

A photograph of a long, single-story residential building with a covered walkway and a green lawn. The building has a light-colored facade and a dark roof. The walkway is supported by pillars. The lawn is green and well-maintained. The sky is blue with some clouds.

MARLENE VAN NIEKERK

TRIOMF

a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing...

Trailer from Michael Raeburn's film of the novel:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RE1fUhkX6kQ&feature=channel>



- Twisted, allegorical tale of the Afrikaner people
- Like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, story narrated partly through interior consciousness of a mentally retarded character (Benjy and Lambert) and taking poor whites as its subject
- Lambert as a mouthpiece for sentiments that others might not voice publically—a 'naïve' narrator
- Use of modernist techniques of interior monologue, free indirect speech, unreliable narration, lists, etc.:
Compare Lambert's list of things to do before his "girl" visits to the shopping list in, for instance, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*.

Meg Samuelson on the novel:

During the emergence of the “new” South Africa, another white writer, Marlene van Niekerk, returns to us Sophiatown’s ruins in her novel *Triomf* (1994). From *Triomf*, superimposed on Sophiatown, the Benades, a dysfunctional Afrikaner family, observe the arrival of the new South Africa, and give the lie to apartheid’s “triumphant” inscription of city-space. The novel performs this demythologizing gesture on at least two levels. Firstly, it subversively recasts the eschatological narrative of Afrikaner nationalism into irreverent scatological idiom (which in turn evokes the origins of Sophiatown alongside the Johannesburg sewerage works). Secondly, it insistently draws attention to the traces of the black urban presence – the sediment of Sophiatown – on which *Triomf* was erected. This historical debris surfaces during Lambert’s digging, which presents an extended metaphor of the need for whites to encounter and come to terms with the black presence cleared but not expunged from the city’s surface.

Unlike Mphahlele's black writers of the 1950s, who dug themselves into a city-space underlain with, and in defiance of, rural ideologies, digging into the city here means coming to terms with competing inscriptions of city-space, and recognizing that the poor white upliftment project of apartheid was built on the destruction of other urban worlds. Thus, the novel does for the white city what Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* did for the arrogated land: the returning black corpse and the returning rubble ensure that the white presence in South Africa cannot assert its innocence.

The Benade family – a product of incest and nationalist mythologies that enticed “poor whites” to cities in the wake of the Great Depression – is sketched as the logical conclusion to apartheid’s whitening, endogamous drive, which was expressed in the usurpation and stratification of urban space. Moll Benade, the ill-fated sister–wife–mother–lover to her two brothers and her son, is presented as the antithesis of the *volksmoeder* ideal (woman as “sign”, once again) as van Niekerk deals a double blow to white ideologies of purity and supremacy and the gendered figures employed to prop them up. Having tumbled from such ideological heights, Moll fears the hollowness on which the city rests, imagining graves collapsing, headstones tilting, houses collapsing, just as they did before the apartheid machinery of 40 years before. Mined out by capitalist greed and bulldozed by white exclusionary nationalism, the city is imploding, just like this incestuous family who satirically represents the endogamous *herrenvolk* – the “master race” of Afrikaner nationalism. Only in Triomf is the “earth is still lekker hard [...] It’s all just bricks and cement from the kaffir-houses” (204). The layers of earlier urban worlds paradoxically come to provide a potential foundation for new narratives of urban belonging: only by incorporating such remains into their urban present and presence, the novel suggests, may the Benades be able to prevent their home from cracking completely.

“Jo’burg’s like that. It’s hollow on the inside. Not just one big hollow like a shell, but lots of dead mines with empty passageways and old tunnels. Treppie says that’s why it’s become so expensive to get buried in Jo’burg. There just isn’t enough solid ground left for graves. And even if you do get a grave, he says, you still can’t be too sure, ’cause most of the corpses fall through after a while. Coffins and all... Getting buried in Jo’burg is a waste of time and money, Treppie says. After you’ve lived in this place there’s not much left of you in any case.” (214)

- How have the “poor whites”/“white trash” been caught in the same bind of dispossession from the land and urban impoverishment as black Africans?

‘So, now the old people are becoming bywoners. Labourers on other people’s land. And the new generation are trekking to Gomorrah,’ he said. (134)

- How do the Benades function as an allegorical indictment of the system of apartheid and its policies of “racial” separation?
 - “She told him it was against the Immorality Act in any case, but he said no, it wasn’t” (200).
 - “Then Treppie said Triomf should have been named after that principal, ’cause anyone who thought a school was like a mine must also think that bulldozing kaffir rubbish was some kind of great victory.” (154)
 - “Then, already an inbred lot.” (134)
- Is this the death knell of the Afrikaners, doomed to become extinct like the Benade line?
 - ‘ ...’cause Baby Benade, the lamb of our loins, ’cause Lambertus the third—surprise, surprise—turned out to be a genetic cul-de-sac. But that’s too difficult for you, so just think of a bulldozer in a sinkhole instead.’
- Does the beauty of the novel redeem the story/history of Africa’s “white tribe”?

THE LIBRARY SCENE

(201-3)

Barbara Masekela



- ANC activist, cultural worker and diplomat.
- She left New York to work full-time for the ANC in 1982. Here, she was charged with establishing the ANC Department of Arts and Culture, which proceeded to debate and develop policy, including the strengthening of the Cultural, Sports and Diplomatic Boycott to exclude the apartheid regime; to manage the Amandla Cultural Ensemble as well as other developmental and promotional cultural ANC projects, including post-apartheid cultural policies.
- As part of the cultural collective of the ANC, Masekela organised various anti-apartheid conferences and cultural festivals, including the "Culture in Another South Africa" festival, which took place at the end of 1987, in Amsterdam. The festival entailed a series of exhibitions and performances in Amsterdam's major theatres, presented by 200 South African photographers, fashion designers, actors and musicians. It was a significant example of the uninterrupted line of unity among South Africans at home and abroad and included the call for the release of political prisoners, some of whom had been sentenced to death by the apartheid regime.
- In 1990, after the unbanning of the ANC, Masekela moved to the ANC's fund-raising department and later became Nelson Mandela's chief of staff, until 1995. She served as a member of the ANC's National Executive Committee, from 1991 to 1994.

(Courtesy "Amazing Women Rock" website)

Violence within the family

- Sexual violence and incest
- Treppie's violence towards Lambert (and earlier child abuse)
- Lambert's out-of-control violence towards all around him and himself

He looks at his hands, at the lines in his palm, his fingers and his three missing fingertips. They got caught in the escalator when he was six years old. He didn't actually see Treppie doing it, but he's always known it was Treppie who pushed him. On purpose. (23)

He's still got the marks on his backside where they say Treppie burnt him with cigarettes. 'So he'd shuddup,' Treppie always says about those days. Treppie says he, Lambert, was full of shit when he was small. (32)

‘AFRIKANERS,’ SAYS TREPPIE.
‘STINKAFRIKAERS.’ (161)

‘BEFUCKED,’ SHE SAYS, BUT NOT BRAIN-
DEAD. WE CAN STILL READ AND ALL.

“WHITE TRASH”



‘The people in this house are scum. They make me sick in my stomach,’ she [the NP organizer] says. (147)

... Wasn’t he, a white man, doing work that no white man should ever have to do? But his mother wouldn’t shut up. She said she wished they were kaffirs. Then at least she’d be able to give them porridge every day, with no salt or milk or sugar. Then they could dress in rags and no one would even know the difference. (138)



Ian Martin, Getty Images



“White Trash”

- Comparison to American hillbillies
- Spur:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpFc-c2Ba8E&feature=channel>
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMDNp42St_w&feature=channel
- Nando's:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsqosiEyGLs&feature=related>

“White Trash”

- Comparison to “kaffirs”

“Leave the rubbish alone, man,’ says Du Pisanie. ‘We’re wasting our time with him, he’s just a piece of rubbish, man.’

‘He’s worse than a kaffir, the fucker. Just look at him!’ says Van der Walt.

‘Jesus,’ he hears one of them say behind his back as he walks away. ‘I really didn’t know you still got people like that around here.’ (243)

The myth of the great north

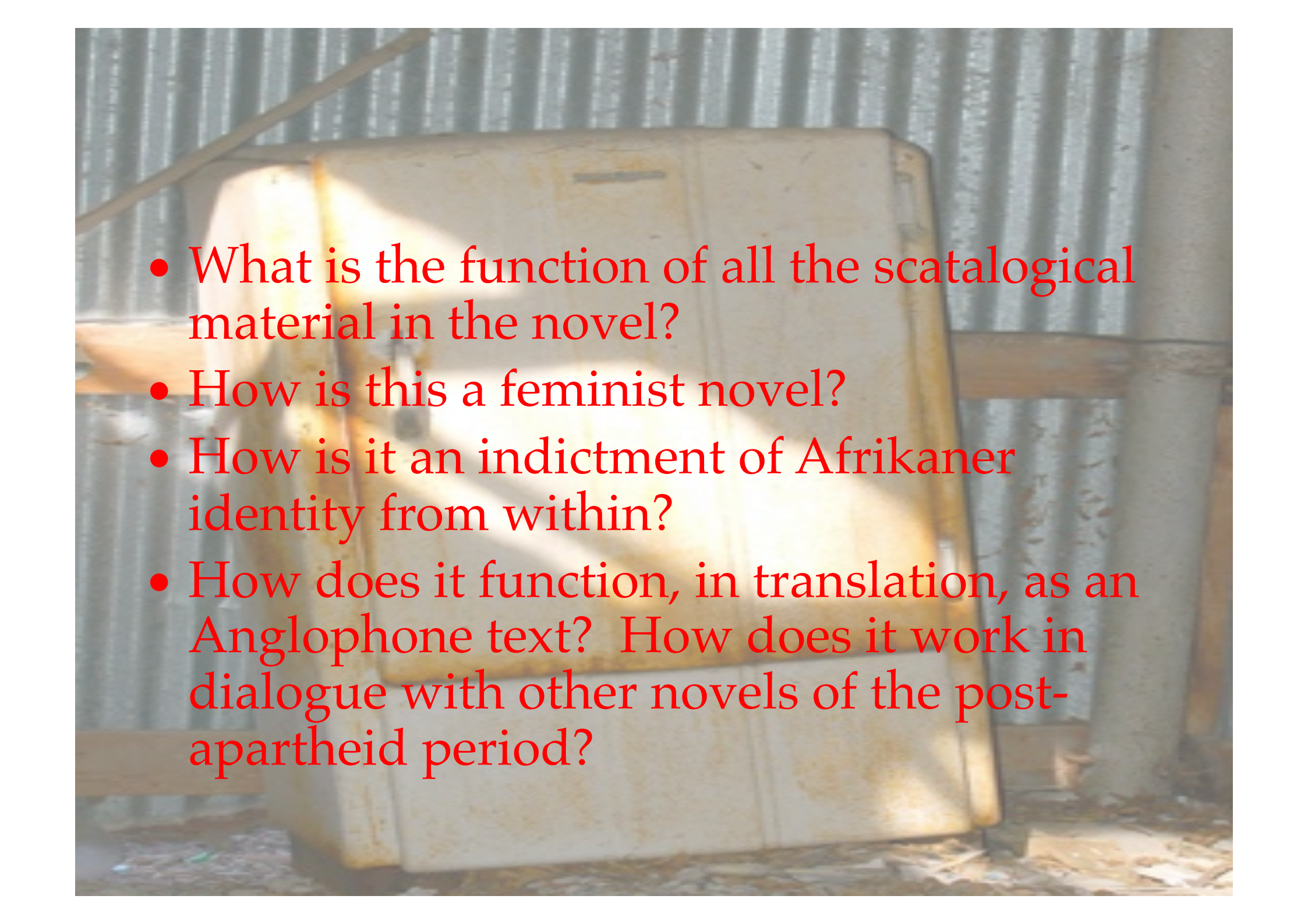
- **Developed before decolonization in the areas north of South Africa**
- **A repetition of the Vortrekkers**
- **A myth of flight kept alive by Lambert's ignorance/innocence**
- **Particularly significant in the run-up to elections, with the potential for violence and unsettled conditions:**

“‘One settler, one bullet,’ Lambert reads” (255).

“And if the shit really starts flying after the election, then he’ll tell her she must come with, to the North, ’cause it’ll be her only chance” (228-9).

Satiric Representation of Fringe White Groups, Inkatha Zulu, and ANC, too

- **Eugene Terre'Blanche and the AWP**
- **“Treppie said she must watch out, if she dressed Gertie in ANC colours the Zulu would beat that dog of hers silly the moment they got their hands on her. Then they'd want to know who knitted the jersey, and they'd stuff her up half-dead too, 'cause she was the only one in the house who knew how to knit. As if they don't already stuff each other enough. Knitting or no knitting, they're stuffing the shit out of each other around here nowadays.” (43)**

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- What is the function of all the scatological material in the novel?
 - How is this a feminist novel?
 - How is it an indictment of Afrikaner identity from within?
 - How does it function, in translation, as an Anglophone text? How does it work in dialogue with other novels of the post-apartheid period?