

Whiteness Visible: The Representation of Race in Daphne Rooke's *Mittee*

Abstract: Through an examination of Daphne Rooke's 'coloured' narrator Selina in *Mittee* (1951), this article explores, on the one hand, the extent to which the narrator's critical perspective on whiteness and racial essentialism could be achieved in the novel and, on the other, how adequately a white apartheid-era author could depict a black narrator. Exploring *Mittee*'s ambivalence in relation to the topic of race via a discussion of the novel's depictions of the performativity of whiteness, racial mimicry, sexual relations and embodiment, it argues that the novel is most politically potent in its critique of white society, but also incapable of transcending the bounds of whiteness to represent Selina in any way other than in relation to it. While whiteness is made subversively visible in the novel, counter to its invisible normalisation in racially unequal societies like the novel's Boer War setting and South Africa in the 1950s, when Rooke published *Mittee*, it is, within a current reading, ultimately *too* visible and is presented at the expense of the narrator's specificity.

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Although South African author Daphne Rooke's novels were published to acclaim in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1950s (even eliciting favourable comparison to the novels of Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing), her writing has received little critical attention. Despite a brief burst of interest in Rooke's work in the 1990s, after Michael Green emphasised her contribution to the literature of Natal and her novels were noted as of potential appeal to feminist scholars, her writing has again slipped largely into obscurity. Lucy Valerie Graham's reading of *Mittee* in her recent book *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature* (2012) is, however, a notable exception to this critical silence, bringing the novel back to the attention of a current readership. Graham delves into *Mittee*'s publishing history to reveal that an episode of rape was presented differently in its American and British editions upon first publication. In the American edition, true to Rooke's original manuscript, a white woman, Letty, is raped by black men after the outbreak of the South African War. In the British edition (distributed in South Africa), however, the scene was altered to avoid the censorship of the apartheid state, and it is a black woman, Anna, who is sexually violated.¹ Graham reveals, then, that Rooke does not merit J.M. Coetzee's approval in his afterword to the Penguin edition of the novel (replicated in *Stranger Shores* (2001) under the chapter title "Daphne Rooke"): "To her credit, Rooke does not indulge in the *ne*

plus ultra of colonial horror-fantasies, a scene in which white women are raped” (J.M. Coetzee 1991: 207).

The existence of two versions of *Mittee* – one which refuses a racist stereotype, the other which embraces it – emblematises the ambivalence of the novel itself,² and the contradictory body of scholarship it has consequently produced. Leaving aside the comparison of its American and British editions, which Graham has explored extensively, *Mittee* has been praised for its political commentary but also criticised for political insensitivity. Among those who acknowledge Rooke’s significance, Christopher Heywood regards her body of work as a “remarkable pre-Sharpeville achievement” (2004: 134). Peter Blair also notes Rooke’s strongly political voice, picking up on what is arguably her most significant contribution to South African literature: her presentation of “miscegenation as [...] displaced colonialism” (2012: 486). Perhaps most notable, however, in the critical praise of Rooke’s novels is the identification of her “broad imaginative sympathy” (Blair 2012: 485), with Ian Glenn going so far as to call her “the South African novelist with the widest range of historical sympathy” (1987: 2). Margaret Lenta similarly commends Rooke’s enterprise in *Mittee* as the “imaginative reconstruction of a voice which was rejected and unrecorded” (1996: 103). Lenta refers to the first-person narration of Selina, the ‘coloured’ girl who has grown up as near-sister yet servant to her white ‘nonnie’, Mittee, in the Transvaal in the years leading up to the South African War. Yet for many of Rooke’s critics it is this comfortable adoption of a marginal voice that renders her writing problematic. Christine Barsby argues that Rooke’s “attempt to give voice to Selina lapses at times into a patronizing portrayal of her” (1989: 100), and Dorothy Driver compares Rooke’s writing to Jack Cope’s, noting the “apparent ease of the narrative shift into the consciousness of blacks [which] now seems innocent, and perhaps dated, the incipient patronisation unleavened by an ironic self-consciousness” (2012: 392). Michael Green takes a middle path, weighing Rooke’s sense of compassion against her final inability to inhabit her protagonist’s perspective effectively: “The empathy of her vision of pain meets with the sense of dislocation involved in trying very earnestly to enter another point of view” (1997: 166). In this essay, I wish to explore this ambiguity, noting the ways in which *Mittee* may be considered to make interesting and relevant comments on race while deploying a mode of narration that supports yet undermines its seeming political imperatives.

Certainly, *Mittee*’s narration, despite the negative criticism it has received, provides access to the novel’s political commentary not merely in its content but also through its perspective. Selina’s point of view is important to the novel’s themes primarily because it

provides an outsider's vision of colonial white South African society and its failings. In this respect, it differs markedly, for example, from the earlier *plaasromane* of South African authors Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith, wherein black characters are barely mentioned shadows at the margins of the texts. Thus, as Margaret Lenta notes, the "choice of a narrator [a 'coloured' narrator, specifically] who will speak what is customarily left unspoken is a major part of Rooke's fictional technique" (1996: 101). Ian Glenn supports this assessment, arguing that Rooke presents the reader with a South Africa "founded on violence and conquest and subsequently covering up that knowledge" (1987: 2–3). Uncovering this violence and conquest forms part of *Mittee*'s motivation. Accordingly, in an unpublished interview with Jane Fenner, Rooke discusses her tendency to rewrite a third-person draft into the first person by choosing a character and filtering the story through his or her perspective: "it seems [...] that I chose the person who was the most deprived amongst the group of characters [...] in *Mittee* the girl is a servant and coloured and nothing she can do can [...] raise hers [sic] status" (1997: 17). Specifically, Selina's identity as a woman of 'colour' grants her insight into the hushed-up horror of interracial sexual abuse within colonial South Africa. Although *Mittee* is set predominantly in the 1890s, it is worth remembering that it was published in 1951, three years after the legislation of apartheid. It appeared, then, shortly after the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, passed in 1949, and the second Immorality Act of 1950, which prohibited all sexual relations between 'Europeans' and people of other races. Such rigid and racist prohibitions transformed interracial sex into a taboo practised yet fervently denied by white society and constituting the central focus of *Mittee*. As a racial outsider who is also the object of sexual abuse Selina possesses intimate knowledge of the hidden aspects of the white colonial social body. She comes to represent that aspect of South Africa repressed and oppressed by the dominant social group, her resilient narration bubbling forth in feisty disregard.³

Accordingly, while Rooke's protagonist is 'of colour,' the focus of the novel remains fixed upon white society. Arguably, Rooke's interest in a white colonial South Africa that bolsters itself through violence and secrecy could not be adequately represented from a perspective within the group without violating the smugly defended superiority she exposes and critiques. From her position of marginality, then, Selina (often with a wry, sarcastic humour) illuminates the problems inherent in white society by viewing it as a category from which she is excluded, thereby defamiliarising the notion of a normative whiteness. Thus, while Selina is a 'coloured' character, her significance within the novel maps on to her relation to whiteness, the novel's predominant focus. This is *Mittee*'s paradoxical strength

and weakness: it is a critique of white society, but ultimately incapable of transcending the bounds of whiteness to represent Selina in any way other than in relation to it.

Indeed, the novel ensures that Selina, possessed by a “feeling of not belonging to [her] own race” (Rooke [1951]1991: 31) and describing herself as having “no home and no people” (100), is cut off from her roots to the extent that the only clear familial relationship she retains is to Mittee. Thus Selina’s unique perspective on whiteness arises because she is partially invited into it. As a kind of *quid pro quo* after Selina’s mother has rescued Mittee from an ambush in which her parents have been killed, Mittee’s family tolerate Selina’s presence, mostly because of Mittee’s need for her. Subsequently orphaned herself, Selina is raised (as playmate and handmaid) beside Mittee.

It is worth pointing out, in relation to the attack on Mittee’s family referred to above, that references to violent ambushes indicate that, within the logic of the text, black characters (that is, characters who are not of ‘mixed race’) are oftentimes murderous and marauding; moreover, they are excluded from the text in any substantial way. The novel, from its beginning, is marked by a racism that differentiates between ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ characters. As Selina observes, in one of many examples, she and her fellow coloured servant Jansie are given “the same food as [the] family ate because we were not Kaffirs and this was more than you got in some other houses where they made no difference between black and coloured” (Rooke [1951]1991: 6). Selina’s ‘mixed-race’ status not only improves her material circumstances within the racist world of the novel, it also appears to increase her narrative potential to an author primarily focussed on whiteness. In Rooke’s imaginary, Selina is metonymically linked to whiteness via her ‘mixed race’ status. Thus it is not only her *physical* proximity to Mittee that allows for her narration, but also, undermining the novel’s critique of essentialism, her *racial* proximity to whiteness.

Rooke’s fiction has a tendency to dramatise one character’s focus upon another – as evident in Selina’s narration of a novel entitled “*Mittee*”. Rooke explains: “I feel that you have really a sort of a Greek chorus [...] commentating on what’s happening around him [sic] and yet, in some ways, drawn into the story” (Fenner 1997: 18). Selina, thus, functions as a kind of choric figure: an outsider to whiteness yet entirely dependent upon it, and therefore entirely fixated upon it in her narration. Through the strategy of providing an outsider’s perspective on white colonialism, *Mittee* in fictional form foreshadows aspects of whiteness theory, the interdisciplinary study of the ideology and social construction of the racial category of whiteness. Critiquing the historical normativity and hence invisibility of whiteness, scholars have emphasised it as a material and discursive category eluding scrutiny

due to its very normalisation, an effect of its power. As Steve Garner writes, whiteness has always been a paradoxical concept, “invisible because its normalization guides scrutiny away from it” while “the exercise of power makes it, on the contrary, extremely visible” (2007: 34). Within the unequal racial hierarchy of colonial South Africa, whiteness effaces and yet simultaneously constructs itself in its identification of a supposedly inferior, threatening and consequently hyper-visible racial ‘otherness.’ Whiteness is therefore imperceptible to itself while simultaneously revealing itself to those it excludes. Indeed, for Selina in *Mittee*, whiteness can never be invisible for she both envies and despises it, feelings that arise because she is an object of its exercise of power. In making whiteness visible, through the angle of Selina’s narrating voice, *Mittee* achieves its greatest political commentary, commentary which nevertheless, in its obsessive focus on whiteness, remains problematic.

Critics, however, have not always acknowledged Selina’s narration as angled, directed and relational. Pia Thielmann, for example, argues that because Mittee’s name is also the title of the novel, “she, rather than Salina [sic] who narrates the story, is the centre of attention” (2004: 243). However, while Selina’s life may indeed appear to be “made secondary through this artistic choice” (243), this occurs in a manner that strongly foregrounds her marginal perspective. Selina grows up beside the spoilt and entitled Mittee, hyperconscious of the latter’s whiteness. Thus the novel emphasises a focus not on Selina’s ‘mistress’, as critics responding to the title “*Mittee*” have argued, but on Selina’s *relation* to Mittee, a dynamic that is, of course, strongly racially inflected. By drawing attention to Mittee at Selina’s expense yet through her perspective, the novel re-inscribes yet undermines a “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida 1997: 22) central to racist society: according to racist ideology, whiteness precedes its ‘others,’ constructing them as secondary and supplementary. However, whiteness cannot be defined in and of itself without recourse to its supposed opposition. It cannot be present to itself in the absence of racial ‘others,’ a dialectic implicit in *Mittee*, and particularly embedded in the relation it sets up between Selina and Mittee. As Derrida argues in relation to constructed binaries that shape supposedly impermeable identities, “there *is* no identity, there is only identification or self-identification as a process” (2003: 25); thus Selina’s relation to Mittee remains an irresolvably shifting process of identification and social dissonance.

Complicating Selina’s relation to Mittee, then, is their contradictory relationship of friendship, indeed sisterhood, coupled with Selina’s enforced subservience, an oscillating relationship of equivalence and inequality that is reflected in Selina’s ambivalence towards Mittee: “Sometimes she forgets I am a coloured girl and calls me Sister. I love her and I hate

her” (Rooke [1951]1991: 59). Their relationship is divided, for the most part, in terms of how they can be with each other when they are alone and how they must behave when observed; social pressures increasingly strain their relationship as they grow up, tipping it into an ever-more volatile ambivalence. Selina observes at the beginning of the novel: “Often Mittee called me Sister or Dear Selina when we were alone” (1). Under observation, however, Mittee can become haughty and superior. “First you pet her, then you torment her” (18), says old Mrs Gouws to Mittee, observing her hold over Selina and the double nature of their relationship. Selina’s longing for Mittee to call her “sister,” a promise with which the latter often bribes her, indicates her yearning to be accepted not only by Mittee but by the ‘family order’ of whiteness itself. Indeed, Mittee’s whiteness forms the repeated focus of Selina’s observations. Her skin is often emphasised, suggesting the pronounced visibility of her racial identity to Selina (and consequently to the reader): “Mittee would sit in the chair, with her arms behind her head, the sleeve of her dress falling back to show the white and delicate skin that sun had never touched” (2). In another episode, Selina’s envy is evident: “She pulled off her nightdress with one gesture and stood naked, gleaming white. I turned my eyes away” (21). Mittee’s skin is so shockingly enviable to Selina that it appears blinding.

The manner in which Mittee pulls off her nightdress to stand “naked, gleaming white” (21) dramatises the novel’s lifting of the hazy veil that obscures whiteness in an unequal society. As Ruth Frankenberg argues, “[n]aming ‘whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance” (1993: 4). The veil on whiteness is removed, revealing its attendant ideologies: “[t]o look at the social construction of whiteness [...] is to look head-on at a site of dominance” (4). To some extent, Rooke’s *Mittee* enables this kind of direct confrontation with colonial power and its abuses. It renders whiteness visible, naming it and shedding light in particular on the secretive interracial abuses that mark a racially unequal society, specifically the sexual mistreatment of women of colour. When Mittee pulls off her nightdress, she reveals her body, naked as her lover would view it, and therefore as the sight and site of Selina’s envy.

Mittee’s nakedness and Selina’s response to it stage the central conflict between the characters. Selina is in love with the brutal Paul du Plessis, a character so violent that he commits three murders by the end of the novel. Paul, however – the white son of a magistrate, dramatising his connection to social Law – is betrothed and eventually married to Mittee. Paul exploits Selina sexually but lavishes his ordained romantic attentions upon her friend. In a strangely naïve formulation J.M. Coetzee wonders, “In a more equal world would Mittee and Selina be true sisters, would there be love and no hatred between them?”

Sceptically, one answers, No: the germ of sexual rivalry lies too deep” (Coetzee 1991: 206). This rivalry, however, is merely a mask for Selina’s underlying desire to be treated with the same dignity and respect as Mittee.

As South African whiteness scholar Melissa Steyn points out, in an observation strongly relevant to the intersection of sexuality and race in *Mittee*, the role of white women within a racist patriarchal society is precarious, hovering between power and powerlessness:

The benefits of whiteness came mainly through being associated with white men [...]. As both female and white, white women belonged to the group that white men needed to draw on for mates, if they were to perpetuate their privileged species. White women [while nonetheless subject to men] could therefore enjoy secondhand feelings of superiority and supremacy. (Steyn 2001: 19-20)

Because Mittee is a woman within a patriarchal context, her ‘power’ inheres in her legitimate romantic and sexual access to white men. Yet Mittee does not want to be married to Paul and, in all his violence, the man himself does not really seem to figure in Selina’s attraction to him, which is in fact an attraction to equality with Mittee, and more generally to being recognised within the only legitimate social group of patriarchal white society. Selina’s rivalry with Mittee therefore plays out within the only possible arena where both have a limited degree of power: sexuality. Mittee’s sexual legitimacy, however, trumps Selina’s association with secrecy and taboo. She is therefore able to goad Selina with stinging racial insults – “How pretty you would have been if you were white” (Rooke [1951]1991: 43) – and Selina caustically explains why she is occasionally prone to fits of weeping – “[b]ecause I’m not a pink and white doll” (58).

Sexuality, then, is the dominant crisis of *Mittee* around which the text continually circles, taking up its role within the novel as a trope for the crisis of racial consciousness. As Rooke emphasises, sexuality arises with the advent of adulthood with its social conventions and political ideologies. Her fiction therefore imbricates race and sex, with racial oppression manifesting predominantly in sexual oppression. Accordingly, *Mittee* presents adolescence, when desire and abuse come to the fore in the novel, as a crisis strongly linked to the growing awareness and consequently increasing visibility of racial difference. Selina’s retrospective narrative dramatises this dreadful transformation. At one point she sums up in miniature the arc of the narrative: “Now Mittee and I were children, running to the forbidden river, now we were young girls, trying hard with the crochet work. There the two young women stood, with

the silver light of childhood still shining on them as they turned their faces to the terrible years” (176). In her desire for Paul, Selina yearns to return to what she remembers as an idyllic childhood: “When we were children, Paul and Mittee and I, we had played together without thinking that their brown skins were sunburned, while the darkness of my skin came from within. We soon learned of the difference” (15). For Rooke (who opposes her contemporary South African author Sarah Gertrude Millin’s blood politics), racism is learned, becoming more entrenched as her characters grow up to be adult subjects within the colonial social order. As Paul observes to Mittee, shooting Selina a throwaway glance, “Her skin is a lot darker. She used to be quite fair. Funny how they get darker as they grow up” (15). Unbeknown to Paul, his perception of Selina’s supposedly darkening skin ironically reveals his own transformation, evident in his increasingly racist perspective.

With this kind of critique at the heart of the novel *Mittee* is in many ways an analysis of racial essentialism. Although Selina envies Mittee’s whiteness and her seemingly unassailable position of superiority, the novel subtly suggests that whiteness is not as essential a category as it may appear to be within the colonial context. Just as Paul’s increasing awareness of Selina’s race emphasises his socialisation into racism rather than her defining racial characteristics, Mittee’s whiteness is not entirely to be taken for granted. Mittee, Selina notes, is “frantic about her complexion” (40). Indeed, she takes “great care of her fair complexion, so that the skin on her face was almost as white as that of her body, the thick whiteness of velvet. Each night she rubbed her face with mutton-fat and camphor and to lie next to her made me feel sick” (12). To remain so delicate – so white – Mittee works hard. She is constantly retiring to the shade for fear of “burning black” (108).

Mittee’s efforts to maintain her complexion – clearly a trope for the fragility and provisionality of a racialised social order – are not the only indicator of Rooke’s emphasis upon the performativity of whiteness. Selina’s occasional dressing up as a white woman dramatises not only her envious relation to Mittee, but also this performativity. Whether Rooke intends it or not (to be sure, the farcical humour of such episodes exposes a certain insensitivity), Selina’s proximity to whiteness and her desire to emulate it suggest a colonial mimicry that is not without its subversion. Homi K. Bhabha describes this mimicry as a “process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined” (1994: 127) – displacing because it reveals the social construction and performativity of colonial power. Throughout the novel, Selina’s narration functions as this “displacing gaze”, but in two specific episodes colonial mimicry is specifically deployed. When Mittee goes to see the lantern slides in Pretoria, leaving Selina behind because “they wouldn’t let a coloured

girl in” (Rooke [1951]1991: 42), Selina is heart-broken. The next day, moved by her tears, Mittee comes up with a plan to disguise her as a white woman so that she too can see the spectacle. She smears camphor fat and bath powder over Selina’s face, turning her white, and hides her hair beneath a bonnet. Mittee therefore transfers her own beautification ritual to Selina in order to transform her into a white woman, thereby emphasising the constructed nature of racial classification.

Another episode suggestive of colonial mimicry occurs later, when the outing to the lantern slides gives Selina’s fellow servant, Polly, an idea for a most diverting game to enjoy when the house is empty:

We would dress up in our nonnies’ clothes and pretend we were white girls. They would have been mad to see us. Down the stairs we would float, taking care to show the slenderness of ankles in open-work silk stockings, as they did and then getting into a fluster because some man might have noticed. For the sake of a tickey, the Kaffir girl would serve us with tea in Andrina’s sitting room downstairs. I laugh even now to think of Polly and me in that room, to which Andrina invited only those she wished to honour. [...] In our borrowed clothes we looked quite at home there. (46)

Selina and Polly enjoy the feeling of luxuriating in their ‘mistress’s’ clothes and also, more importantly, the hilarity of subversive mimicry. As Bhabha has famously argued, characters of mimicry within colonial contexts are “figures of a doubling” alienating the “modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as ‘inappropriate’ colonial subjects” (1994: 126), in this case the dominant discourse of gendered whiteness. Selina and Polly relish the knowledge that Mittee and Andrina “would have been mad to see [them]” and this makes them emphasise the hypocrisy they observe in the white performance of an exaggerated feminine delicacy that all the while is designed to be sexually alluring. Moreover, the notions of belonging and ‘home’ are foregrounded. In their “borrowed clothes” Polly and Selina look “quite at home”, despite being impostors in a domestic scenario that consistently excludes them. “*Almost the same but not white*” (Bhabha 1994: 128, original emphasis), they parody whiteness, revealing its enactment and undermining its narcissistic authority by suggesting an uncanny doubling, a mirror image of ‘otherness’ upon which whiteness relies. It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that this ‘parody’ is uncomplicatedly subversive. In fact, it clearly reveals Selina’s desire for whiteness, thus collapsing to some extent any incipient political commentary. When Paul comes across

Selina in Mittee's silk dress, for example, the hopelessness of her situation is emphasised: "In these clothes I look like a white girl, don't I?" (Rooke [1951]1991: 47), she asks. Paul's response puts paid to her frivolity. "No. You could never look like a white girl" (47).

There is, of course, some irony inherent in Selina's racial impersonation, which mimicry inversely reflects Daphne Rooke's imitation of 'coloured' identity through the voice of the first-person narrator, Selina. While Selina's subversion reflects to some extent the performative nature of racial identity, Rooke writing herself into black subjectivity within the context of apartheid South Africa is not quite so comfortably revealing of an ethic of racial equality. In fact, while *Mittee* may reveal the hidden abuses of an unequal society and the performativity of white power and privilege, it nevertheless slips into uncomfortable racial stereotypes, thereby undermining the authenticity and autonomy of its narrator.

In particular, in a novel that highlights sexuality as an index of social inequality, representations and comparisons of bodies, while charged with subversive political significance, are also prone to reinforcing racist ideology. As Daniel Punday argues, "every narrative implicitly or explicitly defines a certain range of body types" and it is in their comparison that "character bodies primarily enter into semantic relations, since by sorting bodies into types a narrative defines the contrasts that underlie thematic, symbolic, and psychological patterns" (2003: 61). Moreover, as Punday notes in his description of a "corporeal narratology" (outlining the manner in which narrative necessarily harnesses approaches to embodiment), "narratives must define character bodies [...] according to the degree to which individuals are embodied" (66). Obviously Selina's relationship with Mittee plays out around the notion of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' bodies within the South African colonial context, and Rooke harnesses this dualism: Mittee is the sanctified white woman, raised to a pedestal where she appears separated from her sexuality and physicality, and Selina, it seems, steps in to embody these animal qualities and is repeatedly drawn back into the realm of instinct and desire. The two are therefore yoked characters, the novel unwittingly representing white femininity and its objects. Selina, it seems, is never able to raise herself above her object status. Early in the novel, she fixates characteristically on Mittee's looks, her observations reflecting this binary:

Man, when Mittee smiled. Somehow she seemed to lift your heart up and up, like Wimpie Maritz did when he played folk tunes on his violin; not the dances, they made your body tingle and your feet tap as if you wanted to offer yourself to a man. The folk tunes that he played were gay but they held sadness, too, like the veld does just as

that last light fades away and listening, you become all spirit and the wickedness of the body left you. (Rooke [1951]1991: 10)

Selina, however, is linked in Rooke's imaginary to the "wickedness of the body" and repeatedly her sexual encounters with Paul du Plessis occur when he is frustrated by Mittee's physical inaccessibility. This emphasises Mittee and Selina's inverse mirroring, with Selina representing visceral lust within the logic of the text in opposition to Mittee's purity of spirit.

The novel outlines a number of sexual encounters between Paul and Selina; in each, Selina steps into the scenario as a sexual substitute for Mittee. J.A. Kearney argues that Selina becoming "Paul's substitute lover to compensate him for the coldness of Mittee" is a "bizarre kind of extension of the game" (1995: 104) of dress-up that she plays with her fellow servant, Polly. Selina is indeed often involved in a type of racial role play, yet she becomes not so much Mittee's substitute, which would imply her similarity, as her dark, sexual 'other' within the dynamics of the narrative. The first sexual encounter between Selina and Paul occurs when Paul arrives late for a scheduled rendezvous with Mittee. Mittee has gone to bed in a rage, falling asleep "with her hands beneath her cheek, as Grandma Van Brandenburg had taught us to sleep so that our hands should not get into mischief during the night" (Rooke [1951]1991: 20). Selina is charged, on Mittee's behalf, to tell Paul to "go to hell" (19). Instead, Paul leads her into the grass to press upon her, first, "pain and a bitter, useless regret" and then the abandonment that leads her to "[forget] that I was Selina" (20). Meanwhile, Mittee sleeps peacefully, her posture protecting her from dark temptations, including the act of masturbation.

The metaphor of 'dark temptation' for sexual corruption continues in the episodes of sexual encounter between Paul and Selina. When Paul is discovered and thwarted by his magistrate father "[drawing] Mittee into the darkness" (33), Selina, who has been following the couple in a jealous rage, steps into the role of sexual vamp after Mittee returns to the light of a party. The novel's diction suggests that Paul, by this stage, has indeed "gone to hell" in his association with Selina, as Mittee has previously advised him to do. Selina emerges from the darkness, like the snake in the garden of paradise, drawing Paul into the wild abandon of the South African veld:

I put my breast and thigh against him, undulating slowly like a sun-drugged snake.

Where I learned such behaviour I don't know but that brandy certainly made of life a

simple affair. He put out his hands to ward me off but I slipped between them and wound my arms about him.

‘You smell of brandy, you little devil,’ he whispered.

Suddenly he began to laugh. We danced down the road, beyond the strains of the music, to the patch of veld that bordered the river. (33)

Selina is always looking from the outside in, an aspect of her characterisation emphasising her exclusion from white society. This exclusion is dramatised in an episode in which she peers through a window at the white people dancing as Frikkie plays the accordion. There is a draught and Mittee comes to the window to close it, unaware that Selina is on the other side: “She came to the window to pull it down but Paul was behind her, pressing his body on her as he leaned over to pull the sash down. Then he ran his hands from her breast to her thigh and I saw that look on his face that I had thought belonged to me alone” (83). Although Mittee’s sexuality is evident here, it remains at a remove. The window functions as a kind of mirror allowing Selina simultaneously to recognise her similarity to Mittee *and* her exclusion. Thus she is forced to recognise the intimacy between Paul and Mittee, an intimacy that she will never finally share with Paul because of her race. She drifts away, “down to the spring to lie in the cold grass, sad because I was Selina” (83), where she later hears Paul and Mittee in conversation:

They were beautiful words that he said to her, ‘Look, little heart, if I hold up your hand to the sky so, it is filled with stars ...’

I must not stir my aching limbs or call out to them that I was there. I must wait until they were gone and then I must pack my bundle, I must go away.

‘But little wife...’

Her edged voice stabbed the air. ‘No, not here. If a Kaffir should see...’

There were her feet swishing through the grass as she ran away from him. I thought he would follow her but he did not move away from the spring.

I said softly, ‘Paul.’ (83)

Mittee, in Paul’s words, is linked to a transcendence associated with stars, a disembodiment that Selina herself repeatedly attempts to attain. Although Selina associates the “sight of freedom” with the “savage blaze of the stars” (73) and seeks God in “tree and cloud and star” (76), she also seeks transcendence in her sexual relationship with Paul, which allows her, as

she puts it, to “[forget] that I was Selina” (20). Mittee’s transcendental association therefore incites Selina’s resentment and sexual envy (even though – perhaps because – Mittee is not consistently sexualised within the narrative). In a fit of pique, for example, she rips up the silk reserved for Mittee’s wedding dress. The fabric, as she imagines it, would render its wearer both ethereal and desirable (not only to the male gaze, but to Selina herself): “The touch of it melted into my fingers and I longed to wrap it round my naked body. Beneath it, a woman would be a desirable, boneless creature” (48). Desirable rather than desiring, Mittee is distanced from her physicality. To desire, within the terms of the novel (and it is clear that Selina desires Mittee’s very being), is to be associated with blackness and immanence. Andrina Gouws, for example, a peripheral white teenage character madly in love with her forbidden lover, is possessed of “eager hips” that “roll[...] like any crude Kaffir girl’s” (53).

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have observed, the polarisation of women into opposing images of purity and degradation – into the tropes of “angel” and “monster” (2000: 17) – is common in literature, entering women’s writing through the assumption of patriarchal tropes prevalent in society and in the work of male authors. Representations of women slip easily, therefore, into the “embodiment of [...] extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing” (19). These extremes of otherness are even more starkly emphasised in literature arising within a colonial context and dealing with racial difference. Such literature imbricates patriarchal and racial stereotypes. Thus, while Paulette Coetzee may argue that Rooke’s novels “examine the destructive personal effects of racism, offering uncomfortably close views of racial prejudice and the workings of racist stereotypes” (1997: 4), and R.W. Johnson maintains that “Rooke displays such insight and humane economy that the reader is made aware of the inappropriateness and injustice of those stereotypes even when Rooke is writing of behaviour [...] which appears to confirm them” (2006: 14), her writing itself seems on occasion to become the behaviour that reinforces such tropes. Coetzee and Johnson’s statements perhaps overemphasise her political engagement, ignoring the way in which the narrative operates by yoking Selina and Mittee within a dualistic relation emphasising Mittee’s physical distance and Selina’s sexual availability. Within this relational dynamic, the text is at its most irresolvably ambivalent.

On the one hand, through this strategy Rooke points to the fact that supposedly ‘unacceptable’ female bodies have in fact been acceptable to white men for generations, but secretly so; ‘coloured’ characters in *Mittee* are clearly the products of ‘miscegenation,’ of the exploitation of black women by white men. Indeed, Selina’s racial identity embodies this

very exploitation. Other characters, too, suggest it: a peripheral character, Auntie Lena, is “related to half the families in Plessisburg both white and coloured” (Rooke [1951]1991: 34). According to Selina, “[s]he was related to me in an obscure way on my mother’s side and she certainly bore a resemblance to the Van Brandenburg family” (34). Further, Selina’s eventual husband Fanie’s severely mentally disabled mother, Rebecca, is unable to speak of her past: “nobody knows to this day who fathered Fanie. Somebody must have grabbed her while she wandered on the veld at night and it must have been a white man because Fanie is so light” (116). The novel clearly outlines the issue of the sexual exploitation of women of colour. “You will never be finished with me, baasie” (47), Selina tells Paul, in a moment seemingly representing a widespread and horrific social issue.

Yet, on the other hand, Rooke’s semiotics of sexual appetite racially encode physicality and lust. It is not only Paul’s exploitation of Selina that is at issue but also Selina’s inexplicable and, for the vast duration of the novel, unshakeable desire for him. Despite her terror of him and his persistent physical abuse of her she cannot keep away – a compulsion that cannot entirely be attributed to her desire for equality with Mittee, although it may be rooted in it:

Each time I said to him, I will never come here again. But when the moon was high and nothing stirred on the veld but the night wind, I would leave my mat in Auntie Lena’s house and run down the path; across the road to the great wild fig tree. There I waited, fearful of every sound, [...] fearful that one night he would kill me in his bitter self-abasement. Sometimes he did not come and I would creep home, hoping that was the end of it. (109)

As Zoë Wicomb has argued, Selina’s lust for Paul, in contrast to Mittee’s refinement, reveals her as the “debased servant [...] who has difficulty in constituting herself as a subject” (1989: 17). The author, Wicomb suspects, also has “difficulty in portraying her as such” (17). In fact, by linking Selina to lust in opposition to Mittee’s ethereality, Rooke reifies a well-worn stereotype. Mohamed Adhikari points out that it is popular belief in South Africa that “Coloured people [were] conceived through illicit sexual intercourse immediately on the landing of the first Dutch colonists” (2005: 22) and, accordingly, racist ideology imputes not only illegitimacy but also unrestrained lust to the imagined notion of ‘Colouredness’. As Zoë Wicomb observes, “the nasty, unspoken question of concupiscence [...] haunts coloured identity” (in Adhikari 2005: 22). Indeed Paul du Plessis hurls insults of illegitimacy at Selina:

“Voetsak, you bastard” (Rooke [1951]1991: 31), he tells her when she speaks to him fondly, adopting a “slow, savage voice, deliberately choosing the words that would hurt me most” (31). Selina’s ongoing sexual desire for this sadistic man, regardless of his treatment of her and despite her recognition of his racist “self-abasement” succeeding his encounters with her, completes this well-worn double stereotype of illegitimacy and concupiscence. *Mittee*’s binaries seem ultimately too stark for the novel to transcend them effectively. Selina, observing the white walls of a courtroom and its black furniture, sees these “as its symbols, the white for truth, the black for falsehood” (79). She has, of course, been socialised to perceive colour in this way; however, the novel’s treatment of race and sexuality itself fails to rise above this kind of binary thinking.

The problem with *Mittee*, then, exists firstly in Rooke’s potentially patronising choice of a ‘coloured’ narrator, and secondly within the contrasts contributing to the colonial logic of the text. The topic of white authors writing black characters remains contentious. Contemporary South African author Fiona Snyckers broached it in a recent column for *Mail & Guardian’s Thought Leader*: “White South African authors who create black characters are often challenged about the authenticity of their writing,” she observes. “If their main protagonist is black, this challenge intensifies, and if they write in the first person, it intensifies further” (Snyckers, 11 June 2013). For Snyckers, “It can’t be healthy for writers never to venture outside their comfort zones and that is certainly no way to build a vigorous local literary tradition.” Of course white authors have not ignored blackness, even at the height of apartheid, as the case of Rooke makes clear. Yet writing blackness can ironically reveal a curious blindness to racial otherness. Zoë Wicomb, reading *Mittee* and commenting specifically on Selina’s narration and the manner in which it focuses on race, argues that “a black reading will necessarily problematize the notion of Selina as protagonist” (16). Selina, Wicomb correctly argues, is limited by her connection to whiteness – in her circumstances, characterization and mode of narration. As Wicomb points out, her narrative perspective “encodes the reader as white” (1989: 17). Consequently, Selina’s possibilities are diminished and “Rooke’s handling of sexuality is not without tension for those of us who are excluded as readers” (17).

Thus, as the novel critiques racial essentialism, it also re-inscribes it. While the differences between Selina and Mittee may be ascribed to the social possibilities available to each character, these differences also correspond to the tropes of patriarchal fiction as identified by Gilbert and Gubar, and certainly to the tropes of colonial discourse. The representation of sexuality, which in its critique of an exploitative white society is so

subversive, therefore undermines Selina's specificity, trapping her within the limits set for her by a white author whose attempts to write herself into the consciousness of a black protagonist ultimately fail. Making whiteness visible, then, through the apparent perspective of the racial outsider, is only to some extent an effective political strategy for the white author writing within the context of apartheid South Africa. Indeed, whiteness may become *too* visible, ultimately obscuring differently raced protagonists, however accessibly the text may present them.

Notes:

¹ Graham maintains that the difference between the two editions "has not been remarked on in previously published criticism" (2012: 44). Ian Glenn, however, examines the issue of the censorship of *Mittee* in his 1994 article "The Production and the Prevention of the Colonial Author – The Case of Daphne Rooke," quoting from one of his interviews with Rooke to provide explanation for the altering of the manuscript. Of her British publisher, Victor Gollancz, Rooke comments: "why he wanted that scene changed is because he knew the book would be banned. *Mittee* was a best seller and he intended to sell it" (Glenn 1994: 80).

² This essay refers to the Penguin edition of *Mittee*, which does not include the episode of 'black peril' Graham identifies in the American edition of the novel.

³ Shona Bagley identifies the novel's most admirable qualities as "eruptions of spontaneous joy and hope" and a "saving humour from Selina" (1989: 74). R.W. Johnson also observes that Rooke's "sly humour" is "quite the opposite of the ponderous moralizing the South African situation has too often elicited. It is a remarkable achievement" (2006: 14). Indeed the humour and biting sarcasm of the narrative ensures that *Mittee* does not lapse into the uncomfortable sentimentality evident, for example, in the fiction of white female apartheid-era authors such as Dalene Matthee and Elsa Joubert, whose popular novels *Fiela's Child* (1986) and *Poppie* (1980) respectively feature the focalisation of black female protagonists.

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