Kwaito Aesthetics and Spaces of Liberation in Post-Apartheid South African Literature

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Abstract

The article investigates the use of popular culture as a literary device in three post-apartheid South African novels: Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007), Niq Mhlongo's *After Tears* (2007), and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006). It argues that, in these novels, we can see the emergence of what can be called *kwaito* aesthetics, a particular aesthetic trend and a set of tropes rooted in early post-1994 youth culture and formed in defiance of post-apartheid spatial politics. The authors are found to use *Kasi-taal* (also known as township slang) and *kwaito* music in their texts as a means of insisting upon spaces of liberation for multiple subjectivities for young black South African citizens at the level of race, gender, and culture. Drawing on Glissant's theory of opacity, these spaces are then situated within a broader, profoundly ontological aesthetic framework, identifying them as part of a significant shift in early post-apartheid South African literature.

Keywords: kwaito aesthetics, popular culture, South Africa, South African literature, spaces of liberation

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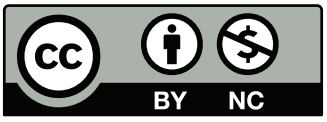

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In the context of black South African literature, popular culture has historically been a creative outlet and a conduit for various levels of representation of a host of socio-political and cultural themes within the country. The *Drum* era of the 1950s, and the ways in which black writers were able to engage urbanity, black identity, and socio-political realities under the newly formed apartheid regime (Chapman 2001, 2), provides one example. It marks a tradition that now extends to the use of popular culture in post-apartheid South African novels as a means through which to deconstruct national narratives of the "new" South Africa, including its economic, social, and racial equality and harmony ostensibly brought about by the transition to an African National Congress-led democratic government in 1994.

What has not been equally well recognized, though, is the kind of aesthetics of the popular as found in the South African literary contexts. Aesthetics here might be defined as a "particular modality of sensory perception" (Steingo 2016, 6), or a "philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty" (Baldick 1990, 6). Accordingly, popular aesthetics in literature would include those that infuse popular forms or formulations into those aspects of the text that we perceive through our senses. Under-explored by scholars until the late twentieth century, popular aesthetic forms are today understood to encompass their own conventions, at times different from, but just as significant as, those of the so-called elite or high culture. These might encompass anything from an aesthetics of emotional disruption in popular fiction (Fluck 1988, 50) to postmodern conventions such as pastiche and irony in urban popular music (Manuel 1995, 227). To be clear, I am not suggesting that any one set of aesthetic conventions could be wholly applicable to, or descriptive of, South African popular culture as such. The vast and varied forms, institutions, and activities that constitute popular culture are far too wide-ranging for this to ever be possible.

All the same, what I do want to argue is that the three texts discussed in this article – Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* (2007*)*, Niq Mhlongo's *After Tears* (2007), and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006) – adopt a specific kind of shared popular aesthetics, one that is connected to, and emerging out of, post-1994 black youth culture. In these novels, we can see an underlying thread of '*kwaito* aesthetics' that provides a particular kind of popular aesthetics permeating the texts as their hallmark. The term *kwaito* here is taken from a musical genre of the same name. *Kwaito* music claims roots in a variety of older South African musical genres including *mbaqanga* (jive), *kwela*, *mapantsula*, bubblegum, township jazz, and Afro-pop, along with Western genres such as R&B, jungle, house, ragga (reggae), and hip hop. *Kwaito* DJs have, for example, used synthesizers to sophisticate bubblegum music, adding to it an amalgam of South African and international beats and sounds and slowing down house tracks to create their own *kwaito* sound (Peterson 2003, 199); the new, slower tracks have then been overlaid with rap. Here, *kwaito* MCs usually rap in a mix of African languages and/or *Kasi-taal*.[1] It is this music and its accompanying socio-cultural implications that constitute the kind of *kwaito* aesthetics that the authors of the above works draw upon, so as to enable them to imagine both thematic and textual spaces of liberation as a means of opposing and deconstructing various "geographies of containment" (Camp 2004, 145). What their novels end up suggesting is that such geographies of containment continue to be maintained and perpetuated even today,

[1] *Kasi-taal* is the term adopted by Makalela (2014) to refer to what is also known as township slang in South Africa. In this article it is deployed to avoid vocabulary (terms such as *Tsotsi-taal*) with more negative connotations for the language group, such as of criminality or aggressiveness.

also in post-apartheid urban and suburban spaces.[2]

Elsewhere, I have argued that the three novels *Coconut*, *After Tears*, and *Room 207* all highlight and thematize particularly spatialized ways in which white supremacist hetero-patriarchy is perpetuated in post-apartheid South Africa (Nichols 2019). They offer insight into continued geographies of oppression and containment in the country in general, and, more specifically, in the kind of urban spaces forming the setting for each of them. These geographies are both racialized and gendered, and the intersections of the various forms of containment that they reveal manifest themselves in both physical and metaphorical spaces. Drawing upon Lefebvre (1991, 33), space is here defined as a fluid, dynamic, and complex entity produced through social relations. Place, for its turn, can then be defined as spaces that are lived but also fluid, taking on varied and multiple identities. The notion of oppressive geographies and geographies of containment can thus be usefully elucidated using this conception of space. In line with black feminist geographer McKittrick's (2016, x) notion of geography as "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations," the three works above all reveal geographies of oppression and containment that are both material and discursive. In other words, they:

> materially and discursively…[extend] to cover three-dimensional spaces and places, the physical landscape and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practice of mapping, exploring, and seeing, and social relations in and across space. (McKittrick 2016, xiii)

The kind of geographies that oppress and contain black South Africans have a long history, reaching all the way back to the apartheid and even the colonial eras. The notion 'geographies of containment' is especially apt in the South African context owing to the material ways in which colonial and apartheid-era law used geography to literally contain black citizens. Through it, spaces were engineered that enforced the strictest separation between citizens based on racial classifications constructed at the time.[3] However, as Mhlongo's, Matlwa's, and Moele's novels show, these geographies persist even in the context of post-apartheid urban spaces, in both discursive and concrete ways. Some examples are continued spatial oppression brought about by township geographies, intense policing of black bodies, many domestic forms of gender oppression and containment, certain prevalent forms of stereotyping, hegemonic notions of masculinity, and various forms of gendered violence (Nichols 2019). One especially pertinent form of discursive containment in South Africa is found in the politics of language. Mhlongo's *After Tears* and Matlwa's *Coconut* thematize a sense of "shrinking spaces to express multiple identities" through language in the post-apartheid context (Makalela 2014, 677–78), highlighting its broader implications for the country's black citizens. These implications are especially well illustrated in *After Tears*, in terms of its oft-repeated observation about language use in South Africa[4] and its point about the dominance of English both in the South African context and globally – something that, to be sure, is alluded to by Matlwa in *Coconut* as well. While, as in many other countries, English dominates in business and is the lingua franca of international educational opportunities, in the South African context the language derives most of its power and appeal from its association with elite status and

[2] The term 'geographies of containment' was originally coined by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Camp 2004, 145).

[3] Among the measures implemented were the forced displacement of black citizens into townships following the Group Areas Act of 1950, the creation of homelands through the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, and the enactment of various segregation laws such as the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953.

[4] See Mesthrie (2008).

whiteness (Spencer 2009, 69).

This state of affairs, the two novels suggest, is, however, not only due to a recognition of the social and economic currency of English in South Africa and our increasingly global world of today, but also to colonial-era pressures placed on black South Africans by whiteness in its various forms (Matlwa 2007, 49). Matlwa's project points to hegemonic discourses that pathologize black South African languages and accents as somehow indicative of inferior intelligence or lack of education. Her novel, moreover, illustrates the identity crisis that bilingual and multilingual speakers experience in "monoglossic" (monolingual) school environments (Makalela 2014, 677–78). This crisis is even more dramatically manifested in the tensions that arise from the use of township slang, *Kasi-taal,* in Mhlongo's *After Tears.* On the one hand, *Kasi-taal* is also known as *Tsotsitaal*, or the language of *utsotsi*, a term used to describe violent male criminals and thugs infamous in township spaces for their lawlessness and gangster lifestyle. On the other hand, however, as Satyo (2008, 92) reminds us, historically *Tsotsitaal* "emerged as a vibrant and imaginative response to white domination". The language itself is thus steeped in ambiguity. While all three of the authors in this study write multilingual texts and use *Kasi-taal*, this ambiguity is most evident in *After Tears*. The novel poignantly communicates a sense of ambivalence in the above noted crisis of identity that the hegemony of English language creates. The only characters serving as the voice for *kasi-taal* in the book are, for example, also identified by their foul smell, ignorant and vulgar comments, and drunkenness (Mhlongo 2007, 11, 101, 103). The contradiction here, quite obviously, lies in the presumed attempt to celebrate black township culture while characterizing that culture through negative linguistic associations. This speaks to the complexities of how discourse works and a resultant uneasiness that Mhlongo might experience with regard to what Stuart Hall has called "overdetermination" and the "politics of representation" (Hall 1993, 109, 111). The question arises: how does the author straddle the line between linguistic celebration, blunt truth-telling, and the comedic exaggeration that distinguishes his novels, and the perpetuation of certain stereotypes about township residents? The ambivalence, or unease, that arises in *After Tears* indeed points to a kind of containment, even at the textual level.

It is here that *kwaito* aesthetics in the three texts attains its importance. *Kwaito* music, is considered by many as the sound of an emerging black post-apartheid youth culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Seemingly interchangeable labels such as "Y Culture," "*Loxion kulcha,*" and "*kwaito*–hip-hop generation" pop up in research attempting to articulate and understand the political and cultural shifts taking place at the time (and still happening today).[5] Despite the different labels, a fairly cohesive picture of this generation nonetheless emerges.[6] Seeking to establish an identity distinct from the struggle identity of the previous generation, it is often described as "self-styling" (Nuttall 2009), "aspirational" (Swartz 2008), urban, "socio-economically hybrid" (Bogatsu 2002), and not only proudly South African, but also proudly "township" (Bogatsu 2002, 5), embracing many aspects of the demotic and the quotidian.

In various ways, *kwaito*, like Y Culture, is also linked to a politics of pleasure and enjoyment, an attempt to disengage from the suffering and struggles of the past and look

[5] Nuttall (2009) and Bogatsu (2002) are two of more notable examples to deploy these labels in their discussions of black youth culture in post-apartheid South Africa. *Loxion kulca* is also a South African fashion label (launched in 1997). Due to its growth out of local popular spaces it has assumed several spelling variations such as *Loxion kulcha*, or *loxion kulca*.

[6] This "generation" refers to those who were born after, or were still children during, the transition to democracy in 1994. They were the "first to experience desegregated schooling on an extensive scale" (Bogatsu 2002, 1) and are more enmeshed in the global flows of culture and capitalism.

forward to a future free of the atmosphere of political struggle, poverty, violence, and oppression (Peterson 2003, 200). It has, indeed, partly evolved as the result of local DJs responding to black township residents' need to express their sense of celebration and release at the dissolution of the apartheid government and the ushering in of democracy in South Africa. For this reason, the genre has also been labelled, by its celebrators and detractors alike, as apolitical (Steingo 2008, 7), hedonistic (Impey 2001, 44), sensual (Peterson 2003, 198), violent (Niaah 2008, 38), and even misogynistic (Impey 2001, 44).[7] Few scholars (notable exceptions being Peterson [2003] and Niaah [2008]) have managed to reach beyond tendencies of moral, academic, and political gatekeeping to "reconfigure our grasp of the complex quilt work of personal and social instances that feed into the making and reception of popular culture," as Peterson challenges us. What needs to be kept in mind is that *kwaito* music generates multiple meanings and inhabits the dialectic space of cultural struggle (Bosch 2006, 98; Hall 1981, 233–35).

The question is often asked whether *kwaito* might be the South African version of hip-hop. This is not only due to some obvious technical similarities between the two (sampling, rapping over a beat, street origins), but also because of certain thematic and political links between the two genres (Swartz 2008). While the answer is a definite no, certain critical strides in the research on what Cooper has termed "hip-hop aesthetics" (2013, 56) nevertheless provide us with an analytical map that we can also use for unpacking what might, correspondingly, be described as *kwaito* aesthetics. The term '*kwaito* aesthetics,' has, to my knowledge, thus far not been used in the literature the same way it is deployed in this article – as a descriptor of the tropes, formulations, and linguistic choices made by authors in their texts. However, *kwaito* also follows certain musical aesthetics, such as its reliance on, besides a long musical heritage, sampling, dance beats, and so on, effecting a clean break from the live band aesthetics of jazz and other popular musical forms in South Africa (Peterson 2003, 204). The aesthetics of *kwaito* lyrics are best "conveyed through performance: irony, allusions, puns, accent on words and the accent of the singer's voice" (Peterson 2003, 205). Recurring tropes here include the hustler, machismo, sexual exploits, exploitation of women, and the desire for material goods, along with the angst that follows the inability to obtain them (Peterson 2003, 207). Steingo (2007, 27), for his part, speaks of the "dance-oriented aesthetic of *kwaito*." As these and other critical examinations of the genre suggest, *kwaito* aesthetics, similarly to hip-hop aesthetics, are grounded in the temporal and spatial contexts from which they arose; they reflect a generational desire to move beyond South Africa's apartheid history at a variety of levels. Yet, none of this quite captures the aesthetic formulations emerging from the three novels in this article.

In her elucidation of hip-hop aesthetics, Cooper (2013, 56) has identified three sociopolitical tropes as particularly characteristic of them: "social alchemy that transforms lack into substance," "a dialectic of deviance and defiance," and "street consciousness and cultural literacy." Driving these tropes are the following musical/literary devices: "the break", and "sampling as an intertextual practice" (Cooper 2013, 57, 64). Cooper deploys hip-hop aesthetics as a tool for the critical analysis of "lit hop," or "ghetto lit," a particular literary genre that emerged during the first decade of the new millennium. Her methodology also illustrates the way that these aesthetics permeate hip-hop culture in general, rather than just hip-hop music. I adopt a similar methodology here in relation to *kwaito*.

In the introduction to his book *Some of My Best Friends Are White: Subversive Thoughts from an Urban Zulu Warrior*, Ndumiso Ngcobo calls this collection of es-

[7] For more on *kwaito* music, see Bosch (2006), Niaah (2008), Peterson (2003), Steingo (2007), Swartz (2008).

says "literary kwaito," a "kwaibook" (Ngcobo 2007, 17): it is made up of "in-your-face writing, self-deprecating 'think pieces' which rework cultural models, as kwaito does" (Nuttall 2009, 94). I would go further and argue that *kwaito* aesthetics, as they feature in music and culture as well as in *After Tears*, *Room 207*, and *Coconut*, develop as part of the political aftermath of the struggle against apartheid and as a product of the township and its particular socio-spatial realities. *Kwaito* culture and style are reflected not only in *kwaito* language and music, but also in the broader stylistic and formulaic choices made by the authors of these three novels, Mhlongo, Matlwa, and Moele.

Matlwa's and Mhlongo's exemplars of literary bricolage mirror the eclectic musical mixture making up the *kwaito* sound. *Coconut* defies linearity and conventional writing styles, opting for combination of epistolary, poetic, and oral forms added to the book's more conventional prose. This eclecticism reflects *kwaito*'s celebratory mix of house, reggae, bubblegum, and other kinds of music, as well as its clear break with the musical conventions of the past. *After Tears*, for its part, sticks to the conventions of linearity while embracing a variety of stylistic features, furthering the narrative by including song lyrics, multilingualism, and dialogue along with conventional prose. In addition, Mhlongo, who, of the three authors in this study, seems the most invested in capturing *kwaito* culture in his text, like Ngcobo relies on an unapologetic in-your-face style, in terms of the realities his book represents and the blunt self-critique it offers. This is also true of Moele's style, which, too, in *Room 207* displays a tell-it-like-it-is type of approach. At the same time, Moele, like Matlwa, has no interest in linearity. His narrative is fragmentary in its flow, being constantly disrupted by anecdotes about a character or some incident in one of the six central characters' lives. Also, in the novel's defiance of not only narrative, but also stylistic and grammar, conventions, the result is thus reflective of *kwaito*'s style.

In addition to these general characteristics, four central tropes forming part of *kwaito* aesthetics can be seen as emerging in the three novels. These are the hustler figure, the trope of newness (as in the "new" South Africa and the "new" South African woman), aspiration and consumption, as well as opacity.[8] While I will be returning to opacity later in this article, presenting it as one of the most compelling tropes of *kwaito* aesthetics, it might be noted here more generally that all these tropes are realized through a variety of literary devices, including verbal and structural irony, foreshadowing, symbolism, and extended metaphor. The most effective device deployed in the three texts to these ends is the use of local linguistic inflection and poetics: the demotic and its links to "*kwaito*-speak" (the multilingualism of *kwaito* lyrics), along with the use of actual *kwaito* song titles and lyrics (cf. Satyo 2008, 91). Together, these features give a certain musicality to the texts, capturing rhythms through speech, song lyrics, and dance.

Mhlongo's, Moele's, and Matlwa's experimentations with multilingualism and their representations of local linguistic inflection and the demotic are there, however, not only as a central stylistic aspect of *kwaito* music: they also independently contribute to the aesthetics and political positionality of the texts. Moele and Mhlongo, for example, use *kasi-taal* as a means of representing everyday speech in black urban spaces and places, while translanguaging (sometimes called code-switching) is employed in all three novels. The latter term was coined by Cen Williams in his unpub-

[8] The hustler figure refers to the trope of hustling which can be found in *After Tears* and *Room 207*, in the novelists' attempts to think through alternative ways to move through oppressive spaces. These spaces are primarily urban, and in them apartheid-era structures continue to be embedded in the urban landscape. Aspiration and consumption are recurrent tropes in Matlwa's *Coconut* and (beyond the three novels now under examination) Wanner's *The Madams*; in them they appear as a desire wrapped up in configurations of the 'New South African Woman' (Gqola 2016). For a more detailed discussion of these tropes, see Nichols (2019).

lished work and disseminated by Ofelia Garcia in the early 2000s. I draw on sociolinguist Leketi Makalela's employment of the term, who used it to indicate ways in which black South Africans from multilingual backgrounds employ multiple languages when communicating either verbally or in writing, using the practice as a means to perform various subjectivities that individuals form and inhabit in a variety of spatio-temporal connections (Makalela 2014, 668). Given the connotations of the term to more technical socio-linguistic traits and their broader political implications, it seems richer as a term than the more commonly used code-switching, and thus more useful in a discussion of why and how certain linguistic practices appear so compelling, such as those engaged in in their texts by the three authors in this article.

While either one of these two linguistic experimentations – use of *kasi-taal* and translanguaging – would be compelling enough on its own, it is nevertheless the authors' use of both simultaneously that, to a large extent, makes these texts so significant with regard to *kwaito* aesthetics. Indeed, what Satyo calls "*kwaito*-speak" is for other critics simply *Kasi-taal.* Since these two and *kwaito* music "share similar structures and large-scale aesthetics" (Satyo 2008, 93), they capture a certain pulse in both dialogue and narration that establishes "the sound" of the text. Consequently, the flow of sentences changes, as seen in the translanguaging segments of *After Tears*, such as "I have two Christian friends who swore to me that they never had sex in their lives, but now *koloi ya Eliya*[9] is calling them" (Mhlongo 2007, 106). Another example of such in-sentence switching, in this case between English and seSotho, comes from *Room 207*: "he has been a friend of mine since long ago, during that time when we were staying at *Kgole'setswadi*" (Moele 2006, 102).[10] Alternation between languages can also occur from sentence to sentence, as in the following shifting between English and isiZulu in *After Tears*: "This is PP, the real Pelepele. *Ngishisa bhe*! I'm very hot!" (Mhlongo 2007, 103).[11] In each case, the rhythm of the sentence changes due to a shift in its sound, brought about by the features of the different language such as the elongation of the penultimate vowel in Nguni languages, the presence of clicks, or the tonal quality of the language. Stylistically, the sentences shift with the back-and-forth verbal flows between languages, which bring new richness to them through metaphors ("*koloi ya Eliya*," "*Kgole'setswadi*") and onomatopoeia ("*Ngishisa bhe!"*).[12] Satyo's argument that *kwaito* lyrics reflect the profoundly lyrical and figurative nature of African languages thus receives its illustration in the dialogue in Mhlongo's and Moele's novels. The metaphor "Prophet Elijah's wagon," referring to the terminal aspect of HIV/AIDS, and the onomatopoeia in the word *ngishisa*, which, when properly articulated, resembles the sound of sizzling, are but two examples of such richness found in African languages and everyday verbal expression. Beyond this function, moreover, translanguaging destabilizes English language hegemony in South African fictional texts, suggesting that, just like identity, texts can also be multilingual and fluid.

In addition to the linguistic significance of the above-noted experimentations, the three texts in this study also use language, in tandem with songs, to establish musicality in them. It is important to note here that the black South African literary tradition boasts a rich heritage of musicality. One example might be the jazz aesthetic. The talented writers of the *Drum* era and the *Staffrider* generation, such as Bloke Modisane and Mongane Wally Serote, em-

[9] *Kasi-taal*, literally "Prophet Elijah's wagon"; in township slang, this is commonly used to refer to persons about to die of AIDS (Mhlongo 2007, 220).

[10] Northern Sotho; literally "far away from parents" (Moele 2006, 237).

[11] "I'm very hot" (Mhlongo 2007, 221)

[12] See Satyo (2008, 94) for a list of various stylistic devices found in *kwaito*-speak.

ployed both US American and South African jazz sounds and motifs as a means to reflect and resist the violent forms of oppression they were experiencing (Titlestad 2004). Musicality in texts like theirs was often manifested in the guise of descriptions of musical sound, meditations on jazz performances, and literary improvisation (Titlestad 2004). In other words, musicality in South African literature is, as such, not a new phenomenon. The novels by Matlwa, Mhlongo, and Moele both celebrate and honour a tradition at the same time as they depart from it, creating musicality rooted in the self-styling ideals of a new, post-1994 youth culture. It is found in the links between language and *kwaito* song titles and lyrics, and in descriptions of movement and dance to *kwaito*.

The reproduction of *kwaito* song lyrics in the three texts in question represents what Cooper (2013, 64) has called "intertextual sampling." One example is the lyrics presented below by the South African recording artists Bongo Maffin, a group known for their spiritual, Afrocentric, and socially conscious message, reproduced in *After Tears*. Taken from the popular song *Thath' isigubu* (Bongo Maffin 1998), they are quoted in an amusing scene involving the protagonist Bafana and his mother Rea:

> Mama burst into a personal rendition of a kwaito song by Bongo Muffin [sic] that was coming from my uncle's radio.
>
> *Thathi's sgubu usfak'ezozweni.*
> (Take the drum and put it in the shack.)
>
> *Ufak'amspeks uzobuzwa…*
> (Put on your glasses and you'll feel…)
>
> *Ubumnandi obulapho.*
> (The joy that is there.)
>
> I laughed inside my room as I imagined the meaning of the song and my overweight mother singing it. (Mhlongo 2007, 20)

The song is mostly in isiZulu, with its lines translated into English next to the originals. A close reading of the song lyrics highlights the comedy of the moment. Without explaining what he means, the protagonist tells the reader that the song has an alternative meaning compared to the literal one given in the translation. We can infer it to be sensual or sexual, salacious in some way, as the thought of his mother obliviously singing the song is the source of his amusement. A more significant effect of Mhlongo's "sampling" here is, however, the link that it establishes between *kwaito* lyrics and language in the novel. The second line, for example, is a combination of isiZulu (*Ufak'*, *uzobuzwa*) and *kasi-taal* (*amspeks*: glasses), mirroring the translanguaging found in Mhlongo's dialogue. Due to the popularity of this song, the lyrics, for a local reader, would also call to mind the sound of the song, given that, as Peterson (2003, 204) has pointed out, the beat in *kwaito* is often more important than the lyrics.

While insertion of various song titles cannot add musicality on its own, in combination with language and lyrics, as above, it can clearly contribute to the creation of an aural quality to a text. One example where such a sense of aurality is rendered is in a scene towards the end of Moele's *Room 207*. In this scene, the narrator-protagonist Noko is at a public taxi rank, preparing to leave Johannesburg for good. Unlike the other main characters in the novel, who went on to embrace the conventions of a middle-class lifestyle in that city, Noko was unable to realize his dream of becoming a screenwriter and must now return to his home village as he can no longer afford to live in the big city. *Kwaito* music plays either in the area where Noko is standing or in his own head: "but the day I am leaving Johannesburg is a sad day for me. There is a kwaito song playing in my ears: 'The Way

Kungakhona.' I'm going home and that is the way it is" (Moele 2006, 233). The song, from the album *Bongolution*, also by Bongo Maffin (2001), lyrically combines at least four languages (Shona, isiXhosa, seSotho, English), blending in local sounds and electronic beats. It is loosely about a departure, a return home and a plea to family for help. The chorus, sung by the group's only female member, Thandiswa Mazwai, invokes feelings of determination and courage:[13]

> The way *kungakhona*
> The way things are
>
> *Ndinengqondo zowuthath' iinto zam ndigoduke*
> I've got a [good] mind to [just]take my things and go home
>
> *Ndinengqondo zowubekel' usana lwam*
> I've got a [good] mind to [just] carry my baby on my back,
>
> *ndibhinqele phezulu ndigoduke*
> tighten my belt and go home.[14]

However, it is the bridge of the song, rapped by vocalist Stoan, that is the most significant: "and the way it is, that's the way it is. And it's like that y'all. It's like that y'all" (Bongo Maffin 2001). Moele recreates the sound and musicality of the song for his own text by cleverly embedding the lyrics into Noko's narrative, in an example of another form of sampling. Here, readers familiar with the song might hear Noko's "I'm going home and that's the way it is" as if it were superimposed over Stoan's refrain, and thus the beat and the music of the song in the background.

Moreover, this particular *kwaito* song seems to be a catalyst causing the release of the protagonist's barely withheld emotions. Its theme is so similar to what is taking place in the narrative that the reasons for the author's song choice become clear. The lyrics complement the song's syncopated beat, plaintive piano melody, and jazzy trumpet solo. Thus, the music then lends a sense of poignancy to the song. In addition, the song "embraces both township jive and contemporary electronic rhythms" (Making Music Productions n.d.), thus augmenting the narrative theme of disappointed hopes and unrealized ambitions.

One of the most creative ways that the *kwaito* beat is captured in the three works under consideration is through the representation of dance in a club scene in Moele's *Room 207.* Here the ritual of flirtation is captured in the description of a dance between Molamo, one of the central characters in the novel, and the woman he desires. However, the dance is represented in a lyrical exchange between the two: "as they dance he touches there and there, then, likewise, she touches there and there, and slowly they mend into one" (Moele 2006, 181). The slower, syncopated rhythms of *kwaito* are mimicked in the written description of the dance, reminiscent of the way Noko's words captured the beat of "The Way *Kungakhona.*" This short scene illustrates the most important difference between the musicality of the texts considered here and the musicality of the earlier literature infused with jazz melodies. Any literature imbued with *kwaito* aesthetics is mostly interested in capturing the beat and the rhythm rather than a melody or refrain. This focus on rhythm and beat can be linked to the dismantling of conventional forms of musical evaluation, which earlier dismissed certain genres. Rose (1994), working on hip-hop, has, in a manner pertinent to the analysis here, deconstructed established hierarchies between Western classical music and African and Afro-diasporic

[13] Adding the words "good" and "just" to convey tone, the narrative voice communicates a decisive attitude in a challenging situation. The expression "*ndibhinqele phezulu*" or "tighten my belt" conveys to the listener that the singer "means business" and is "buckling up, getting ready for action," signalling the presence of a situation that is challenging (Zoliswa Mali, personal communication, 23 February 2017).

[14] Translation by linguist Zoliswa Mali, personal communication, 23 February 2017.

musical genres. As she notes, while functional tonal harmony (melody, etc.) has traditionally been at the centre of aesthetic evaluation focusing on Western classic music, rhythmic and polyrhythmic layering are critical priorities in many African and Afro-diasporic music practices (Rose 1994, 66). The two traditions, however, demonstrate equal capability for complexity and musical richness, with both of them reflecting the depth and breadth of the cultural ontologies and epistemologies found in them (Rose 1994, 69). The emphasis on rhythm in the dance club scene in *Room 207* thus highlights and celebrates those practices.

In Matlwa's *Coconut, kwaito* plays an admittedly more peripheral role. This may have to do with the way the genre is often "under the sway of an urbanite, male point of view, and one that is often accused of objectifying and demeaning women in its explicit lyrical content" (Peterson 2003, 199). *Kwaito* music does not fit equally well with a text that foregrounds the voices of young black women and presents itself as a feminist project. Interestingly, however, even in cases where *kwaito* music and culture are not foregrounded, as in *Coconut,* they are nevertheless present, albeit in company with various other popular culture devices. In one scene in *Coconut*, *kwaito* music adds a lyrical quality to the proceedings, through poetic devices typical of popular music such as repetition and rhythmic lines. The author Matlwa herself, just as her characters, participates and moves within the spaces of the Y Generation in her private life, both creating and consuming cultural forms such as *kwaito* music, *loxion kulcha* fashion, and new urban chic magazines. *Kwaito* aesthetics has thus a natural presence in her works. In some senses, its role may be more ambivalent than in the other texts in this study, yet its presence is unmistakeably felt.

Consider, for example, a scene in *Coconut* where Tshepo (Ofilwe's brother) is employed at a fast-food restaurant. Most of his co-workers are members of the black working class. Outside of his comfort zone, he briefly experiences a bit of the everyday of South African working-class life: mindless work coupled with blasting *kwaito* music that helps ease the monotony of the quotidian reality. The radio plays the *kwaito* song "Ndihamba Nawe" (Mafikizolo 2007), with which he seems somewhat familiar. Repetition of the song's chorus follows, adding to the lyricism of the passage:

> *I hear them before I see them. The group of men and women, singing Mafikizolo's* "We bhuti, ndihamba nawe"…. *I too stand above the deep buckets of fierce oil: plucking, washing, stuffing, spicing, basting, turning one naked chicken after the other, but not managing to sing* "ndihamba nawe" *simultaneously, like the rest of the staff…the chorus comes to an abrupt halt, just as we were getting to* "We bhuti!" (Matlwa 2007, 26–27)

The song's title is also the song's chorus, and thus its repetition mimics the sound of the chorus. Tshepo's list of work tasks – a continuous stream of two-syllable words – mimics the beat of the song, adding to the rhythm of the passage. This – the rhythm and lyricism that is added to the passage – serves two functions. On the one hand, it indicates the importance of *kwaito* music and culture in young black South African identity formation; on the other hand, it affirms this particular musical genre and the youth culture it expresses as a repetitive feature of black South African literature of the early 21st century.

Notwithstanding the importance of the various ways that *kwaito* music is embedded in these novels, the formulation of *kwaito* aesthetics is also profoundly about the role they play in carving out emancipatory spaces thematically and textually. In addition to exploring the potentialities of *Kasi-taal*, translanguaging, and the sense of musicality, the authors of all the three works also imagine ways for *kwaito* music to create oppositional spaces. In *After Tears*, Mhlongo, for instance,

constructs a dramatic New Year's Eve scene. In it, a popular *kwaito* song is being blasted on the streets of Chiawelo township in Soweto[15] where Bafana's character lives, and which provides the setting for most of the narrative:

> [At] exactly twelve midnight the street was full of people and most them were dancing excitedly to the kwaito song that came from Jobe's place. It was one of the hottest songs of the moment by Mdu called "Mazola".
>
> *Baba ka Nomsa*
> (Nomsa's Father)
>
> *Gibela phezu 'kwendlu*
> (Climb to the rooftop)
>
> *Ubatshele, uMazolo sekadaar*
> (Tell them Mazola is here)
>
> The whole of Soweto had been reduced to one big party. (Mhlongo 2007, 122)

What Mhlongo represents spatially here is politically and historically relevant. The full street, people dancing, music blasting into the street – all this represents taking up space. The geographical structures that were put in place by the apartheid government aimed to spatially contain South Africa's black residents. Laws requiring permits and passes to live in the township areas prevented occupation of public land, prohibited gatherings in public places, and generally attempted to prevent black mobility.[16] Thus, what Mhlongo describes here is an explicitly political re-occupation and decolonization of space. The occupation of the street as a space of entertainment and celebration speaks to the ways that popular music contributes to the liberation of various spaces of domination. This scene celebrates the history of how "policed spaces…were appropriated for performance" (Niaah 2008, 42), illustrating the political significance of even an ostensibly apolitical form. *Kwaito* music participates in these kinds of spatial appropriations through its large-scale occupation of streets, public taxis, radio stations, and nightclubs; what Mhlongo and the other authors do is to raise those appropriations from a position of being no more than everyday enactments of loud music to not only an artistic achievement, but also a political accomplishment.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned a set of tropes that characterize *kwaito* aesthetics: newness, the hustler, opacity, and aspiration and consumption. Of these, opacity provides an especially pertinent example of the connections between geographies of containment and shrinking spaces, and of the liberatory possibilities of *kwaito* aesthetics. In *Coconut* Matlwa, like Mhlongo and Moele in their novels, experiments with multilingualism whereby her narrator-protagonist, Ofilwe, code switches: "at nuptial and burial ceremonies, at thanksgiving days *ge re phasa Badimo*, I stand in reverence, out of everybody's way" (Matlwa 2007, 8). Matlwa does not provide translations of the sePedi words and phrases, nor of any slang expressions, in her text, for which reason we cannot necessarily access the language in the same way. This refraining from translations reflects the trope of opacity (cf. Glissant 2010, 115) found in *kwaito* music as well. The untranslated passages may be read the same way Swartz (2008, 21) reads *kwaito*, as a form of exclusion and resistance whereby artists rap and "sing in indigenous South African languages…revers[ing] the cultural hegemony of English." As she has suggested elsewhere, it is high time that "white South Africans begin learning indigenous languages if they want to participate in South Africa's emerging youth culture" (Swartz 2008, 21).

However, as Glissant (2010, 114–15) has suggested, untranslated text also makes a more profound argument for several levels of

[15] South Western Townships, one of the best-known black townships in South Africa.

[16] I am referring to the Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956, which outlawed gatherings in public places (at the discretion of the minister of justice).

textual and cultural opacity: opacity, Glissant reminds us, dismantles and deconstructs colonizing attempts to render the Other transparent. By this I refer to colonial tendencies to stereotype, demonize, and exoticize the Other and reduce it to one-dimensional categories. In such efforts, the measuring rod for comprehending the Other is set according to European worldviews and standards, which, among other things, renders the world more readily apprehensible and more easily conquered and controlled (see Glissant 2010, 114). Moreover, transparency is profoundly about black acceptance in white-dominated societies:

> If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. (Glissant 2010, 190)

Opacity, on the other hand, is the messy, impenetrable, indecipherable reality which is true for all individuals, cultures, and ethnicities. The opaque is, in a word, "that which cannot be reduced" (Glissant 2010, 191), and thus it does away completely with the notion of 'the Other,' as the categories with which to comprehend and render someone "other" become meaningless. Within the literary milieu, opacity operates at the level of the text and the writer. Glissant proposes that while we, as individuals, are opaque, as soon as our thoughts are translated into words, another layer of opacity is added. Thus, one concrete way to think about opacity is through the indecipherability of language. To claim opacity linguistically in a literary text means that the text opposes the notion of hegemonic languages having the ability to speak to the perspective, realities, and ontology of another culture. It also claims the right to another level of textual opacity, one beyond the author and the reality of the text itself: the refusal to translate further indicates a refusal to participate in the ideology of transparency. Ultimately this, then, represents a deeply political literary strategy.

In *After Tears*, Mhlongo experiments with opacity by adding two untranslated passages of prayers in isiZulu. The passages contrast starkly with the ambivalent tenor of Mhlongo's use of isiZulu and *Kasi-taal* elsewhere in the novel. These examples of what Ashcroft and collaborators (1989, 64) have called "selective lexical fidelity" are placed in a telling moment of the text. "After tears" is an expression referring to the gathering held after a funeral (Mhlongo 2007, 206). Thus, the novel's title "ostensibly refers to the partying that goes on after the death of a family member [or] friend but might also be a metaphor for post-apartheid South Africa" (Raditlhalo 2008, 2). The after-tears event, in this case, follows the death of Bafana's uncle Nyawana, one of the more important figures in the novel. Thus, we can infer that this is a central point in the book providing an important context for our reading of the two prayers in the funeral scene:

> Priest Mthembu opened the service with a short Zulu prayer.
>
> *Nkosi, Jesu Kristo, ngokulala kwakho izinsuku ezintathu ehtuneni wacwebisa amathuna abo bonke abakholwa kuwe…. Nakuba imizimba yabo ilele emihlabathini sinethemba kodwa lokuthi bayovumka. Sengathi umzalwane wethu lona angalala aphumule ngoxolo kulelithuna kuze kufike lolusuku oyomvusa ngalo, umngenise ekukhanyeni kwasezulwini.* (Mhlongo 2007, 198)

Here too, as in *kwaito*, language renders the text ostentatiously, almost defiantly, opaque. Even if it is as Glissant (2010) tells us, namely, that all written texts operate with multiple layers of opacity, untranslated foreign-language passages in an otherwise English text add a

further layer of it that in fact alludes, and reflects back, to the other layers. It reinforces and reminds the reader of the opacity of the text as whole, calling into question our interpretations and highlighting the subjectivity of our readings. As such, the text of the prayer above will remain untranslated. If we agree that at least part of Mhlongo's project was to claim a right to opacity, then it seems relevant to act in solidarity with this claim. What Mhlongo and other authors refusing to translate (Gloria Anzaldúa is one example in the Chicana American context) appear to strive for is a refusal: a refusal to allow their texts to serve as an anthropological source. Inasmuch as the use of isiZulu has an aesthetic and creative point here, that point is not to provide anthropological access through literature. Furthermore, as post-colonial studies have shown, glossing in African literature is always and by necessity an inadequate process, one, moreover, that is intricately linked to the colonial project and the oppressiveness of European languages in any colonial relationship (for more on this, see Ashcroft et al. 1989; Thiongo 1993). It, I would like to suggest, turns any literary analysis into an ethnographic examination in which Zulu culture is to be "apprehended" through a fictional text, rendering it transparent by the standards of the Anglo-European culture. The question needs to be asked: how, then, can one establish a practice of allyship and solidarity, one in which literature can emerge as a way to understand other cultures and sympathize with them? While a full answer would require a significantly more extensive discussion, one might infer from the three texts in this study that the answer lies somewhere in a balance between reading literature as art, as something that, while inherently political, is nevertheless always a creative act in the first place, and turning to other fields such as history, political science, and anthropology as the source of our socio-cultural and historical information about other cultures.

In addition to the political ramifications of features such as untranslated passages inserted in an otherwise English-language text, in the works we have looked at also shifts in grammar and speech sounds briefly upend the linguistic conventions of the novel. Rather than a monolithic English language aesthetic, they insist on a different kind of aesthetic – a creole aesthetic (cf. Satyo 2008) reminiscent of the nature of *kwaito* music. In this context, the untranslated text allows a shift in the balance of power between the colonial gaze of the reader and the text as object. Mhlongo's contradictory tone regarding language also inserts an interesting tension in his text. Before the two prayers, not only were there clear linguistic lines drawn between the characters in terms of class and masculinity, but also all non-English words and expressions were translated. This shift might be read as part of the ambivalence and ambiguity marking Mhlongo's novel. It can be said to reflect the push and pull of the dialectic between resistance and complicity found in popular culture more in general (see Hall 1981). In the funeral scene, Mhlongo suggests a decolonization of the conventional South African novel written in English, a dismantling of what Makalela (2014, 668) would characterize as the "symbolic violence of monoglossic [monolingual] ideologies."

In this way, the three novels invite us to consider ways in which *kwaito* aesthetics, through opacity, the demotic, and the quotidian, might generate and expand metaphorical space. One of the most important functions of popular culture in the novels of Matlwa, Mhlongo, and Moele is to carve out those spaces that are lacking while extending those that dominant social structures attempt to constrict. The novels' use of dialects and idiolects is to an extent a linguistic code, marking the texts as distinctly South African and connecting them to a more specific place – a specific township or city. The three authors' uses of music are partly about a celebration of youth culture and its creativity, while the untranslated texts might be there to emphasize a certain cultural distance between the author

and the reader. However, it is not the connection to place that is most important here, nor is it any celebration of culture. Rather, it is the unapologetic celebration of multiple linguistic and geographic identities that remains central, along with the insistence that townships have a place in urban cosmopolitan spaces such as those depicted in the texts in this study. Moreover, townships have a place in whatever makes up the intellectual, creative space called South African literature – not as a site of oppression, an object of pity, an anthropological source, or a spectacle of violence, crime, and poverty, but as a site of knowledge, history, and creativity.

Part of what is so compelling about the development of *kwaito* aesthetics in early 21st-century post-apartheid South African literature is the way it reflects young authors' determination to dismantle conventional thinking about literature and literary criticism. The notion that the use of multilingualism, an aesthetic of rhythmic musicality, and opacity might contribute to the creation of spaces of liberation at a thematic level is important in and of itself. Certainly, it is imperative for us to begin to think about the need for oppositional notions of space and engagements with geography for black men and women, in all their multiple, complex, and ever-fluid subjectivities both in South Africa and throughout the Afro-diasporic world. However, for literature, the textual innovations and what I would respectfully call defiances here – the refusal to translate, coupled with the elevation of a genre such as *kwaito*, dismissed by many for reasons like misogyny, apoliticality, hedonism, and so on, to the level of the literary – can be seen as a sign of authors beginning to insist that local knowledge, creativity, and ingenuity be celebrated at the same level as that which is produced in institutions, many of which are still mired in apartheid-era and colonial-era geographies of oppression and containment. These authors' determination to approach the question of what is literary from an entirely different aesthetic vantage point has therefore consequences for literary studies in South Africa that are potentially quite far-reaching and long-term.

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