

The Idea of “Englishness” and “Black Nothingness” as Colonial Bases in Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut*

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Abstract

Coconut is Kopano Matlwa’s debut novel that has been widely analysed through postcolonial critique in race studies. Existing scholarship has not adequately connected the novel’s portrayal of characters’ “coconuttiness” to the decolonial concept of the colonality of being. This article addresses this gap by examining the marginalisation of Matlwa’s black women characters and their sense of black nothingness. The article argues that the characters’ sense of black nothingness is produced by the idea of normative Englishness that should be understood not only as linguistic or cultural preferences but as a structure of the colonality of being. In foregrounding the idea of black nothingness and Englishness as a disease or dis-ease in understanding women’s characterisation, the depiction of characters’ racialised emptiness and marginality stems from colonial ontologies that reduce black people to being socially and existentially diminished. The women characters’ existential experiences seem to question whether it is possible for black subjects not to be black even in black spaces in South Africa. Thus, in probing the idea of coconut identities, the article argues that *Coconut* exposes problematic ways embodied within the idea of blackness in South Africa and questions colonial existences that have normalised the framework of “coconuttiness” as one possible way of existence. The idea of blackness or black nothingness is indicative of characters who experience discrimination, rejection, abandonment and embody a sense of homelessness. Within the conceptual corpus of decolonial thinking, this article employs Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s concept of the colonality of being to examine the representation of women in *Coconut*. From the decolonial lens, Englishness is read as the colonality of being manifesting in the normalisation of violence against women and their existential experiences. In this way, the article reads *Coconut* as a black letter and explores its stylistic epistolary intentions that capture the everyday voices and struggles of black people.

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Introduction¹

We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups, speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our umqombothi laughs. They will scold us if we dare, not with lips, Lord, because the laws prevent them from doing so, but with their eyes. They will shout, 'stop acting black!' [...] And we will pause perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are we not black, Father? No, not in malls, Lord. We may not be black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools.

Kopano Matlwa in *Coconut* (2007, 31, *italics original*).

This epigraph points to the fact of blackness (or the presence of a black body) as that which cannot be welcomed in the community of “being.” Frantz Fanon (1952, 88) puts it better: “The evidence was there, unalterable. My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me.” The unalterable evidence of blackness, dark and unarguable, is the unacceptability, the vulgarisation, and the existential crisis of the black subject. In this case, Ofilwe piously directs her question to God: “[...] for are we not black, Father?” This idea of black nothingness is central in *Coconut*. What Ofilwe’s existential experiences seem to question is whether it is possible for a black subject not to be black even in black spaces in South Africa after 1994. In her analysis of Kopano Matlwa’s novels, Carli Coetzee (2019, 132) avers that “coconut discourse is a discourse of skin”—it is a racial discourse. The inkling of a coconut or “coconuttiness” appears to have been evoked by Natasha Distiller (2005), who writes on how studying William Shakespeare’s plays matters in South African schools since “coconuttiness” does erase or oppose blackness but is an attempt to negotiate black identity within black spaces.

In describing “coconuttiness” as a conflicted identity, Distiller (2005, 32) posits that a coconut is “a state of being ‘less of what Africa dreamed of and more of what Europe thought we ought to be.’” Similarly, Ndumiso Ngcobo (2008), writing after the publication of Matlwa’s *Coconut*, gives a sense that “coconuttiness” is perceived as embracing Western norms of speech, behaviour, mannerism, or even dress. Ngcobo argues that “people who use words like coconut do so because they lack the vocabulary to say what they really mean, which is ‘Eurocentric’.” However, Ngcobo concludes that people need to embrace that cultures are dynamic and there is no single mode of being African. Building on Distiller (2005) and Ngcobo (2005), I argue that Matlwa’s “coconuttiness” equivocates in a double sense: of both resistance and conformity to Eurocentric ideas, as we read of Ofilwe and Fikile, respectively. The meaning of coconut as represented through Fikile is characterised by poverty and a desire to be English. This way, Matlwa evokes forms of “coconuttiness” among black individuals

1 This article is adapted from my PhD thesis submitted to the University of Pretoria (see Ncube 2022)

as aspiring to efficaciousness in the material sense and in the white world. Yet, in portraying conscious “coconutteness” in Ofilwe and Tshepo, Matlwa aspires towards the creation of a pluriverse—suggesting a freer, more open and varied existence, or a recognition of the validity of differences in identity. This is to argue that the bringing to life of conscious coconut identities is an attempt to create a pluriverse for the colonised beings, which is another idea of knowing the self and the world.

This notwithstanding, this article argues that *Coconut* illustrates problematic ways of being black in South Africa and questions colonial existences that have normalised the idea that Fikile-like “coconutteness” is one permissible and possible way of existence. Scholarship on *Coconut* has engaged with the psyche of Matlwa’s characters such as Ofilwe and Fikile, who are subjected to Eurocentric ideas of knowing themselves cultivated by Judeo-Christian knowledges (see Phiri 2008; Hlongwane 2013; Gqibitole 2019). Coetzee (2019, 126), who reads Matlwa’s novels as a set, siblings or friends, argues that they can be analysed as self-help texts—texts that are forms of healing and shaped by socialites. Reading this way, she concludes that, since Matlwa writes of other ways of being, her novels demand a black-centred reading practice and should be characterised as life-writing and self-imagining texts. Although Matlwa’s epistolary intentions capture the everyday voices that are pronounced, very few critics have engaged with her novels as black “woman” letters. Critics such as Penelope Midzi (2019) have made comparative connections between *Coconut* and Tony Morrison’s (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, which is not surprising because, in an interview with Palesa Motsumi (2012), Matlwa confirms that Toni Morrison influences her writing. In fact, Aretha Phiri (2013, 171) proposes that readers should read *Coconut* “as a contemporary revision of Morrison’s essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*”—a text concerned with race and duplicity.

Tlhalo Raditlhalo’s (2010) reading of *Coconut* problematises the neglect of culture after South Africa’s freedom as resulting in identity crises and asks if it is possible for a black person not to be black. These debates are extended further by critics such as Jessica Murray (2012), who examine the idea of what I call the coloniality of beauty. Interestingly, Nafeesa Nichols (2021) has recently looked at Matlwa’s depiction of intimate and sexualised violence in domestic spaces in *Coconut*. Using this growing body of scholarship as a point of departure, I examine how gender oppression becomes manifest in the characters’ existential experiences. In my reading, I juxtapose Fanonian ideas of black nothingness with the decolonial ideas of the coloniality of being depicted in this novel as emanating from the idea of “Englishness.”

In decolonial thinking, the idea of the coloniality of being is best articulated by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), who argues that humanity suffered a form of colonisation known as the coloniality of power, such that the colonised are pushed to sub-human categories of humanity or confined in Fanon’s (1952) zones of non-being. Maldonado-Torres (2007, 242), who expands on Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) and Walter D. Mignolo’s (2007) concepts of the coloniality of power, says that the coloniality of being is typified

by misanthropic scepticism, which is an attitude of permanent suspicion about the humanity of those who have been colonised and enslaved. This is to perceive blackness through Fanon's (1952) fact of blackness, where blackness is reduced to stereotypes and subjected to the white gaze. While blackness is existential and unavoidable, black nothingness is a psychic nothingness that has marginalised and confined black people into Fanon's zones of non-being. This is to say that black nothingness has been constructed through inferiorisation such that it creates envy of whiteness to the extent of invisibilising itself. Part of what accentuates blackness as an oppressed mode of existence is the Englishness—both as cultural identity and social characteristics that distinguish English people of the Empire from the rest (or the waste). Manthia Diawara (1990, 830) defines Englishness as the “privileging of a certain use of language, literature, ideology, and history of one group over populations that it subordinates itself.” This means that Englishness represents the perfectionism of the coloniser that disempowers the colonised subject and considers it as a copy.

Seeing that English produces blackness as its other, the image of blackness pollutes the purity of Englishness. Matlwa's characters like Ofilwe and Fikile are constructed through conceptual frameworks of black nothingness and Englishness such that their being is deficient, lacking, and their existence is colonised in total. Indeed, the coloniality of being “makes primary reference to the lived experiences of colonisation and its impact on language” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 242). This article argues that the coloniality of being, as the manipulation of the characters' existence (and how they know themselves) speaks to the idea of Englishness as a disease and dis-ease. And, since Matlwa creates black women characters, there is a suggestion that women's lives are at stake—they continue to be disfigured, misshaped, and reshaped long after colonialism itself has ended. Furthermore, I problematise the issue of Englishness as it is linked to education, language, religion, and being.

Telling Difficult Stories through the Epistle Form²

In *Coconut*, Matlwa writes intersecting stories of black young girls, Ofilwe Tlou and Fikile, a young girl from a rich family who lives in an affluent white suburb and the other lives in an impoverished black township in South Africa, respectively. The novel is set soon after Apartheid has ended. Like the title of the novel that is derived from a coconut fruit that has a black outside and white inside, the two characters struggle with their identities of blackness, particularly their acceptability by white society that seemingly has set standards on how to “be.” Ofilwe is isolated on two fronts: black as she is on the outside, and in the comfort of wealth and white surroundings, she has lost

2 Matlwa's diary/letter/journal/memoir-like novels follow the tradition of the epistolary novel that allows the reader to directly hear the characters' voices. The epistolary not only foregrounds the characters' experiences but turns the fabula into real-life likeness and, in the process, establishes an emotional relationship between the reader and the addressee. On women's epistle writing, see Susan Ondrus (2014).

touch with her blackness and her black heritage. At the same time, her white classmates and neighbours cannot accept her as white. On the other hand, Fikile, white on the inside, has had a difficult childhood and envies Ofilwe's life and is determined to work towards it through her "Project Infinity." Matlwa's fiction and epistolary style permit Ofilwe and Fikile to think out loud on paper; it also depicts the effect that colonialism and Apartheid have on "the born frees" today and the possible recovery of a colonised self.³ Matlwa juxtaposes being "born free" with the problematic idea of identity formation. The identity crisis can be best summarised by the story of the Pear and the Green Apple told by Old Virginia to Tshepo, which Tshepo later relates to Ofilwe. In the allegory, the Green Apples grew bold, proud, and evil, and starts destroying those that have not yet ripened, breaking them and smashing them on rocks, while the Pears began hurting themselves, one accusing the other of growing differently "without the long neck that was common to Pears," and by so doing, other Pears begin paying allegiance to Green Apples and shame other Pears as "parasitic" (Matlwa 2007, 35–36).

Matlwa problematises the idea of post-apartheid identity as indicative of coconut identities, attitudes, and tendencies. The analogy of Green Apples and Pears speaks to the Tlous who do not quite fit in the Green Apple's family, such that after they "forgot to be careful" and "having proved [themselves] through numerous dead Pears, that [they] believed for sure that the [real] Green Apples saw [them] as one of their own," they discover that they do not fit in the Green Apple's family. The middle-class Tlous, who are the-not-so-Green-Apples, are similar to all other Pears "yanked off the trees and thrown against a rock" (Matlwa 2007, 37). This, in the main, speaks about "coconuttiness" and the identity crises that characterise post-apartheid South Africa.

The allegory of Green Apples and Pears speaks of assimilation as cultural and imperial domination of the colonised people and effectively denies Ofilwe and Fikile their full humanity. Ofilwe and her family, as well as Fikile, do not fit in the "white" spaces. In her question, "[...] for are we not black, Father?" Ofilwe is aware that she is no longer a Pear but assimilated to be a Green Apple that fails to fit in at Silver Spoon Coffee Shop. Besides being regulars at the restaurant, despite residing in the affluent suburb of Little Valley Country Estate, and her father, John Tlou, a successful businessman who has established his computer company, Ofilwe discovers that they are not treated with due courtesy as the staff treats its white patrons. She says, "We are regulars here at Silver Spoon but are not chummy with Miss Becky, the owner, like other regulars" (Matlwa 2007, 30). In fact, Ofilwe observes that their usual waitress, Fikile (whose story is narrated in the second part of the novel), does not care about them either as she talks eagerly with other white patrons. What seems to bother Ofilwe is that her family has not tried enough to fit in "[...] we have not tried enough to assimilate ourselves into the

3 Siphon Mpongo (2016) complicates the understanding and identity of a "born free" generation by contesting the idea of their "born freeness." By asking what it means to be "born free," Mpongo points to the confusion of using such terminology that suggests an idea of a free generation when the post-apartheid youth is afflicted with unemployment, poverty, inequality, and hopelessness.

Silver Spoon Coffee Shop family tree” (Matlwa 2007, 30). What Ofilwe refers to as “assimilation” may be thought of in terms of Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova’s (2006) concept of assimilation—a dependence on the modern colonial world. Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006, 212) identify assimilation as consisting of wanting to become like the superior other and therefore yielding to the imperial language, knowledge, and subjectivity. Even when the Tlous believe in assimilation, Ofilwe discovers that the world in which she exists militates against their existence, as they deny themselves and are denied the opportunity to be themselves. Lydia Spencer (2009, 66) best summarises the problem of assimilation in *Coconut* by noticing that Ofilwe and Fikile “find themselves in an in-between space where they are either too black to be white or too white to be black.” The surveillance of the Tlou family’s existence and the gaze at Silver Spoon alienate them not only from others but also against themselves as they fail to eat with their fingertips or laugh the way they want in observance of Western table manners.

The fact that they risk being scolded if they act black, or should they dare speak and laugh in their language, points to what Tendayi Sithole (2016) refers to as an anti-Black world that militates against their existence. The anti-Black world is a racist society that militates against the black subject such that black subjectivity is structural, minuscule and hidden in everyday life, which makes it difficult to explain in the realm of common sense. From the characters’ locus of enunciation, Englishness becomes a source of pain as it reminds them of their blackness and dictates how they need to world their world.⁴ In *Coconut*, Matlwa (2007, 31) portrays how it feels to “Stop acting black,” particularly for Ofilwe (and ironically for Fikile too).

Writing in and of South Africa, a country described by Sandile Memela (2013, n.p.) as the “loyal satellite of Europe,” Matlwa’s idea of assimilation spells the inhabitation of the middle space that is inhabited by the black middle class and those experiencing structural violence. To inhabit the middle space as characterised by the so-called middle class is to be conflicted because, while it may suggest people of middle income, it also suggests a conflicting state of being and not being—of being in the middle of cultures and economy. Yet, this in-betweenness, as seen in Ofilwe and Tshepo, follows Homi Bhabha’s theorisation of the “third space” characterised by cultural hybridity. As a result of South Africa’s colonial history and Apartheid, the third space must be perceived as “The process of cultural hybridity [that] gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990, 211). This points to an in-betweenness that is at the border where several cracks emerge as a result of colonisation.⁵ Matlwa’s third space becomes a discursive condition of enunciation of “coconuttiness,” and this results in two things contemporaneously. First, it largely results in Maldonado-Torres’s idea of coloniality of being that is characterised by the denial of one’s humanity and being

4 Locus of enunciation is a geographical space and epistemic location from which one is and thinks.

5 Mignolo (2000, 39) notices that writing from the border envisions a space for the elaboration of alternative spatial imaginaries and creates a space for resistance.

through forced, violent and rigid binaries that enforce existential locks for the colonised people. And/ or secondly, it results in Bhabha's third space that serves as a site of a certain kind of "coconutness" that can best be characterised as resistance. The in-betweenness as read in Matlwa's novel seeks to show the borders through the hybrid characters, and I read this idea of "coconutness" as what translates to the decoloniality of being—a being who, despite his/her conformity to Englishness, like Fikile, is at least conscious of the technologies of her subjection, and like Ofilwe, attempts to resist these technologies.

"Beautiful Hair" and Cultural Violence

Arguably, Matlwa portrays coconut characters as subjects who live in the realm of exclusion and erasure, yet they claim inclusion in a register that excludes them. Phiri (2013, 166) links a coconut to "the exotic coconut fruit, with its brown shell and milky white flesh [which] connotes a physically, visually dark (black) person who is metaphysically white." Fred Khumalo (2011, n.p.) thinks that the term "coconut" is "almost as hurtful as 'kaffir'," and that "a coconut refers to a self-loathing black person who looks up to white people to validate his or her self-worth." When Matlwa (2007) writes of coconut characters as those in the middle class, she writes of and against Western civilisation and writes of subjects who must be understood from their position of existential subjection. In *Coconut*, the exclusionary structures make black characters non-existent even when they act white. I propose an argument here that such exclusion is not only a way of dismembering black "women" characters like Ofilwe but also a way of dictating how they should know themselves and their world. Indeed, one way of forgetting themselves is to stop acting black.

Matlwa (2007) portrays stopping acting black as not only an inward desire for whiteness but also one's desire to change her outward natural appearance to conform to the white gaze. Reflecting on her existential conditions, Fikile says, "They can serve as a constant reminder to me of what I do not want to be: black, dirty and poor. This bucket can be a daily motivator for me to keep me working towards where I will someday be: white, rich and happy" (Matlwa 2007, 118). The act of mimicking whiteness as an infinite project (as Fikile realises) cannot be attained. What Fikile terms *project infinity* is her strong ambition to be included in the white register. Both Fikile and Ofilwe live under Jeremy Bentham's (1995) panopticon of surveillance—a register that partially tolerates them but finally rejects them. Writing on the concept of black subjection, Sithole (2016) avers that blackness as a subject "without" (a subject of lack) is often placed on the ontological margins of being non-human. When Matlwa's (2007) female characters experience structural violence and exist in the register of white enunciation, as Sithole (2016, 31) observes of such bodies that "lack" in general, their consciousness of the body becomes negative—their bodies become a thing unwanted such that they desire to escape from it.

One way of escaping from "blackness" is through reading the female characters' outward appearance. Matlwa juxtaposes the politics of black hair with the pain of

straightening it to conform to Euro-centric standards of beauty. The novel begins with Ofilwe in church looking at Sponono's braids tied by "an old and tattered woollen hairband [which] makes shapes of eight into and out of the blackness" (Matlwa 2007, 1). And, since she is very young, she unplucks her hair braid, causing herself pain, ending with her crying—a discomfort felt by everyone in the church. It must be noted that Ofilwe's first-person narration is interrupted by an italicised narration of the past which merges with the present. Ofilwe remembers: "*Ous Beauty would seat me on a high stool, so I could swing my legs while I waited for her to finish washing, blowing, dyeing, cutting, perming and styling her other customer's hair*" (Matlwa 2007, 3 italics original). Ofilwe may not be swinging her legs today, but the dyeing, styling, and perming of her hair and that of others is still "present" today as denoted by the iterative modal "would." While this is one way of making the past present, it is another way of making the ever-present the future, and this is foregrounded by the frequent act of treating hair. Such a narrative style suggests a continuous, unbroken presence of past traumatic incidents in the present.

Triggered by little Sponono's braids, Ofilwe's mind wanders off to her classmate, Kate Jones, whom she describes as "overfed and hoggish [...] spoilt and haughty [...] rude and foul-mouthed. But with such hair Kate was glorious" (Matlwa 2007, 1). Later, Ofilwe says that because of Kate's hair, even her teachers who were dazzled by its radiance overlooked the red crosses in her workbooks, and "little black girls scattered helter-skelter, doing her favours in return for a feel of her hair" (Matlwa 2007, 1). The depiction of Kate's hair, which embodies beauty standards of hair among black "women" in general, is an indication of ongoing conversations about regulating "black" women's beauty standards, which resonates with Sithandiwe Bengu's (2025) findings that black women's aesthetics are policed under colonial and patriarchal normativity. In the quest to discipline black women's beauty, the valorisation of Kate's hair signifies conformity to the idea of Englishness; as Bengu (2025, 2) observes that "the scrutiny and regulation of Afro-textured hair within schools, workplaces, and public institutions cannot be separated from broader systems of racial and gendered control that seek to render Black femininity as deviant, unruly, or non-normative." In *Coconut*, Matlwa portrays the urgent need to straighten coarse natural black hair today, as reflected by the booming hair industry. The straightening of black hair is juxtaposed with the pain and the hazardous chemicals that are used, amounting to self-inflicted violence, all done to erase one's blackness and attain the dominant idea of beauty.

What Ofilwe and other black girls of her age go through at school profiles the lived experiences of being a black "woman" subject in an anti-black world. Her desire for Kate's hair and the endurance of pain that she subjects herself to is a way of denying their blackness—or at least a validation of their black nothingness. In this case, black nothingness refers to the continuous subjection to structural and cultural violence, which includes physical and mental violence. Indubitably, physical or somatic violence is the representation of beauty as pain and the risk of undergoing burnt scalps to qualify as a human or a "woman". Keletso Mopai's (2019) short story entitled "Hair Tales" depicts

the women's lack of choice with regard to African natural hair. Mopai's (2019) three vignettes tell of the dilemma of hair stories of three African girls in post-apartheid South Africa, Tshepo, Rosina and Lisakhanya, who are compelled to comb their hair to their white teachers' liking and are subsequently denigrated because of their blackness. Indeed, this portrays the traumatic experiences linked to the continuing legacy of racist ideas of beauty, colourism, and apartheid views on language. The lasting risk of policing women's hair is the risk that it poses to the mental well-being of black subjects—the psychological damage it carries to be “women.” Toks Oyedemi (2016, 537) argues that psychological damage amounts to cultural violence since it manifests through identity erasure and Eurocentric distortion of black women's perception of self and beauty. The normalised concept of “beautiful” black hair today bears what Matlwa represents as pervading structural violence—some form of violence that has become acceptable or at least that does not feel wrong.

Oyedemi (2016, 541) observes that “structural violence is indirect and it is built into social structures of social relations: class, hierarchy, race, and all other systems that are socially constructed that display inequality and unequal distribution of power.” Earlier, Yves Winter (2012, 195) observed that the concept of structural violence includes “poverty, hunger, subordination, and social exclusion.” When Fikile embarks on what she interprets as her “project infinity” (an interminable process of trying to make herself white), it is—a reminder of the reproduction of racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness as a measure of desirability. Writing of pain as beauty in *Coconut*, Murray (2012) explores the contemporary ideas of women's beauty and argues that women's appearance is manipulated to look feminine. To look feminine is to aspire to white feminine-ness, it is to be a modern being, a conforming rational being. In the modern “rational” world, it is a way to tame black women's “wildness” so that they are brought closer to the family of white feminine beings or civilised beings.

The policing and pathologising of black women's bodies not only dehumanise them but also erase them such that their invisibility is tantamount to their non-existence. Thus, Matlwa's (2007) hair leitmotif highlights the linguistic, skin colour, language, and gender differences. Panashe Chigumadzi (2015, n.p.) observes that in South African schools today, there is a “certain universalism rooted in the white child and white culture, despite the schools now having black children.” She expands:

The Hair regulations, like many other schools' policies, are created with the assumption of the pupil as a white child. The assumption of the pupil with ‘hair that falls’ and ‘hair that is neat’ and, and if it cannot do so naturally, it can and must be made to do so. (Chigumadzi 2015, n.p.)

Similarly, in a recent observation, Zolisa Mtyalela (2026, 4) concludes that most white South African schools “often perpetuate an insidious expectation for black girls to conform to white beauty standards, leading them to self-deceive and evaluate themselves accordingly.” Through oppression, black people (and particularly black women) participate in the ever-growing colonial and capitalist market for hair and

women's beauty products that seek to bring them closer to whiteness. As we witness Ofilwe's mother, who buys her hair at Ashanti Boutique, the hair business in South Africa is a profit-oriented, booming capitalist market that ignores the risks of hazardous chemicals not only to straighten black hair but to "Whiten" black women's skins.

Splitting Hairs: Blackness and Disfigured Subjects

Matlwa's portrayal of black hair and body chemicals to either straighten hair or lighten skin from being "too black" points to blackness' non-being and its erasure. In a world that militates against blackness, where blackness refers to backwardness or barbarism and seeks to flee from itself, such a world is characterised by cultural violence. Matlwa portrays cultural violence as manifesting itself in the symbolic realm of human existence, which also extends to Englishness, not only of language that Ofilwe asks, "Do all South Africans think in English?" (Matlwa 2007, 50). Or is Englishness only the "TV language" she speaks, that "daddy spoke at work, the one Mama never could get right, the one that spoke of sweet success" (Matlwa 2007, 54). Englishness is not only the language that Ofilwe is denied, such that when three unidentical white members of the school governing body visit the school, Ms Khumalo feels a need to dispute her version that English is her first language and randomly places her under isiZulu: "just tick her under Zulu, it's all the same" (Matlwa 2007, 56).

Englishness represents more than Ofilwe's awareness "from a very young age that Sepedi would not take [her] far" (Matlwa 2007, 54). Consequently, the repetition of "Englishness" at the beginning of consecutive sentences is purposeful, functioning as a rhetorical device that underscores intersectional dimensions through which Englishness operates both as language and a mechanism of cultural oppression. Ma'Shingayi in Tsitsi Dangarembga's (1988) *Nervous Conditions* characterises Englishness as a disease that killed Nhamo, and so, as Tambudzai sets out for a boarding school, is warned against. Matlwa (2007) portrays Englishness as a dis-ease with the maintenance of the modern matrix of racism that takes forms of cultural violence and oppression.

Englishness is the colonisation of space such that when Ofilwe is asked if she was born in Johannesburg, other children such as Zama dispute it and say that she was born "in a stinky shack!" (Matlwa 2007, 14). Englishness denies characters such as Ofilwe and Fikile knowledge of self in favour of knowledge of the Other, just like grandmother Tlou's disproportionate knowledge about the British royal family as opposed to her deficient knowledge of her culture. Ofilwe notices that "Grandmother Tlou took a week off from work at the Department of Education after she heard the news of the sudden death of Diana, Princess of Wales" and did not eat for three days; she wore black as a sign of mourning (Matlwa 2007, 17). Ofilwe's father expresses disgust at her behaviour: "Daddy chided Grandmother Tlou for appearing to be more devastated over the death of the princes than that of her own husband four years earlier" (Matlwa 2007, 18). Indeed, it is the Sepedi culture, rituals, and practices that the family has lost in the Englishness. Lost in the Englishness, Ofilwe confesses that she does not know what the mourning "women" should wear, "which way the yellow mattress should face, how long

[the mourning person] should dress in black [...]” (Matlwa 2007, 8). Cultural violence is the forgetfulness of self as seen in the Tlou family’s sense of loss during the thanksgiving ceremony, where their milieu cannot allow them to be black enough. Englishness is the desire to be white in every sense, which, when Fikile is asked what she wants to be when she grows up, she proclaims that she wants to be white because to be white is better than blackness (Matlwa 2007, 136). Englishness is the existential threat experienced by black people in non-black suburbs, and this goes beyond Ofilwe’s Valley Country Estate to include Fikile’s Mphe Batho Township—spaces in the democratic state where there is a clash of cultures. The exclusion of cultures appears to be capitalist-motivated and materially inclined, which translates to the exclusion of some people, particularly the “black” and poor. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) observes that English, along with other colonial languages, functions as a classed and racialised instrument of modern capitalism and imperialism. Colonial languages, Ngũgĩ (1986, 20) contends, operate as tools of exclusion that orient Africans towards material values aligned with Western interests.

The appalling depth of black nothingness is vividly articulated when Ofilwe reflects on Parents’ Evening Sessions at her school, exposing the alienations and emptiness that permeate her lived experiences. Ofilwe does not want her mother (who cannot speak English fluently) to visit the school, and describes her as an embarrassment, “a metallic blue-black in colour” and disparages her father for marrying a “nothing girl of a nothing woman and a man we know only as irrelevant” (Matlwa 2007, 52). She characterises her mother as leading a “life of nothingness [because she is] a nothing [...]” (Matlwa 2007, 52). It is therefore not surprising of Ofilwe to see sub-classes among the poor people, “even amongst the poor there are those who are lower class.

Perhaps it is consoling for us that there is always someone who is worse off: they are a group who are always dumped with the heap of scorn that has been offloaded onto our own heads” (Matlwa 2007, 52). While Ofilwe thinks that her mother is the worst black, Tshepo calls Ofilwe “Aunt Jemina” (a sell-out) because, like Fikile’s Gloss Magazine’s priceless possessions, Ofilwe keeps pictures of her white heroes on the wall. Evoking Old Virginia’s Green Apples and Pear allegory, Tshepo tells Ofilwe:

You will find, Ofilwe, that the people you strive so hard to be like will one day reject you because as much as you may pretend, you are not one of their own. Then you will turn back, but there too you will find no acceptance, for those you once rejected will no longer recognise the thing you have become [...] stuck between two worlds, shunned by both. (Matlwa 2007, 93)

The argument I submit here is that Matlwa draws the reader’s attention to how her characters not only suffer from the colonial ideology of beauty but also from structural and cultural violence where violence is orchestrated by an indirect violator. Cultural violence, the novel shows, debases blackness and what it means to be a black (and/or poor) South African “woman” subject. The characters’ acceptability of debased blackness plays into the hands of a white register of how black people should act or

look. This is a form of disappearing black people. At most, and since the Tlou family is in the middle-class category (an economic hierarchy), it is as if their middle-ness (or “coconutteness”) makes them immune from being ideologically poor. I submit that Matlwa portrays being black middle class as ideologically similar to the poor class of Fikile since they experience the same structural violence in South Africa.

However, the portrayal of the middle class is different from positioning oneself in the middle space. Indeed, the middle space that Tshepo occupies, dressed in the African kaftans, whenever he plays the African drum, and whenever he wants to think, is the cultural borderline of consciousness that resembles Bhabha’s third space. Tshepo’s middle space is a position of re-membering and resisting being vulgarised and self-vulgarisation. Indeed, occupying the middle space may symbolise that “coconutteness” may not be derogatory after all, at least in the context of characters trying to push back.

Chigumadzi (2015) and Michael Chapman (2014) suggest that “coconutteness” is a new South African identity. Like Ngcobo (2018), Chigumadzi (2015) claims this identity by describing herself as a conscious coconut—people who do not wish to be white, but who are ever protesting against their dehumanisation. Similar to Tshepo, who declares that his skin is black and keeps on reminding Ofilwe of her Pedi-ness, Chigumadzi (2015) notes that coconuts who have become conscious are joining hands in the anti-racist struggles. Read this way, “coconutteness” becomes an identity of continuous struggle. Thus, Matlwa constructs the coconut identity as equivocating in a double sense: a coconut desiring whiteness and a coconut pushing back. Elsewhere, Chapman (2014, 166) challenges that:

Although negative connotations prevail, the traits of the so-called coconut can be viewed also in a positive light: the individual (the modern) who is Western in style [...] the individual person who has a broadly Western education and in the ex-colonies, therefore can converse reasonably fluently in the ex-colonial language (which in South Africa is English); the person who, whatever his/her race or gender, invites the broad classification, middle class.

What stands out from Chapman is that Western and Eurocentric culture, including Western education, continues to exert an impact on the identity formation of the colonised. In constructing the idea of “coconutteness” this way, Matlwa demonstrates that a decolonial being, like Tshepo, must be prepared to learn to unlearn and relearn the world and shift his or her worldview from the Eurocentric perspective to value local knowledge ecologies.

Welcome “Black”: Englishness and Capitalism

To be welcomed as “black” in post-Apartheid South Africa entails being measured against Englishness and capitalism, configurations that discipline identity into fractured forms. In *Coconut*, Matlwa portrays the Englishness paradox: on the one hand, showing how adopting Englishness as a cultural code functions as cultural capital of distinction.

Fikile perceives Englishness as upward mobility and a symbol of modernity. On the other hand, for Ofilwe, Englishness embodies inadequacy and lack—a symbolic marker of being less African. Thus, Matlwa’s representation of black existential subjection points to a need for blackness to embrace itself. The disfiguring of black subjects starts from the school where Ofilwe’s unused Sepedi language is “blown up or deleted or [...] shredded up into a gazillion fragments or degenerated or decomposed into a nasty smell and excreted out of her body” (Matlwa 2007, 57). Gugu Hlongwane (2013) argues that the children’s death in South African classrooms is not only due to the indoctrination of whiteness, of William Shakespeare’s programming that Fikile’s uncle “spew[s] out [...] as if he thought them up himself” (Matlwa 2007, 99). The other death of children in South Africa’s classrooms is that of their “being,” where, like Fanon, the unalterable evidence of their blackness disturbs and angers them. In Matlwa’s *Coconut*, education emerges as a contradiction, simultaneously promising empowerment through cultural capital while producing alienation and disempowerment, as seen in Tshepo’s experience.

John Tlou uses his education against Gemina during a quarrel, just as much as Ofilwe is disgusted by her mother’s level of English. Conversely, it is Fikile’s ability to speak English that makes her “be,” that makes her alienate herself from everyone black on the train, even though she is a school dropout herself. In fact, for Fikile, it is her condition that serves as a perfect reminder “of what [she] does not want to be: black, dirty and poor,” and her condition serves as “a daily motivator for [her] to keep [herself] working towards where [she] will someday be: white, rich and happy” (Matlwa 2007, 118). What is evident from Ofilwe and Fikile’s characterisation is what Chapman (2014) reads as the possibility of multiple coconut identities of blackness. Indeed, Phiri (2013, 171) asserts that “it is problematic, if not regressive, in a culturally and socio-economically evolving nation to continuously and simplistically equate capitalist ideology and practice with a particular racial hue – white – and a more rustic ideology with its opposite – black.” However, my argument is not directed at the impossibility of the plurality of blackness in Matlwa’s (2007) portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa, nor do I regress to the racial politics of hue, but it is important to point out the need for white genocide or the end of white supremacy as suggested by George Ciccariello-Maher’s Christmas wish tweet in 2016.⁶

In *Coconut*, at the characters’ representational level, in portraying Ofilwe and Tshepo, characters who question themselves and who are consciously aware of their state of oppression, Matlwa’s idea of “coconutteness” suggests that, even though a coconut

6 In 2016, George Ciccariello-Maher of Drexel University tweeted that his Christmas was to see “white genocide” happen. His tweet turned into a media sensation both on social media and at the university—a controversy caused by the misinterpretation of “white genocide.” In calming the situation, Robert Harmandez (2016), a researcher at San Diego State University, explained the need for “white genocide.”

generation is undesirable, it is better to have a generation that refuses to conform to Euro-centric forms of existence.

To a large extent, while *Coconut* depicts blackness as produced by the white gaze, it is produced so that it can advance white capitalist interests. Matlwa (2007) writes about Fikile's uncle Silas Nyoni, who is used as fodder to partner with Mr Dix, the CEO of Borman-Nkosinathi at Hyde Park. That is, for Mr Dix to qualify for the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programme meant to empower black people, Silas Nyoni (a security officer) is made to pretend to be the Operations Manager. His mastery of Shakespeare, which Tambudzai in *The Book of Not* (2006) also does, fails to elevate him or even guarantee his inclusion into the white register.

Silas, despite being a Cape Town University dropout, fails to speak and stand up for himself, but takes this humiliation to Fikile back home through sexual abuse. He says, "And I just think sometimes that maybe if I spoke up, said something profound or gave an insightful suggestion, then maybe they'd see that there's more to the security officer than just a black skin and Shakespeare" (Matlwa 2007, 107). Like Silas, the portrayal of Fikile and Ofilwe and their failures to include themselves in the register of whiteness is Matlwa's way of re-imagining black womanhood—that which is forever in the struggle. Matlwa not only asks about the black South African identity crisis, but also asks the question whether black people and black women in particular are free after the freedom wars and the end of apartheid.

Conclusion

Coconut provides a preliminary framework for thinking about the foundations of knowledge that impact our being-in-the-world. In a way, Matlwa weighs in and repositions the robust philosophical debates on the fact of blackness in South Africa. In her work, Matlwa questions the making of black women as those whose understanding can be traced to a Eurocentric and monolithic understanding of the politics of respectability and imperial aesthetics. Matlwa's novel illustrates that Englishness has an impact on the colonised's way of being-in-the-world. This includes forms of knowledge and the functioning of societies. In a dialogue with Tshepo, Ofilwe wonders, "*Christianity, a product? Lord, are you listening to this? Are you crazy Tshepo? Our whole social system is built on Christianity: our calendars, holidays, laws. Our upbringing. Now you want to tell me that it is a whole scam?*" and Tshepo insists that all that he knows is that he is black (Matlwa 2007, 5 italics original). As a result of this socialisation dilemma, Matlwa expands and repositions our understanding of "coconutteness" by foregrounding how black people, and black "women" in particular, inhabit their world, and how their existence, and their thinking create nervous conditions, a la Dangarembga. While Matlwa opens avenues for other ways of thinking by abandoning the monocultures of the mind, she foregrounds and reconstructs epistolary writing into a genre that expounds on the lived experiences and the existential circumstances of women. The women's existential crisis in post-apartheid South Africa

is a result of colonial dictates of how they should exist, how they should appear, and how they should be visible—only as silenced people, invisibilised, and dispensable.

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