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The tailored suit : a reimagining of Can Themba's The Suit

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Introduction

1950s Sophiatown, *Drum* magazine and the work produced by Can Themba and his colleagues have become iconic precursors to the contemporary South African literary and cultural milieu. The work of this period provides a record of the ongoing struggle for cultural, economic and racial emancipation that people of colour have been engaged in since colonialism and apartheid, through to a democratic South Africa. As a product of this period, Themba's short story *The Suit* has become a significant part of this literary history. Formerly banned under apartheid legislation, Themba's work went on to be reproduced multiple times after its unbanning in the 1980s, adapted into stage plays and incorporated into school syllabuses.

This reception of Themba's work is in keeping with Manthia Diawara's idea pertaining to the importance of articulating stories, "in our own voices" (Diawara as cited in Mistry, 2001). He proposes, "people will listen, and in the story we/they will come to know our histories, because History in its grand project is really story as it comes to be interpreted, told and retold, and…remembered (Diawara as cited in Mistry, 2001). As Diawara indicates, the histories that people have access to are important as they, being the ones remembered, shape people's perceptions and lives. While Can Themba's work is important to contemporary South Africa as it provides a rich history of black urban life in the 1950s, I find the gender representations in his work problematic.

Though Themba's work was subversive of racialised ideologies pertaining to hierarchies of difference, as a product of the 1950s, the text legitimises patriarchal imbalances of power and gender hierarchy. While the *Drum* writers articulated resistance to state oppression and the silencing of black South African (male) voices, black women were oppressed and objectified both in terms of modern and traditional discourses. Themba's work can be read as occupying a space at an intersection of two discursive threads, one resisting white supremist ideology and the other upholding traditional patriarchal structures. His work thus illustrates the multiple and overlapping spheres of oppression that constitute the knot of black women subjugation.

This research report is an attempt to unravel the known discourse pertaining to black women's victimisation. Huma Ibrahim proposes a discourse that takes "Third World women out of the context in which they have been too readily seen, that of victimized "other" forever suffering" (1996: 173). Ibrahim goes on to clarify that this statement is not to negate that black women have been and are subjugated but to offer an opportunity to acknowledge that there is more to black womanhood than victimisation. Through this unravelling of discursive norms, an alternate understanding of women's lives may be woven, where the threads of agency and resistance unsettle those of subjugation and victimisation.

As a project that seeks to interrogate and destabilize institutional processes of oppression, an interrogation of the problematic gendered representations in Themba's *The Suit* constitutes a significant area of engagement. To contextualise the project though, the first section of the research report consists of a close reading of *The Suit*. Through engaging with Themba's text I foreground the hierarchical relationship between racialised subjects as these hierarchies were manifest in 1950s South Africa.

Informed by the work of Fanon, I engage with questions of racial subjugation by framing the question of subjectivity in discursively masculine terms, recalling his question, "What does a man want? What does the black man want?" (Fanon as cited in McClintock, 1999: 287). The struggle for racial liberation is figured in terms of the black man's struggle against the oppression of the white man, creating a Manichean dualism of polarised, incongruous opposition (the binary relation of black and white, each defining itself against the difference of the other, thus rendering the two subject positions discursively incommensurable). Subverting this dualism, Themba's work represents a disruption to this polarising Manichaeanism through the shaping and performance of an African modernity.

One of my preoccupations in this research report is to disrupt the ideological assumption that modernity is particular to the west. It is an assumption that follows the linear progression from western enlightenment, to modernity, through to the contemporary postmodern cultural milieu. In this view, western culture has

progressed through history singularly and unaided. As Okwui Enwezor describes, "the modern Western imagination has used the apotropaic devices of containment and desublimation to perceive other cultures, in order to feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power" (2008: 208). As such, other cultures either exist outside modernity, in a 'primitive' state, or they attempt to catch up with and enter into modernity. This modernity presumes and simultaneously constructs its own universalism while denying its other the possibility of self-definition. It is this power of self-definition that Themba's work reclaims. Themba, however, like Fanon, overlooks the revisionist potential of the gendered agency of women "to radically disrupt the binary dialectic" and thus subvert the polarisation of difference (McClintock, 1999: 285).

In response to the representations of black femininity in *The Suit*, my film project, *The Tailored Suit*, posits a direct commentary on and reflexive visual strategy to Themba's narrative from the point of view of the lead female character Matilda. This intervention is introduced through the narration of the historic text from her perspective. In the film, I am concerned with recouping her subjectivity from the objectifying racial and gendered gaze, representing a femininity that has complex, multifaceted even contradictory characteristics.

My intentions are in line with Toni Morrison's preoccupation with reclaiming the possibility of self-definition for the subjugated. Morrison's concern is articulated in her writing expressing "huge silences in literature, things that had never been articulated, printed or imagined and they were the silences about black girls, black women" (Morrison as cited in Mori, 1999: 72). Matilda's absent subjectivity in *The Suit* is in keeping with women's marginalisation in the society in which the text is produced. Whereas in Themba's story, Matilda's voice, articulations and motivations remain largely unknown to the reader, *The Tailored Suit* privileges her lived experience. In her narration, Matilda directly critiques Themba's representation of her character, eventually rejecting his version of her life.

In *The Tailored Suit* I place emphasis on the metaphor of the suit. By using the imagery of clothing to visually allude to processes of creolization, Matilda tailors the

suit belonging to a man (her lover) to fit her body. Her appropriation of the suit, symbolic of the new and other, further destabilises the possibility for polarising of difference through the logic of Manichean disparities, thus displacing notions of distinct and focalized cultural spaces. As women are symbolically cast as maintainers and reproducers of cultural domestic homogeneity, Matilda's appropriation of a foreign factor into the home unsettles her positioning as atavistic cultural marker. Accordingly I use the language of textiles and tailoring to continually foreground the significance of clothing to the project.

Through creating a space for Matilda to tell her story from her marginalized objectified position, *The Tailored Suit* disrupts Themba's historical narrative. By positing Matilda's articulation in conjunction to Themba's text, I do not privilege either articulation of the story (or history). Instead there is an emergence of multiple histories shaped by the experiences of multiple people occupying multiple subjectivities, all having an effect simultaneously on the socio-cultural landscape. Matilda's own voice articulates her story thus functioning to destabilize the legitimacy and authority of the systems of power that subjugate her.

The Suit, Historical Context and Textual Analysis

> Once Themba's work was allowed to legally reappear, *The Suit* took on a life of it's own: in 1993 Peter Esterhuysen made a *Deep Cuts* graphic adaptation of it and in 1994 Chris van Wyk reworked it for Viva Books for younger readers; in 1993 Mothobi Mutloatse adapted it as a stage play for the Duze Ensemble and it was further workshopped by Barney Simon for a Market Theatre production, eventually taken over by Peter Brook in Paris; a subsequent stage version was made by Christopher Weare in 2002. For the fantastic Flying Fish dance Company Boyzie Cekwana choreographed *The Suit* as a dance drama, which premiered at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival in 2002. Discussions for filming are in progress. (*Requiem for Sophiatown,* 2006)

The above forward from *Requiem for Sophiatown* illustrates the canonical status Can Themba's work has come to occupy in contemporary South Africa. *The Suit* is positioned in post-apartheid South Africa as a part of a canon of literary achievement by local African authorship. Can Themba's work was predominately produced in Sophiatown, a place likened to 'what Harlem was to New York in the days (and nights) of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance" (Hannerz, 1994: 184). As denoted by the term renaissance, Sophiatown was a hub of cultural life at a time of transformation.

Rob Nixon describes it as "the most diverse and culturally innovative community South Africa had known" (Nixon, 1994). The name, Sophiatown is associated in collective memory, with a 'flourishing period of creative writing, music and politics" (Gready as cited in Ume-Njamma, 2006: 15). It is remembered for its intellectuals and politicians, gangsters, artists, musicians and the smoky shebeens that people gathered in, in a small, crowded corner of Johannesburg. It was a place where people of various religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities were able to interact and engage. In *Memory is the Weapon*, Don Mattera describes how it was "inhabited by an estimated 200 000 people of different ethnic backgrounds who lived tightly-knit, mixing cultures, traditions and superstitions" (1987: 49). This created the hybridized cosmopolitan space that Sophiatown is remembered for. The symbolic importance of Sophiatown's cosmopolitanism was paramount in a country

governed through oppressive laws of segregation. Ulf Hannerz suggests that in Sophiatown "a cosmopolitan aesthetic thus became a form of local resistance" (1994: 192). 1950s Sophiatown has become iconic in post Apartheid South Africa, due, at least in part, to its creolised cultural character.

The destruction of Sophiatown remains compelling because it was a "powerful metaphor for the destruction brought about by the Nationalist Government's policy of "separate development" (Gready as cited in Ume-Njamma, 2006: 15). Sophiatown was demolished, starting in 1955, as the racist ideologies of colonial rule were starting to be cemented politically with Nationalist Party rule. Themba writes of urban black life in South Africa's townships at this pivotal time in the country's history. His work is invaluable today, as "Themba helped to record and create the voices, images and values of a black urban culture which, in the aftermath of war-time industrial expansion, was struggling to assert its permanence and identity" (Chapman, 1989: 19). Thus Sophiatown, as Nixon observes, "lingers in South African argot" as a signifier of resistance to social oppression (Nixon, 1994). Themba's stories, therefore, unfold from this backdrop; emerging "out of a context of enormous social import" (Chapman, 1989: 20). This context is significant as it frames a culture of defiance to oppression that is central to my study.

Hannerz describes *Drum* magazine as "outside of Sophiatown physically, but a part of it spiritually" (1994:187). Many of the journalists who worked at *Drum* lived or spent time in Sophiatown, some went to school or were teachers there. Most spent time it Sophiatown's shebeens and found stories on the streets (Hannerz, 1994, 187-188). As part of this crucial formative moment of a black South African urban identity, the recorded work of Can Themba and the other *Drum* writers and photographers, occupies an important historic space. As such, Themba's work and that of his contemporaries had an important influence on the cultural landscape. As a text, however, *The Suit* reveals the problematic gender constructions of its moment in history, reflecting it's political concerns outside a progressive gender politics. The text, in its representations, implicitly disseminates problematic imbalances of gender power. Through deconstructing the text and foregrounding these problems, I hope to offer a critical reading of this work.

The Period Model, *The Suit*

The Suit follows the story of a young married couple Philemon and Matilda living in Sophiatown in 1950s South Africa. Philemon is happily married, pleased with having a young pretty wife to wake up to and come home to every night. In Themba's version of the story, the reader does not have access to Matilda's view on her marriage. The first half of the narrative is presented by the narrator and from Philemon's perspective. The reader is only introduced to Matilda's perspective in the second half of Themba's story and with little consistency.

In the opening scene of Themba's narrative the narrator follows Philemon around as he does his morning chores. He is figured as an admirable character; he is an attentive and caring husband who enjoys making and delivering breakfast to his wife in bed. Matilda has to curb his kindness for his own good, putting her "foot down when he offered to wash up also" (Themba, 2006: 117). This is the only time Matilda's articulations are heard in the first part of the narrative and it is a description from Philemon's perspective. Her reasoning and perspective, at this point, remain unknown to the reader.

Unlike other husbands, Philemon is presented as one who does not lord over his wife. The narrator describes Philemon's position, "He felt, he denied that he was one of those who believed in putting his wife in her place even if she was a good wife" (Themba, 2006: 117). In return for such exceptional treatment by her husband, Themba has Matilda have an affair. After the description of Philemon's good treatment, this reads like a lesson about women who are not kept under strict supervision ultimately faltering.

When her husband catches her, Matilda's punishment is one delivered through humiliation. Philemon forces her to include her lover's suit at their dinner table every night, serving it when they eat. Matilda has to take it out on a walk and, at the end of the story, make it the guest of honour at a party she throws for her friends. This final and public humiliation, after constant degradation drives Matilda to suicide.

In *The Suit*, Themba presents an image of black femininity that lacks complexity and contradictions. Matilda is positioned as either an infantilised non-subject, or as an adulteress, defined on one or the other side of the Madonna/whore dichotomy. Matilda lacks any individual humanity as she is represented through these 'types'. Themba writes how Philemon gushes at the image of the wife he 'lost' to adultery,

> Heavens! Here was the woman he had married; the young, fresh cocoa-coloured maid who had sent rushes of emotion shuddering through him. And the dress she wore brought out all the girlishness of her, hidden so long beneath German print (2006: 120).

Here, Matilda fashions herself for her husband's approval. The qualities she accentuates are those that Philemon desires in her, the young, fresh, girlish maid. These terms, descriptive of what Philemon admires in Matilda, allude to an infantilised object, devoid of agency and subjectivity. Matilda is a grown woman being described in childlike terms that are described as admirable qualities. In an effort to "restore her self respect" after the humiliation Philemon has been subjecting her to, Matilda decides to join a cultural club (Themba, 2006: 123). To do this though Matilda "must ask Philemon now if she might…she must ask him nicely" (Themba, 2006:123). This demonstrates how Matilda is reduced to the state of childlike dependence on Philemon. This is the position that he wants her in, that of an infantilised dependant for his possession and control.

The extent of Philemon's control is illustrated in Matilda's experience of the cultural club. Themba describes how "It was for her a whole new venture into humancraft and her personality blossomed. Philemon gave her all the rein she wanted" (Themba, 2006: 124). Philemon's control over Matilda extends to the amount of personal growth and development she may have. Themba describes Philemon giving Matilda permission to have some degree of life experience as a gesture of kindness.

Up until the point where Philemon finds out about Matilda's affair, Philemon is capable of managing life in a South Africa that dehumanises black people. This is demonstrated through the narrator taking the reader through Philemon's morning

chores. Philemon thinks about how even the weather is unkind to people is Sophiatown:

> The rain in Sophiatown always came in the morning when workers have to creep out of their burrows; and then blistering heat waves during the day when messengers have to run errands all over; and then at how even the rain came back when workers knock off and have to scurry home (Themba, 2006: 115)

Yet, at these undesirable weather patterns, Philemon just "smiled at the odd caprice of the heavens, and tossed his head at the naughty incongruence, as if: 'Ai, but the gods!'" (Themba, 2006: 115). In the opening passages, Philemon is hardly upset by any of the misfortunes dealt to him in life, whether by the gods or the state. He lives in cramped, unhygienic conditions indicated by the "pool of muddy water" outside his door and "staying in a yard where twenty, thirty other people have to share the same lean-to" (Themba, 2006:115). The narrator describes, through Philemon, a number of difficult living conditions all of which he shrugs off, content with his situation in life. Philemon is described as "huh-huh-huhing one of those fugitive tunes that cannot be bidden…and the fire he was making soon licked up cheerfully, in mood with his contentment" (Themba, 2006: 116).

It would seem that at the centre of this contentment is his wife, Matilda. His admiration of her is expressed in the first paragraph, as Philemon "leaned over and peered at the sleeping serenity of his wife: to him a daily matutinal miracle" (Themba, 2006: 115). Despite the oppressive reality of life in South Africa at the time, he thanked "whatever gods for the goodness of his life; for the pure beauty of his wife" (Themba, 2006: 115). For Philemon, Matilda provides a vital function in life. Whatever hardships the world may throw at him, his possession of Matilda maintains Philemon. The reader does not learn anything about Matilda apart from Philemon's experience of her. She is a beautiful young wife, with whom Philemon can ascend in the "unperturbed rhythms of his passage through days and months and years – it must be – to heaven" (Themba, 2006: 115). Whether this is a path to heaven for Matilda is overlooked. Her needs and wants are not mentioned; they are not of relevance in that she functions as an object to fulfil her husband's needs.

This recalls what Toni Morrison described in *Sula*, writing about the relationship between a man and his wife. For Jude, Nel's husband, Nel functions as Matilda does for Philemon, "whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem – the tuck and fold that hid his ravelling edges' (Morrison, 1973: 83). Having a wife maintains the man but at the expense of the woman's autonomy. Morrison, using the imagery of garments, figures women's subordination within the metaphor; "Nel's individuality is tucked and folded into part of Jude's garment of manhood" (Feng, 1998: 94). Nel is figured here as supplement to her husband, sustaining his sense of masculinity while she is "driven completely underground by her subservience in this parasitic marriage" (Feng, 1998: 94). In Morrison's narrative, the reader is given an understanding of Nel's predicament. In Themba's narrative however, the reader initially only has access to Philemon's desires, needs, and internal struggles. Themba offers little interrogation of Matilda's motivation for the affair. Up until this point in the narrative Matilda is little more than a pretty, objectified wife who functions only as an adjunct to her husband's life. The woman is thus objectified in relation to her husband. Whatever characteristics, complexities or desires she may have are negated as she is defined solely in relation to husband's experience of her. Her subjectivity is subsumed by over-determined categories of (black) femininity that in relation to Matilda prevailed in her social context.

Elasticity of Malleable Fabric: Reading Women's Resistance

Matilda subtly and overtly resists this positioning. Matilda's behaviour after Philemon discovers her affair demonstrates the ways in which she previously did not conform to his expectations. It is only after her affair is discovered that she fully performs the role she is expected to fulfil, that of the docile housewife. Themba describes how Philemon came home to find

> His dingy little home had been transformed, and the stern masculinity it had hitherto received had been wiped away, to be replaced by anxiously feminine touches here and there. There were even gay, colourful curtains swirling in the

> kitchen window. The old-fashioned coal stove gleamed in its blackness. A clean, chequered oilcloth on the table. Supper ready. (Themba, 2006: 120).

After discovering the affair, Philemon threatens: "Matilda, I'll kill you" (Themba, 2006: 120). The performance of this particular femininity only occurs out of fear after her life has been threatened. This indicates that these conceived tropes of femininity are not inherent in Matilda. She performs this role to appease external expectations of an over-determined femininity that is defined for her by a patriarchal culture. Her performance and reproduction of this domesticity serves to pacify Philemon and ensure her survival.

The reader starts understanding Matilda's desire for an independence she has been denied in her efforts to find a way out of her situation with Philemon. When she is no longer able to continue living under the constant humiliation of Philemon's punishment, she considers her options.

> She thought of how she could bring the matter to a head with Philemon, have it out with him once and for all. But the memory of his face, that first day she had forgotten to entertain the suit, stayed with her. She thought of running away. Where to? Home? What could she tell her old-fashioned mother had happened between Philemon and her? All right, she would run away clean then. She thought of many young married girls who were divorcees now, who had won their freedom. What had happened to Staff Nurse Kakile? That woman drank heavily now, and when she got drunk, the boys of Sophiatown passed her around and called her the Cesspot. Matilda shuddered. (Themba, 2006: 123).

Matilda is confined without a tolerable alternative to her life with her husband. She cannot go back home, as her family would not understand her having an affair. It seems her old fashioned mother would be as uninterested in Matilda's needs or desires as the society that expects her to exist solely for her husbands needs. Her desire to run away outright is a dangerous one. As Themba describes, there is a bitter irony in the 'freedom' won by divorced girls. Even a divorced Staff Nurse, an educated professional woman ends up an alcoholic, abused by society. A young independent woman is thus socially crippled, becoming a 'Cesspot' of degradation. As such, a young woman cannot live a life of her own. If she hopes to be acceptable

to society she needs to either be the ward of her family or of a husband. It therefore follows that women were economically disenfranchised, forcing them to be dependent on their husbands or male family members.

Jacinta Nkem Ume-Njamma describes how even officially, within the bounds of the law, "black women were discriminated against" (2006: 2). She describes how "Legal Code classified black women as legal minors until the age of 21" and how "the law subjected them to guardianship of males all through their lives' (Ume-Njamma, 2006: 2). As a young woman in this context, the conditions of Matilda's life are dependent on Philemon. She is thus trapped with no option but to remain the dependant of her controlling husband.

As a result of the extremity of her disempowerment, Matilda's affair can be understood as an act of defiance in itself. Through having a sexual relationship with a man of her choice, Matilda claims control over her body. Claiming control over her sexuality is an assertion of her right to her own body and she takes back that which would otherwise belong to her husband.

Matilda's eventual suicide follows her enduring resistance. Having had her life threatened directly by Philemon, Matilda's suicide may be understood as an act of defiance. In taking her own life, Matilda prevents Philemon from controlling her life to the extent that he determines the circumstances of her death. As a consequence of the denial of agency to the subaltern it has been argued that, in exercising agency over their own bodies the subalterns' suicide may be understood as an act of defiance (Spivak, 1988; Nge, 2003). Her suicide therefore may be conceived of as the ultimate act of defiance in the gesture of her death.

Elasticity Wearing Thin: Structural Resistance to Woman's Resistance

As a narrative produced in 1950s Sophiatown, it is imbued with the prevailing patriarchal mores of its historic moment. This is indicated through Themba's construction of male and female characters. The presence of this disempowering patriarchy is exemplified in the work of a number of Sophiatown's black male

intellectuals and writers, most of whom worked at *Drum* magazine. As *Drum* was one of the few publications in which the articulations of black people were expressed publicly, the conspicuous "absence of female writing" is significant (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). Black women were denied a voice in the narrow space afforded to black men. This demonstrates how black women were further marginalised and denied the space to articulate their position in society for themselves. Furthermore, this absence of women typifies the exclusion of women from the formal workforce, alluding to their economic disenfranchisement.

The work in *Drum*, as Meredith Goldsmith describes, betrays the "relentless misogyny of Sophiatown writing" (1995: 116). She goes on, referring to Rob Nixon's characterising of Sophiatown's *Drum* magazine writers as demonstrating an "aggressive mixture of paternalism, misogyny" (1994: 20). Although the occurrence of patriarchy and paternalism is apparent, the degree to which it extended to misogyny is less clear. The example of *The Suit* does not indicate an outright hatred of women. Rather, what is apparent is a desire to contain and maintain control over the woman, as she cannot be trusted. In *The Suit*, Philemon's friend, Maphikela demonstrates this mistrust. Expressing his annoyance at his wife for telling him about Matilda's affair he says, "I wish these women would not snoop around so much" (Themba, 2006: 118). He is either expressing annoyance at his wife taking part in community gossip or at Matilda's affair. In either instance women are grouped into an untrustworthy entirety. In as far as this demonstrates an inherent distrust of women then the misogynist subtext becomes more apparent.

Whether Themba subscribed to these ideologies or as a writer was representing the society he inhabited cannot be known. It could be argued that Themba was critiquing gendered and racialised imbalances of power in Sophiatown. The tragedy at the end of *The Suit* may be an indictment of a society that led the characters to their destructive actions. Conversely, Philemon's actions and opinions may be a fictionalised expression of Themba's position and mistrust of women. This mistrust is apparent in a number of Themba's stories.

In *The Nice Time Girl,* Themba writes of a young wife who is bored with her life and husband. After meeting a young man at a party, she ultimately persuades him to kill her husband so they can run away together. In the article *Girls in High-heel Shoes,* Themba describes how the "the Modern Miss has got her red painted talons" and has brought "new problems for her man". (Themba, 1985:130). The 'talons' of the 'Modern African Miss' that Themba describes connotes a predatory danger she possesses. This is set up in contrast to village women who "went in for natural beauty" (Themba, 1985:132). He then describes urban woman as a "lovely dream" and "delightful things" (Themba, 1985:131). In this journalistic piece Themba uses similar language to describe women as his fictional characters. The woman is an objectified entity who, though desirable, becomes a "problem" men need to handle, when afforded too much freedom. Thus, through Philemon, the reader gets a sense of Themba's position on women.

Whatever his personal position, the problematic gendered relations within Themba's narrative testifies to the broader ideological constructs of gender in the urbanized context he lived and worked in and that his characters inhabit. The representations in Themba's work have left a rich archive of its historic context. As such, in order to engage with this process of subjugation of black women, it is necessary to understand black masculinity that in this case of *The Suit* represents this subjugation.

Starching the Fabric: The World of Can Themba

At the time when Can Themba was writing, the relationship between the state and black people was an oppressive one. The intrusion of the state into people's personal lived experience was extreme to the point of exerting control over their ideas and images of themselves. Social conditions in South Africa at the time were such that the personal, private lives of individuals were profoundly political. The state initiated laws that brutally intruded on the most intimate spheres of people's lives.

Such a law was the ‘Immorality Act’ of 1957, which outlawed sexual relationships between interracial couples. As such, racial classification became paramount. With reference to writer Bessie Head who was the daughter of a mixed race couple, Rob Nixon describes the “sense of power that the nation state wielded over the conditions of her identity” (Nixon, 1994: 102). He notes how Head was moved, first between adoptive families then to a state orphanage, which rendered her sense of home and belonging “as an unstable artifice, invented and reinvented in racial terms, and conditional upon the administrative designs of the nation-state” (Nixon 1994: 102). The violence of state bureaucracy was a vestige of “the classificatory obsessions of British imperialism, inherited and transformed by Afrikaner nationalists” that “insured that most black South Africans lived the nation state as a brutally administered form of disinheritance” (Nixon, 1994: 108). With the foundation of control over definitions, the state could classify and reclassify people as belonging to particular races and on those grounds, profoundly control the conditions of a person’s life. It is this control over identity that Head, Can Themba and the other *Drum* magazine writers resisted.

Though Themba was not overtly political, he was averse to the definitions the state would designate him and the black community. He was not interested in “airy dreams of a pure return to more “authentic” identities” (Nixon, 1994: 28). There was a resistance to the "Nationalist Party’s efforts to “fossilize” Africans – as Themba put it –“into tribal inventions”” (Nixon, 1994: 28). Themba’s assertion, that this notion of authenticity is no more than an invention, signals his rejection of a colonial legacy that negates black self-determination.

As seen in Matilda’s disempowerment, Mary Ann Frese Witt discusses, in reading Pirandello’s writing, how women or ‘the other gender’ is viewed "as a series of categories, or dramatic roles, roles defined not by the character herself but by others' views of her (Witt, 1991: 58). This is set up in contrast to the masculine character that is legitimised in having a "sense of himself as both man and father" (Witt, 1991:58). In Pirandello’s plays, the male characters have access to a sense of autonomy wherein they are defined in their own terms. As Matilda is disempowered as a black woman, externally over-determined into particular roles, the black male

subject who is defined as other in white supremacist discourse is also denied self-determination.

In *Black Skins, White Masks* Fanon investigates "the ambiguity of postcoloniality" and the articulation of power in the relationship and interactions between white and black subjects (Gibson, 2003: 2). The constructions of "race and representation" are a key aspect of this study (Gibson, 2003: 2). Fanon describes the "lived experience of the Black" as one in which the "body image is associated with the absence of human value through the White (racial) gaze" (Gibson, 2003:5).

The value of the black subject is defined against the sovereignty of the "normative 'universal' citizen" read: western, male, heterosexual (Van Zyl, 2005). Richard Dyer engages with the construct of white sovereignty in his book *White* (1997). He writes, "white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (Dyer, 1997: 1). As a result of this dialectic universality, white subjectivity becomes an invisible signifier against which black subjectivity is defined as 'other'.

Though there are few direct references to white South Africa in *The Suit*, the omnipresence of the white state can still be perceived. Though ostensibly absent, white society's regulations on black peoples lives can be perceived in the outdoor lavatories where "twenty, thirty other people have to share the same lean-to" (Themba, 1985: 115). The 'invisible' white state is present in the crowded living conditions of Sophiatown. It is in the lack of resources, the two-room shack and the lack of sanitation. Dyer alludes to the dehumanisation of black people by noting the discursive "assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else" (Dyer, 1997: 2). Thus, the white state is present in the living conditions of black people, conditions that can be attributed to the delegation of black people to the margins of the city, the margins of citizenship, the margins of humanity.

In resistance to this negative articulation of black subjectivity, the hetero-normative black man becomes the universalised subject of blackness. This too is problematic as it homogenises and subsumes difference within the black community. Thus, as white

sovereign subjectivity excludes it's 'other' from full humanity, defining black people as objects, void of subjectivity, the universal black subject, in turn, excludes women from subjectivity. In these terms the struggle for emancipation is predicated on the liberation of black men, as their liberation discursively constitutes a racial liberation. As with black subjectivity subsisting on the margins of white society, women had to subsist on the margins of patriarchal society. Though racial and gendered marginalisation intersect to produce a multiple subjugation of black women, for the purpose of clarity, I first engage with the tensions between black and white subjects through these normative masculine terms. I then introduce the question of female subjectivities, which complicates these dichotomies.

The Unravelling and Re-Stitching of Black Identities

In *The Suit* Themba briefly describes Philemon's experience of the white world. After describing Philemon's thorough washing ritual, he notes how "no white man a-complaining of the smell of wogs knows anything about it" (Themba, 2006: 116). What is a thorough hygiene ritual for a black man is unappreciated and disregarded by white society as inadequate. Themba laments how "the whole atmosphere is charged with the whiteman's general disapproval; and where he does not have a law for it, he certainly has a grimace that cows you" (Themba as cited in Nixon, 1994: 39). The black subject is thus subtly debased by white ideology. Fanon describes how,

> I discovered my Blackness, my ethnic characteristics; I was battered down by tom toms, cannibalism, spiritual backwardness, fetishism, race defects, slave ships and above all *Y' a bon Banania* (Fanon as cited in Gibson, 2003:5).

Here the black subject is no longer a subject on his/her own terms but exists in relation to a (superior) white sovereign subject. Fanon describes the black consciousness through a Eurocentric ideological perspective. The black man, thus having internalised his own image as other, ideologically complies with the sovereign omnipotence of white subjectivity. Fanon describes an 'inferiority complex' in Black subjects that is a result of a doubled process. As a result of being at an economic

disadvantage, the black subject feels inferior to the white subject. This sense of inferiority as a result of material lack is then internalised and, as Fanon describes, is 'epidermalized', as a racialised lack (Fanon, 1986). The internalisation of this inferiority complex by the black subject allows them to accept their own image as other, as prescribed through the racial gaze. In this understanding the power of self-definition is usurped leaving the black subject devoid of agency over his or her own image.

Fanon investigates this condition of inferiority particularly invoking the idea of a male subject asking "what does the black *man* want?" (my emphasis, Fanon, 1986: 10). The particular relationship between the subjugated black male subject, and the subjugating white male subject creates an environment for the de-masculinisation of black men. Lindsay Clowes references the "common pattern of regarding the colonized country and colonized people as 'feminine' in opposition to the colonizers, set up as masculine" (2005: 104). The subordinated male subject's masculinity is consequently threatened by the discourse of white supremacy.

Clowes proposes that, at least in part, apartheid was "an attempt to construct and maintain a subordinate masculinity defined by race" (2005: 90). This subordination was enacted through a multitude of processes including that, in the 1950s, black South Africans "were trained by popular culture and mission school education to esteem white heroes and devalue their own" (Goldsmith, 2005: 110). But the education of mission schools and popular culture was offset by an education in the oppressive reality of being black in South Africa. In *Requiem for Sophiatown*, Themba wrote,

> We accept the idealism of Christianity. We accept its high principles. But in a stubborn, practical sense we believe in reality…Democracy must actually be the rule of the people: not of a white hobo over a black MA (2006: 53).

The reality of injustice in South Africa, the discrimination of white society against black subjects, did not allow for black people to fully esteem white, over black heroes. Though Themba attended Fort Hare University graduating "in 1947 with a first class-degree in English" (Snyman, 2007: 2), his education and training were

utilized in contributing to *Drum* and the anti- (white) government sentiments of the publication. Clowes understands "*Drum's* challenges to the apartheid state" as "repeated attempts to assert the manhood of the black man" (Clowes, 2005: 90). For the black male intellectuals of Sophiatown who worked at *Drum*, of which Themba was one, this conclusion seems apt. The representations of black masculinity in *Drum* celebrated the cosmopolitanism of Sophiatown, challenging "apartheid officialdom" when it "ruthlessly assailed cultural amalgams as deviations from an always rural authenticity" (Nixon, 1994: 32).

Goldsmith refers to Fanon's suggestion that, "only the mastery of white colonial discourse affords escape, but simultaneously necessitates the death and burial of [colonized country's] local cultural originality" (2005: 110). This understanding is in accordance with Fanon's idea that "the black man only claims approval from the world of whites" (Goldsmith, 2005: 110). In this view it is only possible for the black man to attempt to appropriate white culture, at the expense of his own, to attain a better standing in society.

Jeremy Prestholdt notes the "all-too-common presumption that human history has been typified by bounded geopolitical and cultural spheres" (2008: 1). This indicates the misleading essentialist philosophy inherent in attempting to identify any 'true African-ness'. To try to ascertain what is truly African is to assume those pure untainted origins that can be categorised and defined as such.

The notion of purity testifies to an assumption of African disassociation with other cultures. Themba's apprehension to the misleading notion of "tribal *inventions*" is apt in that such a perception of the insularity of African cultural spaces testifies more to a European preoccupation with control of knowledge than the actual lived experiences of people. The power implicit in the ability to define is, as Prestholdt asserts,

> The legacy of nineteenth-centaury Western analysts who reshaped and operationalized sophisticated classificatory regimes, or hierarchies of humanity, grounded in the belief that distinct types of things existed in the world, each with its essential qualities" (2008: 3).

The editorship at *Drum* between 1951 and 1955 exemplified the power of these 'classificatory regimes' through the possibility for representation in their absence. Clowes references Jim Bailey's (*Drum's* owner) observation that Sampson, the editor, "knew nothing whatsoever of Africa" (2005, 103). As such, Sampson "permitted Africans to write what they wanted" (Clowes, 2005, 103). Sampson himself is quoted as stating "ignorance had its advantages. I had to let the black journalist tell their own stories with a vigour and freshness that broke all the rules, but that expressed the true spirit of the Townships" (Sampson as cited in Clowes, 2005: 103-104).

In this instance, where the white purveyor of racialised knowledge lacked a prescribed image of 'Africa', the power to represent black urban life shifted slightly into the control of the black journalists. The power of definition, who is doing the defining and who is being defined, is crucial. It indicates relations of power pertaining to the shaping of and dissemination of particular knowledges; evoking Toni Morrison's words "Definitions belong to the definers – not the defined" (Morrison as cited in Mori, 1999). The characters of Themba's narratives and the urban black population they referenced defied the state's attempts to impose definitions. They inhabited and performed the urban modernity that was imagined to be the province of white society as defined against the rural traditional space for blacks.

Goldsmith describes how Bloke Modisane, one of Themba's contemporaries at *Drum* magazine "gains partial empowerment from ironic imitation of white screen and literary heroes, claiming the autonomy denied him through a self-consciously theatrical mode of selfhood" (Goldsmith, 2005: 110). This theatricality can be understood as being both empowering and detrimental to the sense of self. Modisane states how "the African…needs to be a master in the art of chicanery" and become adapt at donning the "canvas smile" (Nixon, 1994: 24). But this performance was also detrimental; "I have no face, I have no name, my whole existence slithers behind a mask called Bloke" (Modisane as cited in Nixon, 1994: 25). Yet, despite the instabilities of this theatricality, it still afforded a level of alleviation from his experiences of degradation for being black in South Africa.

Against the "injustice and humiliation of being black in South Africa, I could defy South Africa by flashing on that cynical 'Saintly' smile" (Modisane as cited in Goldsmith, 2005: 115). Referring to the cynicism of the character 'The Saint' Modisane extracts "the Saint's cynicism and "carefree attitudes" from their context" and "adapts them as a way of responding to racism" (Goldsmith, 2005:115). The literary reference is reused and re-fashioned for his context. Goldsmith articulates what Homi K. Bhabha describes as "the colonial subject mimics the dominant discourse," and in doing so

> What emerges…is a mode of representation that marginalizes the monumentality of history, simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it inimitable" (Goldsmith, 2005: 111).

The saintly smile illustrates a mode of resistance through the mask the black man has come to utilise. In the mocking smile,

> "Africans have discovered – and this by way of self-protection – that the white South African is hopelessly and fanatically susceptible to flattery, a weapon which the Africans use with vicious enthusiasm to express their sincerest contempt" (Modisane as cited in Nixon, 1994: 24).

This mocking of the self-importance of white South Africa demonstrates a resistance to a fully internalised black inferiority to white supremacy. Exposing the need for black subservience, white sovereign superiority becomes questionable, as it is contingent on particular circumstances. The seeming omnipotence of white supremacy can be challenged and subverted.

The smile then is a mode of maintaining the black man's dignity in its ideological undermining of white supremacy. It also illustrates an instance of a cultural mediation and agency on the part of the black man. In this mediation, the "colonial context overturn(s) conventional understandings of Western text" rendering a new dimension of meaning to the text that is not solely defined by the coloniser (Goldsmith, 2005: 115). This process is similar to what Nixon describes, asserting, "if America provided an immense stimulus, Sophia's own cultural resourcefulness prevented craven imitation…what emerged was finally characteristically Sophia"

(Nixon, 1994: 13). Thus, the appropriation of material from international sources, as was illustrated in *Drum*, "came to play a powerful role in the symbolic resistance to such fossilization" that the state tried to ascribe to black subjects" (Nixon, 1994: 28).

The appropriation of western fashioning of self may be read as aspiring to western ideals and thus as an expression of the internalised inferiority complex described by Fanon. As a result of the "effacement of black masculinity" the black man is "compelled to don a mask of whiteness" (Goldsmith, 2005: 110). But for those Sophiatown intellectuals "dressing in European fashions, entertaining guests with the latest jazz imports, and studying dramatic monologues", the performance was not simply a donning of a mask of whiteness (Goldsmith, 2005:110). Homi Bhabha engages with the notion of the interstitial. He writes: "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994: 5). Hybridised forms emerge at the interstitial where, with "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" new or revised cultural formations occur (Bhabha, 1994: 2).

In *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, editors Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin engage with the idea of the hybrid. They outline how early post colonial theory fell within the paradigm that posited the west as a centre. Thus resistance was to these constructions of west as centre. They maintain that this resistance 'focused on issues of separate identity and cultural distinctiveness' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995). Furthermore, they illustrate how this conception of resistance only affirms the position of the west as a centre to which other cultures resist. It is argued how the idea of hybrid cultural formations present a more effective form of resistance as it bypasses a discourse that would reinforce a polarising binary logic. Western culture is thus no longer perceived as a centre against which other cultures either resist or become subsumed.

Themba, along with other writers at *Drum*, was criticised for displaying "petty-bourgeois aspirations" and being "over-enamoured with the fads of Western culture" (Chapman, 1989: 21). His subject matter and style have been criticized for this, being deemed sensationalist and melodramatic (Chapman, 1989; Snyman,

2007). Themba himself is noted to have "tended to cultivate the image of the dandy (he often lugged about the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*)" (Chapman, 1989: 22). This criticism was in part because Themba chose to focus on the 'individual humanity' of his characters, at the supposed expense of social commentary (Chapman, 1989).

Themba's performance of the dandy emerges in a different context and predates the work of visual artist Yinka Shonibare, yet significant parallels can be drawn in the performances of these African 'dandies'. Both their performances bring reflexive complexity to the representation of black masculinity. Shonibare was born in England to Nigerian parents. He lived in Nigeria from the age of three then moved back to England to attend art school. While attending art school, Shonibare was encouraged to deal with African subject matter in his art. It was from this suggestion that the "idea that he should, as a person with a Nigerian background, be expected to make only "African art", Shonibare began considering stereotypes and the issue of "authenticity"" (Cooke, 2010: 8). Angela McRobbie describes how Shonibare "resists the box of being black" and therefore, being expected to create work engaging "directly with ethnicity" (2005: 116-117). In his photographic series "Diary of a Victorian Dandy" (Figure 1 in Appendix) Shonibare created a number of tableaux vivants of Victorian life. He positioned himself, a black man, at the centre of each of these, surrounded and being doted on by white servants and friends. In this work Shonibare plays with and subverts conventional expectations of race and class. His presence at the centre of these tableaux vivants draws attention to and mocks the historical monumental efforts to segregate and safeguard the distinctions between differing spheres of class, race and culture.

Similarly, Themba's performance of a dandy persona indicates a rejection of his determination by society. Themba was frustrated with his subjectivity as a black man being defined in narrow terms of an "objectifying racist gaze"(Goldsmith, 2005: 117). This frustration at being denied the space to exist on his own terms is expressed in Themba saying "The whole bloody ethos still asphyxiates me…Leave us some area in time and experience where we may be true to ourselves. It is so exhausting to be in reaction all the time" (Themba as cited in Nixon, 1994: 39). Themba expresses a

desire to be able to live according to his own terms, without being expected to perform a particular cultural authenticity. In this respect, Themba's seemingly apolitical performance of a dandy persona can be understood as an indictment of the over-determining racialised gaze, which he describes as "the burden of the whiteman's crime against my personality" (Themba as cited in Nixon, 1994: 39).

As indicated in Themba's personal performance of a dandy, an individual's articulation can have broader implications when read against their social context. Though Themba does focus on individual's stories, he makes little references to the intrusions of state and the white supremist society in the lives of his characters. In *The Suit*, the intrusion of state is indicated as Philemon makes reference to his passbook when coming home to find Matilda with her lover. Themba alludes to the changing situation of education in Sophiatown as Matilda recalls how "schools had been forced to close with the advent of Bantu Education (Themba, 2006: 123). Themba's command of English literature and cultivation of a dandy persona did not, therefore, supersede his lived experiences of life in Sophiatown. Rather, it indicates the contradictions and complexities in identity construction.

Although he had been through a 'western' education system and had an admiration for English literature, Themba complicates his performance of an English gentleman dandy in cultivating a "command of *tsotsitaal*" (Nixon 1994: 33). This command of 'the look and slang of the *tsotsis*" along with the image of Hollywood hoods "combined to help Themba and Co. project an image of chic recklessness" wherein Themba came to be known as the "supreme intellectual *tsotsi*" (Nkosi as cited in Nixon, 1994: 33). Nixon identifies the importance of the idea of outlaws at the time. There was a "virtual foreclosure of law abiding life" so that the "urban African could enter, with no effort at all, a life of lawlessness" because of the oppressive laws imposed on almost every part of life (Nixon, 1994: 31). Thus there was an embracing of the "outlaw image"(Nixon, 1994: 31). Nixon cites Lewis Nkosi's description of Themba as "raising hell" in "that sombre, fearful community of the intellect so hideously terrorized by the political regime in South Africa" (Nkosi as cited in Nixon, 1994: 33). What Themba demonstrates is not a brazen imitation of western styles and ideals, but, instead, an incorporation of the foreign into the local context.

Hannerz comments on the creolization of township culture quoting Mphahlele's description of "a fugitive culture: borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, rejecting that" (1994: 190). Sophiatown's gangsters were known for appropriating "Hollywood fantasy", incorporating it into "a local subcultural look and accent" (Nixon, 1994: 32). Thus "foreign style rendered black urban culture all the more inimitable and thereby indisputably indigenous" (Nixon, 1994: 32). Themba's and Sophiatown's authenticity was that of a fluctuating creolized urban space. This is expressed in Themba's need to perform a cultural subjectivity that he has an active role in shaping and transforming without being accused of participating in the death of local culture originality.

The processes by which Themba embraces a transnational yet local identity are the subject of interrogation for Arjun Appadurai (2005) in his book *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. There, Appadurai investigates new ways of imagining cultural exchange in the context of globalization. In positing the term 'ethnoscapes' he alludes to the ambiguities built into this shifting conception of ethnicity as groups are no longer assumed to be "tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious or culturally homogeneous" (Appadurai, 2005; 48). Through looking at the role of imagination in social life and how imaginations are fuelled with transnational media and migration, he shows how the "scenarios for life possibilities" are opened up and that the "ethnoscapes of today's world are profoundly interactive" (Appadurai, 2005: 48, 53). He qualifies though, that 'deterritorialisation' does not mean that the 'character' of geo-specific locales are subsumed and homogenised by acknowledging that whatever imaginative resources may be introduced are experienced through 'lived, local experience" (Appadurai, 2005). As transnational migration and mass media were factors of life in the 1950s, Sophiatown culture may be understood as engaged in these instances of interacting ethnoscapes.

Themba was shaped by, and participated in shaping the world he inhabited. Michael Chapman acknowledges how "Themba – Like *Drum* – was part of the socialising process of the 1950s" (1989: 19). His agency to affect and shape his environment was mediated and suppressed by an oppressive society and its laws. Though his

writing did tend to focus on individual drama, the implicit bias of these dramas was inevitably infused with an exposition and indictment of the political climate of the time. This is evident through the state's reaction to his work. His resistance, and that of his contemporaries, was illustrated by how "*Drum* found itself and its writers in court again and again over the 1950s and 1960s" (Merrett as cited in Clowes, 2005: 90). The narrow space for Themba's public articulation of urban black subjectivities was closed down completely when in 1966 he became a banned person and could no longer to be quoted in South Africa.

Reading Themba's work against the socio-political context it emerged from, when appreciated, "as products of the 1950s…the stories assume an extra-textual dimension of meaning" (Chapman, 1989: 20). Articulating the human stories of black South Africans in urban areas worked decidedly against the Nationalist Party's agenda. It defeated the states effort to "smash any permanent African presence in the so-called white cities" and the attempt to "embark on the apartheid dream of Bantu retribalisation" (Chapman, 1989: 20). To write these stories of a black urban population determined to inhabit this environment and subjectivities at a time when the possibilities for transnational, trans-cultural flows were being closed down as a matter of state endorsed separate development, can be appreciated as an act of resistance to the image the state ascribed to black subjects.

Fraying The Threads of Resistance: The Subjugation of Black Women

> "Apartheid repression, it does seem, created a double tragedy for the black humanity in South Africa…[but] the pain and actual brunt of racial separatism was borne by women who suffered severely on account of their being black in the first place, and being women on the other hand" (Ume-Njamma, 2006: 1).

As discussed briefly earlier, Ume-Njamma's observation outlines the double subjugation of black women. Where the Sophiatown male writers found in *Drum* magazine a space for the public articulation of their subjectivities, black women were marginalised. Clowes notes how the employees at *Drum* were "almost without exception, black and male" (2005: 90). She states "even when stories were attributed to women, men were frequently the authors" (Clowes 2005: 90). While it was "edited and owned by white men, *Drum* magazine was written and produced by black men for an urban male audience" (Clowes, 2005, 90). The producers of the magazine negotiated complex racial politics from within the publication. Nixon quotes Mphahlele's statement; "in shaping the magazine the white hand was very strong, in particular from Bailey behind the scenes" (1994: 30). These negotiations happened between the agencies of male subjects. The magazine was utilized as a platform to enact a particular kind of resistance to the effects of the disempowering nation state. It seems, where the political and cultural agendas of black men were articulated, those of black women took take a back seat.

The struggle for liberation from racist oppression did not translate to a concern for liberation from other forms of oppression. As Dorothy Driver writes, "women's subjectivity" was "compelled once again to take a subordinate position rather than to emerge as a voice of its own" (1996: 240). This legacy has lived on, as recently as 1990 Driver quotes Christine Qunta's statement, "I take the view that we are Africans before we are women" (1996: 240). As resistance to apartheid happened on a racial level, and constituted the primary concern of liberation work, challenging internal oppression experienced by women was subsumed by a broader anti-apartheid agenda.

This negation of gendered imbalances of power is signalled in *Black Skins, White Masks,* Fanon's seminal interrogation of the psychological legacy of colonial power relations. Goldsmith writes, "Fanon discounts the specificities of the Antillean female condition, claiming, "As for the woman of colour, I know nothing about her" (2005, 115). In her own reading of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, she opens the second section of her paper, a critique on the feminist implications of Modisane's autobiography, with the title "As for the woman of colour, I know nothing of her': or, Blame Me on Masculinity?" (Goldsmith, 2005: 115). Here, Goldsmith articulates the problem of the double subjugation of black women. While a history of oppression and de-masculinisation produced a dehumanised black male denied subjectivity, the social order of patriarchy further disenfranchised black women. As a black man, Modisane, articulates how his oppression can be blamed on (His)tory, a Eurocentric, colonialist and imperial oppression. Goldsmiths re-working of the title demonstrates how a similar process of oppression occurs with a history of patriarchal oppression of women. Black women, therefore, have had the burden of both trajectories of history, dehumanising, objectifying and suppressing their subjectivity. The challenges that face the black male subject in societies that marginalises, disables and negates their agency and self-determination are multifaceted, as demonstrated by those faced by the Sophiatown male writers. The challenges faced by objectified black women in this context are even further complicated by radicalized and gendered subjugation.

Though there was a gendered imbalance in *Drum,* articles about women did appear and were sometimes written by women (though these women were often not employees of the magazine). An article written by a woman in the 1958 April edition of the magazine attests to the scarcity of female writing in the public sphere. In her article Sharon Davis describes herself as "a modern miss" (Davis, 1958: 64). She demonstrates how uncommon writing by non-white women was by describing how, in her chosen career, she defied expectations of women's work. She writes, "I became a journalist instead. Not that journalism is such an unconventional way of earning a living, but it's certainly not an ordinary thing, especially for a non-white girl – and that's in South Africa!" (Davis, 1958: 64).

Unlike Sharon Davis, who appeared as a cover girl and had an article in the magazine, most of the cover girls were only that, having no relevance to the magazine's content. Their presence on the cover functioned to sell magazines, as Toyin Falola and Tyler Fleming observe, "a heavy dose of photographs of beautiful cover girls, caused the magazine's popularity to skyrocket" (2005: 137). The magazine sometimes ran a short description of the girls; the 1958 December edition described Linda Mhlugo as "crisp, cute and highly curvaceous all over. What a dainty dish to set before you kings of discrimination just before Christmas! This gal sings, too. A voice like luscious, ripe cherries" (Drum, 1958: 7). This description testifies to the superficial level of engagement the magazine had with women. Who she was or where she came from was not important. The fact that she had talent and capabilities (she sings) was mentioned as an afterthought to the pleasure she could provide for male "you kings" observers. Driver writes how, in *Drum*, "through a set of gestures ranging from domestication to eroticization, intelligent, active and energetic women were returned to subjection" (1996: 238).

Dolly Rathebe featured on the cover of the 1956 May edition of *Drum*, while her 'femininity' was being observed and measured by 'the *Drum* team'. Rathebe stands on a pedestal placidly smiling at the viewer while four men around her prod and measure her body (Figure 2 in Appendix). She wears a bathing costume and the men around her wear suits with bow ties and jackets. The signification of modernity through their attire was in keeping with the publication's shift from traditional representations to those of urban Africans[1]. The modernity they enact, however, displays a shift in patriarchal subjugation of women to one that is eroticized and objectified. Driver describes how *Drum* gives insight into processes where "rural patriarchal structures were giving way to urban forms, as well as into the ways in which women's voices were silenced" (1996: 232). In the image, Dorothy is not a

[1] As Wendy Parkins argues in *Fashioning the Body Politic*, "notions of citizenship may be bound up with and understood through notions and practices of dress…forms or items of dress – from the ceremonial to the everyday – can themselves become sites of political struggle…they can be used variously to contest or legitimate the power of the state and the meanings of citizenship" (2002: 2). The representation of a black African modernity can be read as part of the resistance enacted in *Drum* to state ideals of re-tribalisation.

singer or an actress. Her achievements are sidelined and silenced, and she becomes an object for the sexual admiration of the *Drum* writers.

Women appeared often in advertisements for domestic goods, or in articles as "silently and invisibly present" in the lives of men (Clowes, 2005:103). Clowes discusses the shift from earlier representations in *Drum* where the *man's* family was acknowledged as having a role in his success, to the late 1950s where they became "anonymous children and unnamed wives" (Clowes, 2005:99). She writes how this was particularly exemplified,

> In attempts to identify "the man of Africa 1959", no mention was made of wives, children, or parents of the men short listed for the title, and when the photograph of a woman accompanied those of the male contenders, she was neither named nor discussed in the text (Clowes, 2005:99).

The magazine thus portrayed successes of African men alongside representations of women as little more than sexual entertainment or domestic caregivers. Women existed in the background of men's lives and "the images and texts produced by the magazine tended to reinforce male authority over women" (Clowes, 2008: 2).

This objectification of women was a double standard that black men perpetuated in the face of subjugation from white society. Commenting on Modisane's treatment of women, Goldsmith observes, "While appropriating…masks protects him from the daily physical and psychological brutality of white racism, Modisane perpetuates his own oppression by wilfully reducing women, both black and white, to objects" (2005: 110). The subjugation of women can be understood as a way in which the disenfranchised black male attempted to recover a masculinity undermined by contact with white South Africa.

In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison engages with this cycle of oppression, where the oppressed in turn becomes the oppressor. The character of Cholly who, "has been educated by racism to assert his manhood on the defenceless," is an illustration of this process (Feng, 1998: 60). Cholly suffers a traumatic episode in his youth in which two white men disrupted his first experience of lovemaking. Little more than a boy at the time, Cholly was powerless to protest against the two grown

white men with guns who force him to continue as they watch with a flashlight. The humiliation he and his partner experience is dehumanising, stripping the young adolescents of their dignity. The episode is charged with poignant symbolism. The *two grown* white men with *guns* become metonymic for the power and control of a suppressive white society. The flashlight the men use, illuminating the two adolescents for view, can be read as the "objectifying racist gaze" (Goldsmith, 2005:116). This gaze, as Goldsmith describes, recalling Fanon, "sees the black body and nothing more" (2005: 117). Through this gaze, their humanity is discarded at the fact of their being black. Because Cholly is powerless to confront the white men who humiliate and dehumanise him, he turns his anger to the smaller girl. "Cholly's transference of anger onto the helpless Darlene also illustrates his desperate clinging to the shred of manhood under the threat of racial emasculation" (Feng, 1998: 61). Under the gaze of white supremacist society the two are stripped of their individual humanity[2].

Modisane describes the burden of this 'objectifying gaze' stating how he is "overdetermined from without" (Goldsmith: 117). He, as a person, an individual, a human, is subsumed by his colour. His humanity is subsumed by tropes of blackness negating his individuality. As black men's individuality was overwritten by their race, black women too were rendered invisible. Unlike black men, however, in addition to their race, black women were further silenced by gender, as shown above with Rathebe and Mhlugo. Where the objectified black person loses their identity under the objectifying gaze of white supremacy, the black woman loses hers over again under the objectifying male gaze. In *The Suit,* Philemon is constantly looking at Matilda. In *The Tailored Suit*, this gaze is exaggerated, demonstrating the control it exerts. Through his close surveillance Philemon attempts to keep Matilda in line with his expectations of a wife, foregrounding the oppressive character of patriarchy.

[2] It was this individual humanity that Themba ascribed to the black urban characters in his narratives, and that he was criticised for. As argued above, this illustrates how, although his work was not overtly political, it did have a role in the subversion of problematic racialised ideology.

The gaze that shatters the masculinity of the black man echoes the ideological gendering process of colonisation. McClintock references Fanon's idea of how "colonialism inflicts itself as a domestication of the colony" that diverts "female power into colonial hands and disrupts the patriarchal power of colonised men" (1995: 364). This emasculates black men on two levels. Fanon's ventriloquial projection of the colonial thought process illustrates the first: "If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer its women" (Fanon as cited in McClintock, 1995: 364). The second level of emasculation is in the metaphor of the colony being figured as a "family of black children ruled over by a white father" (McClintock, 1995: 358). There is a convergence in the familial metaphor that shows the processes of colonial, racial and gender subjugation. White supremacy negates the masculinity of the black man. As Philemon's look oppresses Matilda, the black man comes under the oppressive surveillance of western patriarchy when he comes into contact with white racism. His manhood is usurped and he is cast to the subordinate social sphere with women and children as the ward of western patriarchy. The subjugated black man, therefore, is emasculated through a similar process as the subjugation of women and is thus equated with women. As mentioned earlier, while this subjugation was resisted in terms of the normative black (male) subject, black women's emancipation was irrelevant under racial and gendered patriarchal processes.

Ann McClintock observes how, at times, "for Fanon, both colonizer and colonized are here unthinkingly male, and the Manichaean agon of decolonization is waged over the territoriality of female, domestic space" (1995:354). Women are cast as symbolic objects for men to conquer in that "women serve as boundary markers visibly upholding the fetish signs of national difference and visibly embodying the iconography of race and gender purity" (McClintock, 1995: 377). Taken as symbolic of cultural or national hegemonies, women are confined to the 'domestic (home)' space of cultural authenticity. McClintock uses the imagery of clothing to illustrate the fanatical control exerted over women, stating, "Because for (men)…women serve as the visible markers of national homogeneity, they become subject to especially vigilant and violent discipline. Hence the intense emotive politics of dress"

(McClintock, 1995: 365)[3]. It is because of this pivotal space women occupy in the discourse of colonial power that sleeping with a white woman provides the black man some restoration of his masculinity.

As with Cholly, Modisane cannot enact his frustrations on white society directly, he can only put on his 'saintly' smile. As such, he uses women and sex as an escape (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). In order to "compensate for his emasculation in the political realm, Modisane turns to sex with both black and white women as a salve for his wounded sense of manhood" (Goldsmith, 2005: 115-116). In particular "white women provide a temporary salve to the anguish of disenfranchised black masculinity" (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). The salve to his manhood found in sex with white women in particular evokes Fanon's figuring of women as metaphor for the physical landscape men fight over for control and dominance. To conquer the women of the other is to metaphorically conquer the other. Charles W. Mills proposes,

> In a patriarchal society, sexuality is distorted by sexism as well as racism, so that male sexuality characteristically involves the notion of conquest, sexual competition, and proving ones manhood by securing the woman, or series of women, more highly ranked in the established hierarchy of desirability (1996: 148).

Mills asserts that in societies under white hegemonic control "white women will in general represent the female somatic ideal" by virtue of varying forms of media representations and their ideological impact in such a society (1996: 149). He goes on to highlight how this perception of women implies an "acceptance of a sexist framework in which male combat…takes place in part across the terrain of the female body" (Mills, 1996: 150). As such, he highlights (and notes the problematic gendered implications of) a possibility wherein the sexual act becomes a form of revenge for "the systematic humiliations of the denial to black men of their manhood in a society" (1996: 150). Sex therefore, becomes significant in its

[3] This significance of clothing as a cultural maker will be discussed in relation to Matilda later in this report.

association with the maintenance of spheres of difference. This feud, once again, happens between male subjectivities over the landscape of the female objectification. The woman's involvement and motivations for participation are not considered. Her participation or agency is not acknowledged, as she is handled as an object towards a particular end. Similarly, in *The Suit*, the motivations for Matilda's actions are not considered, as she is an object for Philemon's control. Consequently, when her actions demand that her participation in life as an active subject be acknowledged, Themba writes it as a betrayal to her husband.

Modisane's conquest of white women is to be read as transgressing the boundary of his subordinated position in society. In the above example, women remain dehumanised, cast as objects for men to exert their will over. Conversely, as with the character Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Matilda does not submit her sexuality to be to be controlled, through patriarchy, as a symbol of domestic or cultural insularity. Her body and sexuality are her own and she explores her sexuality with a lover of her choice. In this regard, because Matilda's intimacy with her lover is a consequence of her desire and choice, her affair becomes a marker of her resistance to patriarchal oppression. Her body is literally and symbolically controlled by patriarchy, her sexual emancipation is thus a claim to her humanity. However, in *The Suit*, the penalty for this independence is shame that eventually leads to her suicide.

In an effort to recoup the black man's displaced sense of masculinity, then, the control of the woman's body remains significant. White women offered cushioning to black masculinity through the symbolic conquering of white society. Black women on the other hand needed to occupy and maintain a cultural 'domesticity' bound to traditions that retain black male patriarchy.

Black women are symbolically in the domain of tradition and cultural preservation. Anne McClintock engages with this idea in terms of the nation state. In *Imperial Leather* she argues,

> Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of the national tradition…embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by

> contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity…embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity (1995: 359).

McClintock goes on to assert that time is gendered, "figuring women (like the colonised and the working class) as inherently atavistic – the conservative repository of the national archaic" (1995: 359). As such, Goldsmith understands Modisane as casting "the conflict between tradition and modernity in gendered terms" (2005: 116). The apprehension toward autonomous women in *Drum*, may be understood as evidence of how "women represent traditional and indigenous culture in a black South Africa" (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). There is little space for the markers of archaic tradition in the pages of a magazine that is characterized by the "grasping at Americanized technological and popular culture" (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). It follows then, that since racist ideology would cast black men to a subordinate position, akin to women and children, black men distanced themselves from ideological association with black femininity and domesticity.

Modisane seems to only reject a confinement to tradition when it pertains to modernity and his manhood. Goldsmith notes how "he resents any intrusion of indigenous traditions into his everyday life, but profits from the traditions of male privilege in his family" (Goldsmith, 2005: 116). While there is a pursuit for autonomous self-definition in terms of the black masculinity, the possibility for similar emancipation for black women is elided. Where black men went forth 'into' modernity deifying western ideas of what constitutes 'African', black women were denied access because of their "[construction] as the symbolic bearers of the nation" and thus "denied any direct relation to national agency" (McClintock, 1995: 354). As was illustrated above with Philemon and Matilda, the woman becomes an appendage to her husband cushioning the blows of racist society. It is in this way that black women suffer double subjugation, internally from within the black community and externally from the racism of the state. Black women occupied a position on the furthest tier of marginalisation from the centre of white male dominated society.

Though Themba, like his colleagues at *Drum* magazine, wrote against African identity being boxed into the idea of an 'unspoiled African', women were still positioned as bound to domesticity, maintaining the home and culture. The performance of a cosmopolitan identity of the 'new African woman' thus produced "profoundly altered relations between black male anxiety and female subjection" (Nixon, 1994: 20). In the Sophiatown context "the "new" woman found herself increasingly…being projected as a threat to the urban man's virility" (Nixon, 1994: 20). In his article, *Girls in High-Heel Shoes* Themba describes how "the Modern Miss is catching up with us. God save us when she by-passes us, like the American woman has by-passed her man" (1985: 132). The African woman's performance of modernity is figured as a threat to the man's 'virility', his sense of manhood. It is perhaps because, in her independence, she is no longer available to act as the 'hem' to shore up her man's sense of masculinity (at her own expense) that she is cast as such a threat.

Though subjugation of women was not a new phenomenon, Nixon comments, "What was striking, however, is…the new, distinctive forms that the assault took" against the 'new', 'modern women' (1994: 20). The new woman did not uphold the "atavistic and authentic body of national tradition" she did not perform her task of "embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity." (McClintock, 1995: 359). As such, with its articulations of urban male ideologies, "*Drum* became complicit in a wider effort to contain the "menace" and desirability of women within an ideology of domesticity" (Nixon, 1994: 20).

Driver writes "the magazine was part of a signifying system whereby patriarchy manfully reasserted itself in the face of the destabilization of its traditional rural form" (1996:233). As with Sharon Davis and celebrities like Miriam Makeba and Dolly Rathebe, the magazine had to take female subjects into account. This, however, was done with enough patronising objectification that although "[the magazine] also necessarily acknowledged women's increasing power…it tried to exploit and contain this power" (1996: 233). This paradoxical relationship to the representation of femininity is evident in Themba's *Girls in High-Heel Shoes*. He describes his attraction to the village, where the women "went in for natural beauty, with frank breasts jutting out like promontories" professing how "It was very romantic, just the

sedative for jaded, city nerves (Themba, 1984: 132). He then goes on to contradict this desire, stating how the "shattering silence would get me down, and I would panic back to the near-thing of Sophiatown and some loud-mouthed, bewitching girl" (Themba, 1984: 132). Though femininity is being re-shaped, it is still being determined in subordinated terms to the masculine writer. While he is a desiring subject, the woman remains an object, devoid of desire, subjectivity or agency.

This marginalization of women in the pages of *Drum*, a magazine "crucial in South African literary and cultural history" and that celebrated black urban life and agency, attests to women's marginalization in the community it was for and of (Driver, 1996: 231). Nixon's evaluation concurs, describing these gendered imbalances at *Drum* as "all pervasive features of South African life during the 50s" (1994: 20). He describes the sexual politics at *Drum* as ranging from "the merely retrograde" to the "deeply dismal" (Nixon, 1994: 20). It is widely acknowledged in South Africa that the writers and photographers of *Drum* helped set up a tradition of independent black writing that has left an important historical and cultural legacy (Clowes, 2009: 3). Along with the positive, this legacy has problematic implications. It is to these gendered politics, as they manifest and are articulated in Themba's *The Suit,* that a re-articulation is offered in "*The Tailored Suit*".

Self-Styling: Reclaiming Self-Definition

The film, *The Tailored Suit* addresses the positioning of the female subject in Can Themba's narrative *The Suit*. The film offers a re-articulation of the story from Matilda's narrative experience. This articulation works to disrupt the social, cultural and political structures that would render her as woman, subjugated by varying forms of patriarchal oppression.

While the film addresses questions pertaining to racial and gender inequality through Matilda's specific circumstances, I aim to relate them to the broader implications of patriarchal oppression as discussed above. This, however, is not to presume a uniform experience of black femininity. Factors such as age, sexuality and class would produce differentiated experiences within the demographic. As such, I do not position this representation of Matilda's story as typifying the problems or answers to the challenges facing a homogenous group. I do hope, however, through engaging with Matilda's particular situation, to foreground and address some of the principal underlying processes that subjugate a section of the population on account of their being black and female.

The Tailored Suit investigates the emergent possibilities when a woman, figured as symbolically representative of her culture, transgresses the boundaries of the culture she is positioned as representing. It explores the revisionist potential to gendered constructs when the silenced embodiment of "otherness" is defined in her own terms. The film engages with these ideas through aesthetic, metaphoric and discursive strategies.

The Clothes Pattern: Synopsis

Matilda's absent subjectivity in Themba's story is amended in *The Tailored Suit* through the incorporation of a back-story. This acts as a lining to Themba's narrative, illuminating Matilda's reasoning and motives that are absent in *The Suit*. This works to cast a new light on Matilda, reshaping the reception of her actions.

In this back-story, or narrative past, Matilda is represented as having two key relationships that motivate her actions in her later life with Philemon, her narrative present. The first is with her Mother. Matilda is shown as having a close relationship with her mother who left to go to the city. The areas of rural South Africa set aside for the black population, which came to be known as "Bantustans, or homelands" were poor disenfranchised areas as they were "isolated from economic, social and other resources" (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley and Salo, 1995: 135). Matilda's mother's move to the city therefore, was an attempt to access the resources available in cities and thus reveals her aspiration to economic and social emancipation.

Matilda, following her mother's example, aspired to attain the freedom's she perceived city life could offer. Her concept of the city is expressed in her voice over, "The city was a place of promises…it was a place of new jobs in factories, department stores, teaching and secretarial. It is a place the modern miss had won her freedom" (from *The Tailored Suit*). In her imagination, the city offered hope for economic and social emancipation made accessible to women.

Matilda's only access to the city, however, was through marriage. Her voice over informs the viewer "I had to get married so that I could come to the city. My uncle took care of everything" (from *The Tailored Suit*). In her attempt to gain the independence that city life may offer, she is bound to a husband. This indicates the oppressive character of traditional forms of patriarchy over Matilda's agency. The independence and autonomy that Matilda hoped to attain through city life is still unattainable. The "patriarchal family with a male head of household mediating the relationship with state (and agency in the public sphere) for women" persists through her uncle and later in her marriage to Philemon (Lister as cited in Van Zyl, 2005: 227). In the city Matilda becomes the ward of her husband, as she had been the ward of her uncle and male relatives in the country. [4]

[4] Though *The Tailored Suit* is an interpretation of a fictional story, as with Themba's narrative, the fictitious world is shaped by the social specificities it is located in. Matilda's desire for self-reliance can be paralleled with the efforts demonstrated by the Rural Women's Movement, an African women's collective that "battles with both the state and traditional tribal structures" that restrict women "from full participation in decisions affecting their lives (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley and Salo, 1995:135).

Matilda's life with Philemon is a representation of Themba's initial narrative. In this part of *The Tailored Suit* Matilda is stripped of her agency, as she is written in Themba's story. Philemon has control over all aspects of Matilda's life. She has to ask his permission for everything she desires, from joining a women's club to entertaining her friends. In the film, Philemon's infantilising of Matilda is exaggerated in order to foreground its demeaning influence. Philemon rules Matilda's subjectivity to the extent that he even controls what she wears; he instructs her euphemistically "I think the wrap dress would suit you better today" (from *The Tailored Suit*).

The second relationship introduced in the narrative past is Matilda's lover. His presence in Matilda's life prior to her marriage to Philemon establishes the significance of her connection to him. The relationship between Matilda and her lover becomes significant in its representation of the more balanced, reciprocal relationship between the gendered subjects. Their intimacy is illustrated by the two sitting under a tree as Matilda works on his hair. Matilda's lover allows her the space to shape his appearance, which is in stark contrast to Matilda's interactions with Philemon. In his role as male patriarch, Philemon exercises control over Matilda to the point of prescribing to her what to wear each day. With her lover on the other hand, there is a sense of a balanced, mutually influential relationship. Where she twists his hair and shapes his appearance, he teaches her how to play his musical instrument, the mbira.

The lover's re-appearance later in Matilda's narrative no longer reads as a casual act of infidelity by a seemingly bored housewife. Matilda's affair is a reunion with someone from her past whom she cares for. Furthermore it is an enactment of a desire to engage with someone who appreciates her as an adult. Here she is an equal as opposed to her relationship with Philemon with whom she is infantilised.[5]

[5] Homi K. Bhabha reads Fanon as locating an agency of empowerment in desire. "As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely her-end-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world–that is a world of reciprocal recognition" (Fanon as cited in Bhabha, 1994: 12). Fanon articulates the power of desire in that it initiates action. In action

With an understanding of what drives Matilda, her needs and desires, her actions take on new meaning. Matilda's actions are no longer those of an adulterous housewife but those of resistance to the objectification she is subjected to by Philemon.

The Tailored Suit departs from Themba's *The Suit* in its closing. Matilda does not kill herself after her final humiliation of bringing the suit out at her party. Instead she works on the suit and tailors it to fit her body. As opposed to being broken down by Philemon's abuse it gives her the resolve to leave him. Matilda affects and changes the object of and reason for her oppression, creating a garment that suits her needs. Matilda's agency in tailoring the suit is the key intervention offered in *The Tailored Suit*, which I will return to.

Combining of Fabrics: Multiplicity as Revisionist

In the fictional world of the narratives, Matilda's story posits a version of the past that disrupts Themba's account. In *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts*, David Martin-Jones (2006) discusses the narrative form of film in terms of linear and non-linear time structures. He looks at the treatment of time in film, engaging with it in relation to the current socio-political climate of a nation and the narratives of the national histories. Drawing from Deleuze's philosophy of time, he engages with the functioning of the time-image and the movement-image as illustrative of the way "national identity is constructed in cinema" (2008: 1). He posits a reading of filmic narrative structures as formally related to historical transformations in national narratives.

Martin-Jones suggests that the temporal structure of a film either reinstates or disrupts a normative linear perception of narrative time. Whether a film de-territorializes (disrupts) or re-territorializes (reinstates) the legitimacy of linear time can be related to the contingent socio-political climate of a nation. A tension occurs

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there is a participation in shaping one's world and thus the subject that desires demands recognition.

in the interstices between an official narrative history and the differentiated histories that are subsumed by it. Matilda's story, having been subsumed, is being uncovered in *The Tailored Suit.*

Martin-Jones suggests that at times of "historical transformation", when the national narrative is being reassessed, film practices show more characteristics of the de-territorialized image (Martin-Jones, 2006). In the de-territorialized image, labyrinth time-image is more prevalent than in the movement-image. The time-image allows for open-ended, varied and sometimes contradicting realities to coexist as opposed to privileging any 'one-true-time' of a singular trajectory of official history.

Martin-Jones does not disassociate the two types of images, putting forward the idea of a hybrid wherein the two are in constant dialogue, he notes;

> These hybrid films are seen as existing on interactive planes – struggling between the restraining, actualizing powers of the movement image, and the disruptive, virtual force of the time image – in an attempt to open up new possibilities, or close off alternative views of national identity…that is negotiated by a film's de- or re-territorialized narrative" (Martin-Jones, 2006: 5).

Martin-Jones's ideas pertaining to cinematic redefinitions of historical narrative can be read in recent literary engagements with Themba's work. There have been re-articulations of Themba's narrative by young South African writers. These narrative engagements with Themba's original story introduce multiples strands to the once singular thread of *The Suit*. In the world created by Themba, subsequent generations of authors have come to posit their relationship with the almost mythic status of his work.

The Suit Continued, by Siphiwo Mahala tells the story from the perspective of the lover who leapt out of the window when discovered with Matilda. It recounts how Matilda, who never mentioned her marital status, seduced him. Mahala goes on to describe the lover's humiliation, running through Sophiatown in underwear, and his troubles with his own wife for the loss of his suit. Following from Themba's

narrative, Mahala's Matilda finally kills herself though here it is the lover as well as Philemon who suffer for her actions.

Zukiswa Wanner wrote the events leading to Matilda's death as a suicide note in *The Dress That Fed the Suit*. In her interpretation Matilda once again deceives her lover, not letting him know about her husband. Philemon is depicted as a hard working husband who provides and cares for her. He is only driven to his abusive behaviour because of Matilda's betrayal. Matilda's suicide note is an explanation and reads as a plea for absolution. As such, Matilda remains a guilty perpetrator. Neither of these narratives hold Philemon or society accountable for infantilizing and objectifying Matilda, denying her subjectivity and autonomy.

These two versions of *The Suit* maintain Matilda's gesture toward sexual emancipation as morally questionable. Their literary engagement with Themba's text, however, performs what Martin-Jones refers to, in filmic terms, as de-territorialising labyrinth time. As with Wanner's and Mahala's narratives*, The Tailored Suit* posits difference in the articulation of Themba's narrative, what was once a singular narrative, thus opening up the possibility for articulation from varying subject positions.

Pin-chia Feng engages with Toni Morrison's idea of rememory as "*resisting the resistance* of society in its attempt to cover up the unsightly part of history" (Feng, 1998: 20). She traces the multiple and differentiated voices of marginalised subjects allowing for counter narratives to "cut across and break up" a hegemonic version of history (Feng, 1998: 18). Through *The Tailored Suit*, I engage with and attempt to revise the representations established in Themba's narrative. As Feng suggests, through highlighting the 'unsightly parts of history' as exemplified in Themba's narrative, the film's critical impetus functions at the intersection between race, gender and history. It privileges subsumed agencies and therefore works to disrupt processes of multiple and compounded subjugation. In doing so, this film enters into an existing dialogue, contributing a new strand to weave into the labyrinth of history's storytellers.

The Tailored Suit problematises the structural polarising of difference through which oppressive ideology is legitimised. By collapsing spheres of difference the film works to create a space where the agency of the subjugated can be acknowledged. It offers an alternate to a history where the black female is denied self-determination. To this end the film initially establishes structurally disparate visual and narrative spheres which foreground difference.

The narrative of *The Tailored Suit* exists on three narrative and temporal planes. The first is Matilda's memory or back-story, which is her life in the countryside. The second is her present life with Philemon in Sophiatown. The third is the voice over, which functions outside the previous two.

Interlining: Voice Over

The Tailored Suit opens with a shot of a country road. Matilda walks out from a house behind some trees to the side of the road. She walks slowly and thoughtfully towards the camera (Figure 3 in Appendix). Her voice over begins as she walks, informing the viewer of the existence of Can Themba's narrative. Through this voice over the viewer is given access to Matilda that is predominantly absent in Themba's *The Suit*. After recounting its literary status, she states that she does not like his version and describes how "it starts on a normal morning, when my husband, Philemon, is getting up for the day" (from *The Tailored Suit*). Through this statement, the voice over introduces the narrative strategy of the film. Matilda establishes her positioning, in relation to an existing historical narrative, and thus participates in "rewriting history or as Toni Morrison would say "rememorying the past"" (Ibrahim, 1996: 201). In doing so, she articulates her previously negated agency, subsumed by colonial and patriarchal hierarchies. Thus her articulation simultaneously introduces the notion of multiple subjectivities participating in and affecting (Hi)story and, as such, the bias to nonlinearity, which "deliberately debunks the established parameters of past present, and future" (Ibrahim, 1996: 201). This idea of multiple agencies concurrently affecting history and its narratives is central to my objective of

expanding understandings of histories so as to tailor a frame through which the articulations of subsumed voices may come to the fore.

Complimentary Textures: Countryside and Staging

The first section of the narrative takes place in the rural countryside where Matilda grew up. The mise-en-scène is of a realist environment and is shot on location. The environment is marked by the sounds of life in the countryside. Matilda and those she interacts with are a part of the broader environment in which they live and partake. As such, this realist aesthetic frames Matilda's memory as a more experiential reality. It reads as a life that she is involved in, suggesting that her life and experiences there are the most real to Matilda.

The realism of her back-story is disrupted by the absence of dialogue and the non-sequential editing. Though characters talk and engage with one another the viewer does not hear any diegetic dialogue. It is these sequences that are overlaid with Matilda's voice over. Her reflections on the events in the rural environment frame them as memories. The temporal structures of the sequences are non-linear. Images appear, are repeated and linger as Matilda reflects on them.

This repetition and lingering is exemplified by the reappearance of the image of the road. Matilda is seen at moments staring down the road seen in the film's opening shot. Her walk along the road in the opening of the film is mirrored in an image of her mother walking along the same road away from the camera, towards the city (Figure 4 in Appendix). This image of the road becomes significant as Matilda, who came from a rural environment, had aspirations to move to the city. The road becomes a signifier of translocation and possibilities, of movement and transformation.

The long opening shot establishes the lingering pace and protracted treatment of time which come to be the cinematic convention of the film. These moments are significant as they disrupt the continuity editing of the movement image tradition

utilised through the film. Consequently, they disrupt the pace and linear progression of the narrative, allowing for reflection.

The first return to the past depicts Matilda as a young girl seen with her mother. We see the two in a prolonged establishing shot. They sit quietly outside a house as the sounds of countryside life engulf their world. Matilda's mother braids her hair as they intimately talk and laugh (Figure 5 in appendix). Matilda's voice over recounts:

> This is my mother. That is the last time she will braid my hair. After this she left, I never undid my braids again. As they got longer and threatened to break, I just sawed them together…my mother, who came to the city before me and became lost to me (from *The Tailored Suit*).

Matilda's affection for her mother is demonstrated in her sentimental attachment to the braids her mother plaited for her. She attempts to retain an element of her mother by maintaining the braids. With time the braids grow out and Matilda develops her dreadlocks. The distinctiveness of her locks can be associated with her mother, an influence Matilda deliberately holds on to.

The lingering shots punctuate the unfolding action pausing, or suspending the narrative. Thus the viewer becomes suspended in moments of Matilda's remembrances or contemplation. These moments emphasise significant experiences in Matilda's narrative. This emphasis on varying historical moments in Matilda's life foregrounds the significance of the personal individual lived experiences that shape her, recouping her subjectivity from external constructions and representations. These suspended moments and repetitions constitute what Pin-chia Feng describes as "The Female *Bildungsroman"* (Feng, 1998).

In her book '*The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, A Postmodern Reading*' Feng is concerned with the *Bildungsroman* of 'ethnic women' who occupy a space "outside the margins of the marginal groups" (Feng, 1998: 16). She suggests how the process of character development in this space happens through multiple and "ambivalent slippages of selves" (Feng, 1998: 16). Feng notes how this does not conform to the 'linear progression of self toward enlightenment' pattern of development set out by a traditional reading of the

Bildungsroman. In the narratives of the marginalised, a lingering on memory subsumes the characteristic patterns of linearity and progress.

As with her mother and the image of the road, Matilda's memory returns the viewer to moments with her lover. In a similar gesture to Matilda's mother working on her hair as a young girl, she works on her lover's, moulding his hair into dreadlocks that start to resemble hers (Figure 6 in Appendix). The repetition of this imagery parallels Matilda's intimacy with her mother to that with her lover. The intimacy and trust established through and associated with her mother is thus transposed to her relationship with her lover.

Matilda working on his hair suggests an inversion of power relations where she exerts control over his appearance. Conversely, after Philemon dictates to Matilda what to wear (a wrap dress) it is her lover who undresses her, symbolically helping her out of the confines of Philemon's control. Thus, his presence in her story has a simultaneous effect on Matilda as she affects him. The two lovers shape one another in a reciprocal, mutually influential relationship.

The lover's influence persists as a part of the foundational elements of Matilda's identity formation, as does the rural environment and her mother. Where her mother's influence introduced a desire for economic emancipation, the rural environment prompted Matilda to pursue that emancipation in the city, away from the influence of traditional patriarchy (as exemplified through her uncle). Her lover's influence then, may be read in terms of Matilda's desire for sexual freedom and fulfilment. As Feng suggests, the 'formation' or "*Bildung*" of marginalised subjectivities happens "in a fragmentary way, with repetitive emergences of repressed memories of their racial, cultural, and personal pasts" (Feng, 1998:18).

The second narrative sphere is a representation of Matilda's present in her life with Philemon. The voice over stitches together Matilda's lived experience with her performance of Themba's account of her life, creating a single yet multi-textured narrative. The opening shot fades out after Matilda's voice over and Themba's narrative, as she has framed it, begins.

The performance takes place on a set that self-consciously refers to its construction as a staged representation (Figure 7 in Appendix). The environment of a stage set functions reflexively to foreground a fictitious space. In its reflexivity, the set is textually mobilised, functioning as "enfranchised scenography" (Baugh, 2006: 266). It operates as part of the performance in conjunction with the actors, a possibility explored by Brecht and Neher. Here staging is empowered with "potential for comment, criticism, humour and disruption" (Baugh, 2006: 266)[6]. Accordingly, the set of *The Tailored Suit* does not simply function as backdrop but contributes aesthetically to the meanings generated in the film.

The sequences in Sophiatown adhere to 'classic' continuity editing conventions.[7] As Ingeborg Hoesterey observes, these conventions of continuity editing "render all junctures invisible, resulting in a tight, self-absorbed work" that does not "refer to itself as a medium or constructed artifice" (2001: 45). In this way the film attempts to draw the viewer into a suspension-of-disbelief through using conventions of time-image storytelling. The story unfolds in the reality of Matilda and Philemon's situation as Themba wrote it. On the other hand, however, the self-conscious theatricality in the mise-en-scène disrupts the possibility of this. Therefore what unfolds on the stage set is a performative representation of Themba's Philemon and Matilda.

In contrast to the aesthetic treatment of her past, the house she and Philemon live in does not reference the broader urban Sophiatown environment it is part of. The set of their home is situated in an empty black theatre stage. Within the set the realism of the two-roomed house is broken up by a number of absences. Visually their house is missing walls, the conceptual presence of which are indicated by

[6] It was in Brecht's collaborations with Neher that staging began achieving "the status of a 'model'" where "in an important sense…the setting could exist as a layer of meaning within the text; a layer which is as contributive, and therefore perhaps as inappropriate to separate from future productions as the dialogue and…musical score" (Baugh, 2006: 261). The meaning garnered from the set thus becomes as significant to the meanings produced by a text as the characters and their actions.

[7] I use the term classic with reference to the canonical Hollywood tradition of filmmaking, which is positioned as "an artistic and commercial practice with and against which other cinemas have defined their identity" (Hoesterey, 2001: 45).

dividing lines on the set floor, and windows, which are indicated by curtains hanging in space between two existing walls. Furthermore the sounds of the environment have been omitted. There is no ambiance of cars, people and life in the city around them; there are only the sounds that Matilda and Philemon produce in and around their home. In this way the set serves to "break up the autonomy" of the environment and "reveal the constructedness of its representation" (Hoesterey, 2001: 45). The set is a constant reminder of their dislocation from actuality and frames their performances of this space as referent.

It is through the inter-textual reference to Can Themba's *The Suit* that an understanding of the contextual environment becomes apparent. As such, it simultaneously draws meaning from Themba's story while positing new meanings through a re-mobilization of the narrative.

This aesthetic positions Matilda and Philemon as inhabiting an envisioned space that is interpreted by me as the filmmaker. In this regard, *The Tailored Suit* follows in Toni Morrison's tradition of constructing self reflexive narratives in claiming black female subjectivity from oppressive history. Rebecca Hope Ferguson writes, a

> Commitment to a "restructured" or "reconstructed" history – one that reflects implicitly or explicitly on its own narrative procedures and takes responsibility for its own points of emphasis – is central to Morrison's task of reclaiming black history for the present. (2007: 132).

In this representational space Matilda is figured in stark contrast to the countryside environment from which she narrates. Here she is no longer an active author of her own story. Matilda becomes a character in Can Themba's story as he represented her. The story, however, is not performed exactly as Themba wrote it, as it is my representation of his version of the narrative.

In Themba's narrative, Matilda is asleep as Philemon goes about his morning chores. In my interpretation Matilda only pretends to be asleep. Her eyes are open as she listens to Philemon moving about. She only closes them as Philemon comes into the room. In *The Suit* Philemon, describes his morning ritual with affection, particularly the "pure beauty of his wife" (Themba, 2006: 115). This introductory scene in the

narrative present sets the tone of discord between Matilda and Philemon. It establishes how, while Philemon goes about his life content and fulfilled, Matilda quietly performs the role of a pure, beautiful wife that maintains Philemon's content.

Matilda initially resists Philemon's oppressive control in small ways. While Philemon prescribes to her what to wear, in his absence, Matilda experiments with clothing, combining outfits that suit her tastes. Her moments of resistance get bolder as Philemon's controlling combines with his need for revenge, and thus becomes progressively abusive.

Matilda's sewing machine is an element introduced in *The Tailored Suit*. Her use of the machine to alter the suit is significantly transgressive, as Philemon had threatened her life if anything were to happen to the suit.

Matilda finally confronts Philemon at the party she throws for her friends. Philemon's attempt to humiliate her publicly backfires. By the time Philemon demands that Matilda bring the suit out at her party, she is finished with her alterations. Matilda stands up to him by leaving him, wearing her altered suit. As she leaves she pauses to look back at Philemon who has kept her under his gaze from the beginning of the film. In doing so Matilda performs what Bell Hooks describes as a look of "contestation and confrontation" (Hooks, 1996: 199).

The Stitching: Collapsing of Narrative Spheres

The contrasts set up in the treatment of these two narrative spheres reflect discursive dichotomising of difference. The film's construction highlights rural as opposed to urban, the 'real' against the fictitious, the present against the past. It is through such polarising of difference that the creation of otherness can occur. The intervention of Matilda's voice over collapses the structural legitimacy and order of these dichotomies. The voice over constitutes the third temporal and narrative sphere. It positions the entire narrative, countryside and Sophiatown, in an uncertain past. It functions as Matilda's reflections as it takes the viewer through her

experience. Yet in her 'reflections' she slips from describing her aspiration to move to the city to describing it in retrospect; "it *is* a place the Modern Miss *had* won her freedom" (from *The Tailored Suit*). Matilda's descriptions do not function in one temporal frame.

In a similar function to the voice over, Matilda's rural past and urban present, though stylistically disparate, intrude on one another. Matilda's remembrance of her mother interrupts her as she is getting dressed in her Sophiatown home. As she ties a scarf on her head a light starts flickering on her face and the sound of an image projector starts up. She looks up to see an image of herself as a little girl with her mother braiding her hair (Figure 8 in Appendix). The viewer watches Matilda's past with her. The disparate spheres of narrative time are temporarily collapsed, as her past exists in her present.

This blurring of the spheres of past and present recurs in the depiction of Matilda's intimacy with her lover. The two sit under a tree with Matilda working on her lover's hair. The scene dissolves to Matilda's Sophiatown bedroom, with the lovers continuing the same interaction (Figure 9-11 in Appendix). The seamless transition maintains their actions as something that belongs in the 'past'. As seen with Matilda's remembrance of her mother, her past functions as an enduring part of her present.

Rebecca Hope Ferguson describes how, in Toni Morrison's (and other African American writer's work) memory is placed "at the forefront of their writing, in full awareness that their own history has been (to take a phrase from the closing passages of *Beloved*) dismembered and unaccounted for" (2007: 129). As with these writers, in *The Tailored Suit* history and memory are stitched into the fabric of the present, at times indistinguishable as they bleed into one another. The collapsing of the difference between the remembered past and the present recalls Matilda's lover, a significant part of Matilda's past, while unsettling the actuality of his presence in Matilda's present. It thus becomes unclear whether Matilda's affair involved physical adultery. This introduces the possibility that her 'betrayal' to Philemon is not necessarily a betrayal so much as an illustration of Matilda's

emotional autonomy. As such, Philemon's grievance stems from him not owning Matilda as entirely as he desires.

At the end of the film, the voice over that had functioned as a retrospective and forward-looking temporal marker becomes aligned with the narrative present. From her narrative present, which is set in 1950s Sophiatown, Matilda addresses the viewer directly: "I don't like that version of the story", engaging a viewing audience in our contemporary present (from *The Tailored Suit*). Hence *The Tailored Suit* presents a narrative world that collapses seemingly disparate time and narrative spheres. This temporal disjuncture locates the film in filmic discourse that considers the relevance of de-territorializing and re-territorializing narratives in their relation to collective histories and identities (Martin-Jones, 2006).

This re-telling of *The Suit* is situated within this struggle, re-negotiating a historical narrative, positing an alternative understanding, 'translating' Themba's version in order to engage with concerns pertaining to gendered representation, yet without disavowing the value of his work. After Matilda walks out on Philemon and states she does not like his version she adds, "Maybe it's because he had me die in the end. They can *keep* their story" (Matilda, *The Tailored Suit*). Matilda's narration frames the film, as an entity in a context where an alternative version of this story is known. It therefore deliberately bifurcates the spheres of reference, creating a parallel plane where neither one is true or actual, leaving only multiples and difference devoid of hierarchy.

The Tailored Suit thus begins to function in terms of Deleuze's simulacrum. The film becomes a 'copy' that "denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*...neither can be assigned as the original, neither as the copy" (Deleuze, 1990: 299). Though the time structure within the film itself predominantly functions as re-territorialized in the tradition of the movement-image, the external framing function of Matilda's voice over collapses the time of the narrative into a de-territorialized labyrinth of parallels and multiples. In the positioning of this film as a variable in a space of multiple possible truths, it destabilizes any authoritative claim

to be made through normative linear narratives that would place 'other' versions or voices on margins.

> By reducing all other times to the position of other, the movement-image disavows its virtual origins, establishing the labyrinth as the defining other of the straight line of time. Thereby the movement-image disguises the fact that its linear narrative is actually only one manifestation of the labyrinth, and ensures that the virtual and the actual appear to be binary opposites. (Martin-Jones, 2006: 25)

Here, the official narrative is just a version of multiple possible versions of that narrative. As official histories subsume differentiated histories, linear movement-image narratives subsume what multiple versions of that narrative are possible. But 'other' histories subsist, waiting to de-territorialize the official or canonical accounts of history. *The Tailored Suit* therefore expands Themba's historical narrative creating space for previously subsumed articulations to be acknowledged.

Luigi Pirandello's critique of logocentrism implicitly disavows claims to truth and knowledge. His critique rearticulates the productive potential of the de-territorializing of official narratives and thus emphasises contingency and difference where the limitations of discursive binaries are collapsed. In his work, the "violence of abstraction and logos" are renounced (Carlo Sini as cited in Bini, 1999: 167) and his work illustrates the fictitiousness of an "abstract realm of truth". He critiques the impulse to classify and know through alienation and observation.

As with the singular legitimacy of the movement-image, the male philosophers of Pirandello's plays are in pursuit of philosophical truth about life. However, Pirandello's philosophers are overwhelmed by life's fluidity, changeability and multiplicity (Bini, 1999). It is in woman that the fossilizing essentialism of male logos is shattered. Through his female characters, Pirandello writes the paradoxes and complexities of life (Bini, 1999). In doing so he demonstrates how man is incapable of containing "the incoherent, mutable, and chaotic life" (Bini, 1999: 184). Thus the male father, author, Logos can no longer exist in a privileged space detached from the rest of life. The narration Matilda offers in *The Tailored Suit* does not replace Can

Themba's but offers an alternate perspective, testifying to the multiplicity of possible truths, instead of privileging one by silencing all the other possibilities.

Refashioning a Fitted Suit: Weaving Together the Strands

In her introduction to '*Fashioning the Body Politic*' Wendy Parkins asserts that there is, in the "semiotic capacity of practices of dress" a possibility to "either contest or reinforce existing arrangements of power" (2002: 4). Matilda demonstrates this power in the way she combines and alters her garments in *The Tailored Suit*. In the film, Matilda gets dressed while looking at her reflection in the mirror. She wears a blouse and puts on pearls. The iconography of the pearls and blouse allude to a western style sensibility. They are offset by her dreadlocks, which are associated with Africa and African Diasporas. She combines the seemingly disparate cultural signifiers, letting her own aesthetics come together, as she sits back looking satisfied with her reflection (Figure 12 in Appendix)[8]. In her choices and combinations, Matilda rejects the logic of difference-as-alienating as propagated by colonialist and apartheid discourse.

This transgressive potential in the semiotics of dress is utilised in the imagery and metaphors of *The Tailored Suit*. The suit jacket left behind by Matilda's lover is a central figure in the film. It functions as a symbol of multiple thematic concerns dealt with in *The Tailored Suit*.

Literally, it denotes Matilda's lover. It serves as a constant reminder of him. It then follows that Philemon would use this object as a continual reminder of her transgression, exploiting it to carry out Matilda's humiliation. Matilda, however,

[8] This idea of 'complex interweaving histories' is also alluded to in Matilda's preference for wearing shweshwe or German print. The fabric, original introduce by European settlers, has become an "iconic South African textile" (De Toit as cited in Johnson and Foster, 2008: 141). The fabric has come to be perceived as traditional wear for black women, though it has a transnational history only arriving in South Africa in the last few centuries as De Toint writes "isishweshwe (or shweshwe) has a rich local history dating back more than a century" (De Toit as cited in Johnson and Foster, 2008: 141).

converts this object of humiliation into one of emancipation. As a referent of the lover, the suit simultaneously connotes the world from beyond the bounds of Matilda's and Philemon's immediate domestic world. It is an element from 'outside' that has been introduced into their home. If the domesticity of their home is understood as indexical of a bound cultural sphere, which is symbolically maintained by women, Matilda introducing this foreign element becomes significant. As Fanon described, to desire, and thus affect one's environment is to be a part of her world, the human world (Fanon as cited in Bhabha, 1994). Matilda enacts this in the film. Through desire she introduces the suit into her home and subsequently transforms it.

Nixon and Appadurai's articulations of transnational cultural exchanges are recalled in this incorporation of the foreign into the local lived experience. As Appadurai (2005) describes the 'filtration' of imagined possibilities through a 'lived, local experience', Matilda tailor's the suit (Figure 13 in Appendix) to fit her body and frame. Matilda not only brings external elements into the home/cultural sphere, but also appropriates them to suit her needs. Furthermore, she works on the suit using her sewing machine. This posits a further level of Matilda's agency. The sewing machine illustrates Matilda's ability to generate income and therefore represents her economic autonomy.

This metaphoric reading of the suit can be anchored in its association with the West and the styles of America. If considered as symbolic of foreign culture, Matilda introducing the suit into her home metaphorically performs what Nixon describes as "at a loss for local precedents, (Sophiatowners) reached abroad for illustrious analogues. Thus Sophiatown became imaginatively recast" (Nixon, 1994: 13). Therefore Matilda's actions demonstrate Sophiatown's process of hybridisation, wherein diverse and seemingly unrelated ethnoscapes interact. This can be understood as illustrating Bhabha's concept of culture, as located in the transformative interstitial space of cultural contact (Bhabha, 1994). Matilda, the female marker and custodian of cultural homogenous continuity, is participant in the transformative interactions that take place in her domestic sphere. It is Matilda

who introduces the suit into the home, after which her life with Philemon is fundamentally altered.

This incorporation of the suit enacts the process of creolisation, the ongoing process of "hybridized encounters between individuals and societies open to exchange and fusion" (Nuttall and Michael, 2000). Matilda's action thus denies the insularity of the cultural sphere she is positioned as representative of. She is the active agent in the transformation and defining of her cultural sphere, which is not a fixed entity but in constant flux.

These encounters can be traumatic and may or may not include resistance, but they do transform cultural, or in this case, the intimate space of the home into something new. What *The Suit* articulates is unsettling. Matilda occupies a subjugated position. As an infantile non-agent, she is a good wife who is passive and stays at home, out of the public realm, which Philemon has access to (though this is also limited). In the story, the woman, the embodiment of "nationalism's conservative principle of continuity" who desires and thus has agency, is written as adulteress (McClintock, 1995: 359). The only way she might get access to a sphere beyond her immediate, 'originary' context is conceptualised as a betrayal.

This logic suggests that, through her transgression Matilda degrades her home, and it becomes a site of shame, no longer pure. Matilda either remains an infantilised object for her lack of agency or, as an active subject with agency, she only serves to bring the foreign to the heart of her home, a shameful act that she ends up killing herself for. The subjugated may not desire and thus have agency. Matilda may not possess the qualities that warrant her voice to be heard. Her world either stays 'pure', untainted by not fraternising with things beyond it or the opposite, degradation after which there is no way out or moving forward in an altered world.

Matilda's narration rejects these conscriptions on her agency. A 'pure' 'authentic' domestic/cultural space comes at too high a cost, that of being stagnant or 'fossilized'. Bhabha associates fossilisation or fixity with the process of polarising difference that oppressive colonial discourse functions in. He describes how "an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in

the ideological construction of otherness (Bhabha, 1994: 94). Fixity is a "sign of cultural/ historical/ racial difference in the discourse of colonialism" (Bhabha, 1994:94). It is through maintaining the "others" difference that their subjugation and objectification can be entrenched.

As Okwui Enwezor demonstrates, the 'other' to western culture is clearly defined as such. The culture of this 'other' is systematically desublimated to maintain their uncultured primitivism, distinct from western culture. Discussing modernist filmmaking, Enwezor continues, "its conscious structure was to show the degree to which primitive man is not to be confused with the modern man" (2008: 215). With the other reduced to a "pure object of ethnographic study", their peculiarity, or 'strange aura' can be engaged with at a safe distance of difference (Enwezor, 2008: 218). This process, historicized and institutionalized from the perspective of western ethnographic discourse, maintained the West's 'other' outside modernity. This is despite "the degree to which the artistic challenges posed by so-called primitive art to twentieth-century European Modernism have subsequently been assimilated and subordinated to modernist totalization" (Enwezor, 2008: 212). Thus the West has been able to assimilate cultural influence without threat to its autonomy and distinction from the other. As such, 'western' modernity is conceptually indebted to cultures of its 'other' that it has worked to maintain as distinct, different and culturally incommensurable with. This illustrates afresh how seemingly disparate cultures interrelate, here elucidated by the ostensible sovereignty of western culture appropriating forms from its 'other'.

As Bhabha cautions, "the very idea of a pure…national (or cultural) identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweaving of history" (1994: 7). In the introduction or 'appropriation' of new forms into her home Matilda transforms it. As she was subjugated and objectified in her home, the transformation she initiates, far from being destructive, can be appreciated as liberating.

Matilda's tailoring of the suit is thus a gesture towards this liberation. The suit, which Philemon had used as a tool in her degradation, is transformed into an object that

speaks of her emancipation. Similarly in Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe and her mother transform the marks of their oppression into a language for communication. They are deprived of access to writing, the hegemonic processes of recording, as such, they communicate their pain through the scars left on their bodies. They "subvert the dominance of white masters by repossessing their own bodies…reinterpreting their unspeakable feelings in the images inscribed by the oppressor" (Mori, 1999: 83). The women had been positioned as objects belonging to others. They reclaim the site and cause of their oppression, their bodies, to communicate their personal story and history. They articulate their autonomy in a manner beyond the confines of logo-centric discourse. Morrison finds it "necessary to explode the discursive nature of logocentric orders which control the power structure" (Mori, 1999: 73). In her writing, Morrison denies the "centres around which other meanings are forced to turn" (Mori, 1999: 71). By positing the body as an instrument for communication, Morrison opens up a space where articulations that had been cast to the periphery can be taken into account. Where Matilda is denied the space to articulate her needs she too communicates through her actions. When she could no longer tolerate Philemon, her gesture of walking out wearing the suit she altered indicates her rejection of life under the stifling conditions of his control. She is capable of and is making decisions based on her desires and, to recall Fanon, demands 'reciprocal recognition' (Fanon as cited in Bhabha, 1994: 12). As Matilda walks out on Philemon wearing the tailored suit, she pauses and confronts him (Figure 14 in Appendix). He is thus forced to recognise her, not a childlike wife or and adulteress, but Matilda the person.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* "Claudia survives to tell the story by resisting social and racial conformity. Pecola fails the test precisely because of her unconditional internalization of the dominant ideology" (Feng, 1998: 52). The enduring 'dominant ideology' of postcolonial spaces is structured on hierarchies that position black women on the margin. Morrison describes how, for black women, "being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on" (Morrison, 1970: 11). Through Pecola and Claudia, Morrison articulates the consequences of being over-determined by

ideologies that negate and subordinate through race, gender and class. In Themba's narrative, Matilda is ashamed of her behaviour and accepts her indictment from Philemon as her just punishment. Themba writes, "So it was. After that first breakdown Matilda began to feel that her punishment was not too severe, considering the heinousness of her crime" (2006: 122). As with Pecola's descent into madness, Matilda's internalisation of societal expectations drives her to self-destruction. In *The Tailored Suit* however, Matilda does not internalise the sanctions society would impose on her body and agency.

Whereas in Themba's narrative Matilda dies for her transgression, in *The Tailored Suit* Matilda leaves Philemon's house and continues on with her life. With the lessons from her present and past, Matilda continues moving on, refusing to be stagnant, fossilised, victimised. She wears the jacket she tailored and carries two suitcases, one with her clothes, the other containing her sewing machine (Figure 15 in Appendix). The sewing machine is significant as it is the object of her economic freedom. The jacket that once denoted her lover now connotes Matilda's emancipation. By the time Matilda leaves Philemon, she does not leave to be with the lover from her past, she leaves to be free of patriarchy's disenfranchisement of her subjectivity. The jacket's association with her lover infers a sexual emancipation, beyond this however, the jacket connotes a social and cultural emancipation. It symbolises Matilda's ability to participate in the weaving of a cultural fabric, enacting transformations and alterations as her needs prescribe.

Similarly to how Sula resists "the over determined fate of being a "woman of colour", and "converts her body from signifier of racial and gender inferiority into her alternative medium of art" (Feng, 1998: 86) Matilda, in her re-narration of Themba's story, rejects her death sentence for living her life on her own terms and fulfils her desires and needs. Morrison asserts, "it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves" (2000: 31). *The Tailored Suit* claims this power of self-definition through Matilda.

"We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experiences, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom

we have come in contact" (Morrison, 2000; 31). Matilda is the active participant in her life affecting and being affected by the world around her. If this woman is the signifier of the cultural and national collective then the collective she represents is not the fossilised exotic object defined from outside.

Fanon notes how Manichean dualism is "persistently inflected by gender in such a way as to radically disrupt the binary dialectic" that is set up by colonial discourse (Fanon as cited in McClintock, 1999: 285). Consequently, woman's liberation is a central part of any subjugated collective's struggle for emancipation. McClintock writes, "in the unsteady sliding interstices between conflicting national narratives, women's national agency makes its uncertain appearance" (1999: 288). The appearance of subjectivities that have been elided, in terms of constructive active agency, from the ideological construction of nationalisms become the very subjectivities that provide the most revisionary potential to neo-colonial cultural formations.

Darning Old Tears: Perspective from 2010

> Art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that involves and interrupts the performance of the present (Bhabha, 1994: 10).

Bhabha locates culture in the beyond, identifying what he calls the "controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post'" (1994: 1). He associates the proliferation of the post prefix in contemporary theoretical discourse; "postmodern, postcolonial, postfeminist" with the precarious situation of living in the unknown this beyond the prefix alludes to (Bhabha, 1994: 1). He puts forward an active, functional 'post' that works to facilitate revisionary possibilities in between the present the past and the future. Consequently, this 'post' functions temporally in the interstices. In this conflation of history and the present, "the 'past – present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha, 1994: 10). The past is engaged with as having an active role in the present. As Bhabha's approach to the past, present

and future illustrates, a re-articulation of Can Themba's *The Suit* functions as a strategy to interrogate and refigure concepts pertaining to gendered and racial socio-cultural relations in a contemporary context as much as in the historical context.

As argued above, Sophiatown is a significant part of South African National narrative. It has left an important legacy to contemporary culture in South Africa, Africa and perhaps the globe. Hannerz writes of Sophiatown's hybridity, and the influence of the west on the culture and people of the township. He then writes

> There is also, however, the global use of the local – not what the world meant to Sophiatowners, but what Sophiatowners meant to the world… Sophiatown…seems to be rather somewhere midway, where crosscurrents are strongest, and where the interactive processes of creolization bring the most strikingly new results…being midway, they are also in a way more accessible from either end… They also put together things in new ways, in their writings in *Drum,* in *King Kong*, in the music with which Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela have toured the world (Hannerz, 1994: 193)

The presence of Sophiatown in contemporary culture is evident in films like Zola Maseko's *Drum* (2004), and the local clothing label "Stoned Cherrie" launched in 2000. As a formative part of black urban history, this enduring legacy is to be expected. Additional to these affirmative cultural influences, what endures is the problematic coding of gendered agency and power relations. As Matilda's memories subsist in her present in *The Tailored Suit*, the ideological legacy of Matilda's traumatic death in *The Suit* has lingering implications in contemporary South African and African culture.

Through this project and the example of Can Themba's work, I attempt to articulate the influence of public representations on socio-cultural interaction. Through positing an alternate frame through which to appreciate the needs of the subjugated, I've attempted to recoup female agency from the negative representations in Themba's narrative. Anna Snaith credits Virginia Woolf in her

understanding of the importance of women writing themselves into the public sphere.

In *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiation,* Snaith engages with Virginia Woolf's negotiating of writing women and women's lives into the public domain. In this preoccupation of women writing women, Woolf guarded against seemingly apparent, terse definitions noting "Women must not be written into the public arena as types, as political tools: they must refuse to 'be stamped and stereotyped" (Woolf as cited in Snaith, 2000: 46). Though I engage with Matilda's situation as demonstrative of the subjugation black women endured, Matilda's actions in *The Tailored Suit* are for herself, for her as an individual woman, for her needs and desires.

For Woolf, a variety of representations became an "overwhelming conviction" (Snaith, 2000: 46). This apprehension toward an overly didactic treatment of subjects can be seen in Woolf's style of writing itself. She treated genre loosely, to her fact and fiction, notions of truths and non-truths were fluid. Snaith writes "truths, for Woolf, are multiple, changing, and can be conveyed only through stories, through partial, contingent and specific narratives" (Snaith, 2000: 49). Official, historical and ridged 'facts' are further from the truth as there cannot be a narrative that encompasses the entirety of a situation.

Woolf writes sceptically of certainty and the "unequivocally stable 'I'…of fixity and sterility" which she "associates with patriarchal dominance" (Snaith, 2000: 52). In this respect, her treatment of subject often dealt with an 'I' that slid between "autobiography, biography, fact, fiction, history and narrative which challenged not only the categories themselves but the ways in which women's experiences are constructed" (Snaith, 2000: 53). In positing Matilda's perspective in *The Tailored Suit* the film brings the past to life, constructing new possibilities for Matilda. As Woolf recognised, "bringing to life the past necessarily means embellishment and creative imagining" (Snaith, 2000: 60).

As Woolf's writing articulates, homogenising official canons subsume differentiated historical experiences and narratives. As such, expressions of difference work to

destabilise homogenous, ostracising and oppressive history. As part of a broader feminist discourse, South African feminist politics have been further differentiated by "race, class, and gender, and these identities have moulded our particular experience of gender oppression" (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley and Salo, 1995: 133). Owing to the circumstance that black women's subjugation happens at the intersection of varying forms of oppression, "our struggle as feminists encompass the struggle for liberation from a brutal white state. Furthermore, the liberation of Black people as a whole is a feminist issue" (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley and Salo, 1995: 133). This further articulates the contingency of gendered emancipation to a racial, economic, and cultural emancipation.

In re-telling Themba's story, the revisionary potential of the 'post' of our present may be accessed. Bhabha writes how 'post' "only [embodies] its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" (Bhabha, 1994: 6). Engaging with the histories that shape our present presents an opportunity to actively shape the manner in which those histories inform us. "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bahbha, 1999: 193). I propose that, through an examination and re-imagining of the histories, narratives and myths that shape our world, the way in which they inform our present can be addressed.

Conclusion

It is significant that Can Themba was writing from the late 1940s. It shows that, from before the commencement of the Apartheid system, those it functioned to suppress were resisting it. Though Apartheid's laws and official recorded history subsumed differentiated voices, those histories of resistance subsisted alongside it and have, in recent decades, come to the fore. Bhabha writes in regard to colonial oppression, "the state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*" (Bhabha, 1999: 183). In this respect, black subjectivity in South Africa under Apartheid was always emerging from subjugation, articulating and enacting resistance. As such, "the struggle against colonial (and Apartheid) oppression changes not only the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist "idea" of times as a progressive, ordered whole" (Bhabha, 1999: 183). As Bhabha indicates, the subsisting histories that were once subsumed by the state emerge to shatter official history, breaking it down to leave multiples and difference.

The discourse of resistory subjectivities is, however, incomplete without issues pertaining to gender being addressed. Anne McClintock questions the tendency of "postponing a theory of gender" when engaging with issues of racial and national emancipation. She poses the question; "if, indeed, "the state of emergency is also a state of emergence," the question remains whether the national state of emergency turns out to be a state of emergence for women at all" (McClintock, 1999: 287).

As McClintock asserts, an engagement with the positioning of women cannot be left aside as an afterthought in discussions regarding emancipation and liberation. She cautions; "nationalisms are from the outset constituted in gender power…if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository for male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege" (McClintock, 1995: 385). As shown with the example of Themba's work and that of the *Drum* magazine writers, women's emancipation was not considered a part of the struggle for racial equality. In *The Tailored Suit*, Matilda's subjectivity is recouped from the margins of her husband's life. She has the agency to shape her life according to her needs, thus untangling herself from the knot of patriarchal and

racial oppression. Through her liberation, Matilda renegotiates the terms of gender and racial power, positioning herself as a woman as active participants in the world and thus requiring her articulations to be heard.

In reading Pirandello, Daniela Bini describes how "reason is the exclusive attribute of the male…while nature and instinct are the female sphere" (1999: 163). She describes how the world of male logos and reason has been privileged while "the world of the senses has been constantly demeaned, the body debased and its needs and feelings repressed" (Bini, 1999: 164). Bini reads Pirandello's work as being in opposition to these constructs. She understands Pirandello to have debunked the power and centrality of the male *raisonneur*, leaving room "to listen to other voices and sounds…sounds that though devoid of logic…lend themselves to other types of interpretation and may yield different meanings and values" (1999: 167). By articulation from her marginalized position, Matilda's voice posits difference, thus shattering "the position of the male *raisonneur*, holder of the *logos*, subject and creator of discourse" who subordinates "the place of woman" (Bini, 1999: 165). Recalling Toni Morrison's preoccupation with self-definition that shatters the over-determining gaze from dominant society, Bini's reading of Pirandello posits a "defeat of logical discourse" that subordinates and marginalizes other articulations (Bini, 1999: 168). It is in woman that the fossilizing essentialism of male logos is shattered.

As with black male voices being heard and destabilizing the legitimacy of white supremist rule, the voices of black women further unsettle established systems of social hierarchy, subverting and transforming them. By defining herself in her own terms, Matilda's agency shatters the over-determining gaze that constructs her as 'other'. Her voice thus cuts across the multiple tiers of oppressive society that would oppress her subjectivity. Recalling Toni Morrison's literary trope of the mirror in *Beloved*, the reflection from a shattered mirror shows a multifaceted and fragmented reality free of homogenizing and thus marginalizing history. Through her narration in *The Tailored Suit*, Matilda's subsumed articulations are foregrounded, destabilizing and shattering a historical text that itself functioned to unsettle monolithic history. Thus, as illustrated through Matilda's narration of her own story,

the agency of black women produces a powerful revisionist instrument for the delegitimizing of oppressive systems of power.

Appendix



Figure 1: Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 14:00 hours* (1998) chromagenic print, 121.9 x 182.9 cm.



Figure 2: *Drum* Magazine cover (May 1956), Bailey Archive.



Figure 3: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 4: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 5: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 6: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 7: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 8: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 9: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 10: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 11: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 12: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 13: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 14: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*



Figure 15: Still from *The Tailored Suit.*

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