

White Bread and Whitewashing: Whiteness and Food in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*

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Summary

Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, published in Afrikaans in the year of South Africa's transition to democracy, and in English five years later, remains one of the most powerfully cogent deconstructions of whiteness and Afrikaner nationalism to have appeared in local literature in the last twenty-five years. While a relatively large body of scholarship has analysed Van Niekerk's interrogation of whiteness in the novel, this article focuses specifically on the everyday quotidian practices through which whiteness is maintained and perpetuated as an epistemic formation. Most Afrikaans and English criticism briefly emphasises food imagery in *Triomf* to signify not only the Benades' economic impoverishment but also their moral and cultural degeneracy: the Benades – the family on which the novel centres – subsist on an unwholesome diet of margarine-smearred white bread, polony and Klipdrift brandy. However, critics' cursory mentions of food imagery do not do justice to the nuanced and dexterous manner in which Van Niekerk employs food discourse to destabilise whiteness and show it up as a heterogenous construction. In this article, I analyse instances in the novel where the family interacts with food in various spaces in order to offer new and different ways in which whiteness can be read productively in the South African context.

Opsomming

Marlene van Niekerk se roman, *Triomf*, verskyn in 1994 in Afrikaans toe Suid-Afrika amptelik oorgegaan het na 'n demokratiese bestel. Die Engelse vertaling van die roman verskyn vyf jaar daarna. Geweeg teen ander literêre tekste wat ook binne die afgelope 25 jaar plaaslik verskyn het, bly *Triomf* tot op hede een van die mees oortuigende dekonstruksies van wittees en Afrikanernasionalisme. Terwyl daar reeds 'n betreklik uitvoerige korpus navorsing bestaan wat handel oor Van Niekerk se ondervraging van wittees in dié roman, is hierdie artikel spesifiek gemoeid met sekere alledaagse praktyke waardeur wittees as epistemiese struktuur onderhou en voortgesit word. Die meerderheid bestaande Afrikaans- en Engelstalige kritiek oor die roman beklemtoon kortliks die kosbeelde in *Triomf* as tekenend van nie net die Benades se ekonomiese verarming nie, maar ook van hulle morele en kulturele agteruitgang. Die Benades – die gesin waaroor die roman handel – oorleef op 'n ongesonde dieet van margarien- en polonietoebroodjies en Klipdrift-brandewyn. Kritici se sydelingse opmerkings oor die kosbeelde in die roman bespreek egter nie na behore die genuanseerde en behendige wyse waarop Van Niekerk kosdiskoerse inspan om wittees te destabiliseer en ontbloot as veelsoortige konstruksie nie. In hierdie artikel ontleed ek gevalle in *Triomf* waarin die gesin in verskillende ruimtes met

kos omgaan, ten einde nuwe en uiteenlopende wyses daar te stel waarop wittees produktief binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks gelees kan word.

In the opening scene of *Triomf*, Mol Benade surveys the rubble her son Lambert has dug up from under their backyard in Triomf, the whites-only suburb built on the demolished ruins of Sophiatown during apartheid-era South Africa. Gerty, the dog, sniffs at an item and, upon closer inspection, Mol recoils in disgust: “It’s a flat, rusted tin. Looks like a jam tin. Kaffir jam! Sies, ga! She throws it back onto the heap” (Van Niekerk 1999: 1). Two pages later, she muses on what became of the Sophiatown dogs after their owners were evicted and recalls a yarn spun by Treppie, her brother and possibly the father of her son. According to him, “they went and made stew with those dogs, with curry and tomato and onions to smother the taste. For eating with their pap. A little dog goes a long way [...] and those kaffirs must have been pretty hungry in their new place” (p. 4). Meg Samuelson (2008: 63) explains that Triomf was “intended to symbolize, as its name suggests, the apartheid state’s ability to write white domination – and its separating power – onto the urban landscape”. In both the examples above, however, Van Niekerk’s use of food imagery reveals the ways in which Triomf remained an uneasy palimpsest that could not quite obscure the ghosts of Sophiatown. The food imagery shores up ideas relating to white identity and its concomitant reliance on black (and white) otherness. These examples encapsulate the contours of what I explore in this essay; namely, how the conflation of food and space forms a productive nexus through which to examine the construction and destabilisation of whiteness in the novel.

The contested terrain of “whiteness studies” or “critical white studies” has taken unique shapes across a range of fields and geopolitical locations, as I outline further below. A major issue across the discipline has been the risk involved in essentialising (and thereby reinstating the imagined supremacy of) what is understood as “whiteness”. To counter this claim regarding the risk of re-inscribing whiteness, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995: 291) propose that reading whiteness through spatial metaphors “invite[s] the disarrangement of modern thought by promoting a complex spatial view of postmodern life which honours the legitimacy of multiple realities”. They argue that “these spatial metaphors consider the milieu present at the intersection of differing ‘realities’ while recognizing the variance within each of the ‘realities’” (Nakayama & Krizek 1995: 291). My reading of (poor) whiteness through the lens of space in *Triomf* is thus apposite in shedding light on the various forms whiteness takes in the novel.

Exploring *Triomf* in relation to spatiality is by no means uncharted territory: most analyses of the novel focus on this facet to a greater or lesser extent. Lara Buxbaum, for instance, posits that space should be understood as embodied in the novel (2011: 31) and further examines space in relation to mechanical metaphors (p. 32) and as grotesque (p. 33). *Triomf* can be read as

a postcolonial South African gothic, according to Jack Shear, who argues that “the haunted house reveals the haunted nation” (2006: 75). Laura White (2007: 87) demonstrates that “Van Niekerk shows how the history of the conquest of the land literally comes between the family and a productive relationship with the soil”, renegotiating the tropes of the *plaasroman* genre to which *Triomf* is writing back.¹ I aim to contribute to this body of knowledge by bringing to the fore an unexamined aspect of the novel: the deployment of food imagery and the representation of eating and gustatory processes as a means of establishing and disrupting the racial boundaries that constitute whiteness and render it a spatially-contingent construction at the inauguration of South Africa’s democratic moment.

Treppie, Pop and Mol Benade are siblings who live together in a ramshackle house in Triomf, a “poor white” area. The Benades have been engaging in incestuous sexual relations since they were children left at home alone when their parents Old Mol and Old Pop went to work. This behaviour continued into their adulthood, with both brothers habitually raping Mol, who eventually fell pregnant and gave birth to a son, Lambert. It is unclear which of the two brothers is his father. For Lambert’s sake, Mol and Pop pretend to be married and Treppie assumes the role of a distant relative. Mol herself continues the cycle of violence by rubbing her infant son’s penis to keep him quiet. In the present time of the novel, neither Treppie nor Pop seem interested in or able to have sex with Mol anymore, but the violent and unhinged forty-year-old Lambert perpetuates the legacy of abuse by routinely raping his mother and regarding her as his sexual property. The majority of criticism on *Triomf* can be grouped into the following loose and interrelated positions on this aspect of the novel: firstly, the incestuous Benade family reflects the ultimate outcome of insular Nationalist ideologies of white supremacy that in turn gives the lie to the idea of white homogeneity;² secondly, the Benades are both intergenerational victims and perpetrators of systemic apartheid legislature;³ and finally, the family embodies the anti-myth of whiteness, in opposition to the official discourses on whiteness that the apartheid government propagated but could not uphold.⁴

1. For other discussions of *Triomf* and spatiality, see: Buxbaum (2011: 42), Van Coller (2003), Wicomb (1998), and Viljoen (1996).

2. See De Kock (2010: 23), Libin (2009: 43), Willoughby-Herard (2015: 151-152).

3. See Devarenne (2016: 113), Irlam (2004: 707), Stotesbury (2004: 26), and Libin (2009: 38-39).

4. See De Kock (2010: 27), Shear (2006: 88), Irlam (2004: 705) and Buxbaum (2011: 34).

Reading *Triomf* through the lens of food studies works to complicate some of the more problematic bifurcations of whiteness studies. The food studies movement has long demonstrated, across a range of disciplines and through the use of a variety of methodologies, that food (and its textual representation) is anything but neutral. The concomitant social, economic and biological processes surrounding food, as well as its cultural consumption, representation and capital, constitute a highly complex matrix of systems and ideas that shape (and undercut) cultural, gender and racial identities. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2005: 245-246) argues, “Every food discourse or representation has a relationship to a specific body politic [and] consistently signals to the borders of what we might term national bodies”. She advocates that “[s]tudying food in literature is one mode of studying material history [...] associated with particular social locations” (p. 245). This method of study allows for an illumination of “the economic and cultural circuits that are in play during the moment of cultural production” (p. 245). These circuits are teased out in my analysis below: what, how and where the characters eat, and their views on their own food practices as well as those of others, feed into the formation of their identities as disenfranchised poor white subjects occupying an ambivalent position in relation to citizenship at the turn of South Africa’s political history.

International studies on whiteness (particularly those originating in the US) mostly regard whiteness as an invisible and entrenched normativity. Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 1) emphasises that much like gender, whiteness is performative. She argues that, while whiteness is a marker of “race privilege” and a “standpoint for looking at ourselves, others and society”, it is also “a set of cultural practices that are unmarked and unnamed” (p. 1). Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1998: 22) likens whiteness to “what house painters call a primer, a base colour that regulates all others, a norm that spectacularly or stealthily underlies powerful social values”. This implies that the hegemony of whiteness is so dominant and all-pervasive that it functions as an undetectable structure of organisation against which all other markers of identity are always already measured. To undermine this pervasive whitewashing of identity construction, international studies seek to expose whiteness in order to subvert its assumed essence and to make explicit its constructed nature as a signifier of racial privilege and power.

However, critics in South Africa have long been pointing out the dangers involved in a strategy of *exposing* whiteness in the local context: as Jessica Draper (2015: 54) emphasises, “Apartheid devoted nearly fifty years to making whiteness visible, and it would therefore appear that this strategy instead reaffirms racial difference”. The task of reading whiteness in South Africa, then, is to be caught in a trap where “ignoring [it] perpetuates invisible advantage, and acknowledging it reifies a claim to apartheid’s visible advantage” (p. 54). South African whiteness scholars have attempted to get around this in what I identify as three ways: firstly, by emphasising a

heterogeneity that cracks open the monolith of whiteness; secondly, by exposing everyday whitenesses; and thirdly, by proceeding from a position of “nomad science”. I outline each of these below.

In order to perpetuate its unquestioned epistemological advantage, whiteness has to assume a unified purpose. In South Africa, of course, this took the form of state-sanctioned methods of racial segregation. As Andy Carolin (2017: 111) points out, “As a regime predicated on the separation, oppression, exploitation, and violation of bodies that were not white, apartheid was based on a seemingly monolithic ideology of white supremacy”. To displace whiteness from its position of assumed privilege in the South African context, some scholars have advocated an analysis of heterogeneous whitenesses. Raka Shome (2000: 367) argues that the homogeneity of whiteness is a self-preserving myth: “whiteness is contextual, and its complexities are best understood through an attention to its various geopolitical locations and their intersections with the interlocking axes of gender, class, sexuality, nation/ality, colonialism, [and] the politics of transnationalism”. Similarly, in an interview with Mary West, Njabulo Ndebele (2010: 117) states that “this view of a multiplicity of ‘whitenesses’ opens up new and fresh possibilities for dealing with South African questions of race, class and ethnicity”. According to Mary West and Jennifer Schmidt (2010: 12), this would “challenge our convenient reliance on polarising narratives”. *Triomf* evidences a rejection of this bifurcation through shifting the reader’s focus to the Benade family, who, through their socioeconomic disempowerment, “confound the standard postcolonial binaries of colonizer/ colonized, oppressor/oppressed, same/other” (Libin 2009: 39). Zoë Wicomb (1998) points out one way in which Van Niekerk achieves this dismantling-from-within:

Without the ameliorative presence of black characters, Van Niekerk’s representation of Afrikaners disrupts the white/black: self/other homology; instead, alterity is explored from within the dominant meaning of Afrikaner, the Calvinistic self from which debased, landless “poor-whites” have been excluded.

Triomf thus explores forms of white alterity that fracture the monolith that whiteness has assumed and instead presents characters caught in a state of inbetweenness. As I argue, this ambiguous position manifests in the intersection of food and space in the novel.

Several critics argue that one method of undercutting the homogeneity of whiteness involves exploring the forms taken by everyday practices of whitenesses. Because whiteness is often “maintained and produced not by overt rhetorics of whiteness, but rather, by its ‘everydayness’, by the every-day, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity” (Shome 2000: 367) that makes invisible the epistemological formations that give rise to white advantage, this strategy of de-essentialising whiteness involves reading it from the bottom up. As Nakayama and Krizek

(1995: 296) point out, “We are not looking for a major figure to impose his/her definition of ‘white’ from above; instead, we are seeking the ways it is constituted in everyday discourse and reinscribes its position on the social landscape”. Sarah Nuttall and Kerry Brystrom (2013: 326) advocate that this can be achieved through what they term a practice of “intimate exposure”. By looking at “domestic zones or private spaces [...] archives of connection can be opened – and the project of desegregation can begin”. My analysis of food and spatiality in *Triomf* is shaped by these ideas, especially in relation to Van Niekerk’s portrayal of how the quotidian, everyday meaning of food changes with the spaces the characters inhabit when consuming it and how this gives rise to a splintering of their identities as white subjects.

Finally, in “Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies: A South African Connection?”, Leon de Kock (2006: 183), following Nakayama and Krizek, calls on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987: 371) idea of “nomad science” as a productive means of studying whiteness in the South African context. He supports “the notion that power relations can be viewed spatially, and that the technique of deterritorialisation can be employed to rearticulate the space in which power is assembled” (De Kock 2006: 183). Emphasising that this approach is “driven not by methodology but by perspective” (p. 183), he advocates that South African whiteness scholars must continue “to ‘ride difference’ with openness and a negative capability which refuses to enforce sovereign subjectivities and absolute contests” (p. 186). For De Kock, these rhizomatic connections manifest in what he terms “the aberrant eruptions of wildness *within whiteness*” (p. 176, original emphasis).⁵ My approach is similarly oblique (as are the approaches of the critics discussed above, even if they do not explicitly draw on Deleuze and Guattari, as De Kock does). As Nakayama and Krizek argue:

In order to map a strategic rhetoric of whiteness, we have assembled a multiplicity of discourses into a discursive formation. These strategies mark out and constitute the space of whiteness. By marking this territory, we are making the critical move of not allowing white subjectivity to assume the position of the universal subject with its unmarked territory.

(1995: 297)

Similarly, in bringing together concepts relating to food and spatiality, and in reading these against the backdrop of whiteness studies (and studies of poor whites and nation-building, in particular), I open up potential lines of flight for thinking about the representation of whiteness and show how Van

5. De Kock pursues this idea more fully in “The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa” (2010).

Niekerk's novel deterritorialises whiteness by rendering it rhizomatic and always contingent – thus, in effect, blurring its essence.⁶

Through looking at whiteness from within and from the bottom up and focusing on the ways in which the disenfranchised Benade family in *Triomf* are simultaneously the beneficiaries and the victims of legislated racism, the cracks and inherent contradictions that underpin whiteness as an epistemological formation are revealed. Brent Heavener (2007: 75) argues that “[w]hiteness is forced into visibility within the context of poverty” because of the heterogeneity it discloses within official discourses predicated on an assumed white superiority. In the South African context, food offers a rich store of nuanced and diverse cultural meanings in relation to whiteness, apartheid ideology and notions of what might constitute poverty – an analysis that has been neglected in readings of *Triomf* that mostly focus on discussions of the novel in broader analogical or thematic terms. Examining the ways in which Afrikaner nationalist discourses in early twentieth-century South Africa led to the creation of “poor whites” as an ideologically separate class, Tiffany Willoughby-Herard (2015: 33) posits that “[t]he white poor – poor rural, urban miscegenationists that they were – did not demonstrate the high points of white civilization and so revealed gaps in the narratives upper-class whites told about their own noble origins”. Much research has been done on the phenomenon of poor whites at the beginnings of apartheid South Africa – below I outline the salient points pertaining to my argument.

In her monograph, *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (2015), Willoughby-Herard insists on a global whiteness that exceeds the bounds of exceptionalist nationhood, arguing that poor whites are continually being rediscovered as a means to further changing political motivations. She explains her point of departure: “When we begin to think about whiteness as loss and misery rather than privilege alone, we can more carefully analyse systems, patterns, and practices of intrawhite violence that are as much at the root of white supremacist power as antiblack violence” (Willoughby-Herard 2015: 154). Her analysis of the Carnegie report (a 1932 study of poverty among white South Africans) reveals that “researchers made a distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, calling the former the white poor and the latter the poor

6. Wicomb (1998) in her analysis of Afrikaner identity across five texts, pre-dates De Kock in drawing on the Deleuze and Guattari connection. However, she argues that while the texts (one of which is *Triomf*) do evidence practices of de-territorialisation, they ultimately favour verticality instead of horizontality: “[The texts] depart significantly from Deleuze-Guattari's celebration of the horizontal in the figure of the rhizome, their emblem for becoming. The revised Afrikaner self is staged before a backcloth renovated from the old picturesque surface of landscape to the land in cross-section, thus privileging verticality and revealing an underground significant for its association with revised self: other: white: black: culture: nature homologies”.

white” (p. 25). This was done by “judg[ing] the character of the poor by whether or not they maintained racially segregated and sexist middle-class standards of living” (p. 31). Hermann Giliomee (2002: 605) concurs: “The white elite did not define poverty in terms of physical or economic data, but relationally – how a white person by virtue of being white ought to live in comparison to non-whites”. Drawing on J.H. Coetzee’s *Verarming en oorheersing* (1942), Sherrilyn Hoogbaard (1996: 42) echoes his 1942 observation that “nie alle arm Afrikaners [is] armlastig nie”.⁷ Coetzee (1942) lists a range of negative characteristics attributed to those deemed “the poor white” as opposed to “the white poor”.⁸ While researchers have subsequently studied the socio-political currents and economic fluxes that gave rise to poverty among Afrikaners, these undesirable attributes all point to discourses that insist on white poverty as a private occurrence that manifests and has its origins in the domestic realm. Willoughby-Herard (2015: 109) explores the ways in which “the poor white” became racialised in an embodied fashion because of attempts by the nation-state to uplift this group and raise them to proper and acceptable standards of (white middle-class) living. My focus on the food practises of the Benade family resonates with this discourse. Hoogbaard’s 1996 analysis carefully traces the correlation between the historical context surrounding disenfranchised Afrikaners and Van Niekerk’s fictional account of the Benade family and their incestuous private family history: by analysing the ways in which the family interacts with food, I attempt to read whiteness from the bottom up and from the inside out, in order to explore the material history that contributes to Van Niekerk’s fictionalised account of whiteness in South Africa.

In the twenty-five years since *Triomf* first appeared in Afrikaans in 1994, it has become a taken-for-granted observation in scholarship on the novel to point out Van Niekerk’s use of metonymy in having the incestuous Benade family reflect the inevitable outcome of apartheid’s isolationist policies. Hoogbaard (1996: 96-97) makes this explicit in observing that “[d]ie

7, “Not all poor Afrikaners are burdensome to others in their poverty.” (My translation.)

8. The distinguishing characteristics of the “poor white” are given as: “onverantwoordelikheid”, “gebrek aan waarheidsin”, “pligsversuim”, “gebrek aan respek”, “minderwaardigheidsgevoel”, “onkundigheid en liggelowigheid”, “gebrek aan arbeidsaamheid en ambisie”, “onbestendige lewenswyse”, “swak aangepastheid (veral van huislike opvoeding en dissipline)”, “verstandelike swakheid”, “karakterswakheid, soos die neiging tot drankmisbruik of misdadigheid”. This translates to irresponsibility, no sense of truth, a lack of respect, feelings of inferiority, lack of knowledge and belief, a lack of diligence and ambition, unstable living conditions, a lack of household education and discipline, weakmindedness and weaknesses of character such as the tendency towards alcohol abuse and violence. (My translation.)

Afrikaners het ook op bloedskandigheid besluit toe hulle apartheid ingestel het, omdat hulle bymekaar wou hou wat bymekaar hoort”.⁹ Louise Viljoen (1996: 71) states: “On a political level the incestuous and inbred Benade family becomes symbolic of the extremes to which the apartheid philosophy of racial exclusivity led”. Similarly, De Kock (2010: 23) argues that “the headlong drive towards insularity against otherness captured in the lives of the older Benades literally results in the morbid self-consumption of incest”. De Kock’s use of the word “self-consumption” is particularly evocative and finds resonance with my analysis of food and spatiality as a way of reading whiteness in the novel. Autophagy, literally meaning “self-eating”, refers to the practice in which a biological organism begins to consume itself on a cellular level during times of famine or starvation in order to ensure its survival. The correlation between this and the incest practiced by the Benades is self-evident, as is the relation of this to Old Pop’s dictum that “that which belongs together must remain together” (Van Niekerk 1999: 127). The discourse of incest in the novel has been explored by several critics, most notably Chandré Carstens (2002). However, as a point of entry into my reading of food, spatiality and whiteness in the novel, I would like to make a few observations on facets of the origins of the siblings’ incestuous relationship that have not yet been explored.

Willoughby-Herard (2015), Giliomee (2002), Hoogbaard (1996), Coetzee (1942) and many others have traced the historical, material and socio-political conditions that led to the disenfranchised state in which poor white Afrikaans families such as Van Niekerk’s fictional Benades found themselves. What has not been noted in scholarship on Van Niekerk’s novel in particular is her use of food discourse in fictionalising these events. Before the Benades relocate from their farm, where the “depression stripped them bare” (Van Niekerk 1999: 121), to Vrededorp for Old Pop to find work on the railways, Old Mol “caught all forty of her geese” and slaughtered them along with all “the chickens and turkeys” (p. 121) to be sold in the town. The cows, sheep and pigs have already been sold off. The dispossession of their livestock is an example of how food functions as a cultural marker of class status, as the loss signifies a crucial moment in the process in which the family moves from being landowners able to eke out a living from what they can cultivate on the farm to becoming part of the disenfranchised class of white city-dwellers reliant on governmental charity for their survival.

Upon arrival in Vrededorp, the Benades live in slum-like conditions in a boarding house. They do not have enough to eat and are constantly hungry. Old Mol bemoans their circumstances, complaining that “she wished they were rather kaffirs. Then at least she’d be able to give them porridge every day, with no salt or milk or sugar. Then they could dress in rags and no one

9. “The Afrikaners decided upon incest in instituting apartheid, because they wanted to keep together what belongs together.” (My translation.)

would know the difference” (Van Niekerk 1999: 125-126). Her reference to porridge here is ironic in its correlation to the last meal the family eats together on the farm: “a little bucket of milk porridge with cinnamon, and a pot-bread” (p. 122). In essence, both versions of the meal consist of the same ingredients and speak of making do with what is available, but the differences in preparation and context renders the porridge eaten by black people a sign of degradation Old Mol cannot swallow. Interestingly, Giliomee writes of a similar historical occurrence:

The poor were shocked when Smuts told an Afrikaner delegation in 1908 that there was work for them on the Pietersburg railway line for 3 shillings and 4 pence a day and a bag of mealy meal. Haas Das, editor of *De Transvaler*, told an Afrikaner audience in the poor white suburb of Vrededorp that such an offer “was most insulting to the Afrikaner nation”. The sting of the whole thing lay in the offer of mealy meal. “It was placing them on a level with Kaffirs.”
(2002: 613)

Old Mol’s desperate wish to serve her family porridge and her inability to do so reveals the ways in which white poverty is measured in relation to race-bound expectations of standards of living and shows how Van Niekerk employs food discourse to open up fissures in the homogeneity of whiteness. The Benade family’s situation deteriorates to the point where Old Mol has to work in a clothing factory to supplement their income. The children are regularly left unsupervised and stay at home in bed together instead of going to school (Van Niekerk 1999: 127):

Little Pop’s dick could already stand up nicely by then. He showed Treppie and Mol how to rub it. They killed time on those mornings by rubbing Little Pop’s dick. It took away the hunger. They were allowed to have their morning bread only once Pop had come three times; otherwise they’d get hungry for their afternoon bread too soon. And if that got eaten, they stayed hungry all day, until their mother came home from the factory at night.

Here, Van Niekerk’s use of food discourse takes cognisance of the economic and sociopolitical conditions contributing to the beginnings of the Benade siblings’ incestuous relationship. The quotation above, however, focalised through Treppie’s perspective, attributes the behaviour equally to each of the siblings, in contrast to a later point in the novel when Treppie lambastes Pop, saying that “[t]hat dick of Pop’s was the place where all the trouble started” (p. 385). He wants “to know what Pop’s dick was looking like nowadays”, speculating that “it must be looking like a five-day-old Russian behind the counter at Ponto do Sol” and commenting that he used to have “to suck [it] like it was a lollipop” (p. 385). The progression in the description of Pop’s dick from “a lollipop” in the past to being imagined in the present as a “five-day-old Russian” shows how the sexual relationship between the siblings

moves from what *could* be construed as an innocent game (arguably underpinned by sociopolitical currents outside of their control, as well as by Pop's blatant abuse of both Mol and Treppie and, later, Treppie's abuse of Mol) to the abject yet everyday horror it presents for the characters in the narrative present.

Furthermore, Treppie's reference to a "Russian" is in line with the Benades' everyday diet. Many critics introduce the family by commenting on their subsistence on white bread, margarine, polony, Coke and Klipdrift brandy. Such descriptions allude to the degenerate, unwholesome and impoverished lifestyle in which the characters find themselves trapped. While these critical interpretations are apt, the highly processed and refined foodstuffs the Benades consume also work to signify a rupture from their rural past. This relocation to the city, and corresponding change in diet, could arguably be seen as a commonplace tendency in any urbanizing society around the globe, but it gains especial significance when read in relation to the Afrikaner and the mythical connection to the land (and its bounty) that Afrikaners have been told is their birthright.

Van Niekerk's employment of food discourse functions in a manner more sophisticated than the cursory connection made by critics above. Take, for example, the family's discussion with a National Party (NP) representative who is canvassing for votes before the election. Upon seeing the representative's pamphlets displaying the NP's new flag, Treppie comments that it looks "exactly like a lollipop in a coolie-shop" (Van Niekerk 1999: 31). When Pop laments that he is going to "miss the oranje-blanje-blou a lot", the representative's female companion quickly comes up with, "The more colours, the more brothers!" Mol is dismissive, saying that to her the "silly little sun [...] looked more like the little suns on margarine and floor polish". Treppie, delighted with this, says it stands for "*grease*, for *greasing*. The NP was full of tough cookies, and you had to grease a tough cookie well before you could stuff her" (p. 31).

Treppie's conflation of the NP's sun with a lollipop is particularly evocative when read alongside the sexual violence he associates with lollipops (discussed above), and thus functions as an ironic comment on the violence underpinning the party's ideological agenda, despite the party's attempt to plaster over and rebrand its identity. Mol's derisive attitude towards the notion of "[t]he more colours, the more brothers" as a rhyme describing the flag is not surprising; presumably, the last thing she conceivably wants is *more* brothers, considering the abuse she suffers at the hands of both of her own. Her association of the sun emblem with the design on margarine tubs and floor polish refers to Sunshine D margarine and Sunbeam floor polish respectively. Sunshine D, with its ironically pastoral logo of a rising sun, is a staple item in the Benade family's thrifty diet and thus reinforces the ways in which the ruling party continues to neglect those it purports to protect, further emphasising their distance from a rural past. It also functions as a comment

on the patriarchal Calvinist family structure the NP held up as its ideal. Despite his recognition of the violence wrought by the NP (as suggested by the symbolism of the lollipop above), Treppie is all too eager to perpetuate that violence with his reference to needing to “grease a tough cookie well before you could stuff her” (p. 31), alluding to the intricate ways in which Nationalist and patriarchal discourses of violence are imbricated, reproduced and maintained. In each of the characters’ reactions, food discourse thus functions to reveal the ideological position in which they are entrapped.

The male members of the Benade family seem entirely aware that they are not following a healthy diet and both Treppie and Lambert blame Mol for this. Treppie describes their food habits as “Coke and bread and polony, polony and bread and Coke, bread and Coke and polony” (p. 246), sarcastically concluding, “[f]or what we are to receive, may we be thankful, Lord, praised be thy name, amen” (p. 246). The inclusion of the ironic, mangled prayer invokes the rituals of family meals (such as eating together at a table), in which the family never participates. Furthermore, it resonates with the religious discourse the apartheid government employed to justify its segregationist legislature on the basis of the belief in God’s chosen people being the white race. Treppie’s words here are thus doubly significant in pointing out the ways in which he and his family have been let down by their government and by their God. Pop also indicates dissatisfaction with their dietary habits when he purchases a mango (to be discussed in more detail below) and wonders why they “don’t [...] ever buy mangoes at the end of the month” (p. 71).¹⁰ Significantly, instead of placing the blame only on Mol, he assumes some responsibility and recognises that he too has agency regarding their food choices. Lambert, however, seems most aggrieved by the culinary cul-de-sac in which they exist. He “wishes his mother would cook something so that he can eat properly for a change. Potatoes and meat and sweet pumpkin” (p. 92). This is similar to Treppie’s ideal meal plan which consists of “[b]acon and eggs for breakfast”, “[r]ice, meat and potatoes for lunch”, “[w]ors and baked beans for supper” (p. 246). While Marius Crous (2016a: 57) reads this example as Treppie’s wish for “proper meals and proper planning of balanced meals with meat and vegetables”, I argue that the signification is more complex. The meals for which Treppie longs are far from healthy, being high in fat and animal protein. He does not mention any vegetables. Instead, these meals signal a bounty and excess that their diet currently lacks; Treppie wants to consume meat with *each* of the meals (an expensive commodity loaded with connotations of prestige and masculinity in the South African context). While Treppie’s proposed diet *may be* somewhat healthier (or at least more diverse) than Coke, bread and polony, the cultural signification of the food he

10. The motif of fruit in *Triomf* (especially in relation to the lesbian couple across the road and Treppie’s repeated singing of “Sow the watermelon”) unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this essay but warrants future analysis.

desires instead alludes to the socio-political and economic forces that exclude him from upward social mobility.

Lambert's dissatisfaction reaches breaking point when, through a hole in the fence one Saturday evening, he spies on the neighbours having a braai. These neighbours represent an upward social mobility in contrast to the Benades: they are entrepreneurs with their own food-stand business and their house boasts elaborate and unnecessary burglar bars. The narrative reveals the ways in which Lambert's patent envy of and longing for what they have led him to disdain them and to desire to disrupt their convivial evening. Van Niekerk's description of the scene is odd and oblique; the reader only has partial access to what is going on next door because of Lambert's precarious position next to the wall: "All he can see is a strip of yellow light, some braaivleis, and people's bellies" (Van Niekerk 1999: 95). He is, however, able to count that there are eight T-bones and another grill "full of rolled-up wors" (p. 95). The neighbours appear in corporeal fragments as Lambert watches them prepare their meat. He sees 'a hairy boep and a hand going up and down', as well as two women in bikinis, a man in blue jeans with a "bulge in front", a man in a Speedo with "an even bigger bulge [...] pointing to one side" (p. 95). Lambert's view lingers on the man, as he notices his "big pair of thighs and a body-builder's stomach" (p. 95). Because of the lowered angle from which he is viewing the scene, he sees the man grope and fondle the woman while they both make innuendos about the quality of the meat. When their meal is ready and they finally settle down to eat, Lambert is astounded by its largesse: the aunt dishes up "everyone's plates to the brim", and on the table he can see "three bowls of salad, one with bananas in yellow sauce, one with tomatoes and lettuce, and one with potato salad. There's a T-bone and a piece of wors on everyone's plates. And a heap of pap with sauce on top" (p. 97). Tellingly, neither Treppie's nor Lambert's longing for "proper food" matches the bounty of this meal.

This scene, which uneasily blends similarity and difference, encapsulates the ways in which whiteness can be read productively through the lenses of food and space in *Triomf*. Firstly, the extravagance of the neighbour's meal (dished up by a matriarchal figure) functions to highlight the unsatisfactory meals consumed by Lambert's own family. As Helene Shugart (2014: 262) argues, "Food is a primary way in which status is organized in a given social system insofar as the foods one eats – and how one eats them – signify one's class". Secondly, the fence that separates Lambert from the neighbours and their braai clearly signifies his distance from what they represent, while their proximity as neighbours signals some degree of sameness. This similarity and difference mark the episode as a whole: the neighbours lounge around in a state of undress much like his own family, but this is because they are clad in swimwear and not because their clothes are so old and torn that their body parts are exposed. Lambert's observation of the two men's bulging groins implies his envy of their hyper-masculine physiques, while just a page later

Treppie describes Lambert as “a mad fucker with a big dick” (Van Niekerk 1999: 99), suggesting that his aberrant penis connotes monstrosity rather than virility. Just like his own family, the neighbours have had too much to drink and the couple indulges in somewhat inappropriate sexual behaviour in front of their family members. However, this behaviour is both censured good-heartedly by the aunt and then sanctioned by the mother when she says that “horny is horny” and that there is “[n]othing to be done about it” (p. 97). Like the Benades, the neighbours engage in overtly racist conversation, but the talk is cut short for the sake of maintaining the peace (p. 98).

In all of this, the neighbours represent a potential for the degenerate behaviour exhibited by the Benades, but initially, at least, this potential is reined in and circumscribed by social mores to which the Benades themselves do not manage to adhere. Lambert, however, takes it upon himself to disrupt their evening by forcing his mother to mow the lawn noisily at eleven o’clock at night. When this does not have the desired effect, he continues spying on them and then falls over the wall, half into their property. The neighbours, enraged, begin shouting at Lambert. One of the women throws a vase through Lambert’s den’s window and the men climb onto the roof, breaking the television aerial and tearing down the gutters. One of them kicks down Lambert’s post box and calls him a “waste of a white skin” (p. 101).

Van Niekerk’s employment of spatiality in this chapter is compelling. At the beginning, Lambert views the neighbours in bits and pieces: their idyllic evening is presented as a series of decontextualised vignettes that evokes his envy and sense of inferiority. However, once he inadvertently breaches the border that separates them by falling over the wall, his previously truncated view expands and he (and the reader) sees the fuller picture: the circumscribed potential for degeneration discussed above collapses and the neighbours engage in the kind of destructive and violent behaviour the Benades frequently exhibit. There is no need to point out the irony in the man calling Lambert “a waste of a white skin” while he behaves in the same manner Lambert does. What is significant, however, is the ways in which this chapter highlights how whiteness is performative and relies on quotidian, everyday practices (such as the rituals surrounding a family braai) to be maintained. Lambert’s intrusion into the scene demonstrates the cracks in this performance and thus highlights the ways in which whiteness is constructed socially.¹¹

The Benade family’s relationship with food in the confines of their own domestic sphere is, for the most part, decidedly negative. It is only when they transgress the spatial boundaries of their home into the wider world that their relation to food changes in interesting ways. This can clearly be seen in the

11. Later on in the novel, in a heartbreaking attempt at recreating this meal for their own Christmas celebrations, Lambert braais T-bones that “had to be cooked one at a time on a loose piece of burglar-bar”. The family enjoys this with “potatoes and baked beans [and] a two-litre box of wine for the occasion” (Van Niekerk 1999: 308).

chapter in which Pop has an adventure that begins with a mango and ends with a visit to the Spur. Nick Mulgrew (2015: 346) offers an extensive reading of the scene in which the Benades visit the Spur, concluding that the Spur functions as “a metaphor for the integration that the Benades might be expected to undertake with the dawn of the ‘New South Africa’”. Mulgrew’s reading, however, fails to place the scene in context with what occurs in the chapter, as I demonstrate below. One morning, Pop wakes up knowing “it was going to be a good day” (Van Niekerk 1999: 69). On a whim, after dropping Treppie off at work, he travels to Braamfontein and walks around, just because he “wants to feel the rush of people around his shoulders; he wants to see their faces” (p. 70). This desire for connectivity and social interaction is in direct contrast to the frequently repeated assertions that all they have is each other and that that is enough. After giving money to someone collecting funds for the blind, Pop purchases and eats a mango: “The smell comes back to him from very far away. Fresh sheets, that’s what the smell of a mango’s peel always made him remember. Fresh sheets hanging up in the sun on the farm, before the ironing” (p. 71). The reference to “the farm” conveys complex layers of nuance. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder of the white colonial conquest of the land – while remembering the farm, Pop stands amongst a crowd of black commuters and hawkers. But on the other hand, the loss of the farm, to Pop at least, signals the beginning of a process that ends with the Benades living together dysfunctionally in Triomf. Thus the mango functions here as a synaesthetic device transporting him back to a state of childhood innocence.

After eating the mango, Pop has various positive interactions with black people on the street. When he gives a beggar money, the man responds with, “God bless you, sir” (p. 72). He decides to try his luck at an Ithuba scratch card stall and stands in a row of “black men in suits” (p. 72). The woman who sells him his scratch cards is patient with him and shows him where to scratch. Her “lovely smile” is mentioned three times in quick succession and Pop thinks, “Never in Triomf has he seen a black woman smile at him like this” (p. 72). Amazingly, he wins money on three cards in a row. Pop’s experience in Braamfontein is characterised by a spirit of shared human connectedness – he shows kindness and respect and receives the same in return.

Pop spends the day wondering how to treat his family with the money he has won and eventually decides on takeaways and then dessert at the Spur. While Mulgrew (2015: 346) reads the Spur as “a locus of integration” and “a place that enables the Benades to step outside their insular lives and interact with society”, I instead argue that the family’s experience at the restaurant functions to undermine whiteness as a monolithic discourse. From beginning to end, the episode is marked by unease and dislocation. Before going into the establishment, Mol and Pop are nervous about whether Pop has enough money left over to pay for their dessert. People stare at Lambert in the lobby because he is not wearing shoes. Treppie mentions this to him and he in turn

points out that Treppie has not shaved and has a plaster on his head. Pop looks at his family members and thinks that “[t]hey don’t look so good under the stairway lights” (Van Niekerk 1999: 85). The characters are all clearly very aware of the ways in which they may be discriminated against. Even getting into the restaurant is difficult for Pop as he needs Mol’s help to ascend the long staircase. He frets about what they will do if people want to come past them and Mol replies that the people must wait, telling Pop, “[W]e’re also people” (p. 85). Her need to say this aloud belies a deep-seated anxiety that they may not be perceived as such. When Pop tells the man at the restaurant’s reception that his “people are [there] already”, the man “slowly” says that he thinks he knows “where they are sitting” (p. 86). Van Niekerk’s use of the word “slowly” here implies that the man has already drawn his own conclusions about Mol and Pop in realising that they are there to meet Lambert and Treppie and not any of the other customers. The waitress gives them “a funny look” when she learns that they are only going to order dessert, which prompts Mol to ask, “It’s okay just to eat just pudding, isn’t it?” (p. 86). Lambert also notices other customers watching them and comments, “This lot here think they’re the who’s who. Just look at them checking us out. Fucken common rubbish!” (p. 87). The Benades are hardly able to enjoy their dessert because of how out of place and nervous they feel. The scene’s climax occurs when the manager approaches the table and Treppie suspects they are going to be thrown out. Instead, it transpires that they have won a prize – they do not have to pay their bill and they receive meal tickets and sparkling wine.

While it is possible to read the above (as Mulgrew does) as a positive sign of the Benade family being forced to begin integrating into society, their alienation and patent otherness undermines this interpretation to a large extent. The scene is undercut by a very dark humour – the other customers, the management and the serving staff, Van Niekerk and by implication, the reader, are all aware of the farcical nature of the inappropriately attired, dirty, loud and uncouth Benades being the recipients of the prize. The Benades are the butt of the macabre joke functioning as the premise of this episode. Even they themselves seem aware of this as, very soon after receiving the prize, both Pop and Treppie become insistent that they should leave soon. Treppie says to Pop that they should “fuck off now, before Mol starts seeing more roses” and Pop agrees that “that was now enough of a good thing” (Van Niekerk 1999: 89). The implication is that, if they are to stay any longer, the modicum of respectability they have managed to maintain will come loose at the seams and they will no longer be able to pass even tangentially as part of the upward social mobility the Spur represents. This is reinforced by the conclusion of the chapter, where Lambert carries Pop down the stairs: “Pop pushes his head down a bit, into the space between Lambert’s shoulders. He feels like he’s slowly melting back into the place he came from, a place he doesn’t know anymore. Where does he end and Lambert begin? He doesn’t know anymore” (pp. 89-90). Despite the outward movement of Pop’s

adventure with the mango and the family's outing to the Spur, this passage at the conclusion of the chapter suggests a tragic return to insularity and a closing in of the circle that binds the Benades together. This again points to the ways in which alterity exists within whiteness and thus serves to undermine whiteness as a monolithic concept.

The final food interaction to be discussed involves Lambert and his preparations for his "birthday girl". This episode emphasises his always already flawed attempts at upward social mobility and his desire to escape his living conditions. Throughout the novel, Treppie promises to organise Lambert "a special girl" for his birthday and much of the narrative involves the family members preparing for this occasion. While the other Benades are fully aware that this "girl" will be a sex worker, Lambert does not acknowledge this and seems to harbour pathetic (in the true sense of the word) dreams that she will fall in love with him and accompany the family when they escape "North" after the democratic elections. He goes to enormous lengths to fix up the house in order to impress her but all the makeshift attempts at DIY only function to highlight the squalor in which the family exists. Mol and Pop agree to go shopping to purchase the smorgasbord of chips and dips with which he plans to woo and win over his guest but he insists that "they must rather go to the Spar in Melville" because the "Shoprite in Triomf didn't stock those nice dips he wanted for his girl" (Van Niekerk 1999: 365). He wants to show her "that the Benades aren't just any Tom, Dick and Harry from Triomf" (p. 365). In his mind, the marker of class that will separate him from Triomf's other poor white residents is located in his choice of foodstuffs and in providing an array of options to his guest. The plethora of snacks he wishes to provide for the first woman with whom he will have sex other than his mother thus signifies his desire to move beyond the insular confines of his household and the violent and incestuous sexual dead ends it represents. Marius Crous (2016b: 6-7) argues: "Anders as in die wanordelike huishouding, glo [Lambert] aan orde en simmetrie wanneer hy sy plek vir die besoeker voorberei en hy is slegs op die bevrediging van die gas se behoeftes ingestel – hy sal haar soos 'n koningin laat voel."¹² While I concur with Crous, what should also be considered is that while all of these preparations are ostensibly for "the girl's" benefit, she represents to Lambert his only opportunity at engaging with society in a normal manner. She is thus just as crucial to his vision of escape as the petrol he so carefully hoards for their imagined trip "North". Her existence as a subjective human being is immaterial to him. His preparations therefore signify an uncomfortable blend of deep myopia and utterly naïve and misguided concern for "her" well-being in its relation to his own.

12. "Unlike the dysfunctional household, he believes in order and symmetry in preparing for his guest and is only focused on meeting her needs – he will make her feel as though she is a queen." (My translation.)

Treppie attempts to dispel Lambert's illusions by reminding him that *she* "was the one who was coming to get dipped" (Van Niekerk 1999: 365).¹³ This upsets Lambert and Treppie resorts to listing flavours of chips and dips to calm him down. Ironically, however, different kinds of chips and commercial dips are simply still potatoes and some kind of dairy base with a variety of artificial flavourings. Treppie's refrain of "dips and chips and chips and dips" echoes the way he talks about "Coke and bread and polony, polony and bread and Coke, bread and Coke and polony" (p. 246) earlier on in the novel, and gestures towards the difficulty (and possibly impossibility) of any kind of escape from repetition and insularity. The passage concludes with Treppie singing, "If we only had love" (p. 366). While the specific origins of this song are unclear, these lyrics appear in both the Afrikaans and the English versions of the novel, and thus cannot simply be a direct translation of or a creative replacement for an Afrikaans song. A viable source text, however, could be Jacques Brel's "If We Only Have Love", a saccharine song about the power of love to transform lives and save the world. On one level, Treppie's singing these words here can be read as an ironic jab at Lambert's absurd (and doomed-to-fail) romantic intentions. On another level, his changing the tense from "have" to "had" imbues the scene with a deep sense of pathos and tragedy, poignantly bringing to the surface spectres of other possible lives the Benades could have led, the past tense reinforcing the impossibility of change or escape.

My analysis of food and spatiality in *Triomf* purposefully avoids presenting any overarching conclusions or definitive insights into what constitutes whiteness after apartheid. The monolithic visibility apartheid accorded whiteness remains so entrenched in the national imaginary that attempts at pinning it down only serve to fix its persistently damaging material legacy into something that has limitations and boundaries. The lens of food studies allows for the adoption of reading strategies that eschew the focus on grand narratives on which whiteness studies must often fall back. This approach enables incursions into moments that demonstrate the slipperiness and mutability of whiteness. Reading whiteness from the inside out and from the bottom-up forces into view the inherent contradictions that underpin whiteness as an epistemic formulation, revealing instead a heterogeneity of whitenesses that deterritorialises and gives lie to its existence as an easy-to-read binary marker. Van Niekerk's novel demonstrates this splintering of white identity in its refusal to provide the reader with comfortable answers on the question of how to feel about the Benade family. Treppie's commandment at the end of the novel that "they should never again say the word 'kaffir'" (Van Niekerk 1999: 470) in public or in private is ultimately as empty a

13. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of Lambert's meeting with 'his girl' falls outside the scope of this article but it is worth pointing out that she rejects all the chips and dips that Lambert offers her.

gesture as reading any symbolism into the watermelon plants that sprout on the rubbish heap in their backyard. The Benades are the grotesque manifestation of apartheid's racist logic but Van Niekerk also grants them moments of deep pathos that are tragically and inextricably tied up with their status as abject other-within-the-self. This disconcerting conflation of contradictory meanings perhaps best encapsulates the contours of what reading whiteness in contemporary South Africa could look like: "North no more" (p. 474).

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