

Eastern Illinois University

The Keep

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Honors College

2012

A Writer for a Shrinking World: Cultural Identity Formation and Globalization in the Novels of Kopano Matlwa

Heather Gerrish

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#)

A WRITER FOR A SHRINKING WORLD: CULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION
AND GLOBALIZATION IN THE NOVELS OF KOPANO MATLWA

(TITLE)

BY

HEATHER GERRISH

UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DEPARTMENT OF *English*, ALONG WITH
THE HONORS COLLEGE,
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2012

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS UNDERGRADUATE THESIS BE ACCEPTED
AS FULFILLING THE THESIS REQUIREMENT FOR
UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

December 13, 2012
DATE

THESIS ADVISOR

December 13, 2012
DATE

HONORS COORDINATOR

U

December 13, 2012
DATE

DEPARTMENT CHAIR

A Writer for a Shrinking World

Cultural Identity Formation and Globalization in the Novels of
Kopano Matlwa

Heather Gerrish, Eastern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the novels of author Kopano Matlwa in relation to issues in cultural identity formation during the current period of rapid globalization within the author's home nation of South Africa.

South Africa, Then and Now

As the effects of globalization reach further and the world shrinks, the culture of English-language readers can now readily access the stunning body of South African literature. Lest we in North America and Europe forget: South Africa's predominant language of choice is now English. One of the joys of this common language is experiencing, through reading, what it means to be "South African." The tendency of Americans when reading a book from an English speaking country is to assume the English of the text implies Western culture and values. This is a result of the homogenizing effect of English, but reading English language literature from South Africa challenges that. The books are uniquely South African, despite all the colonization and globalization the English words represent. The South African identity, like that of any other country, is loaded with history, politics, race, language, and other broad cultural elements. More specific to South Africa, these elements are intensely complicated by the massive political shift in 1994 caused by the first Democratic election.

The "shift" specifically refers to the end of Apartheid in South Africa. "Apartheid," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, literally means "separateness" in Afrikaans, the variation of Dutch used by the early settlers from the Netherlands in the Cape region.¹ In the historical sense, "Apartheid" refers to several laws enacted between 1948 and 1994 meant to segregate and limit the social mobility of South Africans based on racial differences. These laws, official and unofficial, were created and strictly enforced by a white minority population, and

¹ "apartheid, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. 21 October 2012

dictated where Africans, Coloureds², and other non-white people could live, attend school and work; whom they could marry and have sexual relationships with; how they could address white persons, and many other areas of life. In the last few decades of Apartheid, the struggle for freedom became more widespread and more violent up until Nelson Mandela, the candidate for the African National Congress (ANC) Party, won the first free election in 1994. Nevertheless, the throwing out of the oppressive legislation during Mandela's presidency did not necessarily mean that the situation for people of color in South Africa improved immediately. The legacies of Apartheid persisted in terms of inferior infrastructures and housing for those living in townships and informal (shanty) communities and an education system designed to maintain economic inequities, to name just two examples, These are still challenges South African faces today.

Because Apartheid ended less than twenty years ago, the majority of people living in South Africa today still have a firsthand memory of life during the Struggle.³ Even as conditions improve, generations of people from all races must still face the awkward challenge of working together in a society that was once designed to keep them separate. However, eighteen years of "Post-Apartheid" South Africa saw the birth and growth of the first generation of children, now young adults, to *not* have the first-hand memories of Apartheid. There exists now the beginning of a population reared in a culture of enforced integration, cooperation, and freedom.

² "Coloured," in South Africa, refers to a multiracial person, especially of mixed African and European heritage, and is often perceived as an independent cultural identity.

An Introduction to South African Authors

Throughout this continuum of Apartheid, the Struggle, and Post-Apartheid South Africa, writers have documented the cultural changes from the country as a whole down to the most intimate, individual details. In her article “Young, black and female in post-apartheid South Africa,” Lynda Spencer concisely surveys and analyzes writing in that country since 1994. She first demonstrates that the writing from the years immediately following Apartheid that received scholarly criticism tended to be from white and/or male authors. The focus of her article is to express the value and need for critical scholarship on works by black female writers in South Africa. Spencer explains:

Although very little writing by black women was published in the immediate aftermath of apartheid, the past few years have seen a sudden proliferation of a new generation of female writers, such as Kagiso Lesego Molope, Zazah Khuzwayo, Zukiswa Wanner, Pamphilia Hlapa, Maxine Case, Angela Mahkolwa, Angelina Sithole, Futhi Ntshingila, and Kopano Matlwa. Unlike their older counterparts, these emerging black female voices, the first generation of post-apartheid writers, have received almost no critical engagement... In post-apartheid South Africa, spaces are opening up for previously muffled female voices to emerge (67).

The purpose of my paper is to respond to this absence of critical scholarship on the works of one post-millennial black South African woman. As a collective body, the writing of this demographic is vibrant; the cultural elements of African communities are expressed in terms interesting and clear to international audiences. In particular, Kopano Matlwa's writing often conveys a bitter

and beautiful honesty about the challenges her characters address. I focus on the two novels of Kopano Matlwa, *Coconut* (2008) and *Spilt Milk* (2010) because of the fresh perspective she brings to South African life nearly two decades after Apartheid. As Spencer says, Matlwa is a part of this new, underappreciated group of women writers who “are concerned with re-interpreting their experience from a female perspective through prose narratives,” and who, in the process, “extend the range of female characters and experiences that have been portrayed in fiction by established writers” (67). She is new, she is different in that she is black and female, and she is bound to attract more scholarly attention as her readership grows in the West.

Spencer writes about Matlwa’s first novel, *Coconut*, “[the book] heralds a new voice in South African literature: one that captures the essence of the black experience in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel grapples with the numerous challenges faced by the ‘born-frees’ and the various ways in which they attempt to negotiate a space from themselves in the new era” (67). Had Matlwa’s second novel, *Spilt Milk*, been published before Spencer’s article, this statement could be ascribed to it as well. I add to this another term for what Matlwa’s fiction seems to address: identity formation. While her young characters try to discover their place in the world as individuals, their efforts are representative of the larger struggle of South Africans to form a “South African” cultural identity; what does it mean to be “South African” today as opposed to “American” or “Japanese?” This paper examines scenes of identity formation for Matlwa’s characters and analyzes these scenes and her characters on the whole in relation to scholarly discourse on the current state of South African languages, material culture, and race relations, with specific emphasis on the effects of globalization on these areas of the culture.

“Skin-Colour Crayons”⁴: Identity Formation in *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk*

Kopano Matlwa’s two published novels take place “in the now” in South Africa, and feature young, black female protagonists. Her 2007 novel *Coconut* follows the lives of Ofilwe (Fifi) and Fikile (Fiks), whose narratives occasionally intersect at the upscale Silver Spoon café. The two girls are presented in the book in as divisive a manner as their lifestyles. The first half of the novel belongs to Ofilwe, whose parents are part of a newly created class of wealthy blacks whose notions of modernity are associated with Western, that is White, culture. At the same time, Ofilwe is the granddaughter of a larger family still retaining traditional African language and culture. Ofilwe attends school with wealthy white children, speaks English, and has all of the material possessions her social class can offer. Her greatest challenge is in reconciling her black and “white” (interchangeable with “Western”) identities. Fikile, from the second half of the novel, struggles with the same challenge, but from a very different social status.

Fiks is a poor black waitress from a broken home in the “Township,” a predominantly black slum on the outskirts of Johannesburg.⁵ She commutes daily to work at the Silver Spoon café, located in an expensive shopping area. Armed with recycled beauty magazines from Europe and North America, Fikile desires to become “white” in every way imaginable. The process, which she calls her “millennium plan,” involves cosmetic transformations, making social contacts with her high-profile customers, and completely rejecting anything or anyone too black or too poor. Both of these young women might be called “coconuts” by their society,

⁴ From *Spilt Milk*, 166.

⁵ This area is a holdover from the Group Areas Act, an Apartheid-era law that zoned cities into racially segregated districts. Though the Act was repealed after the 1994 election, many blacks could not afford to leave the area.

which Lynda Spencer explains in her endnotes as “an identity slur worse than death, implying erosion of authentic black values and tacit surrender to white hegemony, otherwise known as sucking up or cultural liposuction” (77). The United States equivalent of this derogatory term is “Oreo;” both refer to someone who is ‘black on the outside and white on the inside.’ Making this the common thread between two very different black South African adolescents suggests Matlwa recognizes “coconut” as an idea in the collective conscious of young Africans in the stages of identity formation.

While Matlwa’s characterizations of Fifi and Fiks address the insecurities of a dual identity that entangles elements of blackness and whiteness, the slightly older black protagonist of *Spilt Milk* is confident in the value of her African identity. She is so committed to the value of blackness that she forms a private academy for talented black children with the absolute mission of instilling self-confidence and self-worth in them regarding their African culture. In *Spilk Milk*, Mohumagadi feels her mission is being subverted by the influences of a white priest leading her detention program. The ten-year-old students in detention represent the generation of “free-borns,” the generation to which Mohumagadi dedicates her school and her life. Complicating matters further, it is revealed that she and the priest had an adolescent romantic relationship in 1994. For Mohumagadi, Father Bill’s presence stirs up old memories; 1994 promised change, but early Post-Apartheid South Africa refused to accept their interracial relationship.

The inter- and intrapersonal conflicts of Matlwa’s characters cannot be isolated from the environment in which they occur. For example, Ofilwe’s struggle to resolve the dissonances between her African and white⁶ identities is often intensified by incidents occurring in her own home, an expensive “Tuscan” villa in a gated neighborhood called “Little Valley Country

⁶ Ofilwe often equates her family’s financial success with whiteness, and admittedly envisions her own future children to be Caucasian (19).

Estate.” Fifi’s description of the house parallels the identity struggle she attempts to resolve within it. In response to her father’s infatuation with the “Tuscan” architectural style, she clarifies, “inside my home is not the smell of sautéed prawns and ricotta stuffed pasta with mushroom sauce that wafts into the garden, but rather the sharp smell of *mala le mogodu*.”⁷ With this and other, more subtle descriptions, Fifi implies that her house has a faux European exterior but an African interior—her house is a reverse coconut.

Coconut’s other narrator, Fiks, suffers daily discomfort during her commute to work with her African neighbors, whom she imagines are all poor and unambitious; a community from which she wishes to distance herself completely. Though she can isolate herself from her family and neighbors at home, and works where most Africans cannot afford to be, let alone shop or eat, she is compressed into a train full of the blackness she detests twice a day. Interacting with African people on the train makes her tense and cruel, and she describes it as the greatest motivation for trying to become white. On one occasion, a black man sits next to her on the train and tries to engage her in friendly conversation. She notices he carries an expensive briefcase.

I do not look at this man, this man who is a thief like all the other men in this train, and probably an alcoholic and a rapist too. I shift back in my seat, straighten up my back, raise my magazine so it is closer to my eyes and begin to hum lightly, flipping through the pages, while working hard to keep the ‘piss off’ look on my face (133).

Despite her own African-ness, Fiks has internalized the colonial stereotype of African men as both criminal and as sexually rapacious. What Fiks does not address here is her own thievery; she tells at one point how poverty led her to steal the black jeans necessary for her work uniform. Though the assumption that the briefcase is stolen is unfounded, Fiks’s refusal to identify herself with her people will not allow her to consider a context for the possible theft comparable to hers,

⁷ Traditional South African dish usually containing tripe, intestines, carrots and potatoes.

that is, that he may have stolen a business accessory for the same reasons she steals designer jeans.

Fiks finds an antidote to the train-ride in her workplace, a café that caters to a predominantly white clientele and the place where she believes her “Millennium Plan” will start to come to fruition. For the most part, Fiks admittedly acts as she believes a white person would in the restaurant, and slips into this role easily. However, when Ofilwe Tlou’s family enters for Sunday breakfast, Fiks becomes suddenly consciousness of her own blackness, and treats this wealthy African family with the same disdain that she bestows on the poor Africans on the train. While she sees her white customers as potential tickets out of poverty, she hates the Tlous, because black families are an “annoyance” and “waste of time” (164). She is pointedly rude to them, and when they do not leave her a tip she asks “what more does one expect from black people?” (176). Fiks never provides a better explanations for why she hates the Tlous, but the reader can assume that she is bitterly jealous of their perceived achievement, or perhaps fearful that if she ever rises to their status, she will still feel the same isolation she does now because of her black skin.

In both *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk*, the young black characters seem engaged in a mental battle between whether Black or White has more value. Tshepo (Fifi’s brother) and Mohumagadi feel pride in their own culture, while Fiks is determined that to be black is to be worthless. Ofilwe has a divided consciousness: while she values what she sees as White (smooth hair, shiny cars, etc.) she becomes more hesitant to embrace this culture as she becomes more aware of her black body. How Matlwa presents this overarching conflict suggests that there is no middle ground for young Africans; white and black identities are irreconcilable; one must choose a side. However, the tone of her narration, coupled with the struggles her characters face with these

polarized identities insinuates that accepting both identities in oneself would make one happier. This topic and Matlwa's attitude towards it is essential when considering the impacts of globalization on identity formation.

Narrating Globalization: South Africa on the World Stage

The pressures of identity formation on a national scale are informed by globalization. Understanding globalization and the ongoing discussion about what it means for South Africa assists interpretation of Matlwa's novels. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of "globalization" indicates how very charged the word is: "The action, process, or fact of making global; *esp.* (in later use) the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity." A group article from the *Journal of Educational Management, Administration and Leadership* expands upon the latter part of that technical definition, specifically regarding how globalization has affected education in South Africa. This article sheds light on the ongoing debate in developing countries about whether globalization is a help or a hindrance. The advocates of globalization point out raised standards of living in poorer areas, and they see it as a process that is "both inevitable and irreversible." Their opponents see globalization "making the rich richer and the poor poorer" (Moloi 280). Though much is to be said about the effects of globalization on macro and microeconomics, understanding how globalization affects the content and context of literature is best explained through its effects on the cultural constructions of "class."

Moloi, et al. point out that “another important dimension of globalization is the greater ease of making comparisons internationally and the introduction of the concept of ‘world-class’.” In the economic sense, this refers to the heightened pressure to make goods at competitive prices in international markets (281). I argue that, by extension, citizens in a global economy wrapped up in competition make more class comparisons in their smaller communities. The areas of material culture, language, and media culture in South Africa are fertile fields for these comparisons as they are heavily influenced by globalization. Matlwa’s literature, as a representative body of these new influences, withstands close reading with a focus on the effects of globalization.

Material Culture

One of the more obvious effects of globalization is the increase in the variety of goods and services offered in a “world-class” or “globalized” area. In South Africa, this initial period of globalization was concurrent with the transition into Mandela’s presidency. Kopano Matlwa captures this transition in the material sense beautifully in the opening paragraphs of *Spilt Milk*.

After all the excitement, after the jubilation...after they had knelt down on their knees and kissed the ground, after they had torn down old street signs...after packing up the room and moving to rooms, after the purchasing of German cars...after changing the neighborhood and the neighbors...after throwing out prima stoves for microwave ovens...after BlackBerrys, MP3s, electronic notebooks and hands-free sets...she came (1-2).

The ellipses reflect many more prepositional phrases linking the changing political landscape with the changes in available products and their consumers. All of the products listed in this long opening sentence are imports made accessible to a new class of wealthy black South Africans, in

addition to those previously affected by the trade embargo placed on South Africa during Apartheid. The “she” who came after all of this is the protagonist, Mohumagadi. Her arrival signals an attitudinal or possible generational shift away from the people ecstatic about their freedom “before” her.

She pointed out that it was now a different time...she pointed out that after the elation, after the hysteria, after the scones and ginger ale and custard and canned peaches, after the delirium and the drama, after the heat and intensity, after the meat and the alcohol and salt and vinegar chips, after excitement pierced the air and prospect ripped the sky, after it all, things came apart. Came apart slowly, but came apart nonetheless (3).

What Mohumagadi points out are many of the same reactions described by the narrator in the opening paragraphs, but what the narrator called “excitement” and “jubilation,” Mohumagadi calls “hysteria” and “delirium.” Juxtaposing her perspective against an omniscient narrator establishes Mohumagadi as jaded about the 1990s and that she belongs to a different generation and mindset than generations before her. That Matlwa weaves a list of imports into these conflicting descriptions of the Struggle’s end reinforces the inextricable tie between South Africa’s new democracy and new place in the global economy. Further, Matlwa’s use of the phrase “things came apart,” resonates with Chinua Achebe’s modern classic *Things Fall Apart*; invoking this idea helps locate this new author in an established African literary tradition.

This same influx of imports sets apart the newly rich black families from their poorer neighbors and fosters their own deterioration. In *Coconut*, Ofilwe’s family, whom Fikile labels “new money,” has a house full of European and North American luxuries and a Mercedes in the garage. Ofilwe uses painful chemical hair relaxers from the United States to model African American beauty standards. Every Sunday, her father orders three “traditional English

breakfasts” for them at the Silver Spoon, and the family vacations abroad; Disneyworld in Orlando, Florida is mentioned. With all of these international influences and markers of Western-style affluence, it is no wonder that Ofilwe struggles with her identity as a black South African girl.

Ofilwe seems to wholeheartedly embrace the expanding definition of South African material culture at the beginning of her story; her home is as equipped for entertaining white friends as their own homes. It is only after arguing with her older brother Tshepo that she considers that her “white” identity may have been produced at the expense of her “African” identity. In one memory, Ofilwe relates how she spent an afternoon covering her bedroom walls with posters she believed “were the greatest breathing beings of our time.” Upon inspection, Tshepo demands that she take them down, on the grounds that she had, unconsciously, displayed only white faces on her walls. “In his eyes,” she reflects, “I saw what was only to hit me many years from then. I think it was on that day that Tshepo saw me for what I was.” According to her brother, she is “stuck between two words, shunned by both.” He says she has come “too far” to ever “return,” but that she will be rejected by those she “strive[s] so hard to be like” (92-3). While Tshepo’s analysis implies a value in African culture that Ofilwe is leaving behind, his words can be interpreted as reinforcing the very hegemony he opposes. In a black/white dichotomy, by saying his sister has come “too far” away from African culture to ever “return” to it, he inadvertently aligns whiteness with ideas of progress. His word choice speaks volumes for the larger issue of assigning different levels of value to Black and White.

Language

South African recognizes eleven official languages, and while English is not statistically the most widely spoken, it is the primary language of business, politics, and broadcasting; therefore, this paper will refer to it as South Africa's "dominant language." Nkonko Kamwangamalu has written extensively on the topic of language maintenance in relation to many of South Africa's indigenous tongues, and has described English as a "killer" language because of its pervasive impact. In South Africa, the popular consensus is that English is necessary for securing employment, and that "African languages cannot feed them" (70). Because of this, and the clear global favoring of English, parents and students have pushed for more schools to teach in English. Mentioned only in passing in *Spilt Milk*, when introducing the outstanding characteristics of Sekolo sa Dithhora academy, the opportunity for an alternative to the schools "where brown boys and girls only ever got certificates for Xhosa and Zulu⁸" was the ultimate selling point for many parents (6). This detail supports Matlwa as a writer of "real" South African experience. Instead of simply implying that a progressive school for Africans will always use English, Matlwa chooses to contrast Sekolo sa Dithhora's opportunities with the conditions of unequal public education, a pressing issue for South African families at this time.

Though the geopolitical and economic value of English is recognized and fostered in Mohumagadi's school, there is great evidence that the school also makes efforts to show the value of African languages. This would be a logical component of promoting the value of "Africanness" among the black students, who may speak these languages at home. For instance, throughout the book, the students refer to the headmistress as "Mohumagadi" as opposed to an English title, and use African titles for other teachers and officials, except when they speak to

⁸ Two most widely spoken African languages

“Father Bill.” Being the only staff member with an English title further distances him from his black colleagues. Other details, such as the school motto being read in English and multiple African languages every morning, show the reader that Mohumagadi is trying not to promote English at the expense of African languages.

Indigenous African languages are starting to die out because fewer people are using them, and the transmission of the whole languages to the next generations is being viewed unfavorably. Kamwangamalu reports that “the number of undergraduate students registered for courses in African languages has dropped from 25,000 in 1997 to 3000 in 2001” at the University of South Africa. If this trend has continued since, at this point there is virtually no one in the country prepared to maintain these languages (70).

Kamwangamalu describes the relationship between globalization and South Africa’s language shift in terms of a concept called “language economics” in which

“linguistic products such as language, language varieties, utterances, and accents are seen as goods or commodities to which the market assigns a value...On a given linguistic market, some products are valued more highly than others. The market value of a linguistic product such as the indigenous African languages is determined in relation to other languages in the planetary economy” (71).

This analysis explains why South Africans feel as though the indigenous languages have a low market value compared to English in terms of the associated opportunities. But even if a person has the commodity of “English,” this language economy assigns value to the smaller nuances of language, such as utterances and accents.

Lynda Spencer’s reading of a scene from *Coconut* in her article regarding Ofilwe’s accent highlights this idea of language economy. Having lived in South Africa, Spencer first

clarifies that “within the broader ambit of South African Englishes, a specific category of English is given preference,” and this category is “White South African English.” To speak like this is a form of “linguistic capital,” she says.

“Say ‘uh-vin’ Fifi...not ‘oh-vin,’ ‘uh-vin’.”

“This is boring, Belinda, let’s see who can climb the highest up that tree.”

“No, Fifi! You have to learn how to speak properly.”

“I can speak properly.”

“No you can’t, Fifi. Do you want to be laughed at again? Come now. Say ‘uh-vin’.”

“Uuh-vin.”

“Good. Now say ‘b-ird.’ Not ‘b-erd,’ but ‘b-ird’” (Matlwa 2007: 49).

In this scene, Fifi (Ofilwe) is trying to play a game with her white friend Belinda, who is far more intent on teaching her a “proper” white accent. By keeping their activity on “the uneven playing field of language,” Spencer writes, “Belinda is unconsciously performing a role that establishes her as superior to Fifi.” Fifi progresses with this accent, which she refers to as “TV language.” Spencer points out that this language “is explicitly linked to a global identity emanating from North America through the medium of the numerous American cultural products that permeate South African television” (70). Further, as Fifi’s English improves, she begins excluding her mother from school functions because her English is “ghastly” (Matlwa 51). Though Fifi feels a greater freedom when using English, Spencer says “she is effectively still being controlled by others’ use of the language: she is forced to disavow her mother and thus to deny a part of herself” (70). Throughout the novel, Fifi’s mother still occasionally embraces her immediate family’s traditional African culture. This seemingly innocuous exchange between

“friends” over the issue of accent demonstrates the imposition of a linguistic hegemony that alienates Fifi from embracing her African identity.

Conversely, adopting her best impression of “TV language” helps Fiks in her efforts to fulfill her “Millenium Plan.” In the restaurant, she speaks to her customers using Western slang and what she hopes sounds like a British English accent.

“I know exactly what you need, Peter, something real greasy coming up!”

“Another waffle, Sheila? I know, I hate men, too! I’m so sorry, Shielz, but you’ll see, everything will be OK. It’s his loss, not yours” (*Coconut* 166).

Fiks even goes as far as to lie about her linguistic background, claiming that she lived in England for a while and that her parents still “lecture” there (146). Fiks fully understands the value of speaking the “right” kind of English in her community, and accent may be the only element of her Africanness that she can completely suppress.

Media Culture

While the televisions and DVD players themselves are part of the shifting material culture in South Africa, the broadcasts and productions played on them are indicative of correlation between globalization and the media. These media imports are so commonplace for Matlwa’s characters that they take their presence for granted. However, the characters’ reactions to this media show a temporal shift in South Africa’s consumption of foreign media. For instance, in *Coconut*, Ofilwe’s paternal grandmother goes into a long public period of mourning over the death of Princess Diana. Her irritated son chides her “for appearing to be more devastated of the death of the princess than that of her own husband four years earlier.” Though her death and the events that followed were international news, Grandmother Tlou, who in all

other ways has embraced the luxury lifestyle her son can now offer, presumably only knows and cares about Diana because of her celebrity in European media sources.

More shocking is that *Coconut*'s much poorer protagonist, Fikile, constructs an entire identity for herself based on what she views in European and North American magazines. Her grandmother collects these discarded magazines from the white households that employ her, and began giving them to Fiks in the hope that they would help her improve her English. However, these glossy pages do something well beyond her intended outcome. As previously discussed, learning a more western version of English helps enforce a distancing between herself and Africanness. In her memories, Fiks grows more and more distant from African girls in her neighborhood despite her grandmother's urging her to play with them. Frustrated, Gogo says her magazines "have taught [her] nothing but to be a snob" (131). Fiks continues to be defiant, and accepts her snobbery.

Fiks physically hides behind her magazines whenever she is in close proximity with other Africans, which is primarily on her daily train commute. Paralleling this image of the white beauty standards she places in front of her face is her "millennium plan," the front she puts on as she tries daily to adhere to those perceived standards. Fiks has manipulated her entire appearance, language, and demeanor to reflect what she sees as valued among her white customers at the café, and, most importantly, in the pages of her magazines. Because she so readily accepts the print models as standards of beauty, she is consequently destroying her own self-image as an African woman, and assigning herself a hopeless goal; despite her extreme efforts, she will always have black skin.

Though it is made clear in a memory passage that Fiks has wanted to be white "when she grows up" since primary school because "everything" tells her being white is "better" than being

black (135-6), the foreign magazines serve as reinforcement that it is not only better to be white in South Africa, but everywhere. Products and styles like the colored contacts, skin lighteners, and jeans she uses for work are all made available because of the same globalization that brings her the magazines selling them.

Conclusion: Entanglement as Identity

In his article “Identity Issues on Our Faces,” which critically analyzes *Coconut* as a novel of identity issues, Ralph Goodman concurs that “current global trends have caused the large-scale disruption of formerly secure national and cultural identities” (112). An individual result of this disruption is the condition of feeling like a “coconut” or an “Oreo,” a condition Goodman calls “fractured consciousness.” In response to this, Goodman finds that in “cultural/literary interactions in the New South Africa,” there is a sense of “unwilling—though not always unwelcome—entwinement, so that things cannot be sorted out or returned to where they are, but must be managed as best they can in an uncertain world” (113). He goes on to suggest that this “entanglement” is a vital part of the new ‘South African’ identity. Hence the dual voices of Ofilwe and Fiks that end *Coconut*,

I do not know how to make it pretty. I do not know how to mask it. It is not a piece of literary genius. It is the story of our lives. It is our story, told in our own words as we feel it every day. It is boring. It is plain. It is overdone and definitely not newsworthy. But it is the story we have to tell (191).

Matlwa’s ending, in reinforcing the girls’ ownership of “their” story, despite their tremendous life differences, endorses Goodman’s point that the inescapable entwining of different cultures defines the collective identity that is “South African.” In addition, the entire concept of

Mohumagadi's academy, designed to educate black children in a globally-informed way, while still assigning value to their home cultures, shows how this applied entanglement can form a generation of happy and productive South Africans.

Matlwa's fiction and recent scholarly writing across disciplines in South Africa indicate that the broad areas of globalization and race relations are working concurrently within the consciousness of young South Africans in ways that create a gulf between these millennial children and their parents, who were born under the Apartheid regime. As these young citizens mature and the world continues to shrink under the pressure of globalization, I predict the increase in the number and popularity of books authored by black women living in South Africa will impact the global literary markets. Readers in the United States are largely unfamiliar with all but the most widely published South African authors, who tend to be white, male, and living in Europe or elsewhere. Literature from black South African women is topically comparable to much of the writing for and from 21st century African American women. The age of these authors, newly granted the opportunities for publishing, along with universal topics such as identity formation in the midst of change and vivid characters navigating those changes, will help these books find a market among readers of young adult literature. Undoubtedly, the existing body of work from these extraordinary female writers will also attract scholarly attention, and hopefully more of this will come from readers both within South Africa and beyond her borders.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Dagni Bredeesen of Eastern Illinois University, whose support, patience, and invaluable input has guided me through this year-long project. I would also like to acknowledge readers Nicholas Cannaday, Kelsey Hoyt, and Andrew Crivilare, whose suggestions have also shaped this paper.

Works Cited

- Goodman, Ralph. "Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut*: Identity Issues in Our Faces." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 24.1 (2012): 109-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Kamwangamalu, Nkonko. "Globalization of English, and Language Maintenance and Shift in South Africa." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (2003): 65-81. *EBSCO*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Matlwa, Kopano. *Coconut*. Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana, 2007. Print.
- Matlwa, Kopano. *Spilt Milk*. Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana, 2010. Print.
- Moloi, K.C., et al. "Globalization and its Impact on Education with Specific Reference to Education in South Africa." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 37.2 (2009): 278-97. *EBSCO*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Spencer, Lynda. "Young, Black and Female in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Scrutiny* 21.4:1 (2009): 66-78. *EBSCO*. Web. 13 Sept. 2012.

Bibliography

- Jansen, Jonathan. "Learning and Leading in a Globalized World: The Lessons From South Africa." *Handbook of Teacher Education* (2007): 25-40. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Le Grange, Lesley. "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Education in South Africa." *Education and Humanism* (2011): 67-78. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Meek, Christopher and Joshua Meek. "The History and Development of Education in South Africa." *Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspectives* (2009): 506-37. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Napier, Diane. "Living Together After Apartheid: Assessments of South Africa's Progress, and Roles for Education Programs." *Race, Ethnicity and Gender in Education* (2009): 31-44. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Schafer, Marc and Di Wilmot. "Teacher Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Navigating a Way Through Competing State and Global Imperatives for Change." *Prospects* (2012): 41-54. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.
- Shindler, Jennifer and Brahm Fleisch. "Schooling for All in South Africa: Closing the Gap." *Review of Education* 53 (2007): 135-57. *Springerlink*. Web. 9 Sept. 2012.