Introduction

The bad news – and it is indeed very bad news – is that post-apartheid South Africa remains a country at war with itself. Only this time, it is nothing less than a gender civil war.

HELEN MOFFETT (2008, 110)

...

The threat of rape is an effective way to remind women that they are not safe and that their bodies are not entirely theirs. [...] It is an effective way to keep women in check ...

PUMLA GQOLA (2015, 79)

...

[U]nder the comfortable cover of genre, writers can display narratives that would not otherwise see the light of day, and, indeed, reach audiences who would not otherwise be reached. Quite what those narratives actually are, however, is rather less easy both to discern and to control.

GILL PLAIN (2001, 94)

...

[To] challenge [oppression] ... would be to re-imagine the oppressed as multidimensional, complex human beings.

– NJABULO NDEBELE (ANDERSSON 2004, 16)

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Since the transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, crime fiction in South Africa has taken on an unprecedented significance. Far from being escapist or trivial, this popular genre has resonated with the country's real experience of crime in singular ways, assuming an almost seismographic quality and continuing the political engagement that has long been a feature of South African literature. In the face of alarming levels of gender-based violence, a number

of South African crime writers have begun to use the genre to address crimes against women, gender inequality and gender conflict. When asked about their motivations for writing crime, South African crime writers unequivocally refer to real-life crime in the country. Margie Orford reports being driven by a “deep sense of moral outrage” and a desire to go beneath the mere facts of violence, closer to the “truth of violence, resilience and revenge” (2010b, 191). Angela Makholwa devised her crime novel *Black Widow Society* in order to bring the taboo subject of domestic violence into the open (Binder 2015, 267). Malla Nunn calls her detective’s adventures “retrospective justice” (2010a, par. 23) and Jassy Mackenzie writes out of a need to do something against crime and to imbue female readers with a sense of empowerment (Binder 2015, 271). These authors are making a claim that is actually quite extraordinary: to be writing against *real* violence in a genre that is invested in and depends on violence like no other. The aesthetics of violence on which the genre draws make it particularly prone to violent – or, at least, problematic – representational practices. The aesthetics of violence may all too easily lead to the violence of aesthetics, especially when we recall the gendered and racialised parameters within which the genre operates. Its commercial modes of production potentially add further constraints.¹

Women and Crime in Post-Transitional South African Crime Fiction (hereinafter referred to as *Women and Crime*) sets out to critically examine this seemingly paradoxical fictional recreation and reflection of a real social ill in present-day South Africa. Drawing on a wide range of South African crime novels written over the last decade, it interrogates their mimetic reflections of gender and racial dynamics against the backdrop not only of South Africa’s violent colonial and apartheid legacy, but of broader processes of social and political transformation. The study is guided first and foremost by the questions asked and issues raised in and by the texts and their authors themselves. It is based on the assumption that to a certain extent a text predefines the ways in which it is to be read – a view of literature as inherently conceptual. It traces the paths carved out by three generic stock figures – the victim, the perpetrator and the detective – in their female forms and explores how crime novels use these figures to a number of ends: to highlight the nexus between women and

1 Here, “genre fiction” or “genre literature”, sometimes also called “popular” or “formula” fiction, is understood as fiction that relates to a set of recognisable yet flexible conventions in terms of content, characterisation and structure. Examples of genre fiction include crime fiction, romance, chick-lit, horror, western, etc. Stephen Knight argues that genre fiction “draws its popularity – and importance – from dynamic variations on compulsive patterns and from its own rapid responses to changing sociocultural concerns” (2010, xii). According to Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, works of genre fiction “provide audiences with a cheap and readily available source of entertainment, and they draw on iconographies, narrative patterns, and conventions of characterization that become familiar through frequent repetition” (1999, 227).

crime in South Africa, to expose the many forms of real violence with which South African women are confronted, to reveal gendered and racial “truths”² and to offer explanations and modes of resistance to women.

At the same time, the study subjects the “theories” outlined by the texts to critical scrutiny by asking several key questions. What gendered and racialised subjectivities are constructed and contested, and what assumptions and genealogies underlie these constructions? How are female figures framed by generic, gender and racial norms? Where do they reproduce the norms and expectations laid out for them? What modes of resistance do they adopt? What new forms of agency do they explore for women? Postcolonial³ feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) insist on the importance of attending to such questions in order to lay bare the politics of representation, especially of women of colour from the global South. Representational practices and discourses must be examined carefully lest they perpetuate the marginalisation and oppression of women in general, and women of colour in particular. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to denote multiple and simultaneous oppression based on gender and race. In a seminal essay, she notes that Black women are rendered invisible by “feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the intersection of race and gender” (1989, 140).⁴ This problem was first identified by Sojourner Truth in 1851 in her speech

2 I use the word “truth” either in quotation marks or in the plural in order to signal absence of objectivity – to signal that “truth” is necessarily biased, controversial, contested, that there are always multiple truths. When I talk about “truth-finding” or “truth-telling”, it always denotes a version of the truth. Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson call it “one of the striking historical ironies of the late twentieth century” that the “philosophical angst about the pursuit of truth has been accompanied by a newfound political confidence in exactly this project.” They view the “growing global enthusiasm for truth commissions,” which “evoke high expectations of the power of truth,” as evidence of this (2002, 1).

3 In this study the “post” in postcolonial is understood not as a temporal, but as a critical perspective that denotes a challenge or alternative to colonial, Eurocentric views and epistemologies.

4 A note on racial terminology is essential at this point. Like gender, race is a construct – or a metaphor, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls it (1985, 4). Any racial terminology therefore refers to the specific historical and socio-political power constellations under which, or in contestation of which, it was constructed. References to people as “Black”, “Coloured”, “Indian” or “White” in my study denote racial categories created under apartheid. This is highly problematic, as it repeats apartheid’s racist, segregationist practices. Unfortunately, these categories are still very much in place and in use in South Africa, and they continue to have meaning and value. I will use them whenever this meaning is important. In order to signify their constructed nature, I have chosen to capitalise these terms, including the term “White”. As Richard Dyer reminds us, it is precisely as an unmarked term, by seeming not to be anything in particular, that White has secured its hegemonic power (1988, 1).

"Ain't I a Woman?" In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins speaks of interconnected "systems of oppression" (of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age) (2000, 18, 299). She further names and challenges "controlling images" that originate in slavery and colonialism, but still serve to dominate women of colour (69–96). Some of these images and stereotypes are at play in the representation of female victims, perpetrators and detectives of colour, as I will show. By applying a decolonial feminist lens, my study reveals subjectivities, practices and performances that draw on what María Lugones – with recourse to Gloria Anzaldúa – terms "feminist border thinking": "[W]here the liminality of the border is a ground, a space, a borderland" (2010, 753). Such "Third Spaces" – along with strategies of disidentification and resignification that destabilise dominant power structures⁵ – assume significance in decoding, for example, South African Coloured subjectivities in crime fiction.

1 Choice of Texts and Approach

My analysis, which is undergirded by post- and decolonial as well as Black feminist theory, involves a close reading of 21 crime novels that have received little critical attention to date. All are set in South Africa and written by South African authors in the post-transitional period. Their authors include South African citizens as well as residents and diasporic voices⁶, and all are written in English.⁷ All feature female victims, perpetrators or detectives as protagonists or as prominent figures who react to and engage with the social and political pressures facing real South African women.

The figure of the *female victim* is given particular prominence in Penny Lorimer's first-time crime novel *Finders Weepers* (2014), as well as in Malla Nunn's expat view *Blessed Are the Dead* (2012). The tradition of attending to female victimisation in South African crime fiction was initiated by Margie Orford – often called South Africa's "queen of krimi" – in her Clare Hart series, which started in 2006 and is still ongoing, but Lorimer departs from Orford's

5 This link is established by Gabriele Dietze. For Dietze, this is the point where the critical sub-genre that she dubs "Queer Intersectionality" can be connected to "the decolonial imperative of 'knowledges otherwise'" (2014, 261–2).

6 Malla Nunn is from eSwatini, but her parents lived in South Africa before emigrating to Australia, where Nunn still lives. Charlotte Otter is a South African living in Germany. Hawa Jande Golakai is Liberian, but she has lived in South Africa and offers the perspective of the many immigrants from other African countries in South Africa.

7 There is a growing body of crime fiction in other languages, most notably in Afrikaans. The best-known Afrikaans crime writer internationally is Deon Meyer.

agenda in two important ways. First, her detective is not White, like Orford's Clare Hart, but Xhosa/German. Secondly, unlike Orford's host of victims of sexual violence, Lorimer's female victims Boniswa and Lulu are as much victims of the South African education system as they are of more event-based forms of violence. Nunn, as an expat and writer of historical crime novels, introduces a further variation. Her detective is not only male and of uncertain racial origins, but Amahle, the victim, is a Zulu girl killed by her father's wife. Foregrounding their victims' trauma, as these crime novels do, they lend themselves to being regarded as trauma novels. Drawing from studies on the gender dimensions of bearing witness in South Africa, as well as postcolonial trauma theory, I examine how the novels, both process the trauma of past and present real violence against women and chart the resources that women are able to deploy in response to such violence. Female victims in the crime genre, particularly if they are of colour, have traditionally been simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. Questions of representation are therefore pertinent, as post- and decolonial and Black feminist theorists emphasise. This study reads the novels in the light of scholarship on the ethics and aesthetics of representing the violated female body in order to assess their politics and, ultimately, their success in doing justice to women.

Novels featuring *female perpetrators* as protagonists are as rare as they are conspicuous. The obvious starting point is Mike Nicol's Coloured femme fatale Sheemina February. She features in his Revenge Trilogy (2010a, 2010b and 2011), which marks the beginning of Nicol's turn to crime writing. February is joined by Jassy Mackenzie's White killer heroine Jade de Jong. Mackenzie, who started her thriller series featuring Jade de Jong, which is still ongoing, in 2008. My third perpetrator is the Black Widow Society, an interracial group of murderous women created by Angela Makholwa in her novel of the same name (2013). All three novelists write female perpetrators who are intent on redressing the power balance for women. Drawing from theories on gender performativity and masculinity studies, my study delineates the ways in which performing the male role of the killer enables these women to move to a place of power and to do justice. What is at stake is their "offence" against both the law and gender norms. By attending to questions of representation and reading fictional female perpetrators against the background of existing discursive constructions of violent women in the crime genre and in South Africa I show that these characters have the potential to prize open gender norms as constructs, to transform the way in which readers of crime fiction view women and to probe issues of retribution and alternative notions of justice from a female perspective.

Because of their diverse backgrounds and origins, the *female detectives* in the novels that I have chosen are confronted with a wide variety of types of crime.

The Coloured police detective Persy Jonas features in Michéle Rowe's crime series of the same name, which began in 2013. Vee Johnson, a Liberian journalist-investigator, is the protagonist of a series by Hawa Jande Golakai in which the detective scrutinises South African society from an immigrant's perspective. Charlotte Otter, like Malla Nunn, is a South African emigrant. Her protagonist is the Afrikaner journalist-investigator Maggie Cloete, who is based in South Africa. Even though these investigators are licensed and empowered by institutions such as the police or the media, the novels examined here also show that their agency is constrained by those same institutions, which marginalise them as women. The feminist potential of the female detective has been debated by feminist literary scholars ever since explicitly feminist crime fiction first appeared in the 1970s. My analysis will engage with these controversies and the question they ultimately touch on: namely, how much change is possible from within the patriarchal system. Taking cues from feminist political and legal scholars from both South Africa and further afield, I will identify the creative and unconventional agentic strategies employed by the detectives in South African crime novels. My reading will also attend to the particular aspects of the South African real that the female detective subjects to female investigation, the kinds of truths that she brings to light and the kind of justice that she is able to administer for women. Finding and exposing the truths about past crimes was institutionalised in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as were restorative forms of justice. I will therefore read the female detective in conversation with feminist scholarship on the TRC.

As my intention is to critically map the cultural and gender/racial-political contribution of South African crime fiction, I am guided in my choice of theory by the crime novels themselves: by the ways in which they negotiate the problematics of law and justice for women faced with crime in South Africa from the diverse viewpoints of their female victim, perpetrator and/or detective figures. What *Women and Crime* offers is a cross-cultural perspective, a *regard croisé*, a view from Europe shaped not only by a full year of living in South Africa and doing research at a South African university, but by numerous conversations with South African writers and an ongoing dialogue with friends and academics in South Africa and beyond over many years. My looking and researching both "here" in Europe and "there" in South Africa is also reflected in the scholarship that informs the study.

Although the crime genre's ability to shed light on social change and the state of the nascent democratic order in South Africa has been recognised in numerous scholarly articles, few book-length treatments of the subject – let alone of novels by female writers – have appeared to date. One notable exception is Leon de Kock's comprehensive study *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality*

and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing (2016a), which, however barely touches on questions of gender. Although Samantha Naidu's and Elizabeth Le Roux's recent volume *A Survey of South African Crime Fiction* (2017) does include a chapter on the subject, this does not consider the intersection between gender and race. Largely under-researched are the crime genre's singular reverberations with trauma, truth-finding, justice and the restoration of order in South Africa, especially from a female perspective. Focusing on the period following the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Women and Crime* traces the various ways in which crime fiction is still in conversation with the endeavours of the TRC and, arguably, provides a response to the TRC's alleged failure to develop a full understanding of women's suffering under apartheid. Ewald Mengel's and Michela Borzaga's collection of essays *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel* (2012b) is an in-depth examination of the role of literature in reclaiming and transcending the country's traumatic past. *Women and Crime* continues this line of research with a focus on crime narratives and an intersectional perspective. In doing so, it takes cue from a long line of work on the consequences of disregarding violations of women's rights in contemporary South Africa by writers such as the literary scholars Desiree Lewis and Pumla Dineo Gqola, the sociologist Nthabiseng Motsemme, the political scientist Sheila Meintjes, the legal scholar Beth Goldblatt, the anthropologist Fiona Ross and the journalist Redi Tlhabi. Beyond South Africa, the book represents an important contribution to the study of what Chris Andrews and Matt McGuire term "post-conflict literature" (2016). In this newly established field, *Women and Crime* is the first work to examine crime fiction. It also fills a critical gap by examining the figure of the detective alongside those of the victim and the perpetrator, who have received insufficient attention in studies of crime fiction more generally. The study demonstrates that, by tapping into violence, misogyny and racism, the crime genre provides a vibrant platform for social, cultural and ethical debates. Its innovative and interdisciplinary theoretical approach sheds new light on the complex ways in which crime fiction resonates with the real and on the genre's potential as a tool of political and cultural intervention from a feminist perspective.

2 Post-Transitional Literature

The crime novels examined here are a product of the so-called post-transitional moment in South Africa's history. Although crime novels are not an entirely new phenomenon in South Africa, they were relatively uncommon before

1994.⁸ Especially during apartheid, as crime writer Mike Nicol puts it, “no self-respecting writer was going to set up with a cop as the main protagonist of a series. It was akin to sleeping with the enemy” (2015c, par. 1). In the “new” South Africa, particularly with the onset of the new millennium, crime fiction started to burgeon. It is important, therefore, to take a closer look at this post-transitional moment in time and the literary landscape associated with it. As Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie note, “the term ‘post-transitional’ is not primarily a temporal marker but rather a widening of the scope of what characterizes current cultural formations” (7). In fact, not all scholars see it as necessary to draw a line between the transitional and post-transitional periods.⁹ For my study, however, which looks at novels that were all written some time after the transition to a new dispensation, and that speak to and reflect the transition and its promises in various ways, it remains a useful distinction.

The period of change, which the *post*-transitional period both refers back to and sets itself apart from, is the *transitional* period as such, which designates the time from 1990 to around 2000. After the country’s narrow escape from a civil war, the unbanning of the liberation movements and Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in early 1990 initiated a process of negotiation. Eventually, a peaceful shift to democracy was secured, culminating in the first non-racial democratic election in 1994, which saw Nelson Mandela elected president. According to Meg Samuelson, the literatures of transition were “invested and implicated in national, often nation-building, processes which found their symbolic and moral centre in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)” (2010, 113).

If the transitional period was about “turning inward,” as Samuelson puts it, the post-transitional years are marked by a turn towards “scripting connections,” both within the national entity and beyond (113–114). As Frenkel and MacKenzie explain, such connections have come to be theorised in terms of “complicities (Sanders), foldedness, conviviality (Gilroy), improvisation (Tittlestad) or hybridity [...] and mutual ‘entanglement’ (Nuttall) [...]” (2010, 6). What this idiom denotes is an orientation towards the complexity of points of social and temporal contact and intersection. Sarah Nuttall captures it with the notion of “entanglement”. She writes, “Entanglement is a condition of being

8 Elizabeth le Roux provides a bibliography of South African crime fiction written in English up to 1994 (2013). A good and regularly updated map of the current crime fiction landscape, which includes South African crime novels written in other languages, can be found on Mike Nicol’s *Crime Beat* website/blog (Nicol 2016). The article by Lindy Stiebel adds Black crime writers of the 1990s (2002).

9 See, for example, Leon de Kock’s study on post-apartheid crime writing (2016a, 9–15).

twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited" (2009, 1). In post-transitional literature, Frenkel and MacKenzie note an increase in transnational allegiances and diasporic connections (2010, 2). With regard to the connections inside the country, they observe that apartheid-era racial categorisations are being complicated or ignored altogether in the post-transition period and that the interrogation of South Africa's painful history, which started during the transition, is being continued, although much literature "disavows the past altogether" (2). On a more cautious note, Samuelson warns that violations of both the apartheid and the colonial past continue to harm the post-transitional present, a fact to which the growing crime genre bears witness (2010, 114). "Crime fiction too," she emphasises, "draws into its bloody maw a range of unfinished business from the past even as it increasingly inserts the national into various transnational networks" (114). Just as the past remains influential, so does the political. Contrary to expectations, post-transitional literature has not turned away from the kind of political engagement South African literature was renowned for during apartheid. Sam Naidu and Elizabeth Le Roux find the status of crime fiction elevated "to the 'new political novel'" (2017, 162). Its significantly increased presence within the South African literary landscape is the result of a general post-transitional opening up, to which the genre has contributed in important ways. This should come as no surprise, given the close association between popular literature and social change.

In very different cultural contexts, two pioneering theorists of popular culture, John G. Cawelti and Karin Barber, have independently postulated that popular forms are both a *sign* of processes of transformation and a *means* of negotiating them. For Cawelti, popular genres facilitate the assimilation of new interests and values into conventional imaginative structures (1976, 36). Barber notes, "New popular cultural forms not only emerge out of historical change, but also participate in it, embody it and comment upon it" (2018, 3).¹⁰ Having said that, the term "popular" is by no means uncontested – Barber calls it a "slippery" term. Given its reverberations with Western class relations, it creates unease when applied to an African context (2018, 7). It is defined as belonging to "ordinary people" by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2020), as opposed to the elite, which raises further problems. Neither group is a fixed entity, boundaries are porous. What is more, as Barber points out, "'Popular' is a term laden with contradictory values, attracting both championship ('the voice of the people') and disdain ('low-class trash')" (2018, 11). South African crime fiction displays a

10 See also Barber 1987 (13–15).

number of characteristics that Barber deems typical of African popular forms (12). First, ambiguity – even contradiction at times – is pervasive, especially when it comes to gender politics. Secondly, South African crime fiction features voices that pit the “us” (the poor, the marginalised) against the “them” (the rich, the powerful, the privileged), albeit while acknowledging complicities and fault lines. Finally, the genre clearly expresses “sarcasm, outrage and challenge,” asserts the dignity of those who are less privileged and exposes inequality, another typical feature of African popular forms according to Barber (12). The ways in which African popular cultural productions negotiate change with regard to questions of gender are outlined by Lynda Gichanda Spencer, Dina Ligaga and Grace A Musila, who make a strong case for the impact that such productions have on perceptions of gender in Africa. They perceive “manifestations of change and continuity in gender scripts,” as well as “alternative ways to re-imagine gender within popular imaginaries in Africa” (2018, 4). Among the elements that they identify as inherent to African popular culture is its capacity to function as a democratic platform to probe gender issues in both transgressive and conservative ways (4).

Intricately linked to the ways in which South African crime fiction mediates social and political change in the years following the transition – not least in the area of gender – is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). If, as Frenkel and MacKenzie declare, the literature of the transition years is “inextricable from the spectacle of the TRC” (2010, 4), the post-transitional period can be regarded as one of prolonged and critical engagement with the TRC in the genre that, like no other literary form, is (explicit) about crime, the “truth” about crime, justice and the restoration of order – epitomised in the victim, the perpetrator and the detective. In fact, I find each of these three figures in conversation with the TRC, so, *inter alia*, I read post-transitional crime novels as still engaged with – or as “rearranging,” to use Samuelson’s terminology – the endeavours of the country’s Truth Commission. The foundations of the TRC were laid in the final clause of the South African Interim Constitution, which recognised the injustice of the past and stated that amnesty would be granted to perpetrators (Hayner 2001, 41). Following the 1995 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the TRC began its work in 1996 (41). Its threefold mandate included, first, investigating and reporting on human rights violations during the apartheid era;¹¹ secondly, granting amnesty to violators of human rights provided that

11 To be precise, the TRC was charged with investigating human rights violations between 1 March 1960, the day of the Sharpeville Massacre, and 10 May 1994, the day of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as president (Krüger 2007, 40).

they fully confessed and their acts had been politically motivated; and thirdly, making recommendations for reparations to victims (Hayner 2001, 41–43, Butler 2009, 53).¹² The commission submitted its final report in 2003. According to Anthony Butler, “[t]he TRC’s principal achievement was to elicit and record the testimony of thousands of victims of human rights violations, and to establish on the historical record the extent and nature of such abuses committed during the era of political struggle” (53). Over 21,000 victims and witnesses testified and told their own versions of the “truth”, 2,000 of them in public hearings; over 7,000 perpetrators applied for amnesty, as Priscilla B. Hayner notes (2001, 42–43). The TRC’s aim to facilitate reconciliation through truth-telling was informed by psychological tenets and the Christian/spiritual principles of compassion and forgiveness: For the victims, telling their story and having its truth value acknowledged was thought of as a way of processing their pain to bring about healing. The perpetrators’ confessions were supposed to have a cathartic effect and to foster forgiveness on the part of the victim (Posel and Simpson 2002, 2, 9). Given the scale of the South African TRC, the most ambitious of its kind to date, it is impossible to measure exactly how successful the Commission was in achieving these aims. Gesine Krüger gives the consensus view: namely, that the TRC played a seminal role in averting a war (2007, 41). For her, it testifies to South Africa’s high awareness of the explosive force a violent history can develop if it remains unreviewed (41). Taking stock, Deborah Posel maintains, “The TRC remains, in several respects, a remarkable achievement” (2002, 166). In particular, she emphasises its role as “historical ‘lie detector’”: enough human rights violations were revealed “to debunk any lingering attempts either to sanitise apartheid or to romanticise the struggle against it” (167).¹³

The TRC has been the subject of widespread debate and criticism, which may be perceived not only as necessary, but as part and parcel of its reconciliation project. With regard to gender, it has been criticised for failing to uncover a full understanding of women’s sufferings under apartheid (Ross 2003a, b, 2008, Borer 2009).¹⁴ Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes summarise this critique as follows:

12 The commission’s mandates are mirrored in its three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee, the Amnesty Committee and the Reparations and Rehabilitation Committee (Hayner 2001, 41–42).

13 Posel quotes Michael Ignatieff, who stated, “All that a truth commission can achieve is to reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse” (2002, 167).

14 See “The female victim: Introduction” for details.

The TRC's narrow interpretation of "severe ill-treatment" means that women who bore the brunt of oppression through forced removals, pass arrests and other acts of systemic apartheid violence have not been identified as victims of gross human rights violations. We have also argued that women's evidence as wives and mothers of victims has cast them as secondary victims rather than as primary agents in a struggle against injustice. A third dimension of a gender analysis [...] is the lack of testimony to the TRC from women victims of sexual violence to the TRC [sic].

1997, 8

In my analysis of individual crime novels, I will show in detail how they respond to these perceived shortcomings, but at this point I would like to highlight some views on the relationship and commonalities between the TRC and literature. Thinking about the role of literature vis-à-vis the country's violent history and the work of the TRC, South African writer André Brink attributes a key function to it. He famously maintains that "unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future" (1998, 30). Brink claims that, because it is based on memory, which is necessarily unreliable, history – even the kind of history that the TRC has written – will always be fallible, will always have its "blind spots and silences" (37). It is therefore literature, as "imagined rewriting of history" (37), that is better suited to the task of attending to the "silent or silenced landscape of the past" (32). Shane Graham makes a similar argument in his study of literature after the TRC, in which he describes the TRC as "merely the opening chapter" in the process of South Africa's transformation: "[R]ather than allowing South Africa to 'close the book on the past,' as many of the commission's proponents suggested would follow from its work, the TRC helped make possible the continual writing and rewriting of that book" (2009, 3).¹⁵ The past, in Graham's understanding, is not monolithic or final (20).¹⁶ This study and the crime novels analysed in it form part of the on-going process initiated by the TRC. It will employ some of the conceptual tools and vocabulary of the human rights discourse introduced by the TRC (restorative justice,

15 For nuance, see, for example, Tyrone Savage (2011).

16 Graham identifies a number of prominent South African writers as participants in this process of (re)writing the past, notably Achmat Dangor, K. Sello Duiker, Antjie Krog, Sindiwe Magona, Zakes Mda and Zoë Wicomb. The process continues to the present day with writers such as Nadia Davids, Niq Mhlongo, Lebogang Mashile, Koleka Putuma and Makhosazana Xaba to mention but a few.

“truth” and reconciliation, gendered peace, discourses of victimhood) in seeking to trace where and how crime fiction responds to the TRC. It will also critically examine the paradox, if not outrageousness, of a potentially violent genre continuing in the vein of a TRC that explicitly advocated non-violent means of conflict resolution.

3 Post-Transitional Crime Fiction and Crime Discourse

This study follows Worthington's definition of crime fiction as fiction “that has crime, or the appearances of crime, at its centre and as its *raison d'être*” (xi). The exact nature of “crime fiction” is notoriously hard to determine. Charles J. Rzepka mentions the vagueness of the term (2010, 2), while Stephen Knight and Heather Worthington discuss in detail the difficulties of defining what constitutes crime fiction (2010, xiii, 2011, xi). South African crime fiction written in the post-transitional period draws from European and American genre traditions originating in both the 19th-century detective novel and the 20th-century hard-boiled and noir thriller. However, it has significantly adapted, transformed and, at times, subverted those traditions. In particular, it shares the notion of “postcolonial ‘genre-bending’” (Matzke and Mühleisen 2006a, 5) which entails social detection, an investigation into power and authority, and a questioning of the social order, often “through alternative notions of justice” (5), with other crime fiction that has emerged in colonial and postcolonial contexts around the globe. The crime novels analysed here largely fall into what Sam Naidu regards as the two main sub-genres being written in South Africa today: namely, the thriller and the detective novel (2013a, 127). Modelled on the US-American hard-boiled novel and its derivatives, as well as on spy or noir thrillers, the South African thriller as Naidu describes it “is formulaic, fast-paced, plot-driven, contains more action than detection, is quite violent, and usually ends with a climactic chase or physical show-down” (127). I use the term “thriller” in this way, with the slight adaptation that it prominently includes the perpetrator's perspective. The focus of the detective novel, by contrast, is on the – often somewhat eccentric – detective. He or she is the driving force behind the investigation of the murder mystery around which the novel revolves. The detective novel can be traced back to tales by Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, although it also borrows from the police procedural of the late 20th century. It can include action, but is slower paced and has more psychological depth than the thriller. Having said that, sub-generic boundaries are notoriously difficult to draw in the crime genre, so I will use the terms “thriller” and “detective fiction” as very broad points

of reference only. As sub-generic distinctions are not central to my argument, most of the time I will refer simply to “crime fiction”.

The recent phenomenon of crime fiction in South Africa was first taken seriously outside academic circles – most notably by Mike Nicol, who in 2007 began documenting the South African crime fiction scene and sparking off critical debates on his website and in his blog *Crime Beat*.¹⁷ As Naidu points out, “Nicol’s reviews, interviews, and research have performed a vital role in creating and sustaining interest in this field” (2013a, 125). In the past few years, South African crime fiction has since developed into an important field of academic study. A key milestone in this development was the 2013 special edition of *Current Writing*, which placed contemporary South African crime fiction in a historical context and brought together scholarly contributions on the subject for the first time. This was followed in 2014 by a special issue of *Scrutiny*.² Since then, numerous publications have appeared in scholarly journals and a lively debate has evolved. If South African crime fiction has begun to attract academic attention, this is largely on account of its capacity for socio-political analysis. As Naidu observes,

For South African crime fiction, which entertains, provides a form of escapism *and* yet manages to engage with suffering on various levels, the question of artistic merit is closely linked to socio-political analysis. The question is no longer whether crime fiction is “highbrow” or “lowbrow”, but one of how this genre, and its sub-genres, manage to entertain and simultaneously perform a much-needed hermeneutic function.

2013b, 731

While crime writers themselves are attracted by this tension between entertainment and analysis (Nicol 2012a), a substantial body of critical work has focused on the genre’s politics. This includes crime novels’ potential as “state of the nation” narratives, to use Jonathan Amid’s term (2011, par. 1). Within the arena of the socio-political, questions of gender and gender-based violence have attracted significant critical interest. My study forms part of and continues this line of critical enquiry.

Just as crime fiction in South Africa cannot be isolated from real-life crime, so it must be viewed within the context of the country’s pervasive discourse on crime. Rosalind Morris notes, “Crime is the phantom that haunts the new nation’s imaginary” (2006, 60). Jonathan Amid and Leon de Kock identify

¹⁷ The few crime novels written during apartheid did receive some scholarly attention, however (Green 1994, Stiebel 2002, Davis 2006).

“‘crime’ as the dominant discourse that encompasses many forms of law-breaking, violence and violation that have taken on ‘mythic’ proportions in the current sociopolitical climate” (2014, 60). In fact, crime fiction occupies a rather complex place as both within and outside such discourse, both feeding into it and reflecting it.¹⁸ On the one hand, crime fiction partakes in these discourses about crime, which encompass dinner-table conversations, news reports, television series and crime films,¹⁹ as well as investigative journalism and the very popular true-crime books.²⁰ John and Jean Comaroff argue that “there seems to be more to the public obsession with criminality and disorder than the mere *fact* of its reality. South Africans of all stripes are also captivated by *images* of crime and policing [...]” (2004, 801, original emphasis). In a society that is threatened by real crime, while faced with an unreliable criminal justice system, crime fiction has a restorative function, “iterating an order that remains distinctly fragile” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 20). Warnes relates “[t]he fact that the detective arm of the South African police is felt to be a key to solving the country’s crime problem” to Meyer’s and Orford’s crime fictional detectives and concludes that “the post-apartheid crime thriller should be read as negotiating – in the ambivalent sense of the word – the threat and uncertainty that many feel to be part of South African life, creating fantasies of control, restoration and maintenance [...]” (2012, 991). Thus crime fiction reproduces the larger discourse about crime, the “criminal obsessions,” which the Comaroffs read as an “effort to *produce* social order” (2004, 822, original emphasis). On the other hand, crime fiction can serve to critique discourses about crime. In her analysis of Truth Commission thrillers, Shameem Black demonstrates how crime fiction reveals the limits of the national narrative of disclosure and healing in its attempt to overcome the atrocities of apartheid (2011). De Kock offers another example of the critical stance that crime fiction can take, namely that of bringing to light “‘crime’ and disorder in the public

18 This section is derived in part from an article published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* December 29, 2015, available online: <http://jcl.sagepub.com>, DOI: 10.1177/0021989415619466.

19 Examples of South African crime films include *Hijack Stories* (2000), *Tsotsi* (2005), *Jerusalema* (2008), *A Small Town Called Descent* (2010), *Menda City* (2011), *State of Violence* (2011), *How To Steal 2 Million* (2011), *Four Corners* (2014) and *iNumber Number* (2014) (Nicol 2014). Jean and John Comaroff discuss South African crime drama as part of the discourse on crime (2016, 83–98).

20 Prominent true-crime writers include the investigative journalists Antony Altbeker, Jonny Steinberg, Mandy Wiener, Barry Bateman, Alex Eliseev and Julian Rademeyer, among others. See Nicol’s article for a discussion and for interviews with some of these writers (Nicol 2014).

body itself" (2015, 35). Doing "the work of social detection," crime fiction exposes the new social and moral economy of the country, in which "the borderlines of legitimate and illegitimate, now far less clear or identifiable, are under erasure" and which, ultimately, has compromised the democratic ideal (36). With reference to the early crime novels by Meyer, Nicol and Roger Smith, De Kock argues that the plotting of crime fiction repeats, and thereby reveals, the plotting of the "agents of self-enrichment and public-sphere corruption" (34) in the South African real. Under these circumstances, he maintains, "[t]he task of the writer (and the critic), then, is to make the transition – or the fiction of the transition – visible and tractable by plotting its characters, their sphere of operation, their motives and *modus operandi*, and ultimately, their deeds and the social meaning thereof" (35).

Crime fiction can occupy yet another place in relation to the larger crime discourse; it can be itself a discourse of resistance and empowerment. Matthew Christensen demonstrates how it can teach us ways to behave and survive in a world governed by neo-liberal rationales. Crime fiction manoeuvres "the chasm between popular and official narratives of collective justice in moments of acute transformation in the relationship between the individual and the state" (2015, 315). What is more, by creating fictional characters who refuse to give in to the threat and terror created both by real crime and by the discourse about it, who refuse to reproduce the awareness of powerlessness and resolve to act against all the odds, such crime fiction offers coping strategies, as Marla Harris notes (2013, 124). This is, of course, a form of mediating fears, but it goes a step further by countering debilitating stereotypes and creating fantasies of empowerment, notably with regard to gender.

4 Post-Transitional Gender Conflicts

When it comes to gender, the transition and the post-transition periods in South Africa are characterised by a seeming contradiction: "women are legislatively empowered, and yet we do not feel safe in our streets or homes," as Pumla Dineo Gqola, a South African public intellectual and gender activist, summarises it (2007, 116). In the midst of the country's hyper-awareness of race, this contrast has brought into sharp focus the importance of attending to issues of gender, too. A large amount of post-transitional South African writing, and certainly all the crime writing discussed here, focuses on gender dynamics, gender inequalities and gender-based violence.

On the one hand, South African women's rights and protection are constitutionally guaranteed. Women were at the forefront of protest and organisation

against apartheid from at least the 1950s, and they took up arms in the struggle for democracy (Meintjes 2001, 64; 69). After the end of apartheid, women were able to sustain political influence and managed to secure their interests and protection in the country's new constitution (69–70). In Cheryl McEwan's words, "This is one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and its guarantees are potentially revolutionary [...]" (2000, 633). And yet, Gqola protests that "women are denied the very freedom that 'empowerment' suggests, the very freedom the Constitution protects," as their "bodies are seen as accessible for consumption – touching, raping, kidnapping, commenting on, grabbing, twisting, beating, burning, maiming – and control" (2007, 120). "A genuinely gender-progressive country," Gqola emphasises, "is without the gender based violence statistics that South Africa has, making South African women collectively a majority (at 52 per cent) under siege" (117). Exactly what these statistics are able to reveal is questionable. For various reasons, including underreporting, accurate statistics about gender-based violence are hard to come by. However, it is said that up to 40% to 50% of women in South Africa have experienced sexual violence (Snodgrass 2015, par. 4). Based on official crime statistics, Rachel Jewkes and Robert Morrell report that South Africa's rape rate ranks as "the highest of any INTERPOL member country, with more than 55,000 rapes reported to the police annually" (2010, 2). The website of Rape Crisis South Africa states:

Rape in South Africa has emerged as a crime of extreme violence. Commentators liken the types of rape they see in South Africa to those perpetrated during armed conflict, in terms of the degradation, ritual humiliation and the extent of injuries, such as mutilation, that are involved. [...] A recent national mortuary-based study concluded that in South Africa a woman is killed every six hours by an intimate partner, another record-setting statistic.

RAPE CRISIS SOUTH AFRICA 2017, par. 6

Such extremely widespread gender-based violence, including the various forms of structural violence that facilitate it, has given rise to numerous attempts at explaining and theorising across a wide range of disciplines. Recurring modes of explanation refer to the colonial and apartheid past and the ways in which it fostered violent masculinities; to the impact on men of the transition and its *de jure* female empowerment and continuing high rates of unemployment and poverty; and, with increasing urgency, to a pervasive culture of tolerance and impunity of gender-based violence (Meintjes 1998, Morrell 2001, Mofett 2006, Hamber 2007, Meintjes 2011, Gqola 2015). Louise du Toit provides a

useful overview of the field, which she organises and discusses in four interpretative frames. The first two, which she observes as prevalent and dominant in both academic and popular discourse, she calls the “past perpetrator trauma” and the “current social exclusion” interpretative frames (2014, 102). They have in common that they explain men’s violent behaviour as a result of colonial/apartheid-oppression or post-transitional socioeconomic marginalisation to the point of emasculation (103, 108). Du Toit criticises both of these frames for othering the phenomenon and the perpetrators on the basis of either race or class (110). She also maintains that neither of these oppressive factors has been limited to men (105, 108). Besides standing in contradiction to the statistical fact that most acts of gender-based violence occur within the perpetrators’ own communities (108), these frames also serve to reduce a perpetrator’s accountability (107). The third interpretative frame, which Du Toit labels “feminist”, is the “patriarchal-politics” frame (112). It denotes what is generally referred to as a patriarchal backlash, often in the aftermath of violent conflict. Thus Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen argue that “the gender violence women experience in wartime increases when the fighting dies down” (2001, 4). They consider that the new power relations women have established during the struggle, and now seek to maintain, are met with the violence of men who want to reassert the old status quo (11–13). Helen Moffett shares this view. She states that “in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining patriarchal order” (2006, 129). In similar vein, Desiree Lewis describes acts of sexual violence directed against Black lesbians as “a backlash against individual sexual freedoms [which] have increased in the face of constitutional and legislative rights to sexual freedoms” (2009, 130). Du Toit favours this interpretative frame over the previous two because it acknowledges the political function of sexual violence and helps to explain its intracommunal and gendered nature, as well as the fact that it is not confined to certain ethnic groups or social classes (2014, 115). Still, she finds fault with a frame that sees sexual violence as a result of a patriarchal crisis, as a symptom of “too much democracy” (114). Not only is it unhelpful in accounting for the fact that a lot of violence against women takes a specifically sexual form – given that “[t]here are many forms of violence that can serve the purpose of terrorizing a subordinate group” (116–117) – but it wrongly “presumes that women in South Africa [...] are already included as the political opponents of men. This is to claim too much” (117). Du Toit therefore prefers a fourth approach, namely an “ontological-violence” interpretative frame. Within this frame, sexual violence is less an instrument for women’s oppression, with a message directed at women, than an instrument to perform and produce male dominance, with a message directed at other men (118). This

specific display of male dominance via sexual violence – which, ultimately, is a perpetuation of patriarchal culture – is particularly tempting for men in present-day South Africa, Du Toit argues, because it is illegal and thus considered daring, but still relatively risk-free, given the low conviction rates, the dysfunctional criminal justice system and the pervasive myths that put the blame for rape on victims (119). A further temptation for the perpetrator, according to Du Toit, lies in the fact that the sexual nature of the crime targets the very world of the victim and thereby bestows power on the perpetrator (120). She concludes that, through an ontological-violence interpretative frame, “we can hold men accountable for rape, even as we address the patriarchal frame and social complicity that heighten the attractiveness of rape for them. Whereas talk of injured masculinities seems to imply that the realisation of women’s rights must be curbed, the current frame indicates the opposite” (121). The importance of exposing and countering social complicity – be it in the form of victim-blame, looking away or trivialising sexual violence – is underscored by Gqola too, particularly since it facilitates a culture of impunity.²¹ She claims, “It is time to apply pressure on men who rape, those who make excuses for rapists, those who make rape ‘jokes’, and to pressure our government to create a criminal justice system that works to bring the possibility of justice to rape survivors and all other survivors of violence” (2015, 15–16). Crime fiction raises these issues of complicity, impunity and justice for women time and again. It makes plain that the law is not (enough) for women: legal rights alone do not suffice, while the criminal justice system is biased.

5 Preview of Chapters

The study falls into three parts, focusing in turn on the figures of the female victim, the female perpetrator and the female detective. Each figure offers a very specific view not only on female experience, but on the fictional construction and contestation of gendered and racialised subjectivities and the scope of their agency in the field of crime, law and justice in South Africa. At the same time, the boundaries between the three figures are not always as clear-cut as they might appear. Victims may turn into detectives, or, alternatively, into perpetrators. Some detectives, too, take up their guns and kill – and not only in self-defence, thus blending with the perpetrators. They are also frequently

21 In her decolonial analysis of media reportage on the life and death of Anene Booysen, Floretta Boonzaier finds the media reproducing victim blaming discourse (2017, 476).

attacked, becoming victims themselves. In addition, they sometimes become the victims' advocates – or even, unwittingly, the perpetrators'. Blurring the figures of victim, perpetrator and detective allows authors to mirror the complexities of contemporary South Africa – in business and politics, the law, ethics and female subjectivities.

The first part of *Women and Crime* analyses the crime novels of Penny Lorimer, Malla Nunn and Margie Orford, all of which give unusual prominence to the victim and her story, be it as dead body or as survivor. If, according to Judith Butler, "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (2010, 14), these novels are concerned with those lives that are not recognised as "grievable." This part of the book revolves around the question of whether and under what circumstances the crime generic frame allows for an emergence – or facilitates the effacement/silencing – of the victim's story and her trauma. It asks whether the South African crime novel can function as an extension or corrective of the TRC by providing a platform for female victims. This is pertinent, given the potential for violence inherent in the representation of the violated female body.

Part two of the study focuses on the female perpetrator figure, who may be read as a radical answer to female victimhood. If the works discussed in part one are about doing justice to female victims by acknowledging their stories of pain, the female perpetrators in the novels of Mike Nicol, Jassy Mackenzie and Angela Makholwa stand for retributive justice; the kind of justice that the TRC sought to avert. The central question here is what happens if women resort to violent means and take the weapons of revenge into their own hands. It is a question that points to both the threat that fictional female violence poses and the empowerment that lies in this masculine gender performance for a woman.

While the female detective shares some of the female perpetrator's frustration with the biased legal and gender system, she seeks to bring about change from within, as an agent and critic of the law. In part three, I examine the female detective who appears in the novels of Michéle Rowe, Hawa Jande Golakai and Charlotte Otter. I interrogate how they navigate the tensions to which they are subjected as female professionals in male-dominated institutions and how they resist and negotiate the law's construction of gender and race.

Pumla Gqola laments the fact that in South Africa gender-based violence is often made women's responsibility. Women are advised to take precautions against violence by being vigilant, dressing conservatively or avoiding deserted areas, especially at night: in short, they should modify *their* behaviour, as they are expected to play by the rules of dominant patriarchy (2007, 120–121). In the workplace too, Gqola contends, it is expected that "women should adapt to the

current system, being ‘empowered’ into position, rather than transforming the formal workplace into a space that is more receptive to women’s contributions, needs and wants” (115–116). Each in her own ways, and from a great diversity of subject positions, the three female figures examined in this study react to and engage with the social and political pressures that Gqola describes.