'[I]f I am Alone I feel like a Target Sometimes': The Making and Unmaking of the Vulnerable White Woman in Strange Encounters with the Black Man in the South African (Post)Colony

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ABSTRACT

In research about South Africa and its troubled past it has now been well established that the devastating systems of racial categorisation and oppression of colonialism and apartheid were deeply and thoroughly gendered. Colonial/apartheid logic constructs white femininity as highly vulnerable, passive and private, specifically in relation to the imputed hypersexuality of the Black man – a contrast that historically justifies and consolidates hetero-patriarchal control over the white woman (as 'protection') and control and surveillance over Black people (and specifically Black men) as origin of danger. Using Sara Ahmed's theory on strange encounters, this article provides a close reading of the story of Helena Marais, a young white woman from a South African town (as narrated by herself to researchers of the Centre of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest) with a particular interest in how colonial/apartheid gender logic continues to condition the terms on which she inhabits her body and the world, which in turn, renders her both instrumental to and complicit in the reinscription of colonial/apartheid racial logic and spatialisation decades after the formal ending of apartheid. In conclusion, the article will ask what is at stake if the white woman should attempt to encounter the Black man differently.

Keywords: gender, South Africa, decolonisation, Ahmed

INTRODUCTION

After the democratic transition in the 1990s in South Africa, many white South African scholars, writers, artists, and thinkers have been reflecting on what whiteness could still mean in a non-racial post-apartheid landscape – what is left of and for an identity after its symbolic architecture had been revealed to be so thoroughly saturated with violence and lies. 'How do I live in this strange place?' asked Rian Malan in his international best-seller *My Traitor's Heart* (1990), which was followed by white Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog's strikingly titled trilogy of non-fiction prose: *Country of my Skull* (1998), *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to be Black* (2009); also works of fiction such as (among many others) J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and, most recently, Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021). The conversation took root at an academic level as well, perhaps most famously with Melissa Steyn's '*Whiteness just isn't what it used to be': White Identity in a Changing South Africa* (2001) and philosopher Samantha Vice's controversial 2010 article repeating Malan's question two decades later: 'How do I live in this Strange Place?'

These works all share the point of departure that the dismantling of the apartheid regime created an opening for the reimagining or remaking of whiteness in South Africa, and that it is up to us to make sure that we end up with something more liveable, ethical and sustainable. These thinkers and writers approach the matter in different ways, but what all of their reflections have in common is a (uncertain and open-ended) faith in or commitment to hybridity and relationality. In different ways they express hope that South African whiteness can drop its guard, soften its lacerating edges and dissolve into something bigger. Today it is almost thirty years after the ending of apartheid (which is perhaps not a long time) and this has not happened; the extent to which white South Africans have collectively managed to unravel their racialisation[1] remains questionable. Although many white people are genuinely and publicly committed to a multi-racial South Africa, racial inequality and segregation endure because of the surviving structures of white privilege, apartheid spatial politics and the racial logic of global neo-liberal

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[1] Melissa Steyn's poetic formulation, see 2001: x.

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capitalism (see for example Mpofu-Walsh, 2021). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear to what extent white South Africa is invested in its own privilege – something that is seen most overtly in small resurgences of white nationalism, and more covertly in the way in which white South Africans can be seen to band together and insulate themselves from the complex realities of the young democracy (through, for example, what Ballard (2004) refers to as 'semigration' – the withdrawal into gated communities).

The aim of this article is to shed some light on the obstinacy of colonial/apartheid whiteness in the post-apartheid moment even despite our intentions to be better. I will do this through a feminist philosophical reading of the story that Helena Marais,[2] a young white Afrikaner woman of twenty, tells about herself. At the core of my reading is a point well established by feminist historians and thinkers, namely that race and gender are inextricably intertwined in colonial logic so that the ways in which we live our gendered bodies, structure our families and direct our desires are all key to the racial identities we inhabit and worlds we make. I will show how Helena's gendered/sexualised fear of Black men renders her both instrumental to and complicit in the reinscription of colonial/apartheid racial logic and spatialisation, decades after the formal ending of apartheid. I will highlight how the ways in which she understands and presents herself as innocent/victim and her fears as somehow pre-political or rational, are all part of an old colonial script fashioned by white supremacy for white women through which they/we continue to naturalise racial inequality and segregation. And I will show how a single-axis focus on gender when we consider sexual violence in a place like South Africa, obscures white women's implicatedness in the maintenance of colonial racial logic and Black death.

Helena's story was obtained by the researchers of the Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest at Stellenbosch University who conducted a series of interviews with residents of Worcester, Langa and Bonteheuwel about their memories of apartheid and their path to healing as part of the 'Trauma, Memory, and Representations of the Past' research project that examined the intergenerational repercussions of historical trauma and traumatic memory in the context of post-apartheid South Africa in 2016.[3] I am interested in Helena's story because it so powerfully illustrates many points made in contemporary feminist and decolonial thought about white women's particular positionality and unique complicity in historical and contemporary systems of racial inequality. Helena is one of the only two white women interviewed for this project (out of more than sixty participants), rendering all the ways in which her story conforms to the stereotypes of white femininity even more striking.

I begin in the next section by providing a brief overview of recent understandings of the intersections between race and gender in colonial and apartheid logic. I look at how colonial/apartheid logic constructs white femininity as highly vulnerable, passive, and private, specifically in relation to the imputed hypersexuality of the Black man – a contrast that historically justifies and consolidates patriarchal control over the white woman (as 'protection') and control and surveillance over Black people (and specifically Black men as supposed origin of danger). In the third section I present Sara Ahmed's work on how identity (of self and community) is constituted in encounters with strange others, as a theoretical framework that is particularly generative when trying to make sense of the tenacity of colonial/apartheid systems of identity formation in contemporary South African society. Finally, in the fourth section I turn to Helena's story. In my reading I focus on the ways in which Helena's subject position as a white Afrikaner woman remains constituted in relation to the imputed threat of the Black man, and how the fear she experiences is therefore not new or unique but conforms to the colonial prescriptions for white femininity made in service of the white settler nation. Accordingly, I read her positionality as a white woman as one that renders her silenced and exploited by, but also ultimately implicated in, the renewal of colonial/apartheid systems of spatial segregation and hierarchy in contemporary South Africa. In conclusion I look at the (symbolic and material) transgressive possibilities that exist within the encounter between the white woman and the Black man in the South African post-colony. I ask, in other words, what is at stake if the white woman should break the rules set for her identity and should attempt to encounter the Black man differently.

Like Steyn (2001: xxxviii), I do not pretend in my reading of Helena's story to have achieved an objective account of what is 'out there'. Rather, (and in Steyn's words) I am presenting my story about Helena's story of her whiteness, and my attempt to tie this story into the larger social story of South Africa. Because I too am a white Afrikaans-speaking woman, it is inevitable that on some level I am also reading myself.

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[2] This is not her real name.

[3] The project resulted in a book of printed interviews and photographs entitled *These are the Things That Sit With Us* (2019) by Gobodo-Madikizela *et al.* where extracts from the interview with Helena is published on pp. 120-123.

THE GENDERED LOGIC OF COLONIALISM AND APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA AND ELSEWHERE

In research about South Africa and its troubled past it has now been well established that the devastating systems of racial categorisation, exploitation, and oppression of colonialism and apartheid were deeply and thoroughly gendered (see for example Hyslop, 1995; Klausen, 2021; Gqola, 2015; and Abrahams, 1997). This is far from unique to the South African context; scholars like Driskill (2004) Rifkin (2016) and McClintock (1995) (among many others) show in different ways how discourses of sexuality are key to projects of racial formation in colonial situations everywhere. Referring to colonial situations generally, Ann Stoler argues famously that it is a misconception to think that there was a clear line to be drawn between white and Black, coloniser and colonised (2002: 42-43). Rather, racial boundaries were always tenuous: skin colour was too ambiguous, while wealth was too mercurial and education or religion were not clear enough (although all of those were important markers) (Stoler, 2002: 42-43). Ultimately then it was the sexual, domestic and conjugal arrangements of both European colonials and their subjects, which were regarded to reveal the 'truth' about someone's race (Stoler, 2002: 42-43). Whiteness in the colony was characterised by a strict heterosexual, monogamous and hierarchical gender binary; consisting of an active, rational masculinity set up against the foil of a passive and vulnerable femininity (see for example Lugones, 2007 and 2010, among many others). Alison Phipps (2021: 87) writes: '[t]he bourgeois white woman's capacity to cry was fundamental to her dominant status, as was the capacity of her male counterpart to respond to her tears with action' (see also Schuller, 2018). On the other hand, the absence of such binary gendered 'order' was regarded to connote the sexual 'primitivity,' wildness, and promiscuity that marked the colonised as Black and therefore less-than-human. Confirming Stoler's insight about the uncertainty of colonial racial categories, many scholars have shown how, in colonial South Africa, racial boundaries were not stable[4] or clear cut,[5] and that when it had to be decided who was white and who was not, the sexual and gendered lives of those involved were often regarded to be the determining factor. This was even more so the case for the Afrikaner who was continuously portrayed as being acutely at risk of sliding out of whiteness or 'going native.' Christi Van der Westhuizen explains that the '"Afrikaner" identity was historically forged in reaction to white Afrikaans-speakers' status of being marked as just-about-white in relation to hegemonic whiteness, represented by British colonialists and later white English-speaking South Africans' (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 4; see also Steyn, 2001: 26; Keegan, 2001: 460, among many others). Whiteness was therefore a project very anxiously and determinedly taken up by Afrikaners, ultimately culminating in the formal establishment of apartheid.

In line with the work of scholars like Stoler and McClintock, South African historians and feminists have shown how the project of whitening the Afrikaner was thoroughly gendered from the start (see Brink, 1990 and Du Toit, 2002, among many others). A significant example of this can be found in the *Carnegie Report on the Poor White Problem* (1932)[6] in which an entire volume (based on research done by prominent white woman writer Maria Elizabeth Rothmann) is dedicated to an analysis of the households of white Afrikaner families. In this report, the restoration of whiteness in the face of poverty and consequent racial 'degeneracy' is explicitly made dependent on the subservient positioning of (sexually passive and pure) white woman in orderly heteropatriarchal families where it is the responsibility of the mother to instil and cultivate the values of white civilisation in the next generation. Accordingly, in the South African colony (and elsewhere) 'civilised' whiteness was performed through an orderly home with clearly delineated gender roles in terms of which the man stepped up as active political citizen, while woman as wife and mother is tasked with maintaining and purifying the symbolic boundaries of the white *volk*. The trope through which white Afrikaner womanhood consequently came to be represented in colonial and apartheid South Africa, is the *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation), with enduring connotations of feminine subservience, sexual containment, moral sanitation and middle-class domesticity.[7]

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[4] The white settler communities in the colony were always regarded to be at risk of sliding out of whiteness (see for example Stoler, 2002). With regard to the South African colony Marijke du Toit explains that the 'threat was poorer whites "forgetting" their true, Afrikaner-identity, "losing" a natural race-consciousness and assimilating with their black inferiors' (Du Toit, 2003: 173).

[5] Klausen explains that the Boers had a history of interracial marriage, concubinage, and extra-marital sex dating back to the earliest days of Dutch settlement in the Cape (Klausen, 2021: 220). By the early 1960s there were at least 20 000 people in the Cape Peninsula 'who still were uncertain whether they were officially to be White or Coloured' (Horrell, 1963: 66).

[6] A study of poverty among white South Africans, funded and published by the Carnegie Corporation.

[7] Van der Westhuizen explains that the trope was deployed in the South African War of 1899 to 1902 to shape an Afrikaner femininity of forcefulness and combativeness (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 102). As the twentieth century progressed the *volksmoeder* was positioned to actively recruit subjects for Afrikaner nationalism in the 'feminine' spheres of (whites only) welfare and in politics (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 102). By the 1930s the *volksmoeder* image was used to 'reorient Afrikaans white women towards self-sacrifice and domestic cloistering for God, *volk* (people or nation) and fatherland', this domestic

In the colony (South Africa and elsewhere), a completely different set of gendered narratives and consequences existed for those deemed Black (see for example Lugones, 2007 and 2010; McClintock, 1995; Gqola, 2015). As noted above, civilised whiteness (marked by the heterosexual gender binary) was constructed in opposition to the imputed gendered disorder or 'primitivity' of the colonised people, so that Blackness was connoted by a perceived sexual promiscuity, fluidity, and wildness. In her book *Rape: A South African nightmare* (2015) Gqola shows how constructions of Black African sexuality as 'primitive' and 'wild' resulted in the naturalisation and normalisation of the rape of the Black woman during colonialism and apartheid, forming the foundation of rape culture and the raging epidemic of sexual violence in contemporary South Africa (see also Abrahams, 1997).

Where the Black woman was made unrapable (see for example Gqola, 2015 and Srinivasan, 2021: 12), the white woman's constructed vulnerability rendered her what could then be termed hyper-rapable, and this hyper-rapability was instrumentalised in key ways in the colony. Scholars like Ann Stoler (2002: 55) show how the discursive construction of the vulnerable white woman in contrast to the rapacious Black man was pivotal to the establishment and maintenance of white solidarity and power in many colonial situations. The colonial order of white supremacy turns on the dual imperatives of subjugating the white women in service of the (symbolic and material) reproduction of the *volk* and the control of the Black man and his labour in service of white capital, both of which are potentially undone when white women and Black men get too close to each other. Accordingly, the possibility of intimacy between the white woman and the Black man stirred up acute white racial anxiety and represented the loss of ethnic identity, white patriarchal power, community cohesion and colonial security. Stoler writes in this regard that '[a] defense of community, morality, and white male power was achieved by increasing control over and consensus among Europeans, by reaffirming the vulnerability of white women and the sexual threat posed by native men, and by creating new sanctions to limit the liberties of both' (Stoler, 2002: 60). Phipps explains that a 'vocabulary of rape' was used in the colony to activate a circuit between white women's constructed and instrumentalised vulnerability ('white women's tears') and white men's punitive power – something that white supremacy continues to rely on (Phipps ,2021: 85). The result was the emergence of the narrative of the 'black peril,' the imagined pandemic of sexual assaults by black men on white women then under way' (Keegan, 2001: 460, which 'came to stand for a dense array of ill-defined fears and fantasies of racial contagion and invasion' (Keegan, 2001: 471). This played out in many places, including America where thousands of Black men were murdered by lynching in the 'Jim Crow' period in the segregated American South, in some cases for merely whistling at a white woman (see for example Davis, 1981: 163).

Throughout the twentieth century in South Africa, the survival of the white Afrikaner people was pinned on the sexual 'purity' of the white woman and white reproduction, and an invented surge of sexual assault by Black men on white women was evoked at times of political uncertainty[8] (see for example Hyslop, 1995; Keegan, 2001; Van Onselen, 1982; and Etherington, 1988).[9] Again, because of the tenuousness of Afrikaner whiteness the sexuality of Afrikaner women was a particularly sensitive matter, and the circuit between white male rage and white women's vulnerability particularly charged. In a 2001 article Timothy Keegan analyses a 1914 incidence of mob violence by a group of white Afrikaans-speaking men that strikingly illuminates this. The Afrikaans men in question attacked an English-speaking man who wrote a letter that was published in a local newspaper asserting that white Afrikaans-speaking 'veld girls' were 'utterly abandoned' in the 'indulgence of their passions', and that 'every farm native who has a desire for white women knows where he can satisfy it' (Keegan, 2001: 459). In this incident the allegation that Afrikaner women were fantasising about sex with Black men functioned to draw into question the right of Afrikaners to be grouped (after the 'Anglo-Boer War' 1899 – 1902) with white people from British descent into the common White South African nationality (Keegan, 2001: 460). The accusation racialises the Afrikaner as less-than-white through first, the ascription of active sexual desire to the women (a colonial signifier of Blackness in itself) that is directed at Black men; and second, more subtly, her association with nature ('veld girl'). Furthermore, the suggestion that White Afrikaner men are failing to contain, control or satisfy the sexuality of 'their' women casts doubt on the Afrikaner's claim to White supremacy which implied 'the domination of the White male as the supreme evolutionary exemplar of civilization' (Keegan, 2001: 461).

When the White women of Natal express their gratitude towards the men who violently defended their 'honour' (with a gold watch and an inscribed scroll), they are installing the white man to his rightful place in the gendered hierarchy that structures Afrikaner racial identity and White supremacy, thereby exchanging sexual agency for racial

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containment reaching its peak during apartheid (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 102). For detailed explorations of the *volksmoeder* trope, see Hofmeyr, 1987; Brink 1990; Du Toit, 2003; and Kruger, 1991.

[8] As a specific South African example of this, Stoler mentions the mineworker strikes between 1890 and 1914 as a time when rape accusations against Black men rose sharply (Stoler, 2002: 59).

[9] Amia Srinivasan (2021: 5) refers to false rape accusations as 'a tactic of colonial rule' in South Africa, but also in India, Australia and in Palestine.

privilege, repeatedly proving their complicity in the building of an apartheid society that is symbolically and materially dependent on the violent subjugation of all women (where Black women are rendered most vulnerable).This colonial racial/gender logic was foundational to the regime of apartheid. Striking in this regard is the fact that the election campaigns which resulted in the formal establishment of apartheid in 1949 largely revolved around the question of mixed marriages between white women and men of other races, and that the first two pieces of legislation that were passed by the apartheid government concerned 'mixed marriages' (see Hyslop, 1995).

Accordingly, during apartheid too, 'sexuality and sexual immorality came to be constitutive of how whiteness was fashioned and secured in place' (Ratele, 2009a: 160). Echoing Stoler's argument about the tenuous, shifting and highly gendered nature of racial categories in the colony, Ratele points out how, under apartheid, people who were 'obviously white-looking' could be found to be unaware of the fact that that they, in spite of appearances, were not white and on that basis reclassified to a different race (Ratele, 2009a: 159). Ratele argues that being indubitably white under apartheid, one had to live like a white person, and this had very specific gendered and sexual meanings, namely 'a hard, sexualized, ruling white masculinity' (2009a: 161), offset by a white femininity that was, above all else, sexually respectable (2009a: 164).

The deep symbolic entanglement between white woman's sexual containment and whiteness itself is evident from the way in which, under apartheid, a white woman who married or cohabited with a man of a different race could be legally reclassified into a different racial category (her sexual preference serving as proof that she was never in fact white to begin with) (see Ratele, 2009a: 164). This stands in great contrast to how white male offenders of the immorality edicts were treated. Ratele explains that white men were by far the majority of offenders but were also more likely than any other group to get acquitted or receive a suspended sentence, while the women involved would get sentenced (Ratele, 2009a: 171-172). Accordingly, 'relatively less racial threat or contamination to the race was posed by white males' immorality violations with females of other races than by white females' transgressions' and 'white females were seen as bringing more dishonour to the race if they chose to have coitus with, cohabit with, or marry males of other racial groupings' (Ratele, 2009a: 172).

In contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, we continue to live the legacy of these systems of racist sexualisation. Steyn *et al.* (2019) show in this regard how patriarchal borderwork (where some men have assigned themselves as gatekeepers of white women's bodies) does the work of policing racialised boundaries (see also Allen, 2002; Van der Westhuizen, 2017; Shefer and Ratele, 2011). Accordingly, colonial/apartheid prohibitions of interracial intimacy are informally re-inscribed in the 'private' sphere of intimacy, sex and kinship in ways that work to preserve systems of racial difference and hierarchy (Steyn *et al.*, 2019: 1671). On this basis, Ratele (2009b) argues that South Africans 'continue to live out the sexual identities, desires, fears, and relationships that apartheid fathers sought to cultivate on this land.' Again, this is not unique to the South African context. Phipps (2021: 86) explains that the global 2020 Black Lives Matter movements reiterated on a global scale how 'Black death is the price for white affective security' (see also Schuller, 2018: 2). Amia Srinivasan (2021: 14) unpicks the enduring consequences of this further when she explains that the 'disturbing genius at work in the white mythology about black sexuality' that continues to shape our global contemporary reality is that it 'produces a tension between black men's quest to exonerate themselves and black women's need to speak out against sexual violence, including the violence perpetrated against them by black men' – thereby constituting a doubled sexual subordination of Black women.

Taking all of this into account, it can be said that the work of decolonisation and the pursuit of social justice in post-apartheid South Africa requires of us, among other things, to identify and reveal the ways in which the (seemingly natural and private) gender norms, kinship configurations, and sexual lives that we live remain programmed by colonial/apartheid race logic, and in turn, serve to remake oppressive structures of racial differentiation and segregation almost three decades after the official transition to democracy.

SARA AHMED AND STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

In her book *Strange Encounters* (2000), Sara Ahmed explores how subjects and communities (national, cultural etc.) are made in strange encounters (encounters with 'strange' others). For her this means that encounter precedes ontology: '[i]dentity itself is constituted in the "more than one" of the encounter: the designation of an "I" or "we" requires an encounter with others' (Ahmed, 2000: 7). Accordingly, identity is not self-contained, but relational – 'identity does not simply happen in the privatised realm of the subject's relation to itself' (Ahmed, 2000: 7). And, more profoundly, that the first constitutive relationality is not within one's community but those that we recognise to be outside of it.

Ahmed takes her work on strange encounters further in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) where she explores race as an affective formation (constituted through feelings, emotions and affective forces) that involve relational encounters of proximity and distance. Ahmed's work forms part of a larger 'affective turn' in the social sciences and humanities over the last decade (see for example Zembylas, 2015) founded in the notion that in order to understand the resilience and tenacity of race and racism we need to look further than epistemology to

the ontological aspects of race and racism as 'doings' that have material consequences (see also Hook, 2005 and Cvetkovich, 2012, among many others). The advantage of theorising race and racism within an affective economy of interracial encounters is that it 'offers a chance to found accounts of race in the relational construction of identities, in the forces created between people rather than in fixed social categories' (Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010: 2309). This is helpful in the South African context where, as seen above, racial categories have never been clear cut or stable and where the maintenance of distinct racial identities continues to require boundary work that is performed consciously *and* unconsciously through everyday encounters. Ahmed's exploration of affect constitutes an important precursor to contemporary modes of analysing global sexual politics in the wake of the #metoo movement, as found in the work of scholars like Amia Srinivasan who develop the idea that our sexual desires and fears are not biological or innocent, but politically conditioned. My decision to centre Ahmed's theoretical framework in my reading of Helena's story is motivated by the fact that it helps us to make sense of the resilience of old forms of whiteness that continue to endure in the post-apartheid moment.

The way in which Ahmed locates the process of identity formation in the affective dynamics of strange encounters enables an understanding of how we remake colonial whiteness and reinstitute apartheid boundaries through adhering to deeply ingrained gender scripts which, because of their affective weight and embodied sexual meanings, are easily perceived as natural, neutral or pre-political. When arguing that we become subjects in encounters with those we deem strange (who then also become constituted as strangers in such encounters) Ahmed goes further than the primary post-Hegelian model of recognition in terms of which the subject is constituted by being recognised by the other. For Ahmed it is not being recognised by the other that is central to the constitution of the subject, it is rather the recognition of others: '[t]he very act through which the subject differentiates between others is the moment that the subject comes to inhabit or dwell in the world' (Ahmed, 2000: 24). Applying Ahmed's vocabulary to the context of colonial/apartheid South Africa, it can be said that the white feminine subject comes into existence as a subject that is properly white and feminine through recognising the Black man as Other. It was seen in Rothmann's diagnosis of the poor white family (1932) and in the work of Ratele (2009a) and others that the white woman who fails to do so and as a result does not sufficiently withdraw from the proximity of the Black man, was regarded to be gravely at risk of racial 'degeneration' and could be reclassified to a different racial group. In such cases the white woman's 'true' racial identity was revealed by her inability to differentiate between self and Other.

Like the self, the stranger does not precede the encounter as that which I/we do not know or fail to recognise but is produced through the encounter as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger' (Ahmed, 2000: 3). In this sense, 'we recognise somebody *as a stranger,* rather than simply failing to recognise them (Ahmed, 2000: 21). Accordingly, when the white woman instinctively and fearfully withdraws from the proximity of the Black man (by crying rape or not) the Black man is produced as Black rapacious Other to the white woman subject (and her white community), also constituted in the gesture of recognising (giving a face to) that which is designated as Black and Other. The fact that we *recognise* strangers implies that encounters 'are meetings (…) which are not simply in the present' but are structured by what happened in the past (Ahmed, 2000: 8). On this basis, Ahmed introduces the idea of historicity, arguing that encounters we have with other others *'reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference'* (Ahmed, 2000: 8).

One crucial implication of Ahmed's theory is that strange encounters quite literally shape bodies. Following Judith Butler (1993), Ahmed argues that 'there is no body as such that is given in the world: bodies materialise in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies, including bodies that are recognised as familiar, familial and friendly, and those that are considered strange' (Ahmed, 2000: 40). The act of differentiating between what is familiar and what is strange marks out the inside and outside of bodily space, where the skin is established as boundary line (Ahmed, 2000: 42). In this sense, a refusal to touch someone still means being touched by someone: 'to withdraw from a relation of physical proximity to bodies recognised as strange is precisely to be touched by those bodies, in such a way that the subject is moved from its place' (Ahmed, 2000: 48).

Importantly, strange encounters do not only shape individual bodies, but also those of communities. The presence of the stranger allows us to demarcate spaces of belonging and therefore the formation of nations and communities, in so far as facing an 'alien stranger' 'allows us to share a fantasy that, in the co-presence of strange and alien bodies, we will prevail' (Ahmed, 2000: 3). 'The containment of certain bodies in their skin (bodily space) is a mechanism for the containment of social space' (Ahmed, 2000: 46).

Ahmed explains how the production of communities through the recognition of strangers follows a specifically gendered logic. Looking at Neighbourhood Watch discourses, Ahmed points out how 'self-policing communities' rely on 'the construction of the figure of the vulnerable member/body alongside the heroic citizen [which] provides the moral justification for the injunction to watch' (Ahmed, 2000: 30). 'The figuring of the good citizen is built on the image of the strong citizen: in this sense, the good citizen is figurable primarily as white, masculine and middle-class, the heroic subject who can protect the vulnerable bodies of 'weaker others' (Ahmed, 2000: 31). As foil to the good, strong citizen or mobile subject, the discourse of stranger danger also involves the figuring of the

vulnerable body 'the one who is most at risk' (Ahmed, 2000: 34). For Ahmed, the figure who is most at risk from the proximity of strangers is the child, who comes to embody 'in a narrative that is both nostalgic (returning to an imagined past) and fearful (projecting an unimaginable future), all that could be stolen or lost by the proximity of strangers' (Ahmed, 2000: 35). The child's innocence and purity become a matter of social and national responsibility so that '[i]t is over the bodies of children that the moral campaign against strangers is waged' (Ahmed, 2000: 35).

It was seen in the previous section how this is indeed how white community formation and consolidation in the South African colony worked. Keegan writes that '[t]he imagery of the dominant male provider, the patriarchal white family, the chaste white wife and mother, and indeed of the black brute at the gate, underpinned the racial and gendered edifice of the colonial order' (Keegan, 2001: 460). However, clear also from Keegan's words, in the South African context, it is the white woman (as mother, wife or daughter) and not the child, that has come to embody the figure most at risk and over whose body the moral campaign against strangers is waged. Like the narratives about the child in Ahmed's scheme, the narrative about the vulnerability of the white woman activates nostalgia (in so far as the white woman is figured as *volksmoeder* who represents a pure Afrikaner culture and history) as well as fear of an unimaginable future (the end of white patrilineage).This gendered construction of communities has harsh consequences for the mobility of the white woman *and* Black subjects in the colony in so far as 'safety for women is often constructed in terms of not entering public spaces, or staying within the home,' while Black people's passing through public spaces is delegitimated as the 'origin of danger' (Ahmed, 2000: 33-34). At the same time the narrative of stranger danger legislates 'a form of mobile and masculine subjectivity' (Ahmed, 2000: 33-34) that is, in the context of the colony, reserved for the white man.

READING HELENA

In this section I read the story that Helena Marais tells about herself. She is a middleclass white woman, more or less twenty years of age, living in the small town of Worcester, in the Western Cape, South Africa. She was born shortly after the ending of apartheid and is therefore part of the first generation of 'born frees.' Although she is aware of the legacy of apartheid in her town, which she can see from the enduring spatial segregation and economic inequality, she believes herself not to have been affected by apartheid – 'apartheid has not touched me really' she says in Afrikaans. However, a closer look at her musings regarding her experience of living in Worcester very quickly starts to reveal the ways in which Helena is indeed and continuously touched by the past. In what follows I highlight not only how her unawareness of this results in her complicity in the reinscription of the past within the present, but also how, through her claims to innocence and vulnerability, she is performing exactly the role that the symbolic logic of white supremacy requires of her.

It is clear that Helena does not think of herself as a racist person. On the contrary, she tells the interviewer of the community work that she is involved in and when the interviewer asks her what she does not like/enjoy about life in her town, she answers without hesitation that there still exists 'great division' in the town. The code she uses at this point to refer to race, is spatial. She says, 'I mean, if you go down Durban Street, in the direction of Avian Park, there is still great division.' Durban Street would be a big commercial street that runs right through town out to Avian Park which is one of the poor neighbourhoods outside of town, historically reserved for so-called 'coloured' people under apartheid law.

Helena mentions race by name directly afterwards when she explains her own experience of this segregation:

> and sometimes for me as white girl, I also sometimes want to go to Durban Street because there is a nice fish and chips shop where we often buy chips. But sometimes you feel unsafe to go in there, because you do not know… I do not say all black people or all brown people will do something to me, but sometimes you feel, 'joh, I'm scared to be here'.

Her evocation of colonial/apartheid racial-sexual categories within the first five minutes of the interview is striking. In her words we immediately see conjured up the image of the vulnerable white woman discursively figured at the heart of the colonial/apartheid projects of making and maintaining whiteness in Africa. We also see, although only in ellipses and the gaps between the words, the spectre of the dangerous Black man, in fear of whom the white woman does not venture far from home on her own. In the encounter with the strange other she becomes a white 'girl,' strikingly evoking Ahmed's point about the feminised vulnerable subject, or the child, that is 'most at risk' (Ahmed, 2000: 34) from the proximity of strangers (needing the protection of the heroic citizen who *can* move through dangerous places).

Interestingly, throughout the interview Helena never refers to Black men directly but expresses fear of Black 'people' more generally (perhaps precisely in a conscious effort not to explicitly perpetuate racist stereotypes). However, I read her from the outset to be referring to men. This is because, in South Africa and elsewhere, the

fear of assault (which Helena expands upon in the rest of the interview) is a gendered fear, something that clearly surfaces in her description of herself as a 'white girl'[10] (see also Allen, 2002 and Stanko, 1995). In her book (2001: xiii), Melissa Steyn recounts a moment in her early adolescence when a young Black man struck up a conversation with her, and her first thought was 'Will I be raped' – a reflex that Steyn understands to be underpinned by: '[t]he messages about the dangers of dark men, ingrained by socialization' (Steyn, 2001: xiii). Similarly, half a century before Steyn, Mary, the female protagonist in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950), was afraid of Black men, 'of course' as '[e]very woman in South Africa is brought up to be' (1950: 70):

> In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her (1950: 70).

When Helena starts speaking about the 'division' that she dislikes in Worcester, one initially expects a moral objection to the spatial politics of Worcester that keep white people separated from Black people in many aspects of their daily lives. However, as seen in the paragraph quoted above, Helena is quick to express her main qualm about the division, which is that it impedes her own freedom of movement because she is scared of what Black men could do to her when there are not enough white people around. Importantly, Helena understands her fear not as racist or political, but as something that is simply rational: 'you must use your head and realise you can't go there alone' she says (referring to places like Durban Street where one would encounter mostly Black people). The immediate give-away here is of course the analytical slippage occurring between Helena's fear of sexual violence and her fear of Black people, disregarding all the ways in which white men have proven themselves to be exceptionally deadly to white women (and all women) in South Africa throughout the course of our history (see for example Falkof's 2015 exploration of white family murders during apartheid.)

What complicates any reading of Helena's story is the fact that South African society is known for its shocking levels of sexual violence and is 'one of the most unsafe places in the world to be a woman' (Ramaphosa, 2019). Accordingly, Helena's fear of coming to harm in public spaces is not unfounded and very recognisable (see for example Allen 2002). Moreover, we are at a point in history where women's sexual victimisation is prioritised in mainstream feminist campaigns, which would then enjoin us to side with Helena as the victim of a deeply patriarchal society where the always present threat of sexual violence radically limits the ways in which women can inhabit space. And this is not entirely wrong. However, scholars like Srinivasan and Phipps warn us against the zero-sum game of easy victim/perpetrator binaries based on the single axis of gender. It was seen above that history gives us ample reason to be circumspect about white women's sexual fears of Black men in so far as the 'injunction to protect white women is key to the deadly disciplinary power that drive racialised and classed regimes of extraction and exploitation' (Phipps, 2021: 85). The point is that Helena's fears are not innocent, personal and simply rational, but imbued with great historical political meaning and force. An intersectional feminist politics therefore requires of us to ask who is served and what is obscured by the 'sanctioned victim status' (Hamad, 2019: 25) that the world so easily grants white women like Helena. This tension between the very real threat of sexual violence in South Africa, on the one hand, and the deeply implicated constructed vulnerability of the white woman, on the other, is markedly captured in Isobel Dixon's poem 'every twenty-six seconds' (named with reference to the statistic that the poet encountered that a woman is raped every twenty-six seconds in South Africa). In the poem (2001: 36-37) the white woman, described as 'the fairer sex, slight, delicate' who 'sunburns easily / wears layers of cream,' takes the kitchen knife to bed in fear of the 'poetic justice' or 'the vengeance of the maids.'

In what follows, I use Ahmed to explore these issues further with reference to the story that Helena tells about herself. When the interviewer asks Helena where she thinks the fear of Black people (men) comes from, she answers: 'I think it is about what you read in the news and what is happening in town,' referring here to the high incidence of rape and violent crime South African towns and cities. She says that she does not experience the same fear around the farm workers (employed by her father), 'because I know them and know what kind of people they are'. It is the Black men that she encounters in public spaces that scare her:

> But the stories that one hears always makes one think: are they maybe one [of the dangerous ones], are they nice? But you don't really know. I'm not saying all of them are the same. I have met so many people there in the past and then it is like wow. (…) But, some of them, I don't know, it is just that anxiety you feel. And I think it is about what you've read and what you've seen happening. Or the assault and those things. And you never know what to expect from the person walking past you.

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[10] Helena's references to her fear of Black people are also encoded with gender in other ways. For example, at one point she explains how her friend would warn her against a man of colour walking past. Also, when the interviewer tells a story from her own experience as a way to connect with Helena's story, it is again the Black man that features as the object of fear.

Helena contrasts the workers on her father's farm ('I know them') with other men that she walks past ('you don't really know' and 'you never know what to expect from the person walking past you'). Helena repeats this sentiment later in the interview when she says, 'if I know the people I go to, it will be fine to go there because it is not bad for me'. Helena recognises the Black man as the stranger, as the one of whom one does not know, rather than simply failing to recognise him – '[t]he figure of the stranger is far from simply being strange; it is a figure that is painfully familiar in that very strange(r)ness' (Ahmed, 2000: 21).

Following Ahmed, it can be said that Helena's encounter with the Black man therefore reopens prior histories of encounter that fix others in a regime of difference that was established in the past. Fear therefore 'does something' here: 'it re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading which produces the surface' (Ahmed, 2004: 63). By recognising the Black man as the unknowable Other and withdrawing in fear, Helena is reinscribing the narrative through which she becomes white (connoted by her feminine hypervulnerability) and the Black man becomes Black (and therefore dangerous to the white woman).

Ahmed (2004: 79) explains that it is exactly the structural possibility that the rapist or violent criminal 'could-be' anyone that justifies surveillance and the restriction of the mobility of those bodies associated with that which is feared. Following Ahmed (2004: 79), we can see in Helena's story how the figure of the assailant is detached from particular bodies, ('an unspecifiable may-come-to-pass' (Massumi, 1993: 11)), but that it is this 'could-be-ness' (deeply established in the white South African psyche through centuries of racist colonial discourse) which leads Helena to fear Black men as a group. The fact that the Black man passes her on the street and does not harm her, does not result in the overcoming of her fear, rather it allows the object of fear to remain uncontained by specific bodies so that '[t]he black man becomes even more threatening if he passes by; his proximity is imagined then as the possibility of future injury' (Ahmed, 2004: 67). This reminds one of the moment in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* where Lucy and David Lurie see '[t]hree men coming toward them on the path' when they go for a walk on the farm, and '[t]he dog at Lucy's side slows down, bristles' (1990: 91). 'Should we be nervous?' David asks and Lucy answers that she does not know. But the men pass them by and when they turn back '[t]he strangers are out of sight' (1990: 91). Of course, in *Disgrace* these three Black men *do* rape Lucy, evoking the criticism from the African National Congress that Coetzee was perpetuating harmful racial stereotypes (I will return to this in the Conclusion).[11]

Importantly, the fear of the Black man that Helena experiences has consequences for how she inhabits her body and how she moves within the world. It was seen already that when Helena describes her experiences of encounters with the Black man, she refers to herself in diminutive terms, 'as a white girl' she feels scared to go the fish and chips shop alone. When the interviewer asks her where she thinks the fear of Black people (men) comes from, Helena says the following:

> I think it is about how some of the people receive you. If you receive me with a friendly heart, a friendly face, I will not become fear-stricken or so. But if you look at me as if I… 'where does this child come from? What is she doing here?' If you look at me with such an attitude I will also become scared from my side.

In the imagined encounter with the Black man, Helena becomes small and vulnerable, a child who does not feel herself belonging in public space, thereby re-enacting or renewing the kind of femininity that historically marks whiteness in opposition to a less-than-human Blackness. To use Ahmed's vocabulary again, it can be seen that Helena feels that 'the openness of the [her]body to the world involves a sense of danger, which is *anticipated as a future pain or injury*' (Ahmed, 2004: 69). She says: 'if I am alone I feel like a target sometimes'. Also: 'some places in the town are very difficult for me, as a person, to go there alone because you are scared of what could happen to you.' The threat of the Black man, from whose physical proximity she withdraws, leads Helena to inhabit her body and to regulate her movement according to the prescriptions of colonial white patriarchy. In Ahmed's words: it forms her as a 'body-at-home', a comportment historically required of the white feminine subject (and something on which colonial Afrikaner whiteness hinges). In this regard it can be said that Helena's fear of the Black man does not only symbolise the expulsion of Blackness from her world and white social space, but actually works to shape social space by 're-forming the apartness of the white body' (Ahmed, 2000: 46).

However, it is clear from her words that her fear does not stop Helena from going wherever she wants to go – the important thing is not to go there alone. Helena mentions specifically that she would move confidently in spaces that would usually scare her, if she is not alone. She says, 'if I am with some of my friends then I also do not feel [scared]'. She explains that many of her friends play rugby (which in this context means that she is talking about men) and that they would sometimes play with Black people and then 'you support and watch the game,

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[11] See for example ANC News Briefing, 'Mediaracism-ANC' (Sapa, Johannesburg, 5 April 2000), online: http://www.anc.org.za/anc/newsbrief/2000/news040.

(…) then I do not feel [scared] at all. I feel safe, completely.' Accordingly, what becomes very clear is that although Helena's fear of the Black man limits her mobility, it does not lead to a refusal to inhabit the world, but regulates the terms thereof. In Ahmed's terms: it compels her to enter the world through the apparently safe enclosure offered by segregated spaces (being-at-home) and other white people (especially the white man). '[S]he is a mollusc, pale, without a shell […] she shouldn't be alone / should marry / or should move back home' (Dixon, 2001: 36).

The few times that Helena mentions white men, they feature as heroic, mobile citizens who work to protect the bodies-at-home. She mentions that her father was in the military during apartheid and that 'if it was difficult in town, he would go to help to keep it calm and so,' presumably meaning that he helped to quell anti-apartheid resistance protests by Black people. She also explains 'if the farm workers had a problem, they also knew that they could come and speak to my father'. Helena's father teaches her that she might end up having to leave her beloved hometown when she gets married because 'a woman moves after a man and not a man after a woman.' In the picture that Helena sketches, the white man moves easily and legitimately through space, in sharp contrast to everyone else.

Evident in the narrative is that it is not Helena's mobility that is most affected by her fear, but rather the mobility of the Black man (and in consequence, Black people more generally). Helena very clearly describes a town where there are areas that Black people do not enter legitimately, except as workers for white people. She mentions that she realised at some point in her life that 'some people do not like to have coloured people in their homes.' When she refers to the 'division' in Worcester, she refers to a town where there are leafy suburbs and affluent parts of town that remain unofficially off limits to Black people (except as workers of white families).

Helena herself does not draw a connection between the fear that she feels and the maintenance of racial segregation through the policing of white space. However, other research suggests that this connection remains strong in contemporary South Africa. Van der Westhuizen argues for example that White South Africa 'is privatised and recreated on microcosmic scale in white, Afrikaans enclaves' and at the heart of the white, Afrikaans enclave of today is the home, shaped by a specific ethnoracial, heteronormative domesticity (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 20). Similar to what was the case in Afrikaner nationalist history, hegemonic Afrikaner feminine identity turns on the normalisation of the woman/wife-as-mother and the abjection of its racialised and sexual and gender non-conforming others' (Van der Westhuizen, 2017: 19). Moreover, Diphoorn (2017) notes that colonial and apartheid racial imaginaries are reified in present day South Africa through the racist depiction of the 'dangerous criminal' by citizens and armed security response officers in private security companies policing middle-class South African neighbourhoods. In this sense it can be said that the 'black peril' trope lingers in contemporary South Africa where the imputed sexual threat posed by the 'violent' Black man at the gate of the white enclaves continues to function as the symbolic counterpart to the 'vulnerable' white woman in the racist narratives that justify the apartness of white bodies (see also Allen, 2002 and Steyn *et al.*, 2012). This is also true in other places (see for example Phipps, 2021).

Importantly, the fact that Helena is not aware of the political import or consequences of the fear that she regards to be purely personal and natural/rational, does not render her innocent. Phipps (2021: 85) argues that the 'attempt to separate the personal and political is central to white women's tears as a strategic device' and that '[w]e demand to be treated as 'just a person' who should be granted the benefit of the doubt, who exist outside racialised structures and power relations even as our actions perpetuate them.' The power and license to centre our own personal experience in our theory and politics (while denying the connection) *is* white supremacy, Phipps argues (2021: 85). Because white women's personal experience of powerlessness activates the settler's and master's revenge (the circuit between white tears and white rage) 'the relationship between the personal and political in white feminism has always been corruptible or perhaps even inherently corrupt' (Phipps, 2021: 86). When Helena understands herself, on a very personal level, as victim of the segregation in the town and the constructed threat posed by Black men (because it means that she cannot move as freely as she wants to), she is therefore fulfilling the exact political role that white supremacy assigns to her. In this way she radically undermines any of her own conscious attempts to contribute towards racial transformation or new ways of being white in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

In her poem 'straatmeid' (a highly derogatory term for brown woman in Afrikaans) Ronelda S. Kamfer tells herself resolutely to 'remember that a white woman is a white man'[12] (2019: 29). To the extent that the poem is concerned with the racial power that white Afrikaans women have wielded against brown/Black women like Kamfer, she is of course not wrong. However, what scholars like Ahmed, Srinivasan, Phipps, Gqola, Davis and many others help us to see, is that there is a level at which the white woman is *not* the white man, and although she benefits greatly from her proximity to him, this proximity comes at a steep price to herself and at dire expense to

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[12] My translation from the original Afrikaans.

others. The opposite is also true: because of the instrumental structural function that the subjugated white woman and her tears fulfil in the logic of white supremacy, she bears great and unique power to undermine it. When we fail to interrogate the white woman's position as distinct from the position of the white man, we are granting her too much *and* too little agency, while missing the opportunity to put her to work as a potentially powerful agent of mutiny in the enduring machinery of white settler power.

In this article I used the lens of Ahmed's work on race and affect to interpret the story that Helena Marais tells about herself and her town. It was shown the extent to which her encounters with the Black man (or the way in which she shrinks from such an encounter) clearly repeats the sexual politics of colonialism and apartheid that turned on keeping white women away from Black men – a separation through which Afrikaner whiteness is secured and maintained in opposition to a less-than-human Blackness. In Helena's story the Black man becomes overrepresented as the unknowable other, or recognised as the stranger who cannot be known, and she herself becomes small and vulnerable, her body shrinking into the bounded spaces of her white community, in line with the historical prescriptions for white femininity (and a crucial symbolic marker for 'civilised' whiteness of her people). It was seen that it is in such encounters that old colonial forms of whiteness are remade even if Helena does not understand herself to subscribe to racist beliefs, and that the cultural/symbolic/ideological power of her fear is vested in, and at the same time obscured by, the narrative of her own innocence in the matter (and the idea that what she experiences is natural rather than political).

Ahmed, read in dialogue with feminist scholars like Srinivasan and Phipps, therefore presents us with one way in which to understand the resilience of settler/apartheid forms of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa – namely that colonial racial identities are maintained through the seemingly natural gendered and sexual ways in which we encounter and touch others. In *The Right to Sex* Srinivasan asks:

> what might happen if we were to look at bodies, our own and others' and allow ourselves to feel admiration, appreciation, want, where politics tells us we should not. There is a kind of discipline here, in that it requires us to quiet the voices that have spoken to us since birth, the voices that tell us which bodies and ways of being in the world are worthy and which are unworthy. What is disciplined here isn't desire itself, but the political forces that presume to instruct it (Srinivasan, 2021, 96).

If we understand the white woman in the (post)colony to become what she is in the encounter with the Black man (or the absence of such an encounter) conditioned by her sexual/gendered fear, there is a possibility for her to become something else if she encounters him in a different way. And, if we take seriously the central position that the white woman occupies in her ethnic-racial community as symbolic carrier or reproducer of whiteness, we see that when the white woman encounters the Black man in new ways that unmake and remake her, it can radically subvert the whiteness of her community and the apartness of the white body, thereby making possible the respatialisation of the South African landscape on different terms. It could be argued that this is exactly what J. M. Coetzee is exploring in *Disgrace,* but seemingly without much hope in the possibility of real transformation. Recall that, unlike Helena, Coetzee's white woman character Lucy does not withdraw from the proximity of Black people, even after she is raped by three Black men. Rather, she insists on remaining on the farm (as neighbour to one of the rapists) and raising the child conceived by the rape. Although it can be said that Lucy is encountering the Black man on different terms, the book seems to imply that decolonisation will amount to a handover of women (along with the land) from the hands of white patriarchy to Black patriarchy. This is not where Ahmed, Phipps, Davis and Srinivasan want to take us. *Disgrace* dismisses or rejects the insight of decolonial feminist thought that the systemic sexual violence that has come to characterise a place like South Africa is produced by coloniality and that what the project of decolonisation requires of us is to do the work of imagining and reaching for a world beyond such violence.

I am not sure what a transformative encounter between Helena and the Black man would actually look like (and contemporary literature does not provide us with a clear example), but it would at least require that Helena starts to ask what it is that precedes her fearful encounter with him and begins to critically interrogate and reckon with her fear. Here I also do not mean to suggest that Black men are necessarily seeking encounters with white women or that we can expect of the Black man to receive the white woman in any particular way. Rather, my argument is that the making of whiteness historically relies on the white woman's fearful withdrawal from the Black man, and that there is therefore nothing less at stake than the unmaking of colonial whiteness if the white woman should start facing up to her structural role in the maintenance of racial categories and begin to take responsibility for it. In so far as this undermines the rules historically set by white patriarchy, such a shift would also carry profound possibilities for the feminist emancipation of white women in the South African post-colony.

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