

## Marking Locality: Inscribing Gendered Subjectivity through Kgebetli Moele's *Untitled*

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**Abstract:** This article approaches Kgebetli Moele's *Untitled: A Novel* (2013) as a distinctive instance of writing locality and feminine subjectivity through literary experimentation. Drawing together insights on world literature, globalization and locality, and experimental writing in South Africa, my reading of *Untitled* demonstrates how the subject position of the main character, like the novel itself, emerges at the crossroads of different forms as they circulate among multiple localities. Analyzing how the novel experiments with narrative, form, punctuation, and subject formation in relation to African literary imaginaries, I suggest that the poetics of *Untitled* inscribe a (black) feminine subject position against dominant narrative conventions of gendered violation and within the interstices of globality and locality.

**Keywords:** experimental literature, globalization, postcolonial novel, South African literature, gendered subjectivity, locality

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If locality is produced through globalization, as Arjun Appadurai argues, then the processes that constitute subjectivity are mediated globally. In *Modernity at Large* Appadurai discusses the ways that convergences and divergences (articulated via the nation-state, diasporic flows, and electronic and virtual communities) produce locality as difference through the work of the imagination in local subjectivities (198). He makes a similar argument in "How Histories Make Geographies," in which he also calls for "a theory that relates the forms of circulation to the circulation of forms" (4). Although he includes literature among the cultural objects that produce locality in these ways, he does not elaborate on

specific examples. An elaboration of this kind would, however, offer a productive counterpoint to more familiar models of the global and the local in paradigms of world literature. For example, Appadurai's framework would pressure Franco Moretti's contention that the novel is an inherently European form that adapts to "local" content in non-European locales. In this article I extend Appadurai's insights regarding the production of locality in the globalizing world to debates about world literature that have emerged in the wake of Moretti's theoretical framework. This approach instigates a reading of Kgebetli Moele's *Untitled: A Novel* (2013) that demonstrates how experimental fiction may challenge the view that "local" content fails to alter the "European" form of the novel. Following the novel as it works through themes of sexual violence by experimenting with form and content, I argue that *Untitled* generates a textual (symbolic) subject position that diverges from the subjectivities produced in European modernism and the more familiar novels associated with globalization.

Touted as a new voice in South African fiction, Moele has attracted considerable critical attention. His "devil-may-care humour" (Rosenthal qtd. in Moele) and "gangster approach" (Olukotun qtd. in Moele)<sup>1</sup> seem to satisfy the desires of his publisher, Kwela, which came of age with the "new" South Africa in 1994 and strives "to document stories that have not yet been told" (Kwela). Moele's first novel, *Room 207* (2006), focuses on six young men who share a flat as they hustle to make a living in Hillbrow.<sup>2</sup> Whereas it features a neighborhood and subject matter familiar to South African fiction, his second novel, *The Book of the Dead* (2009), pushes the boundaries of the familiar in the way it experiments with point of view by taking the perspective of the AIDS virus toward the end of the novel. *Untitled: A Novel* is not only Moele's most experimental novel to date, but its setting is also rather unconventional. *Untitled* moves away from the urban frenzy of Johannesburg to a fictional rural "location" (also known as a township<sup>3</sup>), called Teyageneng.

Teyageneng bears significant resemblance to other postcolonial locales shaped in complex ways by the high-speed networks and fast-paced financial flows of the globalizing world. Notably, however, even as some scholars observe that the logic of globalization appears to result in a

reorganization of apartheid on a global scale<sup>4</sup>—it intensifies a demand for cheap labor that is deeply racialized and further entrenches economic divisions—rarely are such rural locations featured in literature. Similarly, *Untitled* proves distinctive in the experimental treatment of its subject matter. Eschewing what Louise Bethlehem has referred to as the “rhetoric of urgency” (365) associated with black writers in South Africa, *Untitled* tests various narrative voices and styles as it explores the daily life of the main character, Mokgethi, and her female friends, who navigate issues of sexuality and schooling as well as a perverse intertwinement of the two as their teachers seem more interested in seduction than pedagogy.

The experimental devices in the novel negotiate the complex relationship between the reader and Mokgethi. The beginning of the novel inscribes an oblique reference to sexual violence as Mokgethi attempts to write a poem. This ambiguous beginning is only clarified in the final pages of the novel, where the reader realizes that Mokgethi’s poetic attempts at the beginning of the novel are an attempt to understand her experience of sexual violence. The abstruse beginning mixes poetry and prose, which prepares the literary ground for how Mokgethi will use these forms to experiment with various kinds of self-expression in the wake of violence. In this way, Mokgethi works through questions of sexuality through her textual relationships with language, law, education, and other literary imaginaries. After briefly reviewing debates on how the “global” (European) form of the novel fares in “local” (non-European) locations, I turn to *Untitled* to show how its experimentation in form and content contribute to writing Mokgethi’s partial, fragmented, unfinished subject position.

### **I. Locating Reading**

In “Conjectures on World Literature,” Moretti argues that literature from places peripheral to France and England demonstrates a compromise between the foreign (European) form of the novel and local (non-European) content. This argument presupposes that the raw material of content never substantially affects the hard casing of its form. Moretti’s influential theory has rarely been considered in relation to experimen-

tal fiction, but it has been challenged and reworked on other grounds, especially by postcolonial thinkers. In “Provincializing English,” for example, Simon Gikandi argues that even if the novel form itself is not substantially modified, “[a]n effective way of dealing with the anxieties that English generates is to deprive the language of the ecumenical status of the global and to represent it as one language among *many*, to provincialize it, as it were” (13). Similarly, Eileen Julien, who draws on Appadurai to challenge the terms of the novel set forth by Moretti, shifts the focus onto how the expectations of readers in the global north influence what passes through the category of world literature, especially those books that are labeled “African novels.” She advances a theory of the “extroverted African novel” (in an essay by the same name) that resonates with Jean-François Bayart’s concept of extraversion and recalls Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s concern that “African literature” is falsely contorted to the forms of knowledge palatable to readers beyond Africa. Specifically, Julien notes how the conditions of global literary circulation select “African novels” that satisfy readers’ desires for postcolonial themes of hybridity or intertextuality. Contrary to Gikandi, who is intent on analyzing novels from the vantage point of African localities, Julien’s concern lies with how a global readership outside of Africa succumbs to an “ornamentalist interpretation” (*passim*), reading the presence of local (indigenous) African languages in novels written in English or French as a sign of African authenticity.

While some critics contest Julien’s core argument,<sup>5</sup> and even as its emphasis vacillates between the text itself (e.g., its modes of extraversion relative to literary institutions) and its global reception (i.e., interpretive fields), her formulation is useful, especially coupled with Gikandi’s, as a provocation to think carefully about how one reads the novel form in relation to global and local conditions.<sup>6</sup> Drawing Julien and Gikandi together enables a critical analysis of how the use of language in *Untitled* affects the constitution of Mokegethi’s subject position as well as how the literary production of locality affects the reader. This is important because of *Untitled*’s ambivalence about its imagined reader. Indeed, one might describe it as an “introverted” novel gone global. That is, in contrast to the qualities of the extroverted African novel, several of *Untitled*’s

features correspond to qualities that Julien associates with popular fiction that is read by locals, such as its mode of narrative address (what Gikandi refers to as provincialized English) and how it treats the everyday concerns of ordinary people. Moreover, *Untitled* is uninterested in demonstrating intertextuality with European novels or self-consciously thematizing postcoloniality. Rather, it is explicitly in conversation with other African fiction, namely the books that Mokgethi names as her favorites, which situates her in the crosscurrents of a locality produced through the circuits of globalization. The models Gikandi and Julien lay out are thus useful for analyzing how *Untitled* produces locality in relation to the global flows of literary forms.

The intertwining of locality through globalization occurs, in Appadurai's view, as convergences and divergences produce difference via "mass-mediated discourses and practices" (*Modernity at Large* 199). Directing the implications of this insight to South African literature, Leon de Kock offers a theory for how the racialized spatial logic of apartheid is mapped through the literary. In his article "South Africa in the Global Imaginary," de Kock proposes the figure of the seam as one way to describe how "expressions of Self are often marked by a simultaneous setting apart from various others" (266). Although language does not comprise the primary vector through which he analyzes notions of difference, de Kock briefly remarks on how it intertwines with race, both affecting the production of local subjectivity in South African fiction and generating the notion of South African difference for global consumption. Noting how the novels that travel through these circuits are typically those from a "white South African English 'canon,'" he reflects that writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, and J. M. Coetzee occupy the seam as a "deep symbolic structure" in part through the self-reflexive qualities of their fiction, which resonate with the self-constitution in belletristic traditions (284). By contrast, those who write in indigenous African languages "have not been taken up into global consumption unless their work is available in translation and speaks to the great South African themes of duplicity and social conflict" (284). De Kock's analysis dovetails with Julien's as both are concerned with the way that global consumer desires largely dictate interpretation of lan-

guage usage, which has the effect of contorting notions of subjectivity and location to satisfy these readerly expectations.

De Kock's analysis subtly distinguishes between literature visible to the global market by virtue of conformity with recognized genres and the range of writing that does not reach this level of visibility because it deviates from these genres. A similar argument might be made with respect to the level of visibility—or lack thereof—accorded to experimental writing. In one of the few studies of South African literature to address experimental writing, the final chapter of David Attwell's *Rewriting Modernity* challenges the assumption—widely held since the 1960s—that black writing in South Africa operates primarily in the realist mode for reasons of exigency, namely to produce a literature of witness and protest (169).<sup>7</sup> One of the principle objectives of Attwell's book is to demonstrate how the use of print culture by black South African writers “has been crucial to their establishing themselves as modern subjects, *in direct opposition to the identities ascribed to them in colonial and apartheid ideology*” (3; emphasis added). Attwell provides one of the most insightful analyses of South African experimental writing, which makes it all the more disappointing that he summarily dismisses the significance of gender to such a project. Despite conceding that experimental aspects of literature by Bessie Head and Zoë Wicomb pertain to gender, he disregards their contributions as too obvious and insufficient to a larger argument, namely his pursuit of “the meaning of a fictional practice informed by a desire to articulate a black, urban South African epistemology” (178). While the fiction he discusses is important for the way it writes the urban experience of black men and provides significant conceptual tools for thinking about South Africa's negotiation of the terms of transnational capitalism for its own version of modernity, Attwell's explicit refusal to consider gender as a component of black experimental fiction suggests that the story of modernity in South Africa is a masculine one. It also leads him to a conclusion that seems at odds with his initial objective. Although he begins by arguing that black writers have used literature to construct identities in opposition to those ascribed to them by colonial and apartheid ideology, when he asks in his conclusion whether “black writing repeats the subject-construction

of European modernism, or whether it offers something distinctive and original,” he avers that a definitive answer is not possible (202). This model likewise assumes that the subject construction of European modernism is gender neutral, or else, by default, masculine. Proposing a gender-neutral or masculine model of subjectivity for European modernism or South African modernity (the terms Attwell is working with) not only replicates the logic of colonial modernity whereby the male-female binary is replaced by a white-black binary, effectively erasing the specificity of black female subjects,<sup>8</sup> but also enshrines this logic as the criteria for modernist literariness, which neglects to consider the devices deployed in (black) writing that refuses these subjectivizing terms.

In the remainder of this article I propose an alternative conclusion inspired by my reading of *Untitled*. My reading is in dialogue with feminist literary scholars like Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne who analyze how contemporary fiction revises the literary tropes of sexual violation. The works collected in their volume aim to re-theorize rape by incorporating “arguments about trauma and resistance in order to establish new spaces for the subjectivity of the women who either have been raped or have been threatened with rape” (3). Like the literature analyzed in their work, *Untitled* seeks to subvert and displace the “rape script” that relies on binaries of victim/perpetrator corresponding to notions of subjectivity bifurcated as passive or agentive. My analysis continues in stride with this scholarship by attending to the ways that flipping the rape script in *Untitled* necessarily involves revising dominant conceptualizations of gender and sexual subjectivity. Although sexual violence in *Untitled* seems inevitable as it bookends the novel, its representation is disrupted by experiments with form. The importance of form for the rendering of content has been amply explored by feminist scholars who have critiqued the ways that conventional narrative form reproduces masculine structures of desire as the ground for subjectivity. For example, in *Sexual/Textual/Politics*, Toril Moi draws on the work of feminists like H el ene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva to argue that experimental writing breaks with conventional narrative patterns in order to forge new spaces for inscribing feminine symbolic (textual) positions. Critics have also contested the idea that

textual arrangement re-articulates sexual difference, most notably for how it risks essentialism, for its privileging of avant-garde writing, and for its occlusion of race. Rey Chow, for example, in “When Whiteness Feminizes . . .” writes against Moi to show how realist texts can produce an agentic female character and how avant-garde texts might affirm white feminist politics through a re-inscription of racial difference. As I show, *Untitled’s* experimental qualities challenge literary conventions associated with rape narratives by crafting a notion of subjectivity aligned with poetry in the process of being written.

## II. Reading in the Location

The sparse cover of Moele’s *Untitled* (see fig. 1) resembles a lined school notebook in which a young student would practice her penmanship. It offers few coordinates to orient the reader, merely designating the book “a novel.” The novel begins with a short paragraph (see fig. 2) in which an unnamed narrator struggles with the task of beginning to write a poem. This introduces from the outset not only a formal tension between the genres of poetry and prose but also emphasizes how the process of writing is implicated in the search for an adequate form through which she can understand her experience. The reader, like Mokgethi, has few signs to guide an understanding of what has happened. The

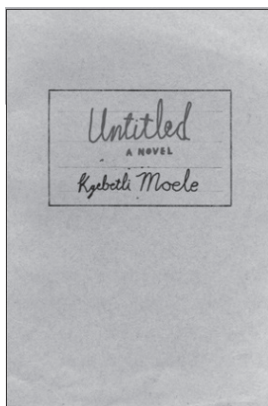


Fig. 1. The title page of *Untitled*.

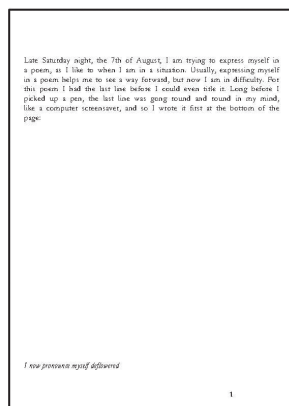


Fig. 2. *Untitled* 1.



colon at the end of the brief initial passage opens onto a wide, blank space. The reader traverses this unmarked area—a space that awaits a future understanding that will enable poetic production—and arrives at the bottom of the page to discover the last line of the poem, which has been furnished by the violent experience that defies words: “*I now pronounce myself deflowered*” (1; emphasis in original; no quotation marks in original). The missing period at the end of the line subtly suggests that this may not actually be the last word on the matter. And, indeed, by the end of the novel this line becomes a (new) beginning, displacing and reframing the rape it refers to. But here, at this beginning, the reader knows only that there is a struggle with form and meaning of an event that cannot be shaped into words.

Formally, *Untitled* is divided into Part I and Part II, but there are actually four sections: three different introductory passages that explain why the novel is “untitled”; Part I, which has chapters named after Mokgethi’s family and friends; “Mokgethi’s Poetry,” which features eight short poems; and Part II, which breaks one day into time-stamped chapters. The incorporation of various forms—poetic, pseudo-diarist, and citational—internally fragment the textual form to the point that it barely holds together as a novel. Such formal experimentation recalls Appadurai’s suggestion about the intertwining of the local and global: “[A] variety of circulating forms affect each other to form some sort of temporary and interactive project which is the result of conscious efforts to ‘produce locality’” (“Circulation ≈ Forms” 8). Bearing this in mind, one can read the particular conjunction of forms in *Untitled* for how it elucidates the novel’s production of a particular view of locality in the globalizing world as well as how it articulates a unique subjectivity.

The forms that converge often bear multiple fractures, and these fragmented forms reveal an uneasy homology between sexual and textual elements. An ambitious seventeen-year-old who aspires to study actuarial science at Oxford, Mokgethi seeks out teenage pleasures with her friends amid a perverse intertwinement of formal schooling and informal sexual “tutoring” at the hands of the teachers. Some of her friends, like Dineo, try to report the crimes, but the police sell the docket to

the accused; others, like MmaSetshaba, concede to marry their rapists; most, including eleven-year-old Little Bonolo, are accused of seducing the men. Others learn to use their sexuality as a form of power, like Lebo who issues “direct under-table” challenges (opening her legs under the table) to solicit the attention of teachers (Moele, *Untitled* 66). Through these characters, the novel portrays the vulnerability of young women as well as how they craft a sense of self that negotiates, and sometimes exceeds, the scripts of victim and culprit that circulate in their community.

Mokgethi is exceptional: she alone seems to discern that despite the limited forms of agency granted to the young women, they ultimately do not control the discourses about their sexuality. Equating sexuality with a loss of self, she, unsurprisingly, wishes to remain a virgin. Sexuality, in her view, is a form of dispossession: “Because I have seen all the girls that I know lose themselves . . . Once a girl loses her innocence, it becomes, “My man this . . . My man that . . . ’ They start identifying themselves with their man and judging themselves through the eyes of the men” (6). Such declarations seem to value virginal wholeness and disparage sexual fragmentation (encapsulated in the oft-used term “deflowered”). However, this ostensible opposition is undercut by the proliferation of textual fragmentation, which suggests not only that “wholeness” is untenable but also that Mokgethi’s motivating question may be: what happens *after*?

The first few pages of the novel stutter as they try to find the right words to begin, because, despite Mokgethi’s attempts to avoid sexual violence, Thabakgolo, one of her acquaintances, rapes her just after four o’clock on the day that concludes the novel. Although the first page of the novel obliquely refers to this event, Part I, commencing on the following page, resets time to a point before the transgression. In this way, sexual violence is the structuring event of the narrative and its main theme, but conventional narrative time is disordered, requiring a re-beginning. Indeed, if Mokgethi’s story begins *in medias res*, it also begins amid the failure of narrative or the failure of poetry (her favorite genre) to effectively express her difficult situation. The events cannot be formed into a cohesive narrative or poetic whole; rather, Mokgethi

patches together the discordant pieces to assess the possibilities that emerge from within their fissures. Sexual fragmentation, in this sense, is repeated in the textual fragmentation. But even as it seems to function as a kind of narrative and ontological baseline, sexual violence is not granted a determinate status. Importantly, the novel does not posit a “blinking of rape” in Thompson and Gunne’s terms, which, they argue, would obscure rape or render it “unreadable” as a political or literary subject; nor is the violence cloaked in beautiful prose (4). Rather, by using the trope of poetic creation, the novel thematizes the process of finding an adequate form in which to express both the violent event and the fullness and complexity of the young women’s lives. Rather than succumbing to conventional gender norms that would equate sexual “wholeness” with goodness, Mokgethi asks what new forms—both textual and subjective—might emerge from the fragmentation of violence.

This positions Mokgethi at a critical remove from the discourses of her community. As will become evident, this critical gap between Mokgethi and the community also mediates the reader’s relationship to Teyageneng as a locality that is inflected in uneven ways by the global. An especially telling passage serves as a productive entry point to these complex interchanges. The passage occurs just after the reader learns about Pheladi, the first girl to be “deflowered” (at age eleven, by the driver of her school taxi). Pheladi’s attributes are soon advertised in the form of graffiti on a bathroom wall:

*It is UNTSHOFONATE 4 tsa batho tsa lefase lo, that they will never be graced by Pheladi, and worse they will never know the ultimate epitome of Beauty, PHELADICON, that we, Mapulana, are blessed wit. Tsa Mapulana di kgona go belega, Pa. (60; emphasis in original)*

Reading the bathroom graffiti from the point of view of the community aligns one with the masculine perspective that young girls are valuable as sexual objects. Indeed, the tribute to Pheladi’s exceptional beauty displaces and mutes the reporting of her violation on the previous page. However, Mokgethi’s interpretation subtly shifts attention away from

the praise of Pheladi's attributes to read its untoward aesthetics. Her appraisal of the graffiti slides away from the dominant interpretation. She advances her view by focusing on the aesthetics of the writing, as if it were a text, ignoring its evaluation of Pheladi and mocking its unschooled qualities:

Graffiti in the men's toilet. The *UNTSHOFONATE* is actually unfortunately misspelled, but intentionally written in big caps, and *PHELADICON* is in a different colour altogether, a metre long and maybe a ruler wide, so artistic that even we, the girls, went to the men's toilet to witness it for ourselves. (60; emphasis in original)

After Mokgethi's assessment, the reader's alignment shifts and follows Mokgethi as she attempts to understand how beauty becomes the alibi for the masculine gaze and provides the logic by which girls are held responsible for the actions of men. This shift in alignment is registered in the arc of the chapter, which begins with a reflection on how young girls are celebrated for their beauty but ends with Mokgethi's reflection on statutory rape, reversing the apparent link between beauty and seduction suggested at the beginning of the chapter by naming it rape at the end. The trajectory of the chapter thus formally traces Mokgethi's budding awareness that growing up female entails a reading against the grain of masculine inscriptions—whether on the bathroom wall or, as she will find, in the law books.

Reading the graffiti as a form of inscription—as a fragmented text—also raises the question of how English readers encounter this passage. An ornamentalist interpretation—the kind critiqued by Julien—would likely gloss the passage for the minimal understanding that comes through the English words, wondering, perhaps, whether “untshofonate” is a provincialized variant of “unfortunately.” But even as Mokgethi confirms this, she does not offer a translation; she provides an aesthetic interpretation—but not a hermeneutics—for the reader. Thus, the ornamentalist interpretation quickly reaches an analytical dead end, which raises Julien's question about whether the non-English words will be read as mere index for the idea of an authentic

African alterity. However, another reading is possible if one considers the hermeneutic space that Mokgethi's reflection creates. Specifically, in this scene Mokgethi becomes an embedded reader, guiding the reader away from linguistic and cultural translation to an alternate interpretive space. Such a shift transfers the responsibility for translation from the text to the reader, requiring something like an extroverted or an estranged reader. In this specific instance, any reader who is not Mapulana presumably cannot know the beauty of Pheladi, but since most readers are likely *not* Mapulana, it provokes the question of what these readers *can* know. In direct contrast to a passive ornamentalist interpretation, an estranged reader approaches the passage as an epistemological experiment, which requires an extension toward "foreign" linguistic forms as a mode of mediation between writing and reading. Put differently, Mokgethi's reading interpellates the reader into the seam of belonging and un-belonging as an active space of negotiating self and other at the intersection of postcolonial locality and globalizing literary circuits. This mode of reading built on estrangement from one's own nationalist or linguistic zone is what Bruce Robbins refers to as the ethical project of world literature. The estranged reader may thus function as one possible antidote to the conditions that underpin the ornamentalist interpretations of "extroverted" African novels.

To avoid an ornamentalist interpretation, Julien advises reading indigenous languages "not as the *necessary trace* of a writer's origins that is the proof of a genuine Africanness, but as an *appropriation* and *strategy* through which the writer attempts to resolve aesthetic and social questions" (679; emphasis in original). In *Untitled* one might engage this advice by considering how what I vaguely refer to above as "non-English" in the novel affects its form. To appreciate how such uses of "non-English" words are used as a strategy to resolve the social questions Julien indicates, it is necessary to know more about these swerves away from English. Dwelling on the references to Mapulana, for example, permits a more substantial understanding of how shifts away from English modify the linguistic conventions of the novel form as well as its constitutive subject positions. This reading subordinates Moretti's understanding of the novel form to Appadurai's insights on how forms

encompass “a family of phenomena including styles, techniques, genres, vocabularies, and other widely recognized ‘containers,’ which can be filled or inhabited by specific voices, contents, messages and materials” (“Forms ≈ Circulation” 7). From this angle, it is possible to consider how linguistic forms mediate between the production of localities and global readers.

As a starting point, an estranged reader would parse the reference to the Mapulana as a *self-referential* marker (“we, Mapulana, are blessed wit [*sic*] [the beauty of Pheladi]”). Although the story takes place in a fictional location, the characters, like the author, are Mapulana and speakers of Sepulana. The relationship between orality and writing is complex,<sup>9</sup> as is the relationship between dialects and official languages;<sup>10</sup> a study of either would provide another vantage point for considering how the deep grammar of globality inflects and infuses the polyvocality of *Untitled*.<sup>11</sup> But my analysis here has more modest objectives related to how the inclusion of English and Northern Sotho words affects the symbolic positions accorded to Mokgethi and the reader via the circulation of linguistic forms embedded in the novel.<sup>12</sup>

One way the inclusion of Northern Sotho affects the constitution of Mokgethi’s subject position is evident in the decidedly anti-aesthetic tribute on the bathroom wall. As the only passage in the novel to refer explicitly to the Mapulana, it is noteworthy that gendered subjectivity marks the boundaries of the reference to the community: the subject addressed *in* the message (Pheladi and her beauty) is situated in opposition to those for whom the message is intended (the men of the community). These self-referential indicators thus converge to mark the linguistic boundaries of community as well as gendered subjectivity. Modifying de Kock’s terms slightly, one could say that Mokgethi occupies the seam as a structure of multiple forms—linguistic, sexual, and scriptural (if not textual). Whereas Mokgethi can transgress the gendered boundary of the bathroom to read the message, the linguistic boundary proves insurmountable to those who can only read the English words. Thus, Mokgethi’s unreliable interpretive assistance shifts responsibility to the reader who must reflect on how the conjunction of linguistic and literary forms affects the form of the novel, turning it into a medium

that negotiates between self and other. Put slightly differently, and in terms that anticipate part of my argument below, Mokgethi's specific subjective position is advanced less through a self-conscious style familiar to European modernism than a distinctly postcolonial (and post-apartheid) convergence of fragmented (linguistic and subjective) forms, splintered along lines of gender, age, and location.

### III. Reading South African and Postcolonial Fiction

Although de Kock and Attwell are concerned (albeit in different ways) about a dialectics of the global and the local in producing South African literature, neither scholar includes a sustained analysis of how the incorporation of African languages may affect the presentation of a novel's content (the treatment of themes or characters) or its form (the experimentation with generic conventions). With Julien and Gikandi in mind, it is possible to recognize how, in the context of postcolonial and global language politics, the inclusion of Northern Sotho points to a linguistic stitching that is constitutive of the postcolonial and post-apartheid conditions that have been debated at least since Chinua Achebe's 1975 comments on writing African fiction in English. Indeed, where Achebe was concerned with using English in a new way, such that it would carry the weight of his African experience, contemporary postcolonial writers also use African languages in a new way to re-mark African articulations of identity in the globalizing world. For example, the code switching (intermixing two or more languages) in *Untitled* diverges from earlier postcolonial novels, which typically glossed the meaning of passages presented in indigenous languages. Moreover, as much as a provincialized use of English is inflected by specific localities, one might also reflect on how the globalization of literary forms is constituted in relation to African languages. Given the way postcolonial fiction is written against a global horizon of readerly expectations, the decision *not* to translate suggests a confrontation between locality and globality that is staged via fictions of translational equivalence.<sup>13</sup> The refusal to translate linguistic "difference" is thus indicative of a refusal to cede to the logic of globalization, which views all particularities as amenable to global "sameness."

The refusal to translate cultural difference through the translational fiction of linguistic equivalence joins *Untitled* to other recent post-colonial fiction, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half a Yellow Sun*, both of which include untranslated Igbo. Since untranslated passages act as barriers to a passive exploration by global readers, the estranged reader must either try to discern their meaning or else endure periods of non-understanding.<sup>14</sup> This incorporation of language is far from the model of the novel in which the nation imagines itself; rather, it is a globalized form of the novel that situates the reader within the partial (yet functional) understanding that occurs as an intrinsic aspect of postcolonial globality. Thus, while the extroverted reader may seek out a translation, focusing solely on linguistic translation overlooks how these passages affect other aspects of literary form and novelistic knowledge. In contrast to the way untranslated proverbs or tales may function as local geographical content indicators in the "global" form of the novel, the graffiti (like other instances throughout *Untitled*) lodges an unconsumable kernel in the commodity form of the novel.

In other parts of *Untitled*, the rough translational gloss provided does not in fact offer adequate information for understanding the meaning of the passage and thus again leaves the reader in the half-light of understanding. One example occurs when one character, Pontsho, brags about his assault of a young girl when the police confront him:

Ja! Sebara, se a resa sa motho. A ke sentsha bofebe.

*Yes! Sebara.* "Sebara" refers to one's in-laws and here at home is popularly used among friends. *Yes! Sebara, it is telling the truth. I was extracting the bitch from it.* (Moele, *Untitled* 93; emphasis in original)

Tellingly, the English "translation" is italicized, which situates the English reader as an "outsider" to the passage. Even more, despite the impulse to explain "Sebara," the explanation stops short of translating the word. Rather than provide a translation, covering the seam of linguistic and racial difference, the passage functions to mark the category of difference. It also demonstrates that the mixing of languages is less a



self-conscious attempt to satisfy readers' desires than a way of suturing the reader to a place of difference brokered through the partiality of understanding. Thus, as much as the passage interpellates an estranged reader willing to negotiate categories of difference, it also refuses to capitulate to this reader, reserving a space that resists assimilation into the book as a commodity destined for non-Sepulana/Northern Sotho speakers.

With this analysis in mind, it is difficult to consider literary form as a mere container that moves relatively unchanged among localities, accommodating local variety without consequence to form. Considering the graffiti as a form of citation—both in the way that Mokgethi refers to it and as a form of (self-)reference to the Mapulana—reveals multiple effects on the form of the novel. As a form of citation, the graffiti indexes how novels experiment with many forms. This is true when citation is used to reference a United States law on statutory rape. Like the graffiti about Pheladi, this instance positions Mokgethi as a reader who stands at a critical interpretive distance from the citation and the conditions it cites:

Lawfully what happened to Pheladi was rape. I was told that somewhere in our law there is something called statutory rape. Looked it up in the dictionary and it said: *Statutory rape by US law is the offence of having sex with a minor.*

So statutory rape is a US law. I think that it is only effective in the US. We are in Africa and though our lawmakers copied the law it is only relevant in law books and not in social reality. (63; emphasis in original)

To challenge the gap between the letter of the law and the material facts of her everyday experiences, Mokgethi leverages this knowledge to assert her own textual authority, ruling that eleven-year-old Pheladi could not have consented to sex. More than simply applying to her local circumstances globally circulating definitions about legal norms of sexuality, she concretizes the otherwise utopian understanding (“somewhere . . . there is something called statutory rape”) with her own verdict. The peculiar semiotics of the passage, namely the suppressed pronoun “I” who

looks up the law, points to the imperfect stitching of global discourses of rape to local subjectivities and conditions. Reading between the lines of what *should be* (the letter of the law) and what *is* (the actions she witnesses), Mokgethi reflects on the conditions that impact the formation of gendered identity.

In contrast to the outcomes she mentions in relation to her friends at the beginning of the novel, Mokgethi forges an altogether different response. After Thabakgolo rapes her, Mokgethi concludes that the masculinism of the law makes reporting the crime useless. She recalls something she heard on television—“[t]he struggle has changed its face”—but she vehemently disagrees with the sentiment, declaring that “this struggle has not changed its face. This struggle’s face is the same as it ever was because it lacks a woman to lead it. However, now, I am taking centre stage and after I die no woman will ever suffer as I have” (209). Just before she voices her resolve to change the face of the struggle, she says, “I have just discovered that this is a very old, very big subjugation” (209). Taken as a whole, the passage shifts attention away from Mokgethi to place the violation in a larger, explicitly political context. The awkwardness of the phrase “big subjugation” to refer to rape coupled with the reference to “the struggle” in the same passage situates her experience and her perspective within a significant tradition of struggle in South Africa. From this perspective, Mokgethi’s conflation of the “struggle” against apartheid with the “struggle” against gender inequality in general (and sexual violence in particular) positions her within an unfinished project of freedom—a project she likens to her failure to finish Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*. As a process of articulating sexual freedom, Mokgethi seeks to rip the current seam (pace de Kock) that joins men and women through sexual violence and decouple the symbolic position of women as one that exists *between* men. In her view, “[e]ven if there is one [a woman who can help her], she will be *between* men. . . . Yes, this woman feels my pain because she has been me—there is a man in her life who once did this to her—but the men she is *between* have done this to me” (209; emphasis added). However, even as Mokgethi’s subject position is forged from the interstices of masculine symbolic systems, she does not simply flee into an

ideology or place outside of South Africa where laws ostensibly offer protection. Rather, she turns to literary representations from other locations across the African continent to engender a livable reality for herself locally. She thus appropriates and redirects global discourses of sexual freedom to subvert the available narrative conventions of stories about sexual abuse in South African townships.

At the same time, as a moment in the novel that refers explicitly to “social reality,” the passage not only meditates on what it will take to achieve a kind of sexual freedom, it also seems to rub up against the social facts of rape in South Africa. There is a significant body of literary and feminist scholarship that reads such literary instantiations as a comment on or reflection of experiential evidence or as a way to remark upon devastating statistics.<sup>15</sup> *Untitled* is clearly aware of the social reality of rape in South Africa and thus directs the reader’s attention to how the novel’s stylistic and formal features relate to this content. One might consider Fiona McCann’s concern, for example, about the danger of aestheticizing rape by obscuring its violence in the beauty of prose. Through its experimentation, *Untitled* avoids this pitfall and does not offer violence as a spectacle for a masculine gaze. At the same time, it resists resorting to narrative devices that would distance the reader from the violence. The novel partly accomplishes this by situating Mokgethi as an embedded reader who articulates strong counterpoints to the concerns that McCann describes. Moreover, the novel’s circular narration and experimentation allow it to take advantage of the imaginary domain of fiction. Specifically, the novel’s use of poetry as the device through which subjectivity is (re-)imagined advances a subtle theory of gender that refuses to be determined by normative sexual categories that prescribe a narrow set of outcomes.

It is possible to find certain faults with how Moele imagines Mokgethi’s options, and some might take issue with how the narrative inscribes a figure of the always already violated black female body. Nonetheless, there is much to be admired in how Moele imagines writing as intimately linked with reading, two activities which together provide a way to re-imagine literary expression and processes of gendered subject formation.

#### IV. Reading Locality

Appadurai notes that the work of the imagination is tasked with producing locality as a site of convergence and mixture between local and global. While I agree with this general observation, it is also worth tracking the ways that globalization enables contact among various (peripheral) locations in such a way as to produce locality in relation to other localities. This occurs in *Untitled* through its references to novels from across the African continent.

Mokgethi enjoys reading and loves poetry, and the books she names as her favorites provide telling points of connection to other literary imaginaries. She names Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*, and Chenjerai Hove's *Shebeen Tales* as books that have had a profound effect on her. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the text's preoccupations, education is the common thread among the novels she cites; it is also a theme that occupies a distinctive place in colonial and postcolonial fiction. But while *The Dark Child* and *Nervous Conditions* reflect on the cultural alienation that results from a European education, no such conflict is present in *Untitled*, nor does *Untitled* explicitly link education to political struggle (which is dramatized, for example, in South African novels such as Mbulelo Mzamane's *The Children of Soweto*, Sydney Sipho Sepamla's *A Ride on the Whirlwind*, and Miriam Tlali's *Amandla*, all of which feature the 1976 Soweto Uprising against the apartheid decree for all education to be in Afrikaans). In place of these more familiar themes, *Untitled* identifies the primary barrier to education as informal sexual "tutoring." In many postcolonial novels, educational aspiration is a privileged route to social and financial mobility. Similarly, in *Untitled*, Mokgethi's aunt teaches at the University of the North, and her mother had a bachelor's degree, which Mokgethi regards as her inheritance. Mokgethi sees education as part of her ongoing struggle for full freedom, and she worries that her current location will constrict her identity to that of an object of sexual knowledge for others. Her belief that her educational prospects require her to remain a virgin thus suggests a determined rejection of sexual knowledge in exchange for her self-constitution as a knowledge-producing subject. Her favorite books serve as a guiding thread that enable her to plot an educational

future according to the coordinates of other African literary imaginaries. This logic also elucidates why she is unable write a poem about her difficult situation: she cannot find its literary precedent.

My analysis of Mokgethi as a subject who imagines her future via books and produces poetry as means of self-fashioning concretizes Appadurai's theory of how local subjectivity is produced through the circulation of forms and forms of circulation; it also suggests a rejoinder to Attwell's remarks about whether black experimental fiction diverges from European modernist modes of subject formation. Mokgethi's identity is supplemented by the literature she reads from other African countries, which enables a coherent and expansive articulation of her sense of self and her educational prospects. The imaginaries conjoined through these novels enable her to articulate a feminine identity against the grain of masculine perspectives, including the sexualized messages in the graffiti and the idealized abstractions of legal rights. Whereas the discourses of the community reinforce violent couplings of masculinity and femininity, thereby (re)producing subjectivity as aggressively predicated on compulsory heterosexuality, Mokgethi forges her subject position amid a variety of literary forms, emphasizing an aesthetic education that is communicated through a series of fragments. Indeed, as the pseudo-dialogic style of the chapter "Pieces of Mokgethi" suggests, she is a subject split between the perspectives of her community—articulated through the occasional omniscient narrative voice—and her own process of self-fashioning, pieced together from her self-description. She thus does not simply take refuge in another word or world; rather, she forges a position through the literary spaces where feminine identity and educational success are affirmed.

While European modernism is often equated with masculinity, Mokgethi recursively produces her sense of self in relation to her locality and other peripheral locations. That is, she forges herself in relation to African (post)colonial literary imaginaries, which enables her to engage in a process of poetic self-creation explicitly against the grain of educational prejudices that disadvantage young women. Thus, even more than Camagu (the main character of Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, which Attwell discusses), who uses his American education

to devise a local alternative to the neocolonial development scheme in rural South Africa, Mokgethi turns her back on a foreign education. Deciding to pursue a degree at the University of Cape Town rather than Oxford, she offers a powerful rejection of the modes of selfhood—forewarned in *The Dark Child*—that are produced by European educational institutions. This decision does not suggest that Mokgethi finds a middle ground (in which Cape Town would act as a cosmopolitan midpoint between her rural location and the globality of former imperial centers); rather, it is indicative of her desire to harness what Premesh Lalu refers to as a modality of schooling that offers a way of life more than a means of subjection. Although Lalu develops his analysis in relation to cinema, his argument about needing to rethink the place and function (in short, the technology) of the school is equally important for thinking about the aesthetic project of literature in a globalizing world. If part of Lalu's concern is to think about modalities of schooling capable of producing a concept of race that differs from the logic offered by apartheid (and therefore a concept of the post-apartheid that is not simply a more efficient version of apartheid itself), one lesson that literary scholars might glean from Lalu's argument pertains to how (racialized economic and other forms of) difference is imagined and materially reproduced through global literary circuits. One might ask, how are literary scholars "schooled" by world literature? If world literature is going to be more than the re-entrenchment of linguistic, racial, or proprietary separation of (Euro-American) centers and (southern) peripheries, then literary scholars might consider the model of reading suggested by Mokgethi. In linking literatures of locality and poetic production to her own mode of aesthetic education and processes of self-formation, Mokgethi experiments with new forms of being conditioned in relation to other literary imaginaries and her own creative (writing) practices.

Mokgethi forges her desire for a form of being that exceeds what is available in her community through attempts at writing poetry. Tellingly, three of her eight poems are about education. In one, "Tribute to my old school [Praise to my new school]," she describes the two schools in opposing columns that resemble a pro-con list, which demonstrates,

despite the title, the stark inadequacies of her new school (134). It ruminates, like the final poem in the series, on “what could have been . . .” (139). This poem, like the unfinished poem at the beginning of the novel, embeds an open-endedness at the heart of the text. The ellipsis in the last poem gestures retrospectively to the earlier ellipsis before Part I, and it glances prospectively to the novel’s conclusion, suggesting that the novel remains incomplete because the poetic subject cannot fully come into expression. The line powerfully suggests that the subject cannot fully come into being because it as yet lacks a form that can accommodate it. Or, perhaps, it suggests that subjectivity is necessarily and affirmatively constituted as a project still in process amid the proliferation of forms and fragments that constitute writing.

In a manner that recalls Kristeva’s notion of the subject in process, Mokgethi’s use of poetry to form her identity comes through forcefully in the final pages of the novel where, even as the narrative appears to arc toward the predetermined ending (the ending that has already occurred at the beginning of the novel), this ending *as* ending is displaced. Indeed, the novel struggles to offer a definitive ending. Instead, the concluding lines posit the rape as the beginning of a new identity that has yet to be created. After the rape, Mokgethi decides that the poem cannot end with the line she had designated: “Because it cannot be a conclusion; it is and can only be an introduction to another life . . .” (209). The story concludes with this sentence and ellipsis. Against conventional uses of the ellipsis, which marks the place of an implied understanding of what is omitted, this ellipsis stands at the end of the page insistently holding open a space for Mokgethi to create her future self beyond the circumscribed meanings issued by the community. The words *I now pronounce myself deflowered* appear at the top of the next page, while the rest of the page remains blank. In this way Mokgethi not only refuses to be defined by the rape, but also wrests control of its meaning away from the predetermined ending that threatens to close off any other signification. If the beginning of the novel leaves the reader wondering how one declares herself deflowered, the ending shows that this pronouncement claims the time and space for her own self-creation. In refusing the set array of meanings associated with

the rape and insisting instead on her own authorial power, Mokgethi claims a poetic space at a distance from the ideological space that marks out female sexuality in the location. Eschewing the self-consciousness of European modernism in favor of a model of subjectivity in dialogue with other African imaginaries, *Untitled* charts its course in relation to the localities brought into connection via globalized circuits of literary production.

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Reflecting on the changing conditions of publishing on the African continent, Tolu Ogunlesi recalls the remark Achebe made when he became the Editorial Advisor of the Penguin African Writers' Series: "The last five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories" (qtd. in Ogunlesi 2). In addition to the Penguin Series, there is a significant increase in African publishers who share this objective, including Kwela (Moel's publisher). Where these initiatives could result in writing that infuses "local" content into the "foreign" form of the novel, *Untitled* demonstrates that this is not inevitable. Indeed, *Untitled* diverges from such expectations in its experimentation and uneven prose. The often-choppy quality of the prose has led some reviewers to lament a lack of editorial rigour.<sup>16</sup> But I read this quality as part of the novel's experimentation with new subject matter. Diverging from the masculine notion of form (which Moretti seems to have inherited from Aristotelian metaphysics) and the white masculine symbolics of European modernism (which tends to proceed by way of a highly self-conscious style, such as in the fiction Attwell analyzes), *Untitled* instead inscribes an alternative (local) feminine subject position through a novel conjunction of forms.

My reading of the novel demonstrates how this subject position, like the novel, emerges at the crossroads of multiple forms as they circulate among multiple localities. Thus, in contrast to theories of literature that seek to demonstrate how local derivations ultimately conform to global novelistic grammars, *Untitled* refuses to subsume difference into the



terms of (globalized) sameness. Rather, its textual innovations critically mediate its exploration of how global discourses of sexuality and education affect local subjectivity. It thus shows how a perspective of globalization that emerges amid the circulation of forms from the Global South offers a reorientation of the terms of world literature that assume “form” is stable and “content” in flux. In fact, the novel’s experimentation diverges from the self-conscious literariness often praised (and critiqued) in what passes through the category of world literature and may even seem to be rather ad hoc. Even as the novel’s editorial or literary unevenness of prose may be due, at least in part, to the approach to the subject matter, it is worth asking whether this would have been the case had *Untitled* been written, like Moele’s previous fiction, from the perspective of men. Moele reports that he was inspired to write *Untitled* after he heard about an eleven-year-old girl from his own location who was raped by her teacher, which leads one to consider how this story might have been told from the perspective of Shatale or Letshele—two of the teachers in the novel who abuse their students. Similarly, one might have hoped for these characters to be more developed so as to enable an analysis of the masculine subject positions that the text generates. Nonetheless, *Untitled* creates a complex position for the reader that disallows passivity as well as any compulsion to “save” Mokgethi. Rather, the reader’s position is one of negotiated difference inscribed through the text’s experimentation with various forms.

At the same time, the text guards against a notion of locality that would be beyond the terms of translatability—a kind of pure particularity. For example, global references flicker throughout the novel: American song lyrics or a reference to the television show *Survivor* jut out as Mokgethi is teased by her brother or writes a poem about school. But these references remain on the periphery of the novel. The *place* of the global within the novel is *displaced*. Indeed, the novel produces locality in conversation with other peripheral locales more than through the discourses and processes of the globalizing world. Glossing Appadurai, one might say that the globalized production of localities—in the plural—exposes the incompleteness of the project of globalization precisely in the way that the global (as a metonym for the US or Europe) is sidelined. Like

Mokgethi's poem, which is still in production, other forms may yet be possible. Even more, it may be that the lesson Mokgethi imparts has to do with form—not for its capacity to shape the expression of “what happened” but rather its very capacity to say (intransitively). Amid the attempts to begin, it is the very positing of the “I” that initiates Mokgethi's position as a speaking subject—from her location but not circumscribed by it. In this sense, location is less about geography than it is about position, subjectively, epistemologically, and circuitously in concert with other localities.

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### Notes

- 1 These comments by reviewers Jane Rosenthal and Desi Olukotun were made after the publication of Moele's first book, *Room 207*, and are reproduced before the title page of *Untitled*.
- 2 For a reading of *Room 207* that analyzes space, place, and transnational connectivity as modes of interpenetration between the local and the global in post-transitional South Africa, see Frenkel.
- 3 In South Africa, the terms township, location, or the slang term “*kasi*” (from the Afrikaans word for location, *lokasie*), refer to apartheid-designated areas where people were forcibly relocated after being removed from their lands or homes. Under apartheid, townships were geographically separated from areas deemed “white” and segregated according to racial categories (Black Africans/Natives, Coloureds, and Indians). Townships today vary dramatically depending upon regional, economic, and other factors and may include upper-middle-class homes as well as informal settlements or shacks.
- 4 See, for example, Amin's “Globalism or Apartheid on a Global Scale?”

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- 5 Irele, for example, argues that empirical evidence would not support Julien's thesis.
- 6 Where Bayart uses the term "extraversion," Julien uses the term "extroverted." Although Julien is clearly indebted to Bayart, where I draw on Julien's argument, I use the term extroversion.
- 7 For another, more historical overview of the debate concerning experimental fiction by black and white South African writers, see Green.
- 8 For a detailed rendering of this argument, see Wynter. *ulturale for International Public Relations*. y, resentment, such as embodiment, participation, performance, and process. nteres
- 9 For an excellent and much more nuanced analysis of the relationship between orality and literacy in relation to missionaries in this region, see Hofmeyr.
- 10 For example, we can detect the sedimentation of apartheid's racial and linguistic classification policies through Sepulana, which is considered a dialect of Northern Sotho. Sepulana does not have a written form, but borrows the orthography of Northern Sotho, which points, in turn, to the historical practices of missionaries who created the written form on which the orthography of Northern Sotho is based. For a historical perspective on how issues of dialects and standardization affect various speakers of languages associated with Northern Sotho, see Mojela.
- 11 One way the deep grammar of globality materializes in the novel is evident in how its syntax and the spatial arrangement of the page respond to the way order, power, and knowledge are organized within the fragmentation of Mokgethi's environment, including the school, the home, and the street but also the relationship of the location to the space and history of the country generally.
- 12 A similar analysis of how Afrikaans is used (and not translated) could also be undertaken, for example using the following passage: "Her father is a powerhouse, in my community's slang a 'gas,' pronounced in Afrikaans" (Moele 65). The passage provides enough information for the reader to understand the gist of "gas" even though it is not translated (and is not a slang word used by Afrikaans speakers in other regions of South Africa). The cues to pronunciation, which are unnecessary in a novel, make this passage especially interesting as issuing an address to the reader as an "outsider." As I argue, this assumes that the reader is someone who is willing to negotiate these linguistic and racial differences. In this way, the mixing of languages sutures the reader to a place of negotiated difference.
- 13 I have in mind the debate about the "double audience" as a mode of directing the text toward a world audience on the one hand and a local or African audience on the other. For a summary of this debate, as well as an alternative to it, see Slaughter's "Form and Informality." On translational equivalence and the globalized world literary market, see Apter's *Against World Literature*.

- 14 Slaughter makes a similar point with regard to Adichie's novels (236n78).
- 15 In addition to Gunne's *Space, Place, and Gendered Violence in South African Writing* and the collection she edited with Thompson, *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, see also Graham's *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature*, which reflects broadly on how social narratives and discourses about rape and race in South Africa relate to literary representations.
- 16 "Enough already!" exclaimed one reviewer, Lunga Mkila, regarding what he described as "writing flaws that should have been addressed by an editor." He also complained that the "gossip and quarrels between Mokgethi and her friends make the book feel like you're reading a teenager's secret diary."

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