial identities; however, there are a few instances demanding more complex considerations of intra-ethnic agendas and literary allegiances. The characterisation of feminist abortion law reform supporters as “white, English-speaking, and middle class” (90), for instance, fails to account for the writings of prominent Afrikaans activists like Ingrid Jonker. Daughter of a conservative politician, Jonker had at least one illegal abortion, which she addresses in her poetry and journals. Together with André Brink and others, she was involved with an experimental writing group called *Die Sestigters* or the ‘Movement of Sixty’, which Klausen misdescribes as a “group of male Afrikaner writers” (60). These complications involving aesthetic treatments of terminations of pregnancy show just how challenging it is to create comprehensive portraits of abortion in the southern African context, where the politics of ‘choice’ are staged across intersecting spheres of representation and reproduction.

Abortion has always been legal in *some* form in South Africa, even under the National Party’s rule. But in the years leading up to the drafting of the Abortion and Sterilisation Act of 1975, abortion was almost completely prohibited – mostly because the current law did not explicitly state when terminations of pregnancies were permissible. The medical profession was largely responsible for publicising this issue, because it was a common and confusing concern for doctors who were faced with the dilemma of operating upon women who approached untrained abortionists to induce incomplete miscarriages before arriving at hospitals’ accident and emergency departments. Immediately, it becomes apparent that the issue of

women's agency was not a major concern, so much as the legal safety of doctors who would complete the second component of a two-part operation. Not all women relied on this method. Wealthier, white women were often advised to leave the country and acquire abortion services in more liberal regions such as the United Kingdom;¹⁰ poorer women, and especially women of colour, were mainly faced with the repercussions of both unclear legislature and backstreet abortionists' dubious credentials.

Some South African medical professionals also argued for abortion on eugenic grounds: a fact that is hardly surprising, given the apartheid government's racist agenda. Even those who expressed seemingly progressive views about the role of black women in modern settings remained paranoid about an impending shortage of space for living and farming. Dolly Maister and June Cope, two liberal feminists who worked respectively in Cape Town and Durban from the 1970s, were concerned with population control measures for the sake of preventing "environmental degradation" (Klausen 99). Their views were echoed by a vocal leader in the conservationist movement named Nan Trollip who declared that black South Africans should use birth control so as to protect the country's natural resources (188). In this sense abortion, population control, and an implicitly racist idea of ecology were intertwined in the twentieth century, a point to which I will return later in this introduction. Many people of colour thus simply refused to engage with abortion law reform because of suspicions of ethnic cleansing. Some, however, were more openly critical of the activist movement's problematic undertones. In an

¹⁰ For more on the phenomenon of 'abortion tourism' across a range of geographical and historical contexts, see Sethna and Davis's edited collection *Abortion across Borders: Transnational Travel and Access to Abortion Services* (2019).

address to delegates at a 1974 conference on abortion, a Zulu presenter named Dr H. Sibisi repeatedly registers her concerns about how birth control is perceived by black South Africans: “family planning in order to avoid population explosion,” she says, “is often seen as one of the lines taken by the dominant imperialistic societies calculated to keep down the number of those they want to dominate” (Sibisi 57).¹¹ Her views, however, are trivialised by the final speaker at the conference; not only does he condescend to her by expressing surprise that “all these things which afflict all organised and technologically developed societies, also involve the African people” (Shapiro 233), but he further dismisses Sibisi’s suspicions of state collusion with the medical profession as unsubstantiated (233).

At surface level, he is partially correct. Already under significant scrutiny by international audiences for their segregation of black and white citizens, the National Party was careful to emphasise that it would not use abortion as a method for population control lest it faced further sanctions (Klausen 155). Yet the majority of conservative Afrikaners in government positions, fearful of liberal values, became increasingly aware that they needed to revise current legislation in order to clearly iterate their ideological positions on the termination of pregnancy. Many did not seem to see an incongruence between supporting the death penalty and proselytising about the sanctity of all human life. Passed during International Women’s Year, the 1975 Abortion and Sterilisation Act was ironically designed “to discipline the body, both literally (the individual women) and symbolically (the social body)” (Klausen

¹¹ Other sections of the conference proceedings approach abortion with reference to Judaism, Free Churches, Islam, Hinduism, the Dutch Reformed Church, the United Congregational Church of South Africa, and Roman Catholicism. As the only black presenter at the conference, Dr. Sibisi is expected to represent all of “African” cultural attitudes (53), despite the fact that there is a multiplicity of ethnic groups – with correspondingly divergent religious beliefs – in the country.

133). In comparison to the strict and simple prohibition of the previous law, its verbose clauses about conditions under which access was acceptable did little to help those who were most at risk. Much like Zimbabwe's Termination of Pregnancy Act, South Africa's new law was technically permissive of abortion in certain circumstances. However, it included a range of access barriers, including a conscience clause and the requirement for certification from at least two doctors, one of whom, in applications for abortion due to mental health, had to be a psychiatrist. The latter condition proved to be one of the most difficult problems to overcome; even if medical professionals agreed in principle with the voluntary termination of pregnancy,¹² mental health care was a luxury that only the wealthy (and white) could afford (168).

Another issue which black women faced – and which the government was reluctant to challenge – was exertion of control over their bodily autonomy by both patriarchal men in their communities, and by African feminist ideologies grounded in the sanctification of motherhood.¹³ As women moved from rural homesteads to the city in search of work, they threatened to disrupt traditional values. In the case of Zulu ethical principles, for example, Dr H. Sibisi highlights “the value of human life i.e. the value of life *more than material things*” (53; emphasis added). With urbanisation, however, women increasingly began to view their political positions –

¹² In the wake of the passing of the Act, medical professionals increasingly came to view abortion more flexibly: three out of three psychiatrists who responded to a questionnaire said that the legislation should be liberalised; 17 out of 24 responding gynaecologists echoed this sentiment; and 71 out of 90 GPs answered that the new Act was not lenient enough. This was particularly true in the case of doctors treating black patients (Westmore 48). For more data and opinions, see Jean Westmore's *Abortion in South Africa and Attitudes of Natal Medical Practitioners towards South African Abortion Legislation*.

¹³ Alongside the stipulation in Zulu and other Bantu languages to use the term ‘mama’ as a signifier of respect when addressing any woman who is elder than the addresser – whether she is a mother or not – veneration of the maternal figure is also expressed by African feminist ‘Motherism’. For more on this philosophy, see Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1995).

and the occupations which brought them a modicum of wealth and social status – as important. Pregnancy came to be seen as an inconvenience for some who risked being fired if they had children out of wedlock. Thus while many South African tribes share kinship terminology which refers to multiple members of the community as ‘mother’ or ‘father’, women in both urban and rural settings began to challenge the duties of an “integrated personality” which had hitherto been enshrined by repronormative scripts (Sibisi 58). Men of colour were preoccupied by the thought that the white population planned to precipitate a black genocide by controlling women’s fertility. Both the African National Congress (currently the ruling party of South Africa) and the Black Consciousness Movement (founded by the revolutionary Steve Biko) were hostile towards talk of reproductive agency for this reason (Klausen 195).¹⁴ The ANC’s Women’s Charter of 1955 did not support abortion.¹⁵ White men simultaneously encouraged settler women from the ‘motherland’ to procreate so as to ensure that they were not outnumbered by the black majority. The result of autochthonous Africans’ and Afrikaners’ paranoia was that “both expected women to reproduce for the sake of the nation” (194). Klausen argues repeatedly throughout her monograph that the 1975 Act was predominantly passed in order to control *white* women’s reproductive agency and ensure the supposed racial purity of future generations. Due to the aforementioned structural inequalities of the health system, however, most of the women who received lawful

¹⁴ It is important to note that there may be other reasons for their reluctance to grant reproductive agency to women; denied political autonomy, many black men were only able to assert power fully in the domestic sphere. Patriarchal folklore, such as the persecution of ‘witches’ for supposedly spoiling crops by menstruating or miscarrying, may have also played a role in these beliefs. See my chapters on Wilma Stockenström and Bessie Head for further discussions of how gynaecological phenomena were associated with witchcraft.

¹⁵ Thanks to the work of women in the party and the influence of speakers at international conferences, the ANC reformed abortion law after apartheid.

abortions were white (210), and the majority of those treated for complications from unsafe abortions were black (212). Women of colour were consequently forced to respond creatively to the limitations placed upon their reproductive capacities: by finding new contraceptive methods or means of inducing abortions,¹⁶ and by using artistic resources to express frustration with restricted reproductive agency.

This also proved to be the case in countries with less detailed laws on access to abortion. The first southern African country to have gained independence from Britain, Botswana saw rapid economic and infrastructural growth from decolonisation from 1966 onwards (Smith, “Challenges” 44). With these developments came an apparent surge of popularity in liberal and feminist values. Published in 1977, Bessie Head’s *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* presents a series of vignettes which investigate the relationship between physical and mental health, particularly in light of Botswanans’ movements from rural to urban settings. Several of the stories allude to women’s reproductive agency. With such issues being brought to the fore of public discourse, one could optimistically believe that access to abortion would be relatively easy to obtain. Despite such artistic developments, however, the majority of Botswanans believed that abortion was immoral. The country retained very basic laws relating to reproductive health; up until 1991, its Ministry of Justice only allowed pregnancies to be terminated in extreme cases when the life of the woman was in jeopardy (Cook and Dickens 1983: 58).¹⁷ Much as in the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa, this

¹⁶ Helen Bradford’s exemplary 1991 article “Herbs, Knives and Plastic: 150 Years of Abortion in South Africa” charts a detailed movement from traditional abortifacients in rural settings to more contemporary methods. For more on abortion and birth control in South African urban settings during the twentieth century, see Catherine Burns (2004).

¹⁷ Abortion is now legal under certain conditions, but only within the first 16 weeks of pregnancy.

meant that poor, uneducated and/or black women were most at risk for complications from unsafe terminations, while those who were more privileged found it easier to approach and pay specialists for their services.

Those who studied traditional attitudes towards abortion near the end of the twentieth century openly admitted that they were baffled by such conservative outlooks, considering that almost all cultures relied on abortifacients or surgically induced miscarriages long before the establishment of Western medical practices (Cook and Dickens 1983: 122). Cook and Dickens observe that such hostility towards women's reproductive agency is not only at odds with international mandates like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also with "the 1981 African Charter [which] gives respect for life in Article 4 to 'Every human being', and provides in Article 16.1 for the health of 'Every individual', which does not clearly cover a child in utero" (63). Similarly, social anthropologist Stephanie S. Smith notes in her 2013 study of attitudes to abortion law that Botswana's Penal Code defines the murder of a child as only possible when it exists in a completely independent corporeal state from its mother ("Reproductive Health" 30). There is thus clearly a disjuncture between Botswanan citizens' perceptions of foetal agency, national laws about abortion, and the broader directives which most southern African states are purported to adhere to. While Smith's analysis contains some problematic stereotypes – such as the assumption that all modern democracies are necessarily beyond the influence of patriarchal ideology (28), or the generalisation that Botswanans have an "informal attitude towards time" ("Challenges" 44) – she does generate some useful qualitative data about the average citizen's attitudes to reproductive health. Her analysis points towards the inextricable link between

fertility and rites of passage in Tswana culture: not only is motherhood seen as synonymous with womanhood, but a Motswana woman is actually given a new name after the birth of her first child (“Reproductive Health” 30). This tradition technically values both the gestating person and the foetus, but it is clear that the natalist values of Tswana culture cause most to view abortion as irresponsible, thus giving preferential treatment to the potential life of the foetus. Furthermore, Smith reveals that the Setswana phrase for the medical procedure is “‘*go senya mpa*’, which translates as ‘to spoil/destroy the stomach’” (50; emphasis added). The destructive denotation stands in direct contrast with the supposedly creative and nurturing traditional roles of women. Even if they may personally believe that they have the right to control their futures, this expression reveals how anti-abortion values may cause women to feel ambivalent or hostile towards voluntary terminations of pregnancy.

Whether southern African abortion laws were classified as basic or advanced, requirements for special circumstances, doctors, or permissions meant that many faced the risk of illness or death due to complications from pregnancy during the late twentieth century. To the present day, even regions with liberal legislation face hurdles such as providing adequate healthcare facilities and sex education to the public, as access to a range of gynaecological services remains a problem. Social inequality and various privileges mean that some women have easier access to safe abortions, while others are not even aware that the procedure is legal. The divergence of moral norms and cultural attitudes do nothing to combat this problem, as proven by historian Rebecca Hodes’s 2016 article surveying access to illegal abortions before, during, and after apartheid (93). Hodes notes in an earlier

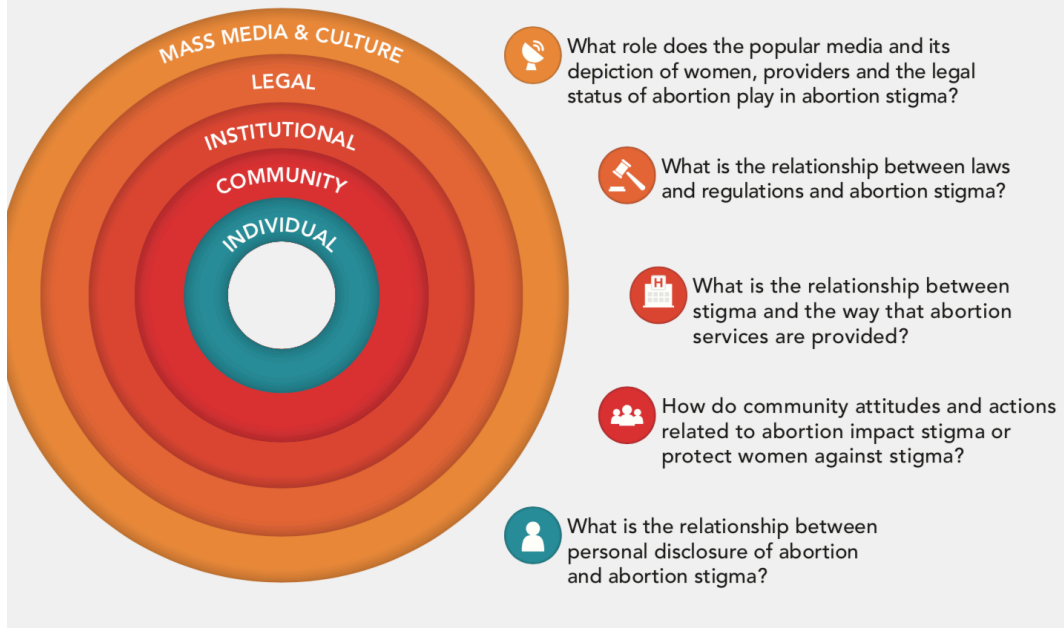
publication that “postcolonial scholars have [...] challenged the artificial separation of biomedicine and ‘indigenous’ medicine” (2013: 528), and her findings in both studies suggest that researchers need to generate localised understandings of fertility and abortion in particular environments, and not merely replace imperialist or patriarchal laws with generalised rhetoric about ‘rights’.

This is a point which Malvern Chiweshe and Catriona Macleod advance in a recent article criticising both liberal approaches to abortion access utilising rights discourse and decolonial perspectives that homogenise definitions of ‘African’ culture. Chiweshe and Macleod present a grounded reproductive justice approach (57), rejecting what they view as the neo-colonial untranslatability of ‘choice’ that is present in the larger context of rights rhetoric. They unpack social and cultural discourse, material conditions, and power relations that lead to unsupportable pregnancies, with an approach that is grounded in the traditional philosophies of Hunhu and Ubuntu. These words do not merely denote a shared humanity, but rather show that each individual’s existence is connected with the collective and the environment. In another article from 2019, Macleod draws on American ecofeminist Greta Gaard’s 2010 article “Reproductive Technology, or Reproductive Justice?: An Ecofeminist, Environmental Justice Perspective on the Rhetoric of Choice”. Through Gaard, and other theorists of “interwoven embodied and social realities” in reproduction (49), Macleod argues that we need to place less emphasis on individualistic choices when discussing abortion. Her approach and mine share many characteristics: questioning the rhetoric of ‘choice’; centring vulnerable beings through intersectionality; paying attention to geographical and historical contexts; balancing culturally and scientifically recognised knowledges; and asserting that the

personal sphere is inherently intertwined with, and representative of, political accountability. Yet while Macleod continues to use the term ‘reproductive justice’, I phrase this reproductive shift as one from rights to *agency*. The latter term has been used as a disembodied concept by some neoliberal campaigners for abortion law reform, as Rachelle Chadwick discusses (9). However, I use the term in the new materialist sense, where it “is rethought as a product of particular assemblages, troubling the notion that agency is something that an individual self or subject ‘has’ or ‘exerts’” (Chadwick 11).

Reinforcing moves by Hodes, Chiweshe and Macleod, and Chadwick towards a feminist materialist understanding of abortion in southern Africa, Jane Harries’s PhD thesis applies an ‘ecological model’ to abortion service provision in the South African context. Harries asserts that “[a]n ecological perspective within a public health setting emphasises both individual and contextual systems, and the interdependent and dynamic interrelations between the two” (7). Her utilisation of the environment as a metaphorical tool mirrors the Ecological Model of Abortion Stigma developed by the International Network for the Reduction of Abortion Discrimination and Stigma (inroads). The network circulates the model, a diagram of concentric circles, on its website and on promotional materials like fliers and bookmarks. Beginning at the level of the individual, the circles grow outwards to represent the community, institutional realms, legal spheres, and, finally, mass media and culture:

Figure 1: Ecological Model of Abortion Stigma



Inroads's Ecological Model of Abortion Stigma (image credit: LeTourneau 3).

This thesis is invested in continuing the aforementioned southern African scholars' feminist materialist lines of enquiry, but it differs by situating itself within the largest sphere of the social environment: that is, the *cultural* arena of literary-aesthetic forms. With many who feel ambivalent towards abortion being silenced by conservative norms and homogeneously alienating rhetoric about African culture, it is apparent that the value of literary studies is to interrogate the use of metaphorical language in recent and contemporary discourse surrounding abortion, and thereby represent the complexities of abortion in southern Africa.

The purpose of centralising abortion is both discursive and geopolitical – opening up the possibility that colonial control extends from human bodies to broader environments. As previously discussed, ecological anxieties were indubitably utilised by white liberal feminists during apartheid to advocate for

abortion on eugenic grounds because of concerns about population growth and its impact on natural resources. This would understandably lead some to question how environmental metaphors can be applied to discussions of reproduction in southern Africa without playing into racist histories. But feminists writing in the region from the 1970s to the 1990s experimented with metaphorical formations of ecological approaches to abortion stigma, tackling material realities which women (particularly women of colour) faced from both liberationist and colonial nationalist regimes. It is vital, as well, to stress that the authors in this study literally crossed national boundaries, each in their own ways. Yvonne Vera moved between Zimbabwe and Canada – home to one of the largest Zimbabwean diaspora populations – several times during her adulthood. Zoë Wicomb emigrated to England and then Scotland, where she still resides as a South African expatriate. Bessie Head moved to Botswana after becoming involved with anti-apartheid activism and never returned to South Africa again (despite its exilic conditions, this was a voluntary decision, as I discuss in chapter 4). It may be of no coincidence that the only white author in this study, Wilma Stockenström, is also the only writer to remain in her country of birth. Yet her novella clearly *thematizes* dislocation as its narrator, a slave woman, is forced into exile on an expedition from one unnamed state to the next. The term ‘exile’ conveys a form of coercive separation that has connections with the nature of the topic of abortion. Throughout this thesis I use the exilic to encompass not only the plethora of movements on the parts of the authors – the diasporic, the expatriate, and political exile – but also their experimental thematisation of how nationalism

colonises both geographical and biological environments,¹⁸ right down to the foetal level.

Metaphors abound in feminist materialist theory. They also accommodate the inextricable link between fertility and rites of passage in southern Africa: whether this is a symbolic gesture like the aforementioned case of first-time mothers in Botswana being ‘baptised’ with new names, or merely the fact that some African feminisms centralise motherhood as a source of mythologised power. There are good reasons why one might believe that engaging with such metaphors may have worrying implications for abortion access. Yet there are also postcolonial feminisms that utilise elements of poststructural thought to treat ‘Africa’ and ‘woman’ as open signifiers; they focus on commonalities through material encounters and also differences through the localisation of experiences (Chiweshe, Mavuso, and Macleod 204). What if the metaphorical flourishes of some traditional feminisms were complemented by their counterparts in new waves of feminism? Likewise, what if the political limitations of feminist materialism were counterbalanced with women’s material experiences of abortion?

III

“Unnoticed as the birth of a wave an idea came into being and swelled unnoticed.” –

Wilma Stockenström, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983: 62)

¹⁸ Throughout this thesis I use ‘environment’ in the ecological sense, applying the concept to non/human animal bodies as well as broader systems wherein these agencies meet. This contrasts with the term ‘landscape’, which refers to geographical vistas (often that those that have been colonised) and implies a separation of land from non/human organisms.

A common theme throughout postcolonial accounts of materiality in African sociocultural contexts is the subject of animism, or the traditional belief that nonhuman organisms, objects, and natural phenomena have spiritual essences. This is perhaps particularly true since the publication of a 2003 article by Harry Garuba which argues that animist world-views in colonial and postcolonial Africa allowed for political forms of agency to emerge (285). Yet with renewed scholarly interest in animism comes the erroneous assumption that all ‘African cultures’ are animist. In a 2014 article on supernatural forces in South African literature, for example, Annel Pieterse “proceed[s] from the assumptions that a belief in occult powers is often central to local knowledge systems in South Africa, and that this belief should be acknowledged as a commonplace feature of life if one is to understand certain aspects of the [...] literary landscape” without establishing any evidence for or origins of these claims or, indeed, explicating what ‘this belief’ in spiritual phenomena actually entails (27). Writing more recently in 2018, Sam Durrant creates a rather intimidating mandate for writers situated in Africa by arguing that “contemporary African literature must do more than simply represent the world. Its most vital role is to perform itself as a surrogate rite of re-ancestralisation, one that engenders a radically expanded, trans-species spirit of relatedness” (178). There are several issues with Durrant’s directive, not least its homogenisation of literature from the continent (in an article studying a single literary text) and its insinuation that the act of representation is divorced from ethical or political implications. A more pressing concern, however, is the assumption that some untouched, ancestral ‘African’ animism exists – and that one can return to its supposed purity through ‘surrogacy’ (a most jarring word when considering the politics of gestation). This is

not a criticism of postcolonial theorists' interests in animism so much as an observation that its origins in oral storytelling mean it is constantly shifting, forming and reforming, interacting with both local and imported knowledge systems – and that this nebulous nature, this question of whose definitions are being used to which ends, must be accounted for. For as Achille Mbembe notes, the contemporary veneration of objects in consumerist cultures means that even capitalism may be understood as a form of animism (Mbembe in Blaser 6).

Since animist perspectives contend that there is spirit in all matter, one could assume that they should not tolerate terminations of unsupportable pregnancies. Yet in much southern African fiction, as in the history of the region itself, the cultures and legacies of *colonisers* have argued more fiercely for the supposed sanctity of the foetus than traditionalist perspectives which appear more ambivalent towards abortion. Writing ten years after his aforementioned article, Garuba revisits the topic of animism and its “suggestion that the boundary between Nature and Society, between the world of objects and that of subjects, between the material world and that of agency and symbolic meanings, is less certain than the modernist project had decreed it to be” (2013: 43). The writers in this study, however, are invoking both situated southern African beliefs *and* the so-called “modernist project”, often referencing and experimenting with literary Modernism in their creative expressions of reproductive agency. There are thus three primary reasons why this study does not engage with animism and related indigenous approaches to material agencies. Firstly, these novels, novellas, and short stories are decidedly prosaic forms that do not emulate oral modes of storytelling; their authors make equal references to

Anglo-European Modernism,¹⁹ American con/texts, and southern African myths. Second, this is not an anthropological study. In cases where tribal traditions are thematised by the texts, they are utilised to provoke aesthetic and ethical issues rather than sociological commentary. Finally, there is very little discussion of ‘souls’ or spirituality in any of these narratives. The writers I am discussing are not interested in the spirit realm – nor in (the white settler’s) God – but rather in how works of fiction inform political affairs as well as more literal *matters*. New materialism can thus gain insight from not only Western literature and science, but also from southern Africans’ modes of narration which are anthropomorphising but not superstitious.

A further point is that while the texts are political in their condemnations of colonisation, they are simultaneously critical of African nationalist movements for perpetuating masculinist understandings of power and agency that privilege ‘man’. It is evident, then, that the fictions in question are not compatible with postcolonial materialisms that exclude feminist perspectives. For example, Pablo Mukherjee’s eco-materialism is useful for socialist studies that attend to mapping the “difference” of “productive activities” (81). Yet the questions of gender and sexual difference – areas which emerging feminist and queer theories demonstrate are far from easily mapped – do not figure in his discussions of production. My biggest concern is the utilisation of the word ‘labour’ without attending to ecofeminist theories of reproduction that exceed post-Marxist cultural geographers’ works. Contra to

¹⁹ Their preoccupation with Modernism is particularly interesting in light of work on abortion in Modernist literature: see Hauck (2003) and Bigman (2016). The scope of this thesis does not allow for extended discussions of transnational Modernisms and their legacies, but this is an exciting avenue of crossovers for postcolonial and Modernist studies that merits further investigation.

Mukherjee, Marxist feminist Silvia Federici defines the sexual division of work as “reproductive labour” (14). Hers is an important theorisation of all the labour that goes into producing life, whether this is parenting, housework, or the physical processes of gestation and childbirth. Yet her otherwise materialist feminism does not address reproductive *environments*, bodily or otherwise, and is uncritical of concepts like rights, choice, and related humanist categories.

In a more recent Marxist theorisation of gestation, Sophie Lewis (2019) argues that all uterine labour (and particularly surrogacy) should be considered unpaid work. She uses similar concepts and ideas as those raised in the collection *Making Kin not Population* (2018). Edited by Donna Haraway and Adele Clark, the overarching argument of this volume is that with contemporary phenomena like a growing human population and ever-increasing environmental catastrophes, it is time to reconceive traditional biogenetic associations of kinship and family. Lewis’s critique is remarkably self-reflexive and exciting for its many nuances, but there is still concern amongst some that the substitution of ‘kin-making’ for the propagation of humankind risks erasing the experiences of those who have historically been denied reproductive agency.²⁰ It may also propagate the notion that some populations need to curb their fertility rates more than others, a misconception that is fairly common in environmentalist circles.²¹ In response to the assumed incompatibility of environmental and feminist interests presented in discussions of

²⁰ See, for example, Jade S. Sasser’s concerns about reproductive justice and definitions of population as purely human numbers (Strathern *et al.* 162), as expressed in a recent 2019 review forum on Haraway’s and Clark’s collection.

²¹ There are several moments in Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist’s edited collection *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation* where discussions of overpopulation and race are dismissed as “conversation stoppers” (Palmer 104), but perhaps the most telling is Dave Foreman’s claim that “the herd mindset of political correctness stops any unruffled, thoughtful talk about population [in the USA]” (65). For a critique of such insidious attitudes towards immigration and race in the environmental humanities, see Timothy Clark (2016).

re/production in postcolonial contexts, I am inspired by Cajetan Iheka's (2017) recent work on ecological violence in literature from Africa. Iheka argues for a distributed sense of agency (4), creating a model of "strategic anthropomorphism" by merging concepts popularised by postcolonial critics like Frantz Fanon with the theories of feminist materialists (14). I adapt this approach by considering queer and non-biogenetic theorisations of gestation as bridges between postcolonial and new materialist perspectives – a point to which I shall return shortly.

Gestation and reproduction also figure in many new materialist formulations of agency, where they are discussed on both literal and metaphorical levels. In her 2007 monograph *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Karen Barad creates a semantic field which can be utilised to discuss both material-discursive issues and purely discursive matters. Barad is actively occupied by ethical questions; her classification of embodied agencies as 'phenomena' which 'intra-act' means that her theory is concerned with both organic and inorganic matter (whether this is human or nonhuman). Drawing on Niels Bohr's principle of diffraction, Michel Foucault's work on discourse, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, she is concerned with the very *process* of being itself. According to agential realism, "[i]ndividuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating" (ix). Thus Barad is interested in the ontology of *how* agency is made and remade in the *present*, as illustrated by her use of present-continuous forms in neologisms such as "spacetimemattering" (383). Barad views new materialism as an important tool for decentring the human subject; she

describes agential realism as “a posthumanist performative account of technoscientific and other naturalcultural practices” (32). Aligning new materialist and posthumanist theory, she underlines the anti-anthropocentric and environmentalist concerns which are present in both schools of thought.

One of the most interesting chapters of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* considers ontology, agency, and reproductive technologies, particularly ultrasounds. Feminist abortion activists often employ the rhetoric of choice, arguing for a woman’s ‘right to choose’. Here, Barad begins to explore how associations of choice and agency are affected if one accepts that existence is not – and never can be – an individual affair: controversially, she contends that the foetus-as-phenomenon includes not only the zygote, but also the gestating body and the environment which it occupies (217). She is not, however, opposed to abortion; she is acutely aware of how pregnant people have been historically objectified and excluded from possessing political power (212). Barad opposes causing suffering on principle while also remaining open to contingencies, and without reinforcing the anti-abortion/pro-choice dichotomy. New materialism has been problematised for its tendency to focus on white philosophers’ work, as well as for propagating the assumption that a focus on material reality is ‘new’ when various indigenous and postcolonial knowledge systems have already been preoccupied with such questions (Hinton, Mehrabi and Barla 4). However, in this chapter Barad is at pains to illustrate how the agential realist perspective allows one to criticise not only the liberal humanist rhetoric of choice, but also concerns like infertility caused by ecological health risks and environmental racism (217). Her theories point to the

shared vulnerability of each and every embodied agency, pushing intersectionality to encompass political and ethical issues.

The fact remains that although all phenomena hold agency, some have more agentive clout than others. Furthermore, the extent to which one may be said to hold agency depends upon the relationships that one shares with other beings. This is not intended as a universalist comment about familial structures (although it is generally acknowledged that a parent would be naïve at best, or neglectful at worst, to claim their infant is an ‘equal’). Rather, I am interested in a vexing question of agency that manifests in movements for social equality in postcolonial settings. Campaigns to treat autochthonous peoples with respect often appeal to a homogenised sense of identity, as noted by Chiweshe and Macleod (49). Ironically, the very notion of sameness can cause the cultural nuances and situational details of such struggles to be misunderstood or overlooked. Here I am approaching a point which is deftly articulated by Judith Butler in her 2009 monograph *Frames of War*. After defining precariousness as a “*shared* condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals)” (13; emphasis added), Butler warns in a characteristically linguistic-discursive caveat that “we ought not to think that the recognition of precariousness masters or captures or even fully cognizes what it recognizes” (13). Here she points to a seeming contradiction of terms: while thinking subjects are able to recognise and articulate their affinity with other beings, such intellectual knowledge is full of slippages and contradictions. If one is to truly grasp the new materialist concept that one holds no more or less agency than nonhuman materials like rocks and stones, then one has to acknowledge that such a thought can never truly be ‘mastered’. A rock, after all, possesses no mind to

comprehend this idea. The onus is thus on the thinking subject to be wary of what they supposedly know – and of the concept of knowledge itself.

Importantly for this discussion, Butler goes on to use issues of reproductive agency – in particular, abortion – to illustrate her concerns about social environments and how they may make a life un/liveable.²² She declares that

it is not possible to base arguments for reproductive freedom, which include rights to abortion, on a conception of what is living and what is not. Stem cells are living cells, even precarious, but that does not immediately imply what policy decision ought to be made regarding the conditions under which they should be destroyed or in which they can be used. Not everything included under the rubric of ‘precarious life’ is thus, a priori, worthy of protection from destruction. But these arguments become difficult precisely here, since if some living tissues or cells are worthy of protection from destruction, and others not, could this not lead to the conclusion that, under conditions of war, some human lives are worthy of protection while others are not? (18)

While the above quotation approaches a pressing question about contemporary warfare, this concern about the comparative worth – or grievability – of lives is made equally apparent in critical race and postcolonial studies. The discourse of entanglement risks transcending important issues like racial identity and ethnic discrimination by forging a crucible of cultural identities. Two examples from the United States are illustrative of this point. The first is the multiculturalist image of the ‘melting pot’, which implies that immigrants will (and must) assimilate to create a new national identity in their country of choice. Secondly, recent outrage sparked by the appropriative slogan All Lives Matter (in the context of my theoretical

²² At one point, Butler tangentially mentions that stereotypical anti-abortion ideology is congruent with animal rights activism, as both enshrine the essential worth of every organism’s life (16). For a more detailed – if subjective – study of this linkage, see Sherry F. Colb and Michael C. Dorf’s vegan theorisation of reproductive agency in *Beating Hearts: Abortion and Animal Rights* (2016).

framework, the latter word appears particularly apt) is evidence of how social inequality persists despite claims to the contrary.

It is thus clear that shared precariousness does not emerge because of similar social conditions and neither is it the product of an essentialised biological sameness. One must recognise that all phenomena hold agency in a philosophical sense, while acknowledging that differential distributions of desires mean that some play more significant roles in society or the environment than others. But if we accept that ethical parity is impossible to achieve on a microscopic level, then it may be argued that we are forced to concede it cannot operate interpersonally, either. This conclusion holds little hope for fostering empathetic exchanges. Some may remain unconvinced by new materialism and its appeal to an apparently depoliticised ethics for this very reason. For example, Mel Y. Chen is critical of what is sometimes perceived as the transcendence of linguistic and political issues in new materialist theory (51), but conjectures that it may hold potential if it is open to the “uncanny” tensions between variant identities (236). Other critics like Sara Ahmed (2008) remain more resolutely suspicious of what they perceive as new materialism’s oversimplification of the relationship between feminism and (biological) science studies. Ahmed rigorously demonstrates how the new materialists construct a “narrative of forgetful feminism” when they posit that older forms of feminism were not concerned by questions of biology (32). In particular, she shows how Judith Butler’s work has been caricatured as ‘anti-matter’ when the reality is that she does grapple with materiality, albeit only in passing because materialisation is not the focus of her work (33).

Butler's work provides an astute counterpoint to the idealism which underpins some contemporary reworking of materialism. A flaw in her logic, however, is that it questions the 'right to life' while remaining relatively uncritical of the concept of freedom. Much like the aforementioned instances of multicultural tropes in the USA, envisioning a singular experience (whether this is of a nationalist everyman or an independent and childless 'modern woman') runs the risk of silencing those whose experiences and feelings cannot be so simply articulated. It appears inconsistent for Butler to criticise materialism as idealistic without considering the homogenising potential of some humanist terminology. In contrast, highlighting agency helps to foreground the problem of social inequality which continues to impact upon women's access to safe reproductive healthcare, while also resisting the tendency towards universalism that some pro-choice activism – and new materialism – promotes. By now it should be clear that my purpose is not to discuss the potential pitfalls of pro-choice campaigns on the one hand and posthumanism on the other. Rather, my aim is to explicate a feminist materialist perspective on the ecological model of women's reproductive agency in postcolonial contexts – that is, a figuration of new materialism which does not lose sight of historical frameworks. With its emphasis on dismantling intersecting oppressions, philosophical posthumanism provides an important critical perspective on the liberal homogenisation of experiences which tends to infiltrate discussions of reproductive agency, but only if it is open to discussing how and why some lives are worth more than others.

In an interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, Karen Barad notes that “agency is not about choice in any liberal humanist sense” (54). Elsewhere, she asserts that

[m]atter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things. Matter is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences. (Barad 136-37)

This quotation highlights the duplicity of the foetus-as-phenomenon: a zygote is not only a component of a gestating figure, but also grows into a foetus which is productive (in the sense that it generates its own sex cells before birth). The word ‘differentiating’ also points to the importance which stem cells play in discourse surrounding abortion. While Barad and one of her fellow new materialists, political theorist Jane Bennett, have discussed ultrasound technology and stem cells, respectively, it appears that the event of abortion is a central question at the heart of new materialism, as both anti-abortion and pro-choice campaigners often appeal to personal agency to justify their ideologies. I investigate some worrying implications of Bennett’s allegiances in my analysis of Bessie Head’s fiction in chapter 4. There are several theoretical knots that remain unpicked in her work, particularly the issue of female creativity and gender essentialism. By focusing too heavily on a *woman’s* choice, many play into the essentialist understanding that the female sex is somehow more naturally astute at nurturing or creating new life. Paradoxically, it is only by accepting that women are not the sole creative forces – to paraphrase Butler, by declining to cognise what we recognise as reproductive – that we can create an inclusive and productive sense of agency.

Barad's theoretical intra-actions have influenced many feminist thinkers including Rosi Braidotti, a key theorist whose work I adapt in my chapter on Zoë Wicomb. Unlike Bennett, Braidotti is critical of philosophical revisitations of vitalism – that is, the belief in an inexplicable life force that charges in/animate objects – and their linkages with trends of genetic citizenship, although she elects not to elaborate too greatly on their connections with European modes of fascist philosophy (Braidotti 2010: 202). Where her thinking mostly greatly informs my readings is in her investigation of new materialism's analogies and metonyms, exploring the disjuncture between theory and reality (as well as equivalences between different contexts). During her keynote address delivered at a conference on “Environmental Humanities and New Materialisms: The Ethics of Decolonising Nature and Culture” in 2017, for example, Braidotti was quick to remind the audience of the “empiricist fetishism” of some new materialist thought. Otherwise referred to as the Eighth Annual Conference on the New Materialisms, the event was hosted at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. Many papers interpreted decolonisation metaphorically and with baffling insensitivity, discussing cancers, invasive species, and other biological colonies rather than racial injustice (postcolonial political contexts were particularly absent from discussion). That Braidotti's astute warning remained unheeded in most panels is proof that much work remains to be done in bridging postcolonial and new materialist perspectives on colonial legacies. Yet she does not abandon posthumanism as a navigational tool; the nonhuman, whether animal or environment, provides an index of empowerment for her and other feminist thinkers, even when thinking through human agency.

Braidotti's emphasis on relational and collaborative thinking when creating critical theory is shared by Claire Colebrook, although the latter is admittedly sceptical of posthumanism proper. Colebrook's reservations are implied in many of her writings but perhaps most notably by the title "Humanist Posthumanism: Becoming-Woman and the Power of the 'Faux'". In this recent article, she exemplifies Karen Barad and Edward Said as two rare thinkers who exceed the tired dichotomy of fixed and essentialist identity categories (particularly the word 'woman') on the one hand, and the homogenous category of 'we' humans on the other (2-4). Her evocation of Barad and Said is vital since both are formative influences in this study. Said's work on origins and af/filiation, in particular, is adapted in chapters 1 and 4 in conjunction with queer ecocritical perspectives on gestationality, and Barad's agential realism informs concepts coined by Greta Gaard, Rosi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo and, indeed, Colebrook herself. What is inspirational here is the collaboration between two vastly different schools of thought and her insistence that both, actually, might be utilised to embrace posthumanism's 'faux' limitations (17). That is, she argues for resisting "the hyper humanism of feminist posthumanism" or "pure becoming" that posits some feminisms are more 'real' than others and reminds the reader that poststructural thought must recognise all signifiers are inherently false (17). Similarly, I approach new materialism from a postcolonial feminist perspective. How might southern African literature allow for non-anthropocentric, yet politically aware, views on reproductive agency to be expressed? Can such accounts of abortion disrupt the notion that the gestating body is a mere vessel for the embryo – a body that may develop to propagate the patriarch's genes – thereby disengaging gender from sexual difference, and further

challenging repronormative and nationalist lineages? These are not questions that can simply be answered with one side of a theoretical coin; neither animism nor vitalism applies in such cases. Rather, as I discuss at length in my final chapter, there is a queer vitality at play.

Queer theorist Jennifer Doyle notes that traumatic or ‘tragic’ abortion stories are often privileged in favour of treating abortion as a mundane and everyday reality.²³ Such discursive erasure is performed by those both for and against abortion, as the thought that a woman may *desire* to deliberately terminate a pregnancy remains unpalatable to many (26). Doyle continues to argue that

it is one thing to frame abortion in terms of human rights – in which we discuss access to abortion as something that women of the Global South need in order to resist social, economic, and political oppression, for example. It is another to frame it as the practice of sexual freedom – to integrate abortion into a story about sexuality, desire, and the body. (41)

While she is deliberately presenting a false dichotomy to illustrate her point, it is telling that the example of social and political injustice turns to a homogenised notion of the ‘Global South’. What emerges in the study of southern African fiction is that abortion stories often are not simple narrative arcs of women overcoming oppression. Even in cases where political issues like abortion access do inform the plot, there are multiperspectival moments where anthropocentrism is unsettled, thereby challenging humanist associations of legal personhood with power.

²³ Doyle simultaneously provides an excellent description of misogyny-by-omission in the work of Lee Edelman, probably the most notable queer theorist to have argued against procreation. Analysing his antinatalist critique of the ‘Child’, which he develops from the depiction of a foetus on a billboard funded by anti-abortionists, she observes that “The pregnant woman disappears into an amorphous and undefined background, even in Edelman’s refusal of the image’s ideological call” (32). For further critique of Edelman, see Nicole Seymour’s (2013) discussion of anti-futurity’s complicity with hyper-capitalism (as discussed in chapter 4).

Similarly to Colebrook's point on resisting strict dichotomies when thinking through feminist and postcolonial critical theories, my emphasis is that such abortion narratives *are* formations of desire; such fictions unsettle the binary of human rights narratives with linear trajectories, on the one hand, and experimental tales of sexual embodiment on the other. Aesthetic representations of abortion in southern Africa challenge normative sexual discourse to both political and ethical ends.

If one views abortion as ending a pregnancy rather than killing a foetus, then questions of finality become more apparent. The literary readings in this thesis do not dwell on typical associations of abortion or the abortive with failure; rather, they explore the queer potentialities that accompany reproductive agency. These potentialities are enmeshed with novel and distinctly southern African models of temporality: the narratives in question unsettle linear models of development long before the new materialists' pronouncement of a revived interest in queer time. Yet their engagement with urban and rural life, nonhuman and human forms, and Anglo-European and indigenous aesthetics demands engagement with humanism from a critical perspective.

IV

"The birth of a word is more significant than the birth of a child." – Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (1998: 68)

Not only is abortion discussed with frankness and detail in the texts that form the heart of this thesis, but it is also reconceptualised as an ethico-political issue rather than a moral conundrum to be resolved in the legal sphere. The distinction between

ethical frameworks that rely on analogy and Karen Barad's approach to philosophy is that while the former compare subjects as being like one another, the latter method reads them through each other. All the authors in this study are preoccupied by the fact that nationalist discourse has metaphorised the female resexual body *as* environment, or vice versa, whether this is through colonial tropes of 'the mother country' or liberationist rhetoric about 'Mother Africa'. Nevertheless, their fictions move past equivocations and analogies, viewing non/human subjects through a diffractive lens. Some may argue the simple 'fact of the matter' is that ecologies cannot possess the same level of agency as a human subject. However, nonhuman materials in these texts come to figure for, and even influence, social matters; they embody a new and critical form of humanism that does not revere repronormative roles (particularly that of the *mater*),²⁴ but rather views both agency and abortion along situational continuums.

The chapters that follow investigate a range of intersecting values that are mirrored and repeated in southern African fiction from the 1970s to 1990s. My first chapter focuses on J.M. Coetzee's English translation of Wilma Stockenström's Afrikaans novella *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983), which I refer to as an interpretive translation. It is set in a vague area of southern Africa and features an abundance of domesticated species and wildlife. Adapting Greta Gaard's critical ecofeminist theory of attentive listening, I argue that the novella uses beastly riddles

²⁴ The term 'critical humanism' has been popularised by Martin Halliwell and Andrew Mousley with the publication of their 2003 monograph *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues*. As its title suggests, their study argues that elements of post- and anti-humanist thought may be located within humanist thinking, and vice versa. I similarly do not argue for a complete break between humanism proper and more-than-humanist thought (posthumanism, anti-humanism, or critical humanism). Halliwell and Mousley, however, focus almost exclusively on European and North American contexts, whereas this thesis is interested in critical humanisms forming in southern Africa. My definition of critical humanism is outlined further with respect to emerging queer posthumanisms in chapter 4.

instead of the technique of analogy upon which the animal fable traditionally rests. Stockenström's formations of gestation and parasitism queer the figure of the human that informs much discourse surrounding abortion. Chapter 2 analyses Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), a Bildungsroman of semi-autobiographical stories set in several very specific areas of South Africa. Moving into the realm of metaphors, of plant life and autopoietic forms, Wicomb presents a perverse take on abortion under apartheid. Formations of agency and desire intersect with anxieties surrounding genetic roots, resulting in deviation from what repronormative cultures deem as 'natural'.

Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) is a novel with short chapters that thematises the rural/urban divide in colonial Zimbabwe. In chapter 3, I explore how the novel weaves organic and inorganic elements, creating a nuanced vocabulary for discussing reproductive, among other, agencies. This is inarguably the most posthumanist novel in the study, as shown by my adaptation of Stacy Alaimo's coinage 'transcorporeality', a term referring to how human and nonhuman bodies are exposed to and enmeshed within one another. Transcorporeal forms in *Butterfly Burning* include water, fire, lightning and rocks. The melding of organic and inorganic imagery signals a move from formations to transformations: Vera's intra-actions metamorphose the 'tragedy' of lost personhood that is supposedly inherent to abortion narratives. Yet her querying of sexual and racial politics in literal and figurative birthings means that the text is also witness to very human matters. The final chapter affirms this transition to the human realm (and to an earlier period of southern African history) by focusing on Bessie Head's oeuvre of short stories and novels, particularly *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*

(1977), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989), and *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Instead of focusing on gestating beasts, as in Stockenström, Head queers non/human agencies through what I term ‘creative ferment’: individuals in her work possess a queer vitality that continues to be demonstrated in and by the broader political landscape. Head’s fiction traces forms of self-formation that challenge not only normative models of personal development, but also narrative time. The very structure of this study thus illustrates its circular logic: there is a move from nonhuman animals to less familiar environmental agencies, before an ultimate return to questions of personhood and agency in the human realm. While Stockenström and Head are preoccupied with questions of intraspecies allegiances, Wicomb and Vera thematise ecological interactions. Narrative form is another notable ground for comparison, particularly in the first two chapters; Stockenström and Wicomb both reformulate the novella by using fragmentary styles.²⁵

The birth of a wave: an idea. The birth of a word or a child. A new name, baptised in blood. Each in their own ways, the authors in this study are preoccupied with how discourse is created, particularly when it involves the idealisation of motherhood and reproduction. For women who reconceive abortion narratives defy nationalist teleologies, whether they are expressed by the racialised political violence of colonisers, or through the insidious sexualised control of the traditionalists who follow in their wake. These authors are narrators of vitality. In

²⁵ The remaining authors also experiment with brevity, owing perhaps to shared Modernist influences discussed at several points.

their words, in their fictional worlds, abortion does not signal southern Africa's demise, but rather a plethora of new possibilities.

Chapter 1

“What Carries its Life in its Stomach?”: Parasitic Listening in Wilma

Stockenström’s *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*

The first novella in this study, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, is something of an anomaly. First published in 1981, Wilma Stockenström’s *Die Kremetartekspedisie* was translated into English for British publishers Faber & Faber by J.M. Coetzee in 1983 (to date, this is his only Afrikaans translation).²⁶ Stockenström’s text grapples with what many would perceive as unusual subject matter for Afrikaans literature, particularly in the years leading up to the 1985 State of Emergency: it is a fictional slave narrative set during the advent of European colonial expansion in southern Africa (historical dates, along with geographical specificity and other details, are deliberately obscured by the novella). In spite – or perhaps because – of its controversial content, the text succeeded in reaching a sympathetic audience without being banned by the apartheid government. In 2014 the English version was reissued in the United States, receiving a resurgence of interest and critical acclaim from publications including *Asymptote* and the *LA Review of Books*. The moral impetus of the novella is generalised in contemporary reviews by critics such as Lily Saint and Cory Johnstone as overtly feminist with anti-racist undertones. Yet there is danger in summarising a text which emerges from such a complex moment in history without contextualising its origins and, particularly, the thematic and literary concerns of its original author. This chapter therefore deviates from many reviews and critical

²⁶ Coetzee has translated two texts from Dutch (the formative ‘parent language’ of Afrikaans): *A Posthumous Confession* by Marcellus Emants and an edited collection titled *Landscape with Rowers: Poetry from the Netherlands*.

articles on the English text – both those that were written soon after its publication, and more recent pieces – by considering the long history of the novella, particularly ethically ambiguous elements which are opened by reading *Expedition* as what I term an interpretive translation. As translator Coetzee ‘listens’ to the original text, but the very act of interpretation reinforces Stockenström’s preoccupation with narrative, cultural, and biological origins.

Wilma Stockenström was born in the Western Cape of South Africa in 1933 and currently lives in Cape Town. She has worked as a translator, actress, and writer, and has received prestigious awards for her Afrikaans writing including the Hertzog Prize (for poetry and fiction), the CNA Prize for Poetry, and the SALA Literary Lifetime Award. *Uitdraai (Turn-Off)*, Stockenström’s first novel, was published in 1976. The text conforms to the thematic preoccupations of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* – that is, a pastoral narrative set on a farm, usually revolving around a white patriarch – but is distinctive in its use of sexually explicit imagery. For instance, Gerrit Olivier summarises the novel’s transgressive elements by focusing on the scene of “a sordid backroom abortion, dramatically visualised by one of those present [at the procedure] vomiting up the figs she has consumed” (319).²⁷ Stockenström’s sarcastic and distanced technique is further reinforced by the fact that the pregnancy is a result of miscegenation, which Olivier correctly identifies as a prominent theme in Afrikaans writing at the time (319-20). One of the most famous examples of such a narrative is Etienne van Heerden’s *Toorberg* (1986), which was translated into English as *Ancestral Voices*. Van Heerden’s novel charts

²⁷ It is quite remarkable that such frankness was not targeted by apartheid censors, given that abortion law was extremely strict at the time of publishing (as discussed in my introduction).

four generations of two families who are complexly sired, shamed, and united by a chain of patriarchs named Abel. Immediately it is obvious how *Uitdraai* simultaneously adheres to and departs from the conventions manifested in this exemplary *plaasroman*: Stockenström also utilises imagery with heavily religious connotations (figs represent fertility and prosperity in the Bible; a fig tree which does not produce fruit is cursed by Jesus),²⁸ but is less concerned with male lineage and genetic anxieties than women's labour.

Die Kremetartekspedisie is Stockenström's third, and undoubtedly best-known, fictional work; a postscript in the Afrikaans Kindle edition records that following its publication in English, it has been translated into French, German, Dutch, Italian, and Hebrew (loc. 1562). Unlike the generic *plaasroman* and her earlier novel *Uitdraai, The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is different in that the pregnancies and sexual violence which form its thematic centre are not relayed from the perspective of a white narrator. Rather, the protagonist is a woman of colour who becomes a victim of colonial expansion and slavery. The narrative is set during the establishment of the Portuguese sea-route to India and it is implied that the nameless protagonist is first captured on the East Coast of Africa (loc. 1552-4). She recounts her life story in achronological fragments as she travels inland to an area which is both unidentified and untouched by modern civilisation. After seeking an abortion and escaping her third master, she ruminates on the lives of sharks, baboons, birds, and bats, before arriving at the titular baobab tree.

²⁸ Christianity is an important component of both traditional Afrikaans writing and culture, as illustrated by the fact that Biblical passages were often quoted by the conservative National Party to promote social segregation and ideas of racial 'purity'. Furthermore, the fruit mentioned here recurs in southern African women's fiction; for an extensive discussion of the implications of the fig as autopoietic symbol, see my second chapter on Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*.

The novella is remarkable not only for its poetic rendition of sexually and biologically graphic scenes, but also for the boldness of its narrative situation. For though we are never given explicit indicators of the narrator's racial identity,²⁹ it is implied that she is not speaking from the privileged position of whiteness. For an Afrikaans woman to write a slave narrative during the height of apartheid, and in the language of the oppressor, may be interpreted as either the ultimate renegade act or the pinnacle of ventriloquism. If one considers the state of censorship at the time of writing, then one is inclined to interpret it as the former; this is certainly what most, if not all, reviewers have tended to do, as the aforementioned pieces by Saint and Johnstone illustrate. However, there is something unsettling about seeing the novella named alongside writings by people of colour who were really forced to live as slaves, like Phillis Wheatley or Janet Lim, as an example of a "modern" slave narrative (Fister 284). Jennifer Fleischner notes in her 1996 monograph *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* that slave narratives are most notably characterised by an autobiographical account of one's birth and childhood, and the escape therefrom (1-2). The importance of authorial positionality is explained by titles such as: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789); *The History of Mary Prince* (1831); and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* obviously lacks this layer of personal authenticity. Yet the novella is preoccupied with similar themes to these

²⁹ Or, it must be added, the markers of miscegenation, which recur in tell-tale descriptions of the 'brown-skinned, blue-eyed' Riet family in van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices*.

transnational slave narratives, particularly issues relating to genetic origins and agency.

It is already clear that Stockenström is less interested in birth than in gestation: that is, the process of potentiality which precedes childbirth without necessitating it. But if her oeuvre charts a growing resistance to clichés of male birth rights and inheritance in Afrikaans writing, then it is worth noting that to date, most readings of her third fictional work follow something of a formulaic mould. Firstly, these readings synthesise large blocks of quotations from the text which are assumed to ‘do the work’ for an underlying feminist message. Secondly, and related to this last point, such readings overemphasise a particularly gendered aspect of social justice which they deem to be its central focus. While Louise Viljoen usefully points out that “[b]oth thematically (in its focus on a slave woman) and stylistically (through its lyricism, complex chronology, gaps and silences), the novel questions male-oriented representations of the past” (Viljoen 2012: 461),³⁰ I believe critics should be cautious about reading too heavily into dichotomous gendered messages simply because of the narrative situation. For example, Stephen Gray goes so far as to describe Stockenström as a “poetess” with a “particularly female” mode of expression (1991: 52; 51) – an outdated and essentialist means of referring to a female author, and an ambiguous assessment of her writerly skills. Yet the greatest problem with Gray’s interpretation is that it typifies Stockenström’s feminism as synonymous with a universalising humanism. When analysing *Expedition*, he argues that

³⁰ While Viljoen classifies *Expedition* as a novel, I identify the text as a novella due to its length and thematic deviation from traditional literary forms.

[i]n reading this work one is invited to be a child again, to marvel, and to listen to the maternal voice of a past which can always become accessible again. Stockenström sees no border between South Africa and Africa, and brings Africa back to us as a whole experience. (57)

The notion that one can ‘experience’ an entire continent simply by reading a single novella – which, despite its multiple settings, still originates from only one country – seems naïve at best. Although no national borders are specifically referenced by the text, there are other geographical markers that are evident by mention of specific species of fauna and flora, immediately disproving that the text utilises the homogenous ‘Mother Africa’ trope. Ironically, the author’s use of a female narrator has led some to patronise both her and the text; they equate the use of what Gray refers to above as a ‘maternal voice’ with a comforting but oversimplified presentation of post/colonial African countries.

This is not to say that myopically feminist readings are the only apparent responses to the text. One of the more interesting studies of the novella is Cecelia Scallan Zeiss’s comparative study of the “boundary-state” in Samuel Beckett and Wilma Stockenström (57). Hers is not an overtly materialist reading, but the ‘in-between state’ alluded to here is remarkably similar to the new materialist theory I discuss in my introduction in its emphasis on liminality as figured through natural elements. Astrida Neimanis’s *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017), for instance, argues much like Zeiss that human and more-than-human agencies all flow together both metaphorically and literally by conceptualising their shared origins in a ‘watery’ commons (Neimanis 12). The latter critic does not use water as a philosophical tool, but her reading is also grounded by references to

nonhuman and nonanimal agencies, specifically in her sustained comparison of intersecting circles of oppression with rings of a tree (Zeiss 76).³¹ Here she is cognisant of the fact that gender-based discrimination is one of many forms of violence in Stockenström's text and that ecological issues should also be addressed. However, I would argue that Zeiss's reliance on 'landscapes' as a term is limiting; the word implies that humans are divorced from, and therefore have the potential to dominate, their surroundings.

In this chapter I am interested in how Stockenström conceives of gestational relationships and the organisms which surround or encompass them. I argue that she deliberately thematises wildlife during the height of apartheid in order to express the complexities of utilising ecological analogies to advocate for the intersecting ideals of national independence and reproductive agency. Specifically, she queers the tradition of animal fables through questions and riddles, showing how activists' focus upon freedom as the primary precondition for personhood causes certain individuals (of various species) to remain precluded from ethical considerations. The text's localised understanding of literal and metaphorical fertility – including beastly imagery, gestation, the 'birth of a nation', or the creation of art – is strikingly similar to emerging new materialist theories about the interconnectedness of all subjectivities, such as Neimanis's "posthuman gestationality", a term maintaining that pregnancy involves but also exceeds the human female reprosexual body (68-69). Stockenström's use of a slave woman as a narrator certainly foregrounds

³¹ Zeiss is so interested in the materiality of the titular baobab that she provides an extensive quotation from a reference book titled *Trees of Southern Africa*, which accounts for "several authentic reports of dead trees bursting into flame by spontaneous combustion", and suggests that Stockenström's evocation of such a phenomenon is strengthened by urban myths about old baobabs similarly catching fire (Palgrave in Zeiss 77). The event of self-immolation serves as a central theme and plot device in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, as I discuss in my third chapter; it is fascinating to consider that an oral history with similar associations surrounds the symbol of the baobab tree.

sexism as a unifying concern for all women in southern Africa. Nevertheless, it is important to *question* her utilisation of a black woman's body not only for comparing human and animal agencies, but also in light of what Greta Gaard terms "the practice of attentive listening" (2017: xvi).

Gaard's latest monograph, *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017), challenges omissions of ecological concerns from mainstream discussions of gender, sexuality, and justice. Her text is both a continuation of and a tribute to the work of feminist thinker Val Plumwood (1939–2008). Born Val Morell, the late philosopher was a literal force of nature: living near Plumwood Mountain in south-east Australia, she chose to change her surname to the common name for *Eucryphia moorei* (the trees and mountain are now also the namesake of an Australian journal of ecopoetry and ecopoetics). In her landmark text *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Plumwood devised the Master Model to explain how Western societies quite literally naturalise the domination of certain groups based on their gender, sex, race, class, nationality, or species. She also coined *critical ecofeminism*, the term informing Gaard's project of seeking justice through attentive listening. The latter thinker is indebted to both new materialists like Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, and Karen Barad, and animal studies scholars such as Carol J. Adams and Laura Wright. Contemporary interventions in materialist theory commonly create neologisms to address feminist concerns within science studies; it must be said that some of these coinages are arguably limited in their originality or depth. Yet Gaard foregrounds one such word which is useful for both my project and broader materialist literary studies: 'restor(y)ing'. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the word is used to refer to not

only the creation, but also the *reception*, of stories; the author is invested in a “rich community of indigenous, feminist, and trans-species listening theory [which] is our birthright as earth citizens” (xviii). She argues that more fiction, in particular, needs to focus on the material implications of interconnected oppressions. While I certainly would not challenge the demand for more creative narratives, this chapter is an analysis of an exemplary fictional work which hears and answers Gaard’s call. My argument is that *Expedition to the Baobab Tree* spans the interspecies implications of pregnancy *and* the negation thereof through such an ethics of attentive listening. Gestation emphasises an unfinished, Deleuzian process of becoming that supersedes supposedly finite chronologies of birth and death.³²

Relayed in an achronological manner, Stockenström’s novella commences towards the end of its narrative arc: having already travelled south from a nondescript northern African region, the protagonist begins her narration by describing the “bitterness” with which she has decided to commit suicide (7).³³ Early in her description of the baobab tree and its surrounds, she recalls a riddle that she and other slaves used to ask each other in their youth: “What carries its life in its stomach?” (8). Perhaps puzzlingly to the reader, an answer is not overtly suggested; moreover, it is unclear exactly whose life is in question here. Firstly, the phenomenon of gestation in the abdominal cavity is a defining characteristic of

³² Here I am referring to poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s interest in open systems of ontological ‘becoming’. For further discussion of this concept, as well as Deleuze’s collaborations with Félix Guattari, see chapter 2.

³³ Interestingly, the Afrikaans word which Stockenström uses initially is “wrewel” (loc. 6), which literally translates as “animus” or ‘temper’ (Majstro def. 1), but is interpreted by Coetzee as “bitterness” (7). ‘Animus’ relates etymologically to the Latin *anima*, which has Jungian associations as the supposedly masculine elements found in feminine personalities. It is significant that Coetzee chooses to circumvent psychoanalytic (and animalistic) interpretations by using a more colloquial term – one which, nevertheless, also recurs in Stockenström’s use of the equally informal Afrikaans words “bitter” (loc. 568) and “bitterheid” or bitterness (loc. 590). There are both literal and metaphorical connotations of this word, which I will return to later in this chapter.

mammals, meaning that there could be an inestimable number of solutions. However, if the word ‘its’ is to be taken literally, then the riddle must be referring to any being that contains its *own* heart and stomach in a singular body cavity (thus precluding mammals from the discussion, but bringing most other vertebrates into consideration). So far, so vague. Yet one must remember that this puzzle has been translated into English. Combined with the ambiguous ‘What’ at the start of the riddle, this fact is most useful in considering how to read both the question and the text. After narrowly avoiding being crushed by a herd of elephants, the narrator describes how “an elephant swallows a pebble down, and the pebbles rattle around in their tremendous bellies all their lives” (9). The Afrikaans for elephant is *olifant*: this word contains, at its centre, the Old English *līf*, which forms roots of both the English ‘life’ and the Afrikaans *lewe* (‘body’ or ‘life’). Thus, just as the belly of the real animal may harbour foetal forms or rattling stones, the ‘heart’ of the word *olifant* signifies, etymologically, two bodily concepts. The intertwined notions of corporeal and ecological life are what inform my reading of Coetzee’s translation of the text. I will begin, therefore, by considering the proliferation of non/human bodies and analogies of ‘questioning’, before moving onto matters of gestation, narrative form, and negation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which Coetzee’s interpretive translation listens to, but also deviates from, Stockenström’s interspecies and materialist understanding of human reproductive health.

Beastly Riddles

While lying nervously curled in the aforementioned passage, the narrator likens herself to “a slug without a shell, a soft-shelled beetle as big as the top of [her] little finger” (9). Here she compares a smaller component of her physiology (one digit) to her entire body; in a sense, her enactment of a “sham death” calls to mind how popular pregnancy discourse often measures the moral worth of a foetus by its size (9).³⁴ Most interesting is that while the protagonist mimics the form of a human foetus, the metonyms and metaphors used to describe her remain situated within the *animal* realm. Although she wishes to “stand up *like a human being* and look around” (9; emphasis added), she is forced to remain on the ground – implicitly, the same level as non-bipedal animals – for the sake of her safety. Simultaneously rendered as a developed zygote, a crawling infant, and an animal, the moral worth of the slave woman is immediately foregrounded as a central thematic concern. Indeed, when she recalls her earlier life in northern Africa, she remembers a slaughterhouse full of “[s]lippery heart liver lungs and gullet messily wrapped in leaves, [...] a desolation soiled with dung and filth where animals buckled at the knee” (22-23). Although the cacophonous sounds of “lowing and bleating” merge with the butchers’ suggestive comments whenever the woman is forced to buy meat by her owner – in what Carol J. Adams would describe as the sexual politics of meat (Adams 23) – this does not deter her from “cook[ing] the food that [she] would share with many mouths” (Stockenström 1983: 22-23). Yet it is imperative to consider what immediately follows the scenes in the slaughterhouse: a description of

³⁴ Zygotes may be compared to any organic materials from kidney beans to pea pods, depending on their stages of growth. Unsurprisingly, the larger an embryo or foetus, the more likely it is to be seen as ‘living’.

the slaves' quarters. In the black women's dwellings, they are forced to share everything from their food to parenting duties; for the sake of simplicity, lactating women breastfeed any and all infants. Implicitly, then, the protagonist is aware that "we women fertile and rank" are treated with the same level of respect as livestock (23) – not only because they are capable of bearing children who will be sold, but also because they themselves are owned by white men.

There is thus a second interpretation of the word 'rank' which is relevant here: that is, a position in a hierarchy. The narrator gradually realises uncanny similarities between herself and nonhuman animals as she recalls her former life and attempts to survive in the veld. For example, she begins to see that she is "too much like" the baboons that she initially fears and scorns (11). Some may argue that the text is courting controversy by evoking the "dreaded comparison" between nonhuman subjects and historically dehumanised peoples (Spiegel 3), particularly since it was written by a white woman during the height of apartheid. Indeed, the narrator never claims to feel any sense of solidarity with farmed animals, and even becomes irritated "when animals do not stay within the limits of their animal nature but want to address [her] on [her] level" (31). In this instance, her annoyance towards beings that possess less agency than her mimics condescending colonial attitudes displayed towards people of colour. Simultaneously, however, her feelings signify the importance of self-preservation: in a context where one literally cannot escape hierarchies and dichotomies, the easiest means of exerting *some* power is by asserting how one is superior to others. Those who are deemed by society as least

valuable may come, accordingly, to define species identity as an integral component of their worth.

Yet the narrator verbalises two exchanges with domesticated animals which point towards an interspecies understanding that is aware of the complications which racial and class prejudices present. Firstly, her encounter with a domesticated cat suggests that the novella's interspecies exchanges are more nuanced, and serve a greater purpose than mere metaphorical equivocations. While watching the feline, she observes how he

looked up at me, then with cat-specific dissimulation at his prey. [...] I could stare for long into his changeable eyes and imagine we were of one spirit. [...] Yet this illusion was enough to make me understand that we were not playmates and that there was a distance to be maintained between us, which I would keep, I promised him, and stroked his fur and scratched behind his ears. (32)

The species-specific gaze of the cat is of utmost importance; it shows that Stockenström is writing against simplistic understandings of intersubjective unification. In “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, the philosopher Jacques Derrida describes a twofold sense of shame when his cat watches him standing naked: he is both embarrassed of his nudity, and ashamed for imagining that a pet has any understanding of such a concept (2002: 372–73). This essay (which originated as an address at a conference in 1997 and has influenced countless interventions in animal studies ever since) grapples with the question of nonhuman subjectivity which, in turn, has occupied theorists since the biologist Jakob von Uexküll first conjectured that animal subjectivities may comprise a range of worlds

and worldviews (Buchanan 2). In particular, Derrida draws upon Martin Heidegger's hypothesis that all nonhuman animals are 'poor in world' because "they are unable to transcend their *captivation* by things" and have a self-reflexive intellectual or spiritual inner life (Buchanan 5; emphasis added). Yet in a sense, all of these theorists are 'imprisoned' by their own subjectivities, and by the fact that it is impossible to objectively experience and know other animals' minds. In her influential monograph *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway voices concern that "[Derrida] was sidetracked by his textual canon of Western philosophy and literature and by his own linked worries about being naked in front of his cat" (20), resulting in his inability to engage with the feline as an individual organism. Haraway's critique is useful in its loyalty to materially grounded interpretations of reality, but I would go further in foregrounding how both Derrida's and Haraway's critiques focus quite literally on the *singular* animal, on the figure of *one* cat: the pet that is domesticated to perform mundane behaviours and yet is somehow regarded as unique. In a sense, speaking of the individual cat without any consideration for its species identity is a form of philosophical domestication.³⁵ Collective *agencies* are therefore neglected when philosophers lose sight of their own situated encounters and complicity with certain biases.

Derrida's illustrative scenario shows how he is clearly captivated by the phenomenon of seeing, by the sense of sight. The above passage differs notably in

³⁵ This is not to say that species identity is easily definable; genetic mutations and morphologic diversity between organisms mean that it is difficult to describe what a 'species' really is. Furthermore, species delimitation studies suggest many contemporary phylogenetic categories are based on subjective and limited sources of evidence. These points, however, are more pertinent to possible identities of organisms which appear to be very similar, instead of humans and cats, which are classified in separate taxonomic orders. For more on species delimitation studies, see Craig F. Barrett and John V. Freudenstein (2011).

that the protagonist reaches out to pet the animal while uttering her promise to him. It is while speaking to the cat – an auditory encounter – that she realises that although different species may share physical similarities or exchanges, for the sake of honouring their respective positionalities, one must constantly remember the imaginative gap between them. That is, while Stockenström’s narrator and the cat may be treated analogously by the man who owns them, they both have distinct cognitive capabilities, desires, and understandings of the world. Instead of trying to theorise such an intangible gap, as Heidegger or Derrida do, the protagonist merely uses the corporeal sensations of touch and hearing to remember this factual ‘matter’. She also resists seeing the cat *only* as an individual (as Haraway would have Derrida do) and maintains distance through the word “cat-specific”, a term which says more about the species identity of the animal than its individual subjectivity. The cat is neither her playmate nor her pet. In short, she recognises the potential richness of the feline world, but resists being ‘captivated’ by what she sees as solipsistic philosophising. The “distance” which the slave maintains is not only for the sake of the singular cat, but also because she has more urgent – and human – concerns to attend to.

Secondly, an interesting sentiment about interspecies exchanges is displayed when the slave woman remembers speaking to a cock about their “mutual owner” in the yard, reminding him that “your crowing and shitting and our chatting and our excretions and secretions, our babies, our ornaments of pod-mahogany seeds and our body-cloths, and the house and the warehouse full of baskets of spices and the rats there, [are] all his” (44). This passage is particularly striking because of its synthesis

of animalistic noises with scatological and inanimate imagery. Postcolonial studies has, from the outset, been acutely aware of the fact that the colonisation of Africa relied on reducing people of colour from human subjects to beastly objects: “discourse on Africa”, Achille Mbembe notes, “is almost always deployed in the framework (or in the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal*” (2008: 1; original emphasis). Perhaps sensing racialised connotations of the ‘beast’,³⁶ the ‘creaturely’ has become something of a buzzword in critical animal studies in the last decade, with researchers such as Anat Pick (2011) and Tobias Menely (2015) discussing its potential in highlighting the shared vulnerabilities and experiences of human and nonhuman animals. Donna Haraway correctly identifies the term’s religious etymological roots (all organisms as ‘creations’), opting instead to refer to all “living beings” as ‘critters’ (2008: 330). I use the term ‘beastly’ to resist the transcendentalist and universalising associations of both ‘creatures’ and ‘critters’, respectively. Furthermore, by using a word which is not associated with the politics of victimhood and is thus more adaptable to discussions of agency, I foreground how *uneven gendered relationships* underlie racist animalisation or dehumanisation. To adapt Derrida, the ‘beast’ (whether human, animal, or any other living being) is that which both submits to and resists the whims of an “anthropo-theological” sovereign (2009: 14), whether this authority is a (male) human figure, a metaphorical conception of the law, or the homogenously ‘harmonious’ construct of the creaturely itself. Together with unresolved intraspecies injustices in the human

³⁶ This is a fact which is crucially omitted in Mary Midgley’s *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (1979), one of the best-known modern studies of human behaviour as contextualised within the animal kingdom. Midgley does repeatedly emphasise how beastliness is a false construct that denies the orderliness of both the ‘animal within’ and nonhuman animals (49), but her philosophy lacks sensitivity to the historical oppression of certain racialised and exoticised bodies within this framework.

realm, the phenomenon of animalisation is one of the major reasons why postcolonial studies as a discipline is generally reticent to address the animal question. Yet in moving immediately from a description of human infants to objects which form part of the slave-owner's household, *Expedition's* narrator implies that all these material beings exist on a similar ethical terrain (and not only from the coloniser's perspective). This is not to say that she endorses the objectification of humans that animal analogies may justify; rather, her positionality as an oppressed person causes her to reflect upon the potentially interconnected agency of all matter, and what interspecies analogies would mean for ethics.

Such concerns about dehumanisation were prescient at the time of publishing, during the height of apartheid. It is important to remember that *Expedition's* subject matter was highly unusual for South African literature, but simultaneously that the novella cannot resist being read as a product of its time. That is, in thematising the slave trade, Stockenström risks the accusation of harking back to comparatively 'worse' times instead of addressing injustices in the years leading up to the State of Emergency. Yet there is also the possibility that her narrative takes the historical long view in order to contextualise the *origins* of apartheid South Africa's racial injustices. First appearing in the year between the novella's publication and its translation into English, critical race scholar Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) conceptualises social slavery – colonialism's simultaneous root and by-product – as a cyclical enforcement of 'natal alienation' upon certain peoples by treating them as material property. This phrase refers to a particular sense of isolation which slaves feel: one

which consists of both the literal loss of ties with one's kin, and damage accrued by a lack of birth rights and more symbolic elements of one's identity (5-7). Patterson stresses that slavery strips people of their cultural heritage, which is vitally distinct from history. "[A] past is not a heritage", he asserts, since "[e]verything has a history, including sticks and stones" (5). One is reminded of Heidegger's and Derrida's respective discussions of worlds; if history refers to the factual past of an object or subject, then heritage differs in that it signifies the symbolic interpretation of previous events.

Slavery, then, is typified by Patterson as a process wherein people are denied the opportunity to extract meaning from their material circumstances, their being-in-the-world. Unlike animals, they are not even considered as 'poor in world', because they are relegated to the status of objects (below the realms of human and nonhuman organisms). Yet Patterson cautions against conflating one's treatment as property with a lack of legal status (23), and he is also wary of speaking to the private lives of slaves because "it is the height of arrogance, not to mention intellectual irresponsibility, to generalise about the inner psychology of any group" (11). It is fascinating – and not coincidental, I would argue – that both he and Stockenström's narrator resist the temptation of imaginative positioning. Rather, we are urged to consider slavery as a 'continuum' of social 'parasitism', wherein the dominator and dominated may be either dependent or independent, equal or unequal, depending on a variety of complexities (336). Similarly to Patterson, the narrator limns dehumanisation *beyond* mere animalisation, approaching her degradation as a scalar phenomenon which is inevitable under the logic of colonialism. That is, she

considers parasitic relationships as representative of broad social structures in colonial southern Africa.

The animalistic term of parasitism, borrowed from biology, is crucial to my study, especially considering Michel Serres's *Le Parasite* (1980), a philosophical study that uses fable to compare human relationships to parasitic symbiosis. In his introduction to the 2007 English translation of the text, Cary Wolfe notes how “‘noise’ (for the English reader) forms the third and unsuspected meaning of the French word parasite: 1. biological parasite; 2. social parasite; 3. static or interference” (xiii). Wolfe goes on to explain that for Serres, noise is a sign of *difference* and *multiplicity*. Sound as a phenomenon involves both creation (noise-making) and reception (listening). Yet much like the parasite-host relationship, it is uncommon to encounter ‘noisy’ scenarios where one is purely an active or passive participant, even in cases where only two actors are involved. Here we may imagine the undergraduate student who questions their tutor or an opera enthusiast humming along to a symphony. Even in the case of a singular organism, the actor always creates noise: its guttural rumblings (eloquently evoked by Stockenström’s riddle of the elephant) and its beating heart mean that the body is never truly silent. It appears, therefore, that *listening* is once again a crucial term in helping to explain the differences and similarities between the dialectics of internal and external, creator and receiver, and parasite and host. Symbiosis signifies interdependence between two organisms, and in the case of parasite and host, their relationship may be deadly. Yet in Stockenström’s novella, the symbiotic relationship is rendered indeterminate through an ethics of listening. This queer switching of positions is

explored not only in her contemplation of gestation and abortion, but also by framing the narrator's journey and her body in the "belly of a baobab" (14).

Literary critic Godfrey Meintjes has discussed how *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*'s aesthetic elements express growing and generalised ecological anxieties during the late twentieth century, while Susan Meyer provides an overtly ecofeminist reading by concentrating on the scenes in which the slave-narrator is presented as the Self in 'Othered' nature, arguing that these more pastoral passages show her "reaching the core of humanness [...] self-respect, pride, and dignity" (Meyer 311).³⁷ Yet, to date, a significant lacuna in scholarship is a consideration of how specific wildlife in the novella marry both nonhumans' and humans' struggles for agency in colonial settings. Scholars have not accounted for the congruence between the unnamed woman's horrific handling by slave owners, the multifaceted exploitation of megafauna around her, and her treatment of autochthonous peoples as she explores the veld. This seems a crucial omission, given that interactions with nonhuman animals not only thematise the protagonist's origins, but also influence the plot and her predicament as she is abandoned near the baobab tree. When her last owner "[comes] to his end in the belly of a reptile" (63), she appears to be more indifferent than distressed. His death is described as "silly" and "ridiculous" as she reflects on the arbitrary nature with which humans decide

³⁷ I take issue not only with the uncritical insertion of such humanist terms into an ecocritical reading, but also with the fact that Meyer appears to be relying here on the very process of imaginative positioning that Patterson warns against.

what is killable and edible,³⁸ and what is not (63). In contrast to the opening riddle which renders an elephant's belly as a fertile birthplace, here the crocodile's body cavity signifies random violence and death. It is important to iterate that the narrator's story – and Stockenström's text – is not an animal fable. Rather, the author *questions* the fabular tradition by creating beastly riddles that provoke answers to the internal/external dialectic of the parasite through attentive listening.

The slave goes on to recall words uttered by her unnamed owner which directly resonate with moral indifference:³⁹ after trying (and failing) to entertain the narrator with mystical fables of the afterlife, the coloniser comments, “I think one can be *ridiculous with dignity*. Or try to” (74; emphasis added). Ironically, his death proves his own hypothesis: it illustrates the fictional nature of humanist constructs like dignity, as he is easily outwitted and devoured by a reptile which is purportedly lower on the great chain of being. In one of the few instances when the untimeliness of his demise appears to upset her, the narrator chides herself that “it [would not be] less ridiculous to be buried and eaten by worms” (64). Here Stockenström questions the bizarre anthropocentrism that is involved in narrating the beastly. Further, she *queers* the very idea of analogy on which the animal fable rests: its assertion that human and nonhuman agencies are exactly alike while still imbuing the latter with

³⁸ The word ‘killable’ calls to mind Judith Butler's work on precariousness and grief, first conceptualised in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and expanded upon in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). While highly influential in its theorisation of the biopolitical implications of death, it is important to note that Butler's work is particularly concerned with how certain *human* animals are portrayed as grievable while others are not. In contrast to Butler (and many of her followers), I am taking an intersectional approach, opening up such theories to the intricacies of situational and intersubjective nuances. For a similarly posthumanist analysis of the ‘economies of death’ involved with edibility and killability/grievability, see Lopez and Gillespie (2015).

³⁹ Although she is selected as his favourite slave, she only refers to him aloofly as ‘the stranger’, even after entering an intimate relationship with him. Her treatment of the man on these terms highlights the text's thematic indeterminacy and, in particular, its focus on unknown origins.

familiar and wholly anthropomorphised traits. This dramatic moment in the narrative shows, rather, that there is an asymmetrical relationship between both humans and animals, and between analogies and materiality.⁴⁰ The death of the slave-owner thus marks a further progression in the protagonist's thinking about agentive exchanges.

This is not to say, however, that such recognitions of humanity's precariousness completely alter the character's preconceptions about power. If anything, her thoughts about "tedious humans" develop into a subtle form of misanthropy (78), particularly when regarding the lives of other and, in her mind, lesser slaves. Recalling again how the members of her expedition party appeared to collude before the stranger and his son died, she asks,

What prevented the slaves from overpowering the two of them, doing away with them, and making off? Were they then so unmanned? I thought I detected a glint in the slaves' eyes. They were watching like the crows were. (78)

Distancing herself from those who carry her through the veld on a litter, she simultaneously objectifies and emasculates them by suggesting that to be without an identifiably elected leader is to be like an 'unmanned' vessel. In his aforementioned monograph, Patterson proves otherwise: although most civilisations did not have a word for freedom until slavery arrived, he notes, many still conceived of power and domination through metaphors such as the Ashanti proverb, "If you have not a

⁴⁰ There is an equally non-identical connection between the beast fable and the origin myth; Westerners typically understand the former to be synonymous with the latter in indigenous contexts, whereas Judeo-Christian lore about the beginnings and ends of life is more strictly humanist (or, rather, insistent that the narration of animal lives is literal rather than analogy).

master, a beast will catch you” (27). The implication of this phrase is that all people – even those sovereigns who ‘own’ others – are subject to being treated as property, and that it is unwise to define slavery as a lack of legal personhood because even material objects may be imbued with legal powers. It suggests that it is entirely possible to understand violent acts of domination without adhering to (typically Western) vertical models of leadership, governance, and power. Yet the narrator is reluctant to recognise agency as a scalar phenomenon. Furthermore, her comparison of the other slaves to the scavengers that clean her owner’s carcass shows that she is suspicious of both their motives and their cognitive capabilities. Thus while the narrator comes to display some nuanced understandings of the wildlife on her journey, her attitudes towards other colonised humans are not so forgiving. At this point, it is worth pausing to read the narrator’s internalised prejudices through her interactions with the Khoisan people who visit her once she has been abandoned at the titular baobab tree. Through tripled associations with childhood – learnt behaviours and biases, literal pregnancies, and instances of infantilisation – I will return to the narrator’s attitudes towards racial identity and argue that she ultimately presents a flexible but imperfect conception of reproductive agency.

Tripled Children

At surface level, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is illustrative of a black slave’s natal alienation and subsequent internalisation of her supposed inferiority. For example, early in her narration the protagonist remarks, “I have no idea what my value must have been or what it ever was” (13). This indicates that the society in

which she lives views black women as objects without agency or individuality and that she has come to see this as a valid assertion. Yet I would argue that the woman's estrangement from her origins leads to a more overtly feminist and intersectional reading of natal alienation than Patterson articulates.

During her childhood and adolescence as a slave moving through various households, the narrator lacks both privacy and a supportive network to smooth her transition from puberty to adulthood. It is not long before sexual abuse results in the first of many pregnancies. She notes, "I was still a child when I carried a child inside me" (14), later reflecting that she was a "mother-child" who "[p]layed at swelling for nine months" (41). Although she is fixated on age, it is clear the narrator's naïveté is not merely a result of her youth. Forced away from the village where she was born, she attempts to forge a new identity and retain some semblance of self-respect; the easiest means of doing so is by divorcing herself from reality and denying the similarity of her subjugation to that of other indigenous peoples. When she is abandoned in the wilderness following the death of her master, she tries to convince herself that she has imposed a sense of order on the world to ward off "the danger of timelessness" and that she is not merely "a subordinate beat in the rhythm" (17).

Yet this gestational imagery of major and minor intertwined lifelines reveals the truth underpinning her fears: even once she is 'free' she remains childlike, relying on 'little people' (a dysphemism for the Khoisan community) who bring her gifts. Protected only by their interventions and the bark of the baobab tree, she is barely capable of looking after herself – the opposite of a stereotypically caring

maternal figure. There are multiple ironies at play here: the former ingénue was forced into early maturity and adulthood, but still views herself as lacking agency; she has cared for children and adult slave-owners since her youth, yet struggles to sustain her own life; and internalised racism means that she is prejudiced against those who attend to her (perhaps, also, because such actions confirm the fact that she is vulnerable). Immediately we can see how a scalar conception of slavery and agency might apply to such a scenario. Particularly, it is implied that enslaved motherhood may lead to a form of social parasitism, whereby a (girl or) woman is faced with the paradox of caring for another life while simultaneously relying on the kindnesses of others. Returning to my earlier discussion of symbiotic relationships, a further complication is that parasites may be said to ‘care’ for the hosts they prey on, sometimes killing by degrees through sustained dependence. If a parasite appears harmless due to its size it is likely to be viewed as a pest – or, worse, it may even evoke a caring response if the harm it causes is initially undetectable. This has many ramifications for Gaard’s theory of reciprocating care through listening (or, more broadly, for adopting the ethics of care which underlies much ecocritical and ecofeminist theory). It also alters one’s perspective on the supposed innocence of the embryo, which is interpreted as a foreign body in the uterus. An embryo’s fight for a nurturing environment (and sufficient nutrients) is often to the detriment of the gestating body.

In the Afrikaans version of the text, an afterword informs the reader that the narrative is relayed from the perspective of an “ou slavin” or old slave (loc. 1553). Reading the novella with age and comparative stages of growth in mind further

intensifies the complexity of the narrator's internalised oppression. Marius Crous performs a nuanced analysis of the original text and its translation, homing in on the importance of poetic word-choices and little-known irregularities, such as the fact that *moederkind* or "mother-child" is an archaic word (Crous 6). In a sense, the narrator's very vocabulary contributes to a disjointed and uneasy narrative situation; her antiquated phrasing is verbose but uncommon, implying a lack of ease with the language of the coloniser. We can easily imagine her attempts to appear educated and mature while being surrounded by men who simultaneously infantilise and sexualise her. Crucially, something which Crous does not discuss is the prevalence of diminutives in the Afrikaans language; it is a general rule that the suffix '-ie' refers to a small entity. The proliferation of such words throughout the text, however, is somewhat missing in the English translation. For example, the word "paadjie" literally means 'little path' – but it is simply interpreted by Coetzee as 'path' (loc. 26; 47; 53). Other diminutives which are lost in translation include: "stroompie" or 'stream' (loc. 26); "wyfies" or 'females' (loc. 73), "mannetjies" or 'males' (loc. 74); "praatjies" or 'little talks' (loc. 160), translated as 'the talk', and so on. Instances where the translator does denote a sense of littleness are notably marked by *double* diminutives in the original text, such as the repeated phrase "klein mensies" (loc. 564; 880), interpreted as 'little people'. Thus, while the thematic preoccupation of growth, or the inversion thereof, is not as explicit in the English version of the text, the moments where it is most apparent are when the narrator is considering the lives of other autochthonous peoples, and their *comparative* worth in a colonised landscape.

The narrator's many pregnancies confirm and further complicate this understanding of subjugation and objectification. Indeed, her very descriptions of her own children display a sense of indifference. She recalls:

I could kneel in waves of contractions with my face near to the earth to which water is married, and push the fruit out of myself and give my dripping breasts to one suckling child after another. My eyes smiled. My mouth was still. (24)

The slave is both unsmiling and unvoiced. Importantly, at no time are the metaphorical fruits of her labours described in much detail: just like the narrator and her home country, they are never assigned names. We do not even learn what happens to these children once they grow older: whether they dwell at the same location, or are sold to a different owner, or even manage to escape remains a mystery. Her emotional distance from her progeny is further reinforced when she specifically recounts her very first birth, remembering that afterwards, “[f]rom my young mouth the rotten laugh of the fruit-bearing woman sounded” (42). This association of her voice with overripe produce evokes a sense of both decay and depravity. Having initially refrained from moving her mouth, her delayed laughter is coded with *bitterness*.⁴¹ I have already elucidated how the ‘weight’ of pregnancy is manifold, and her narration confirms this: “[as] I carried myself”, she records, “I grew tired from the carrying” (42). The protagonist thus grows exasperated with her

⁴¹ As mentioned earlier, this word appears in the opening paragraph of the novella: “With bitterness, then. But that I have forbidden myself. With ridicule, then...” (7). With their short clauses and paratactic structure, these sentences are what Derek Attridge would characterise as typically ‘Coetzian’ (52); lacking a subject or object, it is difficult to decipher what exactly the protagonist is referring to. It is worth noting, however, that both the words ‘bitter’ and ‘forbidden’ have a rich history of association with fruit, from the Book of Genesis to Abel Meeropol’s poem “Strange Fruit”. (The latter protests racist lynchings in the American South, a region which is infamous for its history as a slave territory.)

children for the burden they cause her to carry (their literal heaviness appearing almost parasitic), and correspondingly with herself for birthing them and conforming to a gendered script (a more esoteric weight to bear).

When her eldest child's skull appears during his birth, she lets out an inarticulate "scream back to [her] place of birth", which she imagines to still be echoing at the time of narration (42). One reads the text with this incoherent cry for help resonating as a constant reminder of the narrator's inescapable fixation on birth origins: that is, both her personal history, and the heritage of those who surround her. Once again, it is important to stress that her biographical 'beginnings' are indeterminate; here I follow Edward Said in differentiating between 'beginnings' or linear historical activities and 'origins', which he defines as more passive and "sacred" and thus open to being manipulated for ideological purposes (357). While it is clear that the slave is not indigenous to southern Africa, her country of birth is never named. With no indication of the narrator's true cultural or biological beginnings, both she and the reader must explore her origins instead by reworking references to creation myths.

Natal alienation may fascinate the narrator, but this does not mean she merely accepts a passive role or that she is even fixated on the "passivity" which Said identifies in the discourse surrounding origins (6). Even after her horrifying handling by slave-owners, she describes herself as "a lucky, privileged person, without rights but not wholly without choice" (57). Again, one is reminded of Patterson's observation that treating a person like property does not necessitate the absence of their legal rights. Nowhere in the text is this capacity for 'choice' more

apparent than with regard to reproductive agency: “When I was expecting my third,” she states, “I visited an abortionist” (44). In a sense, this simple sentence epitomises the polar opposite of Yvonne Vera’s elaborate literary style and approach to reproductive agency which I discuss in chapter 3, as the slave’s decision is condensed to a mere declarative statement. By treating abortion as a ‘fact of life’ – or, more accurately, the negation of it – the narrative normalises the desire to possess agency over one’s reproductive capacity. However, not all of the characters in Stockenström’s text display such a liberal attitude. Similarly to Fumbatha in *Butterfly Burning*, one of the slave’s friends is scandalised by her attempt to abort, scolding her and calling her a whore after she confesses that she paid for medical help with sex. The woman even throws away the abortifacient (in this case, violet-tree roots), meaning that it is uncertain whether the abortion is achieved or not. Together with favouritism from one of her owners, this disagreement is one of the major factors which leads to her isolation from the other slaves: when she visits the same friend later in the narrative, the woman refuses to speak to her, and then throws sand at her back as she leaves (49).

A recent study of abortion in the United States shows that more than half of reported abortions are performed on women who already have at least one child,⁴² indicating that the desire to abort is not merely symptomatic of a callous disregard for ethics or antinatalism. While it is inevitable that such a statistic would not be the same in colonial southern Africa, it is important to remember that women’s reasons for terminating pregnancies transcend temporal and geographical barriers. In other words, it is conceivable that a woman in the protagonist’s position would visit an

⁴² The percentage for this particular study from 2008 was 61% (Jones, Finer and Singh 1).

abortionist for a similar reason. In her 1997 monograph *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Dorothy Roberts notes how property laws under slavery meant that women were seen as separate from the zygotes they carried from the very moment of conception. Yet this taxonomy of bodies did not apply to slave-owners or their legitimate children: “The notion that a white mother and child were separable entities with contradictory interests was unthinkable, as was the idea of a white woman’s work interfering with her maternal duties” (Roberts 39). The problem of acknowledging reproductive agency was thus compounded by the fact that women’s labour was subject to interpretations which were based not so much on the quality of work as the bodily markers of the person who was performing it.

Intriguingly, the majority of births by slaves in America took place during the late summer or early fall (Roberts 41); reproductive cycles therefore tended to align with the yearly harvest of crops. Yet there is something to be said here about the feminisation of the natural environment. ‘Fertility’ is a duplicitous term, serving as the basis for growth but potentially also exploitation; pastoral concepts of fertility using natural images may mask patriarchal violence (for slaves’ lack of agency meant the constant possibility of sexual abuse or rape). Slavery is a perennial condition, and those babies that survived delivery would often face perilous infancies, as their mothers would be forced to return to work soon after childbirth. It is difficult to quantify exactly how similar conditions were for slaves in southern Africa as most studies of abortion and slavery focus on African-American women – see, for example, the work of Jennifer Doyle (2009) and Loretta J. Ross (2005).

However, Nigel Worden records that Khoisan women in Dutch South Africa “deliberately induced abortion[s]” (59), meaning it is not unreasonable to assume that slave societies shared repronormative pressures due to enforced sexual labour. Slave women rebelled against reproductive roles through abstinence, contraception, and the use of abortives (mechanical methods of external or internal manipulation, or medicines). Roberts argues that the last of these methods was by far the most popular, and originates from a ‘root’ geographical location, as “herbal remedies” using the roots and seeds of cotton plants, camphor, cedar gum, and other plants were “techniques slaves probably brought with them from Africa” (47). In a literal sense, the very abortifacients are ‘natural’ elements which are easily accessible to black women, and that can be utilised to exert control over their bodily involvement in repronormative, racist environments. The traditional ingredients and herbs form an important sense of cultural identity from a shared source: an origin that remains crucial, but nevertheless *unknown*, as the homogenising usage of ‘Africa’ proves above.

The narrator’s peers in *Expedition* are not sympathetic to her use of abortifacients and other preventative measures, but she remains unperturbed, and does not apologise for her actions. In fact, she becomes so accustomed to giving birth that she longs for “grown children” and mourns the fact that she struggles to connect with prepubescent and adolescent people (58). It is implied that the narrator would not have been able to parent any of her children up to significant developmental milestones, and here we are invited to contemplate the distinction between abortion, adoption, and other losses – a point to which I return in chapter 4.

What, for example, is the definition of a ‘grown child’? Does this phrase refer to a legal minor who has reached a certain stage of biological growth, or to the point when a young person gains full bodily, legal, and social agency? To appropriate Patterson, do such fixations on legal personhood really matter when the construction of slavery through its absence is nothing but a “fiction” (22)? Another possibility is that the narrator is referring to the fact that children become fully-formed persons in a sentimental sense, as their emotions and personalities develop. In a more vulnerable moment she recalls burying a stillbirth behind the slaves’ childbirth hut and uses this memory to prove “[t]hat it is innate in woman to have a spontaneous approach to atrocities, is a lie” (105). Religious epithets such as ‘God’s plan’ and ‘Heaven’s babies’ are often used to comfort women who have not brought pregnancies to term (more often in cases of involuntarily terminations than abortions), and to insinuate that they should not feel upset. This, however, is another fiction which Stockenström exposes: it is clear that the protagonist would be far happier if she could eventually engage with her children as grown subjects, rather than facing the cyclical course of conception, gestation, birth, and loss.

Underlying the slave woman’s anxiety is the racialised association of ‘growth’ (or its lack) with ‘maturation’ (or its delay). These terms are both utilised in medical discourse when describing the growth of a foetus; further, and more troublingly, they are used in colloquial discussions of puberty, particularly in women’s bodies. I isolate the female sex here because their maturity is most often and overtly visualised in a teleological progression towards ‘child-bearing’ potential, from the development of secondary sexual characteristics to the swelling of a

pregnant belly. In a sense, then, gestation is the underlying fascination which propagates many essentialist constructions of womanhood and/or motherhood. Repronormative markers of sexual growth are even more apparent in the discourse surrounding black womanhood; women of colour are triply threatened by negative bodily associations because their sex, race, and position in the legacy of slavery cause them to be viewed as exotic, bestial beings. Thus while the coloniser may be fascinated and aroused by a ‘grown’ slave’s bodily curves,⁴³ she is simultaneously degraded and denied her own desires and agency. In fact, the instrumentalisation of black women’s bodies has its own larger history in the context of slavery and reproductive rights (or the lack thereof), as elucidated in Dorothy Roberts’s aforementioned study of black women and reproductive liberty in the United States. Roberts identifies not only tropes from American history such as the hypersexual Black Jezebel and the maternal (yet powerless and desexualised) Mammy (13), but also stereotypes in the more recent cultural imaginary, such as the fact that in modern America, poor and/or “Black mothers are portrayed less as inept or reckless reproducers in need of moral supervision, and more as calculating *parasites* deserving of harsh discipline” (18; emphasis added). The animalistic undertones of such prejudices recur as a theme throughout Roberts’s study: from the practice of “slave-breeding” to the fact that young slaves were often sold like livestock (27; 34). When critiquing the patriarchal “slavery of reproduction” (de Beauvoir 142), therefore, it is imperative to remember the coterminous processes of racialised

⁴³ There are countless recorded instances of sexually charged experimentation upon black women’s bodies, but two pertinent examples would be the display and dissection of Sara Baartman’s genitals and the cultivation of cells from a cancerous growth in Henrietta Lacks’s womb. For more on Baartman, see Sadiya Qureshi (2004); a popular account of Lacks’s case and legacy is Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010).

sexualisation and infantilisation which further complexify the comparative worth of child-bearing women and the infants they are forced to raise.

Roberts's evocation of parasitism above brings us back to Michel Serres's philosophy. His work is not without problematic elements, particularly its reduction of women in terms of their reproductive capacities and its suspicious treatment of the foetus:

Is mammalian reproduction an endoparasitic cycle? What is an animal that can reproduce only by another animal, inside it? What is a little animal that grows and feeds inside another? It seems to me that it is a parasite, the one who finds a milieu of reproduction and development in another animal, though this other be the same. (Serres 216)

If the "other" truly is the "same", then why is the male human excluded from these rhetorical questions? Why does the second question seem to encapsulate misogynistic insecurities about the female body's role in conception and its overall primacy in gestation? Nevertheless, it is intriguing that Serres argues that *fables* help hosts and parasites to metamorphose (216) – in a chapter notably titled "The Proper Name of the Host/Masters and Slaves". Consider my earlier discussion of how Stockenström both queers and queries the animal fable. Although the slave is frank about how she views men to be perpetually parasitic in their treatment of women, her narration is (once again) complicated by a sense of complicity when she equates agency with power instead of desire. White male slave-owners are consistently rendered as immature throughout the narrative, whether this is because of their reliance on women as caregivers or their "[c]hildish dreams" of dominating hitherto untouched landscapes (60).

Even the narrator's favourite owner is problematised for this reason, as illustrated by her memories of their intimate encounters. When he mysteriously falls ill, she recounts,

I let the invalid nestle between my drawn-up knees with his head on my breast. In his language I whispered lewd stories which made him smile blissfully in my arms. Shrunken baby, what an easy delivery for me. I fed you with the deathsmilk of indifference, for it could do your dried-out body no more harm and perhaps it was your way out, this being set free of any charitableness. (20)

It is no coincidence that she pulls the man's head onto her breast, an organ which is simultaneously representative of sexual objectification and maternal functionality. Her positionality as his favourite slave means that she has catered for his every need, whether domestic or sensual in nature. And yet, despite their physical proximity and shared history, the narrator neither feels platonic nor romantic warmth for him. Instead we are told that she approaches him with a great indifference, which is so potent that it is rendered into a metaphorical milk that she imagines inducing his death. If we entertain her infantilisation of the slave-owner, then in a perverse sense, this too is a termination: we are encouraged to imagine the induction of death as the ultimate act of charity.⁴⁴ This is a remarkable reworking of a word that is the root origin of many religious origin myths and of some anti-abortion campaigns. Here abortion is not the negation of new life (or the absence of social conscience, as

⁴⁴ Charitableness and charity are firmly situated in the humanist tradition, appearing both in secular and religious (Old or New Testament) rationalisations for beneficence as a key factor for the utilitarian betterment of society. I return to these words in the next section of this chapter, by considering Coetzee's subversion of similar Christian concepts such as mercy, sacrifice, and (dis)grace.

argued by some conservative religious groups), but rather the creation of a new chapter.

The men whom she knows less intimately are described by the protagonist as looking “so funny, like disappointed children, when they lose control of something but dare not openly acknowledge it” (79). This prompts not merely a condescending attitude, but also problematic and manipulative behaviour on her behalf. She openly declares that she holds a “peculiar position as a parasite” on the expedition and attempts to use her sexual attractiveness to her advantage by “blossom[ing] at my most beautiful, for them to admire my orchid-like nature for its colourfulness” (79). On a superficial level, this association is evocative, but not particularly apt: as epiphytes, many orchids attach themselves to trees but do not require assistance from these organisms to survive. If one pauses, however, and remembers Patterson’s assertion that ‘parasitism’ is a complex web wherein both dominated and dominator may act dependently,⁴⁵ then the metaphor seems far more appropriate. Although the woman is “utterly dependent like a parasite” (79), the very men that she relies on are also dependent on *her*, whether this is for practical assistance, sexual gratification, or merely emotional fulfilment. Such a symbiotic relationship is further conveyed by another memory of her favourite master. She reminisces:

When I put my arms around him it was like protecting a child. Crazy, when he was the possessor, but it was so. He propped his head against my shoulder like, and with the innocence of, a child. And in the wink of an eye he changed [...] and when we had intercourse he was both father and son and I both mother and trustful daughter. (52)

⁴⁵ For an extensive discussion of analogies of parasitism in abortion narratives, and an analysis of Deleuze and Guattari’s orchid-and-wasp rhizome as a synonymous figuration in materialist theory, see my second chapter on Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*.

In this passage the male slave-owner – who was typified earlier as a helpless child – is simultaneously powerless and commanding. The heterosexual dynamic between the two characters is queered in a power-switching process of paraphilic infantilism, as he allows the young slave to assert her dominance and then subverts her power just moments later. Considering their intricate relationship, which is only revealed after his death, one may revisit the earlier scene and wonder: has the narrator truly offered him nothing but indifference? And can the same be said for him? The exploitative dynamic of slavery is undeniable, but in this passage, sex becomes an agentive exchange and an imaginative space for the protagonist to explore all elements of her natal alienation. In the other avenues of her life, she has been forced to act as a responsible adult, and as a literal or metaphorical mother. Here, however, she experiments with youthful desire and agency which relies on the very *negation* thereof.

It is apparent that *Expedition to the Baobab Tree* and *Butterfly Burning* utilise vegetal, natural materials to approach fertility and its negation – and to experiment with narrative form and time, as I shall elucidate in further detail in my third chapter on Vera. Yet in Stockenström's novella, it is the possibility and metaphorical import of abortion which is addressed with frankness, rather than the actual procedure itself. Like the wordless scream that permeates the entire narrative, terminated pregnancies are evoked in order to highlight the narrator's ruminations on gestation and childishness: her literal children, her infantile owners, but also her own weaknesses. The following section takes as a point of departure the text's ambivalent treatment of gendered oppression, and goes on to consider how narrative

time and negation form the novella's particular ethical take on new materialist concerns.

Narrative Form and Negation

In the previous sections of this chapter, I stressed how beastly riddles and images of gestation are utilised in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* to complexify the uneasy positioning of black women in colonial contexts, particularly the broad area of southern Africa. Yet something worth repeating is the fact that the text is often read in an oversimplified manner, especially when critics linger on the fact that it was translated into English by the 'father' of contemporary white writing in South Africa.⁴⁶ Coetzee's own fiction features the de/construction of Christian concepts such as charity, hospitality, and (dis)grace, which has led many to view his characters and novels as nothing more than allegorical commentary on "the heart of the country" of South Africa (Stockenström 20).⁴⁷ His mixing of New and Old Testament vocabularies interrogates the ethics of care in post/colonial southern Africa, particularly through the symbiotic intermeshing of seeming antonyms such as mercy and sacrifice, forgiveness and punishment. Most readings of *Expedition* are heavily invested in deciphering what Coetzee's translation *means*, at the expense of analysing what it shares with the original novella: that is, narrative form, time, and length. The result is that the female author-figure recedes to the background, as

⁴⁶ Aside from his extensive oeuvre of creative work, J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1990) makes him a literal authority on the topic.

⁴⁷ The very appearance of this phrase in Stockenström's text – which was published after Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) – shows that those who see similarities between the two writers' political concerns are not entirely incorrect. I take issue, however, with reductive readings that are reliant on the assumption that Stockenström utilises similar thematic preoccupations to Coetzee for the same ethical or allegorical ends.

those who respond to the text engage in a seemingly endless conversation about the role of zoologically and biologically specific terms in Coetzee's allegories (Crous 2; Saint 11), the literary implications of political analogies, and generalisations about white positionality in apartheid South Africa. I believe the only truly productive solution to such a conundrum is to move beyond clichéd associations of 'the white writer' with allegory and language games. This is not to neglect the importance of Coetzee's status as translator, but rather to focus on the ethical implications of Stockenström's chosen narrator and narrative form.

On one level, the colonial setting comes to serve as a metaphor; the 'virgin territories' that the narrator enters with her owner, his son, and their slaves are representative of the woman's body in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The land is dominated by men and defined by the ways that they exploit it. As the narrator observes this process of degradation, she sees that she has come to be 'infected' by similar greed and self-preservation: "I knew the fear of bloodthirstiness and of isolation and of ignorance and of punishment and of bewilderment. I knew *him*" (55; emphasis added). By personifying these violent states as male, she implies that aggression and masculinity are inextricably linked; yet the fact that she, as a woman, 'knows' such feelings means that this observation is not meant to be interpreted as an essentialist typification of the gender binary. Indeed, as she goes on to imagine time as a figure who "squats continually before my tree" (66), she continues to subvert and complicate gendered archetypes. Crouching not only lowers one's position, but is also an act that is associated with primal acts like defecation or childbirth (squatting during labour is very common in rural southern Africa). In this

case, then, she queers the image of a sexless and disembodied ‘Father Time’, imagining him as passive, fleshly, and feminised. Queer time – in the sense of both identity formation that defies gendered scripts, and creativity that exceeds linear chronologies – is integral to all the readings in this thesis, but particularly my analysis of Bessie Head’s fiction in chapter 4.

Later the narrator observes that “the names for everything” which were created by Western society all pertain to power relations, such as forced labour and slavery (100). In contrast to the inventors of these names, the slave woman and her associated water spirit are “not listened to” (100). Some may take the juxtaposition between these violent images and the passive nymph to suggest that women are inherently gentler than men, or more aligned with supposedly sanctified nature; literary critics are quick to associate Stockenström with ecofeminism or second-wave feminism. Michael du Plessis, for example, reads *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* through the lens of French feminist theory, arguing that the text ultimately privileges “flows of the female body/language” (125). I have already demonstrated, however, that such simplistically ‘pro-female’ readings are unproductive. They are founded on ironically limited understandings of female embodiment, and they detract from the complex gender- and power dynamics which are tested throughout the novella. I maintain that to reduce the text’s agenda into a neatly gender-oriented message is to *not listen to* the very voice from which Coetzee’s translation originates. As Greta Gaard suggests, if one is to be critical of ecofeminist analogies, then one must attentively listen to a range of voices, regardless of their class, gender, race, sex, or species identities.

Essentialising *Expedition* as nothing more than a feminist fable means losing sight of one of its most important thematic and formal elements: temporality. This is a point Derek Attridge raises when writing against allegorical interpretations of Coetzee,⁴⁸ as he argues that “[t]o allegorise is to translate the temporal and the sequential into the schematic: a set of truths, a familiar historical scene” (Attridge 46). Yet there are other understandings of allegory; Paul de Man, for example, performs Benjaminian readings in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979), arguing that “genuinely dialectical minds” understand the allegorical to encompass indeterminacy and untranslatability (81). Moving away from the overly-trodden territory of Coetzee’s writing, and focusing instead on the novella he has translated, it becomes clear how uncertainty emerges as a possible outcome of allegorical storytelling. Tellingly, Stockenström’s text manifests the *unfamiliar* in multiple guises. From a lack of proper nouns in the narrative to the protagonist’s literal separation from her family (resulting in a loss of personal history), the author is less interested in the generations and legacies exemplified in the typical *plaasroman* than in writing against the association of progeny with identity, or perpetuation with inheritance. The most sequential passages of the text narrate how the woman spends her time working as a slave, whether this is learning how to please her owners or raising their children. Yet these relationships do not contribute to her sense of identity; rather, they are constant reminders of “the nuisance of a body and the time-consuming needs thereof” (98). That is, the most ‘familiar’ moments in her life are merely representative of the

⁴⁸ The reader may find it ironic that I am utilising Coetzeean criticism in order to argue against centralising Coetzee; my defence is that Attridge’s study is a groundbreaking intervention in the general field of South African literary studies, because it is aware of the paradoxical landscapes of political metaphor in, and literal elements of, a text.

never-ending *labour* – whether this is physical or emotional – which black women are forced to perform. To some extent, then, abortion does not simply constitute the decision not to prolong a life, but rather the desire not to perpetuate a system of inheritance that does not care for the work of female progenitors.

The novella queers narrative time to reinforce this association of inheritance with ideologies of property, ownership, and gendered demands, for the text's length is one of its most interesting (and underappreciated) elements. Relaying her story in an unbroken but achronological narrative, with no chapters or other dividing markers, it is clear that the narrator wishes to deviate from normalised, linear progressions of time. "If I could write," she mournfully informs the tree, "I would take up a porcupine quill and scratch your enormous belly full from top to bottom [...] patching together [...] lyric and epic" (30). In this metaphor, the image of a pen is not overt, yet it is glaring in its absence; the phallic object is coded as a tool which one may use to 'disseminate' knowledge. The narrator attempts to wield this power, but since the text aligns creativity with masculinity, it is implied that the female slave lacks the agency to create meaning through written narrative. Instead, she 'reverts' to literally telling her story to the tree by using animalistic noises. The text we encounter synthesises approaches from various oral and literary traditions, but its particular form as a novella means that it deviates from the heroic models that the narrator had previously learnt about in conversations with poets and powerful men. Martin Swales notes that in the German tradition, the *Novelle* is a short-to-medium length narrative marked by a "peculiar and *insistent* energy from [...] a shock confrontation with marginal events" (28; emphasis added), in which "the

relentlessness and indifference of the self-renewing chain of being becomes a kind of reliable – and total – ontological shelter” (153; emphasis added). In other words, its form is distinct from the chronological structure of the novel because it narrates the fate of characters on the periphery of society (Good 206), or those who struggle with the linear progression of (narrative) time. A classic illustration of such a text is Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912). This German novella relays the tragic story of an aging author and his infatuation with a significantly younger man. The protagonist is trapped both by time and the text’s form: in pursuing unattainable youth, he seals his fate in the titular city. Much as in this *Novelle*, and in Vera’s experimentation with tragedy as literary form and theme that I discuss in chapter 3, there are formal elements of *Expedition* that queer time with cyclical embellishments. But while the narrator’s dismissal of written language means she ‘revisits’ older means of storytelling, her noises are more reflective of natal alienation than proof of any animal fable or origin myth. Neither is she adhering to a lyrical, confessional mode, which is so often gendered as feminine. Stockenström’s novella thus self-reflexively stages a narrative of queer terminations with a short form containing sustained riddles.

Complex shifts in tense are particularly interesting elements of temporality which merit further investigation. The original Afrikaans text is based largely in the present tense, whereas the English version is more duplicitous about the narrator’s chronological positioning. For instance, the word “is” recurs in the original text (loc. 250; 252), whereas the translation relays these sections in the past tense. Some of the most obvious sections which have been adapted are passages where the narrator

discusses – or rather remembers – children borne by her and other slaves, such as when the words “Ons kindertjies is” (loc. 474) is translated as “Our children were” (39). The progression of chronology is further disrupted when “Ek praat” or ‘I talk’ is translated in the past tense (loc. 1294). In this instance, the distancing of the word “spoke” foregrounds the oxymoronic positioning of the supposedly illiterate slave’s voice (94): we are reminded that this is a *written* text, and that the author’s positionality is vastly different to that of the narrator’s. Still, Stockenström remains dedicated to the narrative present, and the word “now” is dutifully translated even when Coetzee chooses to adapt her ruminations into the past tense (37), creating an ambiguous sense of narrative positioning. In some respects, Coetzee’s interpretation adds a further layer of nuance – he uses m-dashes to disrupt lengthy clauses and differentiate between temporal points in the narrative. Yet the sense of immediacy and urgency in the original text points away from schematic understandings of time and, more broadly, history.

As her isolation grows, the narrator chooses not only to abandon ‘man-made’ language but also chronological conventions: “It no longer matters to me that I cannot neatly dispose of time. [...] [It] is so ridiculous to measure and record” (92). Gesturing to the arbitrariness of units of time, the narrator implies that it is irrational to attempt to exert control over natural processes such as aging and the inevitable, immeasurable progression of history. Language, particularly names, and time are both constructs that are used by humans to make sense of the world around them; but the narrator avoids naming the people and places she encounters, resisting nationalist logic and eventually reverting to making beastly noises. Here noise

performs again as a marker of difference while simultaneously signifying a common origin between the supposed parasite and host. The protagonist also loses track of time. Instead of using the Khoisan people's handmade black and green beads to mark her days, she turns to "the grey dream" of a world that does not rely on binaries to construct meaning (92). She inhabits the limbo of a baobab tree where she is removed from both colonial society and the Khoisan community that provides her with food. The liminal space of the tree is the discursive site where the narrator simultaneously addresses her past and present. It is also where she commemorates the lives of the Khoisan people who are murdered towards the end of the narrative: "if death is life," she reasons, "then they still live. Here. Right here" (98). The tree – and, by extension, the text – accommodates an interspecies sense of gestation, as the narrator negates teleological understandings of time's progression and death's finality. With its "upside down" trunk, the baobab is the antithesis of a typical tree's shape (96). It is no coincidence, then, that the narrator gradually addresses the tree and identifies with it (30); it is the physical manifestation of her desire to subvert stereotypes and expectations, such as the chronological linkage of gestation to birth. The baobab is simultaneously the narrator's destination and her undoing, as it is both the discursive site and the thematic summation of the narrative. The novella thus self-reflexively challenges traditional narrative forms which privilege "anthropo-theological" storytelling as described by Derrida (2009: 14). Further, it reverses the processes and associations of gestation: the narrator is preparing for death, a new type of potentiality or becoming.

Discussions of aesthetics and materiality on the expedition further reinforce this self-reflexivity. Remarking upon the bizarre ecologies depicted in some rock art the group encounters, the narrator says that “It was almost as if we were discussing art-works” (85). The stranger dismisses the paintings as nothing more than “The work of adult children” (87): “Who in the name of the creator of all things,” he asks, “would have come here to immortalise himself, and in so unfinished a way?” (87). But with the knowledge that this man is himself no more than a grown child, we are encouraged to entertain the narrator’s interpretations of art, rather than his trivialisation of non-mimetic and abortive creativity. The very fact that such a painting could have been created by a woman seems impossible for him to fathom. Yet if one considers the descriptions of the image, then it is clear that it presents an intersectional take on storytelling. Within the paintings are three figures: a female person, a snake, and an ancient elephant. Importantly, both a woman and a serpent feature in the creation myth of the Abrahamic traditions. Here, however, a triumvirate of beasts gestures beyond typically anthropocentric explanations of humankind’s origins (and other species’ beginnings). Together with the beads which the Khoisan villagers leave for her, the rock painting is a materialist form of “Humanware” (96);⁴⁹ conveying a narrative without written words, such artistic objects represent humanity’s inseparability from nonhuman environments, or

⁴⁹ It is possible that, through its engagement with Khoisan artefacts, Stockenström’s novella may be experimenting with this autochthonous group’s myths and folklore explaining time (including the life-death continuum). However, I am reticent to draw any hasty comparisons for several reasons. One issue is that the protagonist mostly views the Khoisan people from a literal distance and they are never centralised as speaking characters. Another concern that is argued astutely by Michael Wessels in his 2013 article on /Xam stories is that such oral narratives “cannot be treated as timeless examples of mythology or traditional folklore. This not only because narrative participates in the multivocality of discourse but also because there is no point outside history from which a /Xam narrative could be viewed as a stable artefact” (2). Together with the plethora of languages and ethnicities constituting Khoisan identity, this means it is virtually impossible to identify any ‘typical’ characteristics of traditional origin myths.

nonverbal means of understanding the world. Another artistic element that the slave encounters towards the end of the narrative is a collection of golden nails that she addresses as “you” while she waits to die (111). Moments later she imagines that she will be commemorated as “a mistress and mother and a goddess. Enough to make you laugh” (111). The second-person pronoun acts here as a marker of material equivalence: the narrator addresses inanimate objects and the reader as similarly reactive elements of the text. The act of interpellation is clearly foregrounded as the protagonist confronts mortality, pointing to her preoccupation with upending human hubris. Listening is, once again, analogised by the works of art that she both listens to and addresses in this moment of tactility and audibility.

Literary scenes like this appear to resonate with both materialism (in this case, Serres’s philosophy, which I have already problematised) and postcolonial theory (particularly, Patterson’s conceptualisation of parasitism as a continuum). Yet reading fiction with an ethics of attentive listening calls for considering more than two perspectives. It would be too easy to claim that Stockenström’s fiction is *both* new materialist *and* hyperaware of postcolonial politics. The implication of this move is that one camp – the one that was established ‘first’, whichever that may be, or that which is more ‘new’ and ostensibly updated – is the host and the other remains a subsidiary, a parasite. What if, instead, we were to read such scenes with an openness to noise, attuned to beastly similarities but also mindful of human differences? For even the slave is far from immune from the logic of colonisation and domination. She admits that

division and counting and classification played such an important role [in her education] as to inspire people to undertake a journey that ought to progress so and so, and bring in such and such, and therefore for this and that reason ought to be set about in this way and not another, in this season and not another, in this direction and not another, with this equipment and not that – in which every last factor was taken into account. (92)

The very expedition she undertakes to the southern tip of Africa is thus symptomatic of ‘anthropo-theological’ discourse. Particularly, the teleological progression from familiar lands to exotic spaces is a common trope which she occasionally endorses in her quest for a safe, untouched space. Yet when she eventually breaks free from her owners and shelters in the baobab tree, she is confronted with her own ethical shortcomings: “I soon had to conclude that my way of thinking did not slot in with that of other beings here. And I searched and opened a way and found. Found, I say. Terrifying” (10). What is frightening is not a new, more-than-humanist way of understanding the world, but rather the fact that she believed that “found” terrain could somehow save her from repressed trauma – the very same logic used by both colonialists and liberationists in order to justify repronormative demands placed upon black women. This realisation of the pervasiveness of asymmetrical analogies (particularly those which associate landscape with womanhood) cause her to search for a more materialist understanding of relationality. And indeed, it is when narrating her life in retrospect that she advises any “remedies against being empty” should mix “a judicious application of old and newly acquired knowledge” (13). In other words, she does not profess to abandon all her preconceptions and prejudices, as I have shown by critiquing her attitude towards autochthonous peoples in the veld. Rather, she takes her former ignorance as an opportunity to explore identity

formation through material encounters, a narrative process which I discuss in further detail in the following chapter on Wicomb.

The formation of the narrator's reproductive agency is strengthened by multiple interactions with the natural environment. As she recovers from the ordeal of the expedition, she notes that

[e]very time I step out from the protecting interior of the tree I am once again a human being and powerful, and I gaze far out over the landscape with all its flourishes of vegetal growth and troops of animals and the purple patches of hills that try to hedge it in on the horizon. Reborn every time from the belly of a baobab, I stand full of myself. The sun defines my shadow. The wind clothes me. (14)

To be 'full of' oneself is a colloquial expression for egotism, a characteristic which is found in much nature-writing that hubristically presents the 'landscape' as an entity to be empirically measured and observed. Here, however, the common interpretation of these words is disrupted by the trope of regeneration; in continually returning to (and emerging from) the baobab tree, the narrator interacts with the very same vegetation that she observes. Crucially, the elements play vital roles in her discovery of a new identity by touching and testing her corporeal boundaries. This materialist sense of connectivity could only be reached through sexual intimacy in her earlier years, as she recalls a partner who was "seed-satisfied, making him, self-content, part of me, of me exclusively" (52). Simultaneously part of and parting from her lover – "he who had just described me analytically and disposed of me like an object in a dispensation" (52) – the present narrator is more concerned with her *own* bodily desires and pleasures than those of her former owners. Refusing to adhere to the coloniser's scripts of motherhood, of womanhood, and of sexual

conquest, she comes ironically to generate both an identity and a creative narrative. It is also a *creation* narrative: one which views the termination of pregnancy as neither an ending nor a negation of life.

Another simultaneously destructive and creative constituent of the text is the hurricane which tears through one of the slaveowners' houses, and, in a sense, sparks her journey away from civilisation. Initially it is unclear what the force is or what damage it causes, as the event is described through a series of reported sights:

I saw a bitter-orange tree where none had stood before. I saw a grey cloud consisting of crested terns and a second cloud thick with glistening sardines. I saw fishes rain and jellyfish tumble down and flotsam performing tricks and saw how a hut sucked in air till bursting point and suddenly collapsed and was flattened and suddenly began to whirl away in pieces. (25)

Here the storm is a force which imbues various manifestations of organic matter – trees, birds, fish, detritus, and more – with agentive potential, similarly to Yvonne Vera's aesthetic treatment of natural elements in *Butterfly Burning*. The storm also uproots kudu-berry trees which line the street, and in the shock of these abrupt transformations, many women pause to place offerings to the spirits. Our young narrator, in contrast, laughs at what she interprets as overly animistic devotions to nature; yet in retrospect, she recognises that she too has been “looked upon as the spirit of a tree” (27). The other slaves' respect for environmental interconnectedness is thus an ‘infectious’ ideological position that she comes to adopt. Her earlier attitude to the tree-spirits contrasts, for example, with her description of the expedition party: “How insignificant our little line of human beings among the tall rough grass-talks, a wholly inconspicuous *phenomenon* in the midst of frisking

herds of zebras and wildebeest and reedbuck, and the ever-amazed ostriches” (82; emphasis added). I would argue that the presence of a materialist description of nonhuman actors here is more than coincidental. As the slave exits the human realm, she respects the creative potential of all matter, and even comes to view time and death as expressions of agency. Yet, simultaneously, we are acutely aware that one possible reason for her suicide is the alienation she feels regarding the sexualised biological narratives of men who abused her.

In order to escape such supposedly rational scientific discourse, and its reliance on gendered and racialised dichotomies, the narrator chooses instead to sleep and finally to die. That her slumber is described as “greyness” is highly relevant (92); grey is a combination of black and white, or a liminal shade between two ends of a continuum. The narrator’s decision to sleep thus illustrates how she desires to embrace the indeterminacy which permeates her riddles and narrative style. By removing herself from society, language, time, and finally from her own narration, she seeks “an ecstasy of never being [...] equilibrium [...] the perfection of non-being” (105). The slave believes that it is better to never be exposed to the inequalities of society – much like an aborted foetus – rather than to be born as a human with no sense of agency. During her journey, she observes a hammerhead shark that “chose the total nothing of seeing nothing more” by dying on a shore (35). The hammerhead is stuck between two ends of a continuum: birth and death. We are told that “in uncertainty the poor thing struggled” (35); and “[l]ike a baby laid on its stomach, curling its spine as it tries to curl upright, so the hammerhead shark had struggled” (36). Her commemorative act of burying the animal in a small grave

foregrounds its almost foetal vulnerability. Similarly ending her own life at the end of the novella, the slave aligns herself with the literal “water-spirit” of the dead shark (111). Yet it would be overly simplistic to suggest her suicide is merely a choice to reject superior humanity and connect with some ‘beastly’ underlying origins. The fluid symbolism of greyness⁵⁰ – and, indeed, of queer gender fluidity – suggests a more layered understanding of gestation and terminations.

Greyness is, in fact, the most prominent tone in Stockenström’s metaphorical palette. The shade appears in a prophecy of “huge grey breakwaters” that signal “extermination over and again” (89); it is used to describe “a strange, fantastic landscape” of “[g]rey cloud. Stones. Lichen. Wet and grey. Grey phantoms [who] must surely have lived there looking for their slave bodies” (70). This latter quotation is followed by the protagonist’s anxious attempts to “limit myself to within myself and resolve against dissolution into the attracting all-swathing grey” (70). Yet we know this will result only in failure. That is, even when the narrator tries to isolate herself, her positioning in the baobab means that she is merely one embodiment of agency in a larger environmental system. She has been taught to keep herself to herself, but in the words of Karen Barad, she is both *part of and parting from* that which exceeds her physical body. This is further reinforced when she commemorates the deaths of

[c]hildless women, or women convicted of witchcraft and shunned because they could not prove they had not let loose the mysterious deaths among the cattle and caused the bad harvests. Of course I often wonder how long a person keeps on till. Surely there must be a boundary somewhere that becomes clearer and clearer to you, towards

⁵⁰ Most hammerhead sharks are either grey or brown in colour.

which you then reach as towards the greyness of sleep and thence towards the grey dream in which, as in a smaller death, you meet good and evil, the inseparable pair, the twins who defy death. (92)

Grey appears throughout the novella, and particularly in this passage, as a marker of ambiguity and dissolution. Here I am referring, again, to Neimanis's Deleuzian 'amniotics', which aims to *dissolve* the gender dichotomy by showing how "gestationality extends beyond the human reproductively womb" (49). Like the witches and spinsters before her, the slave has been found wanting: by society's standards, and even the values of her friends, she is evil for desiring not to behave as a normal mother should. Yet here, and indeed throughout the novella, she *questions* such reproductively ideology by analogising her fate with that of an indeterminate beast, the twinning of life and death (whose species, importantly, is never disclosed). I discuss the links between sterility, queer theory, and ecocriticism further in my final chapter on Bessie Head; in the interim, it is worth noting how Stockenström's narrator refuses to repent for exercising reproductive agency.

Her act of refusal is further reinforced by repeated instances of negative phrasing. This is something that is admittedly more apparent in the Afrikaans version of the text, as the language normalises the use of double-negatives like "niks nie" and "niks meer nie" (loc. 460; loc. 1533). Nevertheless, the translated text still retains a sense of denial, particularly when the narrator considers her species identity. When she first discovers she is truly alone in the wilderness, she verbalises her unease as follows:

I opened my mouth and brought out a sound that must be the sound of a human being because I am a human being and not a wildebeest that

snorts and not a horned locust that produces whistling noises with its wings and not an ostrich that booms, but a human being that talks, and I brought out a sound and produced an accusation and hurled it up at the twilight air. A bloody sound was exposed to the air. (65)

‘Birthing’ a violent shout, here the narrator is defined markedly by what she is *not*. In fact, if the word ‘bloody’ were to be excluded from the above passage, it would be virtually impossible to determine the exact nature of the sound she emits, since more precise words are used to describe the vocalisations of other animals. The human form is thus displaced and decentralised by beastly noise.

Considering these repeated ruminations on both refusal *and* negation, one may be confused when reaching the final page of the novella. As the narrator drinks her poison, she urges, “Quickly, water-spirit. Let your envoy carry out his task swiftly. Yes” (111). At first glance, this conclusion takes exactly the opposite approach to what I have just described. Not only is Stockenström’s narrator enthusiastic about her approaching death, but she is also choosing dissolution through water (rather than self-immolation with flames, as discussed in my chapter on Yvonne Vera). Yet all is revealed if one returns to the original text: the concluding pages of the novella are the most glaringly different passages in translation. In fact, Coetzee inserts the word ‘Yes’; ‘Ja’ does not appear in the Afrikaans version, providing a contrast to the negation which precedes this scene, both thematically and linguistically.⁵¹ This is not even a case of stylistics: elsewhere in the same section he pares down Stockenström’s prose by deleting the word ‘in’ and translating ‘a fruit’

⁵¹ Here Coetzee may be referencing Molly Bloom’s famous final word in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a textual moment of affirmation which is also highly sexualised. As I discuss at length in later chapters (particularly on Wicomb and Head), it is not unusual for southern African writers to operate in the wake of literary Modernism, particularly referencing moments of corporeal disruptions and excesses in such narratives.

as merely “fruit” (111). Yet I would argue that this final paradox does not detract from Stockenström’s project; rather, it adds to the sense of indeterminacy that permeates both versions of the text. *Expedition* utilises *the very text itself* as a gender-defying ‘phenomenon’, a fact which is further reinforced by Coetzee’s role as the male interpreter, and in some regards co-creator, of an intersectional text. In new materialist conceptualisations of gestation, both parents play an important role in the formation of a life, but the person who gives birth holds more agentive clout because their body is the site and origin of the event. However, this interpretive translation holds far less reverence for myths of origins. We must therefore listen to the text with an attentive ethics and with openness to queer potentialities.⁵² These potentialities include the possibility of gestation without birth, or of alternative futures and identities that are not weighed down by normative systems of inheritance and progeny. This is why I have focused on both the Afrikaans and English versions of the text, especially since both Stockenström and Coetzee make certain (at times, conflicting) stylistic choices.

A Human Being and Powerful

By now it should be clear that the puzzling “rattle and rattle” that resonates through Stockenström’s novella is evocative of multiple formations (9). By ‘formations’ I am referring not only to the bodies of elephants that arrive and wander through the text (107) – and to more, too, than the “bestial death-rattle” of the baobab (105). I am

⁵² Although I am not referring to utopian visions so much as a multiplicity of futures, an illuminating collection of essays edited by Angela Jones titled *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* (2013) provides further insight into such potentialities.

naming these elements, and the figure of the human who holds the narrative's centre, but also the process of nomenclature itself. For as the slave writes, even when "I have the names [...] I am not listened to. There is nothing I can do with the names. They are nothing but rattles" (100). Yet again, Stockenström anticipates the importance which materialist feminists such as Greta Gaard place upon listening to situational nuances, as the very literal audibility and recitation in the above quotation suggests. Words become playthings to the writer, yet her very experimentation with narrative forms is indicative of a fascination with creativity, desire, and agency. In lingering on stillbirths, abortions, and deaths, the novella is undoubtedly concerned with human injustices: a fact which is true for all the texts in this study, but is most manifest in Head's oeuvre (as I discuss further in chapter 4). Yet Stockenström's novella is distinct in that the protagonist's reversion to unconventional and beastly narrative techniques emphasises the impossibility of creating feminist accounts which are truly independent of gendered expectations – at least, not without foregoing humanist norms and forms.

Feminist texts typically promote gender equality by advocating for anthropocentrism in favour of androcentrism.⁵³ This has already been illustrated by the protagonist's rejection of patriarchal discourse in favour of feminist narrative modes. However, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* seems to suggest that to merely concentrate on human life is irresponsible, as nature and animals remain inferior in comparison. The narrator decides to ignore humanist ideals like reason and drinks the poison that will end her life. In this defiant act, she reconciles herself with her generative potential and the animality which is coded into the female form by

⁵³ For a comprehensive and ecofeminist overview of this phenomenon, see Val Plumwood (1996).

patriarchal and repronormative discourse. Instead of attempting to write, and thus redefine herself through traditionally male creative forms, she embraces the silence that has so often been ascribed to women. As the narrative process ends, she abandons the male-dominated art of storytelling and is compared to both a bird and a bat (111). Her association with the bat is of particular relevance; these wild animals pollinate baobab trees. In being unified with this ‘creative’ beast, then, it is implied that the protagonist’s death is not like the territorial “slaughter” that occurred between two male-dominated groups outside the tree (107). Choosing to resist the urge to assert either her national or species identity, her death inside the tree is a voluntary and paradoxically constructive affirmation of humanity’s position in nature. At the same time, it is also a materialist reflection of the termination(s) that she had chosen to undergo earlier in the narrative. By dying in the baobab she disrupts the external/internal dialectic of mother and foetus, while also very literally showing how this simplistic binary is *naturalised* by much discourse surrounding abortion.

The conclusion of the novella suggests that it is futile to attempt to exert mastery over nature or to assume that one is more powerful than other forms of life. *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* contemplates the limits of uprooting discrimination through an anti-anthropocentric materialism by deconstructing binaries and challenging traditional notions of power. The slave’s voluntary death is a powerful ending to the non-linear narrative; it suggests that agency can be used to symbolically protest against sexist, racist, and repronormative displays of political control. The text certainly does not omit some problematic elements, particularly

when read with the positionality of the author in mind. It is worth pausing to consider, however, to what extent the discomfort the text generates is because it is reflective of an unjust society which misunderstands the conditions necessary for reproductive agency. This is a matter of collective agency rather than individual choice, as many 'pro-choice' campaigns would misleadingly suggest. It also involves more than a dichotomy between life or death within 'the human', however that beast is defined, and life or death outside. What carries its life in its stomach? Both black women and white men, the text answers. Either a tree or an animal. An adult slave and a child. All of these beings, or none at all. These are not contradictions.

Chapter 2

Uprooted Desires: The Autopoietic Formation of Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get*

Lost in Cape Town

“I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow.” – Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (1988: 203)

The second writer in this study to have been raised in – and the first to emigrate from – South Africa,⁵⁴ Zoë Wicomb is one of the most significant literary voices from that country. Wicomb was born in 1948 (the same year that apartheid officially started) in the rural Western Cape and moved to the United Kingdom in 1970. Writing mostly from Scotland, and drawing on autobiographical anecdotes as a self-identifying coloured woman,⁵⁵ she has since published multiple works of fiction and academic pieces on the state of post/apartheid South Africa. As suggested by the titles of papers in a programme for a 2010 conference entitled “The Cape and the Cosmopolitan: Reading Zoë Wicomb”, many literary critics tend to foreground notions of race, miscegenation and genetic ‘roots’ as indicators of oppression in Wicomb’s work.⁵⁶ While acknowledging the importance of earlier analyses, this chapter, in contrast, considers racial injustice alongside multiple vectors of

⁵⁴ I use the term ‘emigrate’ here since Zoë Wicomb and Bessie Head left South Africa under significantly distinct conditions, a fact I discuss when distinguishing between the diasporic, the expatriate, and the exilic in my introduction.

⁵⁵ In South Africa, the term ‘coloured’ is used to refer to people of mixed ethnic descent – particularly those whose ancestors were South- and Southeast Asian slaves. Even in the post-transitional democracy, such groups mostly embrace this term, viewing it as a source of “mythologised” pride (Wicomb, “Five Afrikaner Texts” 363).

⁵⁶ A notable example is Abdulrazak Gurnah, who writes on travel, “the value of rootedness”, and cosmopolitanism (261), ultimately arguing that “Wicomb’s figures are not ‘heroic’ enough to achieve [self-liberation and self-knowledge] fully, and none are by any means liberated” (275).

prejudice: those based on one's gender, sex, class, and other signifiers. Analysing *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), I explore how Wicomb utilises desire, disgust, and deviance through incidents involving the pubescent or pregnant female body. Deviance is typically defined as the shameful departure from socially normalised behaviours (including, particularly, sexual practices), but Wicomb's novel exceeds such associations by representing the seeds of supposedly obscene desires. These concepts represent the intersecting obstructions to reproductive agency which women of colour face in southern Africa. The inextricable link between racial and gender equality means that one cannot speak of race as a social construct without discussing problematic heteronormative, and repronormative, values.

First published in 1987, Wicomb's literary debut contains ten vignettes that chronologically catalogue the childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood of a young woman of colour named Frieda Shenton who seeks an abortion in the city of Cape Town after entering a relationship with a white man. There have been many conflicting characterisations of the text's material nature, as Andrew van der Vlies's collation of critical responses in a 2013 article shows (22).⁵⁷ Although it features chronologically ordered incidents, the text's elements are rarely discussed as a composite literary system. Rob Gaylard writes in a 1996 article focusing on racial identity in the titular section that "[w]hile the stories collectively constitute a *kind of bildungsroman*, they remain *fragments* of a whole" (178; emphasis added); his comments echo verbatim an early review of the text by Barend Torien, who alludes

⁵⁷ Van der Vlies's article is unique in that it discusses the material history of the publication in its multiple forms; due to the historical parameters of my study, I am only discussing the original (1987) version of the text.

to Wicomb's debut as "episodes of a novel, *a kind of Bildungsroman* and a carefully structured one at that" (43; emphasis added). Despite the shared allusion to the novel form in these responses, the text continues to be described – and taught – as a group of short stories. This seems particularly strange when one considers an early feminist response to the text by Sue Marais, in an excellent 1995 article "Getting Lost in Cape Town: Spatial and Temporal Dislocation in the South African Short Story Cycle". Marais argues that while the text is a "short fiction cycle" (31), its experimentation with irony and metafiction means that it is "more [...] novel than [...] short story collection" (33). Her analysis features varied references to the abortion scene (which occurs in the eponymous section, "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town", but is also referenced in later sections of the text). By way of contrast, Gaylard only refers to abortion in one elliptical instance, when describing the figure of the abortionist. It is disappointing that Torien and Gaylard briefly entertain the notion that Wicomb engages with a predominantly masculinist, long-form genre (the *Bildungsroman*), before ultimately classifying her debut as a story collection. Such *fragmentary* responses – deciding that abortion is a topic of impropriety, or only briefly drawing parallels to the novel form – trivialise the text's ethical impetus and its experimental form. Viewing it as collection of short stories, critics assimilate it to a pre-established normative form rather than allowing it to be something ungainly.

Recent scholarship, however, has destabilised such reactions by foregrounding the feminist significance of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town's* structure. A 2017 article by Kharys Laue is refreshing for its focus on gendered oppression in one segment from Wicomb's earliest text alongside two of her later stories (Laue 19); more readings would do well to focus on all the sections of

Wicomb's debut, as gender performativity is one of the central concerns of her oeuvre. Andrew van der Vlies's aforementioned analysis is significant in that it is interested in the *material* history of the text, and in sustaining its narrative indeterminacy by referring to segments as "chapter-stories" (21). Van der Vlies's use of such language endorses Marais's reading of novelistic elements in Wicomb's metafictional work. I take Marais's reading as a formative influence on my study, and Laue's approach as an encouraging step in discussing miscegenation as one constitutive element of broader intersectional and political concerns; my analysis differs, however, in that it explores how the author experiments with the literary form of the Bildungsroman to expose the erasure of female (and foetal) human forms in patriarchal environments. In particular, Wicomb creates a contrapuntal relationship between hybridity and linear growth, thereby challenging contemporary notions of personal development. Throughout this chapter I favour the term 'development' over 'growth', due to its relevance in both narrative and scientific theorisations of formation. There are instances, however, where a synonym is preferable; in cases where the latter term is used, I am referring to strictly biological processes. The text advances a biological sense of identity formation: it contains progressions from vegetation and animal life to the scatological and deviant, resulting in a conception of creativity which is not associated with naturalised and feminised fertility, but rather with an artistic and agentive form of autopoiesis.

Autopoiesis and the Bildungsroman

Emerging from the scholarship of biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, 'autopoiesis' literally refers to the self-making process wherein any living

system (such as a cell or organism) creates and sustains its own existence. Their theoretical model is overtly uninterested in discussions of reproduction and evolution, concentrating instead on “the organization which makes a living system a whole, autonomous unity that is alive regardless of whether it reproduces or not” (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 7). This last clause is crucial to stress because there appear to be many misinterpretations of the term and how it may apply to new materialist discussions of processes which exceed literal or biological definitions. If one searches ‘autopoiesis’ on Google, for example, the very first result features a picture from the term’s Wikipedia page: a magnified photograph of a cell undergoing mitosis. While it is technically correct that eukaryotes are autopoietic systems, this illustration at the moment of cell division is not helpful for visualising Maturana and Varela’s concerns. Materialist imagery of ‘making kin’ – whether genealogically or nongenealogically⁵⁸ – is secondary to the prime discussion, which is of the continual growth process that a singular system undergoes to maintain its life and vitality. This is not to say, however, that autopoiesis is synonymous with reductionism. In an article co-authored with Ricardo Uribe, Maturana and Varela stress that they are interested in “*the network of interactions* of components which constitute a living system as a whole, that is, as a ‘unity’” (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 7; emphasis added). The whole, in short, is just as important as the sum of its parts; autopoiesis recognises the vital role that each smaller element plays in an organism’s or system’s sustenance.

⁵⁸ In an interview with Lauren O’Neill-Butler, Donna Haraway explains that her recent work promotes “making kin, not babies [...] as a way of being really, truly prochild – making babies rare and precious – as opposed to the crazy pronatalist but actually antichild world in which we live” (6). As I briefly elucidate in my introduction, a blanket statement such as this seems remarkably insensitive to the histories of people who have been subject to colonial violence through population control or reproductive regulations. There is also growing contestation of the antinatalist ‘population explosion’ trope in environmentalist circles.

The concept of autopoiesis is a key illustrator of the overlaps and differences between postcolonial and new materialist theories. It has been adapted in conjunction with the philosophy of Frantz Fanon by anti-colonial writer and critic Sylvia Wynter, as Max Hantel notes in a fascinating essay on the anti-anthropocentric potential of “revolutionary humanism” in Wynter’s work (71). Simultaneously, Maturana and Uribe’s framework has been contested by well-known scholars like Haraway and M. Beth Dempster, who reactively coin the neologism ‘sympoiesis’ for a contrastingly monist and new materialist understanding of living systems’ intra-actions.⁵⁹ Directly evoking Dempster, Haraway writes in her 2016 monograph *Staying with the Trouble* that “many systems are mistaken for autopoietic that are really sympoietic” (33). Sympoiesis is intended to refer to collective creations or organisations of living cells. Yet in the aforementioned article by Varela, Maturana, and Uribe, the concept of more organisationally open systems is already discussed when they distinguish autopoiesis from allopoiesis, or “systems in which the product of their operation is different from themselves” (8). Dempster and Haraway establish a term to distinguish more open living systems from the biologists’ study, without acknowledging that the scientists already coined another word for the very same types of systematic processes.⁶⁰ Allopoiesis or reproduction is a “*moment in autopoiesis*” (Maturana and Varela 101; emphasis added), but not the primary focus of autopoietic studies.

⁵⁹ While both Dempster and Haraway are concerned with the connectedness of all life, they ironically invented this term entirely *independently* of each other.

⁶⁰ I have only encountered mention of ‘allopoiesis’ once in Dempster’s work (8), in a passage which does not acknowledge the origins of the term.

This is only one of many inaccuracies surrounding the topic in materialist circles. Bruce Clarke states that the term is primarily used in one of two contexts: either in the hard sciences, to describe units of both biological and artificial life, or to define social and artistic systems (222-23). His summary is largely correct, especially when one considers how many scholars in the humanities have tended to base their often convoluted understandings of autopoiesis upon illustrative scenarios from biological studies. Yet the history of the concept is not so easily reduced to a binary model. In his introductory notes to *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980), Maturana reveals that the term was invented after a discussion with a friend about Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote*, whose titular character's personal development is marked by a choice of praxis over poiesis (xvii). The Quixotic figure is unsurprisingly emblematic in discussions of the Bildungsroman, and the fact that Maturana's scientific theory was formed in response to *Don Quixote* indicates that autopoiesis holds potential theoretical clout for new materialist studies in the humanities. This is particularly true for literary scholars, provided that one prefaces any aesthetic applications of autopoiesis with two caveats. Firstly, one must stress that although literal reproduction and intersubjective experiences are not of interest to autopoietic studies, this is not to say that it negates the existence of more collective and undefined structural organisations. Those who study autopoiesis are interested in the continual *process* of sustaining a singular life rather than intersubjective moments of creation, but they do not deny that such broader patterns exist. The second disclaimer may operate with this last point in mind, and react as a direct retort to Haraway's phrasing: many texts

are mistaken for sympoietic which are really autopoietic. This is particularly true in the case of the Bildungsroman.

A Bildungsroman is a novel which follows the development or socialisation of an individual from immaturity to adulthood. In his 2002 monograph *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, Paul Sheehan outlines a history of the European Bildungsroman as being informed by humanist philosophies. He argues that in reducing the world to anthropocentric meaning, the Bildungsroman creates the figure of ‘the human’ – yet he notes there are “seeds of philosophical uncertainty” germinating within such narratives of “integrated selfhood” that later give rise to the experimental Modernist novel (5). The Bildungsroman’s focus on physical growth and personal development has many implications for postcolonial literature and the manner in which Wicomb’s semi-autobiographical text has been received: particularly, how many critics have avoided sustained discussions of its experimental overlaps with both this literary form and Modernist aesthetics. According to Joseph Slaughter, author of the ground-breaking study *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007), Bildungsromane are remarkably similar to human rights laws in that both are preoccupied with the tensions between collective, social desires, and personal freedom (Slaughter 10). Although Slaughter’s study focuses on ‘world’ literature,⁶¹ the same is arguably even truer in postcolonial novels featuring settings where

⁶¹ Many interventions in ‘world literature’ – a term referring to texts emerging from any country on the globe, but particularly those that have historically been neglected by the Western canon – are applicable to postcolonial studies and vice versa, due to a shared emphasis on transnational perspectives. Increasingly the fields are being researched and taught in tandem in the United Kingdom; a Google search of “world literature + postcolonial” retrieves the titles of taught courses and research groups hosted by the universities of St Andrews, Oxford, Warwick, and London (Queen Mary). I elect to refer to the postcolonial, since the former phrase risks universalising the situational specificities of literary texts written in the wake of disparate colonial contexts.

human rights have historically been violated in particularly brutal and systemic manners. Yet as Slaughter notes towards the end of his study, “the effective limitations of human rights are related not merely to the institutional frailty of the international legal regime but to the historically nationalist limitations of our literary imaginations” (324). That is to say, even a narrative which strives to promote personal agency will often fail to reconcile such an ideal with the legal and political clout of the nation-state. There is a fundamental difference between acting and having the freedom to act. One’s pursuit of agency is therefore largely dependent on the rigidity or flexibility of meta-narratives of liberty, and often prone to *failure*. Lack of success may apply to anything from physical growth to a more metaphorical *Bildung* and even to the very formation of the literary text.⁶²

This is a point which Ralph H. Austen expresses in a 2015 article titled “Struggling with the African Bildungsroman”. Austen argues that in contrast to portraying a tropified journey from childhood to maturity, most African Bildungsromane conclude with the hero suspended in a state of “frozen or promising youth” (220) – in other words, such narratives often terminate before even personal agency has been attained, still less political freedom. Failure to achieve any sense of agency means that the protagonist is incapable of adopting a role in adult society. Importantly, Wicomb’s protagonist is still childless at the end of *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, with no mention of a job, a partner, or other social responsibilities. Although she has made her journey to the United Kingdom independently, she still visits her family in South Africa frequently and appears to rely on parental support

⁶² *Bildung* also does not merely denote ‘education’, even though many Bildungsromane are at least initially focalised through a protagonist of school-going age.

(either from her father or mother, depending on the section in question). This is the portrait of the writer as a young woman:⁶³ privileged in comparison to her peers, Wicomb's self-styled narrator follows the same upwards trajectory as seen in novels such as James Joyce's semi-autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But while Wicomb is clearly indebted to what Austen describes as "the 'modernist' (and largely British or German) late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century return to disillusionment", he states that Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is "the only African bildungsroman I have found that cites 'classical' European exemplars of the same genre" (220-21). His omission of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* from his analysis is particularly puzzling when one considers that Wicomb's oeuvre holds repeated references to Joyce (as I discuss later in this chapter), Thomas Hardy (whose *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is studied by the narrator in her undergraduate years), George Eliot, and other canonical European writers. Austen even goes on to quote Franco Moretti's assertion that only George Eliot knew how "to deal with the major theme of the [continental] European bildungsroman: failure" (Moretti 216 in Austen 221). The appearance of intertextual references to Eliot and other authors in Wicomb's – and, indeed, Dangarembga's – writing suggests there is a recurring interest in failure in both European literary styles like Modernism *and* the so-called African Bildungsroman, a commonality that he sporadically highlights but fails to interrogate in a sustained discussion.

⁶³ Here I take seriously Gaylard's reading of Frieda as embodying "the (Joycean) desire to escape or overcome whatever is limiting or constricting in the environment and society" (178) – but without losing sight of the situated differences between Wicomb, as a South African experimental writer, and Joyce as an Irish Modernist. I am interested in exploring commonalities without essentialising either the texts or their authors, as the questionably 'off-colour' wording of André Viola's title "Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Coloured Girl*" threatens to do.

The same curious omission holds true for critics who have focused specifically on South African fiction rather than on African literature at large. When writing on modernity in South African literary history, David Attwell argues that in contrast to European Modernism, which frequently concentrates on the subject in exile, black writers tend to focus on the displacement that they feel in their country of birth (176). Given his emphasis on natal alienation, one would imagine Attwell's study to feature an analysis of Zoë Wicomb's fiction (particularly for its focus on genetic 'roots' and racial hybridity).⁶⁴ Yet he only mentions Wicomb – and Bessie Head, an influential writer with similarly experimentalist tendencies – in passing:

Undoubtedly, their work is both modernist and postmodern in specific ways, some of which have to do with gendered modes of representation and their implied subject-positions. However, I would argue that the case I am making can be formulated all too easily with respect to Head and Wicomb, whose gender-positions and whose exilic relation to their material weighs more heavily than it does with writers such as Ndebele and Mda. (Attwell 178)

I take issue with the assertion that the former women writers are not worthy of discussion, or not as committed to a “South African epistemology” as writers such as Njabulo Ndebele or Zakes Mda (178), simply because they chose to leave their country of birth. To categorise writers by their geographical locations (and, worryingly, by the degree of their interest in gender)⁶⁵ seems to me to invest too heavily in gendered and nationalist constructs of ‘home’. Unlike Head's, Wicomb's

⁶⁴ This reading is only expected, and by no means desired; as I have already stated, the theme of miscegenation is oftentimes overemphasised by critics, eclipsing other potential avenues of discussion.

⁶⁵ It is worth stressing here that both writers speak frankly of sexual reproduction and are central to my study of abortion in southern African literature. Furthermore, Zoë Wicomb mentions Bessie Head in several of her writings including “Setting” (152-53) and “To Hear the Variety of Discourses” (43). In the former essay (and in contrast to Attwell), she describes Head first and foremost as a “South African writer [...] who moved to Botswana” (152).

departure from South Africa was not final; this is reinforced by the fact that almost all her fiction to date has been set in that country. It is ironic that Attwell emphasises the importance of agency in African literary experimentalism (175), but then chooses not to examine how feminist experimentation with exilic states (and autonomous rejection of the nation-state) might complicate his thesis.

Yet this is not to say that there is nothing to be gleaned from either David Attwell's or Ralph Austen's discussions. As should be evident in my analysis, I read Austen's article as too categorical, particularly as he does not account for *experimental* approaches to the Bildungsroman. Overall, however, I agree with the thesis that the genre represents "individualistic development, especially through autonomous reading and personal mentorship, but one that, in both its African and 'canonical' European forms, always has to confront larger social contexts" (Austen 228). The Bildungsroman *resists* nationalist discourse by projecting identity-formation as a self-led but global project. It does not – or should not – render the creative individual as allegory for a patriotic identity to be mindlessly reproduced. This rejection of naïve nationalism is evident in Wicomb's article "To Hear the Variety of Discourses" (1990). Writing in the years leading up to South Africa's transition to a democratic state, she questions how the ANC has subjugated black women while fighting for racial equality, by observing the objectification of female bodies during a celebration.⁶⁶ In such instances, she argues, even womanism "reveals itself to be more *desired state* than theory. By its own definition, it must meet the spectacle with *silence*" (35; emphasis added). There are echoes here of the

⁶⁶ Susanne Klausen gestures to a similar issue in *Abortion Under Apartheid* when she observes that both Afrikaner patriots and the national liberation movement framed women's key role in the struggle as 'reproducers' of the nation-state (194). For an extensive analysis of gendered national subjects and the 'Mother Africa' trope in the broader context of African literature, see Florence Stratton (1994).

ethics of attentive listening discussed in my previous chapter on Stockenström. Wicomb suggests that many South Africans of colour are so preoccupied with racial inequality that they tend not to notice the interrelated material conditions of women – and that this perpetuates cyclical censorship. Indeed, silence is precisely the response that Frieda chooses when her body is viewed as either an exotic being or a grotesque hybrid. Continuing her analysis, Wicomb goes on to state that

Apartheid laws, the notions of home, motherhood, and the family have become *constructs characterised by desire*. Analogies with slavery are clear and in black women’s writing [...] these issues can be traced as *tropes of desire that adapt and transform received ideas of womanhood, manhood, motherhood* [and] dominant domestic ideologies and gender relations. (“To Hear the Variety of Discourses” 39; emphasis added)

If ‘home’ and the home country are nothing but constructs of desire, then how can we make sense of readings such as Austen’s and Attwell’s, which ultimately neglect to explore feminist issues like embodiment and reproductive agency? Furthermore, how can we serve justice to black southern African women writers without essentialising them as nothing more than products of a very specific environmental and political climate?

At this point one may turn to a highly influential theorist on the intersections of sexuality and racism: Robert J. C. Young. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995), Young draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to focus on “the historical material procedures of colonialism and its ideological operations”, such as “the severing of the body from the land” (170). Yet this fails to consider the fact that the woman’s body *is* the land in colonial discourse,

a point that remains underdeveloped in Young's study. His analysis of fantasies involving desire and fertility is undeniably important for the field of postcolonial studies, but lacking in intersectional scope. Young uses almost exclusively cerebral concepts like the "colonial machine" and terms from economics (97), without considering how women and the land are embodied in colonial and nationalist rhetoric. Bearing in mind the *silence* of various critics around intersectional experimentations with personal formation, and interpreting Wicomb's description of narrative suppression as an integral preoccupation of southern African women's writing, I am interested in exploring how the above extracts from "To Hear the Variety of Discourses" interact with *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. Following the feminist critic Rosi Braidotti, we can take the 'desired state' to signify "Not just libidinal desire, but ontological desire, the desire to be, the tendency of the subject to be, the predisposition of the subject towards being" (*Nomadic Subjects* 124-25). In this way we can conceive of desire as both a bodily form of craving – whether this is sexual, epicurean, or otherwise – and a more philosophical state of not-yet-being, of wishing-to-be.

Braidotti operates, like Young, in the legacy of Deleuze and Guattari,⁶⁷ but is far more attentive to feminist embodiment when discussing agency, domination, and desire. She utilises the concept of autopoiesis at several points in her oeuvre. This is particularly apparent when she writes in favour of

⁶⁷ Mine is not a Deleuzian approach (as I prioritise 'formation' as 'development' over 'becoming'), but it is important to emphasise how both Young and Braidotti formulate their models of desire in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari's work, especially since Braidotti normalises the conception of the assemblage when writing about the collective nature of desire. A curious symbolic overlap with Deleuze and Guattari will become more apparent, too, in my textual analysis.

approaching the world through affectivity and not cognition: as singularity, force, movement, through assemblages or webs of interconnections with all that lives. The subject is an autopoietic machine, fuelled by targeted perceptions, and it functions as the echoing chamber of *zoë*. This nonanthropocentric view expresses both a profound love for Life as a cosmic force and the *desire to depersonalise subjective life-and-death*. This is just one life, not my life. The life in ‘me’ does not answer to my name: ‘I’ is just passing. (2010: 210; emphasis added)

In this theoretical model, autopoiesis is both a biological and ontological process that recognises the simultaneous self-sufficiency and interconnectedness of all living organisms. What is integral to one’s identity formation is, ironically, depersonalisation (particularly the recognition that the self constitutes one part of a larger whole). Immediately we can see how such a model relates to new materialist theory: in this understanding of autopoietic growth, the self-styling subject may be either a single-cellular organism, a non/human animal, or a more metaphorical *corpus* such as the nation-state. Braidotti is invested in both the personal and political ramifications of this biological process, as she emphasises that subjectivity involves “complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability” (Braidotti in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 31). Considering that *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*’s central plot device is an abortion – a most poignant and taboo matter of ‘life and death’ – I deem it necessary to analyse the text with this materialist model of political and reproductive agency in mind.

It is apparent when reading Wicomb’s non-fiction that agency, creativity, and failure are significant avenues of ethical and aesthetic experimentation to the author. As she discusses J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), for instance, she is consumed by the

way that the character Friday dresses in the author's cloak, "a moment marked both by the impossibility of reproducing the story of the colonised and by indeterminacy", and the resultant fact that "our aspirant author's strategy of impersonation does not father a text" ("Setting" 148). Analysing a story by South African author Ivan Vladislavić in the same article, she admires how his "ideas are stillborn" (148); his text does not have a traditional teleological trajectory but rather "proclaims its *failure*" (149; emphasis added). Even when discussing the authorial self in African American modernity, the writer is consumed by reproduction and its negation. Moving on to a critical appreciation of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), she pays particular attention to how "[e]choes of the modernist intertexts of 'Prufrock' and 'The Waste Land' [sic] abound [...], but as a counter-discourse rather than an endorsement of T.S. Eliot's unreal city of alienation and spiritual sterility" (150). All three of these writers share an experimental approach to literary aesthetics, but Morrison is one of Wicomb's formative influences; she is even quoted in an epigraph in her latest novel, *October* (2014). Similarly to Morrison, the author is experimenting with symbols of displacement and barrenness – which I have argued can be found in both European and southern African modernity – but her aim is not to entirely negate the narrative trajectory of development found in a typical Bildungsroman. I thus build upon ideas broached by Wicomb's non-fiction, and Braidotti's feminist formulation of autopoiesis, by contending that the preoccupation with racialised reproduction in Wicomb's first fictional work is not merely literal. Rather, it also symbolises the problem of feminist self-formation in autocratic, nationalist political climates.

Alongside its exploratory interactions with modernity and Modernist disillusionment, there are various other aspects of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* which suggest there is much to be made of viewing it as an experimental Bildungsroman. This proposition gains credibility when one considers the bodily *Bildung* which Frieda undergoes throughout the narrative. In the first few sections, she does not describe her figure (or her feelings about it) in any great detail. When narrating her childhood in retrospect, for example, she observes that she “had no idea that [she] was fat” (28). It is also during this period that her mother is completely present within the narrative, as well as in the family home. In “Bowl Like Hole”, the reader is introduced to Frieda as a passive child who curls up in the foetal position. This arrangement of the child’s body symbolises that she has not yet exited the domestic realm and interacted with the outside world, and therefore has not yet encountered others (who will, it is later revealed, be prejudiced against her because of her appearance). Instead of speaking to, or even seeing, Mr Weedon (the white man who owns and visits the gypsum mines near her home), Frieda chooses to curl next to a familiar maternal presence. Once she reaches puberty, however, two changes occur: she becomes deeply uncomfortable with her body, and her mother is almost exclusively written out of the narrative.

Gypsum is a soft, pale sulphate mineral which may be used as a construction material, fertiliser, or as an additive to food and cosmetics. All of these utilisations literally relate to development: of buildings, of plants, or of a human’s bodily form. From the outset of the text, concrete elements of the literary environment symbolise a deeper concern with identity and narrative formation. In the following sections, I begin by discussing literally autopoietic environments and systems which recur

throughout *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. Next I analyse how Wicomb redefines desire through various corporeal developments, particularly with reference to vegetation, food, and the female body. Lastly and most importantly, I argue that the text's very formation evokes an extended abortive metaphor that is autopoietic in its scope. The supposed resurrection of Frieda's mother in the final section of the text is what informs my reading of Wicomb's experimental literary form. It is of the utmost importance that the narrative closes with two coloured women speaking freely, without interruption from repronormative discourse. In communicating with her mother, it is implied that Frieda may begin to navigate the territory between her genetic identity, her bodily desires, and her agentive potential. She is no longer yearning nostalgically for her 'roots', but rather looking promisingly at the mountain in the presence of a female role model whom she, in turn, has come to 'mother'.

Abortive Environments

In the first section of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Frieda recalls how she used to lie curled in a ball beneath a kitchen table whenever Mr Weedon came to visit her village: "At an early age," she narrates, "I discovered the advantage of curling up motionless in moments of confusion, a position which in further education I found to be foetal" (1). The reference to learning here is more than literal, as later she will not only go on to attend university (an unusual opportunity for women of colour under apartheid) but also experience an unplanned pregnancy. Yet in childhood, with no premonitions of her future, lying in this position appears to alleviate anxiety

about the white man's visit and the "topsy-turviness of the day" (4).⁶⁸ Frieda recounts that "the flutter inside" subsides when she draws up her knees to "became part of the *arrangement of objects*, shared in the solidity of the table and the cast-iron buckets full of water lined up on it" (2; emphasis added). Thus from the outset of the novel, the distinction between the animate and inanimate, or organic and inorganic, is subject to imaginative reinterpretation. The young girl's empathy with the system of objects that surrounds her is indicative of a subversion of anthropocentric ideology. Yet, as various inequalities between human and nonhuman agencies in the text suggest, the protagonist is not renouncing humanist models of development so much as experimenting with them. There is no universalising gesture here to 'making kin' with collective social desires. Rather, Wicomb's political priority is to imbue coloured female embodiment with a sense of autopoietic agency.

In the foundational years of her schooling, Frieda has two female friends called Sarie and Jos who are also intellectually gifted. When the latter spies on a woman giving birth, she is disgusted; she tells the others, and "with an oath invented by Jos we swore that we would never have babies" (28). By the conclusion of the narrative it is revealed that Frieda keeps this promise, but it is unclear what happens to the other two girls: their friendships end when they are forced to leave school and help provide for their families, since their names are never mentioned in later sections of the text. Yet Wicomb is not simplistically suggesting that working-class women have no choice when aligning with natalist values. The story of Tamieta, a

⁶⁸ "[T]hese topsy-turvy days" which so vex the narrator are, in a sense, redolent of the very presentation of a foetus before birth (1): babies are typically born head-down, unless they are in the breech position.

poor woman who works in the university canteen, demonstrates how reproduction and motherhood are not necessarily bound together, and that women may desire only some – or none – of the stages found in heteronormative narratives of personal development. The cook is delighted to adopt her cousin's baby after it is revealed that the mother cannot adequately care for her: "She who adored little ones would have a child without the clumsiness of pregnancy, the burden of birth and the tobacco-breathed attentions of men with damp fumbling hands" (45). Tamieta's decision to "witness the miracle of growth" without falling pregnant challenges heteronormative scripts surrounding fertility (61), such as the assumption that people only adopt children if they are physically incapable of conceiving. Women may simply not *desire* to be pregnant, or to give birth, and yet still display stereotypically maternal qualities. This character's agency represents non-reproductive parenthood, complicating natalist/anti-natalist and pro-choice/anti-abortion dichotomies.

Similarly to Tamieta, Frieda is reluctant to give birth, although her reasons are less to do with an aversion to sex than with the ethical consequences of bringing a child into the world under apartheid. During her undergraduate years, she conceives a child with Michael, the white student whom she is secretly dating, and decides to have an abortion. Although her friends are aware of the relationship, she is reluctant to tell her family, but not because interracial sexual activity is illegal under apartheid law: she fears that her parents would press her to settle down with Michael in the hopes of raising their social status. Tamieta and Frieda thus embody two transgressive, if not entirely compatible, attitudes to the institutions of marriage and family. When one considers the title of the text and the chapter featuring the

abortion, it is clear the latter woman is exercised by the potential shame of being exposed, of being unable to keep a secret in a society where everyone is invested in monitoring and judging each other's actions. Frieda's fears of being shamed for supposed deviance involve both what is inside her body (the unsupportable foetus) and external appearances: although the abortionist ignores her skin tone and assumes her 'English' accent means she is white (78), there is the implicit recognition that the foetus would also develop to carry markers of miscegenation. The inside-outside dialectic is central to both new materialist theory (which challenges such binarised distinctions) and to my final chapter on Bessie Head, whose own indeterminate racial identity informs much of her fictional writing on individual desires and collective social issues in rural Botswana.

Sitting on the bus with Michael's wallet clutched in her handbag, Frieda internally recounts the story of Jesus's betrayal and crucifixion, and visualises how Judas "howls like a dog" with his "concealed leather purse" (72). On the surface, the parallel between her material situation and Judas's in the parable are suggestive of her disloyalty to the foetus in her womb. She even imagines that other people in the bus suspect she is pregnant and intending to terminate. Yet a few moments later, there is a shift of their two metaphorical roles, and a struggle for dominance ensues: "the foetus *betrays* me with another flutter, a sigh. I have heard of books flying off the laps of gentle mothers-to-be as their foetuses lash out. I will not be bullied. I jump up and press the bell" (72; emphasis added). It is Michael, not Frieda, who contemplates bringing the pregnancy to full term; in contrast with 'gentle' women, the protagonist does not even entertain the notion of *being* a 'mother-to-be'. This repronormative wording – which frames pregnant women in the future tense,

assuming they will want to be parents – foregrounds how choosing education over motherhood is usually perceived as a disloyal act. Yet, as she recalls stories of gestation actively interfering with the intellectual lives of women, Wicomb’s narration subtly begs the question: if embryos really *are* fully-formed persons, with all their legal rights, then should they not, also, be held accountable for contravening their responsibilities? In short, if both the woman and unsupportable foetus are embodied agencies, then who is betraying whom?

It appears Frieda is herself uncertain how to respond to this possibility. Even when imbuing the foetus with the immaculate more-than-personhood of Jesus – his “sad, complaining eyes” – she resolves to “resist” all guilt (72). Moments later she deviates from revering the foetus as divine (and framing it within Judeo-Christian spirituality) by evoking animal imagery. Recalling the words Michael told her (the quote which informs both the title of this section and the text), she confesses, “I am lost, hopelessly lost, and as my mind gropes for recognition I feel a feathery flutter in my womb, so slight I cannot be sure, and again, so soft, the brush of a butterfly” (67). The sensation that the narrator is describing here is known colloquially as ‘quickening’, a word that for centuries has referred to the stage of pregnancy when a foetus’s movements are first felt (*OED* def. 4).⁶⁹ Quickening, in other words, is a traditionally recognised indicator that the baby has not been ‘lost’ in utero – a compelling further complication of the text’s title and its associations with (birth) origins, deviance, and exposure. This experimentation with the

⁶⁹ Writing in 1765, British legal scholar William Blackstone notes that the quickening has historically been used to determine whether or not a terminated pregnancy constitutes murder, homicide, or manslaughter (388). Many – but not all – people still see this to be an important milestone in a foetus’s development, although it does not affect contemporary laws such as the 1996 South African CTOP.

butterfly-wing trope is taken to even further extremes by Yvonne Vera's engagement with tragedy in *Butterfly Burning*, as I discuss extensively in chapter 3. Comparison of foetal kicking with "fluttering" is one of the most common tropes in the discourse surrounding pregnancy (73); while Wicomb is creating a three-way relationship between the human, the nonhuman, and the divine, the animal is not necessarily symbolic of animist spiritual beliefs. As Frieda walks to the abortionist's and feels "[a]nother flutter", however, she thinks of "moth wings struggling against a window pane" (77). In this moment, she braces herself for the termination by reimagining the foetus-butterfly as its stereotypically drab, nocturnal counterpart. The foetus, which is not the product of a miracle but ordinary sexual intercourse, develops through a range of animalised associations while remaining one autopoietic form. This transspecies metamorphosis negates any associations with sunshine, colour, and (re)birth which may have been evoked earlier. It also dissociates the phenomenon of foetal kicking from the formation of legal personhood. Importantly, both of the animalistic metaphors render the foetus as a living subject, but the image of the shapeshifting moth is suggestive of ambiguity and transformation, thus continuing one's suspension of moral judgment.

The section preceding "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town" is titled "A Clearing in the Bush". It opens with Tamieta fixating on an itch on her back, an embodied urge which she interprets as "something ominous", and ends with her marching "chin up into the bush, to the deserted station where the skollie-boys dangle their feet from the platform all day long" (37; 61). I read the section's conclusion as a premonition of gender-based violence inflicted upon the woman's body by *skollies* or hooligans for several reasons. It is of particular importance that

Tamieta meditates that she is tired of things “creeping up on her, catching her unawares, offering unthinkable surprises” (61), since sexual violence is commonly committed against women in South Africa. Particularly, those who are perceived as lesbians may be victims of corrective rape, a hate crime perpetuated by men who purportedly attempt to ‘cure’ women of homosexual desire (Di Silvio 1470). Although her choice to remain chaste is not necessarily indicative of queer identity, her rejection of sexual advances may be perceived as such by predatory men. Further, “Home Sweet Home” (the section following “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town”) describes a raped woman’s corpse that is found in the river: “She would have torn her clothes in the first struggle, and I buried my head in the pillow and squeezed my palms into my eardrums to fend off that death” (91). The narrative develops, in these sections, to contemplate a trinity of ‘killings’: of an adoptive mother, of a foetus, and of a mule. Here the notion of killing is problematised not only since Tamieta’s rape and/or murder in the clearing is unnarrated, but also because of moral and narrative ambiguities surrounding the three deaths.

I have already explored how both the pregnant woman and the foetus are likened to betrayers in the titular section of the text, and how this challenges the apartheid regime’s classification of most abortions as murder. In the case of “Home Sweet Home”, the narrator is similarly preoccupied with questions of moral personhood and classifications, particularly when she sees a mule that is endangered by a landslide at the riverbank. Importantly, she is visiting the river to escape her extended family, who remain unaware that she terminated a pregnancy from an interracial relationship. Frieda is also reluctant to tell them she lives alone and so invents a communal living situation with her fictional landlady Mrs Beukes: her

relatives “are pleased at the thought of a family, comforted at the Beukes’s ability, in common with the rest of the animal kingdom, to reproduce themselves” (86). This scene highlights two recurring thematic tensions in Wicomb’s oeuvre. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the paradox of coloured identity, as shown by the family’s simultaneous pride and internalised prejudices, and their desire for Frieda to transcend the racial classifications imposed upon them. Second, Wicomb is acutely aware here of how racist animalisation often underlies antinatalist discourse (as exemplified by Frieda’s sardonic tone). This is indicative of a trend throughout her writing: she frequently foregrounds humans’ animality, but chooses to “cling, if periodically, to the humanist notion of a core self that is essential to the possibility of resistance” (“Five Afrikaner Texts” 367). The idea of a core self implies a certain allegiance to fixed definitions of personal identity that operate under the same logic as the anti-abortionist position that any and all human forms should be granted legal personhood. Yet complications remain in the ‘periodic’ nature of Wicomb’s humanism, which appears at times to parallel the “revolutionary humanism attuned to nonhuman landscapes” that Hantel reads in Wynter’s formulation of autopoiesis (Hantel 64). I am interested in exploring the tensions between the human and the nonhuman presented in this section of the text, and not only (or even primarily) because mules recur throughout Judeo-Christian spiritual imagery. The body of the mule is a most autopoietic form: as the offspring of a horse and a donkey, it cannot reproduce due to an uneven number of chromosomes.

Although they are proud of her academic ambitions and creative success, Frieda’s working-class family are puzzled by her interest in political activism, calling her “stubborn as a mule” (86). Through this cliched comparison, she is

immediately aligned with the animal that struggles against quicksand. As she watches from the riverbank “on which [she] *theoretically* stand[s]” (90; emphasis added), the mule appears to shapeshift: “Transformed by fear its ears alert into quivering conductors of energy” (103). Here new materialist theories of ‘vibrant’ intra-actions are not sufficient to help the animal; only a benevolent and fully autonomous organism can assist in such a scenario. The fact that the feminist narrator chooses *not* to act is of particular significance. Like the mule, Frieda and the terminated foetus are construed by society as hybrids (as revealed by the etymology of ‘mulatto’, a term used historically to refer to mixed race persons). Her decision not to tell anyone about the animal’s death is thus not only illustrative of her reticent character – contrary to her family’s beliefs, she is not as tenacious as she seems, as she chooses to let them remain blissfully ignorant of the constant exoticisation of women of colour – but is also symbolic of her earlier decision, that “guilty secret” (101). Important, too, is her disgust with the mule’s “*grotesque* dance”, “like an ill-trained circus animal”, and subsequent “lack of *desire*” to search for the water-spirits of her childhood (103; emphasis added).⁷⁰ The mule’s death serves to thematise the cyclical inevitability of gendered crimes committed upon *human* subjects, whether this is the ‘mulish’ narrator or the rape-murder victim. As in “A Clearing in the Bush”, Wicomb sets a fatal scene, but the section ends abruptly, before we are sure of what exactly has been witnessed. The reader is only left with ambiguous allusions to environmental actors like bushveld, quicksand, or “water spirits” that may or may not signify death (103). Read together, the three

⁷⁰ Disgust and (its negation of) desire feature in various other sections of the text, as I shall discuss further in this chapter.

‘killings’ challenge the reader to consider which lives are assigned the most value, and who (or what) suffers as a result.

Conversations with men in the protagonist’s community also raise interesting questions about women’s identity formation and their exercising of reproductive agency. In “A Fair Exchange”, Frieda engages in a sustained conversation with Johannes September (nicknamed Skitterboud) about his estranged wife Magriet (who is named Meid by a white farmwife). Skitterboud tells her that his wife knew she was pregnant and “wouldn’t have allowed [him] to hit her if it wasn’t for the baby in her belly” (143). His justification of domestic violence is horrific, yet also semi-conceivable given that many women with unsupportable pregnancies in apartheid South Africa were forced to seek illegal abortifacients, unsafe surgeries, or to try to induce miscarriage through any other available means. It is implied at the end of this section that Magriet’s attempts to abort are unsuccessful when she insists that the pregnancy is “the fault of the magistrate; that the tokolos lurking about Rooiberg ha[s] an uncommonly large nose” (143). The tokoloshe is an evil water sprite in Zulu mythology that may tease children, carry people away at night, and even commit rape or murder.⁷¹ Magriet suggests that the new-born baby looks unusual because a tokoloshe impregnated her, raising unresolved questions about the child’s genetic makeup and the cyclical violence of racialised exoticisation. Zulu spirit-figures also commonly tend to move between worlds, further complicating the twinned issues of origin and birth. Was she raped by the magistrate, a man who had “quite a small nose for a white man” (142)? Or is the child’s father Giel, the stranger

⁷¹ Considering implicit sexual violence in the previous section, I would argue that it is not a coincidence that the tokoloshe is mentioned shortly after Frieda’s aborted quest to find water-spirits.

who arrives “without [her] consent” the day after she first claims to see the tokoloshe, and with whom she later elopes (134)?

At the end of the old man’s monologue, and a subsequent change of focalisation to Frieda, this remains unclear. Yet in the face of the magistrate’s ruling that the husband owns “Everything, from the children to the last scrap of underclothing [his wife] is wearing”, Skitterboud feels nothing but “shame” (142-143). The white man’s law dictates that the woman and children are his property, but in his mind, Magriet has the freedom to decide whether she wants to remain his wife – and to continue, or terminate, a possibly illegitimate pregnancy. Ironically, Skitterboud’s rationalisation for slapping her is that he views her as an independent adult who must face the consequences of her actions, rather than as an infantilised object. His ‘humanisation’ of Magriet is uncomfortably compatible with the perpetuation of gendered violence, causing one to question whether humanist ‘pro-choice’ rhetoric can truly terminate casual sexism and domestic abuse.

Another section set in the narrator’s hometown, titled “Behind the Bougainvillea”, further explores unequal power relations between the protagonist and men in the community by experimentally subverting the infantilisation and exoticisation of women. In this section Frieda’s father pleads with her to visit the local doctor to have a cough examined; when she finally agrees, he “smile[s] gratefully, a child placated by a parent’s exasperated, Yes, all right” (110). As I discuss at length in my previous chapter on Wilma Stockenström’s *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, the inversion of gendered power dynamics – particularly between father-figures and young women – has the potential to queer reproductive expectations. Without being overly optimistic about the potential of gender non-

conformity in challenging patriarchal authority, there is the sense here that Frieda's succumbing to his wishes is indicative of experimentation with a non-reproductive sense of parenthood and agency. While the older man is infantilised, the woman acts in an authoritative capacity: Frieda is no longer the pathetic, foetal figure who "hugged [her] knees and listened to the afternoon wind piping mournfully through the cracks in the old school door" (115), the place where her childhood sweetheart Henry Hendrikse left her love letters. This fact is reinforced when she accidentally meets Henry in the queue for the doctor's waiting room. In his previous letters he had written that Frieda's "breasts were two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies" (116). The young Henry's words are inspired by the romantic tradition which portrays men as explorers and women as docile environmental actors. In adulthood, however, *she* is compared to a conqueror of terrain: "an awe-struck Gulliver" surveying his "great caverns of [...] flared nostrils" and "distorted mountain of flesh" (111). Frieda's relationships with both of these male figures from her childhood are transformed as she starts acting on her desires and comes to reject the passive, repronormative roles which are so often reserved for women. In a development not free from problematic implications, she mimics masculine structures of power to attempt to attain agency. Yet queer ecological scholarship shows the logic of patriarchy is so lacking in coherence and rigidity that it does not allow for a simple inversion and occupation of two opposing positions; in other words, it remains dubious whether displays of (hyper-)masculinity are truly affirmative or expressive of 'natural' femininity (Sandilands par. 3), whatever that expression may mean.

This much is proven by the fact that it is not only men in the protagonist's life who influence her later views on childbirth. The last few segments of the text reveal that interactions between people of all genders are pivotal in reimagining reproductive agency. In the penultimate section, Frieda visits the house of an old university friend called Moira who has since married and had children with Desmond, a man who "has no interest in the kitchen" (153). In this domestic environment, something catches Frieda's eye; she describes it as "a curious object on the windowsill from which the light bounces frantically. It is a baby's shoe dipped into a molten alloy, an instant sculpture of brassy brown that records the first wayward steps of a new biped" (153). One cannot but think here of the famous six-word story, "For sale: baby shoes, never worn", which is often attributed to Ernest Hemingway (with whom the protagonist, a graduate of literary studies, would presumably be familiar). Although Moira's baby lives and learns to walk, the *reproduction* of the baby's shoe is just as unwearable and useless as the pair in the above short fiction. The metal object thus has no function other than serving as a sentimental, aesthetic signifier of procreative achievement – a feat which Frieda critiques by viewing the child in cynical economic and evolutionary terms.

Even in the last section of the text, the narrator's views on childbirth do not appear to have changed significantly since her decision to have an abortion in early adulthood. An older Frieda opines on a visit to her mother,

Such a poor investment children are. No returns, no compound interest, not a cent's worth of gratitude. You'd think gratitude were inversely proportionate to the sacrifice of parents. I can't imagine why people have children. (171)

In the economy of desire, Frieda believes, sex is not worth the risk of parental responsibility. It is worth noting that here, as earlier, she is using a distanced vocabulary to hypothesise about human reproduction. Yet this time the *mulish* and *childless* Frieda is detailing the disadvantages of bearing children to her own mother. The issue, in short, is personal. There is much irony to be found in the narrator's attitude, particularly when she has a dream during the same visit to her mother that she is in the United Kingdom once more, and that her neighbour is pegging up nappies in the freezing English weather. The mention of the 'Mother Country' is particularly fascinating, and foregrounds what may be perceived as contradictions between the protagonist's rationalisation for antinatalist views and her own ungrateful actions. Frieda has forsaken her biological family by moving to England, severing her ties with the lower-class community from her childhood. She also decides to 'kill off' her real mother in her stories (172). Yet her repeated returns to South Africa in adulthood, and her final visit to her childhood home – where it is implied that her mother is her only surviving parent – complicate the traditional narrative trajectory of a young scholar from the colonies who finds personal freedom in the English academic environment. If there is any *Bildung* to be found by the end of the text, it is her growing realisation that natalist culture and colonial expansion share rhetorical nuances, embodying the patriarchal urge to control women's reproductive autonomy.

Frieda's desire to tell her neighbour that "she's wasting her time" is thus not merely because it is snowing (174). Rather, it is symbolic of the female subject's deepening misgivings with natalist *and nationalist* values. Her recurring contemplation of gendered violence – perpetuated by men of all races – causes her

to suspect that the birth of a new, democratic nation will remain nothing more than fiction. But before I interrogate how Wicomb experiments with ‘killing off’ patriotic discourse in her literary treatment of abortion, it is necessary to further explore literal and symbolic connotations of disgust and desire that are apparent in the text.

Seeds of Disgust, Desire, and Deviance

Disgusted with the traditional signifiers of coloured identity, Frieda’s mother scolds her child for speaking Afrikaans and playing with other children.⁷² When Mr Weedon visits the village, Mrs Shenton is impressed by – and eager to emulate – his enunciation of English words. She is particularly struck by the way he pronounces “Bowl like hole, not bowl like howl” (9), a fact which she reports to her husband, who is ironically the local English teacher. Hidden in the parents’ incorrect pronunciation is a real word, which remains hitherto unaddressed by reviewers and critics alike: *bowel*. I believe the digestive system is alluded to here for several reasons, and that it signifies more than the mere butt of a linguistic joke. Taking this emergence of the obscene in the early stages of the text as my point of departure, I will now explore how literal and metaphorical figurations of craving and disgust are central to understanding Wicomb’s transgressive formations of sexual desire and reproduction.

Nourishment appears as a central thematic motif from the first section of the text. One of the few instances where Frieda and her mother speak involves the use of a milk separator, and it reveals how internalised prejudice operates on not only

⁷² In adulthood Frieda also grows averse to Afrikaans, although her reasoning is more to do with its gendered and “babyish diminutives” (90). For further discussion of this language and infantilisation, see my previous chapter on Wilma Stockenström.

racialised, but also sex- and species-based, models of oppression. In the passage in question, Frieda's mother takes a cow's milk to test the device which divides the white liquid into "yellow cream" and "thin bluish milk" (5). The young narrator accuses her mother of stealing food from the baby calf, to which she responds with "eyes beg[ging] as if she were addressing the cow herself, as if her life depended on the change of routine" (5). Milk is the most defining element in the inherent mammalian connection between mother and infant – an assemblage that is severed in dairy production, as the liquid is consumed by human adults instead of young cows.⁷³ Unlike the "deathsmilk of indifference" which I discuss in my analysis of *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (Stockenström 20), the milk in this instance is undeniably *real*, the product of a maternal animal. Yet its rendering through the separator means that it loses its nutritional value for the calf, and is transformed into two unnatural products that are, according to Frieda's mother, designed for human consumption. The young girl's disgust with her mother's actions, and her decision to sympathise with the (young and/or female) animals,⁷⁴ foreground what will later develop into indifference displayed towards childbirth. In other words, the homogenised 'labour' of milk churning is only one of many gendered roles which she views with suspicion.

Indeed, as Frieda grows older, the twinned threats of domestication and paid domestic work – fates common for most women of colour under apartheid – loom in the imaginations of both herself and her father. When waiting for the train which

⁷³ For an analysis of milk's metaphorical role in Wicomb's oeuvre – particularly *October* – see Stobie (2018).

⁷⁴ Her concerns with ethical eating are further evident when she "herd[s] the mound of rice on [her] plate" during a family gathering (84), and later explicitly states, "I have a vegetarian diet to thank for my not altogether unbecoming plumpness" (117).

will take her to the so-called ‘white school’, the pair’s fixation on her future is perhaps most apparent. As he passes her a bag of raisins, “A terrifying image of a madam’s menstrual rags that [she would] have to wash swirls liquid red through [her] mind” (24). The transition from food to female embodiment here is particularly interesting. On first reading, it appears bizarre that the thought of blood does not evoke disgust in Frieda, or at least cause her to lose her appetite. Yet seconds later, her father hands her a stick of biltong and she confesses, “I have *no control* over the glands under my tongue as they anticipate the salt” (24; emphasis added). Anxiety about his daughter’s bodily and personal development is repressed by Mr Shenton into stress-eating, a coping mechanism that is then transmitted to Frieda and with which she struggles for the rest of her academic career. “The habit of obedience is fed daily with second helpings of mealie porridge” (24), she explains, imbuing the literally nurturing role of her primary caregiver with ominous undertones. By studying hard and attending university, she does escape the role of housecleaner; yet gendered servitude is still coded into Frieda’s dietary habits (given her father’s influence and constant interference, to use the word ‘choices’ here would seem ill-judged)⁷⁵. Accordingly, her relationship with food serves as a further symbol for women’s struggles for reproductive agency.

Even when Frieda tries to form self-assurance and agency through learning, her uncomfortableness with sexual maturity remains. For example, it is the narrator’s *father* who lectures her about childbirth on her fourteenth birthday with a quotation from Genesis 3:16; “[I]n pain you shall bring forth children”, he says,

⁷⁵ With this word one is reminded again of how the rhetoric of ‘choice’ fails to encompass the multiple complex reasons why a woman may feel that a pregnancy is unsupportable.

before mentioning in passing, “Your mother was never regular” (22). He goes on to literally ‘feed’ her unhealthy relationship with food by equating good nutrition with high social standing:

Don’t leave anything on your plate. You must grow up to be big and strong. We are not paupers with nothing to eat. Your mother was thin and sickly, didn’t eat enough. You don’t want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot’s. (24)

This section is the first instance in the text where Frieda’s mother is referred to in the past tense (with a derogatory term for the Khoisan, from whom many coloured people are partially descended). In the wake of the maternal figure’s apparent disappearance, it is important to note that Wicomb is engaging with a common trope in feminist Bildungsromane: that of a working-class young woman attempting to improve her perceived social standing by feeding her body in accordance to the values of an older, male character. Readers of postcolonial fiction may be familiar with examples such as the anorexic Nyasha in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*,⁷⁶ or more recent novels that address the link between gendered performance and feeding, like Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2015) or Yoko Tawada’s *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (2016).

Yet here Wicomb is also engaging with a longer history of feminist fiction that finds its roots in Modernist experimentation. A notable illustration is Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), who expresses a similar attitude

⁷⁶ Clare Barker provides an analysis of this novel in her 2011 monograph *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality*, arguing convincingly that Dangarembga’s feminist fiction not only “generates its own theoretical intervention into feminist postcolonial cultural politics” (63), but also provides a culturally situated model of disability and illness in Zimbabwe. As I stress in my introduction, I am similarly interested in investigating how theorisations of materiality emerge through southern African feminist fiction.

towards food once she is introduced to fine dining as a young adult; she eats a whole jar of caviar when reminded of her grandfather's reverence of the delicacy, and confesses, "I developed the habit of running my eye down those huge, handwritten menus [...] until I'd picked the richest, most expensive dishes and ordered a string of them" (22). This attitude to food is not the only similarity between *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and *The Bell Jar*. Both protagonists, for example, are intelligent young women who use education in order to escape their working-class upbringings. Another commonality is that both Esther's and Frieda's *Bildungen* are decidedly gynaecological; the former suffers abnormal and excessive bleeding after sexual intercourse while the latter undergoes an abortion. The authors' shared interest in, and indebtedness to, such influences is indicative of a broader preoccupation within Modernism: figurations of sexual sterility as metaphor for the failure of one's identity formation.⁷⁷ It is also no coincidence, I would argue, that both writers allude to the writing of James Joyce: Esther's thesis proposal concentrates on *Finnegans Wake*, and Plath occasionally employs Joycean techniques such as transcribing phrases acoustically, like the train conductor's call of "Root Wan Twenny Ate!" (Plath 109).

Wicomb, like Plath, employs similar techniques to James Joyce – from frank descriptions of bodily functions to vignettes told from the perspective of interrelated characters. There is certainly room for further investigation of references to Joyce in Wicomb's fiction. The short-story sequences of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and *The One That Got Away*, for instance, appear very similar to the structure of

⁷⁷ See Christina Hauck (2003) for a study of abortion and "reproductive failure" in European and American Modernism (225).

Joyce's *Dubliners* and the "Wandering Rocks" section of *Ulysses*. Wicomb also briefly mentions Leopold Bloom's breakfast in *David's Story* (35). The influence of the Irish writer further suggests her preoccupation with corporeal sensations like desire and disgust. Indeed, since Frieda is forced into multiple disturbing and uncomfortable situations – whether this is an abortion or a sexually coercive tryst – Wicomb is clearly experimenting with many definitions of deviance. In the titular chapter of the text, for instance, Wicomb displays an almost Joycean awareness of corporeality (for both writers frankly address traditionally taboo topics). However, while Joyce's interests are more scatological and ironic, Wicomb interrogates how the unpredictability of Frieda's desire – whether gastronomic or sexual – is mirrored by the excreting, bleeding female body, particularly when she undergoes an abortion. In this section, the definition of a "good girl" – wealthy, white, married, or chaste and childless – contrasts strongly with her identity as a working-class, coloured, unmarried, and un/pregnant woman (80).

When Frieda is travelling to the abortionist's house, she eavesdrops as a housekeeper on the bus tells her friend that women who have premarital sex must be careful, because most men would not "have what another has pushed to the side of his plate [...] [like a] bay leaf and a bone" (71). This metaphor calls to mind Carol J. Adams's landmark feminist-vegetarian monograph *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), which theorises how patriarchal and carnist cultures intersect and perpetuate each other by positioning females as "flesh" to be "consumed" (72). The woman on the bus asserts that even privileged women are subject to objectification and degradation because of their sexual desires or identities. In the case of women of colour, who are likely to be fetishised or animalised, racial identity further intersects

with the politics of desire. Yet the woman's friend retorts that purportedly promiscuous women may disgust men who compare them to leftover food like "yesterday's bean soup, but we women mos know that food put aside and left to stand till tomorrow always has a better flavour" (71). In the light of Adams's synthesis of feminist theory with ethical vegetarianism, it is interesting that the second woman chooses to refer to a meat-free meal to imply that the sexist trope of 'leftovers' is both inaccurate and indicative of such misogynists' sexual conservatism. Instead of playing into shameful associations of women's flesh and bones with consumption, the woman embraces desire through a metaphor of vegetal excess.

Plant-based foods further figure for thematic tussles between physical embodiment and metaphor as Frieda leaves the bus and walks to meet Michael before the abortion. One of the most important passages of the text uses craving as its point of departure, as she stands before a dried fruit shop and describes its wares:

Rows of pineapple are the infinite divisions of the sun, the cores lost in the amber discs of mebos arranged in arcs. Prunes are the wrinkled backs of aged goggas beside the bloodshot eyes of cherries. Dark green figs sit pertly on their bottoms peeping over trays. And I too am not myself, hoping for refuge in a metaphor that will contain it all. I buy the figs and mebos. Desire is a Tsafendas tapeworm in my belly that cannot be satisfied and as I pop the first fig into my mouth I feel the danger fountain with the jets of saliva. Will I stop at one death? (77)

The above references to infinity and the uncontainable are immediately reflected by Wicomb's deft movement between a range of evocative imageries. All colours of the spectrum (contained in pure sunlight), and the vivid hues of dried fruits, are linked to gruesome images of tapeworms and saliva by a small but crucial clause: the

protagonist's reflection on the 'refuge' of 'a metaphor that will contain it all'. This sentence serves as a semantic bridge between the animalised – and anthropomorphised – food and Frieda's return to dwelling on more human matters.⁷⁸ Yet it also, importantly, foregrounds how the fruits should be read as both figurative and literal entities. Figs are a particularly interesting choice of symbol. Not only does the concept of the fruit have abstract connections to female sexual embodiment and desire in the Bible (again, one is reminded of Mr Shenton's evocation of the Book of Genesis), but furthermore, the origins of *real* figs are equally complex and relevant to Frieda's anxieties about the abortion.

In cases where fig trees cannot self-pollinate,⁷⁹ female fig wasps pollinate their inverted flowers (which then grow into the fruits that humans and animals eat). The wasp loses its wings and antennae when it enters the immature fig and dies shortly after laying eggs and pollinating the fruit. The fact that the fig-wasp is essentially ingested by the fruit, and that it dies before its offspring are hatched, is particularly interesting for our discussion of autopoiesis. One cannot but think here of Deleuze and Guattari's wasp-orchid rhizome (11), a model of an interspecies assemblage that is famously discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (first translated into English in 1987, the same year that *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* was published). Their model explains how the labellum of an orchid develops to resemble the form of a female wasp in order to be pollinated by a male. In this act, the wasp becomes part of the orchid's reproductive apparatus; yet the plant-

⁷⁸ 'Gogga' is an informal Afrikaans word, derived from the Nama language, which refers to insects. In imbuing the fruit with qualities of celestial, animal, and human bodies, Wicomb creates a metaphorical hybrid.

⁷⁹ It is important to stress again here that neither cross-pollination nor self-pollination are inherently autopoietic processes, but they are often aided by individual living systems' intra-actions.

organisation also becomes part-wasp. (Although the plant produces an enzyme which breaks down the body and exoskeleton of the insect, there are some who avoid eating figs for fear of ingesting animal content.) This is an expression that accounts for genesis and agency, exceeding dualistic notions of mimicry or representation. Wicomb's developmental symbol thus holds theoretical resonance with materialist theories of becoming, as well as biological facts of growth.

Another significant association of the fig is the tree that forms its origins. The common name 'strangler fig' refers to a number of species, including some endemic to South Africa, that germinate upon and grow around other trees: they differ from true epiphytes like orchids in that their roots eventually reach the ground. Although they are not actually parasitic organisms, strangler figs often kill the trees they are embedded upon due to accelerated growth and competition for resources. Wicomb is thus approaching the same theme of parasitism that Stockenström does, but with even more layers of nuance surrounding questions of origins and complicity. Frieda's question at the end of the paragraph – 'Will I stop at one death?' – resonates most ambiguously. Sue Marais reads this rhetorical query as evoking the metatextual 'deaths' of Frieda's parents, as she 'kills off' her mother in her earlier stories and then her father in the final section of the text (40). Yet I contend that the imagery of tantalising fruit promotes even more forms of textual indeterminacy. It could be read as referring to the death of the wasps which pollinated the figs (food she craves, and is thus likely to overeat). Another alternative is that she is evoking the destructive symbiosis of the strangler fig, the not-quite epiphytic mirror of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. Finally, she may be asking whether her lack of discipline with food will lead to further, and more serious, moral transgressions.

Thus even before terminating her pregnancy, the protagonist is preoccupied by speculating about ethics at the end or beginning of life; the symbiotic mutualism of fig trees and wasps (and, indeed, strangler figs and other trees) serves as both a metaphorical and literal reminder of consumption and sacrifice, of reproduction and death.

A further complication in this passage is that Frieda imagines her hunger to be driven by a parasite, a 'Tsafendas tapeworm'. Although his name may be unfamiliar to the contemporary reader, at the time of writing Dimitri Tsafendas was infamous, especially amongst South Africans: the parliamentary messenger assassinated apartheid Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in 1966 by stabbing him in the House of Assembly, claiming he acted under the influence of a giant tapeworm that told him what to do. By evoking Tsafendas's name and his crime at several points in the text, Wicomb experiments with utilising Hendrik Verwoerd's death as an extended metaphor for the ethics and politics surrounding termination. Sitting in the cafeteria, Frieda and Moira discuss the assassination:

'Well, do you?' I persist. 'Can you imagine being a member of his family or anyone close to him?'

'No,' she says. 'Do you think there's something wrong with us? Morally deficient?'

'Dunno. My father would call it inhuman, unchristian. It seems to be as if common humanity is harped on precisely so that we don't have to consider the crucial question of whether we can imagine being a particular human being. Or deal with the implications of the answer. All I can tell of the human condition is that we can always surprise ourselves with thoughts and feelings we never thought we had.' (54)

That 'common humanity' is contingent upon the imagination is crucial, particularly because of the human mind's manifold possible responses to tragedy. Here Frieda

observes that *failure* of the imagination may either be because one fails to sympathise (with the ‘architect of apartheid’, and his family), or because one *can* foster fellow-feeling (with a murderer, or others who are seen as immoral – as she later will be by anti-abortionists). This exchange between the two young women serves as an important precursor to later narrative developments, especially since Moira is the only person with whom Frieda will discuss the abortion. Tsafendas’s may be a frustrated response to the mind that constructed an unthinkable political system, but it is still is a horrific and violent act. Frieda’s desire to abort the foetus may be read as immoral, but an unsupportable pregnancy would undoubtedly jeopardise her academic and creative careers. Here we are forced to contemplate how abortion may be labelled as ‘murder’ when such situations are so clearly divorced from one another – and to question how Frieda, as a coloured woman, may be classified just as ‘morally deficient’ as Tsafendas under apartheid law. Yet at the same time, her suspicion of the rhetoric of choice becomes quite apparent when she imagines that she is “persecuted by a *body of words* that performs regardless of [her] wishes, making *its own choices*” (98; emphasis added). The protagonist’s fixation on the ‘inhuman’ and ‘unchristian’, and her arrival at such ideas through discussing an intellectual written response, is therefore a further extension of the text’s concern with the development of dominant discourses surrounding women’s bodily and creative autonomy. Even the hybrid-form of a sustained abortive metaphor, it appears, simply cannot ‘contain it all’.

In equivocating the narrator’s bodily cravings to an organism named after Tsafendas, Wicomb is obviously foregrounding the socio-political setting of 1960s apartheid South Africa and its formative influence upon Frieda. Yet she is also

melding politics with the protagonist's *personal* life and ontological desire for freedom. One is reminded once again of Rosi Braidotti's shared interest in the term 'desire' and its queer potential.⁸⁰ In *Nomadic Theory* (2011), she writes of how desire and fear are interlinked instinctual reactions which patriarchal society attempts to control and pathologise by associating gendered, racialised, and animalised embodiment with deviance (82). Elsewhere she provides an alternative, and intersectional, definition of the term:

Desire is for me a material and socially enacted arrangement of conditions that allow for the actualisation (that is, the immanent realisation) of the affirmative mode of becoming. Desire is active in that it has to do with encounters between multiple forces and the creation of new possibilities of empowerment. It is outward-directed and forward-looking, not indexed upon the past of a memory dominated by phallogocentric self-referentiality. (2003: 57)

The forward-looking trajectory of feminist desire may appear, on the surface, not to be dissimilar to any other narrative *Bildung*. Yet Braidotti's theorisation is careful to stress how an understanding of autopoiesis as active and networked is central to this concept. In the case of Wicomb's novel, too, desire cannot be read with only one organism, or species, in mind. Frieda has a lifelong yearning for food, but the fig is a fruit of hybrid origins, an assemblage constitutive of multiple life-forces (to apply Braidotti's wording). After satisfying her craving she does not acknowledge the seed of doubt, or the imaginary tapeworm, until after the operation. Desire is thus an autopoietic force which kickstarts both the protagonist's and the narrative's formation. Wicomb experimentally inverts the deviance that Braidotti diagnoses as

⁸⁰ In the same interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin quoted earlier in this chapter, Braidotti uses the word no less than 10 times (20-38).

symptomatic of patriarchal control. It is of the utmost importance that the parasite is named after an ambiguously ‘white’ man:⁸¹ as she goes to meet Michael, it is the body of the oppressor which is coded as deviant. The tapeworm’s is a destructive agency that carries death; simultaneously, and even though she is left with “the kernel of shame” (86), Frieda recognises the termination of the foetus has allowed for a different kind of life to emerge. What is inside the gestating body – both the foetus itself, and shame that arises from disposing of it like a parasitic organism – is ultimately overridden by a desire to live and thrive.

In Wicomb’s novel, men’s desires are perpetually rendered just as taboo as the putatively immoral decision to have an abortion – if not more so. One of the first indicators of this fact is Mr Weedon’s bizarre behaviour when he visits the village. He is so “overcome” by “the earth, baring her bosom of rosy gypsum [...] [that he is] forced to look away, at a cloud that raced across the sky with such apparent panting that in all decency he had to avert his eyes once again” (6). That the mounds of fertiliser are feminised (both by their pink colour and the comparison to breasts) is more than coincidental. Yet just after fetishising the environment, Frieda perceives that Weedon sexualises the male workers, too: “his gaze shifted . . . ‘the men are doing a marvellous job’ . . . as his eyes settled on a rippled chest thrown back” (7). Environmental systems, women *and* men are all debased by his racist, libidinal gaze. The man certainly lives up to the phonetics of his name. At best, Weed-on is an intruder in the village who founds his success on the labour of others; at worst, it is implied, he is a sexual pest. What one defines as a weed is often dependent on the

⁸¹ As a man of mixed racial descent, Tsafendas was victimised for his dark skin tone, but nevertheless classified as white by apartheid officials. It is thought that his rejected application to be reclassified as ‘coloured’ may have provoked the assassination.

plant's origins: colloquial usages of the term show that any species that is out of place may be seen as 'undesirable'. This is particularly true of plants that are perceived as reproducing aggressively, as my earlier discussion of strangler figs shows. In a sense, then, the white man's looming presence and desire serves as an important reminder about the sexual violence of colonial and nationalist expansion. Further, it signifies how coloured identity is rooted in histories of sexual coercion, uncertain birth origins, and shame.

The pun on Weedon's name takes a further and scatological turn when Frieda recalls a childhood memory of playing house with another male figure: "I am still smiling at the boy as he deftly pulls a curious hose from the leg of his khaki shorts and, with one eye shut, aims an arc of yellow pee into the teapot" (23). Urinating upon the teapot, the little boy desecrates the clay shrine she made from the earth. Here the protagonist's aesthetic sensibility and creative energies are negated by a perverse action. Even when Frieda grows into adulthood, she continues to view the male body as alien and fearful. Particularly, when Henry initiates sexual intercourse he "deftly unzips his trousers and flicks out the *terrifying thing* of which [she] catch[es] a glimpse only" (123; emphasis added). The sex is not in any way a positive experience; Frieda's uncomfortableness with her own desire results in a confusing and uncommunicative encounter that borders on sexual abuse. There is a line break after this scene, followed by a change of setting: she comes home to her father stooping over a peach tree, and the offer of coffee with cream (124). It is important to note here that immediately after her first kiss with Henry, Frieda is fed canned peaches and cream by her father (116). The reappearance of both foods – one, uncomfortably, the product of the milk separator from her youth – signifies that

the heterosexual encounter is *not* a signifier of personal development for the protagonist. By now it should be clear that there is a distinction to be made between the experimental deviance that Wicomb embraces and the abject actions of men in the text. This is made most apparent when such characters are, ironically, fixating on the supposedly grotesque female form. For example, in the penultimate section Moira's husband Desmond asserts that "a good figure in your youth is no guarantee against childbearing. There are veins and sagging breasts and of course some women get horribly fat; that is if they don't grow thin and haggard" (147). Frieda is determined not to react to his sexism, choosing instead to focus on the beginnings of a sickening pimple on his chin. Her silent refusal to be objectified, and her reversal of his gaze, speaks of a desire to transform associations of both womanhood and manhood, or domesticity and domination.

In the kitchen (and away from Desmond) Frieda speaks freely with her friend for the first time about the abortion and her relationship with Michael. It is only when she is offered one of the children's bedrooms that she feels any sense of bodily shame: "grotesque in the Lilliputian world of the child", Frieda cannot fit into a tiny chair and struggles to sleep in the "chaste little bed", with her "eyes wide open and follow[ing] a mad moth circling the rabbit-shaped lamp by the side of the bed" (162). Once again the narrator is likened to Gulliver, yet in this instance it is not in his diminutive form; she has grown since seeing Henry in the doctors' rooms. It is crucial that the shapeshifting moth reappears at this moment – but this time, it is together with an aesthetic object, shaped in the form of a rabbit. This symbol of irrepressible fecundity reinforces that neither her failed relationships with Michael nor Henry cause the narrator to discover herself. Rather, it is the fact that she is

finally able to discuss creation and failure with another woman of colour. I develop this point further in the next and final section of this chapter, exploring the text's formal experimentations with autopoiesis and the female writer-narrator as a creative force.

Creative Forms

Viewing its ten standalone segments from the outside (or the contents page), *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town's* very form is suggestive of autopoietic self-containment. Yet when one reviews each section's contents, sustained thematic preoccupations of the text quickly become apparent. This could cause one to receive it as if it is an allopoietic – or, as Dempster and Haraway would say, sympoietic – system which is organisationally open.⁸² But extrapolating the text's overall meaning in such a manner ironically adheres to a rather limited and closed understanding of self-referentiality. The *failure* of reproduction or allopoiesis in the narrative structure – from Frieda's abortion to her coercive separation from South Africa, and the subsequent decline of the apartheid regime – asks for a different reading to be performed. Developing an analogously literary approach from Braidotti's theorisation that the whole of each living system holds as much moral worth as each of its parts, we can analyse formal elements which recur throughout the entire text, and explore how they interact with Wicomb's thematic formations – and negations – of desire. Creating a bodily *Bildung* from plant-based lifeforms to

⁸² A recent example of such a reading is Meg Samuelson's "Oceanic Histories and Protean Poetics: The Surge of the Sea in Zoë Wicomb's Fiction". Samuelson's fascinating study is, by necessity, a brief overview that analyses the titular section (544–46); it would be even more interesting to consider how the river-estuary's flow in "Home Sweet Home" connects with, and possibly extends, this oceanic imagery.

more developed living systems, the text presents a perverse and forward-looking understanding of intra-actions and separations. Once again, one is reminded of the parallel between the metaphorical tapeworm and the aborted foetus. Frieda's supposed deviance is actually indicative of development – but in an autopoietic, rather than allopoietic, sense.

In one of her aforementioned essays, Wicomb writes appreciatively of “[Toni] Morrison’s curious use of deixis. The discourse refuses to provide unambiguous referents for ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘this’, ‘now’” (1990: 151). Operating in the legacy of Morrison’s experimentation, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* features similarly obscure and subjective interpretations: an intertextual signifier of germinating identities. This is particularly apparent when the narrative switches between female referents in “A Clearing in the Bush”. There is a sudden change to focalisation through Tamieta, who “rolls her shoulders and like a cat rubs against the bricks to relieve the itching of her back” (37), followed by first-person narration, and then a return to “she, Tamieta” analysing Frieda Shenton, “[t]he girl [who] speaks English” (46). To make matters more confusing, the same narrative technique is utilised in the story of Skitterboud’s wife, which is embedded in his conversation with Frieda in “A Fair Exchange” (136). These changes in perspective are only sometimes accompanied by a line break. Wicomb’s disjointed narrative style is further displayed when the protagonist remembers unwelcome sexual advances from several men on two different continents in “Behind the Bougainvillea” (122). Another instance of deixis is presented in “Home Sweet Home” when an older Frieda converses with Oom Dawid, who talks about “the white stones of our mother’s grave on the koppie” (95). The man may not be her literal uncle (the

Shentons' extended familial connections are rarely verbalised), but he is significantly older than her, which raises questions about who exactly 'our' mother may be, or why he chooses to use the collective pronoun. Paradoxes abound even in the very language of her home community. The Afrikaans phrase "Ja-nee" is literally translated as 'Yes-no' (94), but is used colloquially to signal agreement. It is repeated by both Oom Dawid and Frieda's own father: "Father licks his bone conscientiously and says, 'Ja-nee' with the sense of the equivocal born out of watching rainclouds gather over the arid earth and then disperse. 'Ja-nee' he repeats" (83-84). This quotation is of interest for several reasons, not least of all its subtle reference to Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Merging Modernist literary techniques like repetition with language from the local community, Wicomb experiments with creating a modern South African woman's Bildungsroman. The split of this feminist *Bildung* is navigated in material(ist) terms, as the above actions evoke an earlier conversation between two female characters about the paradox of men treating desirable women as 'leftovers'. Modernism and its deictic legacy thus foregrounds the manner in which discourse develops and is maintained, and how this is central to understanding Frieda's creative formation through autopoiesis.

In addition to intertextual references to European Modernist novels (and 'western' Judeo-Christian scripts), there are also elements of semi-autobiography, and instances where South African historical events merge with the fictional narrative. One of the many changes in focalisation reverts to Frieda thinking that her essay deadline has been extended by "a pet abdominal tapeworm [that] hissed persuasively into the ear of its Greek host, whose trembling hand grew still for a second to aim a fatal shot at the Prime Minister" (39). The assignment she is writing

is on Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a novel which evokes nothing but confusion in the narrator. Although she internalises that "Murder is a sin which should outrage all decent and civilised people" (42), she appears not to judge Tess – a character whose tragic fate is precipitated not by her own ambitions but by the failures of *others*. The timing and topic of the essay emphasises how Tsafendas's crime is a central key to understanding the supposed 'tragedies' which Frieda either suffers or commits (depending on one's views on abortion).⁸³

If the issues of language and metaphors mean it is unclear whether self-formation is achieved or not, then it is worth turning to one final manifestation of a creative form: that of the motherly figure, which reappears in the last section. Mrs Shenton is initially outraged by her daughter's stories, reading her absence – assumedly, the earlier sections of the text – as immoral and disrespectful (163). She is particularly offended by the mention of an abortion, implying that this, too, is quite literally mortifying: "You've killed me over and over so it was quite unnecessary to invent my death" (172). Both the racial and sexual associations of shame intersect and are epitomised by the narrator's mother, and Frieda, in turn, internalises these feelings. Yet while the narrative terminates without explicitly articulating her fate, it is important to stress that the concluding section does clarify that neither she nor Wicomb has 'written out' the maternal figure. The appearance of various motherly women in later stages of the text suggests that Frieda finds self-acceptance through nurturing female relationships and non-reproductive parenting. Her sexual naïveté and bodily discomfort are first discussed when she reunites with Moira (155). Next, her Aunt Cissie joins her in the airport bathroom, leading to

⁸³ Tragedy, as a literary form, is discussed in further detail in my subsequent chapter on Yvonne Vera.

another almost Joycean exchange about “beans and samp” while both women urinate (167-68).⁸⁴ The ultimate signifier of her identity formation, however, is the manner in which she grows to care for her mother.

Although Frieda writes Mrs Shenton back into the text after a conversation with Moira about how she would not be a good mother, it is significant that she is *tending to* the grieving maternal figure in the final scene. Her visit takes a crucial turn when she agrees to drive her mother to the Gifberge, a mountain range which her dead father always promised they would visit. When hiking up the mountain, she is no longer an insecure and anxious girl who desires to morph into a foetal form. One is reminded of the earlier inversion of patriarchal infantilisation: here the parent is physically weak, while her child offers to drive and informs her of the correct colloquial names for flora (180). After the long disappearance of the maternal figure, the now-adult narrator discusses issues ranging from her ancestors to hair straightening with another woman of colour. This is not to say that the women hold identical beliefs. Frieda is hyperaware of discursive violence, viewing nationalist symbols with suspicion and confessing that she has “no desire” to trespass on a farm for a better view of the valley (180). The fact that she and her mother do not agree on these issues is an important aspect of her self-formation – it suggests that conversations about women must be made *between* them, and that sometimes ethical solutions are not easily presentable. Yet she and her mother do reach something of an understanding as they see proteas growing on the fertile land and hum a folk song together that compares a young woman to South Africa’s national flower (177).

⁸⁴ Their discussion is also a reminder of similar vegetarian dishes in the text: sousboontjies (a stewed bean dish), stamp-en-stoot (beans and maize), and the bean soup that is mentioned in the conversation between two other female characters in the titular story. Any dismissal of this recurrence as a coincidence should be dispelled by the fact that beans are the *seeds* of leguminous plants.

Immediately Frieda asserts that she is only singing ironically about this nationalist symbol, and she further mocks her mother for asking her to uproot a protea bush so she can take it home. Her mother is quick to retort that “Those who put their stamp on things may see in it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn’t become what people think they inject into it” (181). Here her mother reminds her, surprisingly, that agency lies in materialist resistance. The protea represents the autopoietic process that the narrator undergoes: her development is not from reproducing with men, but from expressing care for her mother by taking her to an unnamed and untouched land. It is implied that while the ‘refuge of a metaphor’ is a fabrication, autonomy can be found by venturing forth into the material world and rejecting nationalists’ purported power over the landscape.

Shortly before Frieda meets her mother in the final section, Aunt Cissie “[dips] liberally into her sack of homilies and sow[s] them across the arc of attentive relatives”, by stating that “it never rains but it pours; still, every cloud has a silver lining” (169). She then concludes that “It’s in the ears of the young [...] that these thoughts must sprout” (169). In contrast to these clichéd turns of phrase, Frieda’s “terrible stories” may seem deviant and bizarre (182). Yet the formation of her identity from a young girl into a feminist writer, and her interactions with various women from her youth, demonstrate the importance of language in creating and sustaining one’s cultural identity. The final section of the text offers a transformative perspective on ‘uprooting’ the seeds of various oppressions. Frieda continually alludes to hybrid forms: a mule, parasitic tapeworms, the wasp-and-strangler-fig assemblage, or even animist fables interacting with Judeo-Christian symbolic systems (which are also concerned with personal development). Adopting a

caregiving role as a childless adult, she too grows to embody a transgressive formation of literal and figurative miscegenation. Rather than an interlinked short story collection, her narrative operates as an experimental engagement with the Bildungsroman genre, full of ruptures and terminations. All ten sections are formations that undo the erasure of female and foetal forms in controlling and colonialist discourse. There is a cumulative effect of formal developments, causing the text to form an autopoietic system of self-sustaining references and images. Ironically, Frieda reaches the point of locating potential agency by voluntarily separating herself from the 'Mother Country' and choosing to discuss the naturalisation of gender roles with women of colour. The mother is not dead; the narrator has come to confront her desires. If anything has been killed to achieve this formation, it is the violent rhetoric that simultaneously sexualises and infantilises women who opt out of reproductive parenthood.

Chapter 3

Beating Hearts or Striking Rocks: Tragedy and Transcorporeality in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

The previous chapter advances a transformative definition of development, equating it with autopoietic processes of formation rather than linear models of growth. Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera further transforms associations of development and crossovers between literal and metaphorical birthings in her 1998 prize-winning novel, *Butterfly Burning*, which tells the story of a rural woman who self-induces an abortion. In her preface to *Opening Spaces: Contemporary African Women's Writing* (1999), Vera recalls a scene from Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* (1993) in which a pregnant woman's corpse mysteriously gives birth after she is whipped to death (1). At the conclusion of her commentary, she returns to the theme of fertility by proclaiming that the authors of the collected stories are "witnesses, in that seemingly impossible birth" of African feminist fiction (5). Yet throughout *Opening Spaces* – and *Butterfly Burning* – it is the fear of childbirth which recurs for those living in rural and urban environments previously colonised by the British 'motherland'. Written after the 'birth' of postcolonial Zimbabwe in 1980, but set in colonial Rhodesia during the 1940s, Vera's novel utilises natural elements to figure for reproductive anxieties in previously colonised locations.

This chapter argues that Vera foregrounds transcorporeal or interconnected material systems similar to the ecological model of abortion stigma that I discuss in my introduction; creative forms which repeatedly manifest in her work include

human, animal, vegetal, elemental, or textual participants in ecosystems. After contextualising my analysis with an overview of the discourse of tragedy that surrounds both literal and literary discussions of reproductive agency, I perform a close reading of the termination of pregnancy in *Butterfly Burning*, paying particular attention to the interplay of organic and inorganic forces. Next I analyse the second abortion scene, which is often completely overlooked by critics in favour of reading the protagonist's suicide as the text's ultimate tragedy. The final chapter of the novel, I argue, resonates with various earlier appearances of in/organic agencies throughout the text. Having scrutinised these crucial (and hitherto under-investigated) passages and themes, the chapter concludes by considering how postcolonial feminism in the broader social and geographical context of southern Africa transforms the text's aesthetics – and, by extension, its ethical impetus to exceed humanist discourse.

Set in the Makokoba township of Bulawayo during 1946, *Butterfly Burning* is a short novel about a young woman named Phephelaphi who develops a sexual relationship with an older man named Fumbatha. Over the course of the predominantly third-person narrative, it is revealed that the protagonist was raised by two sex workers: Zandile, her biological mother, abandons her in infancy, leaving her in the care of her friend Gertrude. The domestic drama of Phephelaphi's upbringing foregrounds reproductive health as a primary thematic concern, which is reinforced when an unsupportable pregnancy impedes upon her plans to train as a nurse, resulting in a self-induced abortion. The text is composed of twenty-one brief vignettes – the more lyrical of which, on the surface, may seem to have little or no impact upon what many have read as its 'tragic' central plot point (see Shaw 92;

Primorac 2002: 107; Lunga 193). Yet despite such assessments of the abortion as a central conflict in the storyline, the literary event of the procedure remains relatively unexamined;⁸⁵ instead, most studies of the novel to date have focused on elements such as musical imagery, urban space, and repetitive time.⁸⁶ As a result, critics have failed to address the transformative ambiguities that surround the supposed tragedy of Phephelaphi's decision to terminate her second pregnancy by committing suicide. Performing a close reading of the first abortion scene – which unfolds over a strikingly large amount of discourse time – and the novel's final chapter, I argue that Vera resists heterosexist and repronormative understandings of gender dynamics and social development. The two terminations of pregnancy in *Butterfly Burning* explore materialist elements of southern African feminisms, thereby foregrounding issues relating to reproductive agency as well as the philosophical ramifications of treating all entities as potential political agents. The novel aestheticises animate and inanimate co-implications, but Vera's investment in centralising women's agency means that the text ultimately formulates a feminist ethics while still bearing witness to ongoing and intersectional social struggles.

Transforming Tragedy

Yvonne Vera died from AIDS-related meningitis in 2005. She was just 40 years old but had published one short story collection and five novels,⁸⁷ attracting significant

⁸⁵ Ranka Primorac's otherwise comprehensive 2002 analysis, for example, mentions in parentheses that the "ritual" of abortion is "superbly described in chapter 16" (106), but only engages very briefly with quotations from this chapter (which, at 14 pages, is the longest of the novel).

⁸⁶ There have been some discussions of materiality in *Butterfly Burning*, such as Sarah Nuttall's consideration of how material "things" come to signify intersubjectivity between subjects and objects (186). I am less concerned with cities and assemblages, focussing instead on how human reproduction is represented through – and transformed by – materialist ecologies in the novel.

⁸⁷ Frustratingly for critics and readers alike, her sixth manuscript titled *Obedience* remained unfinished.

international acclaim for using literature to thematise ethically charged issues like abortion, incest, infanticide, and rape. The writer lived in her country of birth until 1987, when she chose to read for her BA, MA, and PhD at York University in Toronto. Although she returned to Zimbabwe for a few years preceding her final trip to Canada, Vera's personal, professional, and academic papers are currently housed at her alma mater; much of my argument in this chapter is informed by research from her recently re-catalogued holdings in the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections.

As Sarah Kastner notes in an excellent 2016 article, it may initially seem difficult to reconcile the 'silence-breaking' reputation of Vera's fiction with the fact that she chose not to disclose her HIV-positive status during her lifetime (213). The contrast between her public and private personas becomes more apparent when reviewing her records and letters: even in emails to close friends and family members, her health is often elided as a topic of conversation.⁸⁸ Some may be tempted to read the author's silence as an indication of the tragic disjuncture between literary ethics and lived realities at the tail-end of the so-called AIDS crisis; although medical treatments were being developed in the early 2000s, social stigmas about homosexuality, racialised poverty, or overgeneralised risk factors were still fairly widespread. Yet I follow Kastner in resisting this urge. Could it be the case that Vera's decision not to discuss her diagnosis is actually indicative of agency, particularly a decision to prioritise her artwork and resist being read as a victim?

⁸⁸ A notable exception is an email correspondence between Vera and Mark Dixon on 29 November 2004, when he writes with information about which drugs worked best when she was first hospitalised. The printed version of the email, in which Dixon also criticises George W. Bush's presidential campaign, is headed by an advertisement from Yahoo Mail for *The Apprentice* featuring Donald Trump. Reading in 2019, it is sobering that the current US president threatens to significantly curtail Americans' access to (particularly sexual and reproductive) healthcare.

Kastner argues convincingly that “[b]y assigning agency to the land that is not determined by human meaning, [Vera’s fiction] claims an insurgent form of agency in her own silence” (224). Following chapter 1’s reflections on an ethics of attentive listening in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, I am interested in further exploring how *Butterfly Burning*, another abortion narrative culminating in suicide, surpasses human (and humanist) meanings in aestheticising silence, indeterminacy, and agency.

Like Zoë Wicomb, whose literary debut was published 11 years prior to *Butterfly Burning*, Yvonne Vera’s fiction thematises ecological and reproductive intra-actions in southern African environments. An earlier manuscript of *Nehanda* (1993) contains many moments of multispecies growth (fittingly, this version of the novel is titled *Bird of Bright Plumage*). A densely imaginative example examines ceremonies and rituals surrounding childbirth:

From dreams would come life, and growth. Old men borrowed lives from the branches of trees, until they could pass on to the unborn the fantastic images they had witnessed. In cheerful voices the women celebrated their shelter-giving selves, and saw new existences come out of the dreaming air. They too were in a state of birth, and growth. After the agonising birth they had witnessed they rose from the tattered mat and practised to walk; their footsteps bore signs of a majestic language that would lead them safely into the future. They clapped their hands and created new songs to help clear the path into new lives. When they did not sing their lips parted, and waited. The air waited to be *transformed* into the ecstasy of their release. The women saw images of themselves reflected in the motionless lake in the sky. With words compelling them through the intersection of time, they recognised their future selves. (161; emphasis added)

Most notable here is the way the living and the ‘unborn’, the present and the future, are melded through transformative repetitions.⁸⁹ Waking from dreams of labour, women are imagined as toddlers when they rise and seemingly learn to walk again. Elderly men at the brink of death are also involved in this dreamlike conversation with those who are yet to be born. Yet the connections between the villagers and nonhuman agencies exceed mere biological connotations of materialist intra-actions. Their actions are demonstrative of an understanding of personal development that is measured through intersecting continuums, rather than the teleological model which colonial chronologies proffer. Traditional associations of birth with festivity and death with tragedy are likewise called into question. This has radical implications for many rites of passage celebrating life stages, but the evocation of the so-called ‘unborn’ foregrounds how abortion, too, is transformed when reading ideas of growth in this new light.

Tragedy is perhaps one of the most easily recognisable literary forms: tragedies often involve a hubristic tempting of fate, the death of one or more characters, and, ultimately, an unhappy ending. Paul Hammond studies examples from classical, renaissance, and neo-classical literature in his monograph *The Strangeness of Tragedy* to argue that tragic protagonists are estranged from their environments through the genre’s transformation of language, space, and time. The temporal is perhaps the most obvious dimension where this displacement is apparent; in contrast to comedy, Hammond notes, “tragedy forces events to their conclusion, refusing time for reflection and repentance and recovery” (7). One

⁸⁹ Related to this meshing of chronologies, it is worth noting Vera changes this passage – which remains otherwise almost exactly the same – to the present tense in the final version of *Nehanda* (1994).

should note, however, that postcolonial literature is not included in his discussion. There are so many variations of tragedy – including works such as Wole Soyinka’s Yoruba dramas that destabilise the genre’s apparent Eurocentricism⁹⁰ – that it is worth pausing to consider to what extent Vera’s thematic treatment of ethical dilemmas is participating in this literary tradition. Yet similarly to Hammond, postcolonial critic David Scott explicitly addresses the fact that tragedy is tied to circular understandings of time (Scott 801). Through an analysis of Orlando Patterson’s novel *The Children of Sisyphus* (1965), Scott argues that the tragic vision in the postcolonial text is “in effect, a structure of anomic, Sisyphian repetition” (805),⁹¹ and that “[i]n such a world it is scarcely possible *not* to choose badly, no matter what the context of *choice*” (806; original emphasis). From the shared concerns of Hammond and Scott, one can deduce that cyclical chronologies define the tragic form. Unavoidable recurrences appear in tragedies from classical literature to contemporary writing; in a sense, then, the very repetition of *repetition* as a technique and theme is the tragic genre’s primary defining marker. Repetition figures as both a lack of choice on the part of the characters, and the fact that the author is bound to certain literary conventions which have been rehearsed since antiquity.

The result of evoking repetition through a text’s content and form is that agency – both of the human protagonist, and of the forces who may or may not

⁹⁰ Although tragedies often feature dramatic plots and many classic examples are plays (such as Greek tragedies or Shakespeare’s dramas), it is important to note that tragedy, as a literary form, is not synonymous with theatrical work. This study dissociates tragedy from dramatisation, favouring discussion of the novel form. For more on Soyinka’s African drama, see Van Weyenberg (2011).

⁹¹ His point is immediately reinforced by the reference to Greek mythology in Patterson’s title. Not coincidentally, Patterson’s cultural history of slavery is integral to my analysis of Wilma Stockenström’s abortion narrative *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*; see chapter 1 for my discussion of his theoretical work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982).

determine the future – is complicated, particularly as “the boundaries of the human world, and of the human self, become permeable” (Hammond 12). In canonical tragedies, this often involves imbuing abstract concepts like Fate or Justice with agency. In the case of Vera’s novel, I will argue, all matter is imbued with agency to complicate the nature of tragedy itself. Scott takes a Hegelian approach to the tragic and its destabilising of human actions and agency, arguing that in contrast to melodrama’s tendency to prioritise one actor in a conflict, postcolonial tragedies present both forces in a confrontation with equal legitimacy (801). His reading of such subjective indeterminacy has radical implications for the literary treatment of ethics at the beginning and end of human life. The termination of pregnancy is often figured as tragedy in public discourse (whether this is by those who vehemently oppose the procedure and catastrophise it as murder, or by those who support it but with the clause that it is a ‘last resort’ for desperate cases only).

Let us ignore for a moment the fact that abortion does not necessarily result in trauma. In fact, let us go further and accept the claim that abortion is tragic. If this is the case, and if tragedy involves the confrontation of two or more equally legitimate sets of interests, then what does this say about the comparative worth of the developing foetus and the pregnant person? One must conclude that both the foetus and woman are growing agencies, not that one life is more sacrosanct than the other. The rhetoric of tragedy thus ironically does not serve the purpose which anti-abortion activists would have it do – that is, privileging a foetus’s ‘rights’ over the wellbeing of a woman. It seems, then, that there is a disjuncture between tragedy as literary *event* (traditionally associated with unavoidable disaster, the thwarting of

one's agency) and *form* (a more indeterminate matter, encompassing moments of both death and development).

Scott argues that despite readings of supposedly unrelenting pessimism in *The Children of Sisyphus*, the novel is a “generative literary site” in which postcolonial themes like nationalism and political sovereignty and tragic themes such as conflicting actions and agencies are united for both ethical and political purposes (802). He states that the text “asks us to give up the comforting assumption that self-realisation is guaranteed by the rational agency and moral commitment of the new postcolonial subject, or that an existential space of belonging is guaranteed by the new postcolonial state” (802-803). This ethical-political problematisation of nationalism is rife in Vera's academic work, as I shall discuss in further detail shortly, and has also become something of a marker of her oeuvre in the academy. In an introduction to a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on Vera's fiction, Liz Gunner and Neil Ten Kortenaar rightly assert that “[b]oth Vera and [Dambudzo] Marachera re-vision history away from the impassioned cultural nationalism of the songs of liberation [...]. Both distance themselves from the nationalist romance genre of some postliberation Shona fiction” (Gunner and Ten Kortenaar 2). Yet, much like those critics whom Scott claims have overdetermined Patterson's cynicism, Gunner and Ten Kortenaar move from this fascinating point to declaring that Vera's fiction is largely marked by “pessimism” (4). I would argue against the equation of ethically challenging material with moral pessimism. Is her narration of terminations of pregnancy really indicative of an “absence of

ordinariness” (3-4),⁹² or are we erroneously assuming that abortion is not a regularly contemplated reality for women lacking access to reliable contraception in southern Africa? Echoing my earlier question about reading Vera’s silence as a generative and agentive act, could it be that we are not listening to the transformative potential of tragedy as an aesthetic form?

Unprovoked, in an interview with literary scholar Ranka Primorac, Yvonne Vera announces how abortion is a most misunderstood theme in her fiction: “It’s an unspeakable theme and anyone who I’ve seen in Zimbabwe has omitted to mention that [*Butterfly Burning*] is about abortion” (Vera in Primorac 2004: 160). This seeming squeamishness on the press’s part is proven by the author’s archives. Of all her recorded correspondence with Zimbabwean and international journalists, the only mention of abortion is found in notes for an oral interview by Sebastian Trinki, who astutely moves from discussing medical ethics to questioning whether the dialogic elements of Vera’s fiction suggest a melding of Modernist and African literary traditions (par. 7-9).⁹³ Journalistic features for *Worldpress* and *The Sunday Mail: Zimbabwe News Online* discuss how she ‘breaks the silence’ by writing of rape, incest, and infanticide (Soros par. 2) – but abortion remains curiously unaddressed even when *Butterfly Burning* is mentioned by name. The same is true of a *Daily News* article by Fanuel Jongwe which announces that the novel won the 2002 German Literature Prize.

⁹² I use the term ‘termination of pregnancy’ in deliberate contrast to Gunner and Ten Kortenaar’s “pregnant mothers [who] abort” (3). The latter wording frames the pregnant person in the future tense, normalising the desired outcome of fertilisation as motherhood.

⁹³ Trinki’s questions appear to have been sent in advance of a public appearance with the author; unfortunately, her response to this fascinating line of inquiry is not recorded.

There are some popular beliefs in southern Africa that ritual cleansing is necessary for improving a woman's fertility, either in the weeks following an abortion or when women are trying to conceive (Hodes 2016: 92). Yet, although the force of ritual is important in some of her work, Vera resists traditionalist tropes in her depiction of the physical procedure of abortion. 'Ritual' seems somewhat ill-fitting when applied to abortion in particular, given the word's association with sequential rites that are often performed in religious and communal settings; although solemn and more commonplace than one might believe, abortions are hardly normalised as ceremonial cultural customs. Furthermore, it is vital to note that the emphasis in traditional rituals is to exacerbate a woman's fertility; abortion is not seen as a rite of passage so much as an undesirable event to be rectified or circumvented. Nancy Rose Hunts cites the example of women who were forced by both colonial authorities and Meru chiefs to perform their initiation ceremonies earlier than planned so as to avoid any unsupportable pregnancies and resulting abortions (301). As I discuss in my previous chapters (and particularly in the case of Wicomb's fiction), the residual association of terminations of pregnancy with shame and even witchcraft means that abortion is not a ritual *per se*. Vera conveys both fertility rites and abortion through the literary technique of repetition, but this one commonality is not sufficient evidence to label the latter as rituals, as Primorac does (2002: 206). Rather, these transformative repetitions reflect a broader experimentation with tragedy as literary event and form.

I have already expressed that most readings of the novel state Phephelaphi dies "tragically" (Hunt 296); furthermore, Nancy Rose Hunt reads the protagonist's suicide as an 'alternative' to abortion, a point which my later literary analysis

contests. Helen Cousins's 2010 reading of abortion, infanticide, and sterility in Vera's work, however, provides some interesting insights that I wish to develop further. She supplies a critical interrogation of Zimbabwean parenting in *Butterfly Burning* (37), arguing that Vera is making a point about "the cultural construction of African and Zimbabwean motherhood" (32). Cousins's most original contribution is her focus on both motherhood and fatherhood and "how men can be integrated as responsible nurturers through 'mothering'" (38). Although her reading of gendered roles is not framed through queer theory, I find it to be a most intriguing and productive starting-point. While pursuing Cousins's line of inquiry, the emphases in my study are somewhat different: my reading grapples with the land (both its aridity and fecundity) and interrogates graphic biological imagery in both abortion scenes. Furthermore, I am more concerned with reproductive agency than the issue of parenting (be this maternity or paternity). My literary analysis focuses on literal and figurative birthings: the latter includes 'birth of the nation' tropes as well as gestational implications of the novel's colonial setting (Rhodesia). Both of these figurative models of birth are rejected in the text, without clear alternatives emerging in their place. In this sense, the novel is as sceptical of liberationist as of paternalistic rhetoric, though perhaps most suspicious of the usurpation of such discourse by nationalist interests.

Returning to her interview with Primorac, Vera continues to explain why *Butterfly Burning's* narrator describes the full process of terminating her pregnancy. She is careful to stress the material reality of how the abortion is induced, tackling subject matter which many Zimbabweans view as unthinkable:

How can I write about thorns and such things? But I wanted to. And I felt very much that I wanted to write a novel about my own city. About the people here. About the land. And this story when it developed, as I was writing it, I wanted to incorporate into the body of the story the land itself. Elements of it. You know, how [Phephelaphi, the novel's heroine] feels. In that chapter you can see that it opens with a wish, a feeling which heralds the emotion of what kind of vegetation she would like to experience, that would liberate, that would give her some freedom [...] and the land is implicated in the act. (161)

From these words one can infer that the novel's organic and elemental imagery serves a vital purpose in conveying emotional content with an ethical impetus. I use the word 'vital' in this description of Vera's feminist ethics to deliberately evoke the queer vitality presented by Bessie Head's fictional corpus; it is of no coincidence, I would argue, that the Zimbabwean author references Head in both her dissertation (1991: 8) and her doctoral thesis (1995: 279).⁹⁴ Phephelaphi's corporeal agency is not merely mirrored by the metaphorical state of the vegetal landscape. Rather, the environment comes to acquire its own agency which intermingles with, and even determines, her decision to abort the unsupportable foetus. The vegetation is not a source of nourishment or comfort. Its agency is far more duplicitous and even violent in some aspects, challenging repronormative views by exceeding humanist associations of reproductive health with 'rights'. As the writer herself states, this novel's crucial contribution to society is "[t]o go into the moment of the abortion, and say it; and moment-by-moment of a woman's feeling of tenderness towards herself, and violence towards herself: both those things" (Vera in Primorac 2004: 166). Thus, while the novel does not didactically privilege a singular point of view, its duplicity clearly centralises *women's* feelings about agency. In short, its

⁹⁴ See my final chapter for a detailed discussion of Head's influence on Vera, Wicomb, and Stockenström.

experimentation with the ecological model of abortion stigma does not detract from feminist issues, but rather illustrates a richly intersectional and ethical approach to storytelling.

The new environment of an independent Zimbabwe is also at the forefront of these concerns about literary figurations of landscape and ecology. In her Masters dissertation on images of women in Chinua Achebe's writing, Vera criticises the Negritude movement as an exemplary ideology that attempts to positively reclaim African identities and origins through nationalistic myths of maternity:

[The] preoccupation with manhood, operating under the posture of nationalism, is complemented and reinforced by the imaging of the African woman as Mother Africa. The symbol of Mother Africa is manifest in nationalistic poetry by African males. [...] European influence diminishes under the renewed sense of wholeness brought by Africa idealised as mother: the poet recuperates from a sense of loss and indirection imposed by Western influences. Such poetry of idealisation remains inadequate for arriving at the concrete reality of Africa or womanhood. (1991: 2)

The Mother Africa trope creates homogenous portraits of both womanhood and the African continent. Woman is figured as inherently nurturing, even before taking on a maternal role; national politics and particularities are overlooked in favour of an idealised and gendered 'origin' of cultural roots.⁹⁵ Vera is thus clearly disillusioned by postcolonial theories and literatures that fail to address material reality or that create negative and/or unrealistic representations of women. Analysing Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960), she argues that the character Clara's abortion thematises a conflict between traditional and modern values (83) – but there are

⁹⁵ For a full exploration of the distinction between origins and beginnings, see chapter 1.

several dissatisfying outcomes of merely turning from mythologised representations of maternity to an equally clichéd representation of modern womanhood as callous or unfeeling. One major concern is the predicament of those who cannot mother, who face emotional and social problems for something that is ultimately not their choice (94). But perhaps most crucial is the fact that Achebe does not narrate the abortion from Clara's point of view, choosing instead to focus on a male character's perceptions of the event (83). Writing at least seven years before the publication of her own fictional abortion narrative, it is conceivable that this is a formative realisation for Vera. For in *Butterfly Burning*, the event of abortion is repeatedly conveyed through densely material *forms*, not as an abstracted report. Abortion (and, implicitly, Phephelaphi's suicide) is not the only route to freedom available or the only 'way out'. Rather, tragedy is rendered indeterminate and the reader is invited to consider a plethora of corporeal co-implications. Vera transforms the naturalisation of abortion as tragic content through her repeated and achronological melding of ecological and elemental forms.

Much like the topic of abortion, environmentalist concerns have historically been associated with the tragic and miserable in public discourse, a point which is discussed and challenged at length in feminist ecocritic Stacy Alaimo's latest monograph, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (2016). *Exposed* succinctly and elegantly summarises the anti-anthropocentric theories of thinkers such as Karen Barad, Bruno Latour, Claire Colebrook, and Rosi Braidotti, while also augmenting the author's previous work. Specifically, Alaimo expands on her concept of 'transcorporeality' which was initially coined in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010). One of the most

insightful definitions of this term is provided in chapter 3 (which analyses the pleasure of nakedness in environmentalist protests as a literal manifestation of the titular ‘exposure’), where the author asserts that “human bodies are not only imbricated with one another but also enmeshed with nonhuman creatures and landscapes” (2016: 67). Transcorporeality calls to mind Judith Butler’s observation that “the body is always given over to modes of sociality *and environment* that limit its individual autonomy” (30-31; emphasis added), but Alaimo deviates from Butler in that she renders her explanation in materialist, and material, terms. In chapter 6, the author grapples with humanity’s impact upon the ocean in the Anthropocene. Laying open the image of a spiral-shaped shell, Alaimo evokes an “aqueous posthumanism” (2016: 124). ‘Decentralising’ the human subject is a common goal in posthumanist theory, but Alaimo’s technique is distinct in that she renders humans as one component in a multispecies and agentic liquid, a slippery substance that can never truly hold any centre at all. This metaphor, in turn, calls to mind Astrida Neimanis’s queer ecocriticism and particularly the concept of ‘posthuman gestationality’ (Neimanis 68–69), as discussed in chapter 1.

Furthermore, Alaimo speaks to a matter at the heart of new materialism by highlighting the disjuncture between metaphor and metonymy. Although the former is often utilised by activists and the media to raise public awareness about ecological disasters, it ultimately relies on relating two distinct concepts, images, or bodies. Metonymy, in contrast, is described as what will allow us to “catalyse contemporary commitments to [...] creatures and ecologies” so that “the human becomes more liquid, less solid” (Alaimo 2016: 123). This is not to say, however, that Alaimo’s aim is to *surpass* the human. Her assertion that “one must descend [into one’s species

identity], rather than transcend” speaks to a concern expressed throughout the monograph about the importance of not tending towards ascetic environmentalism (161). Self-reliant conservationists advocating for protection of the ‘natural world’, for example, ironically preserve a transcendentalist dichotomy between the sanctified environment and the social realm. Rather, Alaimo reconceptualises the human by immersing – or ‘enmeshing’ – the reader in a hypnotic burst of spirals: a pattern which recurs throughout nature in vegetal forms, zoology, and scientific formulae like the Fibonacci sequence.⁹⁶ Although some new materialism may be guilty of overinterpreting the metonymic potential of scientific processes, this image is an important and accurate one, and I will reference it later in my literary analysis.

For the sake of providing a critical perspective on new materialist trends, it is worth pausing to consider the implications that such terminology may hold for the formal ‘matter’ of postcolonial writing. As the preceding chapters have already illustrated, discussing realities that underrepresented groups face should be a central concern for both new materialists and postcolonialists, but only if these struggles are not falsely universalised in the process. This vexing issue of representation is also crucial for those who wish to discuss abortion without relying on a simplistic pro-choice and pro-life dichotomy. Theorising the grammar of identity in transnational literature, Stephen Clingman draws on linguist Roman Jakobson’s structuralist figuration of metaphor and metonymy along two axes, where the former serves the linguistic function of substitution, and the latter involves combination or contiguity (13). In addition to these associations, Jakobson conjectures that the metaphorical

⁹⁶ The Fibonacci sequence is a set of integers that is created by adding two previous numbers in the sequence to create a new value. Most modern mathematicians start the sequence at 0, but others consider the first two numbers to be 1 and 1. After the second appearance of 1, the next numbers appear in a sequence that begins as follows: 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, ...

bears resemblance to literary romanticism, whereas realism appears to rely on metonymy. From these sets of generalised observations, Clingman concludes that metonymic prose tends to allow us to imagine interlocking combinations of possibilities rather than a plethora of similarities or dualisms. This much is argued when he states that metonymy “guards against *representation* in specific senses, where the definition of identity claims to represent the sole and absolute possibilities of the self, whether our own or that of others” (15; emphasis added). Rather than further complicating vexed ethical issues through abstraction, Clingman suggests, one can approach a realistic and nuanced sense of representation through the aesthetic technique of metonymy.

Yet ‘representation’ is a vital concept which calls to mind both the legal and moral associations of abortion advocacy, and the aesthetic issue of conveying reproductive agency through fiction. As Vera’s dissertation and thesis repeatedly stress, African literature and literary criticism tends *not* to represent women, whether through metaphor or metonymy – this may be due to the fact that female characters are caricatured and rarely act as narrators, or because women writers face more hurdles in sharing nuanced stories. It seems remiss to create a grammar of transnational literary identity without acknowledging the extent to which sexual difference has been inscribed within supposed ‘realistic’ literary representations. One should question whether literary experimentation with metaphor can truly be discounted due to a supposed complicity with dualistic models of difference. For if tragedy as a literary form is interested in advancing subjective indeterminacy, then creative, experimental, and metaphorical approaches are undeniably important in creating a sense of textual duplicity. David Scott argues that from the Hegelian

tragic perspective, “we are both authors and authored, but it is never self-evident when we are more one than the other” (802). This is surely a generative approach for reading an author like Vera, whose personal and artistic ‘tragedies’ are so clearly linked to the issue of authorial agency. Furthermore, her thematisation of ethical dilemmas means that there is also a creatively metafictional dimension at play; to a certain extent, the reader’s own views on abortion shape the extent to which Phephelaphi’s decision is tragic.

While Clingman’s emphasis on literary realism through Jakobson blunts the edges of Vera’s imaginative and metaphorical imagery, one must stress that *Butterfly Burning* certainly melds moments of metaphor with metonymy and elements of *agential* realism. The word ‘transcorporeality’ not only neatly describes Karen Barad’s image of foetus-and-mother-as-phenomenon, as I discussed in my introduction, but also resonates with the physicist’s assertion that “‘environments’ and ‘bodies’ are intra-actively co-constituted. Bodies (‘human’, ‘environmental’, or otherwise) are integral ‘parts’ of, or dynamic reconfigurings of, what is” (Barad 170). Alaimo’s emphasis on metonymy in her transcorporeal framework is useful for several reasons. Firstly, she distinguishes between environmental justice and environmental health. While the former is more concerned with legal theory (and thus less relevant to this chapter), the latter decentralises the human subject by focusing on the physical permeability of the body and the dangers this may pose (Alaimo 2010: 23). For example, people who live in areas with high levels of air pollution are more likely to be susceptible to lung disease. Another illustration of environmental health is growing public concern about the toxicity of supposedly benign materials like plastics, which are ubiquitous in most urban households and

may pose risks for sensitive individuals. The use of the word ‘risk’ here is especially interesting, since many contemporary arguments for abortion pose the medical procedure as a form of self-defence (Colb and Dorf 87). In cases of unsupportable pregnancies, the foetus is characterised as dangerous or even parasitic (as discussed in chapters 1 and 2), despite the fact that it has not deliberately chosen to jeopardise the woman’s health. It is vital to stress that transcorporeality is only ‘new’ in the sense that it is a neologism; the idea of theoretical overlapping is not something that Alaimo claims to have created. She writes that “as a theoretical site, [transcorporeality] is where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science studies meet and mingle in productive ways” (2010: 3). In other words, she is not interested in creating a hubristic new materialism, but rather in analysing how transcorporeality emerges. To use the duplicitous present tense, Alaimo’s theory poses itself as *becoming* a productive means of understanding environments. This theory departs from older forms of materialism by concerning itself with the flows of language, metaphors, and metonyms within material systems in the current moment.

Jacques Lacan writes that “[i]f the symptom is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so, any more than to say that man’s desire is a metonymy. For the symptom *is* a metaphor . . . as desire is a metonymy” (175; original emphasis). Following on from my theorisation of desire as agency in the previous chapters, it seems apt to privilege metonymy in the following discussion of Vera’s creative form. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, as I have already noted, most readings to date have tended to gloss over the matter of abortion, diagnosing it as nothing more than politicised metaphor. I take seriously the physical permeability of

the body in Vera's text and how this informs the extent to which Phephelaphi is a tragic protagonist. Another issue is the figure of the author herself, and *her desires* to aestheticise political and ethical issues through a form that does not adhere to literary realism. It must be stressed, however, that many of the instances of metonymy discussed below are deliberately rendered indeterminate through their interaction with more traditionally metaphorical literary techniques (often describing medical *symptoms* of pregnancy and/or its termination). The two abortion scenes employ metonymy and transcorporeality to transform understandings of the tragic: tragedy is not simply a linear event, but rather a queer form encompassing multiple subjectivities. Echoes of communal and interspecies interests here cause one to recall Greta Gaard's ecofeminist ethics of attentive listening, which I adapt in my analysis of Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. Importantly, Stockenström's is the only other abortion narrative in this study which terminates with the protagonist's desire to commit suicide. Although both texts culminate in what is commonly conceived as tragedy, the human characters remain hyperaware of environmental agencies, even during their dramatic performances of abortion and self-immolation. This opens up new associations for the genre: for tragedy involves not only the demise of personal development, but also collective desires.

Transcorporeality in the Abortion Scenes

Public discourse surrounding abortion often revolves around issues of personhood – specifically, establishing when an embryo (or foetal tissue) can be said to have gained personal agency. Rhetoric used by anti-abortion activists often draws attention away from the physical capabilities of the foetus in the present and focuses

instead on its future potential as an autonomous human being. Simultaneously, discourse surrounding abortion highlights the agency – or lack thereof – of the person who is pregnant. In a 2016 article on the diversity of African feminisms, Pontsho Pilane states that “the root of feminism is choice” (12). Indeed, this very word has become emblematic for ‘pro-choice’ activists who stress how a woman’s reproductive decisions are *personal*. This section, however, is not concerned with persons – or rather, it does not adhere to the typical conflation of humanity with personhood that often leads to a stalemate between anti-abortion and pro-choice activists. Instead, it suggests that we should reconceive the very notion of agency. To best represent how new formulations of this concept are created, I analyse how Vera counter-intuitively prioritises women’s agency by *transforming* humanist (and typically anthropocentric) discourses of personhood. It is with this in mind that I perform a close reading of *Butterfly Burning* in conjunction with Stacy Alaimo’s articulation of transcorporeality.

Chapter 16 of the novel begins a week after Phephelaphi learns that she is pregnant (in the previous section, she lies awake during Fumbatha’s absence and wonders whether to bring the pregnancy to term). The chapter’s opening sentence – a simple, declarative “No” (113) – not only predicts her decision to abort the foetus, but also instils a sense of negation which is reinforced by descriptions of the earth as a “bare and spare [...] stretching flat land” (114). At surface level, such images may appear to serve as metaphors for the protagonist’s fear of sexual reproduction. According to this reading, her body becomes analogous with the landscape, which is figured earlier in the novel as “swaying twin hills with a valley in between, grooved, wet with newborn things” (81-82). Choosing to pursue a professional career path

instead of motherhood, Phephelaphi seemingly subverts the notion that she is the gendered “land beneath [Fumbatha’s] feet” (28-29). She thereby questions the metonymical links that connect the ‘earth-mother’ trope to reified ideas of Mother Africa (and African motherhood). However, while it is important to equip women with political agency and the power to choose their futures, such an understanding perpetuates gender essentialism by continuing to define womanhood (and female sexual creativity) in relation to nature. Replacing images of feminised fertility with similarly gendered sterility neither overcomes the nature-culture dichotomy nor dispels simplistic gender binaries. It is therefore worth pausing to closely consider the introductory passages of this chapter, which present a nuanced portrait of the earth as a “flat expanse [...] [where] you can smell its absence of weight” (113-14). Here is one of few instances where the text deviates from third-person omniscient narration. This rare use of the second-person pronoun engages the reader as an active participant in the scenes to follow (a point to which I will return later in my analysis).⁹⁷ Furthermore, a strange synaesthesia evoked here – the suggestion that lightness has a scent – shows that paradoxes and ambiguities inform Vera’s understanding of reproductive agency. It is from this important understanding that I now turn to analysing how various duplicitous fertility symbols recur throughout the abortion scene.

As Phephelaphi performs the termination, her body is not compared to terrain, as female physiology is wont to be in masculinist, pastoral literary traditions. Rather, she is aligned with atypical natural elements: first described as a swimmer in

⁹⁷ The only other passage where readers are directly interpolated is in the first chapter, when the narrator describes “Dying in your sleep” (7).

water (116), and then as lightning and fire, and finally as a phenomenon of lightwaves (117). While not living organisms, these last three natural forces hold certain agentive qualities which complicate traditional understandings of inorganic material as inert. Watery imagery, for instance, immediately evokes Neimanis's posthuman gestationality and Alaimo's aqueous posthumanism, particularly the latter's assertion that "the human becomes more liquid, less solid" (Alaimo 2016: 123). Lightning is an unpredictable electrostatic discharge which can result in flames. Waves of light may bend or otherwise spread via diffraction when they pass through a barrier or substance. While there are certainly metaphysical implications associated with such active natural imagery,⁹⁸ for the moment I want to consider how Vera's utilisation of such terms is complicated by obscurity and ethical indeterminacy. As the protagonist attempts to clear all tissue from her uterus with a long thorn picked from a bush, she eventually feels the foetus wrench away: "she clutches something as dead as a root. [...] [A] dead substance which promises no anchor" (117). The combination of simile and metonymy here seems immediately jarring; roots typically ensure the stability and nourishment of plants, and are thus rarely associated with death. Yet in this instance, the foetal form – imagined as a decomposing plant – is granted less livelihood and agency than Phephelaphi, who is described as holding the strength of all elemental forces.

In an interview with Jane Bryce, Vera repeats explicitly that the abortion takes place in a forest (222–23), an area which is stereotypically lush – yet the

⁹⁸ In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad uses the process of diffraction to visualise her methodological approach. While the process of reflection, she argues, is often concerned with the literal and metaphorical differences between 'who' and 'what' matters, "diffraction is not merely about differences [...], but about the entangled nature of differences that matter. Significantly, difference is tied up with responsibility" (36). That is, her methodology prioritises *how* certain materials or organisms come to 'matter', in an ethical sense.

duplicity of arid symbols continues as the protagonist lies bleeding. Through her pain she sees the aforementioned thorn bush and observes that it appears to have spontaneously gone into bloom (117). Soon it is revealed that the red ‘flowers’ are actually the beaks of birds which fly out from the bush (118). Merging vegetal and animal life, the scrub’s microcosmic ecosystem mirrors the spots of blood which begin to fall beneath Phephelaphi as she removes her clothing. The protagonist herself notices the similarity between these two images as she surveys her surroundings: “The hills have disappeared and are gone. They have been flattened to the ground by the simple drop of her eyelids. In a mixture of laughter and tears she sees again the crimson beaks” (119). Here, it is vital to note that, once again, stereotypical associations of women’s bodily curves with mountainous vistas have been called into question; in this instance, the smallest motion on Phephelaphi’s part results in a transformation of the entire landscape. Agency is therefore rendered as a central concern even when the very ‘matter’ of the aborted foetus is not drawn into focus. Another point worth stressing is the fact that she feels both relief *and* melancholy after inducing the miscarriage. Emotional ambivalence is perhaps one of the most important elements that is often ignored by the divisive framing of ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ activists within a ‘debate’. In Vera’s novel, however, Phephelaphi’s mixed feelings are the first of many complications to arise following the procedure.

Another indeterminate element of the chapter is the characterisation (if one can use such a controversial word) of the foetus, as compared with descriptions of the pregnant woman. Firstly, the foetal tissue is described as “lukewarm warmth” thrice in one paragraph (115), and twice again later in the chapter. As this phrase is

repeated, the foetus develops into a more tangible object: Phephelaphi observes that it “becomes a solid [...] like handfuls of saliva” and then “is no longer her own” (118; 121). Importantly, the very comparison to spittle creates a sense of inconsistency; within this simile, liquid is rendered as a solid, highlighting how shifting states of being are a central thematic concern. Furthermore, here the foetus comes into independence only once it has exited the protagonist’s body, thereby suggesting that the woman holds more agency than the (potential) being inside her. This echoes the new materialists’ blurring of external and internal phenomena – a formulation of intersecting agencies that we have already witnessed as manifesting earlier in the fiction of Stockenström and Wicomb. As Ann Furedi notes, those who are against abortion often make emotional appeals by speaking of a ‘mother’ and ‘baby’, even when what is inside the uterus does not resemble a child (loc. 776). *Butterfly Burning* explores differentiations between biological states of growth by framing the foetus as an indeterminate phenomenon. Firstly, Phephelaphi attempts to distract herself “while the child pulls away from her” (119). Yet as it exits her body she observes that “beneath her *the child, not yet*, is released” (120; emphasis added). Referred to with a definite article rather than a possessive pronoun, any sense of the foetus’s potential personhood is undone in this moment. Such negation is reinforced later in the chapter by a description of “the unborn child too small to be a child, just a mingling within the nylon, something viscous and impolite amid the lace” (122). Here, the words ‘just’ and ‘something’ show that while the foetal form is organic, the protagonist does not imbue it with the same sanctity of life as a fully developed human. There are many agencies at play in this scene, but the political issue of reproductive agency is never forgotten.

Concurrently, while the foetus is considered as both a potential person and as a collection of cells, Phephelaphi's very personhood is called into question after inducing the abortion. A barrage of nullifying statements follows when she is described as swimming yet

not being part of anything at all, not her body, not the sky above her, not the not-here tree which she imagines, not even the not-here-ness with hills to be imagined, the emptiness and none being. Not here. Instead, a quiet stretch of time where she is not. Not being. (116-17)

In this passage, her attempts to create meaning by (re)imagining natural imagery result in failure. She is not depicted as the typical strong-willed or self-assured woman whom pro-choice ideology enlists; both her biological creativity and the burden of responsibility are shifted as her body is reduced from an active subject to a negative space. Envisioned in a pool of liquid, the so-called mother-to-be is defined by what she is *not*. Yet certain complexities linger within this image. As I have already discussed, the figure of the developing foetus (contained in amniotic fluid) is often described by relying on comparative stages of growth. The above quotation similarly presents Phephelaphi in a pool of liquid, reducing her to a comparably aqueous state. Furthermore, she is likened to a homologue of the mammalian amniotic sac; "she is a transparent membrane coating the inside shell of an egg" (120). Both of these images call to mind Karen Barad's argument that "[t]he foetus as a phenomenon 'includes' the apparatuses of phenomena out of which it is constituted: in particular, it includes the pregnant woman [...] as well as her 'surroundings'" (217). Although "[n]othing has been born at all" (Vera 1998: 120), it is worth exploring how the novelist utilises the mother-foetus-phenomenon. For

example, before all the foetal matter has been removed Phephelaphi observes that “It is herself [...]. It is she” (116). To the undiscerning reader, this statement may appear to validate the foetus’s moral status – yet it is worth noting that the child is only referred to through the gender of ‘its’ mother. Similarly, after the termination she reassures herself that “[t]he heart beating is hers, her arms, and *she is she*” (124; emphasis added). The foetus is thus portrayed as one constitutive element of the broader parental ‘landscape’; although it possesses a “changing heart” (Colb and Dorf 5), it is only one transcorporeal element of the larger, and more ethically significant, gestating figure’s biology.

Time expands over the course of the chapter to further explore these nuances. Phephelaphi feels each moment as she is “living it, living in it, part of it, and parting from it” (124). The ‘part’ played by this repetitive wordplay is strikingly similar to neologisms used by Barad, who reinvents terms from the school of physics to interrogate how science not only informs how one views physical matter, but also the significance of discourse (3).⁹⁹ The novel’s merging of ruminations on posthuman gestationality and queer time makes Barad’s inventive and immediate discourse of intra-actions seem particularly apt. Indeed, the present tense comes to figure for a form of ethical indeterminacy towards which all the contrasting images of decay and rejuvenation, or sterility and fertility, gesture. The narration implies, for instance, that natural elements hold an agency which is not benevolent, but rather indifferent: “Is. Is. Is. This soil just is. It does not move. No kindness to it. [...]”

⁹⁹ Barad’s feminist philosophy is principally concerned with how scientific discourse is often associated with rationalist, phallogocentric ideology. This is not to say, however, that she (or, more broadly, new materialism) views physics and related fields as inherently misogynistic and logocentric; instead, she uses linguistic inventiveness to simultaneously engage with practicing scientists’ belief-systems *and* trouble such dualistic stereotypes.

Water could not dissolve its rigid hold, its stiff will” (122). Instead of predetermining the earth as an anthropomorphised mother, or imbuing women with characteristics of the supposedly passive landscape, it is suggested that one should merely perceive them as what they *are* in the present.¹⁰⁰ This is not to say, however, that the narrative positions people and natural elements as separate entities. On the contrary, according to Vera both shape each other’s agentic potential through a transcorporeal process of relationality. By the end of the chapter, Phephelaphi is no longer figured as the foetal phenomenon or uterine environment: she has “emerged out of a cracked shell. There is a soothing emptiness in this canopy of sky. She has endured the willed loss of her child. Willed, not unexpected. Expected, not unwilled” (124). Her deliberate actions are certainly figured through ecological phenomena, whether this is the presence of a thorn bush or a flock of birds – but the duplicitous nature of such images shows that they determine neither her decisions nor her essence. One’s will, according to Barad, is a process of becoming or a “congealing of agency” (151). The foetus amounts to a “liquid ferment” (Vera 123), a potentially important factor of Phephelaphi’s future; but once it exits her uterus, it ceases to constitute a defining part of her identity.

The political implications of such views are manifold, especially for a black woman in the colonised landscape of Rhodesia – a country whose very name is a literal reminder of Cecil John Rhodes’s violent legacy, his imperialist desire to sire a new nation. The rhetoric of progeny and natality is inescapable, it appears, as one

¹⁰⁰ The echoes of phenomenology in this statement are inevitable, given Neimanis’s feminist phenomenological framework. By extension, and by adapting her ‘posthuman gestationality’, this study is somewhat indebted to feminist phenomenology; however, I am more interested in the *posthumanist* elements that unite both Neimanis’s and Alaimo’s critical concepts (it is telling that the posthuman features in the subtitles of both scholars’ recent monographs).

cannot erase such a pervasive history of thwarted agencies. This much is made clear by what follows after the terminated pregnancy: devastated by his partner's decision (and her refusal to discuss the matter with him), Fumbatha immediately loses interest and begins an affair with another woman. Phephelaphi is aware of his betrayal but chooses not to confront him, merely contrasting the "strange woman's solid ground [...] [with her] own" (135). The penultimate chapter of the novel is relayed through Phephelaphi's first-person narration (it is the only section to do so), revealing that she has fallen pregnant for a second time. Once again, words like "nothing" and "[a]n absence" are used to distinguish between her current emotional landscape and that of Fumbatha's lover, her former friend Deliwe (146). So-called 'pro-life' activists often describe abortion as an act of denial. For example, the procedure has been described as "the negation of [parental] love" (Carter 25) – thereby implying that terminating a pregnancy is both epistemologically and morally unsound. Those who provide reproductive healthcare services are also liable to receive such criticism: appropriating a quotation from Christian writer C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, American church advisor and doctor Jim Eckman accuses the non-profit organisation Planned Parenthood of causing the "negation of human dignity" (Lewis in Eckman 1).¹⁰¹ Both of these instances show how the concept of nothingness often figures within natalist and legal language usages to reflect negatively on the characters of those who abort fetuses. Yet in Vera's novel, the 'abolition' of fetuses does not cohere with a moralistic binary of pro-life and pro-

¹⁰¹ The word 'dignity' is derived from the Old French *dignite* meaning "dignity, privilege, honour", which in turn is derived from the Latin *dignitatem* meaning "worthiness" (*OED*). In humanist discourse, the word often refers to a *comparative* worthiness, as indicated by Lewis's own employment of the word when arguing for objective value claims in the humanities as opposed to moral subjectivism. Eckman's application of the word thus shows how an uncritically humanist approach to abortion ironically perpetuates the notion that some (human) lives are worthier of living than others.

choice ideology. This is evidenced not only by Deliwe's betrayal of her friend's trust in committing adultery,¹⁰² but also by the protagonist's perpetual suspicion of parental love and the maternal role that is sanctified by repronormative discourse. The final chapter, which suddenly reverts to third-person narration, opens with a longing for negation; a desire is expressed for "the time before, in its *not-knowing*, its *not-tragedy* [...]. [W]hat restores like a torn membrane the time before" (148; emphasis added). Yet as the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe shows, there is no turning back; the only solution is in liberationist rhetoric, which is often similarly guilty of utilising paternalistic tropes.

In her quest for resolution, Phephelaphi ironically chooses to enact what many interpret as the ultimate tragedy of the text: she soaks herself in a flammable "soft liquid" (149),¹⁰³ sets it alight, and embraces Fumbatha as he arrives home. Her metamorphosis into the titular burning butterfly – a fully-grown organism and the final embodiment of the insect's life-cycle – is certainly a tragic event in two senses; she not only terminates her second pregnancy – albeit indirectly – but also her own life. Yet as she burns, she assures Fumbatha that "their unburied child, the one inside her body, [is] *free* and weightless like herself, now, *safe*, now" (150; emphasis added). The sanctity of liberty, one of the central tenets of human rights, is denied to Phephelaphi when her partner punishes her for exercising reproductive agency. Her second abortion is thus not only a removal of the foetal form, but also of her own body – Barad's foetus-mother-phenomenon – from the political landscape. Both her

¹⁰² Before they begin their affair, Fumbatha describes Deliwe's allure in an unconventional manner; he looks upon her as "the sort of woman to make a man crawl as though he had never walked on his own two legs" (64). The *femme fatale* is a familiar character type, but her sexuality is rarely if ever described in relation to maternal power. Thus, even here, Vera evokes fertility in order to deviate from socially acceptable dualisms.

¹⁰³ It is interesting to note that liquid is used here as a destructive element (as opposed to the earlier chapter, where it evokes hydration or nourishment from amniotic fluid).

biological mother, Zandile, and her adoptive mother Gertrude (also referred to as Emelda) are recalled in the closing lines of the novel. Particularly, they are mocked for their “foolishness” to have become mothers (151). In colonial Rhodesia, where women are the victims of both racial hatred and patriarchal hegemony, the protagonist believes that resisting this domestic role is the one political act that she can fulfil, even if it requires self-immolation and death, the ultimate antithesis of action. The notion of an ethics of refusal is advanced and expanded upon in Bessie Head’s fiction, as I discuss in my subsequent chapter on queer vitality.

It would be overly reductive, though, to conclude that *Butterfly Burning* figures society as completely unchangeable or that it contains a condensable biological telos. The earlier sections of the novel recount the budding romantic relationship between Phephelaphi and Fumbatha, who initially meet at a river near the Makokoba township. Yet instead of exploring sexual reproduction solely through natural imagery – which is typically associated with female physiology – Vera challenges such stereotypes through poetic descriptions with dense connotations. The protagonist’s indeterminate feelings about fertility and motherhood are mirrored by the *inorganic* environment, particularly inanimate objects like textiles and other manufactured products. For example, when handed a glass of water, she feels “rescued” by its cool and smooth texture (103). Yet as Phephelaphi lies in bed, a passer-by shatters her window (110); this disruption of her solitude reminds her of the foetus and marks her desire to ‘reject’ it. Furthermore, as she contemplates whether to terminate the pregnancy, the red fibres of her blanket are likened to blood on her hands (107). Sewing, needlework, and other crafts are typically associated with domestication and feminised servility. Yet the textile is likened here to an

organic plasma which both transcends gender and emblematises the protagonist's decision to forego motherhood. Aqueous texturing of the inanimate is also used to draw attention to narrative form. In one of the aforementioned sexual encounters, the lovers' words are described as "laced, dipped in a fragrance soft like milk, words chiselled like stone" (50). While both milk and stone are inanimate, they hold contradictory symbolic associations: the former calls to mind nourishment and growth,¹⁰⁴ while the latter is unyielding and immovable. And yet the word 'chiselled' implies artistic rendering, much as how the blanket which Phephelaphi lies underneath is a product of labour.¹⁰⁵ Foregrounding the potential of creation, narration, and the imagination – and evoking the discursive developments of autopoiesis demonstrated in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* – these complex metaphors lend a metafictional element to the text. That is to say, they emphasise how Phephelaphi's fate is not only influenced by others' words, but also shaped by the reader's perceptions in the act of reading. In her emphasis on narration and retelling, Vera draws attention to the very physical nature of the textual form, and its capacity to influence the reader's life. Like the mixture of oil and water that "shin[es] like new fabric", the text is implicitly both "stagnant and breeding" (20): it may produce an ideological shift in society, but only if individuals are open to the transcorporeal relationships within it.

The novel opens with an image of workers singing as they cut grass: variations on the words "the grass" recur ten times in quick succession (4), to the point that the prose itself takes on a lyrical quality. At surface level, the evocation of

¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that milk is always or even necessarily a nutritive substance, especially when considering the contemporary dairy industry. For a feminist and postcolonial material study of milk, see Gaard (2013).

¹⁰⁵ Considering patriarchal traditions in rural Zimbabwe, this labour would most likely be a woman's.

song in the *veld* appears to be an intertextual reference to Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), a novel which was written and set in colonial Rhodesia around the same time as Phephelaphi's and Fumbatha's story. Lessing's novel is focalised through Mary, a white settler who is most happy when she is single and situated in the metropolis. Her desire to remain unmarried in her thirties and wear "little-girl frocks in pastel colours" seems to suggest a fear of the roles and responsibilities that a patriarchal society associates with womanhood (Lessing 38). When Mary marries and is forced to relocate to a farm, she grows isolated and mentally ill. The novel "repeatedly stages the refusal of mothering" (Graham 62), both through Mary's fear of fertility and through the symbolic barrenness of the landscape surrounding her. While the farm yields less crops and becomes harder to live on, the protagonist grows increasingly insulated and uninterested in conversing with others. Her only meaningful attempts to connect with another human being (a black farm worker named Moses) result in her death. Both novels clearly thematise fecundity and sterility in the southern African landscape. In this respect, they can be grouped with others which take an anti-pastoral approach to the South African landscape, such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), or J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). Both of these texts are focalised through independent women who resist the role of motherhood.¹⁰⁶ In Schreiner's case, the focalisation is only partial, but Samuel Cronwright's explanation that one of her earlier titles for the text was *Mirage: A Series of Abortions* is particularly fascinating, showing how the topic of termination figured on at least a metaphorical level for Schreiner when

¹⁰⁶ In fact, Helen Bradford suggests that the feminist character Lyndall in *African Farm* rides a jolting ox cart to try and terminate her unsupportable pregnancy (640).

writing (Cronwright 307). Importantly, however, Vera's novel diverges from the others in that she focalises the narrative through black characters. Initially, these are the men who foreground the political potential of protest by singing through their work: a scene which unconventionally pairs men's labour with natural imagery and is ostensibly concerned with colonial nationalism's effects on masculinity. Soon, however, the narrative shifts its focalisation to the domestic sphere; notwithstanding, and defying gendered expectations, the later segments are set in the township, which is far less 'natural' than the opening passage.

The scene is set for Phephelaphi's final act during the beginning of a storm, constituted of soil, sand, lightning, air, and leaves: together, they are described as "particles of time" (147). There is a long history of such forces dramatising tragic developments – as demonstrated in plays like *King Lear* and *Macbeth* – yet Vera's choice of elemental symbols is particularly apt for our discussion of development as *formation*. Earlier, I elucidated how lightning is an agentive inorganic force. This image not only highlights the importance of agency, but also mirrors an earlier instance of clouds and flames which occurs when an oil tank explodes, killing many working men. In a run-on sentence, children are described watching "the acrid smoke which spreads sideways and upward like something living, with a will playful and bright unlike their own" (21). Once again, Vera uses the word 'will' to foreground how political agents are situated within wider natural landscapes that also display agency. The 'man-made' cloud evokes a sense of awe in the young witnesses of the event: "this figure rising before them is more commanding, much more rare [*sic*] to their curiosity, than the tiny bodies which they had watched from a distance" (22). In the aftermath of the fire, questions are raised about the

comparative worth of life – not with regard to foetal growth, but rather to racial politics. Those who were victims of the explosion were exposed to such risk because of their limited options for employment; in colonial Rhodesia, manual labourers would undoubtedly be black. In this scene, paradoxically, black children are centralised as observers who are granted the agency to discern whose lives come to ‘matter’. Similarly, in the wake of Phephelaphi’s suicide, the reader is challenged to confront how sexist discourse alienates women who are also forced to make a living through dangerous means. Importantly, it is not only the woman and foetus who die, but also Fumbatha. *Butterfly Burning* thus does not merely anticipate, but rather exceeds, new materialist conceptions of the blastocyst (see Barad 217; Bennet 90) – imagining the foetus as a phenomenon constituting a zygote, woman, *and* man who are victims of various discriminations.

The intersection of political oppressions is thus repeatedly explored throughout the novel, highlighting how *all* beings – adults, children, and other organisms – shape each other’s worth in the world. It is at this point that I want to return once more to the few moments when the third-person narration is broken, particularly by use of a first-person plural pronoun. The first instance occurs early in the narrative as it is stated that Kwela music conveys how “*We* do it together. This and that – fight, escape, surrender. The distinction always unclear, the boundaries perpetually widening” (7; emphasis added). The tragic dimensions of the novel are explicitly communal, much like the associations of natal alienation and social death presented by the protagonist’s suicide in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. *Butterfly Burning*’s opening lyrical imagery suggests that the narrative is concerned with both material *and* metaphysical issues, a fact that is later confirmed when

abortion and indeterminacy take the forefront of the text. Towards the end of the second chapter, ‘we’ recurs when the narrator asserts that “There is nothing we can do to save the dead” (14-15). Here, again, the pronoun acts as a bridge: but this time it is not between physicality and abstraction, but rather between being and nothingness.

The third instance where this word takes precedence is in an earlier (and happier) moment of Fumbatha’s relationship with Phephelaphi; engaging in sexual intercourse, they repeat the words “We are here” (72). In this instance, deviation from third-person narration speaks not only to the connectedness of the two lovers, but also highlights how immediacy and presentness – both in space and time – are repeatedly considered as a solution to discourses that predetermine one’s societal roles and identity formation. Finally, as the abortion scene reaches its climax, the reader is actively engaged in a didactic passage:

The stars are all carried in our eyes, this is why we are alone. We are yet to be born. Some of us are never to be born. To be born is chance and good fortune, and to survive into tomorrow, sheer motive and interest. She was not interested. (119)

This passage stands apart from the others in the sense that it is not concerned with merging two distinct concepts or entities (physics and metaphysics, life and death, or space and time). Rather, here the word ‘we’ is only employed to emphasise one’s existential isolation, a solipsism which is incommunicable and yet, paradoxically, shared with every other being on the planet. There is thus a social as well as planetary or cosmic scale to the use of the collective pronoun. Phephelaphi’s decision to “surrender [to] a death as intimate as birth [...] [and] birth as certain as

love” is not in order to reinforce supposedly separate phenomena such as self and other or birth and death (149). As I have illustrated, the novel is full of ironies and paradoxes, but such juxtapositions also call dichotomies into question. Vera’s biological preoccupation in both abortion scenes theorises the ecological model as materialist, but simultaneously anti-essentialist and postcolonial in its scope. Instead of positioning itself as either ‘for’ or ‘against’ abortion – as much contemporary rhetoric does – the narrative merely sets the scene for reproductive agency, and then presents multiple perspectives on intersecting issues which impact upon black women’s desires.

Literal and metaphorical heartbeats abound in the novel’s more urbanised settings, whether these are eavesdropping neighbours’ anxious breathing in the township (49), or pounding vibrations caused by an approaching train (55). The sound of the heartbeat – typically associated with bodily organs, or the lifeline of a developing foetus – thus exceeds the human corporeal dimension, pointing to the shared vulnerability of all beings in a setting where colonial hegemony is often propagated by ‘naturalised’ rhetoric and metaphor. In one of the earlier passages of the novel, the narrator meditates on the importance of audibility, asserting that Kwela music allows listeners to “embrac[e] choices that are already decided. Decid[e] which circumstance has been omitted and which is set free, which one claimed, which one marked, branded, and owned” (6). Here, Vera melds musical imagery with the rhetoric of ‘choice’. The ekphrastic elements of the text are deliberately foregrounded to show how artistic creativity is an integral component of political action. The aesthetic form is a transformative tool: in thematising the ethical matter of abortion, it inspires a more-than-humanist approach to reproductive

agency. As I foreground earlier in this chapter, vital commonalities between Alaimo's and Gaard's respective frameworks are manifest in Vera's novel, particularly when she evokes the latter theorist's critical ecofeminist ethics of attentive listening. The circumstances of listeners – whether dancers in the narrative, or readers of the text – are thus rendered similarly to Barad's aforementioned notion of phenomena, which informs the work of Alaimo, Gaard, and many other materialist feminists. An ethics of listening means that there is no easily discernible subject to centralise and privilege. The novel's listeners are not merely personified through metaphor, but also rendered as acquiring agentive potential through a metonymic, musical, and creative process.

Witnessing Metonymic Con/texts

Only a decade after the year in which *Butterfly Burning* is set, a crowd led by the South African Federation of Women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa. Although the federation discussed wide-ranging issues on 9 August 1956, such as equal pay and rights for all, their aim on this day was to protest the introduction of pass laws for black women made in 1952 by the apartheid government. Marchers used both a petition and songs to reinforce their message; the event is often remembered alongside lyrics from “Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo”, a feminist protest song. Yet the campaigners’ and political dissidents’ anxieties – about women’s bodily vulnerability during police searches, or the blurred lines between childcare and paid work – speak to a broader set of intersecting concerns about reproductive agency in colonial southern Africa.

Indeed, early in *Butterfly Burning*, Yvonne Vera foregrounds how working-class *men* are affected by the control of autochthonous peoples, particularly in rural spaces. She provides historical context by describing how many black husbands and fathers were hanged from trees for minor misdemeanours – crimes which, in some cases, it was dubious that they even committed. Fumbatha is born during the same year that his father is sentenced to death; in the wake of the hanging, his mother expects him to be “a witness to dying, a pledge to life. She expects him to know his link with the past” (14). At this point it is worth pausing to reconsider Vera’s description of African feminist fiction that I evoked at the start of this chapter, and its resonance with another of the author’s comments. In her aforementioned interview with Jane Bryce, Vera says of the novel: “I want you to be *there*, I don’t want you to hear about it, I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening in each moment, as it happens” (222–23; original emphasis). From these three quotations – a literary passage, an excerpt from an editorial introduction, and a passing comment during an interview – it becomes clear that Vera is perpetually preoccupied with the process of *witnessing the present*,¹⁰⁷ rather than projecting an agenda onto the past or the future. How, then, does she justify setting this novel retrospectively in Rhodesia during the mid-twentieth century – and opening a narrative about women’s reproductive agency with what are ostensibly concerns about masculinity?

The answer to both questions can be found by analysing the formal nature of the text. Particularly, if one expands one’s literary analysis of *Butterfly Burning*

¹⁰⁷ The sense of currentness inherent to this form of witnessing means that it differs from what is found in Mark Sanders’s *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (2007), a study reflecting upon literature and law in apartheid South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

beyond the two abortion scenes, then it becomes clear why it is set not in contemporary Zimbabwe, but rather just two years before apartheid officially began, and a mere ten years prior to the South African Women's March.¹⁰⁸ One of the most prominent illustrations of this is the novel's constant association of aesthetics with ethics, of literary witnessing with presentness (in contrast with either strict retrospection or speculation). In her study of language, music, and modernity in the novel, Lizzy Attree astutely identifies an intertextual reference to "Strange Fruit", a protest song popularised by Billie Holiday which chronicles racist lynchings historically committed in the American South (75). Yet I would argue that the description of murdered men and their mourning families provides commentary not just on musicality, but also on the duplicitous *presence* of textuality. The novel's ekphrastic and intertextual allusions specifically convey a recurring sense of immediacy. For example, Vera's unnamed narrator goes on to describe a transferable continuum of growth and death:

The women keep the most *vital* details of their men buried in their mouths. They receive lightning from the sky with their bare hands and with it, they rename each of their children; the living and unborn. They find new names for the dead and utter them in daylight. Then everything changes; everything is new. (12; emphasis added)

The word 'vital' connotes either necessity or livelihood. Here the latter could be conceived, in Jane Bennett's terms, as "*vital materiality*" (vii; original emphasis) – something which Bennett argues we have the capacity to understand in childhood as

¹⁰⁸ Vera is undoubtedly invested in discussing the wider socio-political context of southern African feminist and anti-racist movements in both her academic and fictional writing. Analysing Ruth First in her PhD, she argues that apartheid impacts upon women's conceptions of agency in the prison narrative (1995: 24). She notes that imprisonment has radically shifted intergenerational and familial relationships for African women, citing the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre and 1976 riots in South Africa as defining moments where it transpires that "even the concept of parenting and motherhood can no longer depend on traditional beliefs" (278).

we play with inanimate objects, but gradually lose as we grow older. Vitalism is discussed in further detail in the following chapter on Bessie Head, where I problematise the seeming lack of a political impetus in Bennett's framework and favour instead the concept of queer *vitality*. Returning to the above quotation, it may initially be interpreted that by refusing to speak of the men's histories, the women are 'killing' their legacies. Yet Vera complicates this sense of negation and strict linear developments by insinuating that the men will be revived as a new generation is (re)named in their honour. In this passage, transcorporeality transcends mere biological exchanges. It begins, in other words, to adopt a temporal element of transference: the tradition of naming is identified as an important process for preserving cultural identity, and simultaneously creating the capacity for empathetic awareness. The inorganic force of lightning metonymically stimulates revival in society, as living children carry their forefathers' names. Importantly, however, this linguistic process does not affect the human community alone, but rather 'everything'. Honouring the past through tradition therefore creates a sense of novelty by revisiting – and revising – transcorporeal relationships within the social environment. It is this sense of timeless imbrications which informs not only the novel's themes – Vera, after all, is daring to describe a taboo yet ancient medical procedure that has been repeated in secrecy rather than as ritual – but also its geographical situatedness. Setting the narrative retroactively causes one to pause and question the origins of prejudices which linger in the present.

It is imperative to note that the men who are brought to the foreground in the earlier chapters – workers in the outskirts of the township, forced to take on menial tasks like cutting grass or transporting fuel – are frequently watched by groups of

children who are always described in genderless terms. This element of non-gendered spectatorship causes the reader, in turn, to reflect upon the roles that young people are permitted to adopt in the township, and what implications these might have for the adults that they grow to become. There are essentialised synonyms for manhood which recur in many societies: these include physical strength, an exertion of power over nature, or financial independence. In Vera's novel, it is true that men utilise natural resources in order to make a living, while children are more concerned with the countryside as a source of recreation. Yet racial oppression means that the former group are as excluded from the polity of colonial Rhodesia as the children who play in the wilderness surrounding them. That is to say, men are frequently denied access to the interior of the city and are forced to earn a pittance in the rural landscape.

It hardly needs explaining that women's bodies have historically figured for natural ecology (or vice versa) in popular art, narratives, and heteronormative social standards. Yet here, on the outskirts of Makokoba, men are rendered as women's allies; whether male or female, it is implied, all adults are infantilised and subjected to limitations which have been literally 'naturalised' by the white metropolitan elite. It is easy to imagine how a woman in the township would struggle to access effective medical attention, particularly for reproductive health issues, during this historical period. Yet we are reminded that this is not all: gestating figures and foetuses are certainly susceptible to such risks, but the gendered domination of land creates an interlocking set of restrictions for the entire milieu. *Butterfly Burning* thus provides important insights about how men and women are subjected to similarly limiting roles by heteronormative patterns of discourse in both colonial Rhodesia

and the nationalist country formed in its wake. Interconnections between adults and children in the novel queer linear models of development, much as in the fictions of Stockenström and Wicomb. In dissociating biological growth and sexual reproduction from development, Vera transforms personal and reproductive agencies in order to give them political implications. As an alternative to focusing on the future of a potential being, whether this the literal birth of a child, or the metaphorical creation of a new country, here it is implied that we should be more concerned with the quality of life of those who are living in the present, or “the living [who] are not dead” (12).

The novel strikes a fine balance between criticism of recurrence or idealised tradition, and a suspicion of new notions or terms. Shortly after witnessing a sublime rainbow and feeling assured of their immortality, members of the younger generation play games with urban waste like a broken record and a leather shoe, then hide inside an abandoned metal drum.¹⁰⁹ Curled in the foetal position, they are

[c]oiled like caterpillars in this dark and temporary retreat, they touch every visiting belief with an anxious curiosity – and in their own unarticulated manner begin to question the whole notion of an innocent belonging. *They are not free.* (18; emphasis added)

This passage epitomises several of the novel’s key themes. Firstly, by comparing the children to larvae (the second stage of the butterfly’s life cycle, emerging after the egg but before the pupa and adult insect), Vera evokes the novel’s title and

¹⁰⁹ Such barrels are ubiquitous in southern Africa, and mostly used to transport gallons of oil – the very substance which kills a group of men early in the novel after a tanker explodes. Empty drums, however, are frequently ‘upcycled’ to be used as swings and/or tunnels on wealthy settlers’ playgrounds (locally known as ‘jungle gyms’). Paired with a record which repeats itself, the echoing chamber thus serves a dual purpose: it is the literal site of the children’s musical play, but also replicates oppositions of death and renewal, poverty and luxury, the manmade and the organic, or work and recreation.

anticipates Phephelaphi's duplicitous transformation in the final chapter. Termination typically denotes an end, but as she attempts to explain to Fumbatha when metamorphosing into the metaphorical butterfly, her desire to terminate the foetus and herself is not simply a tragic final act: instead birth, life, and death are all rendered as transferable stages on a continuum. The model of a continuum is mirrored by the life cycle of the organism itself – and it implies that abortion, too, involves stages of growth and loss, or affirmation and refusal.

Further complicating this continuous experimentation with transformations in the above quotation, the term 'temporary' is used to emphasise various levels of – and reasons for – transience; in colonial Rhodesia, children of the political minority are both physically weak and socially insignificant. Thus, to them, impermanence is not positive, as it is for many who anticipate the agency associated with adulthood, but rather a fearful state with associated risks. Despite the supposed innocence of youth, these children appear to be aware that appeals to a reified sense of freedom cannot assist them in achieving agency, even if they lack the vocabulary to articulate such suspicions. In my introductory chapter, I elucidate how the term 'reproductive freedom' enshrines restrictive understandings of agency. One of the occasions when Vera gestures towards an attempt to reinvent such terminology is displayed when describing the outlying areas of Bulawayo; the words "[i]f not freedom then rhythm" articulate the township's vibrancy in more-than-humanist terms (8). Interestingly, in this instance Vera is once again utilising negation, but with the aim of creating *new* understandings rather than prohibiting possibilities. While such a radical rethinking is certainly characteristic of 'new' materialism, here it is

articulated in simple terms: in short, the sort of language that a child could understand.

While evoking the reader's sympathy for impoverished children, the text does not embody an unflinching devotion towards natalism. In light of Phephelaphi's decision(s) to abort, and her birth mother's similar rejection of motherhood (the narrator is adopted by another sex worker early in her childhood), it would be overly simplistic to argue that the novel conforms to the typically conservative stance that all life and childbirth is miraculous. Perhaps the most imperative indicator of this fact lies in a refrain about ideology and biology which is alluded to twice in chapter 10: "The birth of a word is more significant than the birth of a child" (68). One may be surprised to learn that this position is focalised through Fumbatha, the "witness to dying" who protests Phephelaphi's self-induced abortion (14). Yet his position – and hypocrisy – can be readily explained if one contextualises this comment. He disregards human life only when it is presented in abstract terms: namely, when his partner announces her plans to study nursing. One should pause to consider the associations of this career, for which Phephelaphi is prepared to forgo motherhood. Nursing is typically envisioned as a predominantly female profession – not only because motherhood typically involves breastfeeding or nurturing a baby, but also because of the caregiving roles that women were forced to adopt during periods of war. In this sense, the protagonist could pursue a career while still adhering to the old-fashioned and pastoral ideals of femininity to which her partner prescribes. Yet Fumbatha fears that her financial independence would bring with it an affinity for the city, and thus a growing separation between the two

lovers: “A claim abandoned. A lover lost. *It is the body addressed in its least of possible heights*. A stone thrust” (7; emphasis added).

This description of unrequited romantic affection is strikingly similar to language appearing in fake traditional healers’ advertisements which can be found on street poles and litter bins in the streets of most South African urban centres. As I elucidate in my introduction, such posters claim to cure clients of bad luck, “bring back lost lover[s]” (Jinga 82), or provide ‘pain-free’ and ‘same-day’ illegal abortions (Moore and Ellis 16). Therefore this quotation, which occurs early in the novel, simultaneously provides a social context for the following scenes, and presents its first implicit clues of thematic undertones. Moreover, the small body which is ‘addressed’ here may refer either to the foetus which will be aborted, or to Phephelaphi’s form as she lies in a weak and feverish state after the termination. Unaware of her pregnancy, however, Fumbatha is oblivious to any of the tragedies to come. Imagining his legacy as being reliant on the propagation of a family name is what causes him to claim that discourse always holds more power than a potential life – that is, until he learns that Phephelaphi has exercised reproductive agency by forgoing both her, and his, possibilities of parenthood.

Fumbatha’s fixation on the future is thus what causes him to hold conservative views on reproductive agency. Elsewhere in the novel, though, fertility is normalised and constantly *present*, to the point of inanity. At a crowded train station, for example, it is observed that “[e]ven here, a child is born” (55). Unlike the pastoral landscape, the station is a zone which resists gendered categorisation. French anthropologist Marc Augé characterises sites like airports and train stations as “non-spaces” (122): areas which foster a sense of anonymity and transience,

because a multitude of humans are constantly moving through them. To those living in the township, however, the station holds more meaning; although many of its occupiers remain nameless, their intersubjective exchanges mean that it is not a non-space, or a mere placeholder devoid of significance. This is particularly true in the case of those who cannot afford to access or are not offered proper healthcare, and who must rely on others to help them navigate potential medical emergencies in public. The township's more urban and communal areas thus serve as sites of literal reproduction. Moreover, the lack of privacy is seen as a source of celebration rather than chagrin. As before, Vera renders this point through the eyes of the youngest members of the community, who "possess nothing except an excited value placed on anything shared, and a glorious love of intimacy" (19). Their enthusiasm for common ground – and identity – is rendered even more tangible when a hungry crowd rips at bags of flour in a later scene, causing most of the product to be ground into the earth. Unexpectedly, even the adults "embrace an entire loss, [as] at least there is sharing after the event, not gloating and pride on one triumphant side. [...] The loss is shared. There is joy to destroying a gift" (46). The useless expense of a rejuvenating substance is an image with obvious sexual associations, as colloquial connotations of words such as 'spent' and 'seed' show. However, it also symbolises wider discursive issues. Crucially, the notion of loss permeates much discussion of unsupportable pregnancies: miscarriage is often rendered as a 'shared loss' for both the gestating woman and her partner, while abortion is more insidiously described as a refusal of the 'gift of life'. Yet in the above quotations, such destruction is not only portrayed positively, but also viewed as a necessary step in uniting those who are *already living*. Furthermore, this scene serves as a metaphor which addresses the

privileges that are conferred on some and denied to others, particularly in the uncritically nationalist climate of post-independence Zimbabwe. In short, the wasted product sparks a creative discussion of how nationalism transforms far more than simply political associations of agency. Much like a crowded station or a bustling square, the text is a shared space in which subjects' varying levels of agency are mirrored through transcorporeal relationships.

The aforementioned protest song from the South African Women's March warns, "Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a boulder; you will be crushed" (SAHA 11). With these words, 'woman' is simultaneously constructed as an individual entity *and* as a homogenous ideological category: the figure's agency derives both from her inherent strength ('a rock'), and from her shared struggle with others who identify as female ('the women'). There is a very similar sense of subjective indeterminacy at play in Vera's novel, particularly when the narrative focalises multitudes of subjects. The description of a horde of hungry people, for example, appears directly alongside an image of "a multitude of broken butterfly wings finely *crushed*" (46; emphasis added). I would argue that it is more than coincidental that this last word also appears in a song which advocates southern African women's political agency; it highlights the disjuncture between powerful and weak individuals by intimidating the addressee. Yet in this passage, the term serves a further and more multiperspectival purpose, because it is extended to contrast nonhuman animals' helplessness with the throng of human bodies in liminal colonial settings. Hence in both the struggle songs of the late twentieth century and Vera's novel, metonymy figures as a key narrative technique for foregrounding issues of power – a move towards agency which is less concerned with humanist

values, and more with the relationships between human and nonhuman desires. This materialist impulse is predicated by a desire to exceed humanist values by being held ethically accountable to all phenomena, without adopting a naïve or homogenising notion that all beings are ever truly the same. It is open to differences, particularly those between organic and inorganic agencies, but also sensitive to postcolonial politics.

Invasive trees, imported by settlers, suck the water table dry. These species serve to visualise not only the process of colonisation, but also that of growth and termination, particularly when “dead leaves cling to their tinge of green, resisting their separation from the tree” (8). I have already elucidated how narratives of colonial domination often render the female form as land, or code environments as feminised entities. Yet the novel’s constant engagement with multiperspectivalism and doubling means that there are more interesting metonyms at work, too – phrases that point to an uneasy, but indispensable, sense of politicised solidarity. When she begins to suspect that Fumbatha is committing adultery, Phephelaphi asks herself, “Who [i]s this other woman, and when?” (136). With its omission of an elaborative clause, this brief question renders the other woman not as a passive place, but as an embodiment of agency and simultaneously as a *temporal* setting. This relation of agency with an indeterminate, duplicitous understanding of time suggests that Phephelaphi does not view the affair as a ‘tragic’ endpoint. Instead, Fumbatha’s infidelity is one of many repeated instances of harm, rendering the exact moment of his betrayal into question.¹¹⁰ Importantly, even after she learns the identity of his

¹¹⁰ This creative approach to chronology and time is taken to an even more explicit level of vital experimentation in Bessie Head’s fiction, as I discuss in chapter 4.

new lover, the protagonist desires to kill him, commit suicide, and abort the second foetus: a solution which does not involve, or harm, Deliwe. While she is jealous of Fumbatha's desire for the other woman, Phephelaphi does not view their similar physiologies as a reason for exacting revenge. Rather, she negates the potential life inside her, in the hope that this will present another adult with a better chance of living independently. There is thus a sense of solidarity and transfer that informs not only southern African feminism's objective of a postcolonial political landscape, but also Vera's emphasis on the complex interconnectedness of in/organic agencies – whether these are countries, ecologies, or fully developed human bodies. Solidarity is itself metonymic: it is forged through commonalities rather than identical views.

Emerging from the form and content of the text, then, is a plethora of alternatives to the outdated terminology that recurs in contemporary discussions of abortion (which, at the current time of writing, continue over two decades after the first publication of *Butterfly Burning*). What would it mean, for instance, to act as present *witnesses* of a woman's struggles and desires, rather than as moralising campaigners for or against a certain cause, the telos of which is inevitably projected into an uncertain future? Furthermore, how would the political landscape change if we were to speak of reproductive *agency* rather than rights? On the theme of ecology, in what way do the transcorporeal relationships of organic elements shape our understandings of womanhood and fertility? If there are answers to such questions, Vera suggests, they will be found by circumventing the rhetoric of liberation that has been appropriated by nationalist interests. Claims about rights often rely on an essentialist, default sense of authenticity which ironically fails to account for intricate differences between variant beings. A more viable alternative

lies in an understanding situated between transcorporeality and postcolonial politics – a transformative ethics built by resisting ‘tragic’ readings of feminist events and texts, and by focusing instead on how literary forms themselves may be illustrative of creative formations. Social realities are almost always more complex than any slogan or singular narrative can convey. If a text is true to its historical and geographical settings, however, then the creative discussions it provokes will always be predicated by a greater sense of reality: an ethics based on witnessing rather than overly convoluted metaphors.

The tangibility of metonymy forges a new and non-essentialist vocabulary for discussing abortion; it is sensitive to all beings, but simultaneously insistent that a person’s worth simply exceeds that of any potential life inside them, from gametes to zygotes. In this way, we are reminded that men and children, too, embody creative agency; indeed, even a foetus holds some reproductive potential, as it develops its own set of sex cells. By focusing too heavily on a *woman’s* choice, many play into the essentialist trope that the female sex is somehow more naturally astute at nurturing or creating new life. Paradoxically, it is only by accepting that women are not the sole creative forces that we can witness the comparative worth of life along a continuum. One can return to Vera’s comment about the importance of presence, and Barad’s theorisation of emergence as a continual process, to further clarify this point. Both of these feminist thinkers point to how all beings are certainly worthy of ethical consideration, whether they are formed of organic or inorganic processes. Yet we are reminded that the situation of each agent within the context of Rhodesia – a literal creation of the male coloniser – means that some have been historically oppressed, while others are still incapable of exerting much agency (as far as the

inevitably anthropocentric brain can conceive of such qualities). Doubling pregnancies and terminations, or fertility and negation, the novel troubles more traditional campaigns for freedom and agency without losing sight of feminist and anti-anthropocentric ideals. It limns a postcolonial position on a posthumanist ethics which is still coming into being.

Practising an awareness of presence – whether this is linguistic, corporeal, or temporal – allows one to explore the interrelation of ecological issues which persist in southern Africa. These include, but are not limited to, environmental racism, exposure to health risks, and a lack of access to sex education or reproductive agency. With her subversion of dualisms and coterminous associations, Vera stresses that these problems affect all members of a community. In the human sphere, and in the instance of abortion, this includes the foetus, gestating figure, *and* her partner, as well as the surroundings they inhabit. Yet these agencies are not affected evenly or in equal ways: ecological models of egalitarianism do not necessarily lead to social equality.¹¹¹ Vera's materialist queering of sexual and racial politics in a colonised landscape thus tempers the more idealistic and abstracted excesses of some new materialisms, and dares to venture beyond Barad's conception of the foetus-mother phenomenon.

Earlier, I described the image of a shell's spiralised cross-section, which Stacy Alaimo evokes in her latest monograph. Alaimo's emphasis on all organisms' shared origins, and on embracing rather than transcending the milieu, could equally emblematised several duplicitous twinings that *Butterfly Burning's* title evokes. Firstly, the titular butterfly may refer to an actual insect or to the figure of

¹¹¹ See, for example, Arne Naess's early (1973) conception of "biospherical egalitarianism" (95).

Phephelaphi. In both cases, the ‘butterfly’ can be read in two ways: either as a subject possessing agency or as an object. A further layer of ambivalence is the word ‘burning’, which can be read as either a present participle (a verb, an action) or a noun (evoking Vera’s aforementioned interests in ritual, tragedy, and the act of repetition). Both of these dichotomies signify the stark difference between possibilities of agency and an apparent lack thereof, and yet the elemental evocation of fire concurrently calls this very binary into question. The act of burning evokes associations with death, much like the literary events of abortion and suicide which occur in the text. Yet, simultaneously, the protagonist *metamorphoses* through metonymy into a new form of agency through Vera’s suggestive title. The transcorporeal human-butterfly that we encounter before beginning to read the novel – and again in its final pages – is thus indicative of an ever-changing and chronologically ambiguous transformation between birth, life, and death. Although there are certainly tragic elements to the text, its constitutive duplicity signals that such terminations may not simply constitute an end. Instead, we are asked to imagine such instances of negation as no more than stages: through its continuous evocation of the present, both death and life are rendered as coterminous points on a continuum.

In my introductory chapter, I noted how there initially appears to be a slippage between the ambiguities and indeterminacies that tend to accompany a new materialist approach and the strategic acts of solidarity upon which postcolonial politics insist. Through its constant transference of transcorporeal desires and relationships in the present tense, however, *Butterfly Burning* illustrates that we must exceed humanist discourse if we are to articulate an alternative vocabulary for the

supposed pro-life and pro-choice dichotomy: one which is elegant, yet accessible. At this point it is vital to stress again that posthumanist thought does not equate to an absolute rejection of all humanist ideals. This is especially true in the case of its postcolonial iterations, which must be careful to explicate how (and why) some lives have historically been privileged over others. There is no better way to embody such issues than through an abortion narrative, particularly one which is sensitive to recursions of unfair power relations in post/colonial settings. To date, many have read the novel as a tragic lament about abortion stigma in Rhodesia. The novel's aesthetic technique of metonymy is certainly feminist – and, in some senses, residually humanist – in that it stresses how a foetus simply does not hold the same political agency as a fully grown woman. Importantly, however, Vera chronicles *two* terminations of pregnancy. This suggests she is not interested in presenting a singular and didactic perspective on this ethical issue; a fact reinforced by her constant evocation of contradictions and the interplay of in/organic agencies. Thus while the text presents a situated Zimbabwean perspective on abortion, a close analysis of its medical scenes reveals how this procedure also symbolises how ecological, ethical, and political interests all intersect in southern Africa. Evoking past traumas and yet witnessing the present, this points towards a notion of non-essentialist interconnectedness in the cultural sphere which can underlie both new materialist *and* postcolonial narratives about the comparative worth of all agencies.

Chapter 4

“Creative Ferment”, Queer Vitality, and Bessie Head’s Fictional Corpus

“I’m the New African who hasn’t even started to exist in Africa. This is my continent but I’m not a tribal man. I meet with no hostility just as long as I do not impose my newness and strangeness.” (Bessie Head to Pat and Wendy Cullinan, 28 September 1964)

After three chronologically ordered analyses, this study deviates by ending at the start: with South Africa’s so-called “first Black woman writer” (Sam 55); with a tale of natal origins and exilic beginnings. Academic and biographical accounts of Bessie Head’s life almost always begin by listing several formative events, and this chapter follows in the tradition, if somewhat self-consciously: born in the South African town of Pietermaritzburg in 1937, Head spent her early years under the impression that she was the child of Nellie and George Heathcote, a coloured couple. Then, when as a young teenager she moved to an Anglican boarding school, authorities revealed that her biogenetic parents were a white woman and a black man. Her mother was a patient in a mental hospital and her affluent parents were ashamed of both their daughter and granddaughter, whom they saw as product and proof of an illicit relationship. This traumatic revelation was one of many which Bessie Head would experience while growing up in apartheid South Africa. After working for some years as a teacher and journalist, she chose to exit the country on a one-way permit and live as a refugee in Botswana. These are all facts that the writer

is quick to address in her own autobiographical writings (*A Woman Alone* 3-5). When reading her fiction, however, it is clear that the author was not as preoccupied with the country of her birth as many believe. The plethora of historical recitations of her early life convey the sense that the South African political climate should be read as the primary thematic driver in her fiction:¹¹² a strange situation, since Head is simultaneously referred to as a *Botswanan* writer (nearly all of her fiction is set in rural areas or villages like Serowe). In fact, reviewing secondary material on Head's work gives the distinct feeling that critics have overdetermined her 'tragic' origins as a 'powerless' South African woman of colour, despite the fact that Head was extremely critical of nationalism and partisan identification.

In an interview on her identity as a southern African woman writer, Head comments that "I tended to be born outside any box" (Head in Mackenzie and Clayton 17). Faced with a question about how she chooses to identify, she responds with seeming frustration: "I am not torn by nationalistic arguments: 'Are you South African?'; 'Why have you settled here in the rural areas, and based all your books on Botswana rural life?' These arguments just don't matter to me – it's all props and things that I have found necessary" (11). The writer has a strangely ambivalent, or even contradictory, attitude towards the role of inherited and acquired characteristics in shaping one's personal and artistic development. She insists she enjoys living outside of societally defined conventions or settings (18), yet later in the same interview she says that "this particular environment" of Botswana has been vital to her art's formation (21). Seemingly counter-intuitively, in *A Woman Alone* she

¹¹² Two 'text-book' examples are Margaret Busby's and Margaret Lessing's edited collections on (South) African women and their writing, both of which introduce short summaries of Head's "traumatic life" alongside excerpts from her fiction (Busby 482).

admits to being averse to liberation movements and the people who run them (27), perhaps for the reason that “nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person” (28). Head believes that an interest in politics is important, but she dislikes political parties and their often-polarised divisions between viewpoints (63). Examining her reactions closely, it transpires that the key here is not the name of any country, but rather the generative potential of the various environments in which her stories are set. Head notes, when asked about the importance of gardens in her novels, that “I remember very well saying, because that was one of my attitudes, ‘Not the special ‘lily-white’ artist, but *somebody who touches the earth*’. I remember relating the writing of books to baking bread and peeling potatoes” (Head in Mackenzie and Clayton 24; emphasis added). Such vital labour with vegetal objects is genderless – the work of *somebody*, not *some woman*. Nevertheless, Head asserts that the work is performed in a mostly human, domestic sphere: “no-one can abandon children, *you just cannot abandon human life*. If you haven’t got your real mother concentrating on you, someone has to” (29; emphasis added). While this definition of motherhood is rooted in the human realm, it nevertheless speaks to a form of gestationality that exceeds direct linear-genetic relationships, and which transcends any gendered definitions of maternity.

This chapter argues that Bessie Head’s fictional writing queers materialism and its traditionally gender-dichotomous origins, presenting an understanding of development which exceeds temporal or national boundaries. Her treatment of human reproduction in both tangible and figurative terms disrupts teleological definitions of exile: separation and loss, rendered through abortions and related

procedures, are seen as inherently vital processes for gaining agency in post/colonial southern Africa. My literary analysis explicitly concentrates on Head's biological imagery of growth and separation – whether this is coded through gardening, farming, or literal human reproduction – and how this ruptures the sexist, racist, and speciesist discourse underpinning colonial expansion in southern Africa. I refer to Head's ethical outlook as a critical form of humanism. My understanding of critical humanism differs from humanism proper in that it relies on queer associations:¹¹³ both queerness as strangeness, as the epigraph to this chapter implies, and queerness as resistance to categorisation (much like Head's critiques of essentialist national identities). Merging humanist affirmative stances with elements of queer posthumanism, Head's literary formulations of creativity and gestation – and the negation thereof – go on to inform later abortion narratives by southern African feminists.

Abortion and reproductive health are most explicitly discussed in a chapter of Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Importantly, the section in question is published as a standalone story in her final (posthumous) collection, *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989). Her fictional works published between these years – *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), and *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) – are less direct, but no less important when it comes to discussing corporeality and the critical framework of new materialism. I am particularly struck by the term 'creative ferment', which

¹¹³ See my introduction for a discussion of Halliwell and Mousley's coinage of the term, and how my understanding differs from theirs.

appears in both *Maru* and *A Question of Power*,¹¹⁴ and the concept of ‘vitality’, which recurs throughout all the texts in some shape or form. ‘Vitality’ shares a root word with ‘vitalism’, the philosophical concept that states living organisms are distinct from inanimate objects because they are charged by an inexplicable life force. It must be stressed that Head does *not* use the latter term in her fiction and she also resists endorsing animist belief systems. As I elucidate later in this chapter, her views are more akin to the not-entirely materialist theory of Claire Colebrook,¹¹⁵ who writes of “Queer Vitalism” in *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Volume Two* (2014). Colebrook attempts to recuperate vitalism from its spiritualist associations by ‘queering’ the organic/inorganic dualism – but this ‘new’ intervention remains myopic in its dismissal of agency as a political tool. Later in this chapter I engage with some specificities of Colebrook’s argument, acknowledging the pivotal role of feminist contributions in this debate but further developing her work by forging a queer *vitality* as seen in Head’s fictional oeuvre. Vitality, according to my philosophical definition, is distinct from vitalism in that it has an ethical and political commitment to uncoupling *growth* from *reproduction*, and further disassociating both concepts from Western, materialist conceptions of *development*.

Gillian Stead Eilersen observes that Head wrote to her publisher that the order of stories in *The Collector of Treasures* was vital, as she viewed them as a unit wherein one segment flowed into another (11). While I would not argue against

¹¹⁴ As in the earlier chapters of this thesis, *creative* forms feature most prominently in my analysis. For this reason, I have decided not to engage with Head’s historical novels, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) and *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984). I will cross-reference some concepts mentioned in her letters (1963–1977; 1965–1979; 1984), but these will not be my primary focus.

¹¹⁵ Although she often focuses upon challenges facing posthumanism and feminist science studies, Colebrook’s work is more consumed by sexual difference than feminist materialism. Nevertheless, some interpret her interest in Deleuzian theory as indication of a new materialist framework; see, for example, Myra J. Hird (2004).

reading the text in a linear fashion, it is important to stress that this chapter will not be following a teleological model of progression, and that Head's definition of "continuity" clearly defies traditional understandings of chronology (Eilersen 11). Lee Edelman's queer critique of reproductive futurism has been indispensable here. As I briefly discuss in my introduction, he defines reproductive futurism as any heteronormative political discourse which limits the possibility of thinking through communal relations without revering linear familial ties (2) – the most sacrosanct of these being the parent-child relationship. It is undeniable that even in supposedly progressive social spheres, veneration of traditional family models and values remains. As Edelman observes,

[e]ven proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a 'fight for our children – for our daughters and our sons', and thus as a fight for the future. (3)

Some may ask what harm there could be in framing abortion and reproductive agency as issues which will affect future generations. These are, after all, issues which involve both mother and child. Yet the semantics of reproductive futurism and repronormativity mean that woman and foetus are rarely granted equal ethical consideration or rights. The subtle grammar of Edelman's monograph insists that any younger figure is elevated to the status of the Child, while a parent's needs and worth are rendered as secondary concerns. (Rather problematically, Edelman seems pointedly uninterested in the gendered specificities of such erasure, a point to which I shall return shortly.) His proposed solution to this conundrum is an ethics of

refusal: one which is averse to the binarised models of difference underpinning most political debates, and thus inherently opposed to its own oppositional logic (4). His theory is somewhat esoteric in its paradoxical nature, but it nevertheless provides an important challenge to those who wish to support women's reproductive agency without eclipsing the importance of lateral (rather than linear) relationships. With this queer, unthinkable logic in mind, I enquire how we may read abortion narratives so as to foreground women's embodied experiences, instead of privileging the incorporeal Child who may, or may not, come into existence.

Interpreting the issue of chronology on another, more metaphorical level, Head is also exploring tensions between the modern and the rural with references to folktale-inspired oral and written forms, and by referring to canonical anglophone writers. This chapter particularly considers how she reads – or how her work has been read alongside – Modernist authors like Virginia Woolf. Head insists she is not in the same category as 'suicidal' writers such as Woolf or Sylvia Plath; she believes her writing is distinct from theirs because it approaches mental illness with a sense of humour (Head in Mackenzie and Clayton 26). While her thematic treatment of depression and suicide certainly differs from these writers, her work does hold some stylistic resonances with anglophone Modernism and the literatures which operate in its wake. In keeping with her rejection of the aforementioned women writers, most of her literary, philosophical, and scientific influences operate in Western, masculinist traditions: Bertolt Brecht, Albert Camus, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche are all referenced in her letters or non-fictional writings (overshadowing passing mention of less celebrated writers like Simone Weil, or southern African

philosophical traditions).¹¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that Jane Bennett's 'materialist vitalism' is formed in a very similar manner: both women rely on the affirmative, absurdity-embracing power of the 'yes-man'.¹¹⁷ Yet of all the writers in this thesis, Head is least concerned with matters external to the human realm.¹¹⁸ Unlike Bennett, on the topic of materialism the author is decidedly ambivalent, a point which I develop in my literary analysis.

Adding another dimension to the issue of paradoxes, Head repeated in interviews and her non-fictional writings that she was not a feminist; she insisted that her fiction was not women's writing, that it was "sexless" (*A Woman Alone* 95). I follow Elinor Rooks in considering Head's words not as anti-feminist, but rather as expressing dissatisfaction with white, cisgender, first- and second-wave feminisms which were popular at the time of writing (33). It is undeniable that Head seeks to unsettle the gender binary, as evidenced by her assertion that "I'm not a feminist in the sense that I do not see women as separate from men" (Head in Eilersen 238). Her misgivings are therefore because she reads mainstream (white) feminism as unnecessarily divisive, and potentially alienating to black men or other indispensable allies. It must be stressed that putting Head's work in conversation with feminism – and the legacies of philosophical vitalism – is not to disregard her suspicions about potential tensions that the political movement may cause. Rather, I

¹¹⁶ Head's suspicion of both feminism and tribalism appears to stem from her aforementioned fear of supposedly radical political identifications, resulting in an omission of movements like womanism from her literary corpus.

¹¹⁷ Bennett's influential monograph *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) is composed of eight brief chapters with a plethora of references to secondary sources. The author draws on the affirmation of life – as seen in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and the poetry of Walt Whitman – and the Actor-network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour. It is interesting that a supposedly feminist materialist follows such masculinist traditions, with only two mentions of Donna Haraway (and none of Rosi Braidotti).

¹¹⁸ She also is not, as the epigraph to this chapter intimates, a 'tribal man'.

wish to move past an apparent omission in recent scholarship, which has mostly tended to overlook how Head's fiction evokes and expands upon the same lexicon as supposedly 'new' materialist theories.

It is remarkable how many contemporary analyses of Head's work still focus exclusively on *A Question of Power*. Caroline Davis, for instance, provides an autobiographically informed reading of the text and Head's relationship with its publishers in a 2018 article. Two pieces written in the same year by Sayyed Rahim Moosavinia and Sayyede Maryam Hosseini, and Denae Dyck and Tim Heath, put the novel in dialogue with postcolonial theory – the works of Homi K. Bhabha and Njabulo S. Ndebele, respectively. The latter two articles both analyse the space of the garden but are more interested in metaphorising this ground as a 'garden-variety' Third Space than in grappling with potential materialist implications of Head's textual environments. One notable exception to this trend is Cajetan Iheka's recent monograph *Naturalising Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2017), which features an analysis of materialist-oriented distributed agencies in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Iheka's conceptualisation of "resistance from the ground" is less concerned with biological processes than with a broad schematisation of potentially environmentalist ambiguities in the novel (127), but it is refreshing for its conclusion that such narratives "tell a story of nature's *vitality* and underscore the fact that human actions cannot be divorced from the effects on their environment and vice versa" (145; emphasis added).

This is not to say, of course, that the author's fiction has never been put in dialogue with feminist science studies. In a 2004 book chapter on the textual politics of Bessie Head, Desiree Lewis utilises feminist retheorisations of standpoint epistemologies, briefly referencing how Donna Haraway and Patricia Hill Collins "deal with the liberating consequences of 'seeing from below' in terms of compound power relationships that shape multiple marginalities [...] [thus leading] beyond essentialist, fixed constructions of identity and cultural boundaries" (Lewis 123). Lewis is right to draw a parallel between the aims of intersectional feminism and feminist anti-anthropocentrism, particularly for their implicit investment in moving beyond essentialist markers of social belonging and meaning. Yet her analysis dwells more on spiritual matters than materialism proper. She distances Head's work from the post-structuralist turn against self-sufficiency by citing references to 'eastern' philosophy in her fiction, arguing that they are evidence of the author's "tremendous faith in individuals' creative resources" (129). While it is true that the author did read and debate theology beyond the Abrahamic religions (mostly from Hinduism and Buddhism), it seems bizarre to privilege these often tangential references in her writing over a central theme and plot motif: marginalised southern Africans' (and, often, women's) attempts to attain agency through creative, playful subversions of power dynamics. The invocation of a 'universally liberating' potential supposedly found in new iterations of standpoint epistemologies also ultimately reifies humanist ideals such as political power and rights, which Head undoubtedly desired but also critiqued, as the repeated and literal questioning of the word 'power' in her titles suggests.

In a monograph published eight years prior to Lewis's study, Maria Olausen analyses the roles of environmental setting and identity in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. She also utilises emerging theories by Donna Haraway, but goes further by citing Rosi Braidotti – as well as Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon and other influential critical theorists – in a complex framework that she associates with “post-colonial feminist theory” (Olausen 14). Her reason for doing so, she explains, is because

[t]he contradictions in Head's vision of an identity which is at one and the same time both multifaceted and unitary, both sensitive to the precarious situation of women and highly sexist, both celebratory of the African village and Euro-centric in its evaluations, constitute a considerable theoretical and critical challenge. (14)

Contradictoriness is crucial to remember when speaking of Bessie Head. Olausen argues that the conflicts between the more contemporary theories and older (humanist) frameworks she uses are deliberate, helping to foreground the paradoxes in Head's own work (15). Her approach is inspirational, not least for asserting that the author was decidedly ahead of her time for redefining place and placelessness and the role that gender plays in shaping these concepts. It is a successful project in that it takes seriously matters which Head actively participated in and reflected upon in her non-fictional writing, such as housekeeping and gardening. Olausen also reminds readers that Head's interest in religion was tempered by an equal fascination with Darwinian evolutionary theory (155). Where my approach differs from Olausen's is that I am not concerned with the artist's construction of a

“positive female identity” so much as her interrogation of ‘messier’ metaphors (16), and her foreshadowing of queer ecological theories.

Here I am referring particularly to Nicole Seymour’s *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013). Seymour is wary of Edelman’s queer critique of futurism, not least since “it is corporate and governmental *disregard* for the future that enables the (paradoxical) reproduction of capital [...]. These shortcomings are particularly troubling from both an anti-racist and environmental-justice standpoint” (7-8; original emphasis). I agree with this assessment and am also sceptical of the lack of consideration for the gestating (normatively female) figure in Edelman’s critique. If one is to invoke materialist feminism as a critical framework, then one must commit to exploring entangled connections between textual and gestational environments. Furthermore, my analysis foregrounds multiple facets of women’s reproductive agency and how they figure metaphorically for creativity. In Olausen’s last chapter, she concludes that “Head’s movement from a position of differences within to a place of dichotomous sexual difference is [...] not primarily a nomadic project” (289). I agree with her assessment that Braidotti’s theory of nomadic subjects, which is heavily influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is ultimately at odds with Head’s words. This, however, leads me to identify a theory which *may* resonate with a large majority of the author’s work. In short, Olausen is open about the difficulties of applying theory to a contradictory author; my proposed solution is to utilise an equally paradoxical framework, such as Colebrook’s and Seymour’s. Drawing on the work of Michael Snediker, Seymour formulates a queer optimism wherein

“value is determined by the communal and empathetic process of valuing” (11) – a thought which is refreshing for its uncoupling of anti-repronormativity from failure and pessimism, but which nevertheless appears slightly tautological (it is unclear whether value precedes the empathic process or precipitates it).

In two letters to the South African publisher A.D. Donker written during 1984, Bessie Head expresses that she desires for three of her earlier novels – *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru*, and *A Question of Power* – to be published as a trilogy titled “Personal Choices”. While there is a broad sense of chronology here, the most important reason for gathering these texts is their *thematic* preoccupations, as reflected by the collective title which foregrounds choice (in opposition to ‘power’, a word that recurs in analyses of her work). The same letters state that a second trilogy would consist of *The Collector of Treasures*, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *A Bewitched Crossroad*. She explains that these three texts are united by their interest in the Botswanan Chief Khama III and “his care for women”, his “human grandeur” that allowed her to realise that “an harmonious relationship existed between me and my environment”. Recalling Head’s characterisation of her creative output as cultivating a relationship between the human artist and the earth, and considering this comment alongside her environmentalist reflections provoked by Chief Khama III, it seems apt to begin my analysis with the first text from the second trilogy.¹¹⁹ I am particularly interested in the agentive in/action of negation that several characters undertake, which allows them to experiment with non-reproductive narrative chronologies.

¹¹⁹ Neither of the collections, it must be noted, were published before Head’s death; *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru* are available in a duology by Hachette Digital, first published in 2010.

After discussing the critical reception of Head's oeuvre, I move on to my cross-referential analysis of her aforementioned stories and novels and their communication with queer forms of vitality. My point of entry is *The Collector of Treasures*. The text overtly investigates violence displayed towards women, children, and domesticated or farmed animals: nonhuman entities appear in this collection to address quite human concerns. My analysis draws predominantly on the titular story, in which conversations between female prisoners reveal that many of their pregnancies were terminated by their male partners' physical abuse, thereby complicating the rhetoric of 'choice' which dominates much media coverage of abortion. Other short stories focus on adultery, infanticide, and the gendered rural/urban divide; collectively, they thematise how restrictions in reproductive agency and gender roles impact upon both mental and physical health. This relationship between the tangible and intangible is broached in Head's other works. The second text to be analysed in detail is Head's first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and particularly its engagement with growth and vitality. There are interesting parallels between the extended metaphor of termination that is employed when discussing Hendrik Verwoerd in Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and Chief Matenge's resignation-by-suicide in Head's text. I argue that the material nature of her fiction highlights the intersections between patriarchal and nationalist anxieties about power in the 1970s (Botswana gained independence from Britain in 1966). As mentioned above, this text is notable for its frank treatment of abortion in a chapter which appears as a standalone story in Head's final collection, *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. For the sake of thematic cohesion, I move onto a discussion of the two remaining novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, before briefly considering their

continuities with *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. I conclude by considering how Head's queer chronologies present a new and materialist approach to southern African futures.

“Something or Someone” and *The Collector of Treasures*

As one of the most well-known authors originating from southern Africa, Bessie Head's fiction has been the subject of many interventions in postcolonial criticism; and, despite her misgivings about feminism, her identity as a *woman* writer means that her oeuvre has also been a source of interest to many gender studies scholars. The intersection of these academic interests is made strikingly apparent in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, edited by Susheila Nasta. The collection of essays was published just five years after Head's death in 1986 and her presence is palpable throughout the text. *Motherlands* contains three comparative analyses that are most notable for their discussions of Bessie Head's life and work. In a sense, these responses serve as a barometer aggregating responses to Head in the academy. On one end of the continuum, Valerie Kibera examines instances of adoption in novels by Marjorie Macgoye and Bessie Head; her analysis epitomises traditional approaches to Head's work which focus on the literal and metaphorical abandonment she felt after leaving South Africa in exile (315).¹²⁰ Many argue that Head is a social commentator first and foremost (Kibera 326), and that any concerns with politics in her works are

¹²⁰ One must stress that, despite involvement with unfortunate political events which precipitated her move, Head was not “forced” out of the country (Kibera 315): she chose to leave. I take issue with terminology that portrays the author as ostensibly childlike in her helplessness – a characterisation not unrelated to her precarious mental health, which is also regularly foregrounded in biographical and critical studies.

secondary to this fact. Yet in the case of gender justice – particularly issues involving reproductive healthcare – it is undeniable that the personal *is* political. By thematising such sensitive material, Head is utilising biological agency in the social microcosm to experiment with solutions to macrocosmic political problems.

Secondly, Jane Bryce-Okunlola compares the works of Flora Nwapa, Rebeka Njau, and Bessie Head to explore how different representations of motherhood are utilised as metaphors for creativity in novels by African women. She draws on the work of Margaret Tucker, who describes Head’s questioning of vegetal and human reproduction through female gardeners as a “departure from linear time, [...] a sort of *distorted prolepsis*” (Tucker 174-75; emphasis added).¹²¹ Bryce-Okunlola’s analysis is interesting for its focus on feminine desire as a response to absence,¹²² and artistic creativity as a fulfilling alternative to repronormative expectations (201). Once again, the emphasis here is predominantly on the *social* sphere. More accurately, it is argued that the predominant concern in Head’s novels is the “internal exile of motherlessness” and how this leads to a sense of alienation (203). By all means, we are told, Head experiments with aesthetic production through her female characters – but this is only as a result of traumatic *loss*. According to these readings, abortion or adoption are not manifestations of desire but rather unfortunate narrative disruptions in normative social development. As I imply in my previous chapter on Yvonne Vera, however, it is highly infantilising to regard childless or

¹²¹ In *A Question of Power*, the protagonist Elizabeth chooses to sell the fruit she grows in a panic instead of making jam, which Tucker argues means “she appears to be in stasis; cut off from production for so long, she is not yet able to exert her own powers of reproduction” (175). This brief yet intriguing connection between material and metaphorical manifestations of gendered reproduction informs my later reading of *A Question of Power*.

¹²² This is particularly pertinent when considering the recurrence of desire as a critical concept in my earlier analysis of Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*.

motherless protagonists as compensating artistically for a perceived lack. A more promising alternative would be for feminists to focus on developing an ethics of refusal – one which does not bemoan the social consequences of negation, but rather presents abortion as a process of desiring alternative forms of *life*.

This critical engagement with refusal, challenging the tendency for it to be associated with the ‘tragedy’ of nothingness, is subtly posed by Caroline Rooney as she considers the poetics of survival in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* and Head’s *A Question of Power*. Her analysis begins by reminding readers that the OED definition of ‘motherland’ is “native country”:

‘Mother’ then functions as a substitute for ‘native’ and a trope for ‘of origin’. It seems then that one could alternatively use the term ‘fatherland’ which is defined as: ‘one’s native land’. However, there is obviously asymmetry. *Fatherland is marked by ownership – one’s – whereas motherland is, in comparison, ‘no one’s’*. ‘Motherland’ can also be placed next to ‘mothercountry’, defined as: ‘country in relation to its colonies’. *‘-land’ therefore pertains to the native, while ‘-country’ to the colonial relation*, which suggests that motherland/native country is only country in terms of terrain, whereas mothercountry, as country-country and not country-land, is a proper country, a territory.” (Rooney 99; emphasis added)

Rooney’s critical treatment of the terms through which her chapter – and the rest of the collection – emerges is crucial. Her etymological analysis speaks to concerns of natal alienation which preoccupied women living both inside and in exile from South Africa during the twentieth century, as my first chapter on Wilma Stockenström demonstrates. In *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, the author deliberately obfuscates the narrative setting: we only know the protagonist makes a journey inland from the ‘native’ country-land of her birth, since the mothercountry

as ‘country-country’ is never identified by name. Throughout the novella, there is an explicit avowal of rejection and its transformative powers.

Certainly, Head’s writing is more situated and explicit about geographical markers than Stockenström’s. Yet both South African-born authors believed there was a clear linkage between colonial conquering, nationalism, and heterosexual domestication, as seen in a letter from Bessie Head to Wendy Cullinan from 28 July 1964. She writes:

We once had an Afrikaans teacher and he knew what it meant to love that country [South Africa]. He looked at its hills and its silence and made himself so much a part of it that he could not let anyone else love it. So jealous and possessive is he. [...] Afrikaners love that country possessively and its [sic] with a destructive kind of love that wants to crush and keep the loved thing all to itself. A land and a people can form that kind of affinity – just like a love between a man and a woman. [...] The whole world should not come to a full stop because someone loves something or someone!

Notwithstanding its reliance on generalisations (with which the Afrikaans native speaker would conceivably disagree), there are undeniable similarities between this passage and Stockenström’s attitude to the concept of the ‘motherland’, and the possessiveness it enables. The animalised slave in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* attempts to queer the power dynamic between herself and her male owner/lover. When she loses her love interest, she chooses to withdraw from the world by escaping to the baobab tree, counting her remaining days with a string of beads, and ultimately committing suicide. With a literally terminal “Yes.” (Stockenström 111), she embraces negation as the only in/action which allows her to express agency. Likewise, Head utilises punctuation in the above quotation to figure for the

impossible logic of colonial domination and gendered control. Her description of Afrikaner nationalism is conveyed in grammatically sparse, lengthy sentences, until she finally disrupts the narrative with an exclamatory cry (rallying against a metaphorical ‘full stop’). It is particularly striking how she draws attention to the indeterminacies of subjectivity which such possessiveness enables. For example, if the object of veneration is a more-than-human construct like a country, it may be elevated to such an extent by the nationalist that it is seen as more important than a real human being, even someone who is a fellow patriot. Alternatively, the object of affection may be human (*someone*), but the intensity of possessiveness renders them as a literal object, as *something*. There are remarkable slippages here between human and nonhuman agencies because of colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchal domination.

The negation implicit in ‘no one’s land’, Rooney argues, can be reconfigured to denote different relationships with the environment: “It could be a case of everyone’s land; or, a case of being subject to the land or nature, and acknowledgment of a certain *vital dependency*” (100; emphasis added). Rooney seems to be gesturing towards materialism when she argues that spiritual figures and environmental actors in Head’s fiction operate as more than mere metaphorical or metaphysical devices; she even creates an almost ecocritical term for the narrative’s constant evocation of terminations and beginnings, namely a “literary textual economy of *recyclement*” (123; emphasis added). Yet she approaches this notion through psychoanalytic theory, and her text is more concerned by what is (or is not) an ‘African’ poetics of survival than the specificities in Head’s writing that went on

to influence anglophone writers like South African-born Zoë Wicomb and Zimbabwean-born Yvonne Vera. While acknowledging the uniqueness of Rooney's approach, I wish to focus on the critical humanism at play in Head's work, which uses images of growth, negation, and separation to challenge both colonial and liberationist discourse.

Although something of a renegade in her national and religious values, Head was not immune to the moral alarmism characteristic of twentieth-century Botswana when regarding the sexual lives of young women. In her autobiographical writing, she likens pre- or extramarital reproduction to social crisis: "a high rate of illegitimate births among the children [legal minors]" is a particular concern (*A Woman Alone* 57). She insists that these are issues she wishes to address through her fiction (62), with her personal investment in ethics being particularly apparent in her earlier work (77). Yet there are moments in both her nonfiction and short stories that exceed didacticism and are imaginatively bizarre and transgressive. Marital sex-as-reproduction contrasts with traditional methods of 'abstinence' like thigh sex, for example, a practice which renders sex as an *unproductive* and potentially queer act. And while she was concerned for young women's health, she appeared frustrated, or even bored, by discussions of their bodies. This was particularly true when she was the focus of such scandals. On 18 May 1970 she complains in a letter that Botswanan society fixates upon women's appearances (particularly their bellies) and how their bodies signify for reproductive responsibilities: "I've had the longest pregnancy in history with no man in sight. And I have fantastic sex parts which have been thoroughly and widely discussed with no one really knowing what they are

like” (Head in Vigne 121). Her ironic interpretation of attitudes to her physical appearance may be intended as jocular, but it is also illuminating when considering the thematic preoccupations of her fiction. For here, as in Head’s stories, a woman is subject to the dictates of sexist society: no matter if she is ‘pregnant’ for longer than nine months, or if she denies having had sexual intercourse, she is still at risk of being called both a virgin and a whore.

Many of the women in *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* are pariahs: living both figuratively and literally on the outskirts, they have been abandoned – or at least disappointed – by men. On one level, this is obviously a sustained metaphor for how “the choices made by individuals are linked to the choices made by the society in the ongoing struggle between the forces of tradition and modernity” (Johnson 156). Yet there is also another dimension to the insider/outsider dichotomy that Head evokes in this short story collection, especially when one considers that most of the controversial female characters are outcasts for transgressing repronormative values in their communities. With their condemnation comes a certain degree of moral scepticism. Gillian Stead Eilersen astutely notes that in stories involving murder or infanticide, the perpetrators are often portrayed as relatable, and village members are cognisant of how easily they could commit similar crimes (169-70).

Overall, Head’s first published collection of short stories takes an unusual approach to narrative development. “The Collector of Treasures” is the penultimate story in the collection and its form is disjointed. The first of its four segments opens with the focaliser, Dikeledi, gazing out of a police truck at the rural landscape as she

is transported from her village to a prison in Gaborone: “The everyday world of ploughed fields, grazing cattle, and vast expanses of bush and forest seemed indifferent to the hungry eyes of the prisoner who gazed out at them through the wire mesh grating of the back of the police truck” (*The Collector of Treasures* 87). The mention of bovine animals here calls to mind how cows are transported in a similar way, immediately highlighting the linkage between colonial control and ‘domestication’ of both women and farmed animals. For the crime Dikeledi has committed is the result of a domestic dispute: she killed her husband by cutting off his genitals with a knife (89). She learns from the prison warden that four other women have been imprisoned for the same offence. An inmate named Kebonye admits to having castrated her adulterous husband with a razor after she “aborted with a child” when he kicked her between the legs (89); she takes the matter of others’ contraception and safety into her own hands by killing him (90). The omniscient narrator explains, “That kind of man lived near the animal level and behaved just the same. Like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated and like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also made females abort” (91). Two things are notable here. Firstly, the earlier evocation of the ‘dreaded comparison’ of women’s and animals’ labour is subverted as this abusive man is repeatedly animalised (through reference to three species that have connotations of sexual exuberance in popular discourse). Head is undeniably relying on a traditionally humanist hierarchy of species, but her association of a *man’s* poor behaviour with that of domesticated animals’ is unusual. Second, it is

notable that the word ‘abort’ is used here, and not ‘miscarry’.¹²³ Abortion is normally seen as a ‘women’s issue’ – both by activists who are for or against the medical procedure – but in this instance, it is the result of a *man’s* (or, when regarding the metaphorical rendering, a male animal’s) actions. Indeterminacies of reproductive agency are thus foregrounded from Head’s subtle engagement with anthropocentric diction and her inversion of species-based sexualisation.

The second section of the titular story breaks into a meditation by the narrator about two types of men in modern southern Africa. Firstly, there is the sort of man whom Dikeledi married, a selfish and sexist character type who appears in several of Head’s stories and novels. In an earlier story titled “Life”, for example, the story’s namesake marries the controlling Lesego who cannot understand her sexual vitality and *joie de vivre*.¹²⁴ The protagonist responds by initiating affairs with other men, and the impact of her behaviour is metaphorically foreshadowed by the death of new-born calves at Lesego’s cattle-post (44): an interspecies variation on the theme of sterility and loss. He learns about the affairs and decides to use his slaughtering knife to kill Life (45). Some may argue that the similarity between Dikeledi’s and Lesego’s crimes is proof of Head’s lack of a feminist agenda, and that her fiction is more interested in exploring the hypocrisies of the human condition than in gender-based violence. Yet it is crucial to note that Life never abuses her husband, and that he is made aware of her transgressive sexual proclivities long before they are married (when they first meet, she is a sex worker). Dikeledi, in

¹²³ Head’s choice of word is doubtless deliberate, as in the same story she uses the latter word to refer to the loss of a pregnancy by a woman in a healthy relationship: “Kenalape had a miscarriage and had to be admitted to hospital for a minor operation” (97).

¹²⁴ It is not a coincidence that the spelling of her first name puns on a binarised contrast of ‘Life’ and “death”, personified (41).

contrast, is repeatedly emotionally and physically humiliated by her husband. Two further male characters who commit gendered crimes are the grandfather Mokgobja and his son Ramadi in “Looking for a Rain God”, who sacrifice Ramadi’s two young daughters in the hopes that this will precipitate rainfall during a drought (59). Abuse, infanticide, and murder are thus recurring themes throughout the collection, highlighting how common it is for the ‘first type’ of man to harm female-identifying persons – whether they have children or not, or even if they are children themselves.

Yet female characters in Head’s oeuvre are far from helpless, as “The Collector of Treasures” and other stories imply. In “Snapshots of a Wedding”, the third-person narrator suggests that women in rural Botswana may strategically plan when to present as pregnant (79). This display of agency complicates the traditionally tragic narrative of women being helpless subjects who must suffer due to the unpredictability of their excreting (either menstruating or childbearing) bodies.¹²⁵ A similar thought is expressed in the final story, “Hunting”, where a character assures herself that she will win a man’s affections by feigning pregnancy: “Agh, I’ll tell him I’m expecting a child. I hate them all anyway” (107). In “The Special One” (the only story in the collection that is narrated in the first person), a woman speaks frankly about female desire and sexuality, stating that the libido increases with age and especially after menopause (84).¹²⁶ Here Head creates a memorable character who addresses an unspoken reality for many women: the fear

¹²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of how the concept of tragedy figures in discourse surrounding abortion, see chapter 3.

¹²⁶ While the character’s advice to other women is interesting, it is not necessarily helpful or true. For example, she adheres to the superstitious belief that period sex is dangerous (84), providing the bizarre justification that “all primitive societies have their holy fear of a woman’s menstrual cycle” (85). Ironically, while this is the only story to use first-person narration, it is also the only one to present such a distanced and anthropological perspective on African cultural practices – perhaps foregrounding tensions between the author’s own indebtedness to traditional customs and modern Eurocentric attitudes.

of fertility, and the incongruence of biological realities (desire increasing with age) with societal narratives (of fertile young girls and desexualised older women). Working in tandem with these women's internal strength is their solidarity through sharing traumatic narratives.

One is reminded here of Edward Said's distinction between filiation and affiliation (23-24). According to Said, contemporary textual critics may form their opinions in one of two ways: either in response to unchosen genetic and early environmental factors like their nationalities or places of birth, or by actively forging new allegiances based on similar social and political values. In his recent work on transcultural adoption, John McLeod moves further beyond normative notions of literal or metaphorical family by envisioning identity formation not through a blood-line but as the "life line" in the palm of a hand, a crease in the skin which is determined, up to a point, by biogenetic inheritance, yet shaped by the agency and actions of the individual (26). There are certainly differences between affiliation and "adoptive being" (McLeod 23), but both Said's and McLeod's couching of this distinction in biological terms (between faithfulness to what one is descended from, and devotion to that which one is *not* related to) is particularly interesting. In Head's fiction, women certainly gain agency through nonbiological linkages. This is even the case when they bond over shared stories of embodied processes like childbirth and domestic violence. In "The Collector of Treasures", and many of the collection's other tales, women find kindred spirits beyond biogenetic kin.

Survival strategies may be necessary for women in some circumstances, but Head's vision of gender relations is not without hope. For there are two types of

men, according to the author, and the second is far removed from the first. The narrator in “The Collector of Treasures” reflects that “[t]here was another kind of man in the society with the power to *create himself anew*. He turned all his resources, *both emotional and material*, towards his family life and he went on and on with his own quiet rhythm, like a river. He was a poem of tenderness” (93; emphasis added). I am interested in the new, materialist potential embedded within this description of such a (hu)man and the echoes of Neimanis’s posthuman gestationality and Alaimo’s aqueous posthumanism as discussed in chapters 1 and 3, respectively. Head is both using and subverting the gender binary: there are two types of people, implicitly (men and women), but it is clear that within these groupings there are further sub-categories. The second type of man is actually a queer amalgamation of both stereotypically masculine *and* feminine traits which ‘flow’ like a river in their constant indeterminacy. In some instances, such a man appears to be more creative and (re)productive than women, as when Thato in “Hunting” immerses herself in Tholo because of “the barrenness of her own life” (96). This is also the case in “The Collector of Treasures” when Dikeledi’s neighbour Paul offers to care for her children and pay for their education as she is sent to prison (103). Unlike with the other male figure in her life, Paul’s idea of delivering her from motherhood is not through an act of violence like enforced abortion, and he does not feel entitled to sexual rewards for his platonic kindness. Such masculine tenderness is also foregrounded from the very first story, “The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration”: as in both “The Collector of Treasures” and “Hunting”, we are presented with a man (the chief’s son, Sebembele) who is “unmanly” (4).

There are echoes here of Virginia Woolf's assertion in *A Room of One's Own* that "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (87).¹²⁷ Woolf's blending of both male and female characteristics is particularly instructive when one considers that there are also powerful women in *The Collector of Treasures*. In other words, Head's classifications of 'men' refer to any human being. In the short story "Witchcraft", for example, Mma-Mabele is given the nickname "he-man" (49). On the surface, this may appear a puzzling term: instead of the more commonly-known insult, 'she-man', these words do not include any marker of female sex. Genital biology is not rendered as indeterminate so much as irrelevant: the nickname has less to do with brute strength than her social standing. She is thus not *something* to be mocked, but rather *someone* to be respected. The incongruence of gender and sex are prominent in this collection, and they merge with moments of vitalist continuities between the human and nonhuman. Despite charges of anti-feminism or gender-essentialism, Head's situated understanding of multiple genders within rural Botswanan society works against the 'Mother Africa' trope found in many nationalist writings and sentiments of the time. The manly woman and womanly man are found in Woolf's Modernist works, certainly, but Head is equally invested in showing that flexible gender identities existed in *premodern* southern Africa and may be revived in the postcolonial present. Experiments with chronology in her earlier works show how male 'tenderness' and female 'power' are encoded with the queer and vital potential of self-formation.

¹²⁷ For a convincing and comprehensive materialist analysis of this famous phrase, see Derek Ryan (2013).

Vital Continuities: The *Personal Choices* Trilogy

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett quotes visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, postulating that vitalists may think more ecologically by “revisit[ing] and becom[ing] *temporarily infected* by discredited philosophies of nature, risking ‘the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes’” (18; emphasis added). Whether Bennett’s tone is facetious or not, it is all too apparent that indigenous knowledge systems and texts are literally ‘othered’ in this quotation. Much as how Nietzsche uses biological metaphors of contagion to figure for moral weakness, here Bennett intimates (via Mitchell) that philosophical frameworks developed beyond Western traditions are only deserving of passing interrogation: effectively, she is suggesting that vitalists may ‘immunise’ their work against counter-arguments by conflating their theories with references to animism or other indigenous beliefs. I must stress that, contra Bennett’s suggestions, my argument is not ‘injecting’ postcolonial perspectives *into* vitalist theories, as has been illustrated perhaps most poignantly by my analysis in chapter 2 of Wicomb’s words “a bush is a bush; it doesn’t become what people think they inject into it” (1987: 181). Instead I am interested in how Bessie Head anticipates and challenges new materialist perspectives on vitalism years before *Vibrant Matter* sparked a revival of scholarly interest. Bennett professes in her introduction that “Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body” (xiii). Yet Head obviously disagrees, as shown by how genetic, environmental, and inexplicably intangible factors all influence her characters’ identity formations (most notably in *Maru*).

Another theorist philosophising various forms of in/organic life, Claire Colebrook, has recently grappled with vitalism's queer potentiality. She distinguishes between "active" and "passive" vitalism (100); while queer theory can be built on either, she argues that the former invests too heavily in the social construct of the self through familial relations (100-101). Returning to the earlier discussion of af/filiation and adoptive being, it would appear that such a distinction would be useful for analysing an oeuvre like Bessie Head's, with all its references to abortion, adoption, and other disruptions of repronormative teleology. Yet I take issue with Colebrook's dismissal of agency or activity in favour of passivity. In a 2014 article on creative becoming and patiency which explains and expands upon Colebrook's theory, philosopher Patrice Haynes states that

by prioritizing activity (agency) over passivity (patiency), new materialism inadvertently sustains a dualistic interpretation of the active/passive distinction, a dualism which is traditionally cashed out according to gendered stereotypes: while man is linked with vibrant, creative productivity, woman is aligned with less favoured qualities such as passivity, reproduction and inertia. The radical promise of new materialism for feminist theory is thereby betrayed. (Haynes 132)

This is a fair criticism of new materialisms, particularly those iterations which are dedicated solely to considering Western theorising of agentive activity. However, I have already demonstrated by work done in previous chapters that reproduction is *not* passive; regardless of outcome (parenthood or childlessness), reproductive agency allows for multiple forms of vital potential to emerge. Just like Edelman, Haynes (and, by extension, Colebrook) relies here on the very dualistic nature of difference that she criticises, by distinguishing one 'strain' of vitalism from another and suggesting that only one holds feminist or queer potential. I do share their

suspicion of materialist feminists' focus upon the agentic potential of *matter*, as a grown woman undoubtedly holds more intentional clout than foetal tissue (even if both possess agency in the recalcitrant and disruptive sense that the new materialists suggest humanist accounts exclude). That said, Colebrook's evocation of 'passive vitalism' tends too much to the side of political inertia,¹²⁸ and her chapter in *Sex After Life* feels half-developed as it closes by quoting Deleuze and Guattari rather than formulating what her own queer vitalism entails. Furthermore, I am not inclined to invoke theology as a corrective to materialist theory's shortcomings (as Haynes does), and I have already illustrated that Head remains agnostic by evoking a range of religious images alongside distinctly Darwinist theories.

Yet it would be foolish to pose Colebrook's intricate philosophical construction as a strawperson argument. Her theory is notable, particularly when concerning this study, for its focus upon queer *desire* as a curative solution to vitalisms which focus too heavily upon biological reproduction as a normative marker of social development. She argues that queer vitalism is less involved with majoritarian modes of identity politics than with celebrating the potentiality of difference as a positive force that makes one 'queer' to others and the multiple individuals within oneself. Wearing her poststructuralist influences firmly on her sleeve, she argues for considering "life beyond the concept of the person" (166): using the example of a gay couple who want to have a child, she suggests moral arbiters should consider how both revolutionary and normative desires may

¹²⁸ This is not to argue that she is not interested in politics – Colebrook believes that passive vitalism is "micro-political: it attends to those differences that we neither intend, nor perceive, nor command" (106). Yet, as Seymour astutely articulates in her monograph, extreme forms of anti-anthropocentrism such as this risk disregarding the visceral experiences of certain humans who may suffer due to overtly political problems of difference (13).

constitute such a wish. The lack of political impetus in both Bennett's and Colebrook's work leaves much to be desired – but my earlier textual analysis of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* shows that the concept of desire is itself a source of affirmative potential when employed in conjunction with postcolonial theory. The limits of deconstructionist theory, which informs most new materialist thought, may thus be overcome by utilising more intentional conceptions of agency and vital potential. The analysis that follows adapts Colebrook's lexicon of queer vitalism and desire in conjunction with southern African feminisms; Head's *Personal Choices* trilogy, I argue, looks towards a fully-formed and political mode of vitalism, a queer vitality.

Head's first published novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, narrates the story of a South African refugee in Botswana named Makhaya who joins forces with a British-born farmer to try and help their adoptive village through a drought. Unsurprisingly, there is a recurrence of dust in the rural setting (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 8), and the "arid land" and "barren earth" is a literally sterile environment (116). It simultaneously figures for the stifling sense of fear and social seclusion in southern Africa during the twentieth century: the narrator's observation that "few black men in their sane mind envied or cared to penetrate the barrier of icy no-man's-land which was the white man and his world" could easily refer to any country with a history of racism and colonial control (125). Land, as a metaphorical device, also relates to tribalism (a word Head often invokes in her earlier works), particularly the issue of tribal land tenure (38). To the present day, land ownership remains a heated topic in southern Africa, since the governments of post-

independence South Africa and Botswana did not compensate people whose ancestors were dispossessed of their properties under colonial rule.¹²⁹

Yet the text also presents various surprising moments of literal and metaphorical growth. There are disruptive images and passages where life emerges amidst barrenness, such as the fragile grass which grows and spreads as an allegory for development as a creative and agentive process (37). Makhaya reinforces experimental associations of identity formation when he invites the women of the village to help with farming and gardening: “Perhaps,” he thinks, “all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country and perhaps they too could provide a number of solutions to problems he had not yet thought of” (43). His view of women as catalysts of social change is a somewhat unconventional attitude in the traditionally patriarchal setting of a rural village. Shortly after this scene, the narrator reinforces this sense of development by observing that “things were changing rapidly [...] and the change was not so much a part of the fashionable political ideologies of the new Africa as the outcome of the natural growth of a people” (45). Here, Head is quite literally naturalising an alternative narrative to those that render postcolonial southern Africa as dangerous and degenerating. The people of the village have not been influenced by ‘new’, imported materialist theories. Rather, they negotiate between themselves in order to best arrive at practical solutions to political or environmental crises. The repeated greeting used by the villagers, “branch-of-my-tree” (76), is one illustrative instance of such interconnected vitality.

¹²⁹ Post-apartheid South Africa’s fifth president, Cyril Ramaphosa, started initiating land reform in 2018, much to the chagrin of white minority landowners and US president Donald Trump, who tweeted that he was concerned about “the large scale killing of farmers”.

I have already elucidated, both in my introduction and earlier in this chapter, that Botswana is a comparatively conservative country, especially when considering the issue of reproductive agency. Counter to this fact, the scene which addresses abortion in *When Rain Clouds Gather* marks a moment of development for the rural community. Chapter four opens with a detailed description of Chief Sekoto, a jovial man whose brother Matenge is the novel's primary antagonist (later in the novel, he usurps Sekoto's role as chief of the village). Sekoto rules over court cases, and one day he is asked to make a particularly difficult verdict: a traditional healer named Mma-Baloi is suspected of killing children to use their body parts for witchcraft and accused of murdering a young woman who visited her house to seek medical treatment. Sekoto is aware of public opinion but turns to the local doctor, who reveals that the children's deaths were a result of pneumonia and the young woman "died of a septic womb due to having procured an abortion with a hooked and unsterilized instrument. He would say that the septic condition of the womb had been of three months' duration" (53). Hearing this information, the Chief rules that the people of Bodibeng are misguided and that they "falsely accuse [the old woman] of a most serious crime which carries the death sentence" (54). Importantly, the crime he is referring to is the practice of witchcraft; the traditional healer's attempts to help a 'wayward' woman with sepsis carry no consequences.

The chief rules that each family in the village must donate an animal as payment for their prejudice. His kindness towards the old woman is revealed to have personal motivations when he confesses that he is "tired of the penicillin injections" that he is given at the hospital for "an ailment", and he hints that "perhaps your good herbs may serve to cure me of my troubles" (54). Penicillin is commonly used to

treat sexually transmitted infections, and this vulnerable but humorous monologue from Sekoto reinforces a later offhand remark that “[t]he Chiefs all had syphilis” (65). Nevertheless, whether through Western science or traditional remedies, his decisions are motivated by medical facts. They are also in keeping with sentiments expressed earlier in the novel by Makhaya that “witch doctors were human, and nothing, however odd and perverse, need be feared if it was human” (11). This humanising impulse relies on a critical humanism, which renders supposedly bizarre or incomprehensible methods of healing as interconnected with normative (Western) understandings of human health and wellbeing. Anti-abortion or repronormative rhetoric may similarly be challenged by emphasising the importance of agency in post/colonial contexts.

Chief Sekoto’s benevolent attitude aligns him with the second type of wo/man which Head describes in *The Collector of Treasures*, s/he who is comfortable displaying both power and tenderness. In this way he is the antithesis of his brother Matenge, whose personality the narrator summarises as such: “People were not people to him but *things* he kicked about, pawns to be used by him, to break, banish, and destroy for his entertainment” (176; emphasis added). Matenge’s utilitarian approach to politics is reflective of Head’s earlier concerns about Afrikaner nationalism’s lack of distinction between ‘someone’ and ‘something’, and it is particularly interesting to note that the violent act of kicking (which was linked to involuntary abortion in *The Collector of Treasures*) recurs to figure for patriarchal control. In this description, the writer displays a certain wariness of southern African tribalism, warning that it can be just as problematic as the masculinist rule of colonial powers. This becomes apparent to the villagers, too, after Matenge

victimises a bereaved mother whose child dies of tuberculosis while staying at a cattle outpost during the drought. Through “a strange gathering-together of all their wills” (182),¹³⁰ the community marches to the chief’s house, where he locks himself inside and decides to commit suicide instead of facing justice. Like the sustained metaphorisation of Hendrik Verwoerd’s assassination as abortion in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, there is an extended termination here, as a corrupt political figure is removed – in this case, by public pressure – from a position of power. After the chief commits suicide, rain starts to fall (184): a literal reminder of the potentialities of social formations, which Wicomb attaches to political agency in her novel. The last lines of *When Rain Clouds Gather* speculate that it was “as if everything was uncertain, new and strange and beginning from scratch” (188). The rebirth of society in Head’s novel is precipitated by a single mother’s mourning, but it is *achieved* through collective agency – which, in turn, is informed by creative local leaders and the fresh views of outsiders like Makhaya.

Power and tenderness are uncoupled from gendered associations in scenes involving Makhaya and Chief Sekoto, two prominent male figures who express their authority playfully, appearing open to transgressive potentialities. Makhaya is a mysterious figure – he is referred to by himself and others as both Black Dog and “mad dog” (130) – yet he makes people feel at ease. When a female character suggests that this is because “[h]e takes away the feeling in us that he is a man” (113), she appears to be referring not so much to his gender as to his transgressive anthropomorphising of the elements – and his queering of human

¹³⁰ Not for the first time, Head’s words have a distinctly Nietzschean ring to them, as the villagers display a collective will to power.

power through nonhuman agencies. As Makhaya builds a fire (a traditionally feminised activity in southern Africa), we are told that in contrast to the other villagers, he “treated each stick as a separate living entity” (140). Earlier in the novel he reflects upon “this mass of suffering mankind of which he was a part, but he also saw himself as a separate particle”, and later he begins “to stress his own separateness, taking this as a guide that would lead him to clarity of thought in all the confusion” (81). Through the inorganic agentive forces of particles – related to tinder and fire – Makhaya fixates not upon an inherent interconnectedness of all beings, but rather upon the agency that emerges from their distinctness. Returning to the earlier discussion of Colebrook’s perspective on desire and difference, ecology is coded with queer vitality here in the sense that all these elements are *individuals* in a broader, political landscape. This transgressive developmental continuity is conceptualised even further in *Maru*.

The second text in Head’s *Personal Choices* trilogy is also concerned with issues of literal and figurative re/creation – or anxieties about a lack thereof. As has been observed in several analyses of the text and in Stephen Gray’s introduction to the Heinemann edition, the book’s title (taken from one of its central protagonists), *Maru*, means “the elements” in Tswana (Gray 2008: ii). The metaphorical treatment of ecological sterility in the novel extends beyond the earth; as Joyce Johnson notes in her study of the novel, “[t]he contrast between the sun with its boundless and uncontrolled energy and the fretful and *abortive* rain clouds [...] highlights difference in the personalities of Moleka and Maru” (97; emphasis added). The titular character is one of several Totems or chiefs in the village of Dilepe; Moleka is his friend, another chief who is more stereotypically masculine and ostensibly

powerful in the rural community. Both men fall in love with Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa teacher and artist who is discriminated against because of her San heritage. Margaret's biogenetic mother died the day she was born, and she was adopted by a white woman of the same name who treated her relatively generously but also viewed her as something of a test subject, with "one of her favourite, sweeping theories being: environment everything; heredity nothing" (*Maru* 9). Head places herself at a remove from such a deterministic position, opting instead to treat Margaret's identity formation ambivalently as the young woman negotiates the men's affections and her own growing feelings for Moleka.

Head's contestation of the so-called nature/nurture debate and affirmative rhetoric surrounding Westernised biological discourse begins early in the narrative with mention of blood: it is a pivotal substance in the narrative, particularly when establishing connections between characters. Maru imagines that other villagers are trying to conceal their thoughts from him, but reveals that "he could see and hear everything, even their bloodstreams and the beating of their hearts" (2). The phrase "They did not greet one another. Their bloodstreams were one" is repeated almost verbatim in reference to Maru's relationships with both his sister Dikeledi and his friend Ranko whom he employs as a spy (43). Here the filiative and affiliative are indeterminate, again, as characters' hearts and bloodstreams grow – in a manner not dissimilar to the transcorporeal repetitions in Vera's *Butterfly Burning* – to signify an interconnected vitality. The rural community's vital continuities are best epitomised through Margaret, an 'outsider' who assimilates quickly in the village and who is described in strikingly similar terms to the 'new African' in Head's letters and the 'new and strange' societal rebirth at the close of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The

narrator explains of Margaret's nature, "*It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal*, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation" (10; emphasis added). Margaret *exceeds* the definition and limitations of her Masarwa heritage, particularly as she goes on to destabilise the power dynamic between two traditionally authoritative men.

Moleka is described early in the novel as a stereotypically masculine figure: alongside his physical and sexual prowess as a womaniser, his voice is so commanding that it appears to cause rooms to vibrate (19). Vibration is symbolic shorthand for power here, much as it is for Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*. Yet there are important differences between the two authors' definitions of authority: Head's philosophising is distinctly southern African, and feminist, as the autochthonous figure Margaret grows more and more important in both the narrative and her community. The young woman desires "a whole life of vibrating happiness" (13), and this vitality makes her romantically attractive to the infamously noncommittal chief. Yet, at the same time, Margaret also shares characteristics with Moleka's foil, Maru. The latter man is more artistically minded: "*Creative imagination* he had in over-abundance. Moleka had none of that *ferment*, only an over-abundance of power" (45; emphasis added). Like bacterial cultures found growing in petri dishes or barrels of traditional beer, creativity and ferment appear synonymous to Head (and both, in this sentence, are at a remove from conventional definitions of political authority). In fact, the phrase "creative ferment" recurs in a later description of Maru (54). Margaret is also creative-minded; her artistic "skill for rapid reproduction of life, on the spot" draws the admiration of both Dikeledi and Maru (69). The lines

between artistic and sexual recreation are blurred not only by this intense admiration, but also by the fact that the subject matter of her drawings is later described as “[w]hat she was trying to give birth to” (87). In contrast to Dikeledi, who marries Moleka after being impregnated by him, Margaret remains childless throughout the narrative, even in the opening segment of the text, a vignette looking forward to her married life with Maru. In a sense, then, the potential ‘ferment’ of an unsatisfying marriage is tempered by Margaret’s artistic agency, the one arena in which she can express and act upon her true desires.

Margaret chooses to thematise ordinary village scenes in her work for the reason that they “were the best expression of her own vitality” (87), noting that

There was this striking vitality and vigour in her work and yet, for who knew how long, people like her had lived faceless, voiceless, almost nameless in the country. That they had a life or soul to project had never been considered. (88)

Tackling Botswana rural life as subject matter is clearly an issue of representation to the Masarwa-born woman. Her artistic projects prove an underlying vitality connecting *all* those in the community, despite their various genetic or national roots. But it must be stressed that this worldview still treats the villagers as individuals: hers is not the homogenising impulse of her adoptive mother, the white woman Margaret who would have liked for all human beings to be equal in a ‘colour-blind’ epistemology that completely disregards genetic heritability. The young Margaret, in contrast, upholds the queer potential of vitality by refusing to take an all-or-nothing approach to philosophies of personal development. The new African is an artist who is attuned to the potential of both biology and environment,

creation and fermentation; she is not a Nietzschean ‘yes-man’, but a maybe-woman. By this I do not mean that Head lacks a developed political agenda of her own; rather, there is a multifaceted and processual nature to her affirmative stance. Her seemingly paradoxical formulation of creative ferment accommodates negation to allow for an ethics of refusal. For at the end of the text, in scenes which chronologically precede its proleptic opening, Margaret *loses* her vitality. Learning of Moleka’s marriage to Dikeledi, she falls into a “living death” (101): “A few vital threads of her life had snapped behind her neck and it felt as though she were shrivelling to death, from head to toe” (96). This catatonic state renders her vulnerable to Maru’s marriage proposal, aborting her artistic capabilities and the agency they afford her. Both her creativity and her sexual desires are overridden by patriarchal domination and pressure for a heterosexist *telos*. In a sense, then, there are actually three Margarets in the text: the social-determinist adoptive mother, the docile wife whom we encounter at the nonlinear ‘beginning’ of the novel, and the creative virgin whose aborted vitality courses through the rest of the text, charging much of its narrative development and the shifting philosophical and political outlooks of the village’s previously prejudiced characters.

The most widely debated of all Head’s novels is undoubtedly *A Question of Power*. Written two years after *Maru*, this text also thematises a clear aversion to sexual reproduction in favour of other creative endeavours, as Elizabeth Tucker notes in an instructive 1988 article (175). Reception of *A Question of Power* is particularly interesting for its association of Head with potential artistic influences: Desiree Lewis compares vacillating reception of Bessie Head to critical responses to Sylvia Plath (121); Joyce Johnson likens the novel to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*

because of the use of myth and human ‘types’ throughout history (109); and Maria Olausson notes that

[a]lthough Head was not familiar with [Olive] Schreiner’s work until the late ’70s, and had some reservations about Schreiner’s description of the history of Southern Africa, she nevertheless found similarities between herself and Schreiner. [...] [Head’s] ideas about universal humanism can therefore be said to derive partly from the Western tradition but also shows an awareness of the critiques directed at this tradition. (155)

Crucially, all three of these authors – Plath, Joyce, and Schreiner – thematise women’s reproductive agency in their fiction.¹³¹ As Olausson’s words illustrate, they may also prove to be fruitful comparative partners to Head for highlighting her continuous interest in tensions between the universal and the local, or the modern and the rural, and how these conflicts code for gendered power struggles.

I would go further by highlighting echoes in *A Question of Power* of another literary influence who is concerned with reproductive autonomy and societal pressures: Thomas Hardy. Like the appearance in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* of Little Father Time, who hangs himself and his two siblings with the suicide note “Done because we are too menny” (264), Head’s novel features a strangely named boy who is unusually preoccupied with suffering for a young child. The protagonist Elizabeth has a son nicknamed Shorty whose morbid anxieties are frequently paired with misspellings or incorrect grammar; this is particularly apparent when he describes “a

¹³¹ Here I am referring, in particular, to the protagonist’s vaginal bleeding in *The Bell Jar*; Gerty MacDowell’s ‘female pills’ or abortifacients in *Ulysses*; and Lyndall’s potentially self-induced miscarriage in *The Story of an African Farm*. I briefly discuss abortion and the latter novel in chapter 3; for a more detailed discussion of other possible instances of terminations in Schreiner’s fiction, see Helen Bradford’s 1995 article “Olive Schreiner’s Hidden Agony: Fact, Fiction and Teenage Abortion”.

dog what died” (*A Question of Power* 179), and, soon after, as he writes in a letter to his mentally ill and hospitalised parent, “Dare Mother, when are you coming home?” (182). Hardy’s text is notable for its complex treatment of female sexuality through Sue Bridehead, a character who avoids engaging in sexual intercourse for most of the narrative and who miscarries one of the children she later conceives with her first cousin, the titular Jude. There is a clear fixation here on heredity and genetic anxieties, which is similarly extended in Head’s novel through Elizabeth’s dreamlike (or, more often, nightmarish) encounters with two imaginary figures named Sello and Dan. Her spiritual twin Sello is sceptical of Africanism, an ideology that the narrator raises when critiquing a term which is often used to rally sympathy in political causes in southern Africa, ‘my people’:

When someone says ‘my people’ with a specific stress on the blackness of those people, they are after kingdoms and permanently *child-like slaves*. ‘The people’ are never going to rise above the status of ‘the people’. They are going to be told what is good for them by the ‘*mother*’ and the ‘*father*’. (63; emphasis added)

Suspicion of sexual reproduction and filiation takes on a political impetus here. Head’s critical humanism seeks to move past the condescendingly racist (and controllingly nationalist) undertones of the possessive pronoun ‘my’ – if not the very repronormative and heterosexist logic underpinning supposedly progressive identity politics. Yet Elizabeth is still susceptible to feelings of shame about her political positionality as an ostensibly coloured woman in southern Africa. When Dan mocks her indeterminate genetic origins, she imagines that “he was African, she was mixed breed. What a plague that was! Perhaps in their past incarnations as lovers they had mercifully been of the same race and could peacefully join their souls together ‘at

the roots'?" (147).¹³² Through the rhetorical register of breeding, infection, and biogenetic origins, Elizabeth renders her fears of an ultimately intangible figure – and his loyalty to an idealised and homogenised 'Africa' – in clinical, scientific terms.

While it is illuminating to consider the literary roots of Head's thematic preoccupations as well as the cross-pollination of reproductive anxieties in both Euro-American and southern African anglophone aesthetics, it must be noted that *A Question of Power* is not as bleak in its outlook as Hardy's fiction. As Jane Bryce-Okunlola points out (215), Elizabeth plans to kill herself and Shorty but he stops her by showing he trusts her (*A Question of Power* 174), and when she plans suicide again later her son distracts her by asking for a football (193). Instead of terminating their struggles, she resolves to let them continue. This sense of cyclical inevitability is reinforced by Elizabeth's growing resolution to accept the nurturing role of motherhood. Initially focusing upon her own origins as an orphan whose biogenetic family pay a woman to care for her, like Phephelaphi's adoptive mother in *Butterfly Burning*, Elizabeth remembers with reverence her maternal grandmother, who visited her every weekend during her childhood in South Africa: "It was such a beautiful story, the story of the grandmother, her defiance, her insistence on filial ties in a country where people were not people at all" (17). Yet in Botswana, the protagonist later prioritises her own potential as a carer and *exceeds* received definitions of filiation. A striking illustration of this point is how she calls the

¹³² Elizabeth's anxieties about genetic and metaphorical 'roots' are strikingly similar to those expressed in Zoë Wicomb's fiction, particularly by the protagonist in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. Another interesting comparative note is that both authors reference *Gulliver's Travels* when exploring discomfort with corporeality and embodiment (Head 146). For a full analysis of the functionality of Swift's writing in Wicomb's novel, see chapter 2.

American expatriate Tom her son (183), even after he asserts he left the USA and his biogenetic family because he does not need mothers (121). Her relationship with the foreigner grows into a ‘life line’; when she suffers a mental breakdown, for instance, Tom is the only villager who visits her in hospital and he correctly predicts that she will recover. The thought of her biogenetic and adoptive sons living in a future without her is what keeps Elizabeth fighting against her spiritual visions, eventually leading Sello to reveal that he used her as a pawn in conquering Dan (whom he also discloses is Satan).

Elizabeth’s mental rebirth is precipitated, rather fittingly, with the sustained description of a “long thread-like filament like an umbilical cord” (117): “Attached to its other end was Sello. [...] As she looked at it, it parted in the middle, shrivelled and died. The huge satanic image of Sello opened its swollen, depraved mouth in one long scream” (140). I say this is fitting and not ironic because the protagonist’s identity formation is contingent upon her *own* agency rather than the actions of her supposed soulmate (whom, it is crucial to note, appears just as demonic as the devil himself). With the withering of the umbilical cord, and Sello’s metaphorical abortion, both he and Dan begin to lose their hold on her mental health. Shortly after this scene we are introduced to a character called The Womb who acts as a sexual surrogate for Elizabeth with Dan (146-47). The Womb is pivotal to the text’s denouement: entering the narrative at the exact moment that the spiritual twin loses his power, she provides Elizabeth with a new perspective on female sexuality – from the creatively *embodied* position of female reproductivity. At this highly symbolic point in the text, homosexuality is also raised as an ethical concern. Elizabeth reacts to queer desire (which Dan brands a ‘universal’ phenomenon) with shock, thinking

of both Dan and Sello as perverts for engaging in homosexual intercourse (138). Yet there are contradictions here in her attitude,¹³³ not least because the two figures engage in heterosexual acts that she finds equally abhorrent. This fear of carnality takes a quite literal turn when she says of Dan, “He’s a homosexual, but he also sleeps with cows and anything on earth” (148).¹³⁴ Yet she grows to disregard the coupled men and their taunting, becoming more concerned instead by the figure of The Womb, who steals one of her floral dresses which has a pattern “symbolic of appeal, creativity and vitality” (165). Elizabeth thus embarks on a quest to reclaim the agency she has lost, which involves reconciling herself to the fact that she herself contains a strange amalgamation of embodied desire and queer vitality. Sello reinforces her similarity to The Womb when he confesses at the narrative’s conclusion, “It wasn’t power that was my doom. It was women; in particular a special woman who formed a *creative complement* to me, much like the relationship you and I have had for some time” (199; emphasis added). Considering his words, it is clear the figurative abortion scene advances not an ending, but rather a new beginning: Elizabeth’s male ‘twin’ is replaced by his creative complement, the overtly sexualised Womb, who causes the protagonist to reflect upon her positionality as a mother and woman of colour in Botswana. In looking forward to a future without Dan and Sello, but with her two children, she chooses to embrace the fact that the “creative ferment” of desire is integral to her identity (57).

¹³³ A standout moment illustrating potentially internalised homophobia is when Elizabeth “gaily” says to her female friend Kenosi, “If I were a man I’d surely marry you” (90). For an exploration of potential queer undertones in Head’s writings, see Elinor Rooks (2017).

¹³⁴ One is reminded here of Greta Gaard’s exploration of ecosexuality in her recent work on critical ecofeminism (2017). For an analysis of this trope in abortion narratives, see my discussion of Gaard and Stockenström in chapter 2.

A Question of Power is divided into two sections (named after Sello and Dan, respectively), and while discussing terminations, it is worth considering the literal endings of each part of the text. The first section closes with Elizabeth vowing to herself, “Oh God [...] May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds” (100). This emphasis on multiplicities implies that there are several creative forces at play in the society and the protagonist is one of several agencies who may decide to either help or hinder potential new ways of living. The final section of the text also concludes with the protagonist speaking to herself; as she announces, “There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet” (206). Head is constantly experimenting with the idea of a hybrid prophet in this trilogy. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* it is a ‘mad’ man-dog, but in *A Question of Power* it is a female prophet, specifically the woman who embraces negation for opening up alternative futures and lives. The Womb epitomises creative ferment and encourages Elizabeth to accept the messy indeterminacies of embodiment, to divorce herself from her mental demons by grounding herself in material reality and desires. This is made particularly apparent by the closing words of the novel: “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (206). These final lines advance a solution to the eponymous ‘question’: power lies in a sense of environmental situatedness and interconnected vitality. The protagonist’s gentle reverence of the land appears to quell her earlier anxieties about how to belong in southern Africa as a woman of indeterminate genetic origins.

Aesthetically naturalising agency throughout the *Personal Choices* trilogy, Head explores how individuals’ actions and desires are all interlinked by a strange and persistent vitality: one which manifests itself in nonhuman *and* human forms.

The trilogy both parallels and challenges contemporary understandings of intersubjective connectivity by conceiving of political power as contingent upon ecological forces, years before materialist and vitalist theories took their recent turn away from stereotypically white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender figures of authority. Head's philosophy is distinct from the work of Jane Bennett and Claire Colebrook in that she is *actively* invested in foregrounding the figure and spirit of the fully-formed human – even when utilising elemental and environmental imagery and metaphors. Her vitality quite literally seeks to breathe life into old and new outlooks: she is against the nostalgic logic of colonial expansion as much as she is critical of emerging African nationalisms, since a repetitive and uncritically humanist hierarchy of power appears to underlie these disparate political causes. Abortion figures symbolically in her fiction for this tussle between established and developing regimes. Furthermore, scenes featuring discussions of actual abortions, adoptions, and related processes display a surprisingly progressive attitude to reproductive agency; they present readers with an imagined alternative to dominant discourse on women's sexual health and rights.

Bessie Head's distinctly African perspective tempers the more apolitical aspects of new materialism. Her very texts are symbolic of life lines: setting her fiction almost exclusively in Botswana, but thematising works by geographically distant writers who also fixate upon sexual reproduction and terminations, she foregrounds how identity is predicated by genetic material, environmental factors, *and* individual desires. This has enormous political implications, particularly in postcolonial contexts, where the agency of autochthonous people (and their literary-theoretical treatment) has historically been ignored. Throughout Head's fictional

corpus readers are confronted with images of bodies at all stages of life: foetal forms, stillbirths, abandoned children, virgins, sex workers, newlyweds, biogenetic and adoptive mothers, dying leaders, and more. Her characters adopt multiple identities and her narratives alternate between varying perspectives and rebirths, complicating the linear continuum along which such markers of development supposedly fall. The result is that creativity and fermentation function synonymously in her fiction. Furthermore, her writing promises that a southern African feminism may emerge by cutting ties with colonial and repronormative tropes like 'mother Africa' and 'the motherland', focusing instead on queer desires. 'Queer', here, is both sexual and strange: it alludes to shared vulnerabilities between all organisms, but also instructs individuals to be open to difference and to recognise that one is constantly becoming a stranger to oneself, irrespective of whether one reproduces or not. Queer vitality questions the apparent continuity between parenthood and personal or social development. It also interrogates normative markers of development which are popular in Western cultural and literary canons. There is transgressive potentiality in subverting traditional chronologies through narrative form and content, not least for challenging capitalist and colonial excesses. Playful inversions of power dynamics affirm the potentiality of the new African, the embodiment of creative ferment. The most apt illustration of this figure is one who defies repronormativity: she who believes abortion is not the denial of a future, but rather an affirmation of agency.

Coda: Queer New Time

By the time *Tales of Tenderness and Power* was published in 1989, Wilma Stockenström's and Zoë Wicomb's novels had already been released to critical acclaim. Yet narrative continuity between the abortion scene in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and the story "Chief Sekoto" in Head's posthumous collection suggest that her earlier work had a marked impact on the southern African literary scene, particularly for authors interested in feminist issues like embodiment and agency. Much as in her first collection *The Collector of Treasures*, stories in *Tales of Tenderness and Power* repeatedly foreground reproductive health as a plot point or thematic concern. For example, a character in "Village People" expresses her fears of having an illegitimate child but also of the baby dying (*Tales of Tenderness and Power* 45). In "Property" there is also mention of an unexpected pregnancy (67), although it remains unclear whether the woman in question desires to have an abortion or bring the pregnancy to term. "The Lovers" is another story that expresses anxieties about sexual reproduction, this time concerning infertility as an "endless" story (88). Women are instructed to take precautions "during times of menstruation, childbirth and accidental miscarriages [...] [because] [f]ailure to observe the taboos could bring harm to animal life, crops and the community" (93). Two things are notable in this quotation. Firstly, as in her earlier stories, Head still delineates between unintentional and intentional miscarriages, proving once again that abortion is not simply a 'women's issue'. Secondly, the taboos are interesting for suggesting there is temporal and situational connectedness between human, vegetal, and animal life (in contrast to new materialists' feminism, and Head's more ambiguous theorisations, interconnection is utilised in this case of Botswanan

folklore to control women's bodies and actions). "Dreamer and Storyteller" is an autobiographical reflection on the author's life as a so-called 'Botswana writer'. Commenting on her process of reflecting on society, she notes, "I seemed to be living too, all the time, with animals' eyes" (141), and she later restates that it is "impossible to translate" some of the scenes she has witnessed "into human language" because "human beings, *when* they are human, dare not conduct themselves in such [contemptuous] ways" (142; emphasis added). There is always this multi-layered, conditional sense of the human in Head's work. The shifts between tense in these excerpts illustrate how her fiction repeatedly interrogates ethically fraught moments when people may be said to lose their humanity. Despite her ultimate loyalty to critical humanism, her narratives unsettle anthropocentric models of development, particularly if they appear to harm women and others who are most vulnerable in previously colonised environments.

This feminist and materialist challenging of linear chronologies is undoubtedly what goes on to influence future narrative forms in southern Africa. Analysing the closing pages of *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth Tucker argues that

by exposing hierarchies of power and, in particular, the objectification of women as the foundation of patriarchy, Elizabeth jumps out of Dan's and Sello's 'big picture' to form another time, exemplified by the Motabeng Farm Project. Elizabeth's new 'time' is empowered by the community, not by some authoritative abstraction of History. (Tucker 181)

Viewing Elizabeth's personal triumph as just one instance of subversive development in the broader trilogy, and taking Tucker's words to signify a thematic subversion of narrative temporality in the fictional corpus, I would argue that the

author's new time is decidedly queer in its scope.¹³⁵ Head's and Stockenström's narratives are more concerned with biological forms than ecological processes – the former writer's preoccupations mostly register at the human scale, while the latter is open to discussing nonhuman agencies – but both are notable for queering the figure of the human within nonhuman environments. Stockenström's narrative form negates internalised prejudices through an interspecies ethics of listening; Wicomb's protagonist desires to experiment with an autopoietic and environmental sense of formation; and Vera's literary work metaphorises more non-subjective ecologies and repeatedly stresses transcorporeality's transformative potential. Head predates all these authors, yet her investment in the New African is, paradoxically, what inspires them to move *beyond* the human realm in their forward-looking narratives. In a sense, then, her paradoxical melding of various dichotomies – rural and urban life, human and nonhuman forms, Anglo-European and indigenous aesthetics – creates space for a new lineage of southern African women writers.

As the circular form of this thesis has shown, materialist representations of feminism emerge and reappear continually throughout Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe in periods preceding, during, and following colonial rule. The order of my chapters is crucial – not because Head is superior to the other authors but rather because she thematises the very terminations and beginnings that recur in the others' works. Focusing on embodied entanglements, fictional abortion narratives by southern African women appear to hold more intersectional potential than the very 'new' theories on reproductive health and sexuality established by Western

¹³⁵ Here I am indebted to the earlier work of Jack Halberstam (2005), whose assertion that queer time "creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of *no future* hovers overhead like a storm cloud" goes on to inspire the title of Lee Edelman's monograph (2; emphasis added).

philosophers in recent years. Postcolonial fiction from the late twentieth century is thus not so much an aging 'corpus' as a living body of work which provides insight into ethical and political dilemmas still actively occupying feminists. Head's openness to paradoxes should be equally instructive to new materialists and postcolonial scholars; perhaps it is possible to temper utopian, apolitical theories of agency *and* rigidly anthropocentric perspectives on personhood, power, and rights. Vitalising feminist interconnections involves acknowledging that all individuals in an environment are constantly shaping each other's formation, without denying important differences (intraspecies and interspecies, organic and inorganic subjects). Becoming vies with being, and it is an ethical duty not to forget that. But for the sake of collective wellbeing, we must acknowledge how political agency has historically been denied to many beings in favour of an incorporeal Mother Country, an abstract Father Time, or a reified Child. Feminists from southern Africa have been mindful of the insidious links between nationalism, racism, sexism, speciesism, and repronormativity for many years. Materialists of the future will do well to remember these linkages. As for the matter of abortion: reproductive agencies will have the last word by creating, first.

Conclusion: Questioning Power, Transforming Futures

The previous chapter discusses how Bessie Head's fiction both questions and queers traditional associations of power, expressing an experimental and creative sense of agency. In part, this conclusion's title is a reference to what is arguably her most famous work. Yet it also returns us to the first literary analysis of the slave's quest and riddling questions in Wilma Stockenström's novella. Indeed, one of the most crucial points throughout the previous chapters has been that the primary authors are, each in their own ways, questioning heterosexist understandings of political power and human rights. My modification of Head's title further speaks to the transformative potential of her creative corpus (and the fictions that follow in its wake), engendering a queer vitality through the New African: a lively figure who transcends national borders without losing sight of political matters, particularly how literal and metaphorical reproduction is idealised to control gestational environments. The twinned issues of repronormativity and nationalism are challenged when a woman seeks an abortion. This latter point has been central to the concept of reproductive agency which I associate with individual and collective desires in my introduction, as initiated with respect to the legacies of Karen Barad and Edward Said.

The close reading technique of this thesis has been guided by theoretical dialogues initiated with reference to both postcolonial studies and work by new materialists. While the topic of temporality is included in all four sections, I wish momentarily to highlight the discussions of southern African futures emerging particularly in chapters 3 and 4. In their introduction to the edited collection *African*

Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility (2016), Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio assert that “to speak of ‘Africa’ is not, inexorably, to advance some new (or not so new) reductionist argument” (3), contending instead that “[s]peaking of ‘futures’ in the plural [...] is one modest but perhaps meaningful way of mitigating the teleological significations of the category or the adornment of global ‘History’ with a capital *H*” (12; original emphasis). Their argument signals a growing trend in postcolonial literary studies; indeed, in a special issue of the *Journal of the African Literature Association* co-edited with Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard, Susan Arndt associates the “agencies of futureS” (intentionally capitalising the last letter to stress the importance of pluralities) with what she views as the twinned concepts of hopes and dreams: “I use dreams as (verbal/visual) narrations of what is strived for, wanted and *desired* — excluding the connotational layer of nightmares” (5; emphasis added). As the previous chapters have shown, I also centralise both individual and collective desires for the sake of creating an intersectional and situated sense of agency. Much like several of the new materialists discussed in this thesis, however, Arndt is somewhat hasty in relying on a range of neologisms, including both the capitalised plural above and the term ‘dream*hopes’. Initially she argues that the latter are not identical to agency, yet centrally to her argument,

agency is born out of memory, nourishing dream*hopes for self-determined futureS in the process. Analogously, this agency is born out of (the longing for) dream*hopes, nourishing them just as much as a productive memory in the process. This very cycle of nourishing the nourishment, of dream*hoping memory into dream*hopes and remembering dream*hopes into memories, symbolizes [...] highly promising futureS pregnant with dream*hopes. (10)

Following the repeated critique of metaphorical figurations of gestation and nourishment throughout this thesis, this statement seems an idealistic reading of ‘African’ futures. Furthermore, the tautology in Arndt’s argument risks eclipsing its political impetus. In contrast, I am not so interested in memory; my readings connect agency with political and *material* desires. While the above refashioning of hopes and dreams relies on similarly discursive repetition as seen in some idealistic new materialism, my aim throughout this thesis has been to counterbalance such rhetorical embellishments with a grounded approach by discussing concrete realities of reproductive agency or its denial; and further, by arguing that the primary texts emblematised a present, living, and ever-relevant corpus rather than a record of hopes, dreams, or memories.

My analyses have been organised with the aim of providing material insights into how the nexus between abortion narratives, postcolonial perspectives, and queer ecocriticism can transform collective agency in southern Africa. This brings us to the second part of this section’s title: transforming futures. Importantly, in the primary texts the concept of transformation holds true for both ‘African’ futures and new materialist ontologies. Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*, for example, proves how southern African feminist fiction surpasses Barad’s conception of the foetus-mother phenomenon by presenting a transcorporeal and gender-inclusive perspective on gestationality. In this novel the trope of tragedy – evoked earlier by Stockenström in her own narrative of abortion and suicide – is made and remade as literary form and event. Repetition and political witnessing in the present transforms the future and, concurrently, materialist conceptions of reproductive agency as desire.

Ecological intra-actions are considered alongside situated transformations in post/colonial society, such as Zimbabwe's transition from the literal and metaphorical progeny of Rhodes to a purportedly independent state. The textual readings in this thesis have examined how metaphors and metonyms of reproduction are utilised by colonial and liberationist forces, both for the purpose of nationalist expansion. Birthing and mothering tropes are particularly pervasive, but in southern African fiction such metaphors are destabilised when development is conflated with materialist processes like autopoiesis, resulting in understandings of development as individual and collective *formation*. The forms of the texts themselves are cyclical, yet their abrupt nature challenges associations of circularity with supposedly feminine rhythms. Watery ecologies in all four authors' works position gestationality as inherently queer, as a process involving but also exceeding the human female reprosexual body. Yet the combination of such materialist metaphors with decidedly political settings means that the texts ultimately project reproductive agency as a continuum of ethical presentness, rooted in considering women's desires.

Achille Mbembe argues that if one is to think or write from Africa, then the question of temporality and temporariness is the ultimate opening line of enquiry since “[s]tructures of temporality in colonial and postcolonial conditions are thoroughly entangled with the vicissitudes of the affective, with the subjective play of *desire* and uncertainty” (2016: 221-22; emphasis added). Once again I am struck by the prescience of desire as a critical concept, and how it is now recurring in many contemporary theoretical formulations of futures in African contexts. Yet, when commenting on the implications of China's and India's economic ascents for the future of African theory, Mbembe argues that “it forces us to reflect anew on the

multiple ways to grow the wealth of a nation”, since “[p]rior to the arrival of capitalism, Africa may not have known models of growth based on labor-intensive forms of production and husbandry of natural resources” (229-30). He concludes that Africa might try “to formulate a place for herself in a world where the power of the West has begun to decline” (230). Here there are strikingly gendered abstractions about the ‘labour’ required in order to ‘grow the wealth of a nation’, and a worryingly uncritical advocacy for ‘husbandry’ between new modes of power and production and the naturalised form of Africa ‘herself’. Such repronormative rhetoric contrasts distinctly with the sensitivities shown by all the imaginative approaches to abortion and agency in this thesis. My analyses have been organised with the aim of questioning the naturalisation of benevolent biogenetic relationships and their associations with nourishment – as extensive discussions of parasitism and invasive species, and even queer ecocritical readings of substances such as milk, have shown. Read together, Arndt’s and Mbembe’s comments are illustrative of how postcolonial theory would benefit from *listening* to queer, and particularly anti-repronormative, conceptions of time as presented in southern African feminist fiction.

This is not to say that postcolonial approaches have not played a vital role in this thesis. One of my aims throughout has been to show how unsettling anthropocentric models of development ultimately assists women and others whose reproductive agency has historically been aligned with the colonised environment. As I discussed in chapter 1, narratives that queer interspecies and intraspecies allegiances are crucial for questioning hierarchical structures of power, but only if they are open to discussing political histories situated in the human realm. Bestly

riddles in *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* certainly draw parallels between human and nonhuman gestationality, but the narrative situation never loses sight of slavery and its violation of biogenetic origins. Recent postcolonial analyses of adoption and other disruptions of repronormative discourse, such as McLeod's figuration of life-lines, develop and transform Said's work on beginnings and origins, and these exciting developments of the very concepts of personal development and origins are equally manifest in the fictions of Stockenström, Wicomb, Vera, and Head. The readings in this thesis have not merely demonstrated an ethics of listening (in the interruptions and tragedies of Stockenström and Vera), but also staged an ethics of refusal by embracing phenomena such as disgust and negation (as illustrated by Wicomb and Head). Furthermore, they display how artistic desires – the desire, for example, to aestheticise questioning of metaphorical births and deaths as well as literal figurations of them – lead to political change, whether this is before, during, or after periods of colonial control. Southern African fiction from the late twentieth century is therefore a living body of work which provides insight into present conversations between postcolonial and materialist theories of agency.

Returning finally to the general level of theoretical analysis, this thesis has consistently shown how representations of abortion and reproductive agency signal an important intervention for both new materialism and postcolonial studies. In an interview discussing the future of the African continent, Achille Mbembe asserts

there are a whole set of areas where Africa's contribution to the world of ideas and praxis can be highlighted for the benefit for the world with implications for all sorts of things: theories of exchange, theories of

democracy, theories of human rights, and the rights of other species, including natural species, in this age of ecological crisis. It is work that has not been done, but it is time that we are doing it. (Mbembe in Blaser 16)

It is high time that theorists began to invest more heavily in southern African approaches to aesthetics and ethics; yet this thesis has repeatedly demonstrated that fiction written by Botswanan, South African, and Zimbabwean feminists has already been performing this ‘work’ from the 1970s to the 1990s and onwards. Their experimentation with exile as a metaphorical state, and with reproduction as representing nationalist values, is crucial to understanding contemporary discussions of biocolonial and capitalist developments, as my earlier critique of Mbembe’s own discourse shows. Postcolonial feminisms are communal; they advocate for a collective sense of agency. This is something they share with materialist feminisms, but a marked difference is that the former still usually root their understandings of agency within co-opted forms of masculinist and humanist power. As the triangulations of postcolonial texts with queer and materialist feminisms in this thesis have demonstrated, all fields are suspicious of linear teleologies, and all use agency as an imaginative force for discussing alternative futures. The usefulness of merging postcolonial and new materialist perspectives lies in developing a distinctly southern African theory of reproductive agency that is non-anthropocentric yet political. In other words, the trick is to query power while never forgetting that some inevitably hold more agency than others.

The embodiments of agency addressed in this thesis position abortion as a formation of desire. This process involves both affirmation and refusal, with birth, death, and desire developing along a continuum rather than merely a linear process

of growth. Honesty about supposedly deviant desires is perhaps the most crucial contribution and ethical manifestation of materiality demonstrated by all the primary texts in this study. For if abortion is not (just) an ending, then many of the binarised dichotomies surrounding terminations of pregnancy in popular discourse are immediately called into question. Furthermore, metaphors of birth in previously colonised environments take on increasingly insidious undertones, particularly when one realises how they continue to be replicated in theory and criticism of the postcolonial present. Cultural formations of abortion provide an important and compelling counterpoint to repronormative myths of origins and development, queering traditional gendered roles while remaining sceptical of imported and supposedly new theories of embodiment. The fictions in this study transform power (such as the power that underlies both colonial forces and African nationalisms) into a continuum of agencies. As Bessie Head's fictional body of work shows, abortion narratives are crucial for forming a future-oriented sense of ethical presentness. What seems 'new' in postcolonial studies and materialist theory can be seen to be reliant on southern African feminist fiction and its queer ethics of listening, refusal, and, above all, presentness. It envisions a future where the ecological model of abortion does not span concentric stigmas, but continuums of agency.

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