Solidarity and Gender in Protest Novels: Bessie Head's *The Cardinals* and Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the critical role of gender within racial solidarity in anti-apartheid protest writing by comparing Bessie Head's *The Cardinals* and Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan.* Both novels depict the protagonist's experience of being the only Black woman at a white-collar workplace during apartheid. The workplace relationships explored within the novels illustrate the complex role of gender in forming alliances and nurturing solidarity. Although Tlali's novel prioritises solidarity between Black people in the face of apartheid, areas of significant gender inequalities are present. Head's *The Cardinals*, on the other hand, explicitly explores the fissures in Black anti-apartheid alliances created by gender inequalities. The juxtaposition of these two novels challenges a uniform understanding of Black anti-apartheid solidarity, while also elucidating depictions of the competing relationships of solidarity for Black working women in female-authored protest writing. By forcing the reader to consider the place of gender in relation to both collectives of solidarity and to anti-apartheid protest, the novels trigger a rethinking of what traditionally male-dominated protest writing was and could be.

KEYWORDS

solidarity, gender, feminism, race, apartheid, protest literature, workplace

> I did not want to overemphasize the problem between men, African men and African women, because the success of the struggle depended on how united we were against it [apartheid].
>
> (Tlali, "Interview" 146)

In the above quote, Miriam Tlali points to a conflict often present in the anti-apartheid struggle: a perceived incompatibility between addressing gender inequalities and maintaining a community of resistance in the face of race-based oppression. Despite early Black South African anti-apartheid writing being dominated by male voices, Tlali and Bessie Head made significant entries into what could now be seen as the canon of *Drum* short stories, autobiographies, protest theatre, and Black Consciousness poetry: Head as one of the first South African women to publish works of fiction, and Tlali with *Muriel at Metropolitan* as the first novel published in South Africa by a Black woman.[1] *Muriel at Metropolitan* was written in 1969, but not published until 1975. Head's novel, *The Cardinals*, written between 1960–1962, was only published posthumously in 1993. Both novels depict their protagonist's experience of being the only Black woman at her white-collar workplace during apartheid – Head's main character Mouse is a journalist at a tabloid paper, *African Beat*, and Tlali's Muriel is an administrator at a furniture and electronics shop, Metropolitan Radio. In portraying Mouse and Muriel's experiences, the novels tackle questions of how gender and race impact work relations during apartheid. Using the concept of solidarity, I will examine how these novels depict the effect of gender on the construction and maintenance of alliances and communities in a workplace and social life structured by apartheid. The two novels particularly prompt an analysis of how gender factors into solidarities built on racial alliances, such as Black solidarity against apartheid.[2]

Solidarity as a concept attempts to capture the building of alliances and even communities across difference to address inequalities. However, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out this does not mean expunging dissimilarities to achieve a "commonality of oppression"; rather "[d]iversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances" (7). To reach out across difference is nevertheless vital for solidarity building, and to do this, as Leigh-Ann Naidoo stresses, entails "the capacity to move beyond oneself" (252). One could argue that literature as an art form is particularly suited for exploring solidarity building as it allows, through point of view, narration, and character exploration, for precisely what Naidoo pinpoints as necessary: "the development of a practice of moving oneself into another position, not with appropriation or force, but in order to decentre the self, to find technologies for correspondence across difference" (253). Despite intentions of creating understanding and

compassion with another beyond oneself, and therefore a sense of community across difference, efforts towards solidarity can in actuality build on or produce unequal or exploitative power relations. Naidoo further argues that "unequal power relations can and are often reproduced in the very spaces of resistance we create to redistribute that power. The inability to deal with how power operates through us and our relations with one another results in us – often with the best of intentions – doing harm to one another and to the possibility of solidarity" (241). In the context of Head's and Tlali's novels, I am interested in how power structures around gender interact with and possibly thwart efforts towards solidarity.

Both novels have previously been considered with respect to their intertwinement of gender and race. Barbara Boswell and Pumla Dineo Gqola have recently read Tlali's work in relation to the notion of solidarity, albeit briefly (Boswell "Echoes"; Gqola *Writing Freedom*). Boswell argues that *Muriel at Metropolitan* expresses solidarity between Muriel and Black male workers at the shop in the name of anti-apartheid sentiment, as opposed to an impossible gender solidarity between Muriel and the white female workers. As such, the novel carries an "analysis of the impossibility of womxn's solidarity across racial difference" as it argues for the necessity of racial solidarity during apartheid (Boswell, "Echoes" 204). *The Cardinals* has been read as doing the opposite: it questions Black solidarity from a gender perspective. Dobrota Pucherová has rethought Head's relationship to Black Consciousness through analysing Head's early literary works (*Dissident Desire*; "Romance"). While Head's personal and writerly intertwining of race and gender is much commented upon by critics, Pucherová interprets *The Cardinals* as not only providing Head's critique of apartheid, as previous critics have done, but also of the sexist tendencies of Black nationalist movements. Although solidarity has not been used as a concept to analyse *The Cardinals*, Pucherová's work provides a lucid analysis of the tensions between gender and race in political community in the novel.

So although the issues of gender and race-based political community in the face of apartheid have been somewhat explored in relation to both these novels before, the point of this article is to read the novels together. The novels are both written in the 1960s and describe relatively similar situations, but seemingly express incompatible standpoints on gender and racial solidarity. What can reading them together elucidate concerning gender and solidarity in female-authored protest writing? We can only speculate what might have changed about protest writing, and how it might have affected Tlali in writing *Muriel at Metropolitan*, if *The Cardinals* had been published in the early 1960s instead of in 1993.

What we can do, however, is to reconsider South African Black anti-apartheid writing through *The Cardinals* and reread *Muriel at Metropolitan* in relation to it from the vantage point of today. Analysing the two novels together allows me to investigate how South African literature written by Black women during apartheid imagines the Black working woman's position in relation to notions of competing and contesting solidarities. Head and Tlali's imaginings of community-building force the reader to consider the place of gender in relation to both collectives of solidarities and to anti-apartheid protest, and thus the novels trigger a rethinking of what protest writing was and could be.

Centring Female Protagonists

The Cardinals and *Muriel at Metropolitan* are thematically similar but stylistically different novels. They are both narrowly focalised through a young Black[3] woman who is starting a new job at a white-collar workplace during apartheid. With the workplace as the primary setting, the relationships among colleagues are in focus, and both novels attempt to show the injustices that apartheid visits upon Black South Africans, explicitly discussing contemporary political and social problems. The novels both draw heavily on Head and Tlali's personal experiences working in similar jobs. Despite this autobiographical influence, I choose to read both works as fiction. Exploring potential autobiographical reference points to the authors' lives does not necessarily further an analysis focused on understanding how the narratives creatively explore gendered and racial solidarity. Additionally, I resist turning to an autobiographical reading as Zoë Wicomb has pointed out a tendency among scholars to read Black women's writing as autobiographical whether motivated or not (218). Stylistically, the novels also differ greatly. *The Cardinals* mixes realism, non-mimetic writing, and satire to subvert its use of the romance genre and to interrogate Black South African 1950s male-dominated journalistic spaces (Guldimann). *Muriel at Metropolitan*, on the other hand, is written in a realist style, more closely related to autofiction, with a clear intent to convey the situation at work for Black South Africans under apartheid. Tlali herself has described it as consciously didactic ("Interview" 144). These differences in style affect how the two novels centre their female protagonist and how they write solidarity.

In a novel with a didactic approach, a first-person narrator allows Muriel herself to articulate her position and focuses her individuality and subjectivity, which creates a strong voice with which to convey the anti-apartheid message of *Muriel at Metropolitan*. *The Cardinals*, on the other hand, uses a third-person heterodiegetic narrator – the narrating is performed by someone who is not a character in the story – which creates a spectator effect

that removes some of the closeness of being part of a community. This type of narrator allows, though, for crossing boundaries, and although the novel is mainly focalised through Mouse, it exploits the potential to move outside of her perspective at some key moments. This stylistic choice creates a less stable voice for the main character, which enhances the critical examination of ideas of romance and writing, and, furthermore, the commentary on anti-apartheid alliances.

Despite these differences, both novels centre Mouse and Muriel in their narrative as independent women who embark on successful careers due to their own personal abilities and initiative. Mouse is hired for the *African Beat* because the editor is impressed by the writing skills displayed in a letter of complaint she sends to the paper. Muriel is educated and trained beyond the levels demanded by her clerical role. The centring of capable female characters is significant because the lowly position of Black women in apartheid society is reflected in the discursive construction of female characters of women who did manage to write during this time (Boswell, "Agency"; Gqola, *Freedom*, "Locations"; Pucherová, "Romance"). Commenting on how she kills off the only woman character in her novel *Cross of Gold* (1981) within the first chapter, Lauretta Ngcobo says that "I think it comes from the background that I had come from. I think I learned earlier that women didn't count much" (qtd. in Boswell, "Agency" 424). Starting from a position that Black women count enables Head and Tlali to write complexly about the role of gender in relation to race in the apartheid workplace.

By focusing on their female protagonists' work, Head and Tlali are able to confront them with characters from different backgrounds in a space which forces encounters with and within the apartheid system. Tlali has described the shop in *Muriel at Metropolitan* as "a kind of stage where the whole of the South African scenario was being played out" ("Interview" 144). In *Muriel at Metropolitan*, there is a substantial layer of workers in addition to and between the white boss and Muriel, including white female workers. The novel is concerned with gender relations in reference to cross-racial relations through the relationships that Muriel and the other Black workers have with the white female workers. In *The Cardinals*, there are only two Black male journalists in addition to Mouse and the white boss, and the focus is on the role of gender in the relationship between Mouse and these Black male workers. However, in both novels, the key relationships are those between the female protagonists and their Black male colleagues.

Relationships of Solidarity in *The Cardinals*

When Mouse joins *African Beat* she is the most junior person in the newsroom in addition to being the only woman. She is immediately exposed to sexism when at her first meeting with the editor, PK, he tells her that "I can't handle the job of training a woman. I can't even manage them in my private life" (Head 13). In fact, sexual harassment and bullying immediately characterise Mouse's relationship with her new colleagues: "James taunted her with sly, crude remarks and PK treated her with a patronising and paternal indulgence that was humiliating" (Head 15). The choice of the word "battered" used to describe Mouse's first meeting with the other two journalists, James and Johnny, highlights the violent threat they pose towards her: "Both men battered her with the amused contemptuous looks in their eyes" (Head 14). The narrator makes clear Mouse's exposed position with the remark that "[o]nly to herself would she admit how they disturbed her" (Head 15).

Despite the overt sexism and the underlying violence towards Mouse at the workplace, Johnny seems to see the need for solidarity across gender with Mouse because of a shared experience of race-based oppression. In order to rouse her political consciousness, he tries to start a romantic relationship with her, moves her into his home, and mentors her creative writing.[4] Johnny tells her that "historians may say we were a conquered race. Anyway, we were made to feel like the underdog […] Maybe we can help throw some of those imposed standards overboard. It is a great responsibility to be a writer at this time" (Head 62). He will teach her if she "give[s] me complete control to guide and direct you the way I think you should go, and that you come and live with me" (Head 62). By doing this, he can raze the "wall in which she has enclosed herself" (Head 56) and "explode" her, which will tear down "this crazy notion of barriers" between them (115). Naidoo points out that this movement "beyond oneself" is crucial for the formation of solidarity (252).

Unbeknownst to Johnny and Mouse, he is her father, and their love story is thus incestuous. Scholars have argued (often psychoanalytically) that there is a disruptive force towards "structures of power and social taboos" (Brown 43) – and thus the apartheid system – in the incestuous love between Johnny and Mouse (Brown; Daymond; Gagiano; Wicomb). Scholars have also read resistance into the function of creative writing in the novel, which allows Mouse to rewrite herself and thus enacts a "crisis of legitimation where the Law is rewritten through a rewriting of the self" (Wicomb 222). As such, Johnny's claim of solidarity with Mouse in uplifting her via love and writing from ignorance to political consciousness can rise above the sexist abuse in which it seems mired.

However, in his approach to Mouse, Johnny is not displaying "the capacity to move beyond oneself" to reach out across difference (Naidoo 252), instead he is attempting to mould Mouse into a version of himself. Scholars have noted how writing, so integral to Mouse as an independent woman in securing her role as a journalist, serves to transfer patriarchy: "*The Cardinals* repeatedly affirms a masculine world whose authority is persuasively inscribed in the texts that Mouse confronts and imbibed through the act of writing" (Lewis n.p.; see Wicomb for a related argument). Johnny intends to mentor Mouse to write herself into being – "I want you to be constantly searching for new ways to express yourself" – but instead he leads her to write herself the way he sees fit, telling her that she is a "good pupil" (Head 116).

Ultimately, Johnny's methods are those of bullying, threatening, physically abusing, and sexually harassing Mouse. The novel's ending could be read as Johnny forcing himself sexually on Mouse, no longer willing to wait for her to arrive at a point where she wants him, he moves her to where he wants her. Pucherová has persuasively read in this scene "[t]he implication […] that women's desires are not recognized by nationalist discourses: Johnny, an ardent believer in freedom, wants to force Mouse's freedom upon her" (Pucherová "Romance" 117; see also Nivesjö). This scene can be read through Naidoo's view that an "inability to deal with how power operates through us and our relations with one another results in us – often with the best of intentions – doing harm to one another and to the possibility of solidarity" (241). Johnny himself states that gendered power is how he relates to Mouse: "You have the ability to arouse two strong, conflicting emotions in me at the same time – a fierce masculinity and a paternal protectiveness" (Head 113). Not recognising the workings of gendered power, Johnny ultimately harms Mouse and the possibility of solidarity between the male and female journalists in their struggle to write liberation for self and society. Naidoo further points out that "unequal power relations can and are often reproduced in the very spaces of resistance we create to redistribute that power" (241), male power in *The Cardinals* reproduces inequalities which invalidate attempts at political solidarity between Black men and women in the anti-apartheid fight.

Relationships of Solidarity in *Muriel at Metropolitan*

As indicated in the epigraph to this essay, twenty-five years after writing *Muriel at Metropolitan* Tlali stated that she deliberately avoided issues of gendered conflict between Black men and women in the novel so as not to weaken the Black collective fight against apartheid. However, as Boswell points out, "Tlali describes, to a limited extent, abusive and

violent behaviour by Black men in *Muriel at Metropolitan*" ("Echoes" 204). The exposed position of Black women in public space is hinted at in a scene where Muriel is forced to use a public toilet and "drunken men of all races kept pushing the door open and peering in at you" (Tlali, *Muriel* 34), instances of transactional sex offered by desperate women are mentioned, and sexist attitudes by some of the male employees are briefly described. Gendered issues affecting Black men as well as women are also mentioned, such as men needing to take any work to support their families and the migrant labour system which made "nonsense of the concept of the family unit" (Tlali, *Muriel* 60–1). Tlali has described the issues facing women as "the second war" (the first being apartheid's race-based discrimination), and she has linked Black men's destructive control over women to men's subjected condition under apartheid ("Interview" 146). Her later literary works, such as *Amandla* (1980) and *Footprints in the Quag* (1989), more directly addressed gender issues facing Black South African women and men (Boswell "Masculinity", "Echoes"). Boswell has described the evolution of Tlali's take on gender as going from a "womanist articulation at the beginning of her career, to a radical Black feminist position by the time she penned her last published work" ("Echoes" 202). In 1994, Tlali stated that she would like to rewrite *Muriel at Metropolitan* to include gender inequalities and also "the ideas of love relationships" ("Interview" 147).[5] Although Tlali's remarks are made with the benefit of hindsight and they give no access to her thoughts on these issues as she wrote the novel, reading *Muriel at Metropolitan* in relation to *The Cardinals* one can see how Head addresses gender inequalities and love relationships, missing from Tlali's work. One can only speculate whether if Head had been successful in her attempts at publishing *The Cardinals*, the novel would have encouraged Tlali to include these issues as well.

Presumably because of Tlali's stated desire to present a united Black front in the struggle against apartheid, the overtly gendered comments in *Muriel at Metropolitan* are turned towards female solidarity across racial boundaries instead of to those across gendered boundaries within a so-called racial community. *Muriel at Metropolitan* outlines a vast system of employees existing within a hierarchy subservient to the white boss, Mr Bloch, and his white female administrators, Mrs Stein and his sister Mrs Kuhn. These are the three characters that Muriel works most closely with. Muriel, Mrs Kuhn, and Mrs Stein are also the only (consistent) female staff members. Boswell argues that Muriel "reject[s] any incipient sense of belonging to the category of womanhood articulated by the white womxn at the shop" ("Echoes" 204). The possibility of cross-racial solidarity founded on gender is firmly squashed both by the racist and denigrating behaviour of the two white women towards

Muriel, and by the apartheid system, approved of by the white women, which erects physical barriers: Muriel's desk is separated from them by steel mesh wires, they use different coat hangers and separate toilets.

Nevertheless, Tlali includes moments that gesture towards attempts at reaching out across difference. There are instances throughout the novel, particularly later in Muriel's employment, when Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn gossip with Muriel and share household tips and food with her. Some of the white female employees in more junior temporary positions attempt to form friendships with Muriel, such as Mrs Green, Mrs Ludorf, and Mrs Singham. These, however, turn out to be self-serving. Mrs Green develops an "uneasy, friendly relationship" with Muriel (Tlali, *Muriel* 52), but it is motivated by Mrs Green's ostracisation by the more senior Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn and her wish for Muriel to spy on them. Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn's overtures are often motivated by a desire to talk ill about each other to Muriel. These attempts at community building cannot be read as acts of solidarity because they are not about "moving oneself into another position, not with appropriation or force, but in order to decentre the self" that Naidoo pinpoints as generative of solidarity formation (253). Instead, they perform the opposite function, they centre the self of the white women by forcing Muriel to move into their position.

Towards the end of the novel, Tlali abruptly introduces another Black woman to the workforce, Daisy. This might be construed as a moment for reflection on Black female solidarity. Instead, Muriel's compromised position – captured in the title Tlali originally wanted for her novel, *Between Two Worlds* – as someone towards the higher end of the workplace hierarchy but non-white, is further highlighted. Muriel's more menial tasks get shifted to Daisy, but moving up in responsibility means that Muriel has to sit with the white women on the other side of the steel mesh divide, with Daisy relegated to the hot cramped part of the office. Muriel's advancement is dependent on another Black woman's subjugation. Muriel reflects that neither she nor any of the white female staff members dare to advocate for Daisy: "Maybe if one of them had felt like helping Daisy, she was afraid of being considered *kaffir-boetie* as much as I feared being accused of being an agitator" (Tlali, *Muriel* 174). Ironically, in their fear of condemnation of a desire to help each other, Muriel achieves a brief feeling of solidarity with the white women at Metropolitan Radio.

The firmest bonds of solidarity in *Muriel at Metropolitan* are, however, established between Muriel and the Black male workers. Boswell points out that: "Muriel […] displays race solidarity with Black men, as both Black men and womxn were likely to be on the receiving end of racist provocation and humiliation both in the shop and outside of it"

("Echoes" 203). Loyalty to fellow Black workers trumps any potential differences. Adam, the de facto manager, tries to convince Muriel to see "a good African witch-doctor" (Tlali, *Muriel* 92–3). His reasons have slight sexist undertones and Muriel does not want to, but when Mrs Stein and Mrs Kuhn wonder what the conversation is about Muriel answers evasively because the priority is to keep them in the dark, as they routinely ridicule African culture.

To form solidarity, one needs to "find technologies for correspondence across difference" (Naidoo 253). In *Muriel at Metropolitan*, the use of 'vernacular', humour, and laughter serves as such a technology, as does gossip: "The rumours […] were circulated only among the Black staff in whispers. Somehow, the boss and the white staff never got to hear anything" (Tlali, *Muriel* 51). The Black community of workers is formed through excluding the white workers by the use of African languages, or by shared laughter. Using African languages creates a protective bubble against the white workers for the Black employees' conversations. The white workers are then often further excluded from a community formed by laughter in response to conversations they cannot understand. The Black staff members all share a laugh despite their different opinions about the role of traditional chiefs in modern urban life when two characters greet each other in the shop "as if you are entering a *kraal* and dressed in *amabheshu* making *bayete* (salute) of the days of Shaka" (Tlali, *Muriel* 42). They even pull in a disgruntled customer into the temporary community formed by laughter: "They all laughed, and so did Lebitso Pharahlahle, who until then had been sitting morosely 'waiting for the master'" (Tlali, *Muriel* 43).

The white employees do not require shielding and are thus not afforded the same secrecy: when they speak Yiddish, Johannes, the so-called 'tea-boy', immediately interprets for Muriel. Most of the Black employees also speak both English and Afrikaans in addition to African languages, prompting Muriel to reflect in regard to one of them that "[s]he is more of a true South African citizen than any of them [the white employees]" (Tlali, *Muriel* 172). With this multilingualism, *Muriel at Metropolitan* hints towards a larger community of South African people, perhaps even the South African nation beyond the apartheid regime, from which the – at best – bilingual white staff members are excluded.

Patriarchal Apartheid Capitalism and the Impossibility of Solidarity

Despite how they approach the Black working woman's position in relation to competing and contesting solidarities in the workplace from different perspectives, *The Cardinals* and

Muriel at Metropolitan ultimately both interrogate a patriarchal apartheid capitalist system and its effect on the possibility of solidarity building.

African Beat, as a newspaper, seemingly provides some potential for resistance against the apartheid regime in what it reports on and how. Johnny expresses solidarity with township residents' plight when he chooses to write an article on forced removals that exposes the government's built-in deprivation and control of the new townships. A retail shop, on the other hand, is firmly implicated in the capitalist system of economic apartheid. Metropolitan Radio is particularly exploitative as it sells furniture and home electronics on a hire purchase basis using extortionate interest rates and sometimes aggressive sales tactics such as targeting poor Black housewives in the townships to sell coal stoves or mine workers to sell radios. When the customers set up an agreement, the information in their passbooks is also registered with the shop. As such, the workers at Metropolitan Radio are made complicit in maintaining the deprivation of Black people through debt and the control of them through their passbooks. It becomes apparent, however, that the *African Beat* is equally caught up in the apartheid capitalist system. The newspaper's destructive links to capitalist racism through sensationalist news reporting are shown when Mouse is told to rework the story of an unemployed Black father selling drugs to support his children to cast him as a hardened criminal to sell more papers. The newspaper's customers are aware of its entanglement with apartheid ideology. A shop owner remarks to Mouse that "You people do crazy business there. No one want to buy *African Beat* from my shop anymore. They say it make out that the non-Whites bad" (30). Genuine solidarity between workers and customers becomes difficult, if not impossible, when the exploitation of customers is endemic to a business model dependent on apartheid capitalism.

In both novels the white boss takes on an ambivalent position, seemingly reaching across barriers to form alliances. In *Muriel at Metropolitan*, Mr Bloch is the only white staff member who will use African languages, ostensibly conveying unity or at least camaraderie with Black customers and employees. In *The Cardinals*, the boss, PK, tries to express solidarity with his journalists' political opinions and with the plight of Black South Africans when he tells Johnny, who is "not a supporter of the government", that "[y]ou know I'm on your side" (Head 19). However, PK's position as employer, and, therefore, his complicity with the apartheid capitalist system, makes such solidarity an impossibility. PK might state that he agrees politically with Johnny, and even that he will send Johnny's anti-township article to the head office, but in the end he knows that it is unlikely to get published, and that if anyone loses their job over it, it will be Johnny. Both Mr Bloch and PK are ultimately

committed to making money for their companies, and in a racist capitalist system that inherently entails exploitation of the Black oppressed. This is particularly so for Black women, who, as is frequently stressed in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, were among the cheapest employees to be had (Nattrass and Seekings).

The focus on the workplace facilitates the exposition of apartheid capitalism's incompatibility with notions of solidarity, but the occasional shift of setting away from the workplace reveals other potentialities. *Muriel at Metropolitan* contains very few scenes set outside of the workplace, and even fewer set in a domestic sphere. Nevertheless, one of the scenes of most potent human connection across difference, and a trigger for change, is when Muriel and the reader are momentarily transported away from Metropolitan Radio by a phone call from Muriel's mother. Muriel and her mother take different political stances in regard to how to survive apartheid; nevertheless, through genuine care her mother expresses solidarity with Muriel's work situation at the same time as she challenges her to quit a job she sees as complicit with apartheid. Muriel comments that "even though she was six hundred miles away. I felt an overwhelming desire to extend my hand and touch her" (Tlali, *Muriel* 138). The scenes that convey the most potential for human connection and change in *The Cardinals* are also those that take place outside of the newspaper office, particularly those set in nature that concern themselves with intimate relations outside of the capitalist system. A chapter set on the beach which depicts the romantic relationship between a young Johnny and a young woman, Ruby, seems to exist outside of societal structures and carries the most revolutionary potential for mutual human connection in the novel (Nivesjö).

However, neither novel articulates a simplistic equivalence between domesticity, nature, romantic relationships, and genuine solidarity and potential for change. Muriel is personally fulfilled at work, and restless to get back when she has been home for a week with her ill child. In *The Cardinals* the plot and setting stretch far outside of the newspaper office to the townships, District Six, the beach, Table Mountain, and the characters' homes, and the novel thematically explores many issues arising in these settings to do with abusive notions of gender and sexuality, such as incest, rape, gendered violence, and sexism. The scene at the beach between Johnny and Ruby establishes Johnny as Mouse's father, and propels the incest theme. The fact that neither novel sees domesticity or women's family-internal roles as locations for resistance and change is important in a context where much anti-apartheid ideology placed the woman specifically in this role (Gqola, "Locations").

Nevertheless, one could argue that the trajectories of Mouse and Muriel and the novels' endings point towards the necessity to move outside of the patriarchal capitalist

system to achieve hope of genuine change in relation to the apartheid system. Muriel quits her job in the end, but she emerges stronger despite an uncertain future. Regardless of Boswell's (accurate) analysis that *Muriel at Metropolitan* espouses a womanist perspective which places race over gender ("Surfacing" 204), salvation for Muriel is not found in the home but in the security of her own integrity: "I did not know what the future held in store for me. I did not care. […] My conscience would be clear" (Tlali, *Muriel* 190). Mouse, meanwhile, is drawn further and further into Johnny's grip, both romantically and as a writer. For her, patriarchal power, romantic love, writing, and the capitalism of apartheid seem to go hand in hand – while Mouse is emerging as a stronger writer at the end of the story, she is personally in a weaker position. Muriel escapes the patriarchal capitalist system, while Mouse is trapped by it.

Gendered Solidarity and Rethinking the Protest Novel

When Head and Tlali wrote their novels in the 1960s, Black women in South Africa had not yet been published.[6] The scene changes somewhat in the 1970s with the publication of *Muriel at Metropolitan*[7] and Head's writings after she has moved to Botswana, but also with the publication of Tlali's column "Soweto Speaking" and the "Women Writers Speak" column in *Staffrider* magazine. "Women Writers Speak", Gqola argues, provided the "first declaration of women writers' commitment" ("Locations" 144). In 1979 in "Women Writers Speak", Manoko Nchwe states that the woman writer needs to "clarify the position of a woman in her society" to ensure that "[t]he myth of female inferiority should be completely discouraged" (qtd. in Gqola, "Locations" 145). From this perspective, *The Cardinals* and *Muriel at Metropolitan* through their focus on competent working women do a great deal to challenge the imagined role of women at this time in society and in politically conscious Black writing and to politicise their existence. In extension, Tlali and Head challenge the very notion of protest writing as anti-apartheid writing which supports Black Consciousness through uplifting the Black man's masculinity at the expense of women.

However, both novels explore complexities in their female protagonists' positions that go far beyond simply writing strong women into being. Both novels draw a multifaceted picture of the relation between an avowal of patriarchal capitalism as incompatible with anti-apartheid solidarity and the power that work bestows on women as agents in society. The various relations that they then explore at the workplace also point towards the multi-layered role gender plays in forming alliances and building relations of solidarity. In choosing to

downplay gender issues over establishing firm relations of solidarity between Black people, Tlali's novel still manages to point towards areas of significant gender inequalities. Reading *Muriel at Metropolitan* together with *The Cardinals* shows what bringing these issues to the forefront might mean for imagining Black male and female solidarity, as *The Cardinals* explores the fissures in Black anti-apartheid alliances that gender inequalities open up. Both novels also hint, albeit more obliquely in *Muriel at Metropolitan*'s case, at the damage that apartheid ideology does to Black men's notions of masculinity and in extension to their position in relation to Black women.[8] A key point to why attempts at solidarity fail in both novels is that characters in a relative position of power to Muriel and Mouse are unable to move beyond themselves – Johnny cannot progress from masculinism, and the white women at Metropolitan Radio fail to see beyond their own wants and needs and their own racism.

Although protest writing has often been criticised for prioritising politics over aesthetics, and Tlali herself has commented that "I didn't care to adhere to the so-called aesthetic" ("Interview" 144), style does impact how Head and Tlali's stories are told. The third-person narrator and the non-exclusive focalisation through Mouse enables *The Cardinal*'s more ambiguous portrayal of the possibilities of racial community in relation to the role of gender, while the first-person narration in *Muriel at Metropolitan* allows Muriel's strong view on these questions to persevere throughout the novel. The stylistic choices also reflect the endings of the novels where *The Cardinal*'s more pessimistic ending is articulated by the third-person narrator removing some agency from Mouse's control over her own story as Johnny tells her to have sex with him, while Muriel's voice remains centred and amplified to the extent that the novel ends with the assertion of her agency: the last paragraph uses "I" eleven times as Muriel walks out of her job. Boswell has remarked that recent feminist readings of Head, Tlali, and Ngcobo's writings have revealed the "debate about the 'realist', anti-aesthetic mode of black literary production during apartheid as androcentric", pointing, for example, to Margaret Daymond's argument that Njabulo Ndebele's famous call for a return to the "ordinary" can in fact be found in apartheid-era writing on gendered issues (*Anyway*, 63). Reading *The Cardinals* and *Muriel at Metropolitan* together allow women's position in and experience of society and gender to emerge as key aspects to how racial solidarity could be imagined in anti-apartheid protest writing.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Muriel at Metropolitan* has been published in different editions which exclude or include less or more material. It has also been published under the title *Between Two Worlds*. In this article I am using the Longman African Classics edition published as *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1987. I refer to the novel as *Muriel at Metropolitan* as that is its more well-known name.
[2] In this essay I use "Black" as inclusive of all so-called non-white identities, in line with Black Consciousness thinking that articulated that the term Black included "those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations" (SASO 10). Drawing on Zimitri Erasmus, I understand race as a social construct, although with concrete impact on individuals' everyday lives. My usage of racial terms should be imagined with scare quotes to signify their temporary and constructed nature.
[3] Here I am using Black in an inclusive sense. I am not interested in racialising Mouse according to apartheid racial classifications, as this is not something that Head does in the novel, and I will not draw on Head's own racial identification to steer my reading of Mouse.
[4] I have discussed similar lines of thought in my PhD dissertation (Nivesjö), although not foremost in connection to the concept of solidarity or to the workplace.
[5] Rewriting *Muriel at Metropolitan* would of course complicate its already complex publication history further, and add to the several published versions of this novel that exist. Each version could be argued to be in itself a separate novel, and a hypothetical rewritten version would be as well.
[6] Noni Jabavu published her two autobiographical novels in the 1960s, but outside of South Africa.
[7]Although the novel was banned in South Africa.
[8] Tlali's *Amandla*, Boswell argues, does offer a critique of "the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) articulation of masculinity which establishes itself at the expense of Black womxnhood" ("Echoes" 204).

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