

# Domestic workers in South African history and literature<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of Congress 2022, as well as of its Netherlandic component, i.e., CAANS 2022, is *Transitions*, looked at from an equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) perspective.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will examine colonial and post-colonial power and racial dynamics through the lens of South African domestic workers in stories in which they are pivotal characters. I will consider whether a transition in the position and representation of domestic workers has taken place, and make use of concepts such as entanglement, contact or border zone, the peripheral space of the backyard, and also of the term, ignorance contract.

## 2. Background

But first some background about the place and position I write from. As the reader may know, South Africa had its first democratic election in 1994 after many decades of apartheid government. Nelson Mandela was the first post-apartheid president; Cyril Ramaphosa is the present one. The African National Congress party has been governing the country for the past nearly thirty years and in spite of many important changes, disappointment in the ANC-led government is widespread. Due to space constraints this paper, however, is not about politics in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the keynote lecture pronounced at CAANS 2022. The video recording of the keynote lecture can be accessed at <https://www.litnet.co.za/transition-starts-at-home-ena-jansen-se-toespraak-by-caans-2022/>.

<sup>2</sup> “[The Congress 2022] theme is *Transitions*, and our goal is to inspire ideas, dialogue, and action. At Congress 2022, we invite members of the social sciences and humanities community to re-imagine the world we inhabit, so that together we can build a future that is more diverse, sustainable, democratic, and just” (Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences 2022, <https://www.federationhss.ca/en/congress/congress-2022-archive>).

general nor about specific matters such as South Africa's high unemployment rate and corruption – however relevant they are to my subject.

Allow me to briefly introduce myself and to declare my own position as a privileged white person. I am a literary scholar with a great interest in history and sociology. I have worked as an academic, both in South Africa and the Netherlands.

My inaugural lecture as professor of South African literature at the University of Amsterdam in 2003 was focussed on stories about Krotoa, an intriguing young Khoi girl who was the first nanny at the Cape, working for the family of the first Dutch governor, Jan van Riebeeck. What she might have looked like was recently imagined in a painting by the South African artist, Marlene Dumas, who lives in Amsterdam.

The Cape was a refreshment station for VOC<sup>3</sup> ships *en route* to the East. Krotoa was, besides being a nanny, also an interpreter between Van Riebeeck and her own Khoi people. Much has been written about this intriguing young woman: by historians, novelists, playwrights, and other creative writers.<sup>4</sup>

A few years after my Krotoa lecture, during a visit back to South Africa in 2008, I suddenly realized that every black nanny and domestic worker is, like Krotoa, an interpreter, a go-between figure, moving to and fro between the comfortable homes of employers and their own modest abodes.

Despite their arguably 'low' status in South African society, black nannies and domestic workers do have a degree of agency and power precisely because of an intimate knowledge of their employers' homes and because they know very well just how dependent employers are on their caring skills. On the whole, they are, however, very vulnerable because they so badly need the work in a country where close to 40% of its people are unemployed.

My insight into the Krotoa-like go-between role of domestic workers got me started on a project which combines social history and literary analysis. I was inspired by Alison Light's (2007) brilliant book, *Mrs. Woolf & the servants: The hidden heart of domestic service*. I realized that this was the kind of book which had to be written about the representation of South African domestic workers, but in a wider perspective than looking at the work of just one author. And of course, it would be much more about race than class.

I therefore began reading widely in the South African fiction archive with the specific aim of searching for women with aprons and maids' caps, who might

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<sup>3</sup> VOC stands for *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (the Dutch 'East India Company'), 1602-1798.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Sleight's novel *Eilande* (2002) is one of many works centered around Krotoa. See also my inaugural lecture at the University of Amsterdam in which the history and many other representations of Krotoa are discussed at length (Jansen 2003).

otherwise disappear out of the backdoor of South African collective memory and literary history, if they did not become the very specific focus of literary research.

My research was like working on an archaeological dig, searching for layers of intercultural contacts and for fragments of life stories, which could perhaps show how South Africa got itself into the perilous state it has been in for the greater part of four centuries.

Colonialism and slavery are unquestionably reasons for the skew, unfair and distorted society the country developed into right from the start of the intermingling of the Dutch and local communities. Black people's ability to sustain their pastoral lifestyle in rural areas was undermined as a result of the discovery of gold in 1886 and especially after the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910.

The proclamation of the *Natives Land Act* in 1913 in fact legalised land grabbing by white people. The labour of black people was desperately needed, and new tax laws forced them into the cash system of mining bosses and landlords. Many black men flocked to the cities, entering spaces that both resented them and needed them and their labour. Their presence was regulated by strict pass laws.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Women

In my research, I concentrated on how and why also black women left rural areas to become migrant workers. For many years their movements were not restricted by pass laws. Between 1955 and 1985, however, pass laws also started to regulate their presence in the cities. The only work most of them could do was domestic work. Even now in post-apartheid South Africa, more than a million black South African women remain in domestic work.

Domestic work is important, though unfortunately often undervalued if not disparaged, and deserves appropriate remuneration and respect. These nannies, housekeepers and chars occupy a central place in South African communities, are often loved and respected, but it is an ambivalent position. Precariously situated between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, white and black, they are at once intimately connected to and at a distant remove from the families they serve.

### 4. Like family

All across the world, and very often in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, female domestic workers are described as 'part of the family.' These women are

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<sup>5</sup> The pass laws were a system used to control the movement of especially Black people, but also of Indian, and so-called Coloured people in South Africa (South African History Online 2022a).

without a doubt the most important contact figures in South Africa between white and black. Although kitchens and backyards in white homes can therefore be described as “contact zones” in the sense meant by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), when she coined the term to refer to the “meet, clash and grapple” contacts between people from hugely different cultural backgrounds, my contention is that her term is ultimately too neutral. The ambivalence of the relationship between “maids and madams” (Cock 1980), especially where nannies and children are concerned, always makes for intricate negotiations. After researching a large part of South African history and exploring the literature archive, I came to the conclusion that the ongoing negotiations between domestic workers and their employers require comparisons rather to a frontier or border zone.

For my project, I analyzed more than fifty South African novels, written by both white and black authors. I also made use of memoirs and the occasional interview, e.g., with Cecilia Nomahobe Magadlela who worked for me in Johannesburg for many years. Authors, some of whose work the reader might have read, include J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Elsa Joubert, Sindiwe Magona, and Sisonke Msimang<sup>6</sup>. In these authors’ writings, I uncovered wry and subversive insights into the madam/maid nexus (Cock 1980), capturing paradoxes relating to shifting power relationships.

This research resulted in three books in three languages: the Afrikaans *Soos familie* (2015), the Dutch *Bijna familie* (2016), and the English book *Like family* (2019).<sup>7</sup> The three books overlap but are also very different because of their intended audiences, who have different backgrounds and reading experiences.

The titles of my books all contain the word “family” but also the word “like.” Anyone with a full-time domestic worker, especially if she is live-in, knowing that both intimacy and distance lie at the basis of the entangled madam/maid relationship (Cock 1980), will recognize aspects of what I call the “like family” relationship. The emphasis is of course on the word “like” – these domestic workers are sometimes *like* but they are *not* daughters or mothers of their employers. They are *like* but *not* real family of the families for whom they work.

## 5. Colonialism, apartheid, and domestic work

The dual legacy of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa means that its society and its literature are the site of complicated tensions.

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<sup>6</sup> Msimang lived in Canada during part of her childhood which was spent together with her parents in exile.

<sup>7</sup> *Like family* (2019) was published as hard copy by Wits University Press and online by Cambridge University Press. It is also distributed by New York University Press.

A book written by South African sociologist Jacklyn Cock in 1980 is to this day of the utmost importance. Its title is *Mmaids and madams: A study in the politics of exploitation*. Cock (1980), decades ago, warned that the legal and social divisions between black and white in South Africa reinforce the power of the employer and weaken the position of the employee.

This division is still true in post-apartheid South Africa. Although there now is a fixed minimum wage as well as unions who act on their behalf, these workers are still very vulnerable. They may have the power to vote, and our president and government ministers may be black people like themselves, but they themselves are very far removed from the nexus of power.

In my work, I therefore approach domestic servants as links between different worlds. During apartheid they were practically the only black people living in white suburbs. Nannies were the only black people allowed onto 'whites only' beaches. Their go-between position between races and classes, between rural areas and cities, between tradition and modernity can be analyzed by making use of insights from urban, migration and labour studies. But also, as I show in *Like Family*, by analyzing literary texts.

## 6. Adriaan van Dis and Dutch journalists

I want to start my discussion of literary texts by referring to a book by the well-known Dutch author, Adriaan van Dis.

In *Het beloofde land* ('The promised land'), he describes his trip to Cape Town shortly after the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. He stays with an old friend, Eva, before they will later set off on a road trip to the Karoo, the heart of the country where his friend hails from. One morning, while the char, Sophie, is scrubbing the floor on all fours, he strikes up a conversation with her. He is amazed by how intimately black and white lives are interwoven through the institution of domestic work. Sophie says of her employer: "Eva is a very good white [...] *ze is als een moeder voor me, zonder haar had ik geen huis*" ('Eva is like a mother to me; without her I would not have a house') (Van Dis 1990, 9).

When Adriaan and Eva arrive back in Cape Town from their road trip, they are welcomed home by Sophie who has been staying in Eva's house, looking after her cat and everything else. The warmth between Eva and Sophie is tangible. But also, the realisation that Sophie will, within the next hour, be expected to return to her own small house in the township. The outsider, Van Dis, is struck by the ambivalent relationship between the two women – by their closeness but also, despite calling each other "mom" ('*moeder*'), the normality of the distance between them.

What I want to emphasise by this example is that an outsider like Van Dis immediately notices the close relationship between the employer and her maid, and that he is astounded by both the loving interdependency and the practical reality of their very different positions in life.

In the Dutch version of my book, *Bijna familie*, I therefore added a chapter in which I discuss books by Dutch journalists about their experiences in post-apartheid South Africa. All of them were convinced before coming to South Africa that they would not employ a domestic worker, but all of them eventually succumb to the 'South African way of life'. And all of them experience and describe the servant situation as the crux of the complicated race relations in the country.

## 7. Stuart Hall and representation

It is with all these factors in mind that I consider servants in novels as pivotal characters at the intersection between the categories of race, gender, class, and place. My research project was informed by Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of the circuit of culture, which explains representation through literature (but also through art, theatre, and film) as central to processes whereby meaning and identities in society are constructed and reproduced.

As mentioned before, I therefore view South African literature as an archive (Foucault 1972) and consider literary texts as the outcome of a system of statements that give shape to what can and what cannot be said.

## 8. Poppie Nongena

Without a doubt the most famous South African novel about a black woman is *The long journey of Poppie Nongena*, written by Elsa Joubert and originally published in Afrikaans as *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978).

When Poppie's husband dies, she is subject to rulings of the Urban Areas Act,<sup>8</sup> which determine that Poppie is banished to his impoverished Eastern Cape homeland – a place she has never even visited before. In order to earn money, she desperately needs to evade the pass laws. She leaves her children and travels back to Cape Town.

Quite by chance she finds work in the house of a Mrs. Steytler, a housewife who is in fact the well-known author, Elsa Joubert. When riots break out in the township where she is hiding out at night, Poppie flees to Joubert's house on

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<sup>8</sup> Several acts were passed during the twentieth century determining where South Africans of different races were allowed to live. The Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 for example segregated urban residential space and defined urban Blacks as "temporary sojourners" welcome in cities only insofar as they could serve the wants of the white population. See South African History Online 2022b and 2022c.

Christmas day 1976. Joubert realizes that Poppie's story could be a vehicle for writing about the cruelties of the apartheid system in a very direct way. She starts interviewing Poppie, whose real name was Ntombizodumo Eunice Ntsatha. She tells her life story to Joubert, starting with that of her grandmother.

In Joubert's moving orchestration of these oral history-interviews, Poppie is given a highly audible voice through the novelist's sophisticated and unmistakable mediation. The novel had a huge impact in South Africa. Historian Hermann Giliomee (2017) even thinks that it paved the way for whites to accept the inevitability of an end to apartheid a decade later; every family had a Poppie in the kitchen which made them realize just how wickedly unfair the system of apartheid was that they had always been voting for.

*Poppie Nongena* is a very important text in South Africa. Poppie's powerlessness and dependence on the power of inspectors who patrolled the white neighbourhoods checking on the rights of black servant people to be there,<sup>9</sup> but also on the power of a white woman employer, is stressed in both the novel and the excellent film, which was based on Joubert's novel forty years later in 2020.

Both the novel and the film actively alert white readers' and viewers' awareness of their culpability and responsibility. And both the novel and the film opened up furious discussions about the pertinent question of the right of white authors and directors to represent black characters, to tell their stories.

## 9. *The help* and dilemmas of representing the other

The reader may know Kathryn Stockett's (2009) novel *The help*. It extensively explores the stories of maids in white Mississippi households. The reader may remember that the novelist was accused by one of them that she had 'stolen' her story, that she had "dipped her pen in someone else's blood" (De Waal 2018), that she had fallen into the trap of cultural appropriation. With reference to both *The help* and *Poppie Nongena*, I discuss this dilemma in *Like family* (Jansen 219, 7-10 and 16-18).

How then should stories of oppressed people and wrongdoings be represented? Perhaps by dipping the pen in one's own blood, so to speak? As Mary West (2009) reminds us in *White women writing white*, the domestic spaces of white suburbia are overseen largely by white "madams" (Cock 1980). Perhaps the focus must therefore be on the employers. It is exactly this realisation which encouraged Nobel-prizewinner Nadine Gordimer and Marlene van Niekerk, author of the world-famous novel *Agaat* (2004; translated by Michiel Heyns and

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<sup>9</sup>This was determined by intricate clauses and inscriptions in so-called passbooks proving the status of the bearer.

published as *The way of the women*, 2010), to not focus on and try and represent black women, but to scrupulously interrogate whiteness (West 2009).

In accordance with the dilemma of authors and film directors, art historian Marion Arnold (1996, 90), in her thought-provoking essay *Portraits of servitude*, describes works portraying women in service as “some of the most problematic visual images in South African art.” Arnold (1996, 90-103) distinguishes between works which have the power to alter the conceptions of viewers and those that reinforce stereotypes. She convincingly demonstrates that images and texts that pose questions without yielding a single arbitrary answer can have the power to re-fashion what is considered normal, to alter the world of perceptions and stereotypes. She favourably discusses the painting which I have used for the cover of my book: Dorothy Kay’s portrait of her housekeeper, Annie Mavata.

This ties in with Tamara Shefer’s (2012) reminder, in her article *Fraught tenderness*, that the maid/madam relationship (Cock 1980) is a troubling relationship and that it needs to be represented as troubled.

## 10. The backyard

With this in mind, I want to focus on a few stories situated in a liminal space where employer and domestic worker are most likely to have contact. Besides the kitchen, such a space is the backyard of a typical South African house. This is in line with author Mark Gevisser’s description in *Lost and found in Johannesburg* of the “frontier of the backyard” (Gevisser 2014, 304), which he realizes the yard of his parents’ home must have been.

The backyard of a South African suburban house can perhaps best be compared to the pre-interbellum spatial and societal divide in British society, which is still kept very much alive in modern-day period films like *Downton Abbey*: that of the vertical divide between upstairs and downstairs.

Thanks to our climate, the South African space is more of an outdoor horizontal divide: the backyard is usually within direct sight from the kitchen door of the main house. Somewhere further on, often behind the garage, is the maid’s room. The word backyard, *agterplaas* in Afrikaans, stresses its most distinct feature: that it is at the back, *agter*, out of sight from the front where civil appearances and decorum are important middle-class values. In the backyard, homeowners can do pretty much what they wish, especially to a person rendered vulnerable by her dependence on work and on the living space on offer in the servants’ quarters.

South African children often fondly remember the warmth they experienced in the maid’s room, the comforting smells of soap and porridge in such a room. See, for example, Rian Malan (1990), Griselda Pollock (1994), John van de Ruit (2005). A tactile memory found in many childhood recollections is of



the maid's single bed covered by white sheets embroidered by herself in flower patterns.

Shefer (2012, 311) noted in *Fraught tenderness* that, however unequal relationships were, memories of the nanny are steeped in emotion, especially love and guilt: “[She] is remembered nostalgically as a source of comfort and care.” Based on white people's memories collected in the *Apartheid archive project*, Shefer (2012) concludes that domestic workers play a major role in white people's experience and recollections of apartheid.<sup>10</sup>

In *Down second avenue*, one of the earliest autobiographical works by a black South African, Es'kia Mphahlele (1959) remembers the backyards of the houses in Pretoria where his mother worked as traumatic spaces where white children once tossed an orange at him when he went to visit her – as though he was an animal. Although his mother was their loving nanny and a source of comfort to the white city children, they must have been taught to fear and resent all other black people, however small.

## 11. Two backyard texts

I can mention many texts in which the backyard is important, but in conclusion I want to reflect on only two. These are the short story *Agterplaas* ('Backyard') by Elsa Joubert (1980) and a series of poems, *bediendepraatjies* ('servants' talk') by Antjie Krog (2014).

Both texts are presented as works of fiction, but both have a strong autobiographical ring to them. At the time of publication of their texts, both Elsa Joubert (born in 1922) and Antjie Krog (born in 1952) were living in the affluent suburb *Oranjezicht* ('Orange view'), high against the slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town. The two white protagonists in the texts are tormented by the discrepancy between their own lives and those of their domestic workers. Both texts explicitly interrogate “the figure of the servant [who] takes us into history but also into ourselves” (Light 2007, 314). Both white women are very conscious of their inability to really communicate with the black women. Joubert's worker is a live-in servant during the 1970s; that of Krog commutes from a township just outside Cape Town nearly four decades later. Both black women have strong ties

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<sup>10</sup> The *Apartheid archive project* is an international research initiative that aims to examine the nature of the experiences of racism of (particularly ordinary) South Africans under the old apartheid order and their continuing effects on individual and group functioning in contemporary South Africa. The records of the project can be accessed here: <http://researcharchives.wits.ac.za/apartheid-archives-project-records>.

with the poor rural Eastern Cape, an area where the previous so-called 'homelands' of apartheid times are situated.

### 11.1 *Elsa Joubert*

In Joubert's story *Agterplaas* ('Backyard'), a new domestic worker moves into the servant's room. The first-person narrator realizes that the black woman could be a bridge to a world unknown to her, but she finds it impossible to cross the divide, describing herself as literally living on the periphery (Joubert 1980, 59) of a world which she will never know.

She is fascinated by what goes on in the maid's room, often watering the garden close by for longer than needs be, but at the same time, because of convention and laws prohibiting social interaction between races, she does not dare to enter the room. It is a taboo space. The backroom throbs and stirs ("*bult en roer*") (Joubert 1980, 60) with life. Sounds of desperate conversations emanate from the room. Flora's life is described as multiple, related to that of many others: an amorphous body which invades her own (Joubert 1980, 65). The 'missus' evades contact, but the people that visit Flora nevertheless enter her life and ask her to help them (Joubert 1980, 68). Someone's baby is born there.

Although the white woman intends to help Flora and even to chase pass law inspectors away should they come to enquire how many black people are present on her property, both Flora and the young mother have already disappeared from the room when she returns from a week's holiday.

Rather than wait for mercy in the backyard, Flora and her guest choose the anonymity of the township wilderness in which they might be marginally safer from inspection, prosecution, and banishment to the outermost peripheral zone of South African spaces, the desperately poor so-called 'homelands'. Flora knows that her employer does not have any real power to protect her.

### 11.2 *Antjie Krog*

In *bediendepraatjies* ('servants' talk'), a series of poems by Antjie Krog published 35 years after Joubert's short story, Krog (2014) unflinchingly explores the entangled relationship between a white Cape Town couple and their Xhosa domestic worker, Victoria, in post-apartheid South Africa. In spite of monumental political transitions due to the official ending of apartheid in 1994, many more black people are now unemployed and desperately poor. Whites have moved to the political periphery but are still at the economic centre.

There is no servant's room at Krog's house. The backyard is small and called a courtyard (Krog 2014, 65). It is an ambivalent border zone where desperate negotiations take place. Krog (2014) explores the complicated relationship between her and her husband and their domestic worker, Victoria. In keeping with a long tradition of works in which domestic worker characters

feature (J. M. Coetzee's (1990) *Age of Iron* is an important intertext), the organization of the old and the new South African world is interrogated. It is as though the employer puts herself on trial in the courtyard of her own home.

Victoria relies on the guilty feelings of her employers and uses her knowledge of their shame about apartheid to continuously just shake the white people tree and watch the money falling (Krog 2014, 68). Readers realize that Victoria's extended rural family survives thanks to what she can wrangle out of her employers to supplement their government pensions and child support grants.

Krog (2014) convincingly gives a postcolonial, postmodern, and post-apartheid voice to Victoria. The *praatjies* ('talks') – as the poems are called – are about servants, but also by servants in the sections written in Victoria's language, isiXhosa.

Krog (2014) feels just as powerless as Joubert (1980) in her efforts to alleviate the needs of her domestic worker and resents the fact that Victoria still needs her personal help in the new South Africa, many years after Black South Africans came to power. Compared to Joubert (1980), Krog (2014), however, not only establishes the fact of her impotence. The form of the series of poems dictates a "form of listening" (Krog 2014, 74 quoting Drucilla Cornell 2010, 100-114 in her motto: "the noting of the failure of representation itself becomes a form of listening") and brings about a sense of equality, in spite of the still seemingly insurmountable economic problems in post-apartheid South Africa.

## 12. Conclusion

To conclude, the lives of practically all South Africans have been touched by the institution of paid domestic work: either because of the presence of domestics who are always on hand to serve, or because of the absence of a black mother who does paid housework and cares for the children of white people.

Although the political scene in South Africa changed completely when the ANC party came to power in 1994, not much has changed with regards to private domestic arrangements: most white neighbourhoods have retained the demographic character they had during the twentieth century. Black people entering these neighbourhoods still do so mostly in their capacity as servants, as gardeners and cleaners, whilst black nannies pushing white toddlers around in prams on city sidewalks remain a familiar sight.

Many books have been written trying to explain both the disaster of apartheid and the failings of the transition into a new South Africa. A pertinent question is why apartheid was endorsed for so long and why many aspects of it are still being perpetrated?

The so-called “ignorance contract” (Steyn, 2012) offers some explanation. By making use of material in the *Apartheid archive project* in Johannesburg, Melissa Steyn, author of *Whiteness just isn’t what it used to be. White identity in a changing South Africa* (2001), explores in *The ignorance contract: Recollections of apartheid childhoods and the construction of epistemologies of ignorance* (2012) how the tacit agreement to entertain ignorance lies at the heart of a society structured in racial hierarchy. She makes it very clear that the system of racial apartheid could not have been functional or legally sustained for over four decades without the active and also passive co-operation of the whole white population. All participated in discourses that justified the *status quo*. Their apparent ignorance of gross injustices is explained by Steyn (2012) as constituting a social achievement with strategic value. Both white and black people were part of this ignorance contract. Whites out of arrogance, blacks to shield and protect themselves. Memories collected in the *Apartheid archive project*, illustrate that for ignorance to function as social regulation, subjectivities must be formed that are appropriate performers of ignorance, disciplined in cognition, affect and ethics.

I strongly feel that the literary archive I have worked with in my three *Like Family* books in many ways supplements the *Apartheid archive project*. Literature is an important other repository of knowledge about the workings of apartheid. It shows just how callously structural entitlements were taken for granted by privileged whites at the expense of racialized others.

Steyn (2012) comes to the conclusion that racialization, she calls it “ignorization at close quarters” (Steyn 2012, 8), is recounted especially in stories of early childhood, often in relation to a black nanny or maid. Children were, and still are often taught, as were their parents before them, to not see, not think, not ask. In the interests of white solidarity white children were taught to turn a blind eye, to “sign the contract and take the dividends” (Steyn 2012, 12). This is poignantly exposed in stories discussed in my chapter, *Domestic workers and children* (Jansen 2019, 139-161).

Not only South African society is structured in maintaining racial hierarchy. It is a global phenomenon: the exclusive world of white privilege exists in a parallel universe to the degradation it creates. My conclusion therefore is that all of us, whether in South Africa or Canada or elsewhere, are part of a greater world where power is unequally and unfairly distributed and that we all need to understand this, to imagine this, and to stop perpetuating our roles in the scheme of ignorance contracts.

As prominent postcolonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2001) puts it: what is needed among white people in the so-called West, and for that matter, among all those privileged in South America, the Far East, and the Middle East, is a politics

of responsibility – which would include bearing a material responsibility to undo the ravages of colonialism.

We all need to listen to the pain of others, to read books in which dilemmas of inequality are teased out. We need to do what we can in the border zones of our everyday, to share and to pay respect, to act. Transition starts at home, in the interaction between employers and their carers, their domestic workers and nannies. It can also begin in the books we read.

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