

‘In Every Classroom Children Are Dying’: Race, Power and Nervous Conditions in Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut*

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Abstract

The paper investigates the power of whiteness in South Africa despite the efforts being made in the burgeoning field of whiteness studies to deconstruct whiteness and white privilege. I argue that Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* offers a timely investigation of the power of whiteness, even in a South Africa where the black majority now governs. According to Sam Raditlhalo, this is a society of people ‘suffer[ing] from a debilitating sickness of whiteache, in which they do not wish to “pass” for white but to “be white”’. Indeed, Matlwa’s characters are not only culturally lost and painfully ashamed of their blackness, they live in a country where they are seemingly not allowed to be black. As a result of this state of affairs, black children in South Africa die every day in classrooms where their history and their blackness are not validated. Thus when Matlwa forces her characters to undergo a detox of sorts, she urges those lost South Africans to come home to themselves and to their cultures.

While Henry Giroux urges us to ‘move beyond the view of “whiteness” as simply a trope of domination’, Albie Sachs, in his famous discussion paper delivered in Lusaka in 1989, declares: ‘Black is beautiful, Brown is beautiful, White is beautiful’. I argue in the paper that the overwhelming images of an influential whiteness, both locally and globally, make it difficult for many black folk to see themselves as beautiful. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in the preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, ‘[t]he status of “native” is a nervous condition ...’. Matlwa’s characters – who are educated in predominantly white private schools – experience a racialized nervousness similar to that experienced by Tsitsi Dangarembga’s characters in a colonial Rhodesia. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga’s

character Nyasha suffers a mental and physical breakdown as she lashes out against the white society that confines her. The theories of Sartre and Fanon that relate to the psychic scars of oppression are therefore central to the paper. Matlwa's plot unfolds in a supposedly free, post-apartheid society, but her characters are hardly free even as they enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. The South Africa that Matlwa presents us with is one that is racially divided rather than mixed in the way suggested by Sarah Nuttall in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*. However, I agree with Nuttall that both "whiteness" and "blackness" are 'ideas, lived experiences, and practices in the making. New studies now are needed urgently in order to help us understand the complexity of both and to deconstruct the somewhat ossified versions of each'.

Keywords: Race, South African Literature, Education, Whiteness, Post-apartheid

This paper investigates both the power and psychological effects of race in South Africa. I argue here that Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* offers a timely investigation of the power of whiteness even in a black governed South Africa. In his review of *Coconut* Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo, borrowing Ngugi waThiong'o's term whiteache (wa Thiong'o 2007: 180), contends that Matlwa's black characters are reflective of a South African society 'suffer[ing] from a debilitating sickness of whiteache, in which they do not wish to "pass for white" but to "be white"' (Raditlhalo 2010: 21). Indeed, Matlwa's characters are not only culturally lost and painfully ashamed of their blackness, they seemingly live in a country where they are not allowed to be black. As a result of this state of affairs, black children in South Africa die every day in classrooms where their history and their blackness are not validated. Thus when Matlwa forces her characters to undergo a detoxification of sorts, she urges those lost South Africans to come home to themselves and to their cultures.

Matlwa's novel is an important investigation of whiteness, what Paul Kivel describes as the 'constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence are justified by their not being White' (1995: 17). In

post-apartheid South Africa what is a problem is no longer the violence of apartheid – with its crude institutionalized racism –but the repercussions of apartheid manifested in a nation that is impoverished economically, educationally, spiritually and psychologically. While Henry Giroux calls for a ‘rearticulating of “whiteness” rather than either simply accepting its dominant normative assumptions or rejecting it as a racist form of identity’ (Giroux 1997: 293), Njabulo Ndebele in his interview with Mary West is of the mind that, both locally and globally, the ‘hegemony of whiteness is on a slippery slope’. For Ndebele with ‘the emergence of China and India’ and other ‘middle-level powers’ such as South Africa, Iran and Brazil, ‘[i]t’s no longer open season for colonial whiteness and how it, in the past, shaped the global environment’ (West 2010:118). As much as I agree with Ndebele and with Albie Sachs’ 1989 declaration – a paraphrase from a Mozambican former guerilla and poet – that ‘Black is beautiful, Brown is beautiful, White is beautiful’ (1991: 192), the influence of whiteness in its domineering and therefore ugly form – and not necessarily Englishness as West suggests – cannot be denied, even as Sarah Nuttall rightly says that ‘privilege is something that has to be paid for, and is also something, in its structural white form, which will end’ (Nuttall 2009: 69). The truth is that Frantz Fanon’s influential anti-colonial and anti-racist books, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, remain relevant today. Matlwa’s depressed and suicidal characters evidence the psychological nervousness that Fanon wrote about so long ago. Uncomfortable in their own black skins, they desire the very whiteness that is the cause of their agonizing identity complexes. Clearly, in the so-called ‘new’ South Africa ‘the old rules remain and the old sentiments are unchanged’ (Matlwa 2007: 32). Or as Raditlhalo asserts,

[f]or all the high praise South Africa has garnered in terms of nonracialism as a creed, it is near impossible to think that a declaration of multiculturalism is easy to put in practice, as the text by Matlwa clearly shows (2010:21).

Arguing in a similar vein as Matlwa and Raditlhalo, Michelle Booth observes that ‘[i]n South Africa, given our apartheid past, we are aware of “race” – but we do not share that burden equally’. “Race”, for “whites”, is not a burden in the same way that “blackness” is, mostly because the experience of being “white” is still largely that of privilege’ (2004: 116).

Durrheim *et al.* highlight a well-known issue, namely that South Africa is still a very segregated place, with exclusive and affluent neighbourhoods throughout the country ‘which are not “whites only” but “whites mostly”’ (2011: 52). Richard Ballard (2004), on the other hand, paints a picture of angry and negrophobic white South Africans who have lost their former comfort zones – an anger at the status quo clearly evident in *Coconut*, specifically with regard to the exclusive and predominantly white private schools where the minority black students are treated as aliens.

Like Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and the sequel *The Book of Not*, Matlwa turns her attention specifically to the race wars that are fought in the turf of racially integrated schools in South Africa rather than in Dangarembga’s colonial Rhodesia. There is no shortage of research conducted on these types of schools, popularly known in South Africa as ‘model C’ schools, which were financially aided by the then apartheid government. While Mark Wilmot and Devika Naidoo (2011) examine the racist and sexist attitudes of some white teachers in ‘model C schools’, Nadine Dolby focuses on race relations between black and white students at Fernwood school, a once all-white school in Durban which now has a black majority. Of course Fernwood is typical of what is happening all across South Africa, a scenario which, according to Dolby, produces resentment from white students and teachers who have had to realise that, at least in some quarters, ‘whiteness is no longer in control in South Africa’ (2001: 9). Dolby observes that for some of the white students at this particular school, ‘Blacks are positioned as morally inferior beings, who are only interested in retaliation and revenge. Yet, not surprisingly, the morals and behaviour of whites under apartheid (or in contemporary South Africa) are not questioned’ (2001: 9). It should be noted that many white students from the semi-private ‘model C’ schools, where in many cases black students outnumber white students, are fleeing to fully private schools – which remain predominantly white institutions with a mostly white teaching staff. It is therefore important that more research be conducted on these oases of privilege which are the specific point of reference in Matlwa’s novel.

Jonathan Jansen, however, argues: ‘For a long time to come, the majority of black learners will receive their formal education within the confines of all-black schools. In some ways, a disproportionate amount of research and political energy has been spent discussing racial integration in a small minority of former white schools’ (2004: 127). While I fully agree with

Jansen, the psychological state of the black students who are educated in these very white spaces of learning are worthy of study. To research private schools, in particular, is to research the children of the black elite who are running the country – youngsters who will themselves grow up to take important positions at the helm of government. Jansen is not against private schools per se, for he admits: ‘When tens of thousands of students in well-resourced private schools do well, this is good for the country, the economy and democracy’ (1995: 85). While the reviews of *Coconut* by Aretha Phiri, Raditlhalo, Jessica Murray and Lynda Spencer do not dwell specifically on the effects of a private school education on black students, the reviews are nonetheless important in foregrounding what Pumla Gqola calls the ‘complex, and sometimes uncomfortable, mental landscapes rather than the spectacular ... contest between dominant and disempowered’ (2009: 62).

Matlwa’s plot unfolds in a supposedly free, post-apartheid country, but her characters are hardly free both at school and in the wider society. The South Africa that Matlwa presents us with is one that is racially divided rather than culturally entangled in the way suggested by Nuttall (2009). Richard Dyer, who shares my pessimism about ‘race’, argues:

We are often told that we are living now in a world of multiple identities, of hybridity, of decentredness and fragmentation Yet we have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant. The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for white claims – and sometimes sincerely aiming – to speak for humanity (1997:3).

Matlwa, then, would probably agree with Dyer and particularly with Mandla Mncwabe who insists that ‘[n]on-segregated schooling [in South Africa] is a preoccupation of a minority; the number of children who will even in a post-apartheid education system ever attend a racially mixed school will be relatively small’ (1993:194) – because these types of schools are largely unaffordable for most black South Africans and also because many whites in South Africa would like to keep the old divisions in place. While Mncwabe suggests that the solution to South Africa’s educational inequities lies ‘in the creation of a single ministry’ which will ensure that ‘every child enters school

on an equal footing' (1993: 228), Jansen sounds an even more desperate alarm:

I hate the metaphor, but we are definitely sitting on a time bomb. **I warn all South Africans: there is racial trouble ahead if we do not solve the crisis of having two school systems in a sea of inequality** – a small, elite, well-functioning system for the black and white middle classes, and a massive, dysfunctional, impoverished system for the majority of poor black children (2011: 10-11; e.i.o.).

One of the important points of *Coconut* is that the private school system Matlwa describes in her novel is not necessarily 'well-functioning' in the sense that her characters are spiritually dysfunctional and impoverished even as they learn in the lap of luxury. Because these characters are not taught a positive African history, they die in white environments where they are of the right class but the 'wrong' skin colour. Matlwa's black characters – both young and old – are dazzled by perceptions of a radiant whiteness. To read the tension-filled relationship between Matlwa's main characters – Ofilwe and her alter-ego Fikile who each narrate the two parts of the novel – is to understand quite thoroughly the psychic scars of oppression. The level of hatred that both young women demonstrate towards each other is very disturbing. Ironically Fikile comes from the other side of the class divide and works at the Silver Spoon Coffee Shop where she has to serve Ofilwe, a symbol of the black elite *par excellence*. Although they come from opposite sides of the economic fence, they have much in common in that they both hate themselves. While Ofilwe's blackness makes her suicidal, Fikile – who considers herself brown rather than black – wants to be white when she grows up. Not only do these young women struggle to establish their identities in their respective white environments, they both have negative experiences at school and at home. While Fikile drops out of her black township school, Ofilwe can barely tolerate her so-called privileged private school education. With regard to their domestic relationships Ofilwe has an unhealthy relationship with her unattentive mother, while Fikile – who witnesses the gruesome suicide of her abusive mother – suffers repeated sexual molestation at the hands of her uncle who raises her in his one-room shack. Ultimately both women realize that their souls are damaged and that they need help. Jansen is right, then, when he maintains that '*we may be more*

traumatized than we think. Because of the longevity and intensity of apartheid brutality, we did not recover' (2011: 5, e.i.o.). Ofilwe and Fikile grow up in a post-apartheid South Africa and yet they still show signs of trauma induced by this very environment.

Coconut effectively highlights the scars of colonialism and apartheid. This type of 'everyday ... distress' may not 'produce dead bodies or even, necessarily, damaged ones' (Cvetkovich 2003: 3), but the damage is nonetheless there in the mental and emotional spheres of the traumatized. Judith Butler's argument about the internal sources of oppression is relevant to the characters in Matlwa's text who turn on themselves:

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are (Butler 1997:2).

To avoid this hazardous pressure the oppressed, according to Butler, must 'account for ... [their] own becoming. That "becoming" is no simple and continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being' (1997: 30). In the postapartheid context the act of assuming agency and 'becoming' a new person rather than the confined object of apartheid is complicated by the paucity of signs that point to that freedom. The fact is that the majority of South African blacks live in grinding poverty while the minority upper-class blacks suffer an inferiority complex that leads to a turning away from their black selves. I would argue that there is, for black South Africans in particular, a tortured identity that may need to be recognized as such so that it can be mourned and recovered in different ways. Butler puts it this way in the forward to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*:

... the loss of loss itself: somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one's way as a spectral

agency, one for whom a full ‘recovery’ is impossible, one for whom the irrevocable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency (2003: 467).

Matlwa is part of a long tradition of writers, both past and present, who tell the story for the sake of this ‘new political agency’.

In the novel’s opening page Ofilwe, whose agency is severely compromised, lusts over the hair of a white classmate named Kate Jones. The realization that Kate may in fact be desiring her African hair surprises her. But the ‘compliment’ is actually a joke because Kate has no intentions of being turned native even as she asks Ofilwe to braid her hair in African style. Ofilwe’s Africanness is a joke and both white student and white teacher who chastise Ofilwe for interfering with Kate’s lovely burnt amber locks of hair, are in on the joke. The loud and clear message of *Coconut*, then, is that black people can seemingly never measure up to their white counterparts. Raditlhali puts it sardonically in his review of *Coconut*, ‘To “act black” [or to practice aspects of your culture] in contemporary South Africa is a great mistake; it is to make nonsense of the mirage underscoring the national motto, *unity in diversity*’ (2010: 36). Ofilwe cannot even feel comfortable in church where she is overwhelmed by the white images of beauty that surround her (Matlwa 2007: 1).

For some members of white society and even for black people who have bought into notions of racial differences, ‘acting black’ means using fingers instead of utensils and slaughtering livestock in the suburbs, for example. In her frustration Ofilwe asks her heavenly Father what it means to ‘act black’ given that she is black (Matlwa 2007: 31). She balks at the fact that ‘[w]e may not be black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools. Oh, how it nauseates them if we even fantasise about being black, truly black’ (Matlwa 2007: 31-32). While I agree with Ndebele’s notion of multiple blacknesses which problematize Matlwa’s notion of a ‘truly black’ self, I disagree with Phiri who implies that Raditlhali’s reading of *Coconut* is essentialist. Phiri argues that ‘*Coconut*’s use of humour and satire, its ambivalent posture, consistently undermines racial absolutism and authority’ (7 n.d.). When Raditlhali and indeed Matlwa do not qualify blackness, they use the kind of strategic essentialism described by Helene Strauss: ‘In the context of “racial” and cultural overdetermination, where a subject’s location on axes of privilege limits his or her choices, essentialist claims to identity are made for

various reasons, ranging from the strategic to the reactionary' (Strauss 2004:35). The argument can be rightly made that South Africans now have choices in the new dispensation and that this type of essentialism has had its day. But in South Africa where the economic status quo remains more or less the same as before – with continuing acts of racism throughout the country, even in hallowed places of learning – such essentialism is necessary. While the novel implicates those black characters who have lost touch with their blackness, it also points an accusing finger at those white characters – both students and teachers alike – who see themselves as superior to black people. Matlwa's address of white South Africans, although salient, is not as direct as Antjie Krog's, who pleads: 'I need all whites, all of us so obviously unbent between country and chasm. If we don't repair, we will be forced to live with the mashed-in distortions and wrath of an uprooted, wounded and devastated community' (2009: 264-265). While both Ofilwe and Fikile direct their anger at a God who has created an unequal society, there is never really a direct confrontation of white society in the novel. The only character who comes close to this is Fikile's co-worker at Silver Spoons Café, Ayanda, who tells a racist white customer, 'Fuck you, Ma'am! Fuck you!' (2007: 151). The bigoted lady, however, does not hear the rest of his important rant, which occurs in the kitchen, about the continuing economic injustices of the 'rainbow nation'.

Ofilwe's parents – who do not question their own privileging of whiteness – are useless guides because they themselves need direction in how to discard an apartheid mentality; but unlike her parents Ofilwe at least begins to question the status quo. For instance she is very interested in African belief systems before the arrival of missionaries. Although her mother dismisses her important nagging questions, Ofilwe remains curious about notions of a supposedly insignificant African past (2007: 9). As she watches her paternal grandmother mourn the death of Princess Diana more thoroughly than the death of her own husband, she ponders: 'who is my own Princess Di? Does my royal family still exist, some place out there in a barren, rural South Africa' (2007: 18). Ofilwe has no answers to these questions as her knowledge of this particular history goes only as far back as 'the Dutch East India Company in grade two' (2007: 18). She wonders if there's any truth to the rumours that these African royals 'sit with swollen bellies and emaciated limbs under a merciless sun, waiting for government grants' (2007: 18). Sadly she also questions what it means that when she

imagines her future children, they ‘are painted in shades of pink’ (2007:19). It is interesting, however, that while she is attracted to a street vendor with jet-black skin, she despises her own mother who has a similar complexion. Jessica Murray, who focuses on the gender aspects of *Coconut*, specifically black women’s subscription to Eurocentric standards of beauty, argues that ‘Ofilwe gains some acceptance and access to the popular social circles at school. However, this is explicitly linked to the fact that she is regarded as less black because of her ability to mute her ethnicity in service of the Eurocentric ideal’ (2012: 98). Yet Ofilwe realizes when she plays the kissing game spin-the-bottle, with her white friends, that she will always be considered ‘too black’ by her white school-mates. Her white ‘friend’ refuses to kiss her as required by the game, which means that no matter how much she may perfect her English accent, she will always suffer her peers’ negrophobia. As Spencer asserts, ‘it is not only language but also accent (the way in which one pronounces words) that is used as a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion’ (2009: 70).

Ofilwe clearly vacillates between questioning and accepting the status quo. When she thinks critically about her so-called privileged education, she sees herself as a traitor, a sell-out, a coconut who is sleeping with the enemy. At bottom, she knows that she is not being true to herself, especially in those instances where she plays the part that her white friends expect her to play. While I agree with Phiri’s assertion that ‘it is precisely the point of *Coconut* that Ofilwe does not know who she is’ (7 n.d.), she yearns for a more coherent rather than fixed sense of identity. The term coconut – that rather scathing euphemism for ‘blacks’ who act ‘white’ – is pervasive in South Africa. Nuttall explains that,

the idea of the coconut represents a first wave in the negotiation of inter- and cross-cultural social life, more specifically the cross currents, and increasingly splits and contradictions, within ‘blackness’ as it has been lived and interpreted so far’ (2009: 101).

It seems that the term ‘coconut’ – or Aunty Jemima, the term that Ofilwe’s brother Tshepo (2007: 60) uses to describe her – is applied too hurriedly, especially in Ofilwe’s case, because she earnestly embarks on a search for a healthier identity. I would disagree with definitions of coconut that are

applied to westernized black South Africans, for example – or even black South Africans who speak more English than their native tongue. That should not necessarily make one a coconut because one can be a conscious and proud African regardless of the language one speaks, even as we remain cognizant of language as an important carrier of culture. Ndebele I think alludes to this when he argues that the,

usual reading of the 'coconut' image, both in the novel and in South African life, revolves around the old polarising theme of 'civilized' black people versus 'savage' black people, or those who went to school and were educated, as opposed to the uneducated ones. From this perspective, 'coconuts' are those from black communities who have betrayed their roots by becoming 'white', through attending model C schools, and who perhaps may now even be living in neighbourhoods where such schools are located. They are perceived to have lost their black identity. But in *Coconut*, the old theme has taken on a new dimension, the 'coconut' does not apologise for that condition. I like that. In not apologising, the 'coconut' asserts the notion that there are not only multiple 'whitenesses', but also multiple 'blacknesses' (West 2010: 119).

I believe that Ofilwe, however, is apologetic about some of her unfortunate attempts to escape her blackness. But it is her consciousness of herself as a young black woman that makes the label of coconut an awkward fit. Ofilwe is smart enough to know when she is pandering to white people especially because she feels the pain of assimilation.

Corrine Meier argues that schools such as the one Ofilwe attended 'adopt an assimilationist approach. Learners who are exposed to this approach are expected to adapt to the existing ethos of the school and to curricula that have been developed for a different learner population' (2005: 171). Ofilwe adapts because she doesn't want to die. Her self-doubt is so deep that she wonders, as she goes through security sensors at a store, if she might 'have an innate proclivity for theft' (2007: 44). Unlike Fikile who is forced by poverty to steal from a store a pair of jeans required for her waitressing job, Ofilwe is no thug but a victim of a global white society which criminalizes blackness. Yet at her school a white student named Stuart Simons accuses Ofilwe of having a thief for a father. Stuart is certain that her

father hijacked the luxury car he drives. What is even more painful about *Coconut* is that the few black students who are at Ofilwe's school despise each other to the extent that they cannot even form an alternative community (2007: 49).

Ofilwe finds it difficult to make herself whole because of all the negative stereotypes of blackness that she has to contend with on a daily basis. The stereotype of the dumb black person has a long, global history. But Ofilwe is an intelligent scholar, just like her brother. But white society often refuses to accept this kind of black person. Tshepo, for example, has to repeat grade one (2007: 6) 'because he did not speak English as well as his new, elite, all-boys' school would have liked' (2007: 6). Ofilwe internalizes this racism when she calls her own mother dumb – a dynamic that also plays out in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. But Matlwa's novel is set in a supposedly free, postcolonial society and yet Matlwa's characters seem to be shackled in many ways. If Ofilwe was a free person, she would come to the defense of her household helper, Old Virginia, when she is constantly called dumb by Ofilwe's white friends. Yet Old Virginia is probably the smartest character in the novel – a compelling storyteller who plays a crucial role in giving Tshepo an identity anchored in the rich oral traditions of his culture. But as much as Tshepo tries to bring his sister home, as it were, she remains a severely fragmented person who hates her various body parts: her African nose; her ears which fill up with toxic messages of her supposed inferiority; and her toes which she would like to cut because, as she rationalizes, 'I do not know where I am going anyway' (2007: 62). As I have indicated already, the black parents in the novel are largely absent parents and the teachers are also problematic. The only black teacher mentioned in the novel, who stereotypically teaches physical education, is unsupportive of black students like Ofilwe.

It is fitting that the novel ends with the actual physical journey to enlightenment of Fikile, who is not as close to finding herself as Ofilwe is. At the end of the novel Fikile meets a black man, a stranger on the train, whose reflection on race can potentially put her on a healthier track. But I'm not sure if I agree with Murray's reading of Fikile as an empowered woman who 'works within overwhelmingly powerful structures to access at least some power' (2012: 102), and that a 'more nuanced reading of their experiences [Fikile's and Ofilwe's] also reveals agency and resilience that elevate them beyond the status of mere victims of racist and patriarchal power structures'

(2012: 101). While Ofilwe reflects importantly on her so-called 'coconut' status, Fikile is still at war with herself – and far from the empowered character mentioned above. But at least she has an opportunity, whether she takes it or not, to spring-clean the mess in her head. As she puts it, '*I am fearful of the cluttered floor, the dusty shelves, the locked cases, the stuffed drawers, the broken bulbs and the cracked windows*' (2007: 177). Her fear is an indicator that she is at least still alive and may be open to a more constructive and stimulating education. On this route, she may be spared the fate that Jansen argues awaits high school drop-outs: 'As I have regularly argued, young people do not just drop out, they drop into lives of desperation, poverty, anger, hatred, crime and violence. Those layers of angry youth have been piling up steadily before and since 1994' (2011: 10).

But the unnamed character at the end of *Coconut*, who is educated and gainfully employed, complicates education in the 'new' South Africa. He is so disgruntled about an education system that seemingly teaches young black kids to hate themselves – and alienates them from their African cultures – that he contemplates home-schooling his little girl who refuses to speak isiXhosa. Students are dying in classrooms because they lack useful guides like this responsible black father. They are also dying because of teachers who fail to nurture the minds and hearts of these students. But it is important to say here that Matlwa is a perceptive writer who refuses a surface understanding of things. For her, as is the case with her characters, there is no easy solution to South Africa's education system. An education in a predominantly white private school is seemingly just as problematic as an education in the afro-centric, all-black school she creates in her second novel, *Spilt Milk* (2010). The students at the latter school, who are the sons and daughters of the black elite, feel abandoned by their superficial parents who care more for their material wealth and overseas travels. These students are just as depressed and suicidal as the students in *Coconut*. In *Spilt Milk*, the teachers are all black except one white visiting and fallen white priest who ends up having the most meaningful relationship with the black students he supervises in detention. It seems that the black teachers here fail to give their students a healthy education on race because some of the students are presented as racists. The teachers are also clueless about how to provide an effective education on sexuality. The point that Matlwa seems to be making in both these novels is that all teachers – and indeed parents – should be investigated if there is suspicion of poor guidance. In the case of *Coconut*, the

culprits are both the black parents and white teachers who neglect the pressing needs of their black students.

In Ian Marshall's and Wendy Ryden's important conversation about racism within academic institutions, they write about the construction of whiteness as a silent but potent epistemology in the West. Their discussion is applicable to the South Africa situation. Marshall argues that while white teachers attempt to make,

their own whiteness invisible, but not inconsequential, [they in fact] reproduce the values, culture, and language of the elite. This occurs most obviously when a non-white student brings up issues of racism in the classroom and is often met with silence or avoidance from the [white] teacher and others'.

According to Marshall,

[t]his pedagogical strategy, although it may be unintentional, does two things: first, it suppresses an interrogation of the teacher who often has power and authority invested in their whiteness, and second, it shuts down dialogue, thereby affirming racism as good (2000: 241).

Clearly, as suggested by Mokubung Nkomo and Nadine Dolby, 'the desire to "escape" race – to somehow transcend or mute its power in a search for a common national identity' (2004: 5), is problematic. In *Coconut* there is this shutting down of dialogue and characters like Ofilwe and Fikile can only suffer in silence. But by penning her novel, which is dedicated to the child of her country, Matlwa insists that educators in South Africa conduct frequent conversations on race in their schools and classrooms. This dialogue is crucial because ultimately we should all desire the type of world envisioned by Paul Gilroy (2000), where the dubious nineteenth-century scientific notions of racial typology will be irrelevant. Right now the patterns of racial thinking are still very much with us.

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