"I slipped into the pages of a book": Intertextuality and Literary Solidarities in South African Writing about London

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In this article, I argue that London plays a dual role in South African writing, as a “real” city at a particular moment in history, and as a textual, imaginative space. For many South African writers, London comes to stand metonymically for English culture and literature even if their attitude towards Englishness and Empire may be one of ambivalent critique. The intertexts invoked in South African representations of London forge literary solidarities, and foreground belated postcolonial engagements with modernity that are significantly displaced from the “margin” to the “center” of modernism (and Empire) itself.

Keywords: intertextuality, solidarities, apartheid, colonialism, London, South Africa, modernity, modernisms

Introduction

In Ivan Vladislavić’s 2011 novel, *Double Negative*, the narrator recalls his arrival in 1980s London by declaring that he “slipped into the pages of a book.”[1] This metafictional assertion aphoristically conveys how London envelops the newcomer from the former colony in its past narratives; how London is experienced as a book, or as textual space. In the same passage, the narrator describes how he “couldn’t go down the Tottenham Court Road or Baker Street or pass through Seven Dials or a hundred other places without feeling that [he] was in a story.”[2] Similarly, J.M. Coetzee, in his fictionalized autobiography, *Youth* (2002) describes London as “wrapped in centuries of words.” In Coetzee’s novel, this description occurs in a passage in which the semi-autobiographical focalizer observes the anomalous nature of encountering references to familiar South African places in texts: “Do these Englishmen around him feel the same tug at the heartstrings when there is a mention of Rydal Mount or Baker Street in a book? He doubts it.”[3] While characterizing London as a city overburdened by literary representation may be a common trope in postcolonial writing,[4] Coetzee’s comparative approach and

[1] Vladislavić, *Double Negative*, 94.
[2] Ibid., 93-94.
[3] Coetzee, *Youth*, 137.
[4] See, for instance, John McLeod’s discussion of New Zealand writer Janet Frame’s attempts to shrug off the “deathly shroud of English literary culture” in order to re-imagine London on her terms (McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 83).

Vladislavić's hyberbolic description suggest that there is something particular about London and the city's literary associations that appeals to the South African writer's imagination. In this article, I explore how South African writers respond to London as a literary space, and engage in transnational communities of literary solidarity both through their participation in literary networks, and through their imaginative rewriting of texts in their representations of the city.

Although the passages mentioned above derive from contemporary novels (for all that *Youth* is set in the 1960s), I will focus on examples of postwar South African writing, written or set in the 1950s and 1960s, because this period coincides in significant ways with the moment in which globalized late modernisms took hold. The bomb-scarred postwar space of London also evokes specific reactions from South African writers who have a particular image of London in mind that has been shaped by their reading, which results in moments of disappointment that are also caught up in considerations of modernity and belatedness. Significantly, the postwar period is also synchronous with the beginning of formalized apartheid in South Africa, a system that was both designed to usher in a particularly warped form of modernity, and which was also considered anachronistic. During apartheid, many South African writers were exiled to London because of their resistance to the increasingly discriminatory legislation being enforced, or left South Africa for Britain to further their literary careers and later, to escape military conscription, as in the case of Coetzee. As this sketch of writers' reasons for migration to London implies, there are differences between South Africans' engagements with London and the types of texts they invoked in their representations of the city, not least because of their "racial" classification in South Africa. There are also, however, many commonalities between black and white South Africans' literary engagements with London; for instance, in their common characterization of the city as a metonym for both English literature and modernity, which speaks to the historical entanglement of black and white cultural and literary spheres in South Africa.

London represents an important geographical touchstone in both the South African imaginary and the development of South African literature. Not only was it one of the key places of exile and emigration for South Africans, and therefore the place where many writers found a propitious publishing environment for their works outside of South Africa,[5] but London in many cases stood for the literary life, and literature, itself. Moreover, the texts invoked by these writers in their London writing are not only English works, but include other global forms of urban

[5] See Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, black and read all over*.

writing. This nexus of intertexts foregrounds London's historical and contemporary position as a global metropole, as well as an English or British space.

As they entered into this global hub, South African writers participated in transnational networks and communities in London, and brought international forms of urban writing to bear upon their engagements with the city. The influential South African writer, Peter Abrahams, serves as an example of the former kind of global interconnectedness; in London, he was at the center of the Pan-Africanist, anti-colonial group that included Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore. Abrahams was at the same time influenced by African-American literature, while strains of Keats and Shelley permeate his London writing. Even more striking is Todd Matshikiza's autobiographical writing set in London, which lends the jazz-inflected, Sophiatown-founded style of *Drum* magazine to his reflections on the former imperial center. Considering the intertexts and literary influences invoked in South African writing set in London provides insight into the imbrication of English, South African and other global textualities in South African writing, as they are distilled within writing set in the increasingly transnational city of London. Studying examples of South African writing set in London, filtered through the prism of the literary influences invoked within these texts, contributes to our growing understanding of the ways in which migration and displacement have shaped South African writing.[6]

"Postcolonial intertexuality" and the city as text

By using the term "intertextuality" to refer to texts and literary influences included in South African writing about London, I am employing it in a rather commonsense way rather than conveying its post-structuralist sense. Roland Barthes's proposal that the city be read as "discourse" or as a "poem" is,[7] however, suggestive in unpacking South African writing that represents London not only as an apogee of literariness or as the setting of well-known works of literature ("wrapped in centuries of words"), but also as a text itself, as alluded to in my introductory discussion of Vladislavić's metaphor of slipping into "the pages of a book" or existing "in a story." Andreas Huyssen points out that reading the city as "text," as a "conglomeration of signs," is not a particularly Barthesian, or even "postmodern" phenomenon

[6] See J.U. Jacobs*, Diaspora and Identity in South African Fiction*.
[7] Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," 171.

since our understanding of how “real and imagined spaces commingle in the mind to shape our notions of specific cities” has a long history:

> No matter where we begin our discussion of the city of signs – whether with Victor Hugo’s reading Paris in *Notre Dame de Paris* as a book written in stone, with Alfred Döblins attempt in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, to create a montage of multiple city discourses jostling against each other like passers-by on a crowded sidewalk, with Walter Benjamin’s notion of the flâneur reading urban objects in commemorative meditation, with Robert Venturi’s upbeat emphasis on architecture as image, meaning and communication, with Roland Barthes’s city semiotics of the *Empire of Signs*, with Thomas Pynchon’s TV-screen city, or with Jean Baudrillard’s aesthetic transfiguration of an immaterial New York – a few things should be remembered: The trope of a city as book or as text has existed as long as we have had a modern city literature.[8]

Although the metaphorics of city as text, or a commingling of the textual and the real, is both ubiquitous and particularly associated with the *modern* urban subject, there are specific characteristics in South African writing about London which make their reflections on textuality and the city worth exploring.

Firstly, as has already been suggested, London represented to South Africans the possibility of forging a life of writing. For example, Lauretta Ngcobo explained, in her edited collection on South African women’s writing in exile how, “One great gift that England brought out in me was giving me the opportunity to develop my skills as a writer. The lifestyle is calm and people leave you well alone to do what you want to do.”[9] Britain represented freedom from censure and violence, thus enabling South African writers to be more productive and to be published. Secondly, South Africa has a particularly long and complex relationship with Britain that dates back to the late eighteenth century, and has resulted in English literature occupying an especially strong but ambivalent position within South African culture. Thirdly, the global intertexts, solidarities and networks influencing South African literature are put into relief in significant ways when writers train their gaze on the setting of London.

More broadly, intertextuality produces specific effects when employed in postcolonial contexts. Zoë Wicomb, in an article entitled “Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author,” suggests that “it is the transformative effect of intertextuality” that is of

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[8] Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 49-50.
[9] Ngcobo, *Prodigal Daughters*, 131.

significance for the "postcolonial writer."[10] She argues that, frequently, "our settings in disjunction with citations from colonial texts produce postcolonial irony, and if we are doomed to echolalia it is also the case that repetition re-presents, reverses or revises, or simply asks the reader to reflect on indeterminate meanings produced by citations, meanings that destabilize received views."[11] While Wicomb refers to the repetition or revision of "colonial texts" within local settings, I argue that literary citations, either metropolitan or colonial, have as much potential to produce subversion, irony and critique when taken from the former colony to the metropole by exiled or émigré writers. Wicomb suggests that writers engaging in such intertextual modes introduce "dialogue between texts, whether they be written or spoken, and so [bring] into being the interconnectedness of the human world in a divided society."[12] In the case of South African writing about London, intertextuality often foregrounds the longstanding, complex "interconnectedness" between South Africa and Britain. Moreover, referring to canonical literary texts enables a critique of both colonialism and the South African apartheid system, while informing the writer's self-positioning in relation to their home country and the place of exile. The "postcolonial irony" generated by the "disjunction" between the writers' South African background and the canonical British texts they invoke, as well as the continuity *and* disjunctions between these texts and the setting of postwar London give rise to interrogations of colonial modernity and foreground the role of writing in sustaining or deconstructing colonial discourse.

The city is figured as a text, or as covered in texts, as in Vladislavić's and Coetzee's work, but sometimes this textual metaphor fractures, revealing disparities between the material postwar London and the literary texts superimposed upon it. It is in this disjunction that we find at times an opportunity for a critique of the continuities between apartheid South Africa and colonial modernity, and a consideration of the writer's own position in relation to these historical forces. Modernist intertexts play an important role when South Africans read into London's literary history within the contemporary city, as modernism is taken up by writers from former colonies in resistant and enabling ways; just as Peter Abrahams draws on Romantic literature to underscore his individualism and anti-colonialism. Furthermore, transnational forms of Afro-modernism are interwoven in Abrahams's and Matshikiza's London texts. Thus, intertextuality

[10] Wicomb, "Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author," 146.
[11] Ibid., 146.
[12] Ibid., 146.

in South African writing about London frequently entails a critique of colonial modernity through moments of disjunction and through the creation of literary solidarities.

"It was all familiar from my readings": The strangeness of being at home in London

Literature has also been a conduit of imperial discourse and ideas about Englishness in South Africa. In his seminal work, *Civilising Barbarians* (1996), Leon de Kock carried out research into the work that English studies in South Africa did to establish English as "both a means of transmission and a state of ideality – the place where 'civilisation' was cultivated."[13] While English-medium mission-school education allowed black South Africans a degree of power within the colonial system, de Kock explains, it more negatively "was centrally implicated in consolidating, in representational forms, the modes of othering which Africans had to negotiate in order to achieve the social and cultural empowerment of education."[14] Thus, black South Africans educated in mission schools both imbibed English literature and by implication, a certain admiration for English culture, but also developed an attitude of ambivalent critique toward Englishness and Empire. For many black South African writers and intellectuals, London stood metonymically for English culture and literature, and thus served as a staging ground for the renegotiation and rewriting of their relationship toward Englishness.

For example, the section in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), that describes his 1962 visit to London begins with the statement, "I confess to being something of an Anglophile." He qualifies this statement: "Despite Britain being the home of parliamentary democracy, it was that democracy that had helped to inflict a pernicious system of iniquity on my people. While I abhorred the notion of British imperialism, I never rejected the trappings of British style and manners."[15] Mandela continues his account of his London visit: "I had several reasons for wanting to go to England, apart from my desire to see the country I had so long read and heard about." He then goes on to list these reasons, including his knowledge that "in London [he will] be able to obtain literature on guerrilla warfare." Mandela suggests the important role that literature has played in developing the expectations that South Africans have about London. Mandela would have been schooled in the English literary canon at the Wesleyan mission school, Clarkebury, and the Healdtown College, where students were taught that "the

[13] De Kock, *Civilising Barbarians*, 45.
[14] Ibid., 45.
[15] Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 360.

best ideas were English ideas, the best government was English government and the best men were English men."[16] At the same time, he experiences London not only as an embodiment of his reading and of English values, but also as the former center of a "pernicious system of iniquity," *and* as a place which enables anti-racist activism, through the availability of radical literature on guerilla warfare.

This co-existence of anglophilia associated with reading about England with more radical politics is present in the writing of other black South Africans of Mandela's generation. The influential novelist and journalist Peter Abrahams, for instance, invoked English literature to negotiate his identity as both a writer and activist in London, where he lived in the 1940s and 50s before moving to Jamaica. In his 1954 autobiography, *Tell Freedom* Abrahams memorably (and possibly apocryphally) described how his love of reading was encouraged by a young white woman who read him Lamb's Tales in the factory where he worked as a child laborer. Abrahams was then educated by missionaries at both Grace Dieu and St. Peter's School. In *Tell Freedom*, he also describes how his reading motivated his move to London. He was influenced by writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and his feeling of solidarity with the African American literary sphere certainly influenced his political and literary development. It was Abrahams's reading of English poetry, however, that confirmed his choice of England over America as an escape from South Africa. Although he knew that "America had more to offer" him as a "black man," England, [he wrote] "could counter that call because men now dead had once crossed its heaths and walked in lanes, quietly, unhurriedly, with such beauty that their songs had pierced the heart of a black boy, a world away, and in another time."[17] He decided to go to England "because the dead men who called" seemed "more alive than the most vitally living." He "knew [his] going there would be in the nature of a pilgrimage."[18] Stefan Helgesson describes this passage as evincing Abrahams's response to "nothing other than textuality, to the bibliographic code of a book circulating in an English-language discursive network," and explains how "the truth claim of literature" empowers Abrahams "to *believe* in worlds quite different from the empirical world of Vrededorp and Johannesburg."[19] While the ideological content of both Harlem Renaissance literature and English Romantic poetry certainly influenced Abrahams's writing and political

[16] Ibid., 44.
[17] Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*, 200.
[18] Ibid., 200.
[19] Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature*, 45.

persuasions, what Helgesson points to here is his response to literature as offering another world and existence beyond South Africa, no matter that some of his literary influences derived from a hegemonic cultural system that was implicated in the historical oppression of black South Africans. This response to textuality, to the act of reading itself as producing enabling subjectivities and a sense of belonging, is evident in Abrahams's late memoir, *The Coyaba Chronicles* (2000), in which he describes his first impressions of London, centered around Hampstead Heath: "It was all familiar from my readings. I felt oddly at home on Hampstead Heath."[20] Like Vladislavić's protagonist, Abrahams experiences a sense of familiarity and in London, because he has entered into a mirror version of the world he had experienced through books as a young student in South Africa.

South African writer Dan Jacobson, who was from a similar generation to Abrahams, recalls in his 1985 autobiography how his arrival in London was preceded by a literary familiarity with Britain, while growing up as the son of Jewish, Eastern European immigrants in South African mining town of Kimberley:

> My parents from one world, this constrained yet half-abandoned world around me, I read in book after book of yet another: of England, Britain, to whose empire Kimberley and the country as a whole was still supposed to belong, and because of whose empire I was being brought up to speak English and to go to a school which modelled itself as much as it dared on some vague notion of an English public school. As so many others have done, in so many varying climes, I found it wasn't the reality of the countries from which the books and movies came that I was compelled to doubt, but the reality of the country I lived in: this undescribed and uncertified place where not a single thing, from the sand underfoot to the occasional savage thunderstorm overhead, was as other places were.[21]

In this passage, Jacobson describes how the England he read about in books became more real to him than the country in which he was living, which is reminiscent of Abrahams's declaration that the English poets were, to him, "more alive than the most vitally living."[22] London is a familiar space not only because of the books these writers have read which are set in its streets, but because, in his experience, South Africa is not as fully represented in literature as England is, which is why Jacobson describes it as an "undescribed and uncertified place." One should not take this statement as a matter of fact, as obviously South Africa had been "described" by many writers by the early 1950s, when this passage is set. Rather, Jacobson self-reflexively comments

[20] Abrahams, *The Coyaba Chronicles*, 27-28.
[21] Jacobson, *Time and Time Again*, 8.
[22] Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*, 200.

on the discursive power of English literature and colonial thought upon a white English-speaking South African.

Characterizing South Africa as undescribed, and therefore perhaps indescribable, takes on specific resonances in the writing of white South Africans. When describing London as a city "wrapped in centuries of words"[23] as opposed to the supposedly under-represented South Africa, J.M. Coetzee is critiquing the historical tradition of "white writing" in which South Africa stands for an unrepresented, and unrepresentable, sublime, uninhabited landscape in comparison to the overwritten, densely-populated urbanscape of London. Coetzee is of course the most well-known interpreter of this trope: in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, he refers to the historical "fiction" of "unpeopled" Africa, which allowed western colonialists an ideological base to conquer and people the land. He highlights the role that the "poetry of empty space" plays in furthering this fiction.[24] Jacobson's characterization of South Africa as unlike "other places" positions the South African landscape as somehow alien and inassimilable into the worldview of someone brought up on English literature. In his employment of this trope, Jacobson is looking back on his younger self, and self-critically reflecting on his own interpellation by these ideas of South Africa and Britain's relationship to literariness. Nevertheless, we might ask whether his critique goes far enough, and whether its repetition here is less self-aware than Coetzee's exploration of the trope in *Youth*. Both this moment in Jacobson's autobiography and the Hampstead scene in Abrahams's late memoir were written decades after the fact which highlights how deeply these moments of familiarity struck the writers and lends a self-reflexive distance to their recollections.

The particular writer associated with Hampstead, where Abrahams experienced this sense of déjà vu, is of course Keats, who lived in the north London suburb in his later life (recall that Abrahams chose England over America because "men now dead had once crossed its heaths"[25]). And it is Keats whom Abrahams invokes when he makes an important ideological shift while in London. In addition to being active in the 1940s as part of the anti-colonial group that included the likes of George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah, he was loosely connected to the British Communist Party, working at their newspaper. He abandoned his associations with the party in the mid-1940s, however. In *Return to Goli*, which is an account of a brief trip to South Africa in

[23] Coetzee, *Youth*, 137.
[24] Coetzee, *White Writing*, 177.
[25] Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*, 200.

1952, Abrahams prefaces his travelogue with an explanation of his break from the Party some years earlier, positioning himself as an independent writer not beholden to political associations. The rift came after he was chastised for not being a party member and for refusing to submit his novels for approval. He writes of this moment: "I revolted. I would never submit my work for approval. And to hell! Keats was, and always will remain, more important to me than the Marxist 'classics.'"[26] Abrahams ranks Keats above radical Marxist literature, thus revealing his allegiances to his earlier reading, despite his association with leftist circles. Literary influences on South African writers enabled transnational solidarities, as in the case of Abrahams's Pan-African sensibility awoken by his reading of African American texts, but they could also inspire or justify individualism, autonomy, even an eschewal of certain political commitments, as in the case of Abrahams's reference to Romantic poetry to explain his refusal to toe the Party line. Literary and cultural solidarities often serve as a conduit or sign of political solidarities, as in the case of South African writers' solidarities with African American writing. Alternatively, as Abrahams's valorization of Keats over Marx shows, literary affinities may stand in for or usurp political solidarities. In this case, a reference to canonical literature is used to assert the writer's independence from organized communist politics, arguably a political gesture of another kind.

This is not to say that anti-racist, anti-colonial activism and an admiration for canonical English literature are necessarily mutually exclusive. Natasha Distiller, in her work on Shakespeare in South Africa, acknowledges the argument that "the humanism which underlies the development of twentieth-century English studies is English, bourgeois, problematic: a smokescreen for gender and class oppression" that is "linked to English nation building and to colonialism,". She suggests, however, that "this analysis is produced from, and for, Anglo-American history," and that these texts "[take] on different resonances in twentieth-century South Africa." Liberalism and humanism, which are heavily implicated in English literary studies in South Africa, while certainly complicit in white privilege and Eurocentricism in South Africa, also informed the liberation movement, so that "[t]he liberal humanist subject in South Africa can also be the resisting, anti-apartheid cultural activist."[27] This twinning of English literature and resistance against racism is evident in Abrahams's work; for instance, in *Return to Goli*, he invokes words from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* ("Sceptreless, free,

[26] Abrahams, *Return to Goli*, 16.
[27] Distiller, *South Africa, Shakespeare and Post-Colonial Culture*, 61

uncircumscribed, but man") when suggesting how to transcend the limiting categories of "race."[28] Abrahams's and Mandela's writing reveals how literary influences on South African writers took on complex resonances when they travelled to London. London is the embodiment of all they had "so long read and heard about," a "familiar" place where they felt "oddly at home," but it is also a locus of transnational radical networks, in which they are active. While this combination of aglophilia and anti-racist activism may have been fairly commonplace (if no less open to critique, at times), in South Africa, in London this combination produced some difficulties for writers like Abrahams whom George Padmore, for instance, criticized for pandering to British institutions and readers.[29]

Being in London afforded some South African writers an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between South Africa and England, through a playful remaking of the English language and a more critical rendering of the legacies of English education and acculturation in South Africa. In the 1950s, the crucible for a new South African version of English and a new South African urban sensibility was, of course, *Drum* magazine: Lewis Nkosi described the *Drum* journalists as "the new African[s] cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash."[30] One of these innovators was jazz musician, composer and journalist Todd Matshikiza, who lived in London from 1960 to 1964. If *Drum* magazine's content and approach owed a great deal to jazz and its associated culture and language, as well as to local, Americanized urban culture and African-American writers such as Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison,[31] then Matshikiza's writing style, nicknamed "Matshikez", was the culmination of these influences and attitude: David B. Coplan calls this "word jazz with an American accent."[32] Michael Titlestad argues that "'Matshikeze,' in its black Atlantic relational reach" unravels "in diasporic jazz dialect, the hypostasized subject positions that were the cornerstone of apartheid ideology."[33] What then happens when this counter-identifying, American-sounding, South African-forged "Matshikeze" is trained upon the former capital of the British Empire?

The global metropolitan imaginary in which *Drum* writers positioned themselves shaped the ways in which they represented London. Liz Gunner considers how Lewis Nkosi, another

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[28] Abrahams, *Return to Goli*, 26.
[29] See Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in a Common Cause*, 133.
[30] Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 8.
[31] Jacobs, "The Blues," 10.
[32] Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, 178.
[33] Titlestad, *Making the Changes*, 51.

exiled *Drum* writer, approached London, arguing that his background in the "global ecumene" of Sophiatown meant that he "arrived in London […] already a very cosmopolitan young man," one who "must have felt in many ways at home in the London of imperial twilight, the early 1960s."[34] While Peter Abrahams feels "oddly at home" in London because of his reading of English literature, in Gunner's view, what makes writers like Nkosi feel "at home" is the time spent in the cosmopolitan streets of Sophiatown. The distance between the *Drum* journalists' swaggering personas and Abrahams's breathless reverence toward Keats's old haunts speaks of the increased urbanization of black South Africans, despite the apartheid government's best efforts. It also evinces the evolution of the literary milieu, in which black South African writers were developing new approaches to writing that syncretized local and global influences beyond the mission-school, liberal English background in which most of these middle-class writers were steeped. It was in the context of this new urban sensibility that "Matshikeze" was developed and brought to London, along with the jazz-opera, *King Kong*, on which Matshikiza worked as a composer. This confluence of influences, and Matshikiza's own sense of irony and humor resulted in passages such as this lilting description of the Prince Albert monument in his 1961 autobiography set in London, *Chocolates for my Wife*:

> They sat there feeling free. Prince Albert didn't step down an' say what you doing on my monument, you monster. Or Queen Victoria come out an' say what you doing sunbathing naked in my park jus' because the sun is shining once a year in England.[35]

The slangy, African-American accent recorded in the frequent abbreviations provides a global inflection to Matshikiza's observations of the greater freedoms that London affords black South Africans, in contrast to the draconian laws about black South Africans' mobility in urban spaces. At the same time, the lightly humorous personification of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria subverts, subtly, the imperial glory that this monument is supposed to convey.

When Matshikiza does refer to English literary texts, it is in a notably different vein to that of Abrahams's reference to Keats or Shakespeare. When arriving in Baker Street Underground Station, he is reminded of hearing Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* tales as a child:

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[34] Gunner, "BBC Radio and the Black Artist," 51.
[35] Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 32.

> I went down the escalator in the fairyland of Baker Street where I had read Sherlock Holmes watsoning away at the baskervilles.
>
> My elder brother Temba had read me to bed on that hound way back in South Africa. There was not a footprint I would have not outwatsoned brother Temba upon that night. There was not a book in a brown cover and written in the English language and covered in Harley streets that I could not that evening have uncovered for my brother Temba.[36]

To Matshikiza, Baker Street is a "fairyland" because it invokes the England of his imagination, informed by the classic stories he was exposed to as a child. Notably, Baker Street is one of the iconic literary locations mentioned by both Vladislavić and Coetzee in the passages quoted at the beginning of this paper. English books have informed Matshikiza's understanding of London, so that these stories form a background to his walks around London, in a form of literary geography. He conflates walking with the act of reading: Baker Street is where he has "read" Sherlock Holmes, rather than a place which merely sparks a memory of Conan Doyle's texts. In this moment, as in other passages in his autobiography, Matshikiza constructs himself as a *flâneur*, the quintessential modern subject who wanders the city streets in order to gather material for his art; this is a figure which critics such as Michael Opitz, interpreting Walter Benjamin, have compared to a reader, or significantly, a detective, reading the clues of the city.[37] In this passage, Matshikiza also creatively remakes the English language, turning the Conan Doyle character Inspector Watson into a verb, "outwatsoned," and imagining books "covered in Harley streets." He therefore both indicates his indebtedness to Englishness, but also re-imagines its literary classics and destabilizes the idealized status of Englishness through his play with language.

Despite its difference in tone and style, however, there are some similarities between this passage and Abrahams's recalled sense of familiarity on Hampstead Heath. In both passages, literature charts continuities between South Africa and London. In the Matshikiza passage, it is a memory of reading, or rather being read *to* by his brother, which constructs a blurring of present and past, London and South Africa. His memory of pre-literate imbibing of Sherlock Holmes makes the real Baker Street into a place of imaginative possibility, a "fairyland" which makes him aware of all the books in "brown cover[s] and written in the English language" that are inspired by London's streets. In a magnificent, almost mystical vision, London appears as a mysterious library of interwoven stories which Matshikiza, like a Holmesian detective, can

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[36] Matshikiza, *Chocolates for my Wife*, 49-50.
[37] Opitz, quoted in Frisby, "The *flaneur* in social theory," 99.

"uncover" by "outwatsoning" the textual "footprints" hidden in the city's streets. Despite the deceptively light-hearted, anecdotal tone of this moment, then, Matshikiza, like Abrahams, imagines new worlds through the act of reading. Yet while Abrahams's reading makes him feel "at home" in London, Matshikiza evinces an underlying feeling of homesickness in this passage, as he remembers his brother who remains behind in South Africa. While new forms of urban South African writing, imported into London, meant that Matshikiza's attitude toward London and Englishness was more irreverent, there are nevertheless continuities between the London writing of Mandela, Abrahams, Jacobson and Matshikiza which foreground the ambivalent but influential role that English literature plays in South African writers' self-positioning in relation to Englishness.

"Belated" modernisms and disappointment

In the above examples, writers draw on Romantic and late Victorian intertexts, but some South African writers in postwar London represented the city through the lens of modernist tropes and images. This belated influence is not unique to South African writers; Peter Kalliney's study of late colonial and postcolonial modernist networks, *Commonwealth of Letters* (2013), significantly focuses on the years 1930-1970 because "it was during this period that high modernist principles were institutionalized on a global scale."[38] Moreover, modernism, once thought of as the preserve of European and North American writers of the early twentieth century, has gradually been reframed not only as a continuous preoccupation with modernity rather than with a specific style or form, but also as encompassing texts that were previously categorized as "postcolonial" and problematically as outside the scope of modernism and modernity. In his broad assessment of alternative "geographies of modernism," Andreas Huyssen describes how "metropolitan culture was translated, appropriated, and creatively mimicked in colonized and postcolonial countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America" and that "[in] the most interesting ways, modernism cut across imperial and postimperial, colonial and decolonizing cultures." Crucial to my argument is Huyssen's paradoxical suggestion that, "[i]t was often the encounter of colonial artists and intellectuals with the metropolis's modernist culture that supported the desire for liberation and independence."[39]

[38] Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Lettters*, 10.
[39] Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 189.

South African writers' encounters with and rewriting of modernism both in South Africa and in exile in metropolises such as London enabled resistant subjectivities and informed the development of the South African literary field. The South African poet Arthur Nortje, who lived in Oxford but frequently wrote about London in the mid-1960s, is an example of such a writer, who combined late Romantic and modernist intertexts with contemporary influences. In his London-based poems, Nortje tries on different literary personae through his engagement with various literary influences, which are both inspired by and mediate his engagement with the city. He interweaves the influence of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century urban poets with the confessional lyric mode associated with American and British poets of the 1950s and '60s, and utilizes this radical voice to explore his subjectivity as a Coloured poet in exile.[40] While Nortje mainly drew on and re-purposed metropolitan modernist tropes, London-based "modernist culture" was not the only literary source of potentially enabling subjectivities for black South African writers, as I mentioned in my discussion of Matshikiza and Abrahams. Stéphane Robolin reminds us that South African writers drew on Afro-modernist texts such as Langston Hughes' poetry as well as earlier works such as Marcus Garvey's writing and W.E.B Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which "are widely credited with profoundly influencing black South African thinkers who negotiated the modernist quagmires of their own white power structure."[41] Thus literary modernism, in both its western, early twentieth-century canonical forms, and its global and late iterations, fed into postwar South African writing's engagement with colonial modernity and postcolonial subjectivities.

J.M. Coetzee dramatizes the influence of modernism on the exiled or émigré South African's self-positioning within the metropole through the semi-autobiographical protagonist of *Youth*, John, who chooses to emulate "Eliot and Stevens and Kafka," rather than following the bohemian lifestyles of "Poe and Rimbaud."[42] While John declares, "That era is over,"[43] referring to the time of these late Romantic flâneuristic poets, the 1960s London when *Youth* is set is also decades beyond the early twentieth-century heyday of Eliot and Stevens. John's interest in modernism is also evident in his reading of Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford. Huyssen argues that if "European modernism arrived at the threshold of a not yet fully modernized world in

[40] Nortje, *Anatomy of Dark*.
[41] Robolin, *Grounds of Engagement*, 57.
[42] Coetzee, *Youth*, 60.
[43] Ibid., 60.

which old and new were violently knocked against each other", then "transition into a more modernized world also characterized, however differently, life in the colonies, and it became a central trope energizing and organizing processes of postcoloniality after World War II",[44] thus making these later moments a fertile ground for new forms of modernist art. South Africa, in the postwar period, was however, in the throes of formalized apartheid, which was a system underpinned by an anachronous hanging-on of racism and "moral" conservatism even as its architects aimed toward making South Africa an industrialized, "modern" state. Thus, South Africans' relationship with modernism and modernity was even more complex than of other "postcolonial" states, just as the country's relationship to a trajectory of postcoloniality is less straightforward. South African writing set in London highlights these complexities, particularly through its invocation of modernist intertexts, and its reflections on modernity occasioned by the writer's presence in a metropolis that is the supposed source of modernism and the former center of Empire.

While the idea of modernist intertexts as belated is therefore complicated by the synchronicity of other postwar, postcolonial modernisms, and by a broader sense of the temporal and geographical spread of modernisms, belatedness is still present in South African writing about London. The trope of asynchronicity is found in disjunctions between the expectations formed by the writers' knowledge of English literary texts, and the reality of the postwar city. In writing in the 1950s and 1960s in particular, one can attribute this sense of disappointment in part to the depressed conditions of postwar London. John McLeod discusses Dan Jacobson's disappointing experience of setting out to find Virginia Woolf's home in Tavistock Square in the 1950s, only to find a bomb site, as recounted in the South African writer's 1985 autobiography. McLeod suggests that for Jacobson, this is "a disequilibrating moment when the alliance of London, England, order and culture comes apart in the derelict and ruined spaces of postwar London."[45] In Jacobson's 1959 novel, *The Evidence of Love*, the narrator reflects on the experience of South Africans travelling to England as a series of contradictions: as both "truth" and "dream"; as "reality" and "pure vision"; as "all they had hoped for" yet "a disappointment that endures and endures, long after they have left her or settled in her."[46]

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[44] Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism," 191.
[45] McLeod, *Postcolonial London,* 59.
[46] Jacobson, *The Evidence of Love*, 161.

As a final example of this phenomenon of disappointment, in an essay in the journal *Contrast,* David Lytton recalls how the well-known Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker visited London in 1964. Lytton takes her to Soho and Fitzrovia, an area associated with modernist writers, including Woolf, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. As they walk around Fitzrovia, he finds it "sad" that there are "no poets or painters now to point out." He tells Jonker, "Anyway, this is where it all happened; the geography of all the memoirs" to which Jonker responds, "I've come too late. I'm always too late."[47] Lytton remarks on the disjunction between pre- and postwar London, but in this case it is not the ruined city that is disappointing, but the absence of the bohemian London poets of the pre-war era. Lytton faithfully follows London's literary cartography, the "geography of all the memoirs," but rather than being charmed at his tour-guiding, Jonker continues to bemoan her lateness: "But I wish I could have seen Dylan Thomas. Why must I always be too late?"[48] Jonker not only feels that she has missed the halcyon days of the Bloomsbury group; she also uses earlier narratives about London as maps to guide her through a city she finds overwhelming, and is, according to Lytton, "absorbed in an effort to resurrect some gleam of the literary past from the hooting and sooty present. Browning bowling up Wimpole Street, Keats coming down from Hampstead, Dr. Johnson shambling along compulsively tapping lamp posts." She becomes "distressed that the present remained unresponsive to these conjurings […] that it was grossly and almost deliberately ugly."[49] Jonker experiences a "disequilibrating" moment, comparable to Jacobson's struggle to imagine Woolf's London in the postwar city. While she longs for the bohemian, early modernist London, Jonker also resents the tangible, ugly modernity of the city, which she sees as covering over London's vibrant "literary past." Jonker, along with Lytton who writes her experience, therefore mounts a subtle resistance against damaging forms of architectural modernity even as they hark back to a vibrant, historical moment of pre-war newness.

Why do these white South African writers in particular seem to suffer so keenly the disjunction between contemporary London and the city represented in older literary texts? For a writer like Todd Matshikiza, the disillusionment he feels about London derives from the racism he experiences in the city, which is sadly continuous, albeit in more coded forms, with the prejudice he was trying to escape in South Africa. Peter Abrahams also eventually left London

[47] Lytton, "Ingrid Jonker comes to Stratford," 208-209.
[48] Ibid., 211.
[49] Ibid., 211.

for Jamaica, which he saw as offering a less racist society. Neither writer, however, expresses their disappointment with the city as a mismatch with literary representations. John McLeod suggests that writers such as Janet Frame and Doris Lessing seized upon the disappointment they experienced in postwar London as a "vital imaginative opportunity" to break free from the burden of canonical representations of London, to critique exclusive ideas of national identity and to reimagine their own version of the city.[50] In Coetzee's *Youth*, the disappointment of postwar London drives John to start representing South Africa in fiction, thus resisting the idea of South Africa as unwriteable. Jacobson's autobiography, and the passage in *The Evidence of Love*, however, seem to present disappointment with London as an enduring, unsolvable stalemate, a regret that cannot be assuaged. The reprisal of the trope of London as a ruined or false promise among white South African writers suggests that the moment of disappointment is one which compels them to rethink and rewrite their relationship with both Europe and South Africa; in which their status as "no longer European, not yet African,"[51] to use Coetzee's description, is writ large. While Mandela, Abrahams or Matshikiza also write London through the lens of English literature, any disappointment they feel about the disjunctions between the literary and "real" city is subsumed by London's other meanings in their texts.

Within the context of this special issue which explores the nexus between cultural solidarities, anti-apartheid networks and engagements with colonial modernity, I have attempted to show how the intertexts invoked, critiqued and rewritten in South African writing about London work toward and against certain political solidarities. At times intertexts echo or forge global solidarities, foregrounding what Wicomb calls "the interconnectedness of the human world"[52] in generative ways, while at other moments, they signal loss, shame or alienation. The unevenness of these literary solidarities provides insight into the varied and ambivalent ways in which South African writers positioned themselves in relation to Englishness and Empire. While foregrounding the role that both the real and imagined London played in the development of South African literature, I have endeavored to show how South Africans rewrite the meaning of the metropole and its relationship to its former colonies.

[50] McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 83.
[51] Coetzee, *White Writing*, 11.
[52] Wicomb, "Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author," 146.

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