

**SOUTH AFRICAN AND FLEMISH SOAP OPERA: A CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES
PERSPECTIVE**

by

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I declare that "South African and Flemish soap opera: A Critical Whiteness Studies perspective" is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

H Marx Knoetze

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Carel Sebastian Marx (25 February 1929 – 16 May 2014), my earliest example of academic rigour and the unconditional cultivator of my academic interests, and to my son, Marx Casparus Knoetze (2015.07.15-), who accompanied and enabled me on this journey in more ways than one.

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this thesis was an investigation into the ways in which whiteness is constructed and positioned in the South African soap opera, *7de Laan*, and the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*, with the emphasis on the possible implications of these constructions for local as well as global discourses on whiteness in the media.

In conjunction with the above, this thesis endeavoured to answer a number of subquestions relating to the origin and history of the construct of “whiteness” and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as a theoretical approach and its relevance in the South African and Flemish contexts, specifically as it pertains to the analysis of mass media texts like *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. It, moreover, sought to explore if and how whiteness functions as an organising principle in the narratives and representations of these soap operas with the emphasis on potential similarities, differences and the kinds of whiteness constructed in these texts. Finally, the goal was to draw conclusions on the possible implications of these differences and similarities in the wider context of the way in which whiteness functions in the media.

To that end I conducted a controlled case comparison of a sample from these two community soap opera texts, which was informed by a literature review and deep description of each context as part of the qualitative approach I chose to take. Despite a number of similarities between the two contexts, they still differ significantly, and this afforded me an opportunity to highlight both the consistencies and particularities in the ideological patterning of representations of whiteness, across seemingly unrelated domains, to illustrate its pervasiveness. Added to the emergence of three shared rhetorical devices perpetuating whiteness in both texts, I was also able to draw conclusions about the unique way in which whiteness functions in *7de Laan* in particular, since South Africa remains the primary context of the study.

KEY WORDS: Critical Whiteness Studies, Cultural Studies, Public Service Broadcasting, television, soap opera, whiteness, identity, national identity, diversity, representation, comparative study, imagined community, indigenisation, South Africa, Flanders.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The quest for a new white humanity will begin to emerge from a voluntary engagement by those caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making, with the ethical and moral implications of being situated at the interface between inherited, problematic privilege on the one hand and, on the other, the blinding sterility at the centre of the “heart of whiteness” (Ndebele, 2000: 46–47).

1.1 Contextualising and rationalising the origin of the study

According to David Everatt (2012: 6–8), contemporary South Africa is a “landscape dotted with socio-cultural landmines, awkwardness, faux pas, [and] physical barriers compounding psychological ones”. In this post-apartheid landscape, where South Africans are muddling their way into a “complex, nuanced, inherently different future” (Everatt, 2012: 6–8) all South African identities are destabilised. Thus, white South Africans, like the rest, have to reconceptualise how they fit into the broader South African community. Njabulo Ndebele talks about the need for white South Africans to develop a “new sense of cultural rootedness” (2000: 52), while Sally Matthews (2011: 8) posits that the question of white identity is a key theme in post-apartheid discourses, and the question of white belonging in post-apartheid South Africa is one that invites much reflection and debate.

The South African history of apartheid makes the struggle for whites to find a new sense of cultural rootedness a decidedly complicated one. Whiteness, and the connotations inherent to the construct, remain contentious issues in South Africa today. Kopano Ratele and Leswin Laubscher (2010: 83), for example, write that, in South Africa, “where race was positioned as the fulcrum on which power balances, whiteness seems to have maintained its defining weight”. According to them, the assertion of a continuing white privilege and power is still a widely held and common one. Samantha Vice (2010: 326) corroborates this when she claims that, in South Africa, it is impossible for anyone not to be aware of his or her race¹ and that the effects of racial privilege are still “starkly apparent”.

¹ I acknowledge that “race” in itself is a contested concept viewed by some as a construct and by others as biological origin. There is no simple solution for this. Cottle (2000: 4-5) writes in this regard that “[h]istorically, ideas of ‘race’ developed as a means to differentiate social groups as biologically discrete subspecies marked out by physical or phenotypical appearance, innate intelligence and other ‘natural’ dispositions. These ideas are generally traced back to the Enlightenment and scientific attempts to measure, calibrate, typologize and rank people in a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. Within the context of western imperialism and colonialism, such efforts served to naturalize [sic], in the most literal sense of the term, oppressive social relations. In so

White privilege, in the South African context, might have been taken for granted during colonialism and apartheid, but the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994 marked a paradigm shift that manifested in all areas of South African life. Inevitably connected to this paradigm shift is the struggle for hegemonic power and the renegotiation of identities. This caused whiteness, in South Africa at least, to become an identity under threat. However, Nadine Dolby (2001: 5) writes that even as “white is politically (although not necessarily economically) unhinged from a position of privilege, it finds new paths and trajectories to follow”. If one is to believe Ratele and Laubscher, as well as Dolby, whiteness – while more visible and also under threat – still manages to maintain some of its hegemonic power in South Africa today.

According to Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (2003: 2), to “question whiteness is to question the air around us; it is always there, but nobody acknowledges it”. In contrast to the way in which whiteness functions in other “heartlands of whiteness” (Steyn, 2007), however, whiteness in South Africa has never been invisible. As Vice (2010) points out above, it is impossible for any South African to be unaware of his or her race. While whiteness, in the South African context, much the same as in various other contexts, still to some extent connotes a normative position of power, the key difference here lies in the fact that whites are in the minority and therefore do not hold a dominant or majority position, which makes their whiteness starkly visible.

Moreover, in contrast to other contexts in which whiteness has been (or remains) a dominant ideology, white people in South Africa have never been viewed, or even viewed themselves as wholly indigenous to the country. Matthews (2011: 1), for example, asserts that one of the many disturbing “features of apartheid was the way in which white South Africans insisted

doing they sought to legitimize [sic] systems of power and domination – systems that also found expression in the production and circulation of popular cultural imagery and artistic forms ... Today, scholars debate ideas about ‘race’ in relation to the historical encounters between different peoples ... In other words, ideas of ‘race’ are debated not in relation to the discredited reductionism of biology but in relation to the changing social and discursive formations of history (Cottle 2000: 4). For the purposes of this thesis my intention is not to use the term in a reductionist way, and while I do view “whiteness” and “blackness” as constructions, to my mind race cannot be entirely constructed. In the South African context, no matter how race is viewed, the remnants of western imperialism and colonialism are still starkly apparent, and relevant. My interest, thus, lies in approaching it historically, socially and discursively and to examine how it has become “intimately entwined with systems of cultural representation” (Cottle, 2000: 5).

that they belonged in the southern tip of the African continent, but at the same time insisted that they were different from and superior to other inhabitants of the same land". J.M. Coetzee (1988: 11) describes white South Africans as "no longer European, not yet African". Coetzee (1988) concisely captures the tensions at play within white South Africans' identities, and these tensions are even more prevalent in the post-apartheid context where whites are confronted with their visibility and the politics of belonging, with some whites increasingly referencing their supposed "European roots". In this regard, Vice (2010: 331) argues that, apart from being rooted in South Africa, many white South Africans still "identify in some way with their English and European roots".

From a theoretical perspective, Matthews (2011: 9), among others, refers to Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as a possible tool in this quest to develop a new sense of rootedness and in analysing the politics of belonging in South Africa. She (2011: 9) contends that CWS is aimed at gaining a

fuller understanding of how even those white people who are not actively committed to building and perpetuating racist systems and structures, benefit from white racism and how racism does not only construct a particular notion of blackness, but also a particular notion of whiteness.

Toni Morrison (1992: 90), in turn, sums up the principal goal of CWS as follows: it is "... an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served".

Scholars from various fields of enquiry such as history, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Critical Media Studies, women's studies and education have "fairly" recently begun "exploring the everyday space of whiteness in order to expose the discursive strategies through which whites are positioned and produced as 'white'" (Shome, 1996: 503). Foster (2003: 1) corroborates this in her statement that, at the end of the 20th century, the rise of a discipline referred to as "Whiteness Studies" "worked to destabilize [sic] the assumptions behind whiteness as a cultural norm". She (2003) identifies Richard Dyer as one of the seminal critics in this discipline. Dyer (1988, 1997) called into question the normativity of whiteness, noting that those who do not fall into the white category are marked as Other, while whites are considered to be of no specific race, or no certain race, but rather the human race. One

possible reason for the fact that the everyday spaces of whiteness have only quite recently come under explicit critical scrutiny is that, because of the continuous theoretical focus on the Other, not much attention has been paid to whiteness or the strategies employed to maintain its dominance. Owing to this, the functioning of whiteness in society has remained a predominantly silent or unquestioned discourse.

While much of the CWS literature relates to race and racism in America, some South African writers have also reflected on whiteness. Steve Biko (1973: 96), for example, wrote that even though he does not wish to “concern [himself] unnecessarily with the white people of South Africa”, it is necessary, even when writing about Black Consciousness, to think about whiteness because “to get to the right answers, we must ask the right questions; we have to find out what went wrong”. The exploration of whiteness has also manifested in South Africa in the 21st century with the work of scholars such as Melissa Steyn (1998, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2012), Meredith Green, Christopher C. Sonn and Jabulane Matsebula (2007), Ratele and Laubscher (2010), Eugene De Klerk (2010), Leon De Kock (2006, 2010), Samantha Vice (2010, 2011) and Eusebius McKaiser (2011). This thesis endeavours to contribute to the body of work created by the above-mentioned authors by exploring whiteness in the South African context from the theoretical point of view of CWS.

My curiosity about whiteness, and the possibilities of analysing constructions of it from the theoretical point of view of CWS, quite obviously originates from my own context. I am a white, Afrikaans, South African female, in South Africa, at a time when the discourse of nationhood and the possibility of a democratic imagined community is a topical and controversial issue. Vice (2010: 331) argues that being part of a certain nationality entails fitting into the landscape, and being knowledgeable about how things work and what to expect. According to her, in “South Africa this very landscape is defined racially, so one’s ‘fitting into it’ can only have a racial dimension too”. Similar to other South Africans, white South Africans like me are struggling to find a legitimate way of belonging in South Africa. Owing to South Africa’s politically contentious history, the current struggles to define what it means to be South African in the post-apartheid context and the consequent politics of belonging that are at play, studying the manifestation, production or reproduction of whiteness as a construction, which forms a part of these struggles, is valid.

A number of years ago (2007), I became involved in an NRF²-funded project³ which set out to address the issue of identity formation as it pertains to South Africa's Afrikaans television channels and programmes. The project concerns itself, in particular, with the formation of Afrikaans identity against the backdrop of South Africa's ongoing project of fostering a national South African identity. Moreover, it looks at how the broader project of nation building, as set out by the amended Broadcasting Act of 2002, impacts upon the content and policies of Afrikaans television channels and programmes (Milton, 2006: 1). For the purposes of the project, it was our contention that South Africa's mass media can be read as an important indicator of the identities, interests, values and norms of different social groups in South African society.

Thus, originating, on the one hand, from my interest in voluntarily and critically engaging with my own whiteness, as Ndebele (2000: 46) suggests and, on the other, as a product of the above-mentioned NRF project, in this thesis I reflect on identities and discourses of whiteness, and I do so from the perspective of CWS. I specifically attempt to come to an understanding of how whiteness is constructed in one area of contemporary society, namely the soap opera genre in the context of contemporary public service broadcasting (PSB) television by analysing a sample of soap operas produced in this context.

There are various ways in which to explore the everyday spaces of whiteness. Stuart Hall (1992: 293), for example, posits that one can learn about a specific culture, and the construction of identities within such cultures, by analysing the stories told by and about this culture. According to him, identities are contained in the stories told about nations – “memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it”.

² The NRF (National Research Foundation) was established as an independent government agency in South Africa, through the National Research Foundation Act 23 of 1998. “The mandate of the NRF is to promote and support research through funding, human resource development and the provision of the necessary research facilities in order to facilitate the creation of knowledge, innovation and development in all fields of science and technology, including indigenous knowledge, and thereby contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of all South Africans” (NRF [sa]).

³ The project was entitled: “The televised public sphere: Afrikaans television and identity formation”, and it had the following research questions at its core:

- What can we learn about South African society – particularly Afrikaans-speaking citizens, from the vantage point of Afrikaans television?
- How does Afrikaans television position itself with regard to nation building and identity formation?
- How does Afrikaans television position its audiences with regard to the above issues?

One possible way of identifying discursive strategies that position and produce whiteness (as Shome (1996) puts it) may, therefore, be to look at public narratives and the way whiteness, and inevitably identity, are constructed in these stories. In contemporary society there is a plethora of available stories one could possibly analyse to this end. For the purposes of this thesis, and guided by the NRF project, I chose to look at mass media and popular visual culture, more specifically television soap operas, as a possible source of the stories Hall (1992) refers to. The aim of my thesis is to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on whiteness, specifically as it pertains to popular visual culture and one aspect of mass media, namely television.

The particular characteristic of South African whiteness as having one foot in Africa and the other in Europe guided me in my decision to focus not only on a South African soap opera, but to also do a comparative analysis of a South African and a European, specifically, Flemish soap opera (Cf. pages 86-91 for a detailed discussion of my sampling choices). My interest thus lies also in comparing and contrasting South African constructions of whiteness in a larger context. For example, are certain manifestations of whiteness uniquely South African, or does whiteness secure its hegemonic normativity in similar ways elsewhere? Even though this particular study originated in a South African context, the relevance of whiteness and how it is constructed in the mass media is global. Alison Bailey and Jacquelyn Zita (2007: vii), for example, refer to whiteness as “a global colonising force”. An isolated analysis focusing on the way in which whiteness is constructed might elucidate these constructions, but will not be able to speak to the specifics versus the more general nature of such constructions. Thus, an analysis of a South African soap opera may speak to the construction of whiteness in the context of South African, Afrikaans television. Similarly, an analysis of Flemish soap opera might reveal something about the construction of whiteness in Flanders. Yet, in an effort to understand the particularities and distinguish them from the production of whiteness in a broader context, I intend to do a comparative study of these soap operas that – while similar in genre – originate from different contexts. This comparative approach might enable me to draw some preliminary conclusions, not only about the construction of whiteness in general, but also, more specifically, the construction of whiteness in the soap opera genre (both globally and nationally).

In my attempt to start investigating this, I conducted a comparative analysis of a South African soap opera (*7de Laan* on SABC2) and a Flemish soap opera (*Thuis* on Eén), which enabled me to test the South African findings against a similar text from a different context. The aim is to investigate the manifestation of discourses of whiteness in a sample of South African and Flemish soap operas with the goal of questioning the role these constructions play in local as well as global discourses of whiteness in the media.

The study unfolds in several stages. Firstly, it comprises an investigation into how whiteness manifests in a sample from the local popular media (more specifically soap opera) of two separate contexts. This provides the background to a comparative analysis of the two soap operas in order to draw a conclusion about the similar, but also different, ways in which whiteness negotiates itself in these particular popular cultural texts.

Since this study originated in a South African context, I acknowledge this as the subjective point of view which informs this qualitative analysis. It is inevitable that deep knowledge of South Africa and its context will impact the analysis. The advantage of doing a comparative analysis lies in the fact that issues that are taken for granted because of my connectedness to the South African context might become more visible and thus enlighten my views. My embeddedness in the South African context, furthermore, presents an opportunity to contribute to the larger body of work on the indigenisation of international genres and the localisation of these formats, as well as the body of work on CWS in South Africa specifically.

In summation then, in an effort to engage voluntarily with my own whiteness and perhaps contribute to what Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 7) calls “anti-racist forms of whiteness”, the aim of this thesis is to analyse discursive constructions of whiteness in popular visual culture, specifically soap opera, by investigating and comparing its manifestation in two separate soap operas from different contexts. The rest of this chapter elucidates the choice of soap opera as the popular cultural text of analysis, the sampling choices, the research questions, the methodological approach, and finally, provides a summary of the chapters to follow.

1.2 “If we could have a soap we would have a nation”⁴: a closer look at soap opera

Focusing on soap operas, with specific reference to their ideological and political power, is a contested point of departure. Some critics argue that serious television, such as news and documentaries, is more politicised, and they therefore lament the popularity of, for example, soap operas. Such critics, according to Ian Barnard (2006:39), are representative of a

strain of ideological critique to popular culture that dismisses such cultural production as “mass deception”, and specifically of critics, politicians and intellectuals in South Africa who only recognize [sic] overtly “committed” discourse as engaging with the past and current political crises in the country.

Phil Chidester (2008: 158) similarly criticises the mode of thinking that insists on presence as the carrier of meaning implying that texts which are “free of overt or explicit references to race simply cannot communicate racial meaning”. While the prevalence of overtly ideological programmes such as news broadcasts cannot be contested, the critical approach advocated by the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies implies that soap opera, even if less politicised, still yields political power, and it is this approach I take in the analysis of the texts relevant here.

In line with a Cultural Studies approach, Barnard (2006: 39) argues convincingly that “popular culture, alongside political and social institutions ... chronicle[s] the transformation of the country as well as imaginatively/materially creating a new South Africa”. In the same vein, Douglas Kellner (1996) and viola c. milton (2008) contend that popular media provides “privileged access to the social realities of their era” and can thus be read to gain insight into what is actually going on in a society at a given moment (milton, 2008: 255). Alexander Dhoest (2007: 65), similarly, cautions against the danger of underestimating the power of television to define shared cultural assumptions. Thus, as a subject of analysis, various theorists have long since recognised the merit of soap opera. Judith Franco (2001: 450), for example, writes:

Soap opera, the world’s most popular form of television drama, has revealed itself to be a productive area of study for cultural significance due to the genre’s unique potential to combine local appeal and universal characteristics, exemplified by serial narrative structure, with cultural specificity.

⁴ Denise Bombardier (1985).

Christina S. Beck (2012: 152), moreover, argues that viewers of soap opera are exceptionally vested in the genre and that this leads to “complex, co-constructed narrative intersections that contribute to powerful and multilayered experiences”. These characteristics of soap opera thus create rich texts for a comparative study on how whiteness is presented in soap operas from differing contexts.

Defining the soap genre, however, is no simple matter. Partly because of the localness of soap opera, but also owing to other factors, there is no single, absolute definition of what the genre entails. According to Tamar Liebes and Sonia Livingstone (1998: 158), for example, no common definition of the term “soap opera” can be shared across Europe. This is also applicable to countries such as South Africa. The broad term “soap opera” denotes a number of inherent characteristics most commonly associated with America. Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 147), however, contend that “soap opera is not simply an imported American genre”. They argue that a study of British, Scandinavian and European soap operas revealed that these countries developed three distinct subtypes of the genre. These are identified as the community soap, the dynastic soap and the dyadic soap (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998). Liebes and Livingstone’s (1998) model of subtypes will be instrumental in my study.

For the purposes of my thesis, I argue that both *7de Laan* and *Thuis* can be classified as community soap operas. The classification of both soap operas as belonging to the community genre makes a comparative study, using context specific case studies focusing on the construction and representation of whiteness, possible. Both of the relevant soap operas, moreover, serve as important and vastly popular “flagship” programmes for PSB channels. According to Dhoest (2004: 393), these “flagships of public broadcasting ... [combine] entertainment with information and education”. In both cases, PSB supports the goal of nation building and the subsequent content relating to social issues, identity construction and diversity, whether explicitly or implicitly. My focus is thus not on imported soap operas but on local South African and Flemish soap operas and what the narratives of these soap operas reveal about constructions of whiteness, both in their specific contexts and also in comparison with each other. Even though there might be differing nuances of meaning, the argument of this thesis is that making visible the constructions of whiteness as it is portrayed in two similar texts from vastly different contexts may contribute to the goals of CWS.

1.3 Research questions

With due consideration of all of the above, the aim of this thesis is to answer the following question and subquestions:

1.3.1 Main research question

How is whiteness constructed and positioned in the South African soap opera, *7de Laan*, and the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*, and what are the implications of these constructions for local as well as global discourses on whiteness, particularly in the media?

1.3.2 Formulation of the subquestions

- What is the origin and history of the construct of “whiteness” and the theoretical approach of CWS and how is it relevant and applicable in the South African and Flemish contexts, specifically in the analysis of mass media texts like soap operas?
- Does whiteness function as an organising principle in the narratives and representations of the relevant soap operas, and if so, how does it secure its hegemonic everydayness?
- What are the similarities and differences in the construction of whiteness in South African versus Flemish soap opera?
- What are the possible implications of the above-mentioned similarities and differences in the wider context of the way whiteness functions in these societies and their media?

1.4 Methodology

As mentioned previously, this thesis is situated within the larger theoretical framework of Cultural Studies. Within this framework, the specific theoretical approach will be that of CWS. According to Bailey and Zita (2007: vii), CWS is a conscious attempt to “think critically about

how white supremacy continues to operate systemically, and sometimes unconsciously, as a global colonising force”. Whiteness and CWS as a theoretical approach are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

The methodological framework used for this thesis is qualitative. Research methods include contextual research, as well as a textual-visual analysis of the selected media texts as case studies. In order to identify recurring representational patterns and themes pertaining to whiteness, a comparative analysis of a South African and a Flemish soap opera is conducted. Finding similarities and differences, however, is not the only goal of a comparative analysis since this approach also allows me to draw some conclusions on how whiteness is constructed in the broader context of soap opera. Sonia Livingstone (2003: 478) contends that cross-national comparisons are difficult and problematic, but also exciting and creative. She claims that in the field of media and communications, comparative research – “defined as a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity – is much advocated”.

The specific comparative design I employ is what Fred Wester, Karsten Renckstorf and Peer Scheepers (2006: 628) refer to as a controlled case comparison. Such a comparison involves different cases which are investigated one after the other (Wester et al., 2006: 628). This thesis thus consists of two separate case studies which are compared in a hierarchical manner. The merit of this approach is that the results drawn from the first case study are used to inform the next one. Consequently, the preliminary analysis of whiteness in *7de Laan* enlightens the analysis of the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*. The decision to use this particular comparative design is in line with the acknowledgement of my own entrenchment in the South African context.

Hence the methodological approach to this study is qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual. Given my aim, I analysed six months worth of episodes from the second part of season 17 of *Thuis* (broadcast from January to May 2012), and a similar sample of *7de Laan* episodes (broadcast from January to May 2013). I illustrate my arguments by using purposely selected synecdochal moments from the samples. Chapter 4 provides a more detailed description of my specific methodological approach and related issues.

The next section is a broad breakdown of the chapters of this study with a brief description of the aim of each chapter.

1.5 Structure of the thesis: chapter outline

This introductory chapter serves as a brief preface to the thesis outlining the CWS approach taken in the controlled case comparison of two soap operas from vastly different contexts. I argue that looking at mass media and visual culture, specifically soap opera, is one of the many ways in which one can investigate discourses of whiteness with the ultimate goal of critically engaging with South African whiteness. I briefly justified choosing to focus on soap opera (a choice which is further explored in both the literature review on soap opera (Chapter 3) and the methodology chapter (Chapter 4)) and unpacked the methodology and research questions which guided the study.

The literature relevant to this thesis is reviewed in Chapter 2 and 3. The second chapter concerns the theoretical foundation of the study and focuses on answering the first subquestion. It starts out by exploring the construct of whiteness and then proceeds to delineate CWS as a theoretical approach. To situate the theoretical approach, Chapter 2 contains a brief outline of the development of CWS in the South African context specifically.

In the second literature review chapter (Chapter 3), the history of the soap opera genre and its specific characteristics are explored. Particular attention is paid to the evolution of the genre, its indigenisation and its subsequent diversity. Building on arguments presented in the introduction, the final section of the chapter delves into the reasons why soap opera, as a product of popular culture, is a viable subject of study in relation to the creation of identities.

For the specific purposes of this thesis, I conducted a controlled case comparison focusing on one South African and one Flemish soap opera. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach to this comparison by situating the study in a qualitative paradigm and detailing the sampling methods which led to my choice of comparing two soap operas from the South African and Flemish PSB contexts respectively. The research methods and strategies of

analysis are explicated in detail and, lastly, the role of the researcher is clarified, also as this pertains to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the thesis.

Chapters 5 to 8 contain the contextualisation and analysis of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* which serves as background for the comparison in Chapter 9. Chapters 5 and 7 thus contextualise the analysis which follows in Chapters 6 and 8. Chapter 5 is devoted to explicating the South African historical, national and cultural contexts. In the second part of the chapter the focus is narrowed to the South African PSB landscape specifically. The representation of the nation in the context of South African PSB is discussed and, lastly, the role and place of soap operas in this context is clarified. This structure is mirrored in Chapter 7, which in turn elucidates the Flemish context, laying the groundwork for the analysis of *Thuis* in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6 presents the qualitative narrative textual analysis of *7de Laan*. It discusses the findings of the analysis with specific reference to the setting and community, language use, and the representation of diversity and how these elements are used to construct belonging in the imagined community depicted, with specific reference to hegemonic constructions of whiteness. Chapter 8 similarly presents the findings of the qualitative analysis of the second half of Season 17 of *Thuis*.

Building on Chapters 5 to 8, Chapter 9 presents the findings of the controlled case comparison. It starts with a brief contextual comparison of South Africa and Flanders, and the main part of the chapter is devoted to discussing the conclusions drawn about the manifestation of whiteness in the narratives of the two pertinent soap operas. Through the comparison, three rhetorical devices perpetuating whiteness emerge and they are explained in detail. The final section is a reflection on the specific way in which whiteness is presented in *7de Laan* as an example of a South African popular cultural text which contributes to the construction of a South African imagined community.

The concluding chapter contains a summative overview of the chapters in the thesis as well as the conclusions and implications of the comparative case analysis. It highlights the perceived contributions of the study, to the discipline of CWS, on the one hand, and mass media and

television theory, on the other. Finally, based on the limitations of the study as highlighted in this chapter, some suggestions for further research are made.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to contextualise the thesis. In this introductory chapter, I argued (like Shome, 2000, below) that whiteness is a normative construction which perpetuates dominance. Recognising my embeddedness in South Africa, and by implication whiteness as a discourse, I acknowledged my interest in the construction and renegotiation of whiteness. It was subsequently argued that there is a need for critical interrogation of these constructions and that CWS presents one possible theoretical approach from which to do so.

Shome (2000: 368) writes that if it is a case that whites learn how to be whites and that

whiteness is a structural process through which whites are produced and socialised as whites, the importance of the media in the (re)production of whiteness becomes clear. Popular culture constitutes one site through which whites learn ... the possessive investment in whiteness, that sense of material and cultural entitlement that is enabled, and the sense of social agency that is produced, when we see the world constantly constructed in our image, through our needs, and through our frame of reference.

The relevance of the media in the construction of whiteness was sufficiently substantiated by Shome (2000) and other proponents of CWS. However, while a great deal of attention is paid to texts that explicitly deal with race or hegemonic issues it was argued that there is merit in also looking at those texts that more implicitly reinforce our views of race, racial difference, hegemony and society as a whole. I suggest soap operas to be such texts.

According to Shome (2000: 368), whiteness is understood as a “process constituted by an ensemble of social and material practices in which whites (and often non-whites for survival) are invested, by which they are socialised, and through which they are produced”. She (2008: 368) also emphasises how whiteness is contextual and how its complexities are best understood through “attention to its various geopolitical locations and their intersections with the interlocking axes of gender, class, sexuality, nationality, colonialism ... and politics of transnationalism”. Hence whiteness cannot be viewed as a monolithic formation because it is

constantly “made and remade”. For these reasons, I conducted a context-specific analysis with a consequent comparative element to deconstruct the ways in which social and material practices evolve to perpetuate white normativity.

The choice of a comparative research methodology was justified by arguing that phenomena of media and communications research are applicable across diverse countries and that basing a project in a single country generates “claims whose specificity or generalizability [sic] are indeterminate without comparable projects in other countries” (Livingstone, 2003: 478). It is also through this aspect of the study that I aim to contribute to the larger bodies of work on a South Africa-specific application of CWS and the indigenisation of genres. Heeding Geert Hofstede’s (1998) warning against “comparing apples and oranges”, various reasons for the comparability of South African and Flemish soap operas broadcast on public service channels were put forward. Apart from the link I identified between South African manifestations of whiteness and its supposed European roots, the classification of both *7de laan* and *Thuis* as community soap operas was provided as one of the reasons for the validity of the comparative analysis (these choices are expanded on in Chapter 4).

All of the above created the background for the formulation of the research questions which guided the proposed analyses. The study was situated in the larger theoretical framework of Cultural Studies and a qualitative paradigm was identified as being suitable for the needs of this thesis because of its interpretative and descriptive nature. All of this informed the outline of chapters that followed.

Frankenberg (1993: 157) argues that people should be “race cognizant [sic]”. According to her (2011: 10), “[r]ace cognizant’ [sic] white people are willing to critically interrogate their own (often unwitting) complicity in the creation and perpetuation of racial injustices” and through such awareness “race-cognizant [sic] white people can play a role in making racial injustices visible”. With this thesis, the hope is that raising and critically investigating these questions might add to awareness of the processes by which whiteness as a position of privilege is constructed through symbolic forms of expression in the media with specific reference to soap opera as one of the visual media’s prominent genres and that this might lead to these processes being questioned.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES (CWS): A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Whiteness is a power-laden discursive formation that privileges, secures, and normalises the cultural space of the white ... subject (Shome, 1999: 108).

INTRODUCTION

Gordon Alley-Young (2008: 312) argues that “whiteness” is of specific interest to communication scholars because “whiteness and white skin are codes for communicating cultural meanings and also because whiteness is given its meaning through the performance of communication”. In this context, and specifically for the purposes of this thesis, both the construct of “whiteness” and the origins and history of CWS are crucial. In response to the first subquestion (Cf. page 10), this chapter is devoted to unpacking this construction and theoretical approach with the goal of applying it to the comparative media analysis that will ensue.

Although “whiteness” has been broadly conceived as a subject position that is discursively negotiated and maintained, it has rarely been explicitly addressed in Western social discourse. This lack of address causes “whiteness” to be able to continue functioning as the, often invisible, norm (Chidester, 2008: 157). Critically interrogating “whiteness” and its ideological and hegemonic power is, however, important when deconstructing contemporary society. Dyer (1997: 1), one of the seminal theorists connected to CWS, for example, contends that

[a]s long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced. We are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being “just” human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity.

Similarly, another seminal proponent of CWS, Ruth Frankenberg (1993: 236), describes “whiteness” as the “production and reproduction of dominance rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage”, and advocates its deconstruction.

Regardless of these and other theorist's writing on the topic of "whiteness", there is no clear-cut definition of what it entails. "Whiteness" can be described as multifaceted, contextually bound and fluid (Green et al., 2007: 389). Foster (2003: 4–5), for example, argues that some critics claim it is impossible to disturb the category of whiteness. She writes that there is "plenty of evidence of whiteness continuing to avoid the radar screen of cultural and social consciousness when it comes to discussions of race". Furthermore, as will become clear in the sections to follow, it is a concept that is connoted to much more than race.

An understanding of the formation and evolution of the construct of "whiteness" is crucial to analysing its presence in any media narrative, particularly from a CWS perspective. For the purposes of this thesis, a clear distinction will be made between "whiteness" and CWS. It is essential to note that while these concepts may not be mutually exclusive, they are not interchangeable. For the purpose of clarity then, and in an effort to try and articulate myself in a theoretically dense and confusing discourse, when I refer to "whiteness", I am referring to it as a discursive construct (Cf. 2.1.1) unless specified otherwise, and my intention is not to reify it in any way. When referring to CWS, in turn, I am referring to the theoretical approach of interrogating the production and reproduction of white dominance, in this case specifically through the representations of whiteness in texts or symbolic forms of expression.

As stated in the previous chapter, CWS has its most prominent roots in America and Australia, and even though the development of CWS has been more prevalent in the last decades, its origins can be traced much further back. This chapter is devoted to an overview of the origins of CWS, how it can be situated within the bigger theoretical framework of Cultural Studies and how it relates to Critical Race Studies and Postcolonial Theory. Furthermore, the focus is on how it has been applied, what it aims to do, its possible weaknesses and, finally, its specific relevance to this thesis.

Concerning its relevance to this thesis, context inevitably plays a significant role. Although the most prominent theorists working in this field write from an American or Australian perspective, CWS have also become prevalent in South Africa (Cf. page 4), and this is where

the particular focus of this thesis originates. Owing the fact that South Africa cannot be considered a Western society, the construct and the theoretical approach operates differently in this context. Both “whiteness” and CWS as they pertain to South Africa are addressed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The final section of this chapter investigates the ways in which “whiteness” adapts or mutates in the face of challenges to its dominance. Various adaptation strategies are identified, and it is in this identification that the crucial link to my analysis lies, since the manifestation of these (and other) strategies in the narratives of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* will be instrumental to conclusions about the ways in which they construct “whiteness” and, consequently, social reality with the end goal of voluntarily and critically engaging with the culture of whiteness, as suggested by Ndebele (2000: 46–47).

2.1 Whiteness and CWS

2.1.1 Unpacking the construct of “whiteness”

Reference was made to the fact that no concrete definition of whiteness or its origin exists. De Kock (2010: 15) writes that the term “whiteness” as a sign should be viewed as a trace, and not an essence. According to him, it is not possible to capture or contain “a category description as referentially fractured as whiteness”. This confirms Shome’s (2000: 368) understanding of whiteness as a process constituted by a range of social and material practices, rather than an absolute entity (Cf. page 14). Robin DiAngelo (2011: 56), similarly, uses the terms “white” and “whiteness” to describe a process rather than a static entity. Whiteness cannot therefore be viewed as a monolithic formation because it is constantly made and remade with the goal of maintaining its position of hegemonic power.

These arguments are in line with Frankenberg’s (1993: 1) definition of whiteness as multidimensional. She writes:

Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint”, a place from which White people look at ourselves, at Others, and at society. Third, “Whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.

To note: although Frankenberg speaks here only about white people, and the specific vantage point from which they see themselves, it is arguable (Cf. Shome's argument on page 14) that what she says also applies to other members of communities in which whiteness is a dominant ideology since members of other races are often also invested in these social and material practices for their own survival. Naming and marking these cultural practices may encourage critical engagement with them.

DiAngelo (2011: 56) contends that whiteness refers to the specific "dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of colour". According to her, whites are theorised as actively shaped, affected, demarcated and elevated through their racialisation and the individual and collective consciousness that originates within this racialisation (DiAngelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1997). The term or concept of whiteness is thus used to signify

a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced, and which are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of domination. Whiteness is thus conceptualized [sic] as a constellation of processes and practices rather than a discreet entity (i.e. skin color alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels. These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people (DiAngelo, 2011: 56).

Proponents of Cultural Studies argue that identity is something that is constructed and remains under construction. Hence crucial to understanding the way in which whiteness functions, is to comprehend that it is a position of structural privilege, that it is assumed by those who inhabit it to be a universal reference point and that it is always under construction, dynamically adapting in order to maintain its structural privilege. Valerie Babb (in Foster, 2003: 23) stresses the importance of understanding whiteness as a construct when she argues that "only by coming to a full awareness of the ways in which an artificially crafted identity was constructed to maintain hierarchy and divisiveness can any meaningful and useful dialogue on race begin".

Foster (2003: 30) postulates that whiteness is not merely a social construction, but that it was also constructed as a legal one. According to her (2003: 30),

whiteness defined citizenship, freedom; blackness connoted slavery and bondage. Whiteness moved from being just something to be proud of to a legal form of property ... Whiteness became more than just a concept when it became a legal identity marker.

In the South African context, whiteness was definitely a legal construct. During apartheid, for example, South African citizens who were not legally classified as white were required by law to carry a pass book (a form of internal passport) when travelling outside their homelands or designated areas (Cf. page 39).

Even though whiteness is constructed, not often explicitly acknowledged and constantly adapting, there are certain characteristics which were historically attributed to whiteness. What becomes clear from Foster's (2003) argument above is that whiteness, as well as its normative status, can be defined by emphasising its binary opposition to its Other(s). She (Foster, 2003: 23) identifies a number of dichotomies of which whiteness is thought to represent one end of the continuum. Whiteness, for example, is associated with goodness, kindness and intelligence. Other practices or characteristics linked to whiteness include heteroperformativity, homogeneity, bravery, the nuclear family, rationality, class and civilisation.

Linked to the idea of binary opposition, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (in Foster, 2003: 2) argues that whiteness should not merely be viewed as something that describes a group or a race, but rather as a term that makes thinking about race seem logical. Substantiating this, is DiAngelo's (2011: 62) assertion that since "race is constructed as residing in people of color [sic], whites don't bear the social burden of race" and we move through our societies without a sense of ourselves as racialised subjects. This is supported by Cheryl, E. Matias, Kara Mitchell Viesca, Dorothy F. Garrison-Wade, Madhavi Tandon and Rene Galindo (2014: 290) who write that whites often refuse to acknowledge the existence of the white imagination and normalise their dispositions using mechanisms such as "whiteness-at-work", "color [sic] blind ideology" and denial, to such an extent that they do not recognise their own subjectivity to dominant racial ideologies of whiteness. Frankenberg (2001), who is credited with establishing the understanding of whiteness as a transparent, invisible category, importantly, later modified her (Frankenberg, 2001) own position "arguing instead

that whiteness is invisible mostly to white people, while it is quite visible to the “Other”, non-white groups; the latter, from their inferior position in the social hierarchy, are keenly aware of the colour and privilege of whiteness” (Sasson-Levy, 2013: 31).

When one considers the list of characteristics identified by Foster (2003), it seems that while whiteness remains unchallenged, it provides a norm or centre against which anybody not viewed as belonging to this group can be classified as Other and marginal. Whiteness remains “invisible” by defining itself according to what it is not. Consequently, the invention of whiteness was (and remains) reliant on the invention or identification of the Other. There seems to be no singular white identity, but rather a rhetorical silence on the subject and a seemingly historical right to define itself as everything that the Other is not. In colonial contexts, for example, whiteness was initially constructed through a “defense of the normativity that was perceived to be under threat from the ‘heathen’, the ‘barbarian’” or the ‘primitive native’” (Stevens, 2007: 427). So, rather than defining itself as good, kind, heteronormative⁵, etcetera, whiteness is defined as *not* bad, evil, irrational or uncivilised, characteristics which are attributed to the Other.

Race, or more specifically whiteness’s opposition to blackness, is the most pervasive binary used in its construction. The black subject is constructed as embodying all of whiteness’s binary oppositions. Morrison (1992: 56) writes how, even in early literature, concepts (such as freedom) connected to whiteness were defined in relation to its opposites which were connoted to blackness. She uses *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1885) as one such example. Even though *Huck* is separated from the other middle-class white characters in the narrative, his existence is still dependent on the black slave, *Jim*. Morrison (1992) refers to the “necessary and necessarily unfree Africanist character ... because freedom has no meaning to Huck or to the text without the spectre of enslavement ... the signed, marked, informing, and mutating presence of a black slave”. According to her (1992: 57), the book “simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom”. Even

⁵ Dhaenens (2012: 443) defines heteronormativity as “the discursive power granted to the compulsory heterosexual matrix in western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of gender, sexuality and identity and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning universality and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. In this way, it succeeds in depreciating, despising or excluding those who do not comply with or conform to the demands of the heteronormative discourse”.

though race, or blackness, is the most prominent construct used as binary opposition to whiteness, it is not the only one. Morrison (1992: 63) writes that race “has become metaphorical – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was”. Whiteness then becomes a metaphorical umbrella term for all that blackness is not, even while it needs its binary opposition to exist.

Apart from blackness, sexuality and gender are also important constructs on the binary continuum employed to define whiteness. Whiteness is associated with heterosexuality in particular. Foster (2003: 123) argues that whiteness as a hegemonic power demands compulsory heterosexuality and encourages the myth of the nuclear family. Thus heteronormative performances of marriage and parenthood are considered to be well-performed whiteness.

Owing to the fact that whiteness is defined according to all that it is not, it is fuelled by a fear of hybridity. Fears of race mixing, gender bending, class-passing and other forms of hybridity are constant threats to whiteness, but consequently also justify or ensure its existence (Foster, 2003: 33). According to Foster (2003: 90), whiteness “thus depends on a disavowal of hybridity, an elimination of ethnicity, and an adherence to the Othering mechanisms of whiteness. It depends on correctly performing as white ...”.

Despite this renunciation of hybridity and change, one of the most enduring characteristics of whiteness seems to be its ability to adapt. In order to survive, whiteness mutates and often negates some of the key oppositions mentioned above in order to ensure the continuation of its normativity. Threats to its normativity and hegemonic power are met with a number of performative strategies that aim to reassert normativity. These include compromising its normative status by making whiteness visible or naming itself, deflecting attention by creating new Others to define itself against or appropriating Otherness in order to redefine itself (Cf. section 2.2 for a more in-depth discussion of these strategies).

One, therefore, has to be cognisant of the fact that, even though white hegemony might exhibit some universal characteristics, its performances and manifestations are contextual

and wide ranging. Tying in with this, Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995: 293) argue that the meaning of whiteness is not something that is fixed or essential, but rather that it evolves depending on when and how its meaning is created. To Alley-Young (2008: 312), this echoes Hall's (1992) argument that "race is a floating signifier that is contingent on a specific context, culture, and time to give it meaning". Acknowledging the constructed nature of whiteness allows one to investigate how and why it changes or evolves and consequently to deconstruct it, which is at the core of CWS.

2.1.2 CWS as a theoretical approach

Racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world. In relation to the study of communication, Alley-Young (2008: 307), for example, writes that race and difference are important focus areas since the "body is increasingly used as a text by which to read, theorize [sic], and critique systems of oppression and privilege". There has been an enormous amount of analysis of racial imagery in the past decades, ranging from studies on blacks, or American Indians to the constructions of the racial Other in colonial and postcolonial texts (Dyer, 1997: 1). The tendency, however, as Dyer (1997) posits, is to focus on the racially marginalised when it comes to analysis of racial imagery. This is usually done in an effort to investigate how these groups came to be marginalised and what the effects of said marginalisation are. Foster (2003: 94) confirms this in her statement that the "Other" remains defined as the problem in contemporary race discussions. CWS seeks to problematise this point of view.

In contrast to the above, Dyer (1988, 1997) maintains that, at its very basic, CWS can be defined as an exploration of the representation of white people in white Western culture. The emphasis therefore shifts away from the margin to the centre in order to interrogate this centre/periphery dichotomy. The focus of this investigative strain is on representation, thus, not on how whites are, or how they feel, but how they are represented, or represent themselves (Dyer, 1988, 1997). Dyer calls into question the normativity of whiteness, noting that those who do not fall "into the white category are marked as *Other*", while whites are considered to be of no specific race, or no certain race, but rather the human race (Foster, 2003: 1). At the end of the 20th century, the rise of a discipline referred to as "Critical

Whiteness Studies” “worked to destabilize [sic] the assumptions behind whiteness as a cultural norm” (Foster, 2003:1). According to DiAngelo (2011: 56), CWS begins with the “premise that racism and white privilege exist in both traditional and modern terms”, and aims to reveal it rather than to prove its existence.

CWS can be situated within the larger discourse of Cultural Studies and can be located as an offshoot of Critical Race Theory (Alley-Young, 2008: 308). According to Alley-Young (2008: 308), critical thinking about race is influenced by both Postcolonial- as well as Critical Whiteness Studies. According to him, both of these theoretical approaches “speak not with one voice but instead encompass a variety of voices and academic paths”. While CWS frequently assumes the frame of Critical Race Theory, critics like Hytten and Adkins also argue that CWS originated from postcolonial thought, “specifically in the call by postcolonial writers for white academics to see their whiteness and explore their privilege” (Alley-Young, 2008: 309). One could, furthermore, claim that neither is an exclusive area of study and also that the origins of each perspective are not singular in nature. Consequently, some critics argue that CWS should be viewed as an extension of postcolonial thought, while others contend that Postcolonial Studies failed to successfully interrogate whiteness (Alley-Young, 2008: 308). However ambiguous its roots, CWS as a theoretical approach has become an integral part of academic curricula, where entire graduate programmes are dedicated to it in some cases. For the purposes of this thesis, I view CWS as a theoretical approach that enables me, in my capacity as a white South African, to complement and contribute to discourses invoked in Critical Race Studies as well as Postcolonial Studies.

Scholarship in the CWS field provides a site for the radical critique of the racial order, delineating the historical processes which culminated in the social positioning of whites as relative to its Others (Steyn, 2007: 420). It interrogates the social identity of those who are “racialised into whiteness, identifying the discursive and semiotic, political and legal, egregious and everyday practices that establish and maintain racial privilege as the normative place from which racial power is deployed” (Steyn, 2007: 420). Alley-Young (2008: 309) contends that the goals of this theoretical approach “range from disowning or rejecting whiteness to making it visible in everyday life so that privilege can be catalogued, undone, unlearned, and/or stopped”.

Similar to developments in other approaches to diversity such as the study of gender, sexuality and disability, for example, the academic gaze has shifted from the margins to the centre (masculinity, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness) in order to focus on the empowered positions that normally deflect attention (Steyn, 2007: 420). According to Shome (2000: 366), the investigative strain of CWS is marked by several political impulses, the most important being to “(re)turn the gaze of critical race studies to how whites are socially produced, maintained and constructed as ‘white’”. Similarly, Morrison (1992: 90) writes that the principal goal of CWS is an effort to “avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served”. The point of this reversal, or of seeing the racing of whites, is to dislodge them from the position of power “with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the world” (Dyer, 1997: 2).

Three general “waves” of CWS can be identified (Steyn, 2007: 420-421). The first wave originated in the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Dyer and Toni Morrison (Steyn 2007; Twine & Gallagher, 2008) and drew attention to the unmarked nature of whiteness, specifically with regard to literature and film. The focus is on how whiteness functions as the norm, but also how this normativity is only possible when constructed with blackness as its binary Other. The objective is thus to render whiteness and its strategies visible, and naming it, in order to neutralise its power (Steyn, 2007: 420).

Subsequent work on whiteness (or what may be regarded as the second wave) aimed to particularise whiteness by “identifying, describing and contextualising various expressions of ‘whitenesses’ which share the ‘founding narratives’ of white superiority, and therefore have ‘family resemblances’, but have come through different historical, class, gendered and geographical experiences” (Steyn, 2007: 420). In this regard, France W. Twine and Charles Gallagher (2008: 10) write that seminal works by E. Franklin Frazier, St Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison presented “unflinching empirical accounts of racism and its root causes”.

The most recent wave of CWS considers the global dimensions of whiteness. Work in this wave often takes a postcolonial perspective since there is a relationship between exposing whiteness and “decolonising the imagination of both the oppressed and the oppressors” (Docker & Fischer, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 2002; López, 2001; Shome, 1999; Steyn, 2007). Steyn (2007: 421) posits that this wave interrogates some of the ways in which whiteness has been theorised in the centres of whiteness, for example, North America. According to Twine and Gallagher (2008: 15), “analyses of diverse cultural sites, including newspapers, autobiographical writings, music, public policy debates, social relationships and state discourse, are central to third wave whiteness”. The topic of this thesis clearly falls into this category because it aims to analyse the manifestation of whiteness in samples from the mainstream media of two separate contexts, which speaks to all of the above.

CWS is often seen to constitute a controversial theory with criticism levelled against it of which this thesis needs to take cognisance. In an attempt to acknowledge these criticisms and indicate how I will attempt to avoid them, five such criticisms or possible pitfalls are discussed below.

Firstly, reference was made earlier to the shift that occurred in feminist theorising or gender studies where the focus shifted to masculinity or Masculine Crises Theory. According to Garth Stevens (2007: 426), CWS provokes the same uneasiness found in the above and its consequent implications for recentring and recreating hegemony. The most prominent criticism against CWS then, is that this body of work attempts to recentre whiteness. This is not an unreasonable criticism, and concerns about CWS and “the potential for its appropriation into liberal and conservative ideological agendas that reinscribe racialised power relations are fairly self-evident” (Stevens, 2007: 426). Related to this is the possibility that, by recentring whiteness, or by focusing on whiteness as a category, one runs the risk of further confirmation of its binary opposition to the Other. Considering how whiteness has managed to mutate and assimilate in order to protect itself, it follows that CWS might also be one of these assimilations and every application of CWS should acknowledge this threat. In this thesis, CWS will be employed to reveal and interrogate the ways in which whiteness manifests in texts which reveal something about the society they depict. The goal is a critical

engagement with these manifestations, in the way suggested by Biko (Cf. Page 4) rather than reifying whiteness.

A second point of criticism, which might, at first glance, seem like the total opposite of recentring whiteness, is to the approach adopted by “new abolitionists”. According to Alley-Young (2008: 309), supporters of this approach believe that the “purpose of studying whiteness is to abolish it and urge whites to use rhetorical strategies to sabotage their whiteness”. These performances seek to erase the colour line, but Alley-Young (2008: 315) correctly points out that such erasures translate into the appropriation of another’s culture. In the post-apartheid South African context, for example, some whites are now claiming to be African, a stance that is met with mixed reactions from black South Africans. While this is a complicated debate, and in some instances, identifying with their African roots constitutes an honest attempt at finding a new way of belonging in the country, it is an example of one way in which whites are seeking to deny their own privilege and appropriate another culture. Alley-Young (2008: 315) asserts that attempts “to disown white privilege might be seen as whites attempting to appropriate racial minority oppression by shifting focus to white issues”. In other words, a type of recentring by appropriation.

Apart from the possibility of recentring whiteness or appropriating other cultures, Stevens (2007: 425) identifies three subsequent risks inherent in CWS. Firstly, he advises against applying and extending international work on CWS to a specific context without caution, warning that whiteness manifests differently across contexts. According to him, contextual comparisons may sometimes elide these differences. To address this issue, 2.1.3 specifically focuses on CWS in the South African context, and Stevens’ warning is taken into account in the course of my comparative analysis (Cf. Chapters 5, 7 and 9).

Stevens (2007: 428), moreover, cautions that CWS runs the risk of uncritically accepting white self-articulations. Whiteness should be historically, materially and structurally located in order to understand its performative social functions. As an example, he lists some non-discursive elements, particularly relevant to South Africa, which maintain white normativity. These, for example, include the failure of wealth redistribution, racially skewed ownership of production and slow land restitution. Stevens (2007: 428) asserts that manifestations of

whiteness in a changing society can only really be understood if contextualised, because if they are evacuated from this, CWS “runs the risk of generating an identificatory mobility of the white subject”, which provides whites with the prerogative of an individualised subjectivity that is constructed “ahistorically, apolitically and decontextually”. This can lead to the recentring of whiteness through discourses such as “the white identity crises”, “white identity politics” and “white marginalisation” (Stevens, 2007: 428).

Finally, he cautions against perceiving CWS as the “silver bullet” or ultimate solution for comprehending and opposing racism. While he acknowledges that it is a “potential node of resistance in the form of tactical reversals against the strategic relations of power that constitute racism”, he emphasises that it should rather be viewed as a complementary tool for anti-racist praxis (Stevens, 2007: 429). In this regard, Alley-Young (2008: 319) suggests instead that disciplines such as CWS and Postcolonial Studies “continue to work together in communication studies, not so that they might speak in a single voice but so they might continue to challenge each other to account for gaps in our knowledge”. Matias et al. (2014: 289), similarly, propose utilising CWS to support Critical Race Theory to aid in deconstructing the dimensions of white imaginations, which is also the approach taken in this thesis as mentioned above (Cf. page 24). (For a reflection on the possible influence of these limitations to my own study, Cf. Chapter 10).

Allowing whiteness to remain normative, or as Frankenberg (1993: 204) calls it “no-culture”, keeps intact a defining set of normative cultural practices against which everything else is measured. She (1993: 204) writes that, in narratives, whiteness appears to function “as both norm and core, that against which everything else is measured, and as a residue, that which is left after everything else has been named”. While all of the criticisms should be kept in mind when proceeding with CWS as a theoretical approach to this thesis, it is clear that until “whites begin the work of making whiteness strange, little change will come in race relations” (Foster, 2003: 151).

Keeping all of the above in mind, it is the aim of this thesis to proceed consciously in trying to effect what Shome (2000: 367) calls “a deconstructive political move that calls attention to the ways in which whiteness remains the organising principle of the social fabric and yet

remains masked because of the normativity that this principle acquires in the social imaginary". The goal of these deconstructions is to expose and interrogate whiteness as normative construction and to not only correct images that whites have of non-whites, or even to reverse the situation by holding up a mirror. It is also about "tracking down and exposing the voice of power" (Trin T. Minh-ha in Foster, 2003: 144). Furthermore, CWS is viewed here as an opportunity for developing more refined ways to think about, and articulate, privilege and oppression (Alley-Young; 2008: 319). Orna Sasson-Levy (2013: 31) articulates the goal of CWS as striving to "'color' [sic] the seeming transparency of white positioning in order to expose its perceived neutrality and reveal its heterogeneity, specificity and localness". Accomplishing all of this within the scope of this thesis is obviously impossible, but the hope is that by interrogating whiteness in the texts relevant to this thesis, I can make a small contribution to the body of work sharing the aims outlined here.

2.1.3 CWS in South Africa⁶

Heeding Stevens' (2007) warning not to apply and extend international work in CWS without caution, this section contains some reflections on how this theoretical approach can be fruitfully applied in the South African context. Despite white South Africans occasionally invoking their supposed European roots, South Africa remains a non-Western context and it differs from other contexts in which CWS has been applied because, even though whiteness was a dominant ideology during apartheid and its traces remain in the country today, whites have never been a numerical majority. Reference was made to Dyer (1988) (Cf. page 23), who writes that CWS is an exploration of the representation of white people in white Western culture, but in a South African context, CWS explores these representations outside of Western culture.

⁶ Both the South African and Flemish contexts are pertinent to the analysis in chapters to follow. However, I focus only on a discussion of CWS and narratives of whiteness in South Africa for two reasons. Firstly, South Africa is the primary context or "heartland of whiteness" (see Steyn, 2007) in which the study originates. Secondly, this is the theoretical framework at the root of this thesis and my analysis of both texts is conducted within this theoretical framework. Moreover, as a theoretical field, CWS does not exist in Belgium. While there are individual researchers referring or contributing to it, there is no identifiable body of work which may constitute specifically Belgian/Dutch whiteness studies (see the arguments of Costera Meijer and De Bruin, 2003, in this regard).

While CWS has been internationally established for more than 20 years it is a much newer theoretical approach in the South African context. According to Stevens (2007: 426), however, although there are only a few theorists in South Africa dealing explicitly with CWS, there is a larger literature base that has implicitly focused on elucidating whiteness in the broader context of race and racism. Some of the more prominent CWS scholars in South Africa include Steyn (1998, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2012), Stevens (2007), Green et al. (2007), De Kock (2006, 2010), De Klerk (2010), West and Schmidt (2010) and Vice (2010).

Similar to critique voiced elsewhere, CWS has been regarded with a measure of scepticism in South Africa. Some critics question its political agenda, arguing that it runs the risk of recentring whiteness and/or “threatens an emergent ‘Native Club’ nationalism in post-apartheid South Africa”, while others question its intellectual rigour, suggesting that its theoretical framework might be simplistic or neo-essentialist (West & Schmidt, 2010: 9). Derek Hook (2011: 23) reiterates this critique when he writes that the dangers of CWS in the South African context are easy enough to anticipate: proponents of this approach may end up “substantialising” whiteness and recentring it as a fixed category. He warns that since whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it “the very act of turning a critical gaze upon ... whiteness can operate to place it once again centre-stage” (Hook, 2011: 23). In this regard, he points out that it is crucial to keep in mind that whiteness is a set of social relationships rather than an object in itself.

In contrast, other theorists believe that CWS might be instrumental in creating a discourse on South African whiteness since it (whiteness) continues to be relevant in post-apartheid South Africa. Green et al. (2007: 437), for example, argue that, although it is not the only or the most important tool for understanding and opposing racism (as pointed out by Stevens previously), a critical interrogation of whiteness is a vital resource in continuing development of anti-racism approaches, particularly in the context of South Africa. Even Biko’s writing targets the “normalising factor of whiteness, attacking its role as a cultural benchmark from which judgements of deviance, beauty and morality can be made” (2011: 23), and I believe that it is in this possibility for attack that the value of CWS lies, particularly in the South African context.

De Kock (2010: 18) maintains that many of the inclinations of CWS as it developed in America also manifest in South African CWS. He describes these inclinations as follows: “to be divested of everything that has come to seem distinctly ‘white’ behaviour, and for whites to un-white themselves”. According to him, CWS in South Africa conveys a “sense of urgency of bringing ‘whiteness’ into visibility as an unreconstructed zone in post-anti-apartheid South Africa”⁷. In “Blanc de Blanc: Critical Whiteness Studies – a South African connection”, De Kock (2006: 175–189) proposes a version of CWS peculiar to South Africa. He identifies the dominant trend of local CWS as unmasking and exposing. According to him, more astute scholars in the field also recognise that “for every gesture of naming whiteness, there should be a countergesture of remaining open to its variability or ‘difference within’”. Thirdly, he highlights the difficulty in particularising whiteness in a way that is not essentialist because the “practices of this group are webbed in the quotidian ubiquity of the everyday” (De Kock, 2006: 183).

Central to the debate on the relevance of CWS in the South African context (and in line with Stevens’ (2007) argument in the previous section) is the contention that whiteness in South Africa is different from whitenesses in other contexts. Steyn (2007: 421), for example, argues that whiteness in South Africa never had the quality of invisibility that is inferred in “standard” CWS literature. In contrast to this invisibility, made possible by being in the demographic, economic and political majority, whiteness in South Africa is more visible because white people constitute a minority. Furthermore, in contrast to other “heartlands of whiteness”, black people in South Africa have voices and their own sense of “rights, entitlements, and possibilities, and certainly do not need to ask for white tolerance” (Steyn, 2007: 422).

Steyn (2007: 422) posits that the central question to theorists who are trying to “delineate the contours of whiteness” in South Africa is one posed by López (2001), namely: “What happens to whiteness, then, when it loses its colonial power?” Another question Steyn (2007: 422) identifies as crucial to CWS in South Africa is as follows:

⁷ De Kock (2010: 35) identifies this “as a move that, in South African scholarship, was inaugurated by Melissa Steyn” (2001).

What happens to whiteness when it is in a position that confronts it with experiential knowledge of the Other and consequently disrupts its own subject positions? Moreover, these subject positions are not disrupted by consciousness raising education or anti-racist workshops/practices that encourage whites to voluntarily “depower” themselves while the broader societal power relations remain largely unaffected, but rather through new power structures brought about by a change in the regime.

One could similarly ask what happens to whiteness when it is infused with feelings of guilt, as is the case in South Africa, also when this guilt is politically, ideologically and even in some cases legally imposed on it.

CWS proponents in South Africa clearly emphasise its contextual nature. According to West and Schmidt (2010: 9), however, even though questions about how white South Africans would negotiate the guilt attendant to their complicity in apartheid are central, local writers are also increasingly situating understandings of whiteness in the politics of globalisation. It is the intention that the comparative element of this thesis speaks to the global context in which South African whiteness functions.

Hook (2011: 24) writes that while Biko’s critique of white racism is clearly focused on the South African context, it also has “... a global resonance” and that “apartheid represents a particularly brutal instantiation of a racist power structure that can be felt elsewhere in the world” (Hook, 2011: 24). It is therefore possible that, by bringing South African whiteness into visibility (and here I am not only referring to in-group visibility since, as I mentioned earlier, some members of other cultural groups are also invested in whiteness, if only for their own survival), there is a contribution to be made to the emerging body of work on whiteness in the South African context but also to the larger body of work on CWS, but from a non-Western, South African, point of view. To that end, the next subsection investigates more concrete manifestations of whiteness and its shifting boundaries as the underlying framework for the analysis in Chapters 6 and 8.

2.2 Manifestations of whiteness

The previous sections highlighted the fact that whites are socialised to assume that their perspectives are objective and representative of reality. This belief in objectivity, coupled with the situatedness of white people as outside of culture (and consequently as the norm for humanity) enable them to view themselves as universal humans representative of all human experience (DiAngelo, 2011: 59). Making whiteness visible, or “acknowledging racism as a system of privilege conferred on whites” can challenge these claims to universalism. Consequently, a great effort is made to hide white skin privilege and, in cases where this is not possible, what DiAngelo (2011: 61) refers to as “defensive moves” to reinstate white equilibrium, are initiated. This section explores some of these strategies and defensive moves, as identified by CWS proponents. This being said, however, these narratives or strategies are not considered to be exhaustive and the goal is always to keep in mind De Kock’s (2006) argument regarding the counter-gesture. In identifying these strategies, I am also cognisant of the danger of homogenising whiteness and its anti-racist strategies (Truscott & Marx, 2011: 481–182). The goal is thus to be able to identify these and possibly other strategies in the narratives of *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, and in so doing contribute to scholarship on the specifically South African, but also more global, manifestation of whiteness in popular culture.

2.2.1 Strategies of whiteness: the maintenance of white skin privilege

According to Sasson-Levy (2013: 27), the main argument of CWS is that “whiteness is not an optional, symbolic, ethnic identity, ... but a social category that maintains its privileged status through the marking of social boundaries”. However, she posits that whites do not only demarcate social boundaries but are constantly engaged in blurring these same boundaries. Echoing De Kock’s (2006) sentiments, she therefore suggests an adapted version of CWS, and the analysis of hegemonic ethnicities, which interrogates how these groups both “mark and unmark the boundaries between themselves and Other groups in order to maintain their privileged status” (Sasson-Levy, 2013: 28).

According to Shome (2000: 368), in cases where it is not possible for whiteness to secure itself through the rhetoric of normativity, when whiteness is contested, its “hitherto normalised practices often become visible” and it is in such times that whiteness begins to mark itself, or name itself:

In moments when whiteness is comfortable in its hegemony, it constructs itself as the “norm”, and its Other as “different” or “strange”. However, when the normalcy of whiteness gets contested ... different strategies of self-naming emerge. Instead of positioning itself as the “norm”, it begins to mark itself as the “Other”, as “different”, as an identity in crisis ... and therefore having a particular location that, like minority locations, needs to be defended, salvaged, and protected (Shome, 2000: 368).

Hence when whiteness’s “hegemonic invisibility” (Matias et al., 2014: 290) becomes threatened or visible, this results in a socially sanctioned array of what DiAngelo (2011: 61) refers to as “counter-moves”. These counter-moves can be linked to what De Kock (2006) calls “countergestures” (Cf. page 33) and to what Sasson-Levy (2013) refers to as the blurring of boundaries and it manifests in a variety of ways.

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) identify six such communication strategies, or performative actions, which function to hide whiteness and white skin privilege. Alley-Young (2008: 312) summarises these strategies as follows: The first strategy is the association of white skin, and whiteness in general, with power. The second approach is to “speak of whiteness in the negative; that is, to speak of whiteness as a lack or absence of race or ethnicity”. Thirdly, in some cases, science is used to “naturalize [sic] whiteness, to obscure the issue that it is a race”. The fourth strategy involves conflating whiteness with nationality rather than race, for example, referring to Americans as a homogeneous subject group. The fifth strategy is “used when whites claim color[sic]-blindness” while the sixth and final strategy involves “claiming European origins to avoid claiming whiteness”⁸.

To this, DiAngelo (2011: 64) adds what she refers to as discourses of victimisation, and particularly “white fragility”. She (2011: 54) defines “white fragility” as a state in which “even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves”, and claims that this happens because whites have not had to develop the cognitive

⁸ The strategies mentioned here can be linked to the specifically South African examples discussed at the hand of Melissa Steyn’s work in 2.1.3.

or affective skills required for constructive engagement across racial divides. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and result in behaviour such as argumentation, silence or an avoidance of the stress-inducing situation. The result of the above is often a discourse of self-defence through which whites “position themselves as victimized [sic], slammed, blamed, attacked, and being used as ‘punching bags’” (DiAngelo, 2011: 64). These self-defence claims, however, position speakers as morally superior while simultaneously obscuring the power of their social locations, in the process blaming others with less social power for the situation and, in so doing, restoring equilibrium. By positioning themselves as victims, whites avoid the responsibility for racial power and privilege and therefore restore the equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011: 64).

Furthermore, in contrast to the fear of hybridity outside the perceived scope of whiteness mentioned earlier, whiteness seems to create increasingly more subject positions within the realm of whiteness in order to maintain and justify its normativity. Patricia McKee (1999: 13–14) writes that even if white people project

certain kinds of Otherness beyond the bounds of whiteness, they also project a wide range of both similarities and differences into public exchange as parts of whiteness. Identities of whiteness are in circulation, one might say, in the space between any individual white and the irremediably “Other” massed identity of blackness ... [I]n the more visual terms of twentieth century public life, there is a wide range of images of whiteness. White persons, therefore can experience their identity not merely as self same but as diverse.

Thus, when it is not possible to deflect Otherness or blame on to “non-white” groups, Otherness is created within, in the form of the bad white body. Foster (2003: 137) writes in this regard that

[b]etween the binaries of the white good ... and bad guys ... exists the white Other – the ethnic type, the whore, the slattern, the corpse, the fall guy, the victim, the queer, the white trash, the homeless, and the disabled.

DiAngelo (2011: 59) confirms this when she contends that even when a white person recognises whiteness as real, it is often deflected from the individual as the problem of other “bad” white people. According to her, whites are usually “more receptive to validating white racism if that racism is constructed as residing in individual white people other than themselves” (DiAngelo, 2011: 61). This is possible because, while whites are taught that their

interests and perspectives are universal, they are also taught to value the individual and see themselves as such (2011: 59). Consequently, they are able to distance themselves from other “bad whites” and the actions of their racial group.

Related to the above, class can be identified as another category used to create new or different Others within the spectrum of whiteness to ensure normativity. bell hooks (2012: 5) writes that, historically, racial solidarity, “particularly the solidarity of whiteness, has ... always been used to obscure class, to make the white poor see their interests as one with the world of white privilege. Similarly, black poor have always been told that class can never matter as much as race”. According to Foster (2003: 77), however, lower- or working-class whites can be inscribed with markers of blackness, creating a new Otherness within the white margin against which whiteness can be centralised. “Images of racist white trash often both legitimize [sic] and challenge the white-centered [sic] status quo ... Critics argue over whether *white trash* is a classed or a raced category” (Foster, 2003: 143). Foster, however, is more interested in how white trash is Othered, and she contends that it is a category that is “*both* classed and raced as ‘low grotesque Other’”. This creates an opportunity to deflect racist practices away from whiteness. White racists are almost always white trash, according to Foster (2003: 143). This allows the audience to Other racism while not owning up to their own and simultaneously creates “a comfortable space for projecting its own racism on the [bad] bodies of a white Other” (Foster, 2003: 143).

Apart from deflection or Othering, but related to the above, whiteness also responds to threats by appropriation. Frantz Fanon (in Fuss, 1995: 142) posits that, in colonial regimes of representation, even Otherness is appropriated by white subjects. According to him, this attempt at excluding blacks from the very self-Other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible, is colonialism’s greatest physical violence. Sullivan (2006: 165), similarly, writes about this as white people’s “habit of claiming a ‘right’ to project themselves into any and all spaces”.

One such example of appropriation is related to homosexuality. Foster (2003: 7) argues that while we still live in a world of white dominance and heterocentrism/heteronormativity, we are in the midst of “postmodern destabilizing [sic] forces when it comes to sexuality and

race". Consequently, even though whiteness still remains connoted to heterosexuality, it has also adapted to the destabilising of sexuality and race. For example, while homosexuality was once marked as a marginalised, and therefore, Othered identity, Foster (2003: 151) writes that even "queer identity is now being marked as white and comfortably middle class within the idealized [sic], all white casts of *Queer as Folk* and *Will & Grace*". These are just two examples of how homonormativity⁹ has been appropriated by whiteness.

Dolby (2010: 6) postulates that whiteness plays an implicit role in the construction of a nation and national identity, which in turn is also inherently linked to patriarchy.¹⁰ Connected to this, as well as to homonormativity, and arguably another form of appropriation, can be what Jasbir Puar (2007) and other critics refer to as homonationalism. Don Kulick (2009: 28) defines homonationalism as "an understanding and enactment of homosexual acts, identities, and relationships that incorporates them as not only compatible with but even exemplary of neoliberal democratic ethics and citizenships", while Haneen Maikey (2012: 126) refers to it as "the normalization [sic] and integration of certain 'more acceptable' queers into the nationalist ideal". While LGBT communities and ideologies have previously been viewed as oppositional to patriarchy and heteronormativity, some of the "more acceptable" performances are now appropriated into these ideologies. Graham Potts (2012: 4), for example, criticises gender discourse in America and Canada as homonationalism which tries to "dunk the queer into the institution of patriarchy".

As evidenced in the examples referred to earlier (*Will & Grace* and *Queer as Folk*), it is my contention that these negotiations and shifting boundaries are reflected in the narratives we encounter in mass media. For the purposes of this thesis I look at television soap opera in particular, with the goal of investigating how these narratives manifest in the pertinent texts. These complex negotiations and renegotiations, furthermore, manifest in particular ways in the South African context, where (as mentioned previously) whiteness is not

⁹ Lisa Duggan (2002: 179) defines homonormativity as a "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized [sic] gay constituency and a privatized [sic], depoliticized [sic] gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption".

¹⁰ It is important to acknowledge here that I do not claim any of these characteristics (heteronormativity and patriarchy, for example) to be unique to whiteness as a construct. It may very well be that both of these are also applicable to, for example, blackness as a construct. My aim in this section, however, is to identify a number of discourses and ideologies that work together in the construction of whiteness.

guaranteed normative invisibility, which will have an influence on my analysis of the construct.

2.2.2 Narratives of whiteness in the South African context

In South Africa, because of white people's numerical minority, but also because of their political and historical prominence, their racialisation is not as obscured from consciousness as in other "heartlands of whiteness" (Steyn, 1998). Liese Van der Watt (2005: 122) argues in this respect that the post-apartheid context has brought "hypervisibility" to whiteness. Steyn (2007: 422) writes that the "relatively disempowered relationship to the state and to political power positions whiteness in South Africa differently from whiteness in any other places that are theorising whiteness". Since the advent of democracy in particular, whiteness in South Africa differs markedly from that described elsewhere. Owing to the shift in power relations, whites can no longer assume the same privileges, and the post-apartheid era necessitates the rethinking of white identities in South Africa.

This does not imply, however, that a sense of entitlement to the privileges of white supremacy was (and in some cases still is) not taken for granted (Steyn, 2007: 422) in South Africa. Even though whites in South Africa no longer have an overtly dominant political position, they do – in some instances – still occupy an economically dominant position and the remains of the ideologies of whiteness which were enforced during apartheid still shape social relations in South Africa today.

The production and maintenance of whiteness as a dominant identity and ideology has thus changed significantly with South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy (Green et al., 2007: 397) and it is being defended in various ways. Stevens (2007: 427) writes that it is ironic that white normativity in South Africa has been maintained through the defence of historical and global normativity when whites are the numerical minority. He writes that this defence against the "primitive and violent native" was later extended to the defence of white jobs, to the defence against miscegenation and the tainting of the "*volk*" (nation), to the defence against the so-called "*swart gevaar*" (black danger), and finally, to the defence

against marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa. These defensive stances are similar to the discourses of victimisation as identified by DiAngelo (2007) in 2.2.1.

Linked to the above (and as referred to previously by Foster, 2003) is the fact that whiteness is also a legal construction. This is especially true in the South African case. From 1948, the South African apartheid government followed the principle of what was called “separate development”. The aim of this was to establish “independent” bantustans¹¹ with the “eventual denationalisation of the majority of black South Africans and their reconstitution as foreign citizens exercising full political rights outside South Africa’s white constitutional order” (Jacobs, 2002: 283) as end goal. (Cf. Chapter 5, page 115, for a more detailed discussion of these policies of apartheid). In this way, white hegemony was enforced by legal measures. Green et al. (2007: 394) refer to the above as “policy constructs”.

The Registration Act of 1950 required citizens to validate their whiteness in a legally prescribed process where individuals were obligated to register in order to officially obtain the status of being white. Since a person’s racial heritage was not always absolutely clear, authorities developed a variety of tests allowing them to classify citizens as white. One such test was the “pencil test”¹² during which a respondent could be classified as white based on the texture of his or her hair.

In the previous section, reference was made to six communication strategies employed to hide whiteness as identified by Nakayama and Krizek (1995). In the South African context, as mentioned, there is a contradiction to the invisible normativity of whiteness in that, because whiteness is threatened, it faces the need to speak, while at the same time wanting to remain silent in order to defend its historical privilege. Hence whiteness in South African society manifests both in traditional invisible, but also uniquely visible, narratives. On the one hand, it remains silent on the persisting economic and other privileges which remain as a result of apartheid implying that this is the status quo, while on the other, it makes itself

¹¹ A Bantustan (also referred to as a black homeland or black state) refers to a specific territory set aside solely for black inhabitants as part of the policies of separate development in South Africa during apartheid.

¹² The pencil test was used as a method of assessing whether or not a person has Afro-textured hair. In the test, a pencil is pushed from the roots to the ends of the hair. Whether or not the pencil passed through the hair smoothly determined how the person was classified. The formal authority of the test ended with apartheid in 1994.

visible in narratives of victimisation such as the ones mentioned above. The first involves ensuring the invisible normativity of whiteness by perpetuating its everydayness and focusing on the Other. The second involves constructing whiteness as Other and narrating it as visible Otherness. One should note, however, that in the South African context, invisible whiteness is always under threat because it can only ever be invisible to those who inhabit it and those who subscribe to it as dominant ideology. For black South Africans, whiteness is starkly visible. Biko, for example, wrote that “blacks see whites as the major obstacle in their progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society. Through its association with all these negative aspects, whiteness has thus been soiled beyond recognition” (Biko, 1978: 77).

Melissa Steyn (2001), a seminal South African theorist on the subject of CWS, confirms this tension between visible and invisible whiteness in the South African context and offers a more detailed version of some of the narratives employed to enact/perform either visible or invisible whiteness. In her book, *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: white identity in a changing South Africa*,¹³ she interviews more than 50 respondents all of whom are “faced with reinterpreting their old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities” (Ndebele, in Steyn 2001). Similar to Nakayama and Krizek (1995), Steyn (2001) identifies five different narratives, or manifestations, of whiteness in South Africa based on these interviews. It is important to note that these narratives are not mutually exclusive.¹⁴

According to Steyn (2001: 59), the first narrative is called *Still colonial after all these years*. She explains that, although the country has undergone significant changes “some whites are telling the same old story about whiteness”, perpetuating the idea that the old master narrative is still suitable for orienting themselves in the new circumstances (Steyn 2001: 59).

¹³ I should note here that Steyn’s (2001) research is situated in a particular moment in South African history which implies that the narratives she identifies might have changed since then and that new narratives might have emerged. The continued relevance of her narratives, however, is evidenced by the examples and other authors I found to supplement and confirm Steyn’s (2001) narratives of whiteness.

¹⁴ De Kock (2006: 184) writes that even in sensitive research, which is aware of the dangers of essentialising the “subjects of enquiry that the writer is purportedly particularising, it becomes necessary at some point to summarise, to conclude and to categorise”. He views both Nakayama and Krizek and Steyn’s summaries as rich and revealing, although he warns that a major challenge of such work is keeping, what he refers to as the “counter-gesture” in play. De Kock’s warning is acknowledged here, and it is an explicit aim of this thesis to look for these narratives, while keeping in mind that they are not exhaustive and that others might also emerge.

The defining characteristic of this narrative ... is that the person still constructs whiteness around the belief that whites are in a position to define themselves and the “Other” more or less unilaterally, and that intervention needs to take place on “white” terms, for the “good” of the “blacks” (Steyn, 2001: 59).

Steyn (2001: 69) calls the second narrative *This shouldn't happen to a white*. In a previous section, reference was made to the reaction evoked when whiteness is threatened. This is especially relevant in the South African context where white normativity came under threat after the end of apartheid, and still continues to be threatened. One of the possible ways in which whiteness is protecting itself or shifting its power is in responses to affirmative action. In some cases, whites then (re)construct their identity as the “new minority” or the “new oppressed”. According to Dolby (2010: 8), drawing on Nietzsche, this can also be referred to as “politics of resentment” where threatened whites position themselves as victims. Steyn (2012: 8) postulates in this regard, that some white South Africans, for example, claim that “it was not as bad for black people during apartheid as it is for white South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa”. This narrative involves an unshaken faith in white superiority, but also disillusionment with the new, and decidedly more hostile, environment which is viewed as unfair. Whiteness is thus more keenly felt, and should therefore be more publicly defended. Like the previous narrative, this one would manifest as visible whiteness. Milton and Marx (2014: 20) refer to this as a rhetoric of “white-genocide” and identify contemporary occurrences of this narrative in Afrikaans pop music. Popular Afrikaans musicians, Steve Hofmeyr and Bok van Blerk, for example, sing about the various ordeals that the Afrikaner people have been subjected to by other people. The lyrics of Hofmeyr’s song entitled “We shall survive”, for example, suggest that “Afrikaans speaking white South Africans are being targeted once more in post-apartheid South Africa ... [c]ompletely negating any reference to the Afrikaner as oppressor under the Afrikaner-led National Party of the apartheid period” (Milton & Marx, 2014: 21).

The third narrative is called *Don't think white, it's all right* (Steyn, 2001: 83). Unlike the previous two narratives, this one falls into the category of invisible whiteness. According to Steyn (2001: 84), *Don't think white, it's all right* can be regarded as the “multicultural” narrative of the New South African society. This narrative can be connected to the narrative of the rainbow nation, where the focus falls on a heterogeneous national unity rather than

specific groups within that unity. She posits that this way of thinking entails ignoring colour, and therefore ignoring any possible problems that might be associated with it. By denying the effects of racialisation, however, colour blindness is “a powerful mechanism in building white consensus and enabling the reproduction of racism” (Steyn, 2008: 29).¹⁵ Some white South Africans, for example, choose to identify/describe themselves as African (Cf. page 27), rather than as white. Such claims, however, might be interpreted as self-serving, or an effort to avoid facing up to their apartheid past. For some, these claims to be “African” might seem just too convenient (Matthews, 2011: 6).

The fourth narrative Steyn identifies (2001: 101) is *A whiter shade of white*. Respondents in her research, who associate themselves with the fourth narrative, according to Steyn (2001: 101), entertain a “construction of whiteness that frankly disclaims any implication in whiteness, or avoids any real reflection about the issue”. An example of this narrative would be South Africans who claim that it was not their generation who was responsible for apartheid, and they are therefore not implicated (Steyn, 2012: 8). She (2012: 11) refers to this as white ignorance, as an “implicit agreement to misrepresent the world”, which she coins “*the ignorance contract*”. According to her, this ignorance is not “necessarily brought about by neglect, but by historically generated, structural practices that may be related to our situatedness as knowers, our group identities and our oppressive systems”. She cites Baldwin who identifies white ignorance as an “appalling achievement” that has as a “core element that one should not care to know: ‘It is the innocence which constitutes the crime’” (Steyn, 2012: 11–12). Both this narrative and the previous one can be connected to Chidester’s (2008) argument that silence (or in this case invisible whiteness), or absence might also be a carrier of meaning.

The last narrative is called *Under African skies (or white, but not quite)*. According to Steyn (2001: 115–116), this narrative “does not retain the familiar old discourses of whiteness as templates for the future. Rather, it looks to create and define new subjectivities by drawing on other discursive and cultural repertoires to supplement and replace” previous white identities. This can be linked to Sasson-Levy’s (2013) contention that whiteness not only

¹⁵ It is interesting to note here that this strategy/narrative of whiteness bears close similarity to the ANC government’s policy of “non-racialism”, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

constitutes the practice of marking boundaries but also of shifting or redefining them. An example would be the appropriation of homonormativity discussed previously (Cf. page 37). Another example of white South Africans using different cultural artefacts and forms of expression to reinvent and rearticulate their identities, in this case specifically white Afrikaans identity, is through the use of satire and the rise of a so-called “zef culture”¹⁶ as embodied by websites such as Watkykky.co.za and musical acts like *Die Antwoord* (see milton & Marx 2014 in this regard). Riaan Grobler (2012: 18) describes this zef culture as a “social phenomenon where a generation of Afrikaners – mostly in their 30’s – have embarked on finding their own cultural identity by disowning the values associated with their parents’ generation”. In their quest to disentangle themselves from their parents’ identities and create new “zef” personas, this generation of Afrikaners draw on both coloured gang culture and poor white culture. Zef thus remains an identity which can only be “assumed by whites who are not poor, as their position within Bourdieu’s strata of cultural movement allows them to move between identities and thus gain ‘cultural capital’ through assuming a ‘cool’ identity” (milton & Marx, 2014: 24). Since poor whites do not have the same kind of cultural capital to appropriate other identities, it is possible for these manifestations of zef to simply perpetuate middle-class, white normativity.

When contextualised, the intricacies of whiteness in interaction with context-specific axes of not only race, but also, history, gender, sexuality, etcetera, become clear. De Kock (2010: 15) describes whiteness in the South African context as a hot potato:

[I]n a context of heterogeneity as marked as that in southern Africa, the signifier “whiteness” ... despite equally persistent tropes of sameness and rock solid marks of identity, must be regarded as a shuttling moniker, a hot potato variously juggled and differently handled, grasped, welcomed or rendered problematic across time and space.

The complexities inherent in constructions of whiteness and the way it manages to adapt to ensure hegemonic power addressed in this and previous sections manifests in cultural products such as literature and media. It becomes apparent that symbolic forms of

¹⁶ “Zef” refers to something which used to be considered common but now has credibility, and it operates within a subsection of white, Afrikaans youth culture as an acknowledged embodiment of “common as cool” (milton & Marx, 2014: 24).

expression, such as the media and literature, are a rich source for the analysis of whiteness as will be shown in and with the analysis of soap operas in Chapters 6 and 8.

CONCLUSION

This chapter was devoted to unpacking whiteness and CWS as the theoretical approach relevant to this thesis. In so doing, it attempts to answer the first sub-question identified in Chapter 1, which pertains to the origin and history of the theoretical approach of CWS.

I briefly explored the concept of whiteness, focusing specifically on its constructed nature and the ways in which this normative construction is dependent on certain performative rules and binary Others for its existence. Against this background, I investigated the origin and nature of CWS as situated within the wider theoretical framework of Cultural Studies, also linking it to Critical Race Studies and Postcolonial Theory. Three waves of CWS were explored and possible criticisms or shortcomings of this approach were emphasised.

Particular emphasis was placed on the development of CWS in South Africa because of the situatedness of the study, but also as a means of contextualising it. Even though it is a considerably newer and less developed theoretical approach in this context, it could be useful as a tool to deconstruct the unique racial dynamics in post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa, with specific reference to the soap genre as a form of symbolic expression in the mass media. While CWS in South Africa shares some of the theoretical tenets of global CWS, it was emphasised that it also has unique characteristics because of the different ways in which whiteness functions in this context. Approaching my thesis from this point of view has the potential to contribute to the South African body of work on CWS.

It was argued that whiteness is fuelled by fears of hybridity, and threatened by change, but it also became clear that one of its most enduring characteristics is its ability to adapt. The final section was thus devoted to looking specifically at how whiteness reacts to threats of hybridity and the “counter-moves” it employs to return to a state of hegemonic equilibrium. Responses to being threatened included making whiteness visible, appropriating Otherness into whiteness, or creating new Others against which to define itself.

With specific relevance to the South African context, Steyn's (2001) narratives of whiteness were explored. Section 2.2 is of particular significance for the rest of the study since the defensive moves, performative strategies and narratives identified here will be used in an effort to answer the main question of this thesis. This speaks to the construction and positioning of whiteness in the narratives of *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, also as it pertains to the implications of these constructions for local as well as global discourses on whiteness in the media. Frankenberg (1993) refers to whiteness as a set of cultural practices which are unmarked and unnamed, and the goal of marking these as they manifest in the soap operas is to interrogate them. As argued by Babb (in Foster, 2003) earlier (Cf. page 19), it is only when whiteness is understood as a construction that a useful dialogue on race can begin.

CHAPTER 3: SOAP OPERA: THE DIVERSIFICATION¹ OF A GENRE

The pervasiveness of television culture has become an entirely naturalised feature of everyday life
(Ang, 2007: 21).

INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter it was argued that a plethora of public stories could be analysed in an effort to understand constructions of whiteness. Some of the earliest representations of whiteness and ideologies of whiteness could be traced back to popular literature and cinema. More recent forms of mass media, such as the soap opera were, furthermore, identified as contemporary narratives which could be analysed in an effort to understand constructions of whiteness.

Kellner (1996) emphasises that media texts highlight the values, social issues and trends of the context in which they are produced. These texts can therefore be considered as snapshots of a particular society at a particular time. Similarly, Enric Castelló (2010: 209) writes that links between social discourses (in this particular case the discourse on whiteness, for example) are “often forged through intertextual relationships” related to the production and consumption of media texts. Following Kellner (1996) and Castelló’s (2010) argument, the aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of soap opera’s development as a genre, the particular conventions that govern its production and the possibilities these productions hold for representations but also (re)negotiations of whiteness. The role of the genre as a form of symbolic expression is, furthermore, touched upon in order to link it to the analysis of whiteness as it manifests in popular narrative forms (Cf. Chapters 6, 8 and 9).

To this end, this chapter provides a literature review of research on soap opera² which serves as background to the analysis of soap operas which follows (Cf.

¹ Title adapted from a similar one by Liebes and Livingstone (1998).

Chapters 5 to 8), but also contributes to the fundamental theoretical background of the thesis. The first two sections deal with the history of soap opera and its inherent characteristics. Knowledge of soap history and the generic characteristics of the genre, but also the ways in which the genre developed and diversified, will facilitate the comparative analysis in the final chapters. In particular, being aware of the general characteristics of the genre emphasises the ways in which it is being indigenised, which strengthens the comparative element of the analysis. The final section of the chapter focuses on investigating how and why soap opera can be regarded as a valid subject of analysis, particularly with reference to ideologies such as whiteness.

3.1 Soap history

It is popularly accepted that soap opera had its origin in the USA in the 1930s, in the guise of daytime radio serials.³ These radio serials were sponsored by giant soap powder manufacturers like *Proctor and Gamble*, *Colgate*, *Palmolive* and *Peets* (Hobson, 2003: 7). According to Dorothy Hobson (2003: 7), after radio became a mass medium in the 1930s, US manufacturers embraced it as an opportunity to expand their markets. Soap opera created an ideal vehicle for advertising, but this was not only the case in the USA. Radio as mass medium, as well as the use of soap opera to attract audiences and advertise products, spread to Britain, Australia, Europe and eventually also to developing countries such as South Africa. These programmes were conceptualised to attract the attention of female listeners or housewives who were at home during the day, affording these companies an opportunity to advertise and sell their products. Their scheduling purposely reflected the times when women would sit down for a break from their housewifely duties.

² For the purposes of clarity it should be noted here that the term “soap opera” will be employed to refer to the phenomenon as well as to a singular soap opera, while the terms “soap operas” or “soaps” will be utilised when referring to more than one soap opera.

³ Milly Buonanno (2008: 108), however, argues that its roots can be traced as far back as the 19th century when readers in the USA came into serialised novels from the Old Continent, thanks to the transportation by sea of books and other products from European publishing houses.

Related to the genre of radio serials and its history is the *telenovela*. According to Marilyn Matelski (2010: 186), this Latin American genre had its roots in Cuba where, in the 1800s, tobacco production was one of Cuba's major industries. Local cigar-maker guilds came up with the idea of hiring "lectores de tabaco" – literate employees tasked with reading novels – chapter by chapter – to their co-workers every day. The popularity of novels being read in instalments "soon went beyond the cigar factories and onto the radio waves in the 1920s". With this, the radio novela was born, and the first radio novela was broadcast in Havana, Cuba, in 1948, followed by the first *telenovela* in 1952 (Matelski, 2010:186). According to Castelló (2010: 211), these fictional narratives were later shifted to adapt from the *telenovela* style to the soap opera model, and also adapted to local taste.

The term "soap opera" probably originated in the entertainment press of the late 1930s. The term came from its connection to soap manufacturers although there were also other sponsors and advertisements including toothpaste, cereals, drugs, food and beverages. Soap operas were, moreover, occasionally referred to as "washboard weepers" (Allen, 1985: 8). According to Robert C. Allen (1985: 9), the "opera" in soap opera acquires meaning through its ironic and double inappropriateness. "Linked with the adjective 'soap', opera, the most elite of all narrative art forms, becomes a vehicle for selling the most humble of commodities" (Allen, 1985: 9).

The first producers of a successful soap opera were Frank Hummert and his wife Anne Ashenurst (Hobson, 2003: 8–9). They produced a soap called *Betty and Bob* in October 1932. In this production, some of the basic characteristics of modern soap opera were already present – starting out as a love story and specifically dealing with the problems of marriage in modern society. Other themes also established at this time included jealousy, fidelity, divorce, child-rearing/childlessness, family and romantic love (Hobson, 2003: 9).

As mentioned above, radio soaps did not remain restricted to the USA. Michele Hilmes (2006: 5) argues that, during the 1930s and 1940s, American and British radio

networks kept a close eye on each other, “frequently borrowing programme ideas”, evaluating each other’s institutional practices and using each other as conceptual counterweights in policy debates. She writes that the BBC, however, “resolutely held out against the program [sic] form most notoriously associated with ‘vulgar’, commercial feminized [sic] American radio culture: soap operas”. Despite this, the first British soap opera, *Front Line Family*, made its debut in 1941, but only on the North American service as a propaganda vehicle. The programme, however, proved to be highly popular with British audiences. Hilmes (2006: 5) writes that *Front Line Family* became the precursor of other serials such as *Mrs Dale’s Diary*, *The Archers*, and eventually also contemporary soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. The first long-running series in the UK was called *Mrs Dale’s Diary*, and it ran from January 1948 until April 1969.

During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a visible shift to more working-class characters, which reflected the changes in cultural awareness in all areas of popular entertainment as well as the arts. A shift was thus made to the so-called “kitchen-sink” dramas, which emphasised domestic realism (Hobson, 2003: 10). In 1955, for example, *The Archers* was featured on the opening of commercial television in Britain. It had a strong commitment to “everyday realism in a working class setting ... [and] would contribute greatly to the ethos” of both *Coronation Street*⁴ and *EastEnders*⁵ (Hilmes, 2006: 24). It was thus also in the 1960s that soap opera emerged as a new type of television programme. In 1978, the BBC transmitted the first episode of the American-produced soap opera, *Dallas*, which attracted 24 million viewers. Ien Ang (2007: 18) writes that, looking back, we can affirm that *Dallas* was not just an ordinary television show. It was so popular in the Americas, as well as in Europe and around the world, that it went on for 13 seasons.⁶

⁴ A long-running British television serial produced for ITV.

⁵ Similar to the above, *EastEnders* was a long-running serial drama produced by the BBC.

⁶ In relation to soap opera’s longevity or never-ending narratives, it is noteworthy that this seminal soap opera, after years of being off-screen, returned in 2012. Some of the original characters and narratives are still present, but there are also new storylines and younger members in the dynasty as if the narrative had continued while *Dallas* was not screened.

The popularity of soap opera was thus indisputable from the start, even if it was not without criticism. For example, in April of 1937, Roy Witmer, Head of Sales for NBC, commented in an interview that, regrettably, if it is a case of giving radio listeners what they like to listen to, soap operas are at the top of the list (Hilmes, 2006: 11). The history of soap opera can certainly be traced back to America, and the spread of the genre could therefore be viewed as a kind of export or even imperialism. However, soap operas have evolved and diversified in different contexts (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 148). Ang (2007: 23) writes that while, in the 1980s, the dominant concern was American cultural imperialism and with it fears of colonisation of local and national television cultures by American productions, the actual situation is much more complex and contradictory. She writes that “[t]o put it simply, American popular TV became both more powerful and less hegemonic, both more influential and less popular”. While soap opera as an international genre certainly became a prominent fixture in national television schedules, the fact that it became progressively more indigenised diminished its American hegemony. The “conceptual shift from ‘cultural imperialism’ to ‘globalisation’ serves to capture this contradictory complexity” the result of which can no longer be viewed in terms of “existing center [sic]-periphery models but must be comprehended through the more fluid model of global cultural flow, in which the United States is ... only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai, 1996: 31-32). For example, while a soap opera like *Dallas* still centred on upper middle-class characters, Australian soap operas such as *Neighbours*, like their British counterparts, revealed the different attitudes and values of the culture they represented. Similarly, most European countries produce at least a few of their own soaps and in Latin America, the telenovela, while sharing some of the main characteristics of soap opera, differs greatly from American soap operas. These domestically produced soap operas are not simply local versions of an American format and are often some of the most popular locally produced programmes. Hilmes (2006: 25) refers to this as globalised formats with nationalised expressions.

This introductory overview of soap opera’s history highlights some of the inherent characteristics pervasive in my analysis. From the outset it is clear that the

popularity of the genre cannot be contested. Viewing this popularity in conjunction with the fact that it was originally conceptualised to attract audiences, included characteristics of the melodrama from the outset, and clearly adapted to reflect the changes in society, highlights the ideologising function of the genre. Furthermore, the contention that the genre is not simply the product of American imperialism, but rather a complicated mix of international flows and indigenisation (Cf. page 60) is key to my analysis of such texts in specific contexts. The sections to follow provide a more detailed account of these characteristics of the genre and the contemporary development of soap operas.

3.2 Characteristics of the soap genre

Broadly, soap opera can be described as follows:

Soap opera is a radio or television drama in series form, which has a core set of characters and locations ... The drama creates the illusion that life continues in the fictional world even when viewers are not watching. The narrative progresses in a linear form through peaks and troughs of action and emotion. It is a continuous form with recurring *catástasis* as its dominant narrative structure. It is based on fictional realism and explores and celebrates the domestic, personal and everyday in all its guises. It works because the audience has intimate familiarity with the characters and their lives. Through its characters the soap opera must connect with the experience of its audience, and its content must be stories of the ordinary (Hobson, 2003: 34).

From the review of soap opera's history and development that precedes this section (Cf. 3.1), however, it is clear that there is no singular set of defining characteristics for soap opera. Although the soap opera may have some intrinsic characteristics, and even though it may function as a globalised format, genre boundaries are not fixed or permanent. Rather, as Christine Gledhill (2003: 357) argues, "we find ... sliding conventions from one genre to another according to changes in production and audiences".

The mention of a specific genre, nevertheless, invokes certain expectations about the kind of stories or narratives readers or consumers are likely to encounter. The

aim of this section is to clarify the essential characteristics of the soap genre. As mentioned, these characteristics will form the basic framework according to which soap opera will be discussed in the remainder of the thesis. For this purpose, the views of a number of theorists are discussed.

According to Gledhill (2003: 343), relevant points when considering the form and structure of any given television programme include the following: the particular broadcast genre, the narrative structure, the organisation of shots, character types, modes of expression such as melodrama, comedy and realism, and lastly, the reception of the viewer, both at aesthetic and affective levels. Gledhill (2003: 352), furthermore, identifies the following specific features or conventions that define soap opera as a genre: format and medium, narrative pattern, subject matter, plots and character types. Gledhill's (2003) points and conventions form the structure of the investigation of the soap genre in the subsections below.

3.2.1 Format and medium

Soap operas generally adhere to specific conventions regarding their format and narrative pattern. These include particular narrative structures, more technical aspects of the television medium and characteristics relating to both subject matter and medium such as the choice of shots, for example.

According to Gledhill (2003: 352), soap operas usually consist of 30-minute slots, broadcast once or more a week through the mediums of either radio or television.⁷ Often these slots will be interrupted for the purpose of commercial breaks. Even though 30-minute slots are most common, it is not unusual for some soap operas to fill 45- to 50-minute slots.

Concerning the narrative pattern employed in these 30- to 50-minute slots, Gledhill (2003: 352) identifies the following: "Multiple interweaving storylines; we probably

⁷ Even though radio soaps were central to the discussion of soap opera history, for the purpose of this thesis, the focus will be specifically on the television medium.

don't remember or never saw the beginning; no end in sight". This substantiates Mary Ellen Brown's (1987: 4) characterisation of soap opera as a serial form that resists narrative closure and employs abrupt segmentation between parts. Allen (1989: 49), in turn, refers to this as "narrative seriality" and mentions (1983: 100) that the prolongation of events, rather than the compression thereof, is congenial to soap opera. In other words, soap opera time parallels actual time, or, at the very least, creates the impression that it does. The fact that events are not compressed into single episodes (as would be the case with sitcoms, for example) "implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch or not" (Brown, 1987: 4). Linked to this, Lidia Curti (1998: 72) writes about the "horizontal repetitive pace of the plot" and the fact that the format is open, which creates a lack of closure. She, furthermore, identifies the absence of a preferred point of view or "authorial markers (such as the voiceover for instance)" as some of the distinctive traits of soap narrative.

In soap operas, the predilection for talk, be it "conversation, gossip, dissection of personal and moral issues, and at crisis points, rows" (Gledhill, 2003: 370), serves to substantiate the argument about the open-ended nature of soap opera. John Fiske (1995) also presents this argument. According to him (1995: 343), soap opera's "extended middle" causes disruption and deferment of the soap opera narrative. The open-ended nature of soap opera also has implications for the way in which meaning is created in these texts. Allen (1983: 98), for example, enquires how to deal with a form "in which audience satisfaction cannot possibly be derived from the telos at the end of the work (since there is none), a form in which the operation of the hermeneutic code is perpetually retarded". Tania Modleski (1982: 101) posits that in soap opera, "revelations, confrontations, and reunions are constantly being interrupted and postponed by telephone calls, unexpected visitors, counter revelations, catastrophes, and switches from one plot to another". For her, these interruptions are both annoying and pleasurable.

Linked to the narrative patterns of soap operas are the aesthetic devices used to achieve these patterns or structures. Allen (1983: 100) claims, for instance, that in

soap operas “facial expressions are just as important as dialogue”. This predilection for talk, and the consequent focus on facial expressions, also dictate the genre’s characteristic use of camera shots. Since the focus is mostly on one or more characters engaging in dialogue, soap opera most commonly makes use of medium close-up, close-up and extreme close-up shots of talking heads, creating a more intimate conversational context which encourages viewer involvement.

Related to the above, but also to the shots and format inherent in the genre, is the fact that the home, or some other place that functions as “home”, usually serves as the setting for the show (Brown, 1987: 4). Gledhill (2003: 352) validates Allen’s (1983: 100) referral to the “construction of a world that is for the most part an interior one”, when she lists the following as settings or locations for soap opera: “Home interiors and public places where lots of people can meet, e.g. pubs, laundrettes, corner shops, offices, street corners, hospitals, sometimes the workplace”. In the case of Anglo-American soap operas, an example of this would be *Forresters*, the large fashion house in the *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

3.2.2 Subject matter, plots and characterisation

Soap opera’s unique format, narrative structure and settings are closely intertwined with the subject matter and plots employed in this genre. In this subsection, the focus falls on the characteristic topics, but also character types, plots and modes of expression inherent in soap opera.

Charlotte Brunson (1983: 78) writes that soap opera is constituted primarily through representations of “romances, families and attendant rituals [such as] births, engagements, marriages, divorces [and] deaths”. This is corroborated by Hobson’s (2003: 8–9) comment mentioned in 3.1. Gledhill (2003: 352), in turn, characterises the subject matter of soap opera as the “[u]ps and downs of family or community life and personal relationships”. She identifies the following congenital plots: “[f]allings out between family and community members; jealousies, infidelities, dirty dealings, hidden secrets and their exposure, social problems, e.g.

illegitimacy, abortion, sometimes work problems, e.g. redundancy” (Gledhill, 2003: 352). Allen (1989: 49) articulates the prominent subject matter of soap opera as a “dramatic concern with heterosexual romance, kinship, and family ...”. Modleski (1982: 68) similarly identifies some of the frequent themes of soap operas as follows:

the evil woman, the great sacrifice, the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse, marrying her for money, respectability, etc, the unwed mother, deceptions about the paternity of children, career vs. housewife, the alcoholic woman (and occasionally man).

As a case in point, Ang (2007: 18–19) outlines the narrative of *Dallas* as follows:

The story centres on the weal and woe of the extended Ewing family, who live in a sprawling ranch just out of Dallas, Texas ... The multiple storylines revolve around the complicated mutual relations between the characters, and focus on emotive states of affairs and incidents that are quintessential to soap operas: the struggles between love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, greed and compassion, hope and despair. While the Ewings were larger than life in terms of their opulent lifestyle, and were the constant subject of grandiose narrative plots including murder attempts, kidnappings, dubious billion dollar business deals, political machinations, mistaken identities, and so on, the hub of the story – and the key anchor for the intense audience involvement – were the “ordinary” human dimensions of personal and family relationships, marked by age-old rituals such as births, marriages and deaths, the intimacies, disappointments and petty jealousies of romance and friendship, and the moral dilemmas brought about by conflicting interests and values.

These recurring themes can be directly linked to characters found in soap operas. Soap opera characters are generally multiple and diverse, and span the social spectrum; with many female roles, including older women, widows and divorcees (Gledhill, 2003: 352). Despite the large variety of characters, however, soap operas are often criticised for stereotypical or archetypal representations that perpetuate the established beliefs about the nature of the masculine, the feminine and the dominant ideologies in society. Even when soap operas include characters who fall outside of the heterosexual spectrum, these characters often manifest as homonormative, in some way still perpetuating Allen’s (1989) claim that the focus falls on heterosexual romance.

milton (1996: 71), for instance, identifies the following archetypal or stereotypical characters inherent in soap opera: the romantic hero, the romantic heroine, the antagonist or anti-hero, the patriarch or matriarch, the female opposition (professional woman) or super bitch, the professional man, the loving mother, the gossipmonger, Cinderella and the reformed rake. In relation to this (and substantiating earlier arguments about the flow of the genre), Antonio C. La Pastina and Joe Straubhaar (2005: 278) identify the following four stereotypes which he identified in Japanese soap operas: the universal archetype of the “self-seeking individuation” or “self-determination, endurance and strength”; the archetype of the “disobedient female” (a woman who defies oppressive social constraints); the archetype of the “heroic struggle” against which the hero/heroine ultimately succeeds; and the archetype of upward “mobility by the individual or family from poverty or material success”.

Despite the stereotypical nature of soap opera characters, these characters are often reformed or corrupted because of soap opera’s resistance to narrative closure. The reformed rake could have been the villain in previous storylines and the romantic heroine often develops into the female opposition, for example. In soap opera, because of the longevity of the text, few characters remain defined in the same stereotypical role they started out in and a lot of character development takes place, thus countering the argument that soap opera presents only stereotypes. While the stereotypes inherent in the “soap recipe” remain, the opportunity for character development over extended time periods thus opens up the potential for more challenging roles (Cf. footnote on page 217 as a case in point).

From the analysis of the narrative pattern in the previous section, but also from the characteristics referred to in previous paragraphs, it is clear that a closed setting and the prominence of the family are intrinsic in most soap operas. Modleski (1982: 85–86) shares similar views on the characters and setting of soap opera as follows:

... [S]oap operas are set in small towns and involve two or three families intimately connected to one another. Families are often composed of several generations, and the proliferation of generations is accelerated by the propensity of soap opera characters to mature at an incredibly

rapid rate ... Sometimes on a soap opera one of the families will be fairly well to do, and another somewhat lower on the social scale though still, as a rule, identifiably middleclass.

Modleski (1982: 86), furthermore, states that although children feature in many of the plots, they do not make many appearances on screen. Smaller children are important because they often determine marriages and relationships, but they are hardly ever part of the storyline as three-dimensional characters. In addition, she (Modleski, 1982: 86) points out that minority characters are rarely represented but that controversial social problems are introduced from time to time.⁸ With reference to male and female roles, Brown (1987: 4) mentions male characters who are “sensitive men” and female characters who are often professional and otherwise powerful in the world outside the home.

In summation, it is clear that from the outset, soap operas exhibited specific characteristics with regard to subject matter, themes and characterisation. According to Pieter J. Fourie (1984: 14, 2007), owing to its unique characteristics, soap opera is ideally situated to reveal something about the society that produces it, since as a visual metaphor, it is small enough to represent dramatic, personal interaction, yet at the same time it is big enough to reflect social norms and values. Consequently, there is merit in an investigation of how whiteness is represented and negotiated in soap opera.

However enduring the key characteristics of soap operas remain, the genre has evolved significantly to become indigenised to specific contexts. The next subsection is devoted to examining the diversification of the genre.

3.2.3 Diversity and evolution of soap opera forms

While American soap operas are undoubtedly the most prominent, or rather well-known, form of the soap genre, Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 147) contend that an

⁸ This aspect differs from soap opera to soap opera and has also changed over time. Although it is only mentioned here, this subject will be dealt with extensively later (Cf. Chapters 6 and 7).

analysis of popular local soap operas in Europe, for example, reveals that the soap opera is not merely an imported American genre and that it is constantly evolving. They argue that distinctive subtypes of the general soap opera genre have developed and call for researchers to consider this broadened range of soap operas and to resist focusing on the canon. This subsection is devoted to unpacking these subtypes since they will be instrumental in the comparative analysis of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* (Cf. Chapter 9).

Liebes and Livingstone (1998) identify three unique subtypes of the soap genre. These include the dynastic, community and dyadic soap. They define these subtypes as follows:

The *dynastic* model focuses on “one powerful family, with some satellite outsiders – connected by romance, marriage or rivalry – on its periphery (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 153). Soap operas classified as dynastic take for granted an “unshakeable class structure in which the glamorous, larger than life dynasty” is the main focus and patriarchy is the dominant ideology (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 161-162). Arguably the most seminal example of a dynastic soap opera would be the similarly titled primetime American soap opera *Dynasty*. Likewise, American primetime soap opera, *Dallas*, is also an epoch-making example. In a South African context, the soap operas, *Egoli*⁹ and *Generations*¹⁰, are apt examples of a dynastic soap opera.

In contrast to the dynastic soap opera, the *community* soap opera consists of a “number of equal, separate, middle- and working-class, multigenerational families (including single-parent ones), and single characters, mostly not romantically connected, all living within one geographical neighbourhood and belonging to one community” (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 153). Unlike both the dynastic and dyadic

⁹ *Egoli – Place of Gold* was the first South African produced daily soap opera and was aired from 1992 to 2010. The series was set in Johannesburg (which is sometimes referred to as eGoli) and revolved around a well-to-do family who owned Walco – an International automobile manufacturer.

¹⁰ *Generations* is a South African soap opera broadcast on weekday evenings on the PSB channel SABC1. It is set against the backdrop of a well-known advertising agency owned by prominent family members in the context of corporate Johannesburg, and it portrays the rivalry, treachery and blackmail between foes, siblings and colleagues.

soap operas, the community soap opera thus has a more open structure which includes a whole neighbourhood or community of ordinary families. In this community, the more generic melees of love, betrayal and reconciliation are part of the struggle “through more pedestrian hardships of sickness, unemployment and teenage drug habits” (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 153). The focus of these soap operas is not on the glamorous upper classes, as is the case with most American, dynastic soap operas, but rather on working-class, mostly urban people. Social conflicts and class differences are often overcome through an idealised representation of living together or interacting in common public places (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 165). As opposed to the patriarchal nature of the dyadic model, gender relations are more equal in community soap operas. Furthermore, a unique characteristic of the community soap opera is that it often provides moments of comic relief. Liebes and Livingstone (1998) argue that community soap operas (of which the British *EastEnders* is a case in point) tend to be produced in the spirit of PSB, and are also more likely to “problematise, for example, gender issues in a conscious attempt to transmit social messages” (Lamuedra & O’Donnell, 2013: 70).

The third subtype, namely the *dyadic* soap opera, involves a destabilised network of a “number of young, densely interconnected, mostly unigenerational, interchanging couples, with past, present and future romantic ties, continually absorbed in the process of reinventing kinship relations” (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 153). The power structures in these soap operas are not patriarchal and “in the spirit of postmodern lifestyle, everything goes and characters may go to prison only to return to the soap opera untainted”, incestuous love occurs and sex or romance overrule professional relationships (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 170). According to Ang (2007: 22), “straight” melodrama (as presented in the dynastic soap opera) became unfashionable and irony became trendier. As a result, we saw the ascent of internationally successful, female-oriented television drama series “all of which deftly combined the appeals of sentimental melodramatic feeling and ironic

playfulness". An example of a dyadic soap opera would be *Melrose Place*.¹¹ Liebes and Livingstone (1998) argue that dyadic soap operas are the most postmodern form of soap opera and also contend that increasingly more of them will be created.

Hence from a theoretical point of view there is merit in more work on the origins of soap opera in a specific country rather than assuming it to have generic American features. This can be linked to Buonanno's (2008) work on the indigenisation of the genre (Cf. page 79) and earlier arguments regarding the flow and globalisation of the genre instead of assuming it to be solely a product of American imperialism. Buonanno (2008: 88) explains the concept of indigenisation as follows:

By the concept of "indigenization" [sic] I mean the process through which forms and expressions of external cultures, elaborated by other societies, are appropriated, re-elaborated, and restored by diverse local societies in configurations that are consistent with their own home-grown systems of meaning. This process gives rise to forms and expressions which in their hybrid¹² and syncretic nature are the result of native and non-native elements. They are visibly marked by domestic specificity and represent original and authentic creations of local culture.

Furthermore, the choice of soap opera model in a specific context "has consequences for the representation of power, social locus and gender in the life world of the soap, in turn offering different national audiences particular versions of everyday life" (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 161). Both the soap operas relevant to this thesis can be classified as community soap operas and the principles highlighted

¹¹ Like *Dallas*, this soap opera was also recreated with a younger cast years after the initial soap aired. The original series aired on Fox from 1992 to 1999 and in 2009 a sequel was aired in which five actors from the original series were featured again.

¹² The concept of hybridity or hybridisation can be linked to a number of more or less synonymous terms such as "creolisation", "syncretism" and "glocalisation". For the purposes of this thesis, Buonanno's (2008: 109) conceptualisation of the concept will be adopted. She writes that "hybridization [sic], or any other term adopted to indicate the same thing – the processes of contamination and inter-cultural miscegenation – refers to a conception of culture as a symbolic and material complex that is 'in the making', in constant tension between permeability and resistance to the external influences that have been faced with the passage of time. This is culture understood as a process or a flow, rather than as a permanent and uncontaminated structure." For Buonanno (2008: 110), hybridity contributes fundamentally to de-essentialising the concept of culture and cultural identity as something pure and uncontaminated.

here are thus crucial to the analysis of the role these soap operas play in constructing whiteness.

3.2.4 *Fact versus fiction: reality and verisimilitude*

The preceding sections indicate that, because of its narrative structure and subject matter, there is a complex relationship between reality and fiction in soap opera texts. Fourie (1984: 13, 2007), for example, states that texts like these use reality as a model, while they also function as a model for reality. In this section I investigate how the verisimilitude created by these texts can possibly influence the creation of meaning and then proceed to briefly question the kinds of viewer/subject positions this creates.

According to Maria Lamuedra and Hugh O'Donnell (2013: 63), realism "is one of the most disputed terms used in cultural analysis", and it is therefore important to take into account the difficulties surrounding the term "realism". Gledhill (2003: 360) states that

realism today is the more familiar term through which we judge whether a fiction constructs a world we recognise as like our own; but as we have seen, realism is a highly problematic category ... in fiction *reality* is always constructed [original emphasis].

Soap operas are often described as "exaggerated, far-fetched, stretching things, over the top, overboard, extreme, even ridiculous or surreal" (Lamuedra & O'Donnell, 2013: 63). Despite this, however, there is widespread agreement that some soap operas are realistic in other respects, such as the way in which they work social issues into its narratives (Lamuedra & O'Donnell, 2013: 63). This can be related to Straubhaar's (2005) notion of "cultural proximity". Soap operas incorporate elements that are familiar to its viewers, and in this way it is perceived as "realistic". Cultural proximity, according to La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005: 274) is based to a large degree in language, but also includes other cultural elements such as dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humour, ideas about story pacing, music traditions and religious elements.

Furthermore, owing to the potential for viewers to identify with a multiplicity of plots and characters, it is often argued that soap opera closely resembles the everyday life of the viewer. Soap narratives and the life narratives of soap viewers exist in close proximity and are often interwoven. It is regularly suggested that soap opera is a vehicle to escape the burdens and mundaneness of everyday life. Yet, in the previous subsections it became clear that to contend that soap opera is mere escapism is to overlook much of the complexity underlying its narrative.

According to Allen (1983: 105), soap operas “use devices which both distance the world of the soap from that of the viewer and make quite explicit connections with it”. Soap opera takes signs from the social and cultural world familiar to us, not only to represent it, but to produce a similar, though fictional, world. For Nadia van der Merwe (2012: 51) the world presented in the soap functions as a parallel universe and can be seen as a rich source of vicarious experiences. Gledhill (2003: 360) introduces the term “verisimilitude” which she defines as follows: “[V]erisimilitude refers not to what may or may not actually be the case but rather to what the dominant culture believes to be the case, to what is generally accepted as credible, suitable, proper”. *Reality* and verisimilitude cannot, however, be clearly separated in practice, “for the demand for realism won’t go away, however problematic the notion” (Gledhill 2003: 360). This is also applicable to the verisimilitude of soap opera narrative.

One reason for soap opera’s seemingly “real” feel is because of the proximity of soap opera time to “real” time (Cf. Brown on page 102). In the same way that soap opera resists closure, it also resists a specific time. Soap opera, like the lives of the viewers, does not have a strictly linear time flow but rather a minimum of three concurrent narratives which proceed through a succession of short segments (Brunsdon, 1983: 78). There are no temporal relationships between segments, although it is possible to say that time, in general, moves forward. According to Brunsdon (1983: 79), the very “simplicity of the use of ‘interruption’ as the major form of narrative delay, fabulously extending dramatic action, also works against the construction of coherent referential time”. The different narratives co-exist in a simultaneous

present, along with the life narratives of the viewer. This creates a kind of parallel universe with which the viewer can identify, and almost participate in, through the creation of parasocial¹³ relationships (Pitout, 1996).

The sets of soap operas also serve to create a feeling of verisimilitude. According to Brunsdon (1983: 79), the sets “function very literally as setting or background, seen always from the same points of view, as familiar as the room in which the viewer has the television”. The viewer thus develops a kind of familiarity and intimacy with the soap opera’s space, to such an extent that it creates the illusion of being part of the viewer’s life.

The idea of the soap world being a part of the viewer’s world has also manifested in other popular narratives, such as film. Consider, as a case in point, the narrative of the fiction film, *Nurse Betty* (LaBute, 2000). In this film, the main character – a fanatic soap opera viewer and nurse – suffers memory loss and whilst suffering from amnesia she meets one of the actors in her favourite soap. In the relevant soap opera this particular actor portrays the role of a doctor. Betty is unable to distinguish between the soap opera and real life. Consequently, she is unable to differentiate the actors from the roles they portray and she is convinced that she is applying for a nursing position at the fictional hospital. While this may be a somewhat exaggerated example of viewer involvement, and the intention is not to paint viewers as passive consumers, it does speak to the propensity of soap opera viewers to make the soap world part of their own.

Apart from the fact that viewers become familiar with soap opera characters because they encounter them on a daily basis, there is a verisimilitude that defines these characters as being true to life. According to Hobson (2003: xiii), “they create the impression that they could live and breathe and operate outside their fictional form and could be transferred to other situations and still retain their credibility”.

¹³ Parasocial interaction is based on a process of recognition, that is, a similarity (or cultural proximity) between the everyday lifeworld of the viewer and the imaginary world of the soap opera (Pitout, 1996: 182).

This is perpetuated in the narrative of *Nurse Betty*, for example. Another example would be soap characters moving from one soap opera to another. Lauren Fenmore, a character portrayed by Tracy E. Bregman, for example, crosses over seamlessly between the American soap operas, *The Young and the Restless* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, suggesting that these soap operas are existing realities. Soap actors, moreover, also often make public appearances where they are in character.

Another factor contributing to soap opera's verisimilitude is that, although there is a vast difference between soap opera and "reality", soap opera often feeds on fears that have a basis in reality. According to Modleski (1982: 108), it is crucial to recognise that soap opera "allays real anxieties, [and] satisfies real needs and desires, even while it may distort them". Examples of this include the need for human interaction or romantic love which is central to both soap opera narratives and "reality". In this regard, Fourie (1984) contends that soap operas ultimately fulfil a moralising and unifying function by perpetuating shared values and social solidarity. Even though the storylines often include anti-social and immoral behaviour, in the end, good triumphs over evil and, in the process, accepted social myths and moral values are perpetuated. Magriet Pitout (1996: 168) adds to this that viewers identify with the social roles of characters and consequently associate their own experiences and emotions with those of the characters. Characters are often viewed as role models for socially acceptable behaviour and viewers could wish to emulate this behaviour.

There are clearly a number of areas where it becomes possible for the "real" lives of viewers to become intertwined with the verisimilitude created on the sets of soap operas. The next subsection investigates the viewer and subject positions created by soap operas.

3.2.5 Viewer and subject positions

Some critics argue that soap opera viewers are mere passive pawns. This relates to the view that soap opera is a lowly pleasure, or an example of low culture. According

to Ang (2007), however, this popular pleasure should not be dismissed. She suggests that what tends to be snubbed is a politics of pleasure:

[N]ot only were *Dallas* fans ridiculed as stupid masses; they were also, significantly, feminised. It is for this reason that so many of the viewers who admitted to enjoying watching *Dallas* ... felt the need to be apologetic about their own viewing pleasure: they had a strong – and uneasy – awareness that in the dominant social hierarchy of value theirs was a lowly pleasure (Ang 2007: 20).

Ang (2007), nevertheless, cautions that viewers are not mere cultural dupes and that popularity and pleasure always “says something about real desires and aspirations amongst audiences”. She (2007: 20) argues that the real connections viewers have with soap operas and the way in which they identify with these texts cannot simply be dismissed as simple “false consciousness”.

Ang (2007) further contradicts the opinion that soap opera viewers are passive, with her argument on the different ways in which soap opera audiences interact with the text. For her (2007: 21), there are at least two major ways in which audiences enjoy the show, namely through an identification with its melodramatic imagination, but also, more recently, through ironic pleasure. According to Ang (2007:21) (specifically referencing *Dallas*), ironic pleasure is a mode of “viewing that is informed by a more intellectually distancing, superior subject position which could afford having pleasure in the show while simultaneously expressing a confident knowingness about its supposedly ‘low’ quality”. Irony becomes a way of relating to soap opera

by cunningly having its cake and eating it too: “I love watching it because it is so bad ...”. The ironic viewing position is a socially and culturally powerful stance; one that pokes fun at, and consequently neutralises, the melodramatic imagination which was precisely the source of viewing pleasure for so many serious *Dallas* fans (Ang, 2007: 21).

On the one hand, identification with the melodramatic imagination of the text creates pleasure through the emotional identification “with the narrative excesses of the text”, and not by taking ironic distance from it. Irony, on the other hand, is a form of

cultural capital that empowers those who possess it to construct a relativist relationship to television; it is appreciative of its pleasures but not fully succumbed to it; “in the know” about its textual tricks and therefore able to good humouredly play with them (Ang, 2007: 22).

Ang’s (2007: 21) arguments highlight the fact that it is necessary to distinguish between perceptions about viewers as such, possible ways in which viewers derive pleasure and the political power of this pleasure, instead of merely dismissing the genre and its viewers.

The melodramatic nature of the text and the predilection of viewers for identifying emotionally, nevertheless, limit the number of liberating subject positions offered to viewers of soap opera. Mass media texts are created for a specific target market according to the characteristics the producers believe that target market to have, and in the case of soap opera, these viewers are – or at the very least traditionally were – feminised. Moreover, the way in which the audience is addressed creates subject positions.

Soap opera audiences, as well as the characters they make available for viewers to identify with, however, differ markedly from more traditional narratives. It is precisely in this difference that the potential for negation is created. Gledhill writes that (2003: 374) unlike “traditional” (masculine) narratives, such as mainstream Hollywood cinema, soap opera “does not centre on an individual hero, or, through his gaze, on the spectacle of the glamorized [sic] female”. In contrast to mainstream cinema, soap opera invites identification with numerous personalities. According to Modleski (1995: 348), “soap operas continually insist on the insignificance of the individual life”. Contrary to traditional narratives, soap opera does not have only one main character. Multiple plot lines cause the viewer to engage with a large number of characters at the same time. It follows logically that viewers do not associate with an individual character but rather with a number of characters, possibly from a number of different plots. Soap operas, consequently, create more fluid subject positions than most other narratives. Both Modleski (1982: 105) and Fiske (1987: 179–197) refer to this notion of the decentred viewer. It implies a potential for

undermining a specific or single subject position. Thus, even though soap operas are often criticised for their stereotypical melodramatic representations, the notion of the decentred viewer may counter this argument.

Deborah Rogers (1995: 328) offers an opposing argument when she writes that the fragmentation of the soap opera text reconciles “women to traditional female roles and relationships” such as being a housewife. Commercial breaks and the overall fragmentation of the text, arguably, create an opportunity for the housewife to continue to perform her role without the risk of missing out on much of the narrative. This, according to her, serves to reinforce patriarchal cultural behaviour. Fragmentation in this sense therefore perpetuates male dominance. According to Rogers (1995: 328), “while all these little expressions of male dominance and female submission may seem insignificant in and of themselves, they add up and create an effect that is overwhelming”.

Although Rogers’ (1995) argument has merit, there seems to be substantial evidence that the fragmentation of soap narrative can negate male dominance and provide a site for negating patriarchal power. Ellen Seiter (1981: 43), for instance, counters Rogers’ argument by posing that the fragmentation of the narrative negates the (masculine) master narrative:

[t]he importance of small discontinuous narrative units which are never organized [sic] by a single patriarchal discourse or main narrative line, which do not build towards an ending or closure of meaning, which in their very complexity cannot give a final ideological word on anything, makes soap opera uniquely “open” to feminist readings.

Fiske (1987: 179–197), similarly, argues that a variety of reading positions allow for the interrogation of patriarchy. Seen in the light of Fourie’s (1984, 2007) and Pitout’s (1996) contention about the moralising and socialising effect of the soap opera text, it is possible to argue that these texts provide viewers with examples of how hegemonic ideologies may be contested. The subversive potential of soap opera narrative has been hinted at throughout this chapter. The next section unpacks this and focuses specifically on substantiating the merit of analysing soap opera for the purposes of this thesis.

3.3 Why soap opera? Soap opera as a site for struggle and negotiation

Both Pitout's (1996) and Ang's (2007) arguments support the pervasiveness of television culture, but specifically soap opera texts, as naturalised features of everyday life. These theorists also argue convincingly that the skilful and ritualistic way in which viewers interact with these narratives situates them ideally to provide us with preparatory ideas in terms of social life and the rules that govern it.

In this subsection these arguments about soap opera's unique nature and characteristics are used to formulate a justification for the analysis of soap opera as it pertains to the construction of cultural meaning and enculturation,¹⁴ but specifically whiteness. To this end, arguments relating to the previously mentioned subject positions and verisimilitude will be referenced to prove how soap opera differs from traditional narratives, how it can function on both a pleasurable but also a political level, and finally, how all of this creates the potential for soap opera to challenge the hegemonic order and especially whiteness as a hegemonic construct.

3.3.1 Differences and similarities between soap operas and "traditional" narratives

Given the need to uncover what is inherent and unique about soap opera narratives, it is necessary to situate them in the wider context of "traditional" popular mass media narratives. Brief reference was previously made to the fact that soap operas might have the potential to create more fluid subject positions than mainstream Hollywood cinema, for example. This subsection further unpacks the differences between soap opera narratives and more "traditional" narratives.

Allen (1989: 50) distinguishes between soap opera narrative and "traditional" narratives as follows:

The term soap opera has provided a convenient and useful framework within which to examine programmes whose narrative structure would

¹⁴ Enculturation here is viewed as the process through which people are taught the requirements of their particular culture, as well as the process of acquiring behaviours and values appropriate or necessary to that culture (Grusec & Hastings, 2007: 547).

seem to be fundamentally at odds with that of the classic realist text, whose “ideological problematic”, modes of address and methods of pleasure production would seem to be quite different from the other forms of television ...

One of the defining characteristics of soap opera is the fact that it has no definitive end(s), and that the anticipation of an end becomes an end in itself. It is noteworthy that “traditional” narratives are constructed according to a beginning, middle and end, whereas soap opera consists of an “infinitely extended middle” (Fiske, 1995: 341). This is true for at least two reasons. Firstly, since soap opera is a continuous serial, the plot or storyline never reaches a definite conclusion. Although individual, smaller plots may reach some kind of climax, they are simply replaced or continued in new ones. Every hint of equilibrium is simply followed by more disorder. Owing to this, relationships are in a constant state of flux. Secondly, commercial breaks which interrupt the narrative at regular intervals contribute to the fragmented nature of soap opera. Allen (1989: 48) refers to this “extended middle” when he writes that “soap opera, by this definition at least, would not be a mainstream narrative at all, since it is predicated upon the infinite delay of closure”. It could therefore be argued that soap narrative is circular, rather than linear, thus opposing it to a linear masculine narrative.

The pace at which the narrative progresses is related to the above, and also functions to distinguish soap opera from more “traditional” narratives. Owing not only to the fragmentation of the text, but also to the numerous plots and the partiality for conversation, the pace at which soap opera narratives develop is not as fast and action oriented as more “traditional” narratives. Soap opera is “opposed to the classic (male) narrative, which, with maximum action ... speeds its way to the restoration of order” (Modleski, 1982: 106–107). This puts it in direct contrast to the typical male narrative film, because in contrast to a situation “in which the climax functions to resolve difficulties, the mini-climaxes of soap opera function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify the characters’ lives” (Modleski, 1982: 106-107).

The continuous nature of the soap opera texts, as well as the slow pace at which they develop, allows continued exposure to the same characters, which is conducive to identification. This encourages viewers to build relationships with characters and situations over extended time periods. In this regard, Pitout (1996: 175) writes that viewers may recognise aspects of a character as similar to themselves or significant people in their lives, engaging in “parasocial interaction”, watching the action as if playing opposite the character, as if interacting with him or her directly. Ang (2007: 19), for example, posits that seminal characters in *Dallas*, in particular J.R. Ewing (Larry Hagman) and Sue Ellen (Linda Gray), became household names, which still “live on today in the collective cultural memory as emblems of global television history”.

The aforementioned factors differentiate soap opera and its narrative from mainstream genres. While some of its characteristics may be fluid enough to cross boundaries between genres, contextualising soap opera in this way contributes to comprehending the unique characteristics of the genre, which will be used in the analysis of the soap operas relevant to this thesis.

3.3.2 Politics or pleasure?

It has been established that soap opera’s main purposes are to entertain¹⁵ and serve as vehicles for advertising. According to Lamuedra and O’Donnell (2013: 64), the “low social prestige enjoyed by television serials in general ... and the defence mechanisms of irony and appeals to entertainment or escapism, which at least some viewers mobilise to justify watching them” are well known. Together with all other mass media texts, soap operas are popularly viewed as forming part of low culture.

¹⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, I use “entertainment” as an umbrella term that encompasses specific industries, genres and products as well as an overall cultural condition (Van Zoonen, 2005: 9). Moreover, since entertainment is essentially a value ascribed to a cultural product by its consumers, my use of the term also incorporates the conceptualisation of entertainment in terms of its effects or the effects of its consumption. In this regard, Liesbet van Zoonen (2005: 9–10) writes that such a conceptualisation has as its by-product that “genres and fields usually considered its quintessential opposite – information, journalism, and politics – can be seen as entertainment as well, since they too can provide gratification and enjoyment”. In particular, I view entertainment as a crucial ingredient of popular culture.

The issue I wish to address in this section, however, is whether something that is primarily intended to provide pleasure and popularly perceived as low culture can function at a political level in the way Fourie (1984, 2007) and Fiske (1989) claim popular texts to do.

In this regard, Gledhill (2003: 340) (in the same vein as Fourie and Fiske) cautions against the incorrect dismissal of these texts as harmless entertainment without social, moral and cultural implications. According to her,

the term fiction suggests a separation from real life. Stories are by definition only stories: they are not real life. This often leads to the dismissal of popular fictions as “only” or “harmless” entertainment, or worse, time-wasting, money-spinners made by the profit-driven entertainment industries (Gledhill, 2003: 340).

Soap opera’s primary goals cannot be denied, but the question that arises in this section is whether, or rather how, soap operas are relevant to the politics of lived experience. Hence is soap opera relevant to life experience or does it constitute mere entertainment – politics or pleasure?

From a Cultural Studies point of view it needs not be one or the other since entertainment pleasure also has political relevance. In proposing the relevance of soap opera representations to life experience one does not need to deny its primary entertainment value. Gledhill (2003: 343) states the following:

We need to take care in using the term representation, that we do not use it in a limiting way to refer only to the representation of discourses, figures and events in the social world, and neglect the purpose of fiction in producing the pleasures of drama, comedy, melodrama, as well as the pleasures of recognising situations we know from lived experience.

Consequently, I argue that soap opera can be politically, culturally and ideologically relevant as well as (or precisely because of) providing pleasure. Furthermore, this has implications for soap opera’s role in the politics of belonging¹⁶ and the construction of a national imagined community. Van Zoonen (2005: 1) argues in this

¹⁶ For Nira Yuval-Davis (2007: 3), the politics of belonging “comprise of specific projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivity/ies, which are, at the same time, being constructed themselves by these projects in specific ways” and this is crucial, among other things, for any critical political discourse of nationalism.

regard that “[c]itizenship can be pleasurable”,¹⁷ and she identifies the enduring encounters between entertainment and politics as a phenomenon. For her, politics cannot be set apart from the rest of culture, and consequently also not popular culture (Van Zoonen, 2005: 2). According to Van Zoonen (2005: 21), the media, “through its entertainment genres in particular, possibly much more than through its informative programming ... provides narratives and perspectives to make sense of politics”. Below I discuss two separate, yet interlinked ways in which soap operas can be connected to the political, as well as to politics. Firstly, I argue that by appealing to the affective in a variety of ways, it has the power to provide viewers with the tools for involved citizenship¹⁸ and identity construction. Secondly, I argue that soap operas are politically relevant because the conventions of the genre, as well as the actors, sometimes manifest in actual political debates.

On the topic of the civic subject in the media landscape, Peter Dahlgren (2013: 71) writes that the media contributes to the political life of democracies in various ways, even when the contents are not explicitly journalistic, as is the case with soap opera. According to him (2013), the media addresses audiences in a variety of ways which provide them with resources for citizenship. He emphasises that affect is a site, as well as a resource, for the political, and that it constitutes a dimension of public expression and challenges the “traditional view of strict separation between politics and the public, on the one hand, and popular culture and the private on the other” (Dahlgren, 2013:75). For him (2013:75), even though these two domains should not be collapsed into each other, there can be no fixed boundary between politics and popular culture since they flow into each other, particularly through evolving genres and modes of representation in the media. This is supported by Van Zoonen’s (2005:21) view that television is “indeed our prime source for learning about politics, and it provides the instruments for understanding, evaluating and appreciating it”. In this regard, Dahlgren (2013: 76) writes that

¹⁷ It is instrumental here to clarify that I am not conflating the politics of belonging with national identity or citizenship, but that the three concepts are mutually related.

¹⁸ This is closely linked to the important feminist insight that the personal is the political and that, in any domain of life, the private, as well as the public domain is “embedded in power relations and should be analysed as such” (Yuval-Davis, 2007: 3). This is similar to Dahlgren’s (2013) argument about the affective later in this section.

popular culture offers a sense of easy access to symbolic communities, a world of belonging beyond oneself that can at times be seen as preparatory for civic engagement, prefiguring involvement in one's private domain. Thus, popular culture invites us to engage – with both our hearts and minds – in many questions having to do with how we should live and what kind of society we want. It allows us to process issues having to do with conflicting social values, norms, and identities in a turbulent late modern sociocultural milieu. Moreover, many of the themes taken up by popular culture may seem more important and more personally relevant than the agendas on offer from mainstream politics. Finally, popular culture can serve to foster alternative conceptions of what actually constitutes politics and the political, generating reflections and engagement over other kinds of concerns and issues. In short ... affect and pleasure are always potential concerns of – and resources for – citizenship.

As a case in point, Matelski (2010: 188) states that, throughout the 1950s, Fidel Castro was one of serial drama's most ardent fans because of his witnessing the power of soap operas during his stay in the USA years before. "Castro also recognized [sic] that a worldview could be subtly transmitted through serial drama. In the early stages of his revolution, he encouraged writers to use the genre to persuade audiences toward a 'new order' in their country" (Matelski, 2010: 188). Castro's importation (during the 1970s and 1980s) of Brazilian telenovelas is another example of how soap operas are relevant to the nation as a whole. TV-Globo's *La Escrava Isaura* was received with such a positive reaction that electricity rationing was rescheduled to accommodate the programme, and Castro even planned his meetings around the programme's scheduling (Matelski, 2010: 189). Ana M. López (1995: 264) writes that:

For the first time in decades, the nation rallied through fictional serial television: the country literally stood still during each evening's broadcast of the popular Brazilian novela and the ICRT had to arrange a morning re-broadcast to accommodate the demands of night shift workers.

Owing to soap opera's appeal to the affective there are a number of specific ways in which it has the potential to contribute to the political lives of its viewers. According to Horace Newcomb (1974) and Fourie (2007), television, and more specifically, soap operas, are ideally suited to encourage viewer involvement and accordingly, to have

some effect on their viewers. Newcomb (Modleski, 1982: 87) argues that soap opera represents, in some ways, the furthest advance of television art. He writes that for all its stereotypical qualities, soap opera combines, to the highest degree, two of the most important elements of the television aesthetic: “intimacy” and “continuity”. He (Modleski, 1982: 87) states that because of soap opera’s serial form, it offers depictions of people in situations which evolve and change over time allowing for “greater audience involvement, a sense of becoming part of the lives and actions of the characters they see”. Pitout (1996: 175)¹⁹ shares this view in her research on the way in which viewers become involved in a parasocial relationship with the characters and events on the screen as if engaging with real people. If viewers become involved in the way Newcomb and Pitout suggest, it follows that the content of the soap opera may influence their perceptions (Modleski, 1982: 87). Owing to the large audiences reached by these texts, they are powerful tools in creating (or negating) ideas about social values, norms and identities, and they are also related to gender, class and race distinctions. With specific reference to the goals of this thesis, the above implies that soap operas can influence or construct versions of whiteness.

Apart from the intimacy and continuity inherent in soap opera narratives and aesthetics, its structural characteristics also contribute to its potential to change viewers’ perceptions. Some theorists consider an end to be crucial to any narrative. However, critics like Frank Kermode and Walter Benjamin believe that fictive ends are probably “figures of death” (Modleski, 1982: 89). For this reason, Modleski (1982) argues that the continuity of soap opera offers the promise of immortality and eternal return. Consequently, soap operas

present the viewer with a picture of the family, which, though it is always in the process of breaking down, stays together no matter how intolerable its situation may get. Or, perhaps more accurately, the family remains close precisely because it is perpetually in a chaotic state (Modleski, 1982: 90).

¹⁹ Pitout’s work (1996, 1998) on the parasocial and social dimensions on of soap opera viewing is seen to be one of the first South African studies in the field of reception studies on this topic. Pitout conducted a reception analysis of *Egoli-Place of Gold*, one of the first South African soap operas.

This reassurance of the never-ending family would be one example of how soap opera may function at a moral level rather than as mere entertainment.

The intense viewer involvement referred to, as well as Modleski's (1982) and Fourie's (2007) views on the moral implications of soap opera's endlessness and content, relates to Allen's (1989) argument that soap opera functions as something more than pleasure. Allen (1989: 49) writes that, despite its status as an advertising vehicle, soap operas are "progressive texts by virtue of their raising of problems which are seen as relevant" to the lives of the viewers. Matelski (2010: 186), for example, writes that serial dramas are used as educational instruments in Cuba, specifically to promote social awareness on issues such as HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, homophobia and abortion. In the spring of 2006, Cubavisión premiered a primetime serial named *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* (The dark side of the moon), which featured a married man who becomes involved in a gay relationship and later discovers that he is HIV-positive. Moreover, according to the *Miami Herald*, *La Cara Oculta de la Luna* was the most watched television series in Cuban history (Matelski, 2010: 190), proving the popularity of these texts. Two other Cuban telenovelas, aired in 2008, entitled *Polvo en el Viento* (Dust in the wind) and *Mulheres Apaixonadas* (Passionate women) similarly addressed sexual diversity and infidelity "as well as HIV/AIDS, family scandal, prejudice, and discrimination" (Matelski, 2010: 191) and broader social issues such as cultural taboos "including domestic abuse, alcoholism, lesbian relationships, sexual harassment, prostitution, and adoption". Socially contentious issues such as HIV/AIDS, infidelity, incest, inequality, racism, gender roles and gender dominance are a vital part of the content of the community soap genre. The contentious and serious content occasionally grappled with in soap opera gives it the potential to renegotiate, or at the very least comment on, hegemonic orders while simultaneously educating viewers on these issues.

Apart from the subject matter, other factors unique to the genre also function to create the possibility for the genre to critically comment on social issues. Soap opera's predilection for prioritising talk over action is one instance where, for instance, gender roles can be challenged. Although words or language, in

conjunction with reason, are traditionally seen as masculine properties, this is contested in soap operas. Men still do a lot of talking, but the male characters in soap opera tend to be more willing to discuss their feelings, something that is traditionally connoted to the feminine. Fiske (1995: 344) contends that power in soap opera is given a “‘feminine’ inflection” when men talk about their feelings because this produces different gender roles and relationships. Gledhill (2003: 381) summarises this potential of soap opera to negotiate gender roles as follows:

Cutting across the impact of male dominance in any given episode are the consequences of the still equal if not greater number of roles for female characters, of narrative inconclusiveness and reversal, of the role of the audience in extending the fiction beyond the bounds of the text, and the primacy, both textual and extra-textual, in this process of the feminine competence of talk.

Soap operas, however, do not only speak to individual identities. Even though they do not contain specific or explicit references to group identities, soap operas display what Michael Billig (1995) refers to as “banal nationalism”. This refers to everyday representations of the nation which, taken together, build a shared sense of national belonging. Castelló (2010: 208), confirms this in writing that the production of television drama “can reinforce national identities through elements such as language, humour or representation of conflict”. In other words, because of their social proximity, soap operas hold up a mirror, but also reflect the society in which they are broadcast and produced. Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 148-149) similarly point to the role that soap operas play in preserving national identity, arguing that “part of the debate over national identity in relation to broadcasting has rested on the assumption that characteristics of a national culture can be clearly identified in the programmes they broadcast” (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 149). Soap operas, and specifically community soap operas (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998; O’Donnell, 2002), often form a crucial and substantial part of local productions in a specific country, contributing in that way to perceptions surrounding national identity. For Castelló, Dhoest and O’Donnell (2009: 3), the “narrated nation becomes a kind of ‘political stage’ in TV fiction, reconfiguring scenarios, territorial representations, depictions of the population, or linguistic use of characters”.

Apart from all of the above, soap operas are also often used explicitly as tools in political debates. Governments and politicians alike embrace soap operas and soap actors as useful vehicles for their campaigns. Van Zoonen (2005: 20) concretely connects the soap genre to politics when she writes about the “ubiquitous presence of soap opera as a frame of reference both for presenting and understanding politics”. According to her, political parties eagerly incorporate both the soap format and its actors into their political campaigns and coverage. As a case in point she refers to the labour election campaign in Britain, which was backed by a whole range of celebrities, among them actors from soap operas such as *EastEnders*, *Crossroads*, *Hollyoaks* and *Emmerdale*. She claims that this is by no means a British phenomenon and provides additional examples pertaining to America, Germany, Canada and the Netherlands. Closer to home, South African soap operas such as *Isidingo* have been known to include narratives pertaining to voter education. As another example, Van Zoonen (2005: 27–28) cites the Dutch *Volkskrant* describing a complicated tax discussion between the minister of finance and the president of the national bank as a “lovely soap”²⁰ and presenting the different arguments in terms of daily episodes. According to her, “[s]uch use of soap opera in constructing politics testifies to the fact that television culture has become a dominant, if not *the* dominant, means for interpreting social and political life” (Van Zoonen, 2005: 21). For her, nowadays, politics can more easily be described in terms of television genres. Van Zoonen (2005: 34) writes that she reviews some of the articulations of soaps and politics in the hope that some of the soaps’ “miraculous qualities of moving, engaging, and mobilizing [sic] people would transfer to politics”.

If soap opera does function at a political or cultural level relevant to our lived experiences and constructions of our own identities, it follows that it might also reveal something about the way in which whiteness functions as an organising principle in the society that produces and consumes them.

²⁰ It is interesting to note here that soap operas are simultaneously functioning as a means of denunciation and as an instrument of support (Van Zoonen, 2005: 31). Thus, even in its use as a frame for describing political debates, the negative perceptions about the genre (as identified by Lamuedra and O’Donnell (2013) at the beginning of this subsection) are still pervasive, and even instrumental.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was primarily to foster an adequate understanding of soap opera and a general theoretical framework for the genre and how it evolved, according to which soap operas may be analysed in the following chapters.

The origins of soap opera were briefly discussed. The historical overview of the development of the genre hinted at some of the pertinent characteristics of soap operas such as the international flow of the genre, its inherent popularity and the way in which soaps are indigenised and adapted to its context. Even though no absolute definition of the genre exists, it was possible to identify generic characteristics of soap opera such as its format, themes, narrative patterns, characterisation, aesthetic devices and modes of expression.

To ensure a more specified analysis, it was emphasised that even though some generic characteristics make soap opera as a genre identifiable, there is merit in taking into account the diversity and evolution of soap opera forms. In this regard, the subtypes identified by Liebes and Livingstone (1998) (namely, the dynastic, community and dyadic soap operas) were highlighted. Both soap operas relevant to this thesis can be identified as community soap operas (Cf. Chapters 6 and 8).

Related to the above, it is clear that even though there has been some standardisation of format and formula, soap operas have been adopted and adapted to suit the particular public space in which they are produced and viewed. Contrary to views based on theories of “McDonaldization [sic]” (Ritzer, 1993), “Cocacolonization [sic]” or cultural homogenisation, Ang (2007: 24) argues that while

this global capitalist modernity represents an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, it has also spawned the proliferation of new versions of modern culture – including television culture – that stress the significance of particular identities and their difference from hegemonic Americanism. In short, this global culture is characterised by simultaneous homogenisation and heterogenisation, sameness and difference.

She (2007: 25) refers to this process as “glocalisation”, which implies the “indigenisation of imported conventions and genres to suit the cultural tastes, knowledges and concerns of the local”. Castelló (2010: 208) refers to what Buonanno (2008) calls *indigenizzazione* where “productions are not only adopted, but also adapted, while the genres and programmes are attuned, adjusted and modified to local styles”. Buonanno (2008: 88) specifically links the concepts of hybridisation and cultural proximity to this subversive power of soap opera. According to her (2008: 88), these two concepts cooperate in breaking up the alliance between the “‘myth of the uncontaminated culture’ and the ‘threat of imported media’”.

Despite the diversification of the genre, and the indisputable main function of the soap opera to entertain, I therefore argue that the inherent characteristics of the genre situate these texts ideally to present a “slice of life” from the context in which they are created.

The distinction between fact and fiction was mentioned and the term “verisimilitude” was introduced to suggest the alternative, but parallel, world created in soap opera, contributing to soap opera’s potential to educate viewers on pervasive issues, while also providing clues on these issues in the given society at a particular moment in time. I argued that the parasocial relationships that develop between viewers and the characters in soap operas encourage viewers to see these characters as models for behaviour. Furthermore, the fact that the subject positions created in soap operas differ from those created by more “traditional” male narratives as well as the use of irony as a form of cultural capital (Ang, 2007) challenge the notion of soap opera viewers as passive couch potatoes.

In fact, because of its popularity, viewers tend to discuss the narratives in spaces other than where they are viewed, for example, online forums or even social gatherings, resulting in “soap talk”. According to Matelski (2010: 191), “if the true goal is to ‘create conversation’ telenovelas have a proven track record for success”. Contentious topics or themes raised in the course of the narratives thus also make

their way into everyday conversations or other forms of mass media, creating, at the very least, another space for the exploration of these (oftentimes taboo) issues. Castelló (2010: 210) and O'Donnell (1999) refer to this as hypernarrativity, the ability of consumers and producers "to relate the narratives of stories to other texts, framing meaning about reality and society and flowing in other media products and also in social relationships". It is my contention that this also pertains to perceptions (and negotiations) of whiteness.

Furthermore, I contend that the perception of soap opera as a feminine genre taken together with its prevalence in political debates is indicative of its inherent potential to fulfil an ideological role. Van Zoonen (2005: 22) writes in this regard that in the context of the "dominance of masculine metaphors and symbols, the emerging symbolic and metaphoric articulation of soap with politics becomes all the more interesting" since the soap genre is usually considered as appealing primarily to women. This positions soap operas as fundamentally at odds with the generic features of modern politics, which creates a subversive potential in these narratives. According to Van Zoonen (2005: 24), the mere presence and regularity of the soap metaphor in politics is a sign of the crisis of masculine politics. She suggests that the soap metaphor may provide a way of exploring reconciliation between the "antagonistic requirements of popular culture and representative democracy" (2005: 24).

Jim McGuigan (2005: 434) succinctly articulates some of the main arguments I presented in this chapter as follows:

The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspension of disbelief; for example, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and should not do.

All of the above makes soap operas ideal texts to analyse in relation to constructions of whiteness. The cultural proximity characteristic of the genre, together with the unique way in which these texts are indigenised, implies that they have something to say about the community which creates them, and more specifically, the functioning of whiteness in their respective contexts. Moreover, the close interaction with viewers suggests that they play a role in constructing viewers' sense of whiteness which, in turn, has implications for the creation of imagined communities, citizenship and politics of belonging. Thus, like Fourie (1984, 2007), Castelló (2010) and Lamuedra and O'Donnell (2013), I attempt to prove with my analysis (Cf. Chapters 6, 8 and 9) that soap operas can be viewed as cultural resources that contribute to the popular public sphere, as well as the cultural public sphere as this pertains to the construction and maintenance of whiteness.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The way in which a study is conducted is determined by the questions on which it is based. The questions pertinent to this thesis were outlined in detail in Chapter 1 (Cf. page 10) and mainly concern the construction and positioning of whiteness in soap operas, with specific reference to the similarities and differences between these constructions in South African and Flemish soap operas. In order to investigate this, I followed a case study approach to which I added a comparative component with the aim of revealing both international as well as local interpretations and constructions of whiteness in popular television programmes. The goal was to bring into visibility – and critically engage with – the ways in which whiteness evolves to remain hegemonic, both in the South African context specifically, but also in relation to a more globalised one.

Building on my introductory chapter and the research questions discussed there, and taking into account the preceding theoretical and literature review chapters, this chapter unpacks why the study of whiteness (as it pertains to mass media texts such as soap operas) can best be approached from a qualitative research angle that takes particular issue with context. The previously identified research issues and aims dictate the methods and design of the study as well as the sampling methods which are all described in the sections to follow. The choices outlined here should be seen in the wider context of Cultural Studies and Critical Race Studies, but specifically CWS as a theoretical framework (as detailed in Chapter 2). In addition, I describe how the trustworthiness and authenticity of this thesis was ensured. Following the post-modern approach to social sciences which implies that the social scientist is intrinsically linked to his or her social and historical context, this chapter concludes with a section clarifying the role of the researcher in the context of this thesis. Linked to this will be a critical evaluation of the possible ethical considerations inherent in this qualitative project.

4.1 A qualitative paradigm: designing the research approach

This thesis focuses on representations, interpretations and the production of meaning rather than looking for statistics or numerical facts. Thus, drawing on both the phenomenological-interpretivist traditions, as well as critical traditions as meta-theories, it is situated within a qualitative research paradigm. This subsection is devoted to a discussion of the reasons why this paradigm is appropriate to answering questions about the nature and the construction of whiteness in a sample of South African and Flemish soap operas.

According to Earl R. Babbie and Johann Mouton (2012: 53), the term “qualitative research paradigm” refers to a generic research approach in the social sciences where the researcher attempts to study human action from an insider’s perspective in order to describe and understand, rather than explain or predict human behaviour. This confirms Alan Bryman’s (2008: 384) contention that the main pre-occupation of qualitative researchers is an attempt to see through the eyes of the people being studied. Both of the above sources stress the contextual nature of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers have a preference for understanding events, actions or processes in their context. For the qualitative researcher it is only when one understands “events against the background of the whole context and how such a context confers meaning to the events concerned, that one can truly claim to ‘understand’ the events” (Babbie & Mouton, 2012: 272). Since this study posits that mass-produced products or narratives, like soap operas, or more broadly, popular culture, matter greatly in the everyday construction of the national imagination, both in a national and global context, such a contextualised approach is relevant (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7 for more elaborate contextualisation). Coupled with social sciences’ objective of probing at what is beneath the surface appearances of people and their social worlds, in this case particularly as it pertains to constructions and manifestations of whiteness, it seems appropriate that the distinctive research strategy specific to this thesis will therefore be a qualitative one.

Amir Marvasti (2004: 10) emphasises qualitative research's focus on a detailed "description and analysis of the quality, or the substance of the human experience". The interpretivist nature of qualitative research is appropriate to this study since I attempt to understand the social world and how certain narratives or manifestations of identity, particularly white identity, function in a given context. The goal is to contribute to the literature and understanding of whiteness by examining the interpretations represented in products of mass consumption, such as soap operas.

In addition, qualitative research is appropriate because the ontological position described as constructionist may be viewed as one of its distinguishing features. According to Marvasti (2004: 10), it is exactly the analytical distinctions between positivism and constructionism which are at the root of debates on quantitative or qualitative paradigms. Bryman (2008: 366) argues that a constructionist ontological position implies that "social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena 'out there'" that are separate from those involved in its construction. It follows that the constructs created by soap operas are not separate from the lived world and experience of their creators and viewers.

Babbie and Mouton (2012: 53) contend that in the analysis of qualitative data, the emphasis lies on inductive analytical strategies. The inductive nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to generate theory from the actual research – in this case, the analysis of the selected soap operas. The goal will thus be to investigate whiteness and its manifestation in popular soap operas, from the perspective of CWS, with the aim of contributing to the existing body of work on the topic. In other words, the approach followed here includes deductive as well as inductive components.¹

Furthermore, from a qualitative point of view, social reality is perceived as constructed, and therefore social scientific knowledge remains a construct of social

¹ It is necessary to clarify here that although my research is inspired by Grounded Theory, and the goal is to contribute theoretically (through its inductive nature), the situatedness of my thesis within the theoretical framework of CWS means that my approach is not one based purely on Grounded Theory.

inquiry. There can be no independent, social reality that exists outside of human reflection and inquiry. Added to this, Babbie and Mouton (2012: 40) contend that “knowledge and power are closely related and mutually dependent. This means that a naturalist account of objectivity is totally inappropriate for social science”. A qualitative approach may therefore reveal aspects of how whiteness is constructed and how this plays into issues of power and hegemony in our social realities.

Qualitative research subsumes a number of diverse research methods. One of the main research methods associated with qualitative research, and also of relevance to this thesis, is the collection and qualitative analysis of texts and documents (Bryman, 2008: 369), in this case soap operas. Dhoest (2004: 395) describes such qualitative content analysis as a kind of discourse analysis, although he emphasises that it is not discourse in the strict sense “of the analysis of linguistic, spoken or written texts, but in a wider sense of the textual analysis of cultural products, including images, as meaningful discourses”. According to Dhoest (2004: 395), this type of analysis is “useful for identifying representational patterns and themes”. Qualitative research makes it possible to reveal meanings through a detailed immersion in the text, which is also the goal of this thesis. The sections below outline how I will proceed with the collection and interpretation of this data against the backdrop of the larger theoretical frameworks of both CWS and Cultural Studies.

4.2 Sampling

In Chapter 3 it was argued that soap opera may be classified as the world’s most popular form of television drama and that it is a productive area of study for cultural significance, especially “due to the genre’s unique potential to combine global appeal and universal characteristics, exemplified by serial narrative structure and cultural specificity” (Franco, 2001: 450). Its popularity is proven by the abundant press coverage devoted to the genre, often relying on extra-textual information like characters’ and actors’ off-screen lives, or speculation about future storylines (Franco, 2001: 450) as well as the fact that these texts often function as flagship programmes for the channels that broadcast them. Both the introductory chapter as

well as Chapter 3 contain elaborate descriptions of why analysing soap opera narratives in relation to the construction of identities, particularly white identities, is relevant. This section therefore focuses on briefly justifying the reasons for choosing examples of these popular cultural texts from South Africa and Flanders as purposive to the goals of this analysis and clarifies how these samples have been identified.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter (Cf. pages 5), my work on Afrikaans, South African soap opera developed as part of the NRF project researching the televised public sphere and the role of Afrikaans television in identity formation. My interest in introducing a comparative element originated from a ten-month residence in Antwerp, Belgium,² where I had the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the functioning of Flemish popular culture, PSB and television. Moreover, the tangible historical, cultural and linguistic links between some aspects of Flemish and South African society, which I encountered during my stay in Antwerp, made the idea of a comparative analysis evocative. Finally, the importance of PSB and its quest to contribute to a national identity in both contexts reinforced my conviction that a comparative analysis would be viable. The research thus started out with the goal of exploring how an Afrikaans, South African soap opera represents whiteness, and introducing a comparative element made it possible to highlight the particularities of the South African case as well as the commonalities it shares with an international example.

A comparative analysis focusing specifically on whiteness seemed viable precisely because of the possibility to both contrast and compare. On the one hand, whiteness functions completely differently in the two contexts. While it may be a hidden construct in Belgium, it has historically never been that in the South African context. On the other, however, there is an underlying similarity between South

² I spent ten months at the University of Antwerp as a recipient of an Erasmus Mundus, EuroSA scholarship. Erasmus Mundus is a “cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education that aims to enhance the quality of European higher education and to promote dialogue and understanding between people and cultures through cooperation with Third-Countries. In addition, it contributes to the development of human resources and the international cooperation capacity of Higher education institutions in Third Countries by increasing mobility between the European Union and these countries” (EACEA, 2013).

African apartheid (which is responsible for many of the connotations linked to whiteness in South Africa today) and the integration policies in the Netherlands and Belgium, which makes these contexts fertile for the analysis of whiteness. The descriptive concepts *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* described by Philomena Essed and Sandra Trienekens (2008: 57) as “setting apart “US” from “THEM”; the real Dutch (*autochtoon*) from the not-quite-Dutch (*allochtoon*)” is reminiscent of the way in which a similar “us” versus “them” ideology was created during apartheid in South Africa, an ideology which, to some extent, is still visible today. Also, since one of the strategies (as identified by Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Cf. pages 34 and 256 for a more detailed description) used to maintain white hegemony, in South Africa as well, is claiming to have European roots rather than acknowledging whiteness, comparing manifestations of the construct in these two contexts made sense.

There are a number of reasons for the specific choice to focus on *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. Firstly, only soap operas created and distributed for and by the public broadcaster of each particular region were included. Because the production of television texts in the PSB context is governed by specific mandates relating to nation building (Cf. the discussion of South African and Flemish PSB in Chapters 5 and 7, respectively), it is easier to interrogate their representation of the nation and the imagined communities they construct, also as it pertains to whiteness. Both soap operas claim (and are mandated to from a PSB perspective) to represent a diverse population, even though diversity in these contexts, and by implication the representations thereof, differs in a number of ways. The fact that texts created for the PSB in both contexts are mandated to reflect the society in which they are produced in some way, made both texts relevant for my analysis.³ Choosing texts from the PSB context ensured a focus on the construction of a specific imagined community, an element that is central this thesis. Specifically in relation to soap

³ In contrast to this, texts created for the pay-to-view or commercial channels in South Africa and Flanders are not required to adhere to the same stringent specifications which make it more challenging to pinpoint their stances on the representation of diversity. Soap operas created for *KykNet* (an Afrikaans pay-to-view channel on the South African DSTV platform), for example, are not compelled to adhere to the public broadcaster’s commitment to nation building.

operas, Franco (2001: 452) argues that it seems as though the public service has discovered the potential of soap opera in terms of nation and image building.

In South Africa, there were (at the time of writing) five local⁴ soap operas broadcast by the PSB, but *7de Laan* was the only Afrikaans one, which made it an obvious choice given the parameters of the NRF project within which the thesis was conceptualised. For the purposes of the project, we proposed that the position and role of Afrikaans television in South Africa's media should be explored "within the context of the competing pressures of tradition, cultural maintenance, and other pressures towards the change and democratisation", since in a society as driven towards change as South Africa, it is important that the media be analysed as institutions that could contribute to "national (and transnational) processes of political liberalization [sic] and democratization [sic], as potential agents of national solidarity, cultural convergence, and social transformation" (Milton, 2006: 5–6) In the case of Flanders, *Thuis* was the only soap opera adhering to similar criteria.⁵

Besides *7de Laan* fitting into the scope of the larger NRF-funded project examining Afrikaans on television, the soap opera's predominant use of Afrikaans is significant for reasons pertaining specifically to my goal of investigating whiteness. Afrikaans as a language is intimately connected to whiteness. Even though white South Africans are not the only mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans, and the language has strong indigenous roots, in the early 1900s it was re-conceptualised as a "white man's language".⁶ The language is, furthermore, politically and ideologically connected to whiteness owing to apartheid and its concomitant language policies – hence the reference to Afrikaans as the "language of the oppressor". Moreover, since the

⁴ These soap operas include *Generations* on SABC1, *7de Laan*, *Isibaya* and *Muvhango* on SABC2 and *Isidingo* on SABC3. *e.tv*, the independent, free-to-view channel hosts *Scandal!* and *Rhythm city*, while *kykNet* (the pay-to-view Afrikaans channel linked to *M-Net* and housed on the *DStv* platform) hosts *Villa Rosa* and *Binnelanders*. *7de Laan* is thus the only Afrikaans language soap opera hosted by the PSB.

⁵ The only other local soap opera broadcast on Flemish television at the time of writing is *Familie*, which is hosted by the commercial channel *VTM*.

⁶ In 1905, for example, journalist Gustav Preller "set about reinventing Afrikaans as a 'white man's language'". He aimed to eradicate the stigma of its "coloured; ties by substituting Dutch words for those with non-European origins". (The history of Afrikaans [sa]).

Afrikaans debate⁷ is often driven by white Afrikaner cultural organisations, there is a tendency to confuse Afrikaans as “belonging to” white Afrikaners. Considering the goal of this thesis as it relates to whiteness, choosing the Afrikaans soap opera is therefore the obvious choice. Afrikaans as the primary language of the soap opera, as well as its channel positioning (Cf. footnote on page 138), further situates *7de Laan* ideally for analysing it as a conveyor of possible identities and interests relating to whiteness in South Africa. Moreover, the palpable link between Afrikaans and Flemish⁸ situates the two soap operas favourably in terms of comparison.

In addition to the similarities mentioned above, and relating to their status as PSB soap operas, both of the soap operas chosen for this analysis can be classified as community soap operas⁹ as defined by Liebes and Livingstone (1998) (see Figure 4.1 below for Liebes and Livingstone’s depiction of the family structure of the community soap opera) and discussed at length in Chapter 3 (Cf. page 58-59). Franco (2001: 449) classifies the community sub-genre as characterised by social commitment and realism and identifies it as the PBS’s privileged soap model, as well as the culturally most specific one.

⁷ When speaking of the “Afrikaans debate” I am referring to the debate about Afrikaans on South African television. Much attention is paid to its diminishing role, focusing on the link between language and cultural identity, on the one hand, and arguments for the “constitutional empowerment of all South Africa’s indigenous languages” on the other (Milton, 2006: 5).

⁸ Afrikaans is a daughter language of Dutch and an estimated 90% of its vocabulary has a Dutch origin. It originated around 1685 as a new South African dialect, colloquially referred to as “Kitchen Dutch”. Afrikaans also has lexical and syntactical roots in other languages such as Malay, Koi, Portuguese, German, French, English and some of the indigenous African languages, but there is a large degree of mutual intelligibility between Dutch and Afrikaans, particularly in the written form.

⁹ As mentioned previously, not all of the local soap operas screened by the SABC adhere to the characteristics of community soap operas, which therefore disqualify them from this comparison. Both *Generations* and *Isidingo*, for example, display inherent characteristics of the dynastic model. Although the subgenres should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, and all of the soap operas in question can be argued to be socially and culturally specific, most of the other local soap operas also incorporate more of the dynastic and dyadic characteristics than *7de Laan*. While *Isibaya* and *Muvhango* do exhibit some character traits linked to the community soap opera, they were disregarded because of the fact that they are broadcast in African languages, with English subtitles, which made them less comparable with the Dutch language *Thuis*.

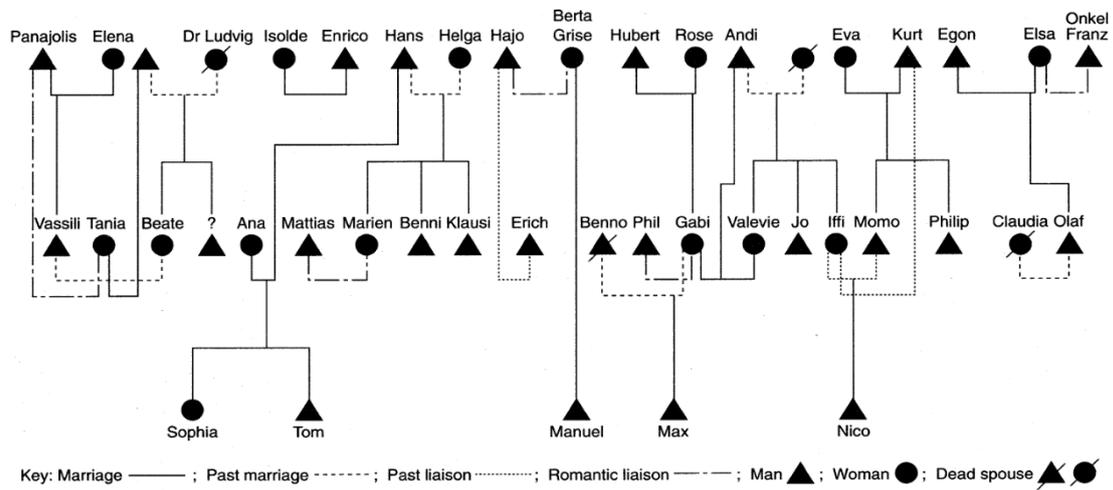


Figure 6 Romantic and family ties in *Lindenstrasse* (1993)

Figure 4.1: Liebes and Livingstone’s (1998: 150) graphic depiction of the family structure in the community soap opera

In this regard, Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 159) aptly ask how the adoption of a particular model may reflect the cultural and/or institutional structure of broadcasting in a specific context. They further contend that a “close look at the different soap operas suggest that both the choice of a particular soap opera model and the way in which each pattern is elaborated is likely to be dependent on the different cultural settings in which it is produced” (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 159). It stands to reason that a comparison of these two soap operas might reveal something about their cultural setting and consequently also the construction of whiteness in these contexts.

Apart from being aired by local public broadcasters and being classified as community soap operas, both of the soap operas chosen for the comparative analysis can be classified as successful soap operas. Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 157) define a successful soap as one “which has a relatively long history and high ratings”. Both of the soap operas mentioned above adhere to this definition since they have both been on the air for more than a decade and consistently score some of the highest audience ratings in their particular contexts.¹⁰ *Thuis* was launched on

¹⁰ South African soap operas are consistently featured on the list of “Most watched shows” compiled by the South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF) and MarkLives. In April 2014, for example, *7de Laan* was number 21 on the most watched national shows (SAARF: 2014). It should be

the 23 December 1995. It is aired on weekdays (interrupted by a three-month summer break every year) and continues to be one of the most popular local television programmes in Flanders today. Similarly, *7de laan*, aired its first episode in April 2000 and it remains one of South Africa's most popular locally produced soap operas to date. A thick description of both of these soap operas will be provided as part of the analysis in Chapters 5 and 7.

In summation then, *Thuis* and *7de Laan* were identified as suitable for my analysis because of the similarities they display in terms of situatedness as PSB texts, language use, sub-genre and subject matter, positioning and popularity.

In my attempt to gain a better comprehension of how whiteness is constructed in contemporary soap operas from different contexts, non-probability, specifically purposive, sampling was employed to select examples of whiteness as they manifest in the selection of episodes. Furthermore, units of analysis will be selected in terms of their perceived relevance to the specific research questions to be answered.

Since data gathering took place in the specific contexts relevant to each soap opera, the time frame from which the purposive selections were made differ. *Thuis* was recorded for the period between January to May of 2012, while I was living and working in Antwerp, Belgium. *7de Laan*, however, was recorded for the period between January and May of 2013 upon my return.

4.3 Research methods and strategies of analysis

In order to elucidate and deconstruct the manifestations and narratives of whiteness in popular culture, I conducted two consecutive case studies, each focusing on one of the pertinent soap operas. According to Wester et al. (2006: 600), the goal of a case study is to describe social processes and the factors relating to them. In this

noted that *7de Laan* is not the most popular soap opera in South Africa, but taken together with the other factors identified, its popularity does justify my choice of *7de Laan* as the text to analyse.

case, the focus falls on constructions of whiteness, the factors that might influence these constructions and perceptions relating to them.

The primary importance of the case studies in this thesis, however, lies in the comparative, controlled component of the analysis. After the initial case study of the South African case, a comparative controlled case study focusing on the Flemish case follows. Findings relating to the construction and manifestation of whiteness in these contexts will then be formulated on the basis of these two case studies. This sub-section describes the way in which the controlled case comparison is applied and outlines the strategies I employ.

4.3.1 Literature review

A crucial part of the conceptualisation process involved in case study research is the construction of a framework. In such a construction, the literature review plays a decisive part.

The first subquestion (Cf. page 10) concerns the origin and history of the theoretical approach of CWS and how it is relevant in the South African context, specifically pertaining to the analysis of mass media texts like soap operas. To answer this question and to contextualise the theoretical approach to the comparative analysis, as well as the wider context of Cultural Studies as the theoretical base of the thesis, the first research strategy for gathering data was an extensive literature review. The literature review also serves as a source of data.

A seminal part of said literature review addressed the issue of whiteness, its history and, most notably, the history and nature of CWS (Cf. Chapter 2) and functions as the theoretical foundation of the thesis. This was approached by not only looking at the international roots of CWS, but also its manifestation and significance in the South African context.

A similarly crucial part of the literature review deals with soap opera texts, their specific characteristics and format, and research conducted on the social significance of these texts (Cf. Chapter 3). The goal of this part of the literature review is to situate this thesis within the larger body of work on television, and specifically soap opera. To this end, reference is made not only to international research on soap opera, but also, more specifically, South African and Flemish research on the topic (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7). Furthermore, the literature reviewed on this topic elucidates characteristics of soap opera which inform the case studies and comparative analysis in subsequent chapters.

Even though a controlled case study does not imply equal knowledge about the contexts of both cases, a literature review on the Flemish context and Flemish public media is crucial to contextualise the analysis of *Thuis*. Both of the case studies are thus introduced by means of literature reviews on the national and media contexts in which they are created (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7).

4.3.2 The case study(ies)

Since the case study makes up a basic component of the controlled case comparison, this subsection is devoted to briefly looking at the defining characteristics of case studies before venturing into a validation of the choice to use a controlled case comparison.

Roger Pierce (2008: 51) writes that simply put, a case study refers to a “sample of one event, instance, state or sub-unit at one point in time”, and that it may be considered an essential building block of empirical research. For Robert K. Yin (2003: 13), a case study is an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. For the purposes of this thesis, two case studies were conducted, each comprising an analysis of five months worth of the soap operas in question. The event, instance or subunit Pierce (2008) refers to

was the chosen soap operas and the contemporary phenomenon Yin (2003) refers to was representations, constructions and manifestations of whiteness.

As mentioned previously, contextualisation was a key part of both case studies since it seems that the boundaries between constructions of whiteness and the contexts in which it is constructed are not always explicit. This thesis endeavours to empirically investigate the contemporary phenomenon of whiteness as it manifests in the South African and Flemish popular cultural contexts. Like Wester et al. (2006) and Babbie and Mouton (2012: 281), I emphasise that the interaction of the study unit with its context is a key component of an intensive case study. Thick descriptions of both contexts therefore make up a seminal part of the study.

Owing to the many variables and points of interest, this case study cannot be connected absolutely to one specific research technique, but should rather be viewed as a research strategy or approach which involves the simultaneous analysis of a number of relevant factors in order to understand their interrelatedness as well as their relationship to their specific context (Wester et al., 2006: 617). To this end, the case studies in this thesis were conducted through a multimethod approach which is outlined throughout this section and the sections to follow.

In line with the inductive approach propagated in qualitative research, case studies have a potential for theory development. In this case, the goal was to contribute not only to the development of CWS in the South African context, but also to the larger body of work on whiteness globally. The thesis, similarly, speaks to work done on the soap genre, specifically as it pertains to identity construction and the indigenisation of genres.

Pierce (2008: 53-54) cautions, however, that the great weakness of a single case study is that its generalisability remains unproven. According to him, one solution to this problem might be to compare two or more cases in an effort to identify causal variables which cannot be identified from a single case. Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley (2000: 147) define the comparative method as the social sciences' answer

to controlled experiments and describe it as sociological method “*par excellence* for the formulation of definitive theories ... what experiment is to the natural sciences, the comparative method is in the social sciences”. Added to this, Wester et al. (2006: 620) identify the following functions possibly fulfilled by conducting a case study or studies: exploration, description and understanding. For the purposes of this thesis, all three of these functions are applicable. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the manifestations of whiteness in popular culture by exploring and describing its representation in selected soap opera texts. More precisely, the comparative case study in this thesis can be used to understand one particular “‘cultural configuration’ [in this case whiteness in South Africa] ... and comparing other similar configurations [whiteness in Flanders] with it, in order to test the correctness and sufficiency of the interpretation” (Bullock & Trombley, 2000: 147).

In an effort to achieve the above-mentioned, the particular case study design I chose is what Wester et al. (2006) call a controlled case comparison, or more precisely a “gecontroleerde casevergelijking” (See Figure 4.2, page 96). The next subsections are devoted to a justification and elaboration of my choice to conduct comparative research, the choice of this specific design and an explanation of how this was applied to my particular topic.

4.3.3 Cross-national comparative research: the controlled case comparison

According to Jay G. Blumler, Jack M McLeod and Karl E. Rosengren (1992: 8), comparative research

can pose challenges to scholars’ preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting ... [but its contribution] is not confined only to testing, validating and revising existing theory. It also has a more creative and innovative role – opening up new avenues.

To this Livingstone (2003: 477) adds that that the phenomenon of globalisation and the “concomitant rise of globalization [sic] theory” is another of the main reasons why researchers in media, communication and Cultural Studies increasingly find themselves initiating/being invited to participate in multinational comparative

Figuur 13.2 Vormen van case-vergelijking

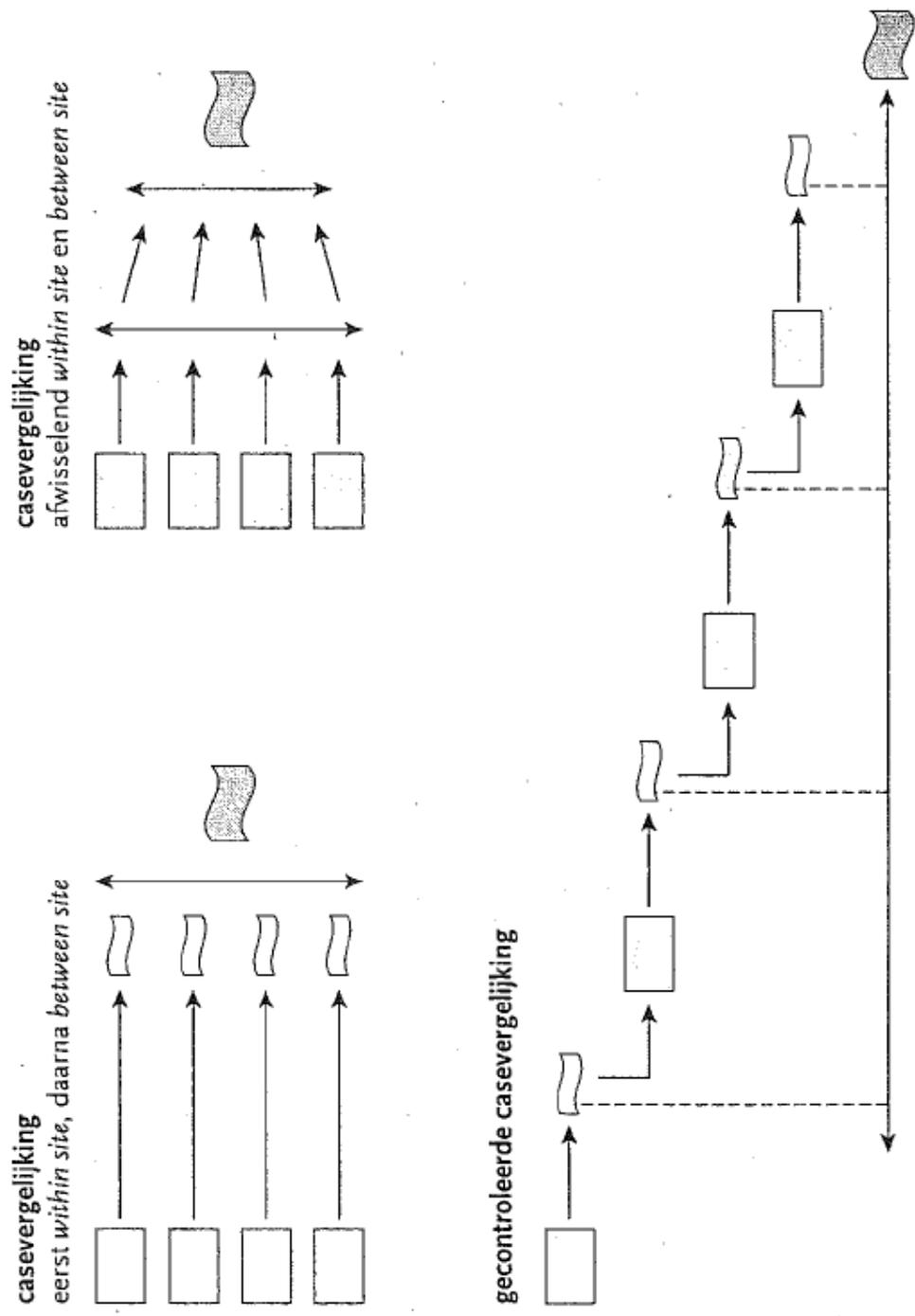


Figure 4.2: The controlled case comparison (Wester et al., 2006: 628)

projects. She (2003: 478) contends that, contrary to debating the difficulties of this approach, one might even argue that the decision not to conduct cross-national comparative research in a time of globalisation requires just as much justification as the choice to do it. Charles Mills (2008: 100) echoes this call for comparative research when he claims that comparison, specifically in qualitative research, is inescapable.

The three statements provided above already present a compelling argument in favour of using a comparative approach. Added to this, Livingstone (2003: 479) lists a number of aims which might be met by conducting comparative research. These include the following:

improving understanding of one's own country; improving understanding of other countries; testing a theory across diverse settings; examining transnational processes across different contexts; examining the local reception of imported cultural forms; building abstract universally applicable theory; challenging claims to universality; evaluating scope and value of certain phenomena; identifying marginalized [sic] cultural forms; improving international understanding; and learning from the policy initiatives of others.

Considering the main research question of this thesis, namely "How is whiteness constructed and positioned in the South African soap opera, *7de Laan*, and the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*, and what are the implications of these constructions for local as well as global discourses on whiteness, particularly in the media?" it is obvious that a number of Livingstone's (2003) aims are applicable here. Improving general comprehension of South Africa is certainly key to understanding not only how, but also why, representations of whiteness are the way they are here. Furthermore, improving understanding of other countries (in this instance, Belgium, specifically Flanders) could be instrumental in testing the representation of whiteness across diverse settings which might ultimately contribute to building abstract, globally applicable, theory whilst simultaneously challenging claims to universality. Finally, this will hopefully contribute to evaluating the scope and value of the phenomenon of whiteness. These specific aims also dictate that the comparative research applied here will be cross-national.

Livingstone (2003: 483-486), moreover, uses Kohn's (1989) typology to identify four approaches to cross-national comparison: the nation as the object of study, the nation as context of the study, the nation as unit of analysis and the nation as component of a larger international or transnational system. The aim of this thesis was to adopt an approach that could be situated somewhere between what Kohn and Livingstone (2003) coin as the "nation as context of the study" and the "nation as unit of analysis". The second model identified by Kohn "tests the hypothesized [sic] generality of findings across nations in order to support claims regarding an abstract or universal phenomenon" (Livingstone, 2003: 484). The third approach can be seen as a multidimensional version of the second approach listed above, insofar as "an abstract, cross-national theory is sought and tested. However, this theory also seeks to understand the diversity of different national contexts, achieving this by re-presenting the specificity of each country using a common conceptual language" (Livingstone, 2003: 484). Related to this is Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges"¹¹ or the "idea that meanings are often embedded in local, national, and global contexts". In other words, representations of whiteness in South African soap opera are compared to those in Flemish soap opera using a controlled comparison with the goal of testing to what extent representations of whiteness are different or similar in differing contexts.

Even though a comparative case study seems to be the answer to the aims of this thesis, a number of criticisms or anticipated difficulties need to be taken into account when considering this approach.

Cross-cultural comparisons are often criticised for producing measurements out of context or asserting "methodological and/or theoretical universalism at the cost of recognizing [sic] cultural specificity" (Livingstone, 2003: 479). Related to this, some

¹¹ Donna Haraway (1988: 578) questions the notions of objectivity, realism and truth claims which she perceives as a threat to our "collective historical subjectivity and agency and our 'embodied' accounts of the truth". She suggests "situated knowledge" as a viable alternative encapsulating specificity and difference. She argues for a practice of objectivity which "privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing". For Haraway (1988: 578-589), positioning is key to grounding knowledge, she stresses the politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating "where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge".

critics argue that searching for difference only exacerbates national stereotypes and runs the risk of overstating homogeneity at the loss of heterogeneity (Livingstone, 2003: 479). She (2003: 491) contends that this might be countered by an attempt to “balance and interpret similarities and differences while avoiding banalities and stereotypes”, and this is certainly my aim in the comparative aspect of this thesis.

Mills (2008: 101) identifies a number of additional problems encountered in conducting comparative research. According to him, case selection and sampling pose one such challenge. Folk wisdom indeed cautions against the random comparison of apples with oranges (Hofstede, 1998). Motivations for case selection and sampling are discussed in detail in 4.2 in an effort to address these anticipated difficulties of comparing two texts from disparate contexts. I contend that South Africa and Flanders, but specifically *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, are sufficiently similar and different to make a comparative analysis, which aims to compare as well as contrast, viable.

A second hurdle Mills (2008) identifies relates to scale. He contends that a large number of case studies run the risk of producing superficial results, while the choice to include only a few units creates the possibility of having too many comparative characteristics and too few cases to effectively examine them. He notes that among “other issues is the issue of how to deal with large comparative differences across groups such as variation in cultural norms or the value of certain objects or meaning attributed to different aspects across groups and societies” (Mills 2008: 101). As a solution to these anticipated difficulties, Mills (2008) suggests using “thick description” or rich data, a goal which is addressed in the literature review and contextual introductions mentioned in 4.3.1 (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7).

Moreover, one needs to acknowledge the difficulty of using the nation as a unit of analysis. Nations, in themselves, are not self-contained, closed or homogeneous, but consist rather of multiple cultures variously displaying diasporic and global trends. Livingstone (2003: 478–480) writes as follows in this regard:

[f]ollowing Appadurai's (1996) formulation in terms of transnational "scapes" – mediascapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes and financescapes – analysis is required of flows and networks, not geographically located and bound communities ... yet notwithstanding the onward march of globalization [sic], it is surely still defensible to claim that nation-states continue to serve as convenient shorthand for distinctive histories, cultures and policy environments.

However, while numerous critics argue that "societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable" (Chisholm, 1995: 22), Livingstone (2003: 483) contends that "whether implicitly or explicitly, research uses conceptual categories to assert distinctions", and that following this argument, "leads one to question the legitimacy of single-nation studies". She refers to this as the "apparent impossibility and yet surely also the necessity of cross-national research". Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, South Africa and Flanders function as broad conceptual categories within which I use two linguistically defined segments of the "nation" as units of analysis, while at the same time remaining sensitive to Arjun Appadurai's (1996) call for analyses that are not geographically bound.

With this in mind, and perhaps in an effort to address some of these inherent difficulties, this thesis comprises two separate case studies which are compared hierarchically. More precisely, the analysis part of the thesis takes the form of a controlled case comparison. Wester et al. (2006: 628) describe a controlled case comparison as a study in which the two different cases are investigated one after the other. The importance of this approach lies in the fact that the results drawn from the first case study are processed and then applied in the next study (See Figure 4.2). A controlled case comparison can therefore not be viewed as a series of independent, single, case studies. The initial analysis of the manifestation of whiteness and narratives of whiteness in South African soap opera thus informs the analysis of the Flemish case. According to Bryman (2008: 387), "conducting qualitative research in more than one setting can be helpful in identifying the significance of context and the ways in which it influences behaviour and ways of thinking". A controlled comparative approach might therefore make it possible to draw preliminary conclusions about whether the ways in which whiteness functions

in South African texts are unique or similar to the ways it functions elsewhere, or more precisely, which aspects of the manifestation are unique to this context. The risk of ending up with superficial results (as identified by Mills, 2008, above) is avoided by using only two case studies. In addition, the particular model I chose does not ask for an equal comparison of both contexts, but rather one that builds on the primary analysis which guides the comparative characteristics I focus on, avoiding the pitfall Mills (2008) identifies in using only two cases.

Like the choice to do a comparative study, the choice to specifically use a controlled case comparison should be based on the problem statement of a given project (Wester et al., 2006: 629). When the goal of the research project is to attempt to gain some insight into a given phenomenon by looking at different cases in which said phenomenon manifests, a comparative case study is a viable methodological approach. Since the goal of this thesis is to investigate the manifestation of whiteness in popular soap opera narratives, specifically in South Africa, but also in the broader context of a globalised world, this method proves to be a feasible approach. The controlled case comparison is not an option when the goal of the research is mere comparison because both cases are not analysed in equal depth (Wester et al., 2006: 629). This approach attempts instead to determine the social structures represented in soap operas, asking questions about how these social networks compare cross-culturally and whether there are national differences (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 157).

There is no standard procedure for the gathering and analysis of data for the purposes of a controlled case comparison. Moreover, considering the amount of available data, organising the findings can pose a serious challenge. The goal therefore is to develop clear conceptual categories providing a focus for the findings. Even though it is crucial to keep in mind that the analysis will be dynamic and might evolve organically, some preliminary categories in this study included power structures, social locus and gender relations. According to Milton (2006: 2), in South Africa, four important codifiers of cultural identity emerge in the media's construction of a national, South African identity, that is, class, race, language and

gender. While these are not the only markers of cultural identity, for the purposes of the NRF project, we argued for the centrality of these concepts in the context of South Africa “as Afrikaans television often employs a lens of class, race, language and gender to visually and linguistically codify the essence of Afrikaans identity” (Milton, 2006: 2). Guided by this, as well as a preliminary content analysis of the South African case, the following categories emerged and, consequently, guided the analysis of the Flemish soap opera: setting and community (the construction of social reality in the soap opera), language use and the representation of diversity and difference. This broad structure was applied as the underlying analytical model to Chapters 6, 8 and 9.

I argue that one possible method of analysis that might prove successful in achieving Wester et al. (2006)’s goals of exploring, describing and understanding the phenomenon of whiteness, is narrative textual analysis. My specific approach to narrative analysis is explained below.

4.3.4 Narrative textual analysis

For the purposes of identifying and investigating the conceptual categories referred to above, narrative analysis was chosen as a suitable approach. This approach entails a variety of different methods, mainly concerned with the identification and analysis of stories that people tell or employ in an effort to organise or understand their lives and the worlds they live in. According to Bryman (2008: 556), this is an “approach to the elicitation and analysis of data that is sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as tellers of stories about their lives or events around them, detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts”. Brown (1997: 111) asserts that, narrative is the “mode of discourse through which human action is interpreted as a meaningful agency”. Jerome Bruner (2001: 25), in turn, suggests that the “actions” recaptured, as well as the order in which this is done, help to create an identity. The narrator thus chooses a specific sequence of specific events, which creates an identity. He refers to this “action” as the “why tell” function of narrative (Bruner, 2001: 25). André P. Brink (2003) contends that any

storyteller or historiographer makes a selection out of reality when narrating. The narrator thus selects from reality that which is endowed with exceptionality from a specific point of view and, in so doing, constructs an identity. Paul Ricoeur's (Brown, 1997: 113) definitions of narrative and identity are meaningful to my investigation into the role of narrative in constructing identity, and he states the following in this regard:

Narrative is that form of discourse that represents human action in relation to given problematic situations. To follow a story is to recognise the sequence of events and actions as displaying a particular direction, in which the intentional human response to a situation "brings the story to a conclusion"... Ricoeur contends that action is that aspect of human behaviour that can be recollected in stories whose function, in turn, is to provide an identity to the actor. Identity is established through an interpretation of who acts in the narrative.

Narrative analysis¹² is often used to refer to both an approach to the examination of the storied nature of people's lives as well as the sources themselves – that is, the stories people tell (Bryman, 2008: 553). For the purposes of this thesis, soap opera narratives will be regarded as the sources from which I attempt to examine the storied nature of our lives as conceptualised by Bryman (2008) and Brown (1997) above.

Catherine K. Riessman (2008: 540) writes that narrative analysts ask the following questions:

For whom was the story constructed and for what purpose? How is it composed? What cultural resources does it draw on or take for granted? What storehouse of cultural plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counternarratives?

An attempt to answer Riessman's (2008) question, as it relates to the narratives of *Zde Laan* and *Thuis*, makes up a central part of my analysis (Cf. Chapters 6, 8 and 9).

¹² The work of Russian formalists, specifically Vladimir Propp, and the influence it had on narrative analysis is acknowledged here. Even though the application of narrative analysis used in this thesis does not adhere specifically to the principles Propp and his contemporaries identified, it certainly has its roots in the work of these Russian formalists.

For Bryman (2008: 553), in turn, while there is arguably little consensus on exactly what narrative analysis entails,

at the very least it entails a sensitivity to: the connections in people's accounts of past, present, and future events and states of affairs; people's sense of their place within those events and states of affairs; the stories they generate about them; and the significance to context for the unfolding of events and people's sense of their own role within them.

Taking into account Riessman's (2008) and Bryman's (2008) conceptualisations, narrative analysis in this thesis will be approached as a sort of ethnographical observation of the stories told, or of the life-worlds, of the soap opera. Hence the decision that the first conceptual category in the analysis pertains to the construction of social and cultural reality in the soap opera text. Liebes and Livingstone (1994) believe that it "makes sense to study social relations and cultural identity in soaps by examining the ways in which the society within the soap functions on a micro-level". They start by charting the family network and romantic relationships as the social context of the soap opera in order not to impose their own analytical categories, suggesting that the appropriate way to observe characters is in the context of their relationships and the rules that govern them (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 155). See, in this regard, Figure 4.1. For Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 155), their

ethnographic approach does not regard the society portrayed in the soap opera as mimetic, as a realistic portrayal of the society in front of the screen. Rather ... [they] analyse the characters, narratives and situations of the soap opera as they are established and evolve over the lengthy course of a programme's own history, in order to reveal the agenda of concerns, values and metanarratives of the soap opera. Based on what audience researchers have learned of soap opera audiences in terms of their viewing resources, motivations and contexts, this agenda of concerns, values and metanarratives may be seen as indicative of the agenda of the society which views the soap opera. In short, while any simple mapping of the soap world on to "real world" is to be avoided, media texts of diverse genres have always been read as revealing the society which produces these views.

The aim was thus to analyse the soap operas by using the ethnographic approach referred to above in an effort to reveal the operation of the society in which these

representations are produced. However, from a Cultural Studies perspective, a narrative textual analysis alone cannot provide a sufficient basis for conclusions, and the social situations in which production takes place should also be taken into account. While there is room for the analysis of a number of factors or characteristics in a case study, it is still necessary to study these not only in relation to each other, but also in relation to the wider context (Wester et al., 2006: 600). To this end, the thick descriptions of both the broader contexts of South Africa and Flanders, as well as their respective PSB contexts function as backgrounds which informed the analysis.

Franco's (2001: 449) comparative analysis of *Thuis* and *EastEnders* is instrumental in describing the application of narrative analysis relevant here. She (2001: 449) identifies the following factors as being crucial to her comparative study of two soap operas: the "construction of community, social class and gender, as well as thematic preoccupations and a narrative/ideological analysis of representative storylines" in an attempt to identify the unarticulated givens of the soap operas' social structure as being indicative of the agenda of the society that watches these soap operas. According to this, the preliminary aspects and subthemes that are relevant to the narrative analysis are as follows: a map of the family network and romantic relationships, the construction of social and cultural reality through the settings and the communities in the soap opera, language and the representation of diversity and difference. It was my contention that the analyses of these conceptual categories allows for the identification of broad patterns of representation which will fit into even broader observations on the manifestations of whiteness.

4.4 Trustworthiness and authenticity

Owing to the nature of qualitative research, issues such as validity and reliability are not as absolute as in the case of a quantitative approach. For example, since numerical measurement is not a major preoccupation of qualitative research, measuring its validity could be problematic. There are numerous debates on this subject. Some researchers suggest that reliability and validity should be adapted for

the specific purposes of qualitative research, while others suggest alternative criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research (Bryman, 2008: 376). Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln (1994), for example, are critical of the view that there are any absolute truths about the social world, and rather support the idea that several accounts are possible. Since they believe no single or absolute account of social reality to be feasible, they suggest trustworthiness and authenticity as better suited alternatives to the above-mentioned concepts. Bryman (2008: 382), in turn, refers to “subtle realism” which entails recognising that we cannot be absolutely certain about the truth of any account, “since we have no completely incontrovertible way of gaining direct access to the reality on which it is based ..., [t]herefore ..., we must judge the validity of the claims ... on the basis of the adequacy of the evidence offered in support of them”. This implies that a given account may be viewed as valid if it accurately represents those features of the phenomena it intends to describe or explain.

Hence the aim of this thesis is to adhere to the principles of trustworthiness and authenticity by making use of the strategies highlighted below.

Firstly, the aim is to be credible, dependable and confirmable. Since there can be several possible accounts of a particular aspect of social reality, it is crucial that the account the researcher arrives at is plausible and feasible. This is possible by adhering to the underlying idea of Münchhausen’s objectivity which is that of doing justice to the object of study, as attempted throughout (Babbie & Mouton, 2012: 309). Secondly, linked to the emphasis placed on context earlier in this chapter, a vital aspect of ensuring trustworthiness is to achieve transferability by ensuring that a thick description is provided. This is accomplished by detailed descriptions of the data in context (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7), also in the literature review chapters (Cf. Chapters 2 and 3) (Babbie & Mouton 2012; Bryman, 2008). The choice of sampling method contributes further to the trustworthiness of the study. According to Livingstone (2003: 492), different scholars make different choices, but the crucial factor to consider is whether one is able to explicate and justify the choice. Sampling and the motivation for the choices made was detailed in section 4.2. While my

sampling choices are clearly outlined, I also acknowledge that no single comparative study can produce a complete or comprehensive account. In addition, triangulating data, collecting information on the constructions of whiteness from different sources and using different methods will contribute to the credibility of the research and the conclusions drawn. My findings are tested according to how they deviate from or fit into previous knowledge, research and theories, as well as how the comparison of the two cases confirms or negates them. While my goal is not to generalise my findings, indicating some links between the findings and previous knowledge on the subject validates them.

Even though qualitative analysis is not, and does not aim to be, objective, the study proposed here can be classified as unobtrusive, and therefore poses little risk of ethical complications. Data collected for the purposes of this thesis will consist exclusively of existing literature and the actual texts under discussion, which means that nobody runs the risk of being subjected to unethical research practices. Since in my role as the researcher, I do not intrude on the object of study while researching the particular phenomenon of whiteness, this study can be typified as unobtrusive research employing unobtrusive measures. Babbie and Mouton (2012: 375) define unobtrusive measures as “data gathered by means that do not involve the direct acquisition of information from research subjects. It can be said to be non-reactive in nature, which thus avoids problems caused by a researcher’s presence in the field”. Because this thesis will mainly make use of narrative textual analysis, the researcher’s presence can cause no problems in the field.

Central to considerations relating to the contextual nature of the research, as well as Bryman’s “subtle realism” and Münchhausen’s objectivity, is the role a researcher plays in any qualitative study.

4.5 Role of the researcher

From the viewpoint of the post-modern approach to social theory and the inevitable link between the researcher and his or her social and historical contexts, any form of

value-free social inquiry would be impossible. This is in line with feminism's challenging of the assumption that the social identity of the observer is irrelevant to the quality and results of the research process (Babbie & Mouton, 2012: 38) and can be linked to Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledge" as discussed earlier (Cf. page 98). The subjectivity of the researcher is thus viewed as a crucial part of the research and its outcomes.

In line with this view, I acknowledge my identity as a white, heterosexual, Afrikaans, South African female. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the fact that I was born during apartheid and therefore witnessed the transition of my country from apartheid to democracy influences my interpretations. There is no doubt that all of the above played a crucial role in not only my choice of topic, but also the execution of the project.

Despite this recognition of the researcher as forming an integral part of the process and outcomes, Kock (2006: 176) cautions against the "'I-am-a-white-scholar' confession, followed by the predictable avowals of subjectivity, complicity and positionality" that one occasionally encounters in critical scholarship around race and power relations. However, by acknowledging my situatedness I am in no way excusing my interpretations or confessing to the predictability highlighted by De Kock. To the contrary, it is about acknowledging that my situatedness is part and parcel of the complexity of the issue, as well as foregrounding it as a possible influence on how this complexity will be allowed to speak. At the beginning of this thesis I highlighted the fact that the aim of CWS to make whiteness visible in an effort to interrogate its construction and by explicitly acknowledging my whiteness and the other inherent aspects of my identity. I am making that same effort.

Even though it is my point of view that there is, and should be, an explicit link between the researcher, his or her context and the outcome of the research process, I do support Münchhausen's principle of objectivity and support the view that it is a researcher's responsibility to do justice to the subject at hand. Babbie and Mouton (2012: 33) refer to this as "[o]bjectivity as inter-subjectivity": a phenomenological

tradition which “supports an anti-naturalist conception of ‘objectivity’ which lays stress on the idea of inter-subjectivity, engagement, and empathy”. According to them (2012: 33), such a tradition rejects the natural sciences’ attitude, which “stresses the distance between scientist and object of study, as well as the crucial role of controlling the research situation” but rather emphasises “getting close to the subject and viewing the world from the perspective of the insider”.

Related to the above, and as part of clarifying the role of the researcher, it is pertinent that part of the research reported on in this thesis was conducted during a ten-month research period in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. This included an opportunity to view *Thuis* first hand, as well as visit the set of *Thuis*, and interview both the producers and marketers of the soap opera. More broadly, it also afforded me the opportunity to interact in and witness the Belgian and Flemish context, albeit within the limited period of ten months.

Livingstone (2003: 491) contends that contextualised interpretation should be complemented by rational interpretation since the latter performs the methodological functions that contextual interpretation cannot. While I do acknowledge my situatedness, and certainly did unpack my complicity and positionality above, my aim is to achieve a balance between insider knowledge and rational interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the research process as it progresses throughout the chapters to follow. In Chapter 1, the research problem and subsequent research questions were discussed. This chapter, in conjunction with Chapters 2 and 3, focused on translating these questions into a suitable research paradigm, theoretical approach and methodology.

Situated in the larger theoretical context of Cultural Studies and a qualitative research paradigm, this thesis adopts a CWS approach to analysing a South African and a Flemish soap opera. The reasons for choosing a qualitative paradigm were discussed in detail in the first subsection of this chapter. It was argued that the descriptive and interpretative nature of qualitative research makes it an ideal paradigm within which to situate this thesis.

The sampling process was described and qualified. In reaction to Hofstede's (1998) warning to be cautious in comparing apples with oranges, the reasons for choosing both these nations as well as the soap operas relevant to the thesis were discussed in detail. I argued that *7de Laan* and *Thuis* are viable texts for comparison for a number of reasons. These included, inter alia, the fact that both use PSB as a platform, implying that they are written to adhere to certain mandates. Related to the fact that the products of PSB are typically mandated to reflect or positively influence society, it was pointed out that both soap operas could be classified as community soap operas (Liebes & Livingstone 1998) characterised by a commitment to social realism. Furthermore, both soap operas are undeniably popular in their respective contexts, which increases their potential for social commentary and reform owing to the large audience reach. Apart from format, platform and popularity, these two texts share a number of linguistic and cultural characteristics, which were also highlighted as contributing to sampling choices.

A multimethod approach, inherent in most case studies, was identified as my approach and the various sources of data and combined methods of analysis were detailed. The literature review was identified as serving the purpose of situating this thesis in the available literature and discourses on the topic of whiteness with specific reference to soap operas. As indicated, the case studies are introduced by deep descriptions of the South African and Flemish contexts respectively, adhering to the contextual nature of qualitative research as emphasised throughout.

It was, furthermore, argued that a controlled case study is appropriate for this thesis because of the potential such an approach holds for the creative application of

qualitative analysis in the context of globalisation. The specific application of comparative research chosen for the relevant case studies was identified as a controlled case comparison. It was suggested that this particular application is especially germane when considering the research question and the goal of gaining some insights into the construction of whiteness and both its local and global manifestations.

Concerning the actual analysis of the two relevant soap operas, narrative textual analysis was identified as a suitable research method. Attention was paid to the way in which narrative can be defined for the purposes of this thesis, as well as the ways in which narrative can be linked to identity. The particular application of narrative analysis relevant here was described and justified with reference to the ways in which it has been applied to previous studies on soap opera.

Conducting research within a qualitative paradigm also has implications for the validity and reliability of the relevant research project. Since these are contested concepts within the qualitative paradigm, it was argued that trustworthiness and authenticity are more suitable terms to describe the value of the thesis. Measurements to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity were consequently outlined with direct reference to how they were employed in the study at hand.

The final section of this chapter was devoted to clarifying the role of the researcher. In a qualitative paradigm, the researcher cannot be considered as objective, and the complexity of both the subject matter as well as the nature of the researcher's involvement should be balanced by rational interpretation and the application of situated knowledge. With this in mind, this thesis aims to test, validate and contribute to work on the topic of the soap opera and the portrayal or representation of whiteness in the media.

CHAPTER 5: THE SOUTH AFRICAN CASE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter, in conjunction with Chapters 2 and 7, addresses the first subquestion identified in Chapter 1, which relates to the construction of whiteness as it is relevant to the South African and Flemish contexts, and specifically the analysis of mass media texts like soap operas.

Locally produced entertainment contributes to democracy, nation building and the development of a country (Teer-Tomaselli, 1998: 96) and local mass media in South Africa is viewed as a vital carrier of the identities and interests of the different social groups in South African society, in this case specifically of whiteness. According to Milton and Fourie (2013: 1), however, an understanding of South Africa's "media landscape is lost without looking into the historical context from which it originates". Hence as background to my investigation into constructions of whiteness, this chapter unfolds as follows:

The first section focuses on a brief overview of the South African national and cultural context. Building on this, a more focused introduction to the South African media landscape and PSB in particular, follows. The PSB's prescribed mandate to contribute to nation building in South Africa is an important subtext for exploring identity formation in this context. PSB and its role in constructing an imagined South African community, particularly through mechanisms like unity in and through diversity will, consequently, form the main focus of the third section. The final part of this chapter investigates local soap operas as role players in the nation-building initiatives of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as a prelude to an analysis of whiteness in these texts.

The goal of the elaborate contextualisation in this chapter as well as Chapter 7 is an exploration of the situatedness of both soap operas in their respective sociopolitical spheres. Understanding how these soap operas are situated is instrumental in

exploring the particular vantage points from which they define whiteness. Furthermore, comprehending the embeddedness of the two texts in their contexts is in line with the qualitative methodological approach of this thesis, as outlined in Chapter 4 (Cf. pages 83–85). Chapter 7, which is centred on the Flemish context and media, will be structured similarly. Building on the contextualisation provided in each of these chapters, I will first analyse *7de Laan*, and then *Thuis*, in Chapters 6 and 8 respectively.

Hence this chapter in particular will concern itself with the formation and renegotiation of an imagined South African community against the backdrop of the media's ongoing project of fostering a national identity with the ultimate goal of identifying discourses of whiteness in this context.

5.1 Constructing the “rainbow nation”: the South African historical, national and cultural context

South Africans' contemporary quest to define themselves as a country with a complex but unified national identity becomes apparent when one considers its history of struggling to become a sovereign democracy. Firstly, there was the struggle to become an autonomous republic after colonisation, secondly, the struggle to rid themselves of apartheid and its residues, and currently the struggle of attempting to define what being South African post-apartheid entails. The democratisation of the country started in the mid-1980s and culminated in 1994 with the country's first free elections. The elections marked the official transition from apartheid to democracy after decades of being an authoritarian state under oligarchic white minority rule (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005b: 36).

Apart from this relatively peaceful transition, however, South African history is marked by power struggles such as indigenous conflicts, colonialism, racism and its notorious apartheid policies. Race in particular has been a central discourse in the South African history of conflict. Hermann Giliomee (2003: 88), for example, writes about the fear and consequent battles for and against *gelykstelling* (social levelling)

which took place in the 1790s when South African society was already a racial hierarchy ranging from white (British) property owners (burghers) to white servants with “free blacks, and Khoikhoi servants lower still, while slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder”.¹ What is significant here, in terms of whiteness, is the fact that even within the echelons of South African whiteness there was already a linguistic and hierarchical divide between English-speaking South Africans of British descent and the white group that became known as the “Afrikaners”, and who were considered to be of a lower social standing. This divide is noteworthy in terms of understanding the subsequent battles for white (right-wing) hegemony.

In 1909, the Union of South Africa was created as a dominion of the British Empire. The process of segregation in South Africa began officially when the first Union Government enacted the seminal Black Land Act in 1913. This marked the beginning of the repression of black Africans (and any other groups perceived to fall outside the norms of whiteness) in formalised and structured ways.

In 1948, the National Party came into power with party leader D.F. Malan claiming ownership of the country and declaring that: “Today South Africa belongs to us once more” (Giliomee, 2003: 487). The “us” Malan was referring to here were white “Afrikaners”. South Africa was thus not only “about white domination, but also about which whites would dominate” (Giliomee, 2003: 487) with Afrikaner voters gradually outnumbering English-speaking voters from 1984. When Malan said that South Africa “belonged” to the Afrikaners, he “did not have a white-black struggle in mind but the rivalry between the Afrikaner and the English community” (Giliomee, 2003: 487). Malan, nevertheless, also cautioned his fellow Afrikaners against the “real danger of blood mixing and the disintegration of the white race” (Giliomee,

¹ I acknowledge that this account of South African history is a cursive introduction with the goal of exemplifying the role that race has played in identity construction in the country throughout its history. A properly detailed account of South African history would, for example, and amongst other things, have explored the intricacy of arguments such as the ones presented by Mamdani (1996) which explicates how colonial rule and apartheid resulted in a situation where settlers became citizens and were accorded the status of “races”, while the indigenous population remained subjects in legal arrangements which made them “ethnicities”. Such a detailed account, however, falls outside the scope of this thesis.

2003: 488), marking the beginning of the the “us” versus “them” dichotomy, with which segregation was later legalised in the form of apartheid (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005a: 196).

Based on the Population Registration Act of 1950, the government classified citizens into identified communities of whites, coloureds and Africans transforming apartheid from “a loose body of segregation measures into a system, imposing a tight racial grid” (Giliomee, 2003: 503). According to him (2003), classification had “momentous implications” since “[a]ssigned membership in a legally defined community would determine almost every important daily activity”. Apartheid and the concomittent racial segregation and classification was presented as

a policy that would take away no rights without “putting something good or something better in its place”. The rationale offered for segregated suburbs was that it would end a situation where black or coloured people living as “appendages” in mixed areas had developed “a sense of inferiority”. Living in their “own” townships would provide them with a greater sense of dignity and self-worth (Gillio mee, 2003: 506).

In reality, however, these systems severely curbed the rights of anyone not classified as white.

Following a whites-only referendum in May 1961 (which excluded a fast-growing black majority from the vote), South Africa became a republic and left the Commonwealth. During the 1960s, the South African government followed the principle of what was called “separate development”. This resulted in the establishment of “independent” bantustans (Cf. page 39) which aimed at the “eventual denationalisation of the majority of black South Africans and their reconstitution as foreign citizens exercising full political rights outside” South Africa’s white constitutional order (Jacobs, 2002: 283). Giliomee (2003: 560) writes that underlying the “homelands policy was the fiction that the common area was the white homeland”. viola c. milton, Hermann Wasserman and Anthea Garman (2013: 408) write in this regard that, under apartheid, great pains were taken to symbolically mark understandings of nationhood, citizenship and “South

Africanness” as white. Both Giliomee (2003) and Milton et al.’s (2013) comments are indicative of the way in which whiteness in South Africa was normalised and, to some extent made invisible in apartheid South Africa, even if only to whites.

Identity politics in South Africa are not only tied up in a long history of minority rule and segregation, but also in its history of political violence. Settler invasion and conflicts about British rule, for example, preceded apartheid as instances of politically motivated violence in the country’s history. The violent struggle against apartheid specifically came to a head at Sharpeville in 1960 when 69 demonstrators were killed by the police. This led to an abandonment of the Black Liberation Movement’s previously non-violent resistance. Under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, the armed wing of the ANC (Umkhonto we Sizwe [*Spear of the nation*]) initially embarked on a low-key campaign of sabotage (Giliomee, 2003: 533), but later committed more violent acts, resulting in Mandela’s arrest and the concomitant Rivonia trial in 1963, which saw ANC (African National Congress) leaders sentenced to life imprisonment (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005a: 196). The violence, however, persisted. In June of 1976, for example, a series of student-led protests against the induction of Afrikaans (viewed as the mother tongue of apartheid) as the medium of instruction in Sowetan schools ended with 176 casualties.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the rise of new black voices such as Steve Biko who acted as the main spokesperson for the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) (responsible for considerable support among black students, journalists and professionals for a non-racial democracy), and later Bishop Desmond Tutu, who represented a generation of black clergymen committed to black liberation. Despite this, the “white electorate jealously guarded against any effort to dilute its own power and privilege” (Giliomee, 2003: 564–566) and the violence continued. From 1981 onwards, South Africa embarked on what became known as a campaign of destabilisation, but its success in placating the armed struggle was not decisive. The ANC continued its violent resistance to white domination and for “blacks engaged in

resistance any evidence of ANC-directed armed activity, even if negligible and intermittent, raised the morale” (Giliomee, 2003: 592–593).

Despite this, and the fact that by the 1970s, Afrikaners had shrunk to less than 10% of the population, President P.W. Botha was still quoted as saying “if one begins to demolish the Afrikaner nation ... its splendid history and its splendid traditions, one is chipping away at the cornerstone of the South African structure” (Giliomee, 2003: 601). Botha’s sentiments are indicative of efforts on the part of white South Africans to continue the construction of the Afrikaner as being central to South African culture. Such constructions, however, became increasingly fragile, and towards the end of his years in office, Botha explored negotiations with the ANC as an option (Giliomee, 2003: 627). Growing black opposition in the form of the ANC’s armed struggle and its lobbying for economic and diplomatic sanctions, together with the resultant pressure from international forces and economic sanctions against the white minority regime, led to negotiations between the Apartheid Government under F.W. de Klerk and the (then recently unbanned) resistance movements in the early 1990s (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005a: 196). According to Giliomee (2003: 628), “no transition to democracy would have been possible without both the ANC and the NP forming a bridge over which South Africans could walk ... using as pillars the NP-ruled state and the ANC as the embodiment of the anti-apartheid struggle”. The first non-racial, nationwide, elections in April of 1994 indicated the formal end of apartheid in South Africa and the establishment of a Government of National Unity with the ANC as the leading party (Barnett, 1999: 274).

Hana Horáková (2011: 109) describes this historical moment as follows: “After 250 years of colonial rule, followed by almost a century of racial segregation concluded by almost half a century of institutionalised apartheid, a new era based on the project of nation-building emerged in South Africa”. Similarly, Milton (2006: 9) writes that officially “the struggle” was over, but 1994 marked the beginning of a new struggle, namely for the formation of a national South African identity. South Africa’s history of inequality caused the issue of national identity to become an intense site of concern, debate and struggle (Milton, 2006: 9). In this context, the nation-building

projects have followed as a logical step to overcome the divisions of the past in order to create an overarching national identity with a common sense of nationhood and solidarity. Since 1994, South African identity, typified as a unity celebrating its diversity, has been a constant, albeit not uncontested, point on the South African political, economic and social agenda. It is in this context that whiteness in South Africa finds itself in a destabilised position (as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2) and new narratives of whiteness are emerging.

Apart from putting formal institutions such as a Human Rights Commission, an Independent Electoral Commission, a Public Protector and a Gender Commission in place, the ANC, most notably Nelson Mandela, worked hard to foster a climate of reconciliation and unity (Jacobs, 2002: 285) as conducive to national unity. This new unity was validated by new national symbols such as a national flag, an adapted national anthem and the recognition of 11 official South African languages.

In contemporary struggles to define “the nation” as a unified, coherent entity and single political and cultural unity, Ruth Wodak, Rudolf De Cillia, Martin Reisigl and Karin Liebhart (1999) posit that the unique and uniform character of a nation is often a key characteristic in the discursive construction of national unity. In contemporary nations such as South Africa, “diversity” is often included in such representations. Oliver Haag (2010: 333) refers to this as “nationalist discourses of diversity”. In contrast to the legacy of the former regime, “which defined different cultures as exclusive enclaves”, the leading politicians in South Africa came up with an idea based on the synthesis of cultural development in which the “emphasis on the entire racial and cultural otherness among different ‘population groups’ was replaced by a new political vision of a unified, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa” (Horáková, 2011: 109). The ANC’s non-racialism project emphasised both unity in diversity as well as the irrelevance of race and ethnicity (Horáková, 2011: 109). ANC secretary general, Gwede Mantashe (2011: 1), for example, described non-racialism as follows:

Now non-racialism is an ideal of society where colour and race do not count. We become a normal society. Features of that non-racialism will

be where people stay together, that people will begin to intermarry, that people will begin to practise religion together, the people [are] to practise their different cultures within the same society. And therefore race and colour will not be an issue. That is the ideal of non-racialism. That is the ideal [the] party still strives for. We must have a nation we must not have races.

In South Africa, this call to celebrate unity in diversity manifested at an ideological level in the metaphor of the “rainbow nation”. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is credited with introducing this notion of the “rainbow nation”. In a number of televised appearances after South Africa’s first democratic elections, the Archbishop used the “rainbow people of God” as a metaphor to describe the post-apartheid South African nation, in contrast to the segregation of apartheid. The metaphor suggests a nation that is supposedly diverse, but united in spirit (Haron, 2007; Milton, 2008: 256). The metaphor marked the symbolic shift to democracy, signalled the non-racialist approach adopted by the ruling party, and indicated a shift away from white minority dominance over the black majority.

President Nelson Mandela elaborated on this rainbow nation discourse in his first month of office. During the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, “Rainbowism was gradually superseded by Africanism” (Horáková, 2011: 115) and the idea of unity was perpetuated in what Kirstin Skare Orgeret (2004: 156) refers to as “the united idea of African renaissance”² or “Africanism”.³ President Mbeki’s “I am an African” speech gradually directed “the ANC party rhetoric towards a more exclusive form of nationalism that the one offered by Mandela” (Horáková, 2011: 115).⁴ The rainbow nation discourse was, however, again invoked by President Jacob Zuma in his inaugural speech, when he was elected president in May 2009 after the country’s

² The notion of the African Renaissance as introduced by President Mbeki “denotes a deliberate act of de- and re-narrating the European discourse of the African ‘other’ to which, and through which, Africa has been subjected for several hundreds of years. The trope of the African Renaissance challenges the foundations of whiteness in Africa, and can be understood as the ‘return of the repressed’ in white identity in South Africa. It presents a ‘deliberate act of talking back’ by the ‘other’, a spectre of Africa defining itself on its own terms” (Steyn, 2008: 40).

³ Although the rainbow nation metaphor is mentioned here, together with the notion of the African Renaissance, it is important to note that the two cannot be conflated. While both are unifying discourses, they differ on issues of inclusivity.

⁴ “Mbeki repudiated Mandela’s one-nation legacy by pronouncing that these were two nations, one white and rich, the other black and poor” (Horáková, 2011: 116).

third democratic national elections. According to Elirea Bornman (2013: 442), “rainbowism” represents a compromise between the governing party’s commitment to non-racialism, on the one hand, and a growing awareness that ethnic and racial identities (among other things) continue to exist in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as being socially and politically relevant, on the other.

Linked to the concept of the rainbow nation is the African principle of *Ubuntu*.⁵ The term *Ubuntu* has its origin in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which roughly translates into “a person is a person through other persons” or “I am because of others”. The emphasis here is thus on the community as opposed to the individual, or on the individual as a product of his or her community, again emphasising unity.⁶ This theme of a unified diversity is also reflected in the preamble of the South African Constitution (SouthAfrica.info) which states that “[w]e, the people of South Africa, believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity”.

Everatt (2012: 18) contends, however, that democracy “has not ushered in the non-racial nirvana of a ‘Rainbow Nation’”,⁷ and Milton (2006: 9) writes that South Africans, and the country’s minorities in particular, are finding it difficult to ascribe to the politics of “one nation, one soul”. Emerging from this difficulty

... is a growing awareness of what Homi Bhabha calls “the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force”. The nation can assume symbolic force precisely in so far as it is represented as a unity; yet national unity is always ultimately impossible precisely because it can

⁵ Nkonko Kamwangamalu (1999: 25) writes that the “concept of *ubuntu* is understood as a collective solidarity whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to the perception of others”.

⁶ As a matter of interest, there is also a debate on the suitability of *Ubuntuism* as a possible normative media theory, which underscores the prevalence of the concept, not only in South Africa, but in Africa today.

⁷ Horáková (2011: 115), for example, points out that the concept of the rainbow nation “associated with multiculturalism reinforces the deeply entrenched assumption held by South Africans that divisions are not only social and economic but predominantly cultural”. Other theorists have argued that the concept itself is actually racist and demeaning to black South Africans as it implies that they were never aware of their situatedness within a space of co-existence and that the metaphor merely serves to pacify whites South Africans at the expense of black experience. Moreover, according to Horáková (2011: 115), the “preponderance of evidence shows that the vision of the rainbow nation remains in the domain of the romantic ideal, perpetuated at a symbolic level”.

only be represented as such through a suppression and repression, symbolic or otherwise, of difference (Stratton & Ang, 1994: 124).

Horáková (2011: 114) similarly argues that the concept is contradictory in its emphasis on the perceived need for national unity and a national identity, on the one hand, and the emphasis on multiculturalism, group identity and cultural diversity, on the other. For Everatt (2012: 17) non-racialism is perhaps widely accepted as a good thing, but “like so many other virtues it is fuzzily understood, rarely practiced [sic], and more often the recipient of lip service than of action”. In contrast to the scenario sketched by Mantashe (2011), for example, South Africans are still required to

fill in countless forms that demand details of their race – the same race ascribed to them by apartheid – from birth to death, and an entire industry has sprung up around checking the race credentials (Black Economic Empowerment ...) ... It is barely surprising that citizens think and talk about race when the entire bureaucracy of society, in its state and non-state forms, insists on race as a primary indicator (Everatt, 2012: 12).

The South African nation is indeed a diverse one. In 2011, the South African population comprised roughly 50 million people from a variety of cultures, languages and religious backgrounds. The unequivocal majority of its population consists of Africans (40 million), with smaller coloured (brown) (4.5 million), Indian/Asian (1.2 million) and white (4.5 million) communities (Statistics South Africa, 2011).⁸ Apart from these broad racial categories, diversity in South Africa also concerns countless ethnic and cultural differences. The black population, for example, is divided into four main ethnic groups, namely Nguni, Sotho, Shangaan-Tsonga and Venda. Within these groups there exist numerous subgroups such as Zulu and Xhosa (as subgroups of the Nguni). Consequently, it is apparent that, from a linguistic point of view, South Africa is also a diverse country. Officially, the Constitution recognises 11 official languages even though there are more spoken in the country. These official languages include English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. Social and economic differences further

⁸ It is notable that the apartheid government segmented South Africa into the four distinct racial groups mentioned here (white, black, coloured and Indian), but that these categories are still utilised today, even when they are used for the purposes of black economic empowerment.

contribute to diversity in the South African context. South Africa constitutes the largest economy in Africa and is rated as an upper-middle income economy by the World Bank, yet it is still plagued by economic and structural inequality. Despite extensive efforts like black economic empowerment (BEE) and other policies of social and economic reform, the country was still ranked as the third most unequal society in the world in 2011 (based on the Gini index measuring the distribution of family income) and crime rates are among the highest worldwide (CIA World Factbook, 2012). The South African Rainbow Nation thus encompasses much more than race and is culturally, linguistically, socially and economically diverse.

Given all of the above, Milton et al. (2013: 405) write that “living with difference” proves to be a thorny issue. They pose the following question:

How is a balance to be struck between the need to treat people equally (via legality of citizenship), the need to treat people differently (the reality of multicultural nations) and the need to maintain shared values and social cohesion (the South African nation-building project)?

According to Horáková (2011: 110–111), these nation-building initiatives of the post-apartheid government have been met with a range of reactions. Some see its non-racialist approach as a “form of repatriation that will at some point wither away”, while others see the emphasis on nation building as an attempt to impose a common culture with the goal of homogenising the citizenry along “Africanist” lines. Another school of thought welcomes the idea of “South-African-ness as a vital means of the country maintenance and future prosperity”, while others are critical of nation building’s potential to endanger legitimate group identities, calling for “the respect for cultural difference”.

Bronwyn Harris (2002: 169), furthermore, writes that South Africa’s transition to democracy, and the consequent shift in political power, brought about a new range of discriminatory practices. According to her, xenophobia, especially towards African foreigners, is one such example that is prevalent in the “new” South Africa. In 2008, xenophobic attacks on foreigners in South Africa made international news when 62 people died in a series of riots that started in a township in Johannesburg. In 2012,

the SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations) called on the South African government to address the problem of xenophobia (Conway-Smith, 2012), and in April 2015, xenophobia and citizens' concomitant loss of job opportunities to illegal immigrants caused heinous acts of human cruelty, on the one hand, and a critical backlash of activists against xenophobic attacks, on the other.

In current-day South Africa, the view seems to prevail that if South Africa in the mid-1990s was a place of where there was the hope that "tomorrow is another country", then "on the eve of its third consecutive democratic elections in 2009 the realisation had set in that South Africa had entered a phase 'beyond the miracle'" (Wasserman & De Beer, 2009: 379). Horáková (2011: 116) substantiates this in writing that South Africa's current climate shows signs of a transition from an age of hope to an age of uncertainty. This uncertainty is characterised by concerns about "mounting violent crime, increasing unemployment and poverty as well as widespread corruption in central and provincial governments linked to the misappropriation of resources". In this context, divisive strategies such as renaming towns, cities, streets and removing or erecting statues and monuments threaten to split the country apart. Based on a report by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2008), the *Sunday Times* newspaper noted the following:

The confidence South Africans have in their future, the economy, and the government has crashed since the last election in 2004. They think the government has made a mess of the economy, the fight against crime, healthcare and job creation. In addition, they are far less confident than they were just two years ago about the future of racial harmony (Boyle, 2008: 1)

At the time of writing, debates on the pace of racial transformation in South Africa were rife. These debates were sparked by the persistence of economic and social divisions 21 years after apartheid. Horáková (2011: 111) writes in this regard that gross inequalities in the country "contribute to an ever increasing black and white polarisation of society even though the gap is no longer between white and black but between the new multiracial middleclass and huge underclass". Race therefore remains at the core of the construction of social identity in South Africa and racism

proves to be an integral part of the structure of South African society (Horáková 2011: 111).

It is in this context, specifically, that a study of whiteness as constituting a part of South African diversity, is merited. Renewed racial conflicts at the beginning of 2015 once again put the issue of whiteness and its relationship with power on the public agenda when activist groups called for symbols of white rule to be removed from South African society. A case in point is students from the University of Cape Town protesting for the removal of the Rhodes statue⁹ chanting: “Down white power, down”. According to the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)¹⁰, Julius Malema, the fall of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town was a major step towards defeating white supremacy in South Africa (Times LIVE, 2015). This statement was made amidst other similar protests (such as acts of vandalism defacing the statues of President Paul Kruger on Church Square in Pretoria and the statue of Jan van Riebeeck in Cape Town¹¹) dominating newspaper headlines. Another pertinent example is the student protests against “white domination” at Stellenbosch University during April 2015. Students carried posters claiming that they felt as if they were in Europe¹², and they were protesting the perceived lack of transformation on campus. These protests were linked to the appointment of Professor Wim de Villiers as the University’s new rector and their consequent claims that years after the end of apartheid, there was still white domination on the Stellenbosch campus.

⁹ In April of 2015, South Africa’s oldest university (the University of Cape Town) voted to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes (a British colonialist, businessman, mining magnate and politician in South Africa who founded Rhodesia in 1895) after a month of protests against this “perceived symbol of historical white oppression”.

¹⁰ The EFF is a relatively new South African political party started by controversial former ANCYL (ANC Youth League) president, Julius Malema. The party propagates a revolutionary socialist ideology and is currently the third largest political party in the country.

¹¹ Paul Kruger was the president of the Republic of South Africa from 1883 to 1900 and Jan van Riebeeck was the Dutch colonial administrator who commanded the first Dutch settlement in South Africa. He is popularly considered to be the founder of Cape Town.

¹² It is interesting to note here the dichotomy between white South Africans claiming to have European roots versus black South Africans’ denunciation of European connotations.

Hence, amidst less extreme reactions, two polarised stances emerged from these events. On the one hand, there were activist groups sharing the view that whites cannot be consulted in matters pertaining to the feelings of displacement experienced by black students or citizens in South Africa since they could never “truly empathise with the profound violence exerted on the psyche of black students” (Sapa, 2015), and that all symbolic signifiers of white domination should be removed, with force, if necessary. On the other hand, the removal and desecration of statues and monuments marked the rising of a white backlash which saw white groups taking action to protest what they view as the violation of their heritage (Bartlett, 2015). These two stances resonate with some of the narratives identified by Steyn (2001) in Chapter 2. While some whites are attempting to renegotiate their whiteness by distancing themselves from apartheid practices and legacies, others paint themselves as victims and consider the threat to colonial statues and Afrikaans universities, for example, as an attack on an integral part of their heritage and hence their perceptions of belonging.

Given all of the above, it seems logical that theorists such as Benedict Anderson (1994) have been critical of oversimplifying the matter of nation building. He emphasises the myth of the concept of nation and describes them as “imagined communities”. Anderson argues that members of a community cannot know each other personally, and can therefore only imagine being part of a certain community. Eric Hobsbawm (1990) associates this idea of the imagined community with terms such as “fabrication” and “social construction”. Defining this community in the South African context remains marred by racial discourses which defy the construction of a homogeneous nation. Everatt (2012: 23) writes in this regard that racial division in South Africa “has been internalised, and is being reproduced with remarkable efficiency 17 years into democracy”.

According to Wasserman and De Beer (2009: 383), after 1994, the South African media “became a site and instrument for transformation by providing a (albeit circumscribed) forum for the exchange of ideas, promoting frames of reference and constructing post-apartheid identities”. Given all of the above, how does the South

African, Afrikaans media construct the South African imagined community, particularly as this relates to whiteness? The next section provides an overview of South African broadcasting as the context in which answers to this question are approached.

5.2 The South African mass media, PSB landscape and the representation of the nation

In general, the media is considered to act not only as a role player, but also as a reflection of what is happening in a specific context at a specific time. In this regard, Abebe Zegeye and Richard L. Harris (2003: 1–2) contend that South Africa’s mass media can be read as indicators of the identities and interests of the different subnational groups in South African society, and in this capacity,

the media help to determine the relative power, status and influence of these groups ... The identities and interests of the different groups within the population are represented by the mass media in the “public sphere” of South African society. The values, laws, policies, rules, codes of conduct, norms, morals and public attitudes that govern how people live together are formulated, expressed and determined in this important sphere of social life.

Mass media are thus regarded as constructing ideas about nationhood as well as the politics of belonging. Across national contexts, public service media specifically have been identified as key institutions supporting the creation and consolidation of nationhood (Cardiff & Scannell, 1987; Van den Bulck, 2001). Concerning the SABC in particular, Eric Louw and viola c. milton (2012: 9) write that

... understanding what happened to the SABC in the 1990s helps one understand much about the birth of the New South Africa and the direction in which that society seems to be moving. This is because the SABC was the first organization [sic] to encounter the challenges, successes, pain and failures of transformation that still lay ahead for South Africa’s other organizations [sic].

For the purposes of this thesis, as far as the media are concerned, the focus falls on PSB, but public service television in particular, as having a potentially unifying function. In South Africa, as in many other countries, there are deliberate attempts

to address and bring together “the whole nation”, and to create a shared public sphere. For Milton (2006: 14), television presents a way for us to “see ourselves in relation to the community or communities we live in. It is also a way for us to gain an understanding of our communities”.

5.2.1 Background to South African broadcasting media

As part of the process of unravelling the role that PSB plays in constructing ideas about nationhood, this section provides a brief background on the development of the South African media system and PSB in particular. Specific attention is paid to the SABC as the flagship of PSB in South Africa and recent debates on it.

The broader South African media system was founded and remains largely based on the Anglo-American, democratic-liberal model. This model is characterised by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and commercial characteristics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The first newspaper appeared in 1800, although the first Western settlement began as early as 1652 when the Dutch colonised the Cape of Good Hope. This was followed by British colonisation in 1795. According to Milton and Fourie (2015: 181–182), the above-mentioned two periods were clearly marked by the development of “two strong language (and power) groups in South Africa, both primarily white: the Afrikaans speaking descendants of the Dutch settlers and the English speaking descendants of the British settlers”. They write that (2015: 181) South Africa was characterised by “a social and media landscape based on racial exclusion, with a white presence and a structured black absence as its defining characteristics”. By 1820, South Africa had acquired what may be described as its own version of the British Magna Carta guaranteeing “press freedom” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005a: 196). Despite this ostensible “freedom”, from its inception, South African mass media has been dominated by either of the two white groups, a fact which provides some insight into the way the mass media developed in the country and to some extent still functions today. In relation to this, Fourie (2002: 20) writes that the mainstream media in South Africa created “a cognitive construct of a white utopia – an island of white well-being, progress and prosperity ...”. Colin Sparks

(2009: 197) adds that the social relations in the country generated “media institutions designed to reproduce their essential features” and the prevailing social and racial relations were discernible in the content of these institutions.

Broadcasting in South Africa started in the 1920s with the creation of a radio station called JB Calling. I.W. Schlesinger established the African Broadcasting Company (ABC), which was later renamed the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and news services were introduced in 1962. As the main broadcaster, the SABC was “originally conceived along racial divides according to the logic of apartheid” (Baker, 1996: 219) and, in line with the politics of separate development, separate stations for black people originated, broadcasting in African languages. Moreover, the SABC initially operated radio stations only, mainly because the National Party (NP) viewed television as “the devil in the black box” (milton & Fourie 2015: 183). According to them, television threatened to “undermine divinely ordained hierarchies of gender and ethnicity” (Nixon 1994: 43). As a result, television was only introduced in South Africa in 1976.

Thus, despite the alleged press freedom alluded to above, before 1994, under the authoritarian regime of apartheid, from the outset, the SABC functioned as “a bastion of the apartheid state and mouthpiece for the ruling NP” (Barnett, 1999: 274). milton and Fourie (2015: 183) describe the South African broadcasting system as “one of the most politicized [sic] broadcasting systems in the world”. This substantiates Duncan’s (in Louw & milton, 2012: 270–271) summary of the history of the South African media landscape where she writes that, under apartheid, the broadcast sector was sympathetic to the ideologies of the apartheid government and the SABC became a “state” broadcaster rather than a “public” broadcaster. News programmes perpetuated the views of the government, policy privileged white audiences and there was a much richer supply of content for white audiences than for speakers of African languages. Moreover, staff composition also embodied apartheid principles (Sparks, 2009: 198).

Residues of this white dominance are still to be found in media representations today. It is clear from the above that, historically, media ownership and distribution in general, but specifically in the SABC, mirrored South Africa's political economy which "established economic, political and cultural power in the hands of white South Africans" (milton & Fourie, 2015: 182). Louw (1993: 130) contends that communication in both colonial and apartheid South Africa was characterised by a top-down approach which allowed domination by the successive minority white ruling groups. Thus, even though television was initially considered to be a threat to white hegemony, in the context of the SABC, it became an invaluable tool in the government's "total strategy" against black insurgency. During this time of white minority rule, all media was subject to legal measures like censorship that repressed media freedom, and restrictions were placed on any publication of material relating to the exiled African National Congress (ANC) and other so-called "enemies of the state" in South Africa.

White minority rule, however, created challenges, both nationally and internationally, and a number of factors contributed to its downfall. The apartheid system of racial segregation that served the dominant party became a threat to South Africa's economic growth and political stability during the 1980s when local and international opposition made it clear that political transformation was imminent. Both economic sanctions, as well as the fact that the international community declared apartheid a crime against humanity, are examples of these pressures. Hence, during the late 1980s there was a move towards privatisation of the media "perceived by some as a method to entrench the position of white South Africans" (Duncan in Louw & milton, 2012: 270–171). However, external and internal pressures persisted. For example, when President Nelson Mandela's release and inauguration became a global media event, South Africans were faced with not only the reconfiguring of society post-apartheid, but also the challenges posed by globalisation (Louw & milton, 2012: 1). Consequently, transformation had to be considered and South Africa's shift from apartheid to democracy began. In this context, the SABC played a key role as the the first functioning Government of National Unity (GNU) type organisation in South Africa.

The move from apartheid to democracy in 1994 brought to an end decades of “repressive state regulation of the media” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005b: 36). With the shift to democracy, the South African media was forced to reposition itself ideologically, politically and culturally (milton & Fourie, 2015: 181). During the 1992–1993 negotiations, what might be termed a “negative convergence” occurred between the different political parties regarding broadcasting reform. Both sides were reluctant to afford the other the opportunity to control the media, which resulted in the principle of independent broadcasting (Barnett, 1999: 281), with both main groups agreeing that it was necessary to re-establish the SABC as an independent PSB (Sparks, 2009: 200).

Hence at the same time as the negotiations were in progress to end apartheid, the NP also set in motion a process to free the SABC from government control by setting up a broadcasting regulatory mechanism – the IBA (Independent Broadcast Association).¹³ The IBA was designed to function as a buffer between the government and broadcasting, ensuring that no single party could manipulate it the way that the NP had in the past (Sparks, 2009: 200). This would have implications not only for the SABC, but also for South African broadcasting as a whole – hence the emergence of South Africa’s three-tiered system of broadcasting (public, commercial and community) (Duncan in Louw & milton, 2012: 270–271).

Moreover, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act that came into effect in 1997, made special provision for the right to freedom of expression, contrasting it with the stringent censorship laws of apartheid which had restricted access to information and freedom of expression (milton & Fourie, 2015: 188). Consequently, unlike in previous years, this enabled the SABC to provide coverage that exhibited an unprecedented degree of balance, fairness and neutrality during the 1994 elections (Teer-Tomaselli, 1995). The elections heralded the complete restructuring of the broadcasting sector in South Africa. According to Wasserman and De Beer (2005a:

¹³ In 2002, the IBA was absorbed into a new regulator, the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA).

194), the emphasis shifted from “apartheid-era governmental control of the media (often in the name of ‘the national interest’) to one of self-regulation (in the ‘public interest’)”. The SABC was consequently transformed into a PSB funded through TV licence fees, advertising, sponsorship revenue and other business services.

With this restructuring, the media was once again conceptualised as a key role player in the construction of the nation, in this instance, in the development of a democratic national unity specifically. Radio and television became widely regarded as important stages for “symbolic representations of the ‘rainbow’ concept of ‘One Nation, Many Cultures’” (Barnett, 1999: 275). Subsequently, a year after the first democratic elections, the IBA proclaimed the following:

Through local music, and through locally produced entertaining, informative and educational programming, produced by a wide range of South African producers, television ... will make a vital contribution to democracy, nation building and development in South Africa... (IBA, 1995).

The new Constitution, adopted in 1996, included a Bill of Rights that guaranteed media freedom, freedom of expression and access to official information. These constitutional changes were also “complemented by other reconfigurations in the media landscape, such as changes in the industry’s ownership patterns” (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005b: 37). Democratisation effected a move away from what was the largely white-owned mainstream media of apartheid. According to the South Africa: Public Broadcasting in Africa series document (Lloyd et al., 2010:7) collated in 2010, South Africa’s Constitution is widely respected as “one of the most progressive in the world. It guarantees and protects the right to freedom of expression, including media freedom, the right to access to information and the independence of broadcasting regulation”.

According to Sparks (2009: 209), in this context, the SABC “demonstrated a new commitment to public service ideals, both in its new policy and in the service it provided to its audience”, and this was characterised by an effort to revamp its output to make it more representative by, among other things, producing a wider range of programming in African languages.

This relatively favourable situation, however, did not last. In recent years, the protection of the right to the freedom of expression is being increasingly challenged by proposals of new legislation. The SABC is accountable to the public through both the parliament and government and to the broadcasting regulator, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) (Lloyd et al., 2010: 8). Developments over the last couple of years have suggested, however, that the government is looking to extend its influence over the SABC. The ruling party (the ANC), for example, argues that self-regulation of the media is insufficient and that the government should be able to take “punitive measures” against media, as well as individual journalists, viewed as “offending”. They therefore proposed a statutory body which functions at government level – a Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT). The media, prominent individuals and a number of civil society organisations, however, “while acknowledging that the self-regulatory system can, and should be strengthened” have, fairly vehemently, voiced their protest against these plans (Lloyd et al, 2010: 8).

Apart from the government’s attempts to extend its influence on the SABC, the latter has also been experiencing ongoing problems relating to governance and funding. It is even more heavily dependent upon advertising revenue today than it was in the past. One of the results of these problems is that some of the programmes the broadcaster should be offering to fulfil its mandate are no longer being produced, and some claim that the quality of journalism at the corporation has deteriorated (Lloyd et al., 2010: 8–9).

There are two additional factors at play in the SABC’s funding dilemma. On the one hand, whites have retained many of their economic privileges through surrendering their monopoly of political power, which gives them some power in generating advertising revenue and thus determining content. Sparks (2009: 195) posits that the SABC remains a “prisoner to the economic realities of the new South Africa, where white economic power remains largely intact”. On the other hand, the new African business, as another group with economic capital, owes a great deal of its success to government policies and close connections with the ANC. Consequently, changes in

the racial make-up of media ownership and staff have not changed the media's class base (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). According to Milton and Fourie (2015: 201), the intersection of race and market inevitably holds consequences that cannot be simplified to simple "white" or "black" ownership, since this masks the more complex interrelations created between white ownership and newly created black-capital. Moreover, the pressure of securing advertising revenue means that the target market of the mass media in South Africa arguably still remains largely white or, at the very least, affluent black. Hence the profit motive "marginalises and indeed misrepresents peripheral communities in programming and content decisions" (Milton & Fourie, 2015: 201). Subsequently, despite deracialisation of ownership, market segmentation still displays some of the polarisations of apartheid (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005b: 40).

Duncan (in Louw & Milton, 2012: 271), furthermore, cautions that one should take into account the fact that even though the SABC is funded by advertising, sponsorships and the like, advertising revenue, for example, still puts the government in a position of power since it is one of the SABC's largest sources of advertising. Sparks (2009: 204) writes that in "this use of the state to promote positive discrimination for a particular ethnic group, commentators have noted the irony that the ANC is following closely the strategy of the National Party used to promote the Afrikaners".

In addition, the continued dominance of the ANC in senior SABC board membership suggests that the "SABC is being diverted [or re-verted?] from its obligations as a public service broadcaster into something much closer to a voice of the government" (Sparks: 209-210). Thus, despite claims that contemporary South African PSB is more open to critical voices, "the criticism of the media as being simply the mouthpieces of the ANC and the rich have been increasingly heard from social movement activists" (Sparks, 2009: 209-210). According to Louw and Milton (2012: 265),

good intentions notwithstanding, the broadcast transformations of the 1990s did not ultimately create a post-apartheid SABC free of government interference. Instead, over the years there has been no end

to reports of, and expressions of concern about, the ANC government's interference in the SABC.

In 2010, for example, security Minister Siyabonga Cwele introduced the Protection of Information Bill (also referred to as the "Secrecy Bill"), which, if accepted in its original format, would effectually shield government officials from public scrutiny. This, in turn, would criminalise activities essential to investigative journalism practices (milton & Fourie, 2015: 205). This Bill (which criminalises the publication of classified information) has been widely criticised as an attempt by the government to control the media (not unlike the apartheid government) and, in so doing, curb media freedom and diversity in South Africa. A second case in point would be the proposed implementation of the PSB Bill of 2009. This Bill proposes, *inter alia*, radical changes in the SABC's funding model. However, inconsistencies in the Bill's phrasing and the threat it posed for broadcasting and media freedom, resulted in the Bill being shrouded in controversy from its inception. In essence, "the PSB Bill proposed that in future, direct parliamentary appropriations and television license fees be replaced by an earmarked tax on income" (milton & Fourie, 2015: 207). Some critics contend that the enactment of the Bill might be detrimental to the SABC's autonomy and civil organisations under the leadership of the Support Public Broadcasting Campaign (SOS) immediately effected efforts to petition against the passing of the Bill.¹⁴

So, while media freedom in the "new" South Africa has been largely taken for granted by both the media fraternity and society as a whole, it seems that an increasing number of threatening noises are being made (Lloyd, 2010: 9). milton and Fourie (2015: 181) contend that, even though South Africa today is a "multi-party constitutional democracy with a vibrant media", which is often at odds with the country's post-apartheid media policies, South African media still bears "striking similarities to the media landscape under apartheid and colonial rule". Although the

¹⁴ It is important to acknowledge that the above-mentioned conflicts also reflect different cultural perceptions of concepts such as "public interest" and "freedom of expression", with some arguing that the media holds a Western-biased view which is not applicable to the African context, often neglecting the need to indigenise journalistic practices (milton & Fourie, 2015: 208).

constitutional changes to the rights of expression and media freedom were complemented by reconfigurations in programming, ownership and services, the transformation is still plagued by inherited economic, institutional and cultural conditions. These conditions continue to impose limitations on the practical implementation of a “progressive conceptualisation of the mass media as a vehicle for nation-building and democratic communication” (Barnett, 1999: 274).

It is in this context that different role players are trying to define and situate themselves, also in the discourses that play out in the media. According to Milton (2006: 9), competing “social groups attempt to use the media to promote their agendas and ideologies, while the media itself reproduces conflicting political discourses, often in a contradictory manner”, also as it pertains to the construction of a South African national ideal.

5.2.2 South African PSB and the representation of the nation

Kellner (1996) posits that our current local, national and global situations are articulated through the texts created within the mass media. Added to this, Orgeret (2004: 147) argues that “understanding the link between the nation state and its media becomes ever more important in newly democratized [sic] countries and not least in an era of increased globalization [sic] processes”. Barnett (1999: 274) confirms this with reference to the South African situation, when he writes that South African radio and television are ascribed a central and official role in nation-building rhetoric as the media of communication through which such exchange could be facilitated.

These goals are echoed in the Public Service Broadcasting Act of 1999. According to this Act, the PSB must:

- (a) make services available to South Africans in all the official languages;
- (b) reflect both the unity and diverse cultural and multilingual nature of South Africa and all of its cultures and regions to audiences; ...
- (e) ... and contribut...[e] to a shared South African consciousness and identity; (Broadcasting Act of 1999).

Similarly, the SABC Guidelines for Programme Content specify the following:

In a multi-cultural society, the SABC needs to ensure not only that the diversity is reflected, but that it is reflected positively ... Programmes should contribute to a sense of nation-building and should not in any way disparage the lifestyle or belief systems of any specific cultural group or in any way attack the integrity of such a group, unless it is established to be in the public interest (1996: 10).

Thus, as opposed to the apartheid notions of exclusivity, the SABC defines the nation “inclusively as a diverse group of people with a shared South African consciousness and identity” and sees its nation-building role as being representative of the unity and diversity of South Africa (milton, 2008: 259).

The role of PSB television is specifically pertinent to this thesis. Second only to radio (which reaches 93.1% of South Africans), statistics reveal that television reaches 91.7% of South Africans (OMD Media Facts 2013: 10). This makes South Africa the African country with the largest television audience. Moreover, in terms of the licensing agreement, as regulated by the IBA Act of 1993, close to 50% of the programmes transmitted by the SABC are produced locally (milton & Fourie, 2015: 198). Seen against this background of access and content, then, it is obvious why television is given such a prominent role in the nation-building project and it is conceivable that it could fulfil this mandate. milton (2008: 262) describes the SABC, (and consequently also PSB television) as “the country’s primary cultural carrier” and contends that the “SABC has been crucial in disseminating the rhetoric of ‘rainbowism’”.

In the South African context, the problem is obviously to find ways in which broadcasting can successfully reflect the enormous cultural diversity of the country (Sparks, 2009: 202), while still speaking to the ideal of the imagined South African community. Given South Africa’s history of inequality, it is not surprising that the public broadcaster experiences some difficulties in creating a sense of community in this context of diversity.

As highlighted below, there are, however, a number of tendencies present in the South African PSB context which attest to efforts made in this regard.

Horáková (2011: 115) writes that the discourse of hope that accompanied the first ten years of democracy was also evident in the popular media with marketing campaigns such as “Proudly South African”, “Alive with possibility”, the “Homecoming Revolution” and “South Africa: Good News”. This was, similarly, reflected in SABC1’s slogan: “Simunye, we are one”.¹⁵ The media in South Africa was thus saturated by images of *ubuntu* and the “rainbow nation” – all connected to how South Africans should unite in their diversity and embrace that which is indigenously South African. More recently, this rhetoric is also reflected in, for example, beer advertisements¹⁶ or advertisements for popular chain restaurants creating a narrative of a multicultural South African society where everybody celebrates together.

Related to the above is the prominence of language, or rather the 11 official languages, as carriers of the unity in diversity ideal. The SABC was assigned an important role in the South African “constitution’s and government’s explicit commitments to promoting all 11 official languages in its charge to broadcast in all the official languages and to promote previously marginalized languages”, in so doing also promoting the rainbow nation ideal (Barnard, 2006: 49). This was also reflected, in the SABC’s Editorial Policies in 2004:

As South Africa’s public broadcaster, the SABC embraces the constitutional duty to treat all the official languages equitably and with equal respect. We also recognize [sic] that language plays a crucial part in promoting and attaining the goals of building our democracy and our nation and protecting and developing our unique diverse cultures (SABC Editorial Policies, 2004).

The SABC attempts to reflect this mandate in a variety of ways. Different programmes in different languages are, for example, aired on the same channels in an effort not to cause segregation between channels, although different channels

¹⁵ Simunye is Zulu for “we are one”. The slogan of SABC was later changed to “Ya Mampela”, which means “the real thing”, when the channel was rebranded.

¹⁶ The *Hunters Gold* advertisement and the *Wimpy* advertisements screened in 2015 are both cases in point.

still focus on different audience demographics¹⁷ and social groups. Another strategy is to create multilingual programmes, some of which employ up to four languages in one episode. Barnard (2006: 39) contends that multilingualism is one of the rhetorical devices used in the development of the media's political agenda. According to him, the representation of linguistic fragmentation, cultural hybridity and multiple sites of struggle suggests models of postcolonial, multicultural democracy which counter patriarchal nationalisms and demands for linguistic purity (Barnard 2006: 39).

However, despite these efforts "television programming in South Africa hasn't completely changed its stripes ..." (Barnard, 2006: 41). Well-intentioned policies and buzz-words like "the rainbow nation", "the African Renaissance" and "multiculturalism" cannot prevent some ethno-cultural divisions from persisting and even strengthening. Unsurprisingly, then, many academics have criticised public broadcasting for disregarding the actual diversity in society (e.g. Martín-Barbero, 1988; Murdock, 1992). Even though South African media "have to be commended for playing a role in denouncing racism and racial discrimination" (Bornman, 2013: 445), it is arguable that PSB television does not promote an understanding of more complex discourses relating to the inherently heterogeneous nature of South African society. Therefore, what we witness in the PSB media, and also in PSB television, is part of the ongoing struggle to create discourses of national unity in a diverse and globalising world.

Against this background it is useful to analyse the role and position of Afrikaans television in South Africa's nation-building project and the way in which it contributes to discourses on the politics of belonging. In particular, I am interested in how Afrikaans soap operas, like *7de Laan*, as products of PSB, are positioned on matters of identity, and whiteness in particular.

¹⁷ In this regard, Orgeret (2004) states that while the SABC's slogan was "Simunye we are one" until 2002, the different channels "increasingly seemed to be structured after distinctive social groups". According to her, SABC1 is supposedly "aspirant" and "youthful" broadcasting in Nguni and English addressing mainly young black audiences. SABC2 focuses on the family broadcasting in Afrikaans, Sotho and English, while SABC3 seems to aim at the more "cosmopolitan" up-market English-speaking audiences (Orgeret, 2004: 156).

5.2.3 Soap opera and the national broadcaster

In the context of the media as an agent of change in contemporary societies, Michelle Tager (2010: 100) writes that South African soap opera functions as both a “barometer” and “vehicle of change and consistency”. Furthermore, she contends that any conceptualisation of South African soap opera as creator of cultural meaning should be seen in the context of “received political economic determinates (i.e. prescribed guidelines by the South African national broadcaster (SABC) regarding how the popular media should be configured) which have themselves been transformed into a set of strategically managed social-cultural determinants” (Tager, 2010: 100). With specific reference to South African soap opera, Andersson (2003: 151) describes these guidelines as having the intention to promote “one nation viewing” and “rainbow nation TV”.

All three of SABC’s free-to-air channels broadcast a locally produced soap opera as a flagship programme, each of which draws higher numbers of viewers than their other programmes. Hobson (2003: iii) writes in this regard that soap operas help to fulfil the remit of public broadcasters to deliver audiences. SABC 1’s local soap opera is *Generations* (aired for the first time in 1993), SABC 2’s is *7de Laan* (which premiered in 2000) and *Muvhango* (which premiered in 1997) and SABC 3’s flagship soap opera is *Isidingo* (which premiered in 1998). As flagship programmes for all of SABC’s channels, South African soap operas are carriers of the SABC’s propagation of “societal ideals signifying the hope of renewed solidarity, harmony, and social cohesion in post-apartheid South Africa” (Tager, 2010: 103) as articulated in the rainbow nation metaphor mentioned previously. Barnard (2006: 42) contends that

South African prime-time television sitcoms and soap operas metaphorise the political processes that are marking the country’s transition from apartheid, becoming striking documents in genres usually known for their apolitical insistence.

The initial mandate for *Generations*, *Isidingo* and *7de Laan* was to make use of a multiracial cast.¹⁸ In this regard, Andersson (2003: 151) asserts that these soap operas were conceptualised as non-racial, popular drama series with the potential to bring together, as viewers, “the black and white people formerly separated by apartheid and now being joyously reunited by the rainbow nation”. Hence in the context of South Africa, diversity in PSB soap operas “has been deployed as a means to redress the damage and injustices inflicted by apartheid and its legacies, suggesting a new way forward for post-apartheid South African society” (Tager, 2001: 108).

For Tager (2010: 101), both hegemonic and resistant views appear to converge in the commercialised form of South African soap opera, creating viewing pleasure in the process. She, furthermore, suggests that, through their viewing experiences and discussions of soap operas, viewers are better able to manage their lives in South Africa’s changing social environment. This echoes Pitout’s (1996) arguments as outlined in the previous chapter (Cf. pages 63–64, 70 and 74). Tager (2010: 111) writes:

Although South African soap operas have recently begun to address current socio-political issues, it is primarily their capacity to do so while transcending differences of nation, culture, class, age and gender, urging viewers/audiences to tap into mediated, highly conventionalised understandings of universal emotion that renders them readily adaptable, if not translatable, in the context of South African society.

Andersson (2003: 151), however, is critical of the unproblematic, utopian depictions in South African soap opera. According to her:

In any other country the back-slapping and camaraderie between black and white characters might be unremarkable. In the context of an apartheid past (and a present where apartheid is still in evidence) it is very much the stuff of a fantasy, an enchanted ‘future memory’ for South African viewers.

It may well be that soap operas present an idealised version of the society they originate from, but the fact remains that there is always a foundation of some sort on

¹⁸ *Generations* has since evolved and currently hosts an all black cast.

which the imagined communities represented in these texts are built (Ramutsindela, 1997: 100). According to Louise Spence (1995: 188), watching “soaps is experiencing a fantasy which we believe to be true enough to warrant drawing moral conclusions, forming opinions, and comparing what we know from the real world”. In the same vein, Andersson (2004: 10) argues in subsequent work that “Soapies mirror SA’s soul” and that there is no reason “why South African audiences should not be able to apply the flimsy stuff of soap to their own” realities. Tager (2010: 115) concurs, arguing that the SABC uses soap operas as moral and social blueprints for viewers in post-apartheid South Africa. Moreover, Tager’s study, inter alia, indicates that viewers do create links between what they see in soap operas and their lived experiences, even though these texts typically present fictional worlds devoid of explicit political or ideological messages.

However, if it is indeed the case that popular local productions are to be instrumental in shaping South Africa’s “new” social reality, the question that begs answering is: Whose utopian ideals are represented, for whom, and by whom? Also, considering the critical potential of these texts, do they not need to problematise issues of race and diversity, or at the very least be cognisant of these issues? Hall (cited in McQueen, 1998: 139) argues that given the fact that

the media have the power to represent the world in certain ways and because there are so many different and conflicting ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets left out, and how things, people, events, relationships are represented.

These questions form the basis of the analysis of *7de Laan* in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Any attempt to investigate contemporary struggles for a South African identity as it relates to the South African media’s mandate towards nation building is incomplete without situating it in the historical context of the country. To that end, this chapter started out with a cursory overview of this historical context and its related

intersections with identity construction and the symbolic construction of the rainbow nation in particular.

This was followed by a closer investigation of the history of PSB in South Africa, with specific focus on the role the public broadcaster has played in the past, and continues to play today, in the process of establishing a national identity. While it seems that there have been concerted efforts to establish a free and democratic media that supports the notion of unity in diversity, some of the legacies of apartheid are still pervasive. Moreover, the new dispensation brought with it a number of its own issues. As a cultural industry, South African PSB acts as both a reflector of the political conditions in the country and a political role player in its own right.

The final two sections focused on the role of South African public service television, and soap opera in particular, in the construction of a national identity characterised as celebrating unity in diversity. In the South African context it is clear, from the mandates that govern their productions, that soap operas are viewed as significant in identity construction. It follows that indigenised versions of the global genre are material in an analysis of the identities and interests of South African society, also as it pertains to constructions of whiteness.

milton et al. (2013: 409) refer to Bottero (2010) when stating that, in a Cultural Studies framework, “questions of identity inevitably evoke issues of representation, reflexivity and symbolic construction”. It is with this in mind, and in the context of South African PSB as outlined in this chapter, that, in the next chapter, I seek to analyse the symbolic constructions of whiteness in soap opera in order to determine whether the symbolically marked whiteness of South Africanness has changed, or whether the legacies of marginalisation remain prevalent in these popular cultural representations.

CHAPTER 6: *7de LAAN*: SOAP FOR THE NATION

INTRODUCTION

Marlene van Niekerk (1994: 271) writes the following on the Rainbow Nation in her award-winning novel, *Triomf*: “Nuut se gat ... dis nie nuut nie, dis dieselfde gemors gerecycle onder ‘n ander naam” (*New my ass ... this is not new, it’s the same trash recycled under another name*).

In this chapter, testing Van Niekerk’s (1994) comment about the fact that a lot of things in the “New South Africa” have not changed in actual fact, but have merely been recycled or renamed, I investigate the utilisation of the “rainbow nation” in the local Afrikaans soap opera, *7de Laan*, as metaphor for the South African imagined community and interrogate how this metaphor can be read in relation to contemporary renegotiations of whiteness.

I address the following subquestion (Cf. page 10) in the scope of this chapter: “Does whiteness function as an organising principle in the narratives and representations of the relevant soap operas, and if so, how does it secure its hegemonic everydayness?” This is done against the background of South African PSB and its mandate to contribute to nation building in post-apartheid South Africa as outlined in the previous chapter. To that end, the chapter unfolds as follows:

Building on the previous chapter’s elucidation of South Africa’s public broadcasting context, and the role of soap opera in that context, the first section introduces *7de Laan* and situates it as an Afrikaans soap opera produced for the PSB. A broad contextualisation is followed by more specific descriptions of the social reality constructed in the soap opera. Firstly, in accordance with Liebes and Livingstone’s (1998) ethnographic method (Cf. Figure 4.1, page 90), a graphical depiction of the family structure and romantic relations in *7de Laan* is presented. Liebes and Livingstone (1998) argue that such graphical depictions provide a starting point from which one can derive an accurate representation of the relationships, connections

and interactions which form the narratives of the soap opera. This is followed by an analysis of the five-month sample of *7de Laan*, which serves the purpose of an ethnographic enquiry into the social reality as constructed in the soap opera. The analysis focuses specifically on the social and cultural reality as constructed by the community and setting in *7de Laan*, the use of language in the soap opera and the representation of diversity and difference. A number of studies have focused on some of these aspects (Andersson (1991, 2003), Barnard (2006), Dhoest (2009a, 2009b), Franco (2001), Liebes and Livingstone (1998), Milton (1996, 2008), O'Donnell (2002), Pitout (1996), Tager (2010), Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009) and Van der Merwe (2012) but the specific focus here is on how the social reality and imagined community constructed in *7de Laan* perpetuate or negate hegemonic narratives of whiteness. Phrased differently, what does whiteness in *7de Laan* look like? The analysis is conducted in the context of the classification of *7de Laan* as a community soap opera. Hence characteristics such as social commitment, “realism”, its commitment to PSB mandates and cultural specificity are foregrounded.

All of the above contribute to the goal of this chapter, which is to answer questions such as: For whom is *7de Laan* constructed and to what end? How is it composed and which cultural resources or storehouse of cultural plots does it draw upon? What do these narratives accomplish and are there any obvious gaps and inconsistencies which might create the possibility of preferred readings or counter-narratives (Riessman, 2008: 540)?

The findings in this chapter will be used as a starting point for the controlled case study of the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*, which follows in Chapter 8. Together, this will contribute to answering questions about the similarities and differences in the construction of whiteness in South African versus Flemish soap opera in Chapter 9.

6.1 Contextualisation

At the time of writing this thesis (2015), *7de Laan* was the most popular South African, Afrikaans, soap opera (Van der Merwe, 2012: 36, SAARF: 2014). It is

broadcast predominantly in Afrikaans, but also features English, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana and English subtitles. It was created, and is still produced, by Danie Odendaal.¹ *7de Laan* was first aired in 2000 and is broadcast in 30-minute instalments on weekday evenings on the PSB channel, SABC 2. Initially, the soap opera was broadcast only from Mondays to Thursdays, but this was later changed to include Fridays, making it a daily soap. The show generally consists of 17 permanent actors and approximately ten regular guest actors. The setting of the soap opera is the fictional *7de Laan* (*Seventh Avenue*) in the imaginary suburb of *Hillside*, in Johannesburg, South Africa, where all the characters live or work. Within this fictional space, the characters all interact on an ostensibly equal level irrespective of age, gender, race or class (Labuschagne, 2010).

In the South African PSB arena, soap operas prove to be a popular choice among viewers. Quantitative audience data has proven that both imported and locally produced soap operas are popular among South African audiences (Van der Merwe, 2012: 37). However, locally produced soap operas are, without exception, the flagships of their respective TV channels (Cf. page 139), which supports La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) thesis about the appeal of cultural proximity (Cf. page 61) as well as Billig's (1995) theorisation of audiences' tendency to relate to "banal nationalism". In this context, *7de Laan* holds its own in the "fiercely competitive timeslot" at 18:30 during which two other local soap operas, namely *Isidingo* (SABC 3) and *Rhythm City* (e.tv), are broadcast (Van der Merwe, 2012: 36). Van der Merwe (2012: 39) attributes the appeal of *7de Laan*, at least in part, to the unique combination of situation comedy and soap opera characteristics, mixed with cultural proximity, which is often found in community soap operas.

The fact that *7de Laan* is broadcast on SABC 2, with its tagline, *You belong*, implies that it caters for an audience primarily falling into the LSM² group 5-7 and mostly

¹ Danie Odendaal is a South African writer, producer and director. In 1992, for example, he worked as head writer on the set of *Egoli*. He is the director of *Danie Odendaal Productions*.

² The Living Standards Measure (LSM) is a measurement strategy introduced in the late 1980s "to segment the market on a non-racial basis". This measurement strategy has now been "accelerated as

speakers of Sotho, Afrikaans, Venda, Tsonga and English (Television channel profiles, 2012). Although *7de laan* is an Afrikaans soap opera and was initially commissioned for the upper-income category, it “now has a much wider audience base which includes viewers from different socio-economic, racial and language groups” (Van der Merwe, 2012: 36). The audience demographics of the soap opera seem to be spread almost equally between white (33%), brown (35%) and black (31%) viewers.³ Furthermore, in contradiction to soap opera’s theorisation as a genre geared to appeal to female viewers, *7de Laan* draws only marginally more female viewers (57%) than male viewers (43%), with 35% of the audience being over the age of 50 years (Van der Merwe, 2012: 37).

Concerning the intended target audience of the soap opera, Odendaal claims that, even though the primary language of the soap opera is Afrikaans, *7de Laan* was never intended to be a “white soapie” (Van Zyl & Venter, 2014). Odendaal’s comments are mentioned here since they are an indication of *7de Laan*’s ideological positioning. The connection he makes between Afrikaans and whiteness is telling, since, in the South African context, white people are not the predominant speakers of the Afrikaans language – brown people are. The producer’s ideological linking of Afrikaans to whiteness could therefore be read as part of the underlying assumptions governing its production.

According to Milton (2008: 263), *7de Laan* is a soap opera that “presents a liberal-pluralist utopia of ‘the nation in colour’”. It presents utopian images of community, working class and ethnic solidarity and personal friendships, as outlined in the PSB’s commitment to represent a multiracial society. Van der Merwe (2012: 46), in turn, describes *7de Laan* as having a “unique balance between humour/light heartedness and drama, and between fantasy and reality” and being specifically “geared towards relaxation and diversion from the harsh realities of daily life in South Africa”. Milton’s (2008) observation about the utopian nature of the representations and

a number of black South Africans progress to the more affluent sectors of South African society”, even though race is still a determining element in market segmentation (Roome, 1999: 313).

³ The remaining 1% constitutes Indian viewers (Van der Merwe, 2012: 37)

Van der Merwe's statement confirm Hennie Van Coller and Anthea Van Jaarsveld's (2009:30) contention that the soap opera is built around the idea of "relax and relate" and also echoes Jooste's (2005) argument that *7de Laan* provides "guilt-free" Afrikaans television.

From the outset then, it is clear that, despite the ideological implications of Odendaal's statement, the goal of *7de Laan* is supposedly to represent a non-threatening, non-racial, but representative version of the South African imagined community with the goal of entertaining audiences and providing escapism from the South African reality. Van der Merwe (2012: 38) summarises the perceived premise of *7de Laan* as follows:

7de Laan presents an idealised version of living together, and class and race differences, especially, are underplayed. Upward mobility is possible within the community, but is, at the same time, restricted to the community. While social issues are from time to time included in the storyline, *7de Laan* mostly steers away from gender-specific issues, and also from homosexuality, AIDS, and overtly political issues. Sexual intercourse, though implied, is never shown.

Van der Merwe (2012: 47), furthermore, describes *7de Laan* as being "safe and not progressive" while, in contrast, Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 31) argue that it may well be progressive because of its idealised reality which could be interpreted as suggesting a new South African identity, free from the burdens of race.

This is a recipe that seems to resonate with audiences. Both theorists mention these "safe" representations as a significant part of the soap opera's appeal, even more so since it does not "require much deliberation from the audience" (Van der Merwe, 2012: 47). Van der Merwe cautions, however, that one must be careful "not to equate effortless viewing with passive viewing", since her research reflected that these "discrepancies between the 'real' world and the 'soap' world" were often part of *7de Laan*'s appeal, and some viewers "took pleasure in fantasising about 'what might be', especially when it came to living in an imagined close-knit multicultural society like Hillside" (Van der Merwe, 2012: 47).

Confirming *7de Laan*'s success is the fact that it reaches a larger audience than any other Afrikaans soap opera.⁴ Its longevity and the accolades bestowed on it, furthermore, speak to its popularity. In April of 2010, *7de Laan* celebrated ten years on television and on Monday, 9 May 2013, it broadcast its 3 000th episode. SAARF (South African Audience Research Foundation) rates it as one of the most watched shows on South African television today. In 2010, for example, it was voted the most popular soap opera at both the SAFTA (South African Film and Television Awards) awards and the *You/Huisgenoot/Drum Spectacular*. Similarly, in 2014, it received the award for the Best Soap Opera at the SAFTAS for the third year in a row (*7de Laan wins best soap award at SAFTAS, 2014*). Furthermore, at the 2014 Royalty Soapie Awards, *7de Laan* scooped up three statuettes, namely for outstanding supporting actor (Hennie Jacobs), outstanding supporting actress (Annelize van der Ryst) and outstanding newcomer (Simoné Nortmann) (*Isibaya wins big at Royalty Soapie Awards, 2014*).

Another testament to the soap opera's popularity is the fact that Leo Manne (general manager for the public broadcaster's television channels) writes that because of the amount of advertising revenue *7de Laan* generates,⁵ it is one of the two central programmes responsible for the survival of SABC2. According to Manne, "[t]he SABC2 schedule only survives on two pillar programmes – the largely Afrikaans soap *7de Laan* at 18:30 and the Venda soap at 21:00" (Ferreira, 2014). This substantiates arguments presented previously (Cf. 139) regarding the nature of soap opera as a flagship for PSB.

⁴ It should be noted that part of this popularity is due to the fact that *7de Laan* is the only Afrikaans soap opera broadcast on a public service channel and that other local Afrikaans soap operas are only available on the commercial, pay-to-view channels.

⁵ South African soap operas, in accordance with the history of the genre, are conceptualised mainly as advertising vehicles and are considered some of the prime programmes in which to advertise. During commercial breaks, advertisements are specifically aimed at what is regarded to be the target audience and, because of the soap opera's popularity, advertisements in these slots are highly exclusive. In the case of *7de Laan*, prominent advertisements featured during commercial breaks include those for local supermarkets such as SPAR, Pick n Pay, OK, Shoprite and Checkers, those for cell phone service providers such as Cell C, MTN and Vodacom, those for insurance providers such as VIRSEKER, MiWay, King Price, Hippo and Alexander Forbes and those for domestic products or beauty products such as Staysoft, Mr Muscle, Glade, Nivea, Vaseline and Clinique.

The popularity and influence of these texts also extend beyond the television format. Apart from being able to view *7de Laan*, viewers are encouraged to buy into the soap opera as a product. For instance, *7de Laan* provides the option of downloading its theme song as a ring tone for cell phones. Interaction with soap operas as products, furthermore, includes guest appearances by actors at public shows or shopping malls. Two cookbooks, published by *7de Laan*, further contribute to the perceived reality of these characters in the lives of the viewers. The second cookbook, *7de Laan celebrates* (2013), for example, offers recipes featured in the show, such as favourites from the safari dinner, Errol's 21st birthday party and the church bazaar. Another case in point would be *Die Flooze* who created a career outside of *7de Laan* based on the character she portrays in the soap opera. Audiences can watch her perform live, in character, at popular Afrikaans music shows such as the *Huisgenoot Skouspel* or *Afrikaans is Groot* (Afrikaans is Big)⁶ and art festivals such as the Klein Karoo National Arts festival. She has also released a number of albums as *Die Flooze*. Viewers are, furthermore, able to interact with the characters on designated websites where pictures, voting polls, chat rooms and archival information are available. At the time of conducting this research, for example, there was a poll asking viewers to vote whether or not Charmaine should tell her daughter, Vanessa, about Zander's infidelity. In the unlikely event that a viewer did not manage to watch one of the three or more screenings of a specific episode, information on previous, as well as upcoming shows can be obtained via these websites or via SMS.

All of the above is indicative of the influence of soap operas as extending outside the frame of the television genre as an interactive discourse. Both Van der Merwe (2012) and Andersson (2003) highlight the pervasiveness of "soap opera talk" or "soap talk" as a mechanism used by viewers not only to socialise, but also to comprehend their daily lives. Van der Merwe (2012: 44) writes about *7de Laan* that part of its appeal "is the social and participatory nature of watching ... For many

⁶ Both "Huisgenoot Skouspel" – popularly described as South Africa's largest Afrikaans music event – and "Afrikaans is Groot" (Afrikaans is big) are popular music concerts hosted annually. They feature the country's most popular Afrikaans musicians and attract huge audiences annually in several venues across South Africa.

viewers the appeal of watching soaps in general is enhanced by the associated soap talk that is often characterised by speculation and playful interaction”.

Despite its popularity, *7de Laan*'s ratings have not shown any growth over the last year (Channel24, 2015). Moreover, the soap opera has also recently been the topic of some criticism. In August of 2014, the *Huisgenoot*⁷ magazine's front page declared that the SABC demanded *7de Laan* to change its “recipe”. According to *Huisgenoot*, the SABC was forcing affirmative action on *7de Laan*'s producers. It is anticipated that said affirmative action would have an impact on casting, intrigues and narratives. The goal of the requested changes is to make “Hillside more representative of all South Africans”. This pertains to not only the actors and storylines, but also the producers and writers. “According to Odendaal the SABC felt that the soap could better represent the South African market if it had more brown and black representatives in the creative team” (Van Zyl & Venter, 2014: 10). This was met with mixed reactions from viewers on public forums. While the changes highlighted here pertain to *7de Laan* specifically, they can be read as being indicative of the current crises in the PSB and consequent changes in the SABC, as outlined in Chapter 5 (Cf. pages 127–134).⁸

Odendaal confirmed that during deliberations with the SABC, it was concluded that *7de Laan* was not keeping up with the changes in the South African society. Kaizer Kganyago (spokesperson for the SABC) added that he thought it would be a good idea for the soap opera to include more current issues in its narratives, especially

⁷ *Huisgenoot* (Afrikaans for “House Companion”) is a weekly Afrikaans language, general interest family magazine. It is the South African magazine with the highest circulation in the country. It is aimed at white and brown Afrikaans speakers and has two sister magazines, namely *You* (aimed at demographically diverse South African English-speaking readers of different ethnicities) and *Drum* (mainly aimed at black readers).

⁸ In June 2015, *7de Laan* was “relaunched” with a new theme song for a new opening theme featuring modern-day retail environments instead of the soap's iconic sepia-toned opening sequence (Channel24: 2015). Other cosmetic adaptations such as the makeover of the club, *Felicity Fashions* and *Theron & Terblanche*, however, were the only amendments made. A related article on the changes made (*Huisgenoot*, 25 June 2015) assures readers that Afrikaans and the characters and intrigues will remain. Hence at the time of writing this thesis, no significant changes had been made to the content of the soap opera as suggested by the SABC.

seen against the decline in viewership of *7de Laan* between August 2013 and July 2014⁹ (as reported by the Television Audience Measurement Survey [TAMS]).

Regardless of its obvious popularity then, it seems that *7de Laan's* presentation of the South African imagined community as an artificial hybridity, denying difference and conflict, is problematic to some, and this is reflected in the SABC's suggested changes. It is against this background of obvious tension between the existing popularity of the text and the palpable problems its representations pose to politics of belonging that I take a closer look at its content from a CWS perspective.

6.2 *7de Laan* as a community soap opera

Community soap operas are often the choice of soap genre for PSBs since their characteristics adhere to PSB-specific mandates (Cf. Chapter 3, page 58-59), such as commitment to social issues, a propensity for “realism” and an obligation to be culturally specific. *7de Laan* falls into this genre.

Thus, even though entertainment is undeniably *7de Laan's* primary purpose and “relax and relate” is its particular approach, the fact that its intended audience is Afrikaans-speaking South Africans and its platform is PSB, implies that there is some merit in examining the specific version of the imagined community it constructs (as outlined in the NRF project on Afrikaans television). While community soap operas – as the name suggests – focus on certain communities which are geographically bound, and their concerns are predominantly insular and domestic, these constructions still have implications not only for the PSB mandates it is obliged to adhere to, but also for the way in which certain meanings are structured to be more pertinent than others, particularly as this relates to the types of whiteness which is foregrounded. The sections to follow investigate *7de Laan's* version of social reality with particular emphasis on the nature of the community and setting, the importance of language and the treatment of diversity.

⁹ According to the TAMS report, there was a decrease of more than 400 000 viewers during this period. The average viewership of a single episode of *7de Laan* is now approximately 2 405 159.

7de Laan: Graphic depiction of family and social structure

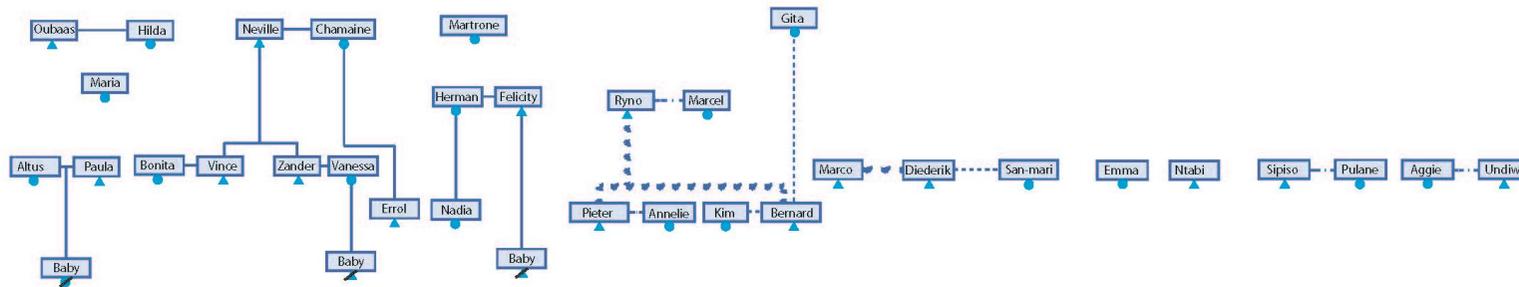


Figure 6.1: Graphic depiction of 7de Laan’s family and social structure

6.2.1 Graphic depiction of 7de Laan’s family and social structure

As evidenced in the graphic depiction (Cf. page 152) and as representative of the structure of the community soap opera, the characters in *7de Laan* are interrelated because of their primary role as part of the *Hillside* community. In this community, various characters are linked by familial, romantic and business relationships.

During the episodes relevant to this analysis, *7de Laan* featured the Meintjies/Beukes family consisting of Charmaine and her daughter, Vanessa, and her husband’s two sons, Xander and Vince. Other prominent households featured in the narrative include those of Herman and Felicity and Oubaas and Hilda. The soap opera, furthermore, features a large contingent of young adults related to each other through familial as well as romantic links. *7de Laan*’s family and social structure clearly mirrors Liebes and Livingstone’s (1988) depiction of the structure of a community soap opera in Figure 4.1.

6.2.2 Setting and community: social and cultural reality as constructed in 7de Laan



Figure 6.2: *7de Laan* logo (Soapie Teasers, 2014)

7de Laan’s introductory theme song and the accompanying visuals (see Figure 6.2) serve to construct the urban milieu of the soap opera. A collage of street activities, featuring shop fronts and restaurants, is presented to the viewer.¹ This showcases the street (7th Avenue) in *Hillside* which, presumably, functions as the backdrop for

¹ This argument still holds true for the “revamped” version of the soap opera, since the opening sequence still features a street scene connected to Johannesburg, and even a shot of the *Hillside Times*, with the headline: “Hillside residents unite”.

the soap opera, as well as the typical activities relating to such a street as the setting of the soap opera (see Addendum A for a detailed description of the shops and related spaces featured in the soap opera, as well as an elucidation of the specific actors interacting in each space). Odendaal was inspired to create the soap opera when he was living in Melville (a suburb in Johannesburg) where he watched people come and go every morning over coffee and breakfast in his favourite coffee shop, in the process creating his own imaginary suburb with a variety of characters (Milton, 2008: 273).

Hence, although *7de Laan* is set in the fictional suburb of *Hillside*, the opening credits show actual images of Melville in Johannesburg. The fact that viewers recognise this setting allows for heightened identification. However, because no further mention is made of Melville or Johannesburg, and no outside shots are included, viewers are able to associate Hillside with different settings, making the setting appealing across a variety of contexts (Van der Merwe, 2012: 48). Many cities and towns in South Africa have a 7th Avenue, and viewers are therefore able to associate it with a setting familiar to them. Placing the narratives in surroundings familiar to viewers is one of the most basic ways in which soap operas create verisimilitude and cultural proximity. The environment created in soap operas approaches the status of the “real”, enforcing Billig’s (1995) notion.

Bongani Majola (2003) writes the following on the popularity of Johannesburg as a setting for soap operas: “Johannesburg is the favourite location for the country’s television soapies. With equal vigour, independent commercial broadcasters as well as the national broadcaster have used Johannesburg as a focal point of dramatic action in their storylines.” Some reflection on Johannesburg, and the connotations attached to it, is material in creating a nuanced description of the setting of the soap opera. As South Africa’s largest city, Johannesburg (also colloquially referred to as “Jozi” or “e-Goli” [City of Gold]) is the epitome of South African corporate success and urban living, often described as “Africa’s economic power house”. It is home to a vibrant community of South Africans from all ethnicities and classes and, in contrast to its role as the economic power house, is also considered to be one of the most

dangerous cities in the world, making it a melting pot of contrasts. Situating *7de Laan* in this milieu obviously emphasises urban culture, which promotes aspirational values and provides a suitable background for its goals regarding the representation of a multicultural community.

Apart from the “real” settings created in local soap operas, they also create the illusion of co-existing with what happens in a South African context on a daily basis, and employ “real time” as far as possible, which can be linked to the verisimilitude mentioned in Chapter 3 (Cf. pages 62–64). South African viewers thus have the opportunity to celebrate Christmas or New Year with their favourite soap opera characters while they are celebrating these same events at home. Not only happy occasions are depicted in “real time”, however, but characters in the soap opera are also depicted as being faced with the same problems as their audience. When the South African electricity grid was in danger of falling, for example, and the whole country was being subjected to load shedding, the 49M initiative was launched to encourage South Africans to use our energy resources responsibly, the same campaign was also featured in a prominent story line in *7de Laan*. In this instance, Tsepo, a young black boy, coined the key phrase: “Elke bietjie help, remember your power” (*Every little bit helps, remember your power*).

Van der Merwe (2012: 48) contends that in this “familiar though flexible setting, the focus on neighbourliness is, to some extent, part of *7de Laan*’s appeal. Neighbours get along, look out for each other and are all equal, irrespective of race.” In this regard, Milton (2008: 262) writes that on “the surface it would ... appear as if these characters have surpassed the boundaries of race and class (and gender), that they are operating almost within a framework of a unified community”. The soap opera therefore presents its viewer with a microcosm housing a utopian community characterised by neighbourliness and collegiality despite its inherent diversity.

Everything in the soap opera happens within this microcosm, and factors external to this enclosed space seldom have any explicit influence on the goings-on in *Die Laan*. Events that are considered newsworthy are all from within this microcosm. This

resonates with Geldhill's (2003: 352) and Allen's (1983: 100) contentions (Cf. page 54) that soap operas are constructed in an interior world. Errol, for example, starts an anonymous gossip column and, for this purpose, he plans a whole safari dinner in order to get the residents talking. He then records these conversations to use as material for his column, which is considered newsworthy. When references are made to the world outside of the microcosm, this involves unthreatening spaces such as holiday destinations, for example, Ryno's beach house in Boggomsbaai, or Marko's planned trips to Prins Albert and Gamkaskloof.

Apart from the above, hardly any references are made to a world existing outside of the microcosm of *Hillside*. The only reference to the existence of rural communities in South Africa, for example, is when Tshepo has to return home to his rural community around Rustenburg after visiting his sister in Johannesburg. Other than the brief references to his rural upbringing, little reference is made to any rural communities in South Africa, constructing the national character, in *7de Laan* at least, as predominantly urban, or, at the very least, creating the impression that this urban community exists independently from any other communities in South Africa. Thus, when issues such as the above are introduced into the storylines, they are not painted as part and parcel of South African life, but rather treated as "special" themed narratives, which stand apart from the "normal" status quo. This overt preference for an urban setting, according to Milton (2008: 268), causes the "views and ideas of rural Afrikaans communities [to] remain marginalised and thus unheard".

Moreover, within this enclosed space, all the characters are sketched as homogeneous. Scant, if any, references are made to historical events² and there

² When historical references are included, it is usually with an unproblematic and positive inflection. Two examples of such references would be the celebration of Heritage Day and Youth Day. Heritage Day, for example, is a South African public holiday celebrated in spring time. On this day, South Africans are encouraged to celebrate their cultures and the diversity of their traditions and beliefs. Heritage day is also, however, colloquially referred to as "Braaidag" (Barbecue Day). While having a barbecue is certainly a uniquely South African tradition, white South Africans have been criticised for taking this tradition and making it the overriding tradition of the day, in the process negating all the other nuances of South Africans' shared and individual heritages. In *7de Laan*, Heritage Day was celebrated by having a braai in *The Heights*, and no reference was made to other traditions or beliefs.

seems to be an unspoken agreement that all the characters share a homogeneous “South African” history which does little to acknowledge the different backgrounds and roots of the characters depicted. Since identity is relative, everybody in *7de Laan* is depicted as sharing the same circumstances, aspirations and ideals. These ideals, according to Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 29), are reflected as being related to “personal fulfilment, love, money and status”. Possibly because of its divisive potential, political emancipation and religious fulfilment play no role (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 30). Overall, *7de Laan*, thus constructs a community reflecting aspirational values that are in line with those of the rainbow nation, albeit utopian and not necessarily linked to any real-life situations. Like Van der Merwe (2012), Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 30) identify this “microcosm of equality in diversity” as one of the reasons for the show’s popularity.

Related to the above are the cultural activities and practices which are, presumably, shared by all the characters, perpetuating the idea of a national culture of unity in diversity. A closer look, however, reveals that the cultural activities, practices and practitioners portrayed in *7de Laan* have highly specific underlying cultural connotations. As a case in point, when the respective owners of the three primary social venues (*Oppikoffie*, *Stasie Ses* and the *Deli*) in *Die Laan* try to compete with one another to win over patrons, they each host special activities to promote themselves. *Oppikoffie* hosts a Bingo game for their patrons, while *Stasie Ses* invites “Ferdie die vriendelike hipnotiseur” (*Ferdi the friendly hypnotist*), and the *Deli* hosts a food and wine pairing. All of these activities are decidedly Western, arguably white, practices which speak to the construction of the dominant culture portrayed in *7de Laan*.

Apart from the activities presented in the narratives, the cultural practitioners or carriers of popular culture presented in the storylines are also predominantly white,

Similarly, even though *7de Laan* celebrates Youth Day by taking part in community service, hardly anything is done in the actual narrative to create awareness about the fact that the day commemorates the protest which resulted in the Soweto uprisings of 1976.

and often Afrikaans. *Stasie Ses* is an example of one venue where characters often gather for social events linked to cultural practices, or to indulge in Matrone's "boerekos" (associated with traditional Afrikaans cooking). At the relaunch of *Stasie Ses* (which was screened in March of 2013), for example, all the residents of *Hillside* – regardless of their age or class – enthusiastically gathered to see Arno Carstens³ perform, and supported this musical act, dancing and singing along. The characters are all depicted as being familiar with the artist's repertoire and work, even though he falls specifically within a white, South African, rock and roll genre.⁴

References to celebrities are often also restricted to white celebrities. Examples of such references from the episodes viewed for this analysis include Prince Harry (the younger son of Charles, Prince of Wales and Diana, Princess of Wales), Minki van der Westhuizen (an Afrikaans model and television presenter) and Danny K (a popular English musician).⁵ These examples are indicative of the type of popular culture presented as the norm in the narratives of *7de Laan*.

Even though the characters are presented as a unified whole sharing a national character, some of the characteristics of this culture, as presented in the narratives, are still reminiscent of dominant white ideologies. Oubaas and Hilda's explicit involvement with the church is one such example. Oubaas's role as "ouderling" (elder) and Hilda's constant worry about "what dominee would say" whenever they are in the middle of something perceived to be amoral, are reminiscent of the role the Dutch Reformed (Neder-Duits Gereformeerde, often shortened as NG) church played as the ideological state apparatus during apartheid South Africa. Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 24) comment in this regard that the NG Synod has been described as "the National Party in prayer". During apartheid, the NG Church served

³ Carstens is a South African singer songwriter. He started out as the lead singer of the rock band, *Springbok Nude Girls*, and has since started a solo career and released seven studio albums and 18 top-ten singles.

⁴ Apart from the examples listed here, other examples of entertainers visiting *Die Laan* within the scope of the analysis include Lindie Stander (an Afrikaans comedian) and "Ferdie die vriendelike hipnotiseur" (Ferdie the friendly hypnotist) and Snotkop (an Afrikaans rapper).

⁵ The only ethnic group referred to in the sample of episodes was "Freshly Ground" a South African Afro-fusion band hailing from South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

as a bastion of apartheid and patriarchy and had definite connections with the Afrikaner Broederbond.⁶

Other overt cultural practices perceived as being outside of the homogeneous culture presented in the soap opera are, although often with comic effect, marked as different. Hilda's "Ikebana"⁷ classes are a case in point. Oubaas describes the practice of Ikebana as "volksvreemd" (foreign), thus rejecting it, and Hilda appropriates this traditional practice and reinterprets it in a way that does not necessarily correspond with its principles. Two underlying discourses are at play here. Firstly, Oubaas explicitly rejects a practice he perceives to be foreign to his "volk" (*people*), a people to which all the characters in the soap opera obviously cannot belong. Even though Oubaas's musings are often viewed as humorous instances, the uncritical acceptance of his rejections does attest to a specific ideological viewpoint. Furthermore, in appropriating non-Western practices, these narratives simply define new subjectivities by drawing on other discursive and cultural practices to supplement previous white identities perpetuating Steyn's (2001) *Under African skies (or white, but not quite)* narrative.

Perpetuating this idea of the absolute nature of this closed setting is the fact that even when there are minor internal differences, characters remain ultimately loyal to their *Hillside* space. Moreover, when criminals or other perceived "negative influences" interrupt the storylines, they are always from the outside (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 31).

I acknowledge that the notion of television portraying utopian ideals is not new or unique to soap operas, and therefore, in itself, it does not constitute a reason to be wary or critical. It is also arguable that these utopian depictions have a role to play in

⁶ The Afrikaner Broederbond (translated: Afrikaner Brotherhood) was a secret, exclusively male, Calvinist organisation in South Africa dedicated to the advancement of white "Afrikaner" interests. Its influence on South African politics and social life (sometimes compared to that of the Free Masons) was most prominent during the rise of apartheid. Many prominent figures in South African politics during, and before, apartheid were part of the Broederbond.

⁷ Ikebana is a Japanese art of flower arrangement. It is a disciplined form in which the arrangement is viewed as a living thing "where nature and humanity are brought together" (Ikebana International [sa]).

the construction of post-apartheid identities in South Africa. According to Milton (2008: 262), “TV dramas constitute an important imaginary space where utopian moments are played out or embodied, i.e. they portray a ‘good place’ and realise an ideal social order”. She, furthermore, emphasises the tension between the realism and idealism of a drama since by its nature, it is as “an imaginary re-creation of the social world”. This being said, however, one needs to be cognisant of the fact that only certain groups are given a voice within these utopian spaces, and consequently they remain ideologically loaded. Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 31) ask the following about the idealised closed space depicted in *7de Laan*: Is it really about disturbing this idyllic version or rather about the South African audience not being ready for such a disturbance?

My concern is that, in creating this utopian space which perpetuates archaic versions of whiteness (such as those represented by Oubaas and Hilda) and which is characterised by a limited and particular set of cultural and social practices (such as safari dinners and church bazaars, cf. pages 156 – 158), *7de laan* creates what Mills (2008) and Steyn (2012: 8) refer to as a “‘feel-good’ history for whites, ... [and] a more favourable, or at least comfortable present for whiteness in South Africa”, which enforces her argument about the existence of an unspoken “ignorance contract” perpetuating white dominance. Moreover, in relation to the creation of identities in the future, these constructions create the possibility for whites to impart “this amended reality to their children ... [and] enabling subject positions for them that will be characterized [sic] by ignorance”.

These concerns are also relevant to the application of Afrikaans in *7de Laan*, as outlined in the next section.

6.2.3 *Language: guilt-free/guilty Afrikaans pleasure?*

According to Milton (2008: 256),

[b]ecause Afrikaans has a unique history as both a language of unification (in the white Afrikaner nationalism project) and a language

of oppression (due to white Afrikaner nationalists' adoption of the apartheid ideology), an exploration of the SABC's Afrikaans language programmes provides an interesting foundation for analysing the broadcaster's position with regard to South Africa's ongoing national identity project.

As mentioned previously, *7de Laan* is a multilingual, but predominantly Afrikaans, soap opera with full English subtitles. At the time of this analysis, Afrikaans constituted 90% of the dialogue in the soap opera, with the other languages only being afforded 10% of the dialogue. However, some of the characters occasionally switch to English, Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu (all of which are part of South Africa's 11 official languages). Sifiso and Phulani, for example, switch effortlessly from their mother tongue (Xhosa) to English or Afrikaans, depending on who they are talking to. It is noticeable, however, that apart from Marko (who speaks Afrikaans, English and Zulu), it is only the black characters who are portrayed as multilingual, often speaking more than two languages and switching seamlessly between the one and the other. This may create the impression that it is expected of some characters to adapt to multilingualism while other (predominantly white) characters are not required to do the same. Nevertheless, this use of not only subtitles, but also indigenous languages, is responsible, at least in part, for *7de Laan's* popularity among South Africans from all spheres and groups (Milton, 2008: 267).

At an extremely basic level, the implication of a text which is broadcast predominantly in Afrikaans (despite the inclusion of subtitles) is that viewers need a more advanced knowledge of Afrikaans to be able to interpret the nuances of the dialogue. The character of Oubaas, for example, is known for using elaborate Afrikaans idioms during his – often unplanned and unwanted – speeches. While these are translated, it is inevitable that some meaning is lost in the process. The flipside of this is that, as speakers of one of the 11 official languages in the country, speakers of Afrikaans are entitled to entertainment in their mother tongue.

In the case of Afrikaans, because of the inherent unification/oppression dichotomy connoted to it, matters are not quite that simple. The ideological connotations attached to Afrikaans have been hinted at in the introduction as well as in Chapter 5

(Cf. 5.1). Language is central to identity, and in the South African context specifically, Afrikaans, as the mother tongue of an almost equal number of white and brown speakers in a highly polarised society (specifically based on race), is a site of contestation (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 23). It has a long history as a spoken variety of the Dutch language and, from its inception, Afrikaans has functioned as a vehicle for the fulfilment of a number of ideals, but white, Afrikaner nationalism in particular (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 23). It follows that the way in which Afrikaans and Afrikaans programmes construct South African identity is not ideologically neutral.

Apart from the fact that *7de Laan* is an Afrikaans text, the application of the language in the text is significant for the identities constructed. A diverse but united community speaking Afrikaans, at first glance, might appear to suggest that the language could play a unifying role in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

However, while Afrikaans is used as a binding force, “representation of the language operates within the framework of standardisation which serves to normalise the standard version of the language, while dialects are ignored or used for comic relief” (Milton, 2008: 270). The permanent characters, although not all Afrikaans, speak standardised Afrikaans, and “different dialects are neutralised as much as possible” (Van der Merwe, 2012: 38). While no dialects are present, the characters also all speak in a highly specific vernacular using informal, colloquial language. Characters would, for example, mix English and Afrikaans, which connotes an informal use of language and promotes the idea of informality and familiarity between the characters. For example, when one character is thanking Errol for a favour, he says “Baie dankie Errol, jy was amazing” (Thank you Errol, you are amazing) mixing Afrikaans and English.

In her research on contemporary Afrikaans dramas (research which also originated as part of the NRF project on Afrikaans television), Carli van Lingen (2014: 227) found that some dramas “produced in the 2000s reveal [sic] a construction of Afrikaans identity, which shows openness towards the diversity of Afrikaans and its user base”.

According to her, standardised Afrikaans was no longer depicted as the only acceptable norm in these dramas, and this suggests that Afrikaans identity and the Afrikaans language are not fixed or completely homogeneous (e.g. only white), but rather that this is multidimensional. In contrast to Van Lingen's (2014) argument that there is a significant change in the approach and use of the Afrikaans language and that some genres are opening up new avenues of Afrikaans identity, it seems that in the soap genre, or *7de Laan* in particular, mainly standardised Afrikaans with little variation is presented. Thus, even though the soap opera goes some way in changing the perception that whites are the predominant speakers of Afrikaans, its use of standardised Afrikaans does little to represent intralinguistic differences, resulting in the homogenising of the *7de Laan* community. While the characters all use a decidedly informal, colloquial language, none of them use specific accents or context specific jargon which might elucidate their specific roots. The brown characters, for example, do not speak in any specific vernacular as would be the case in reality. Milton (2008: 268) takes issue with such a repositioning of Afrikaans (deterritorialisation) since she views it as "little more than a renewed effort to get all Afrikaans speaking South Africans to speak in one tongue (thus rather reterritorialisation)". According to her, if Afrikaans programmes such as *7de Laan* "are willing to acknowledge the linguistic diversity in the country, they should work a little harder to reflect the diversity intra-linguistically as well" (Milton, 2008: 268). Thus, despite hopes for the unifying potential of Afrikaans, its application in *7de Laan* suggests a negation of some legitimate Afrikaans vernaculars in the quest for homogeneity.

The fact that all the characters speak without a trace of any dialect or accent serves to blur the differences between them, which counteracts the idea of "unity in diversity" espoused by the SABC (Milton, 2008: 268). Instead, it promotes the idea of a homogeneous construction of a non-racialised community which is problematic precisely because of the inherent contradiction at the heart of this concept (Cf. page 120 – 121). It seems that *7de Laan* wants to be visually multicultural, and textually multilingual (albeit superficially) but still remain non-racial. Moreover, the application of Afrikaans in the texts create the impression that Afrikaans identity

remains something exceptional, even in the context of post-apartheid South Africa and in seemingly non-racial depictions such as the ones referenced here (Van der Merwe, 2012: 38).

Matrone's request for Marko and Lindile to switch from Zulu to Afrikaans is a case in point. While it is arguable that this scenario can be perceived as being critical of Matrone's (and white characters in general) ignorance about indigenous languages and their wariness in adapting or learning to speak a third language, it is more likely that this is a manifestation of Matrone's own perceived superiority and the assumption that she should be addressed in a language of her (white) choice, and that this language should be spoken exclusively in her presence.

Linked to Matrone's insistence on the unquestioned dominance of her mother tongue is the way in which Oubaas utilises Afrikaans. It is noteworthy that he depicts the stereotypical old, white Afrikaans male. While the text arguably pokes fun at his archaic use of the language (and insistence on the practices traditionally associated with this specific application of Afrikaans), Oubaas epitomises some of the negative characteristics attributed to the "Afrikaner" man, and because of his popularity, has the potential of validating their existence in society, at least for the viewers of this soap opera.

Tellingly, the only deviation from standardised Afrikaans functions to create renegotiated white identities. In the post-apartheid context, and the subsequent reconfiguration of white identities in particular, a trend referred to as "zef"-culture has emerged (Cf. page 43). This includes the use of "zef Afrikaans", a vernacular recently made popular, particularly among Afrikaans youth, by "zef" Afrikaans websites such as Watkykky.co.za and musical acts such as "Die Antwoord"⁸ and "Jack Parrow"⁹. "Zef" Afrikaans combines aspects of language connoted to "poor white trash", on the one hand, and brown gangster culture, on the other. In contrast to

⁸ "Die Antwoord" is a South African rap-rave group, whose image is connotative of a counter-culture movement called "zef".

⁹ Jack Parow is the stage name of Zander Tyler (born 22 February 1982), an Afrikaans rapper from Parow, Cape Town.

the standardised version of Afrikaans used in the rest of the text, this “bastardisation” (Breytenbach, 1999: 176) is an “active reworking and construction of, and engagement with, identities that do not necessarily conform to South African notions of race or class” (Marx & Milton, 2011: 724). In greeting Diederik, for example, the Flooze asks “Hoe brand you kole?” (*How are your coals burning?*), and in another instance, when referring to Diederik’s multiple talents, she claims he has “soveel talents ... soos Tombola by n basaar” (*Talents as numerous as the tombola at the church bazaar*). Such mutations of Afrikaans, however, invoke criticism because of the appropriation of disadvantaged identities in the creation of new white identities, and point to whiteness’s “historic capacity for mutability and mobility” (Watts, 2005: 189) and the inherent cultural capital which enables such mobility.¹⁰ This is in line with the *Under African skies (or white, but not quite)* narrative (Cf. page 42).

Despite all of this, Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 31) suggest that the use of Afrikaans in a multicultural soap opera presents it as a possible means to the creation of a new South African identity, and that language, in this way, is presented as a medium for transformation. As suggested above, however, it seems that the only identities that are transformed are those of white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. Moreover, the hegemonic role Afrikaans plays in *7de Laan*, particularly amidst the inclusion (albeit limited) of indigenous languages, could be taken to mean that Afrikaans can be “enjoyed without feelings of guilt resulting from the exclusion of other languages” (Van der Merwe, 2012: 48) perpetuating Steyn’s (2012) notion of the “ignorance contract”.

Possibly owing to the issues highlighted here, language practices in *7de Laan* have also recently come under scrutiny. In addition to the previously mentioned changes requested by the SABC, the SABC also expects the Afrikaans dialogue in the soap opera to be cut from 90% to 80%, increasing the use of English and other indigenous

¹⁰ The argument is that, instead of “rediscovering” poor white identities and bringing their plight to the fore, appropriations of “zeif” and poor white identities work to recentre whiteness. In this case, the white margin is pitted against the normative white centre. (See Milton & Marx, 2014, in this regard).

languages to 20%. Furthermore, News24 reported that, in the SABC, “[e]ybrows were also raised about the fact that black actors had to speak Afrikaans in this popular soap. During negotiations with the SABC to renew the soap for a new season, some individuals felt it was unfair and “unnatural” to expect black actors to learn Afrikaans dialogue” (Van Zyl & Venter, 2014).

The narrative decisions regarding the use of language in general could be read as manifestations of Steyn’s (2001) *Don’t think white it’s all right* discourse. Even though the cast is representative, white cultural practices and beliefs are still represented as normative without any explicit reference to this state of affairs. The critical reaction of the SABC is but one indication of the fact that the application of Afrikaans in *7de Laan* is problematic. It seems that, even though the visibility of Afrikaans on national television is significantly smaller than 20 years ago, the ideologies perpetuated by Afrikaans programmes on the SABC have not changed significantly.

6.2.4 *Diversity and difference*

In contrast to the above, at first glance, *7de Laan* presents a utopian ideal of South African society “where man and woman, black and white, rich and poor can live together in harmony without fear of being victimised because of the colour of their skin, gender stereotypes or classist supremacy” (Milton, 2008: 262) – hence a society in which things have changed. Andersson (2003: 151) describes the *7de Laan* landscape as a “land where the years have advanced but prejudices have not”. The cast represents characters from a variety of ethnic origins as well as ages and genders and, even though characters from different social classes and income brackets are depicted, they are all represented as interacting in the same social circles. Hence, true to the South African ideology of the rainbow nation and the ANC government’s ideology of non-racialism, the community in *7de Laan* is portrayed as a unified whole. As if confirming this, Charmaine comments in one episode: “Hier in die Laan kyk ons na mekaar” (*Here on the Lane we look after each other*).

As far as gender is concerned, in the South African context, patriarchy remains the dominant ideology and most of the societies in South Africa are male dominated. This, however, is also changing. At a political and social level, the roles of females are being celebrated and re-evaluated. These processes are, however, not without the expected difficulties which continue to complicate the situation, and this is mirrored in soap operas. While there are some roles challenging gender stereotypes, there are also roles perpetuating male dominance and gender stereotypes.

In this respect, the characterisation in *7de Laan* adheres to predominantly heteronormative principles. To date, there have been no characters displaying behaviour outside of the heteronormative norm. Relationships and marriages have been exclusively heterosexual and no explicit storylines depicting a character exploring any alternative sexual or gender identities have been represented. Same sex relationships, it seems, fall outside the purview of the imagined South African community as depicted in *7de Laan*. Heteronormative relationships, operating within a patriarchal ideology, are presented as the standard. Van Lingen (2014: 209) contends that, in the past, homosexuality was completely avoided on Afrikaans television as it was considered morally wrong by many conservative Afrikaner Christians. Things seem to have remained the same. Van Lingen (2014: 209) writes that despite the fact that “[h]omosexuality has received more media coverage ... and it is now more often seen as part of contemporary society” and many media initiatives are “trying to de-stigmatise issues such as homosexuality and AIDS”,¹¹ so far, “homosexuality has not been explored extensively in Afrikaans media” (Van Lingen, 2014: 209) – *7de Laan* is a case in point.

As far as male and female roles are concerned, the characters similarly portray predominantly normative representations of these constructions. The young men, for example, are presented as beer-drinking, women-watching, protagonists, while the young women are mostly presented as wine-drinking, fashion-oriented, giggling “girlfriends”. A case in point would be Paula’s make-over fashion shoots where all

¹¹ The 2011 Afrikaans film *Skoonheid* (Beauty), directed by Oliver Hermanus, is a notable example of one of these initiatives.

the men are eager to help out for the opportunity of seeing the girls strut their stuff for the camera, and the girls are all eager to take part because of the perceived glamour involved in a fashion make-over.

Nevertheless, because of the inherent feminine nature of the genre and the associated characteristics, soap operas often have the potential to challenge existing gender roles, and *7de Laan* is no exception. There are instances where women are portrayed as strong and independent, while males are sometimes given a feminine inflection because of their propensity for talk and more overt display of emotions. Van der Merwe (2012: 39), for example, writes that the males in *7de Laan* “are portrayed as good listeners and they communicate their feelings to their friends”, characteristics which deviate from normative constructions of masculinity, but which are also characteristic of gender representation in the soap opera genre as a whole.

One of the dominant characteristics of whiteness (Cf. page 22 and page 37) is its overt heteronormativity and the subsequent patriarchal inflections representations of whiteness often exhibit. Stephanie Marlin-Curiel (2003: 65) refers to “Afrikaner masculinity” as a given when she writes that “the first step to debunking Afrikanerdom is to castrate the Afrikaner masculinity (It may also bring to light the urges generated by years of repression under Afrikaner patriarchy)”. In this regard, the strong female characters in *7de Laan* might be potentially liberating, also in countering dominant discourses of whiteness.

However, strong females are usually tainted by some kind of eccentricity and portrayed as the evil female. The character of Gita McGregor is a case in point. Although unpopular and cast in the stereotypical role of the “super-bitch”, Gita is also presented as a fiercely independent business woman who does not let society, or any man, stand in the way of her business ventures or personal needs. As owner of both *The Heights* and *Hillside Travel*, she is viewed as one of the most successful business women in the soap opera. Apart from the fact that professional female characters are still inclined to focus on the family, it can also be argued that the powerful females in soap opera often have some kind of deviation which renders

them unequal to men and therefore perpetuates patriarchy, also as an ideology linked to whiteness. The powerful woman in a soap opera is more often than not also the villainess. Modleski (1982: 351) presents a counter-argument to this by arguing that this can be empowering because the villainess is able to “transform traditional feminine weaknesses into the sources of her strength”.¹² In other words, these characters employ the traits which normally render them helpless and use them to their advantage. An example of this would be pregnancy, often used as a weapon of manipulation. This, according to Modleski (1982: 352), causes a reversal of male/female roles because the anxiety of conception is transferred to the male.

Although the representation of female characters in local soap operas may open some avenues for the liberation of the female, these representations are not without problems. Milton (2005: 4) points to the fact that almost all the brown females in *Egoli* and *7de Laan* are portrayed as the wise, motherly type. A case in point would be Charmaine Beukes, who is depicted as a mother-figure who always has a sympathetic ear and advice. Milton (2008: 262) draws a connection between stereotypical representations such as these and the “mammy figure of the yesteryear”. Younger brown females are similarly stereotyped by often being depicted as unwed mothers (consider both *Vanessa* and *Felicity*) left by the fathers of their children to be single parents. According to Milton (2005: 5), there are simply not enough programmes representing rounded brown female characters and she believes that there should be a conscious effort to write stories in which the spectrum of brown, Afrikaans, female experiences is represented.

The above argument is indicative of the fact that representations of gender and race are interrelated. Milton’s argument about the lack of rounded brown characters can be applied to the construction of race as a whole within the narratives of *7de Laan*. She (2008: 262) writes that a closer look at *7de Laan* “reveals that while it is true that much time is afforded to previously marginalised groups in terms of storylines, these representations do not necessarily represent a break from old ‘apartheid’

¹² It should be acknowledged that this is a peculiarly Western feminist modelling of strength. Other traditions, such as Indian/Brazilian soap opera may have different perspectives on this.

stereotypes”. This argument is supported by the examples of Charmaine and Vanessa cited above. The representation of Sifiso (and Kabelo before him) as a two-timing, hyper-sexual black man, is another case in point. In the narratives relevant to the analysis he is depicted as cheating on his girlfriend on more than one occasion. In itself this might not be significant, but read against his much tamer and less overtly sexual white counterparts, it could be read as stereotyping.

Race and matters relating to race mostly fall outside the purview of the narratives of *7de Laan*. In the episodes I analysed there was not a single reference to race. In fact, only two instances in the history of the soap opera’s narrative come to mind when thinking about race and racial issues, and the way in which both these situations unravel is telling about the soap opera’s approach to issues of race.

In one particular narrative, Diederik, then still a waiter in *Oppikoffie*, performs a deliberate act of visible whiteness. While he is being considered for a promotion, he explicitly claims that he would not get the job since Kabelo, his black colleague, was also being considered. In so doing, he explicitly evokes the *This should not happen to a white* (Steyn, 2001) narrative. This narrative is commonly applied when whites represent themselves as victims in the post-apartheid situation where black economic empowerment is perceived as a threat to their livelihood. Diederik, however, was severely criticised for this line of thinking by the other white characters, effectively representing all the other white characters as “good whites” (Thompson, 2003). The storyline continues where Diederik realises that he was wrong and admits that he did not get the job because Kabelo is the better waiter. So, in this narrative, this bad white individual (Cf. page 35) was taken to task. According to Shome (2000: 369), this is a “problematic rhetoric in that it seems to locate the problem of whiteness at an individual level: as long as some “bad whites” can be fixed and brought to task everything will be all right”. The way in which the conflict is resolved is also significant. Against the background of the rainbow nation, this incident is handled like more of a family crisis than a racial one. Charmaine (the brown manager of the coffee shop) is like a mother to Diederik and in the end his

remorse is like that of a child towards a parent. This lack of references to race and the general “colour-blind” approach of the soap opera are problematic in that they

allow [sic] white liberals to distance themselves from racism, presenting it as something other (bad) white people do. Thus, racism is presented as something that relates to bad white racists and poor black victims, but has nothing to do with the colour-blind white liberal ... The problem with the colour-blind approach, then, is that it assists in “the production of a white self innocent of racism” (Frankenberg, 1993: 188) and is an “unconscious defensive device (Sullivan, 2006: 127) which allows white people to ignore continuing racial oppression” (Matthews, 2011: 9-10)

The second instance in which race was explicitly addressed was when Vince (a brown character) started dating Ciska (a white girl), and was publicly chastised for it by two unknown brown characters. Vince’s close friends and family, however, steered clear of this conflict and where white characters did voice their apprehension it was represented as if out of concern for this brown character whom they love and whom they presumably did not want to make vulnerable to the world of “bad whites” out there. What is also significant is that none of these stock characters ever question the utopia they live in, although their concern in this case might be an indication that they are aware that there is a world out there which might not be prepared for their utopia. When this utopian equilibrium is disturbed, however, it is always by guest characters – such as the two brown characters mentioned above. Again the prominent characters in the soap opera are constructed as disclaiming any implication in whiteness in line with the *Whiter shade of white* narrative. Reactions to the storyline were also telling. Ilham Rawoot (2009), for example, writes the following on this storyline in the *Mail and Guardian*:

I’ve always known that it was a rather safe and naive show, a bit behind with current issues and always with a little safety net ... So now they have done the unspeakable – introduced an interracial couple. Ciska is a pretty white redhead and Vince – a cute coloured boy ... Vince is getting hassled by his community for having a white girlfriend. In one memorable scene, the couple is accosted by two confusing Jo’burg coloured guys with striking Cape flats accents, who are very angry with this example of the rainbow nation ... Now, this would have been a breakthrough episode had it been 1995.

The fact that the permanent brown characters in the cast are pitted against the brown outsiders who are perceived to be the trouble makers is also significant. In this regard Steyn and Foster (2008: 34) write that one strategy of whiteness is to pit “good blacks” against “bad blacks”. In such cases, the “trope of good blacks is employed where the ideologically more accommodating ‘other’ is used to discredit and even reprimand the ideologically more confrontational position of other ‘others’”. All the white characters are depicted as “good whites” since they are friends with the “good blacks”, and together they unite against the perceived threat of “bad blacks” outside of the closed circle of the soap opera, distancing whiteness in *7de Laan* from the type of whiteness that perpetuates racism.

In general, while the cast is, arguably, representative,¹³ characters in the soap opera seldom act in a “race-specific” way. Moreover, in a rhetoric where racism is defined only as “overt acts of blatant discrimination, vicious oppression or hate crimes”, everyday exercises of “privilege and perpetuation of advantage” (Steyn & Foster, 2008: 31) such as the ones hinted at in the above narrative, pale into insignificance. However, according to whiteness scholars, racism is defined as

encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize [sic] and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between whites and people of color [sic]. This unequal distribution benefits whites and disadvantages people of color [sic] overall and as a group (DiAngelo, 2011: 56).

By this definition, even when there are no explicit references to race or racism, some of the practices depicted in and governing the narratives of *7de Laan* could be classified as perpetuating existing advantages and racist practices.

Apart from the above two instances,¹⁴ the community in *7de Laan* is constructed as homogeneous, perpetuating the notion of a unified whole and indulging a narrative

¹³ Even though a variety of ethnic groups are represented, there are still more white than black/brown characters.

¹⁴ Even though it falls outside the scope of my analysis, it should be noted here that, at the time of writing (2016), *7de Laan* represented another multiracial relationship, this time between Nandi and Bernard (a black female and white male). This storyline evoked strong reactions from characters in

of invisible whiteness. This evokes both the *Whiter shade of white* as well as the *Don't think white it's all right* (Steyn, 2001) narratives. When Herman Croukamp and Felicity Daniels got married, for example, no reference was made to the fact that Herman is white and she is brown, enforcing the *Don't think white, it's all right* narrative. In the soap opera, this instance of a multiracial relationship is presented as unproblematic, while it would, arguably, not be considered an everyday occurrence in reality. When the South African Democratic Alliance,¹⁵ for example, introduced Mmusi Maimane as its new spokesperson, various news agencies made a point of reporting on the fact that he is married to a white woman (*City Press*, 2015). Apart from the instances mentioned above, no interracial relationships are depicted in the soap opera.

Moreover, it seems deliberate that both of the above examples concern a relationship between a white and a brown character. It could be that such instances of multiracial relationships are perceived as more palatable – or less risky – to depict than other multiracial ones, possibly due to the fact that both brown and white characters are mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans, in this way creating the possible perception that they are culturally “closer”.¹⁶ It certainly remains apparent that there has (up to the date of my analysis) never been a single situation where white and black or brown and black characters have been depicted as being attracted to each other (Cf. footnote nr. 14). Milton (2008: 265) contends that what the ostensibly jovial friendships between characters from all races depicted in *7de Laan* mask, is that “the programme actually operates much closer to a perception of ‘separate, but equal development’” because, “while these friends play, work and even live together, they never ever sleep together”. For Milton (2008: 268)

[i]t appears unnatural that people who are in such close proximity every day, who profess to love and respect and honour each other would not

the soap opera, but also from viewers, and caused trouble for some actors and the SABC because of alleged racist conversations taking place behind the scenes (Venter, 2016). This being said, however, the way in which characters were forced to face negative reactions from family and friends arguably constitutes a more nuanced depiction of such situations than earlier ones.

¹⁵ The Democratic Alliance (DA) is a broadly centrist South African political party and the official opposition to the leading party (the ANC).

¹⁶ This is a deduction which could possibly make up a part of the audience study suggested in the final chapter (Cf. page 287).

at one point or another develop a crush on each other ... Unity in diversity is not equal to love and love alike. While black and white characters live together quite contently as friends, no one oversteps the boundaries of friendship by venturing into the realm of love.

Regarding class, in *7de laan*, despite the fact that characters from different social strata are depicted, there are no explicit class distinctions. The community is depicted as socially integrated with everybody facing the same economic struggles. La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) archetype of "upward mobility" (Cf. page 56), however, abounds and characters are depicted as having the potential to liberate themselves from their positions as members of the lower class with remarkable ease. Errol, for example, is a coloured orphan who lived on the streets until he was adopted by Charmaine and Neville Meintjies. Under Neville's mentorship, Errol developed an interest in journalism, earned himself a bursary to study it part time and was consequently employed by the local newspaper (*The Hillside Times*). Errol is thus portrayed as upwardly mobile, moving from the lower to the working class, and continuing his upward path by completing his education after hours. This is in line with the aspirational goal of PSB and community soap operas, and thus, even though some theorists argue that class is the new race, class, in very much the same way as race, is treated as a homogeneous construction in *7de Laan*.

Some of the underlying class inequalities which were common to apartheid are, however, still perpetuated. Two pertinent examples of this merits mentioning: Firstly, Maria, who works for Oubaas and Hilda as a domestic worker, is represented as portraying the stereotypical role associated with domestic workers in the South African context. She cooks, cleans and addresses Oubaas and Hilda in the traditional master/servant register as "Oubasie" and "Ouma". Maria is portrayed as a sassy, verbal character who does not let anybody tell her what to do and she interacts socially with all the residents of *Hillside*. The reality, however, remains that she is still cast in the stereotypical role of black domestic worker working for a white family. While Maria's character is still afforded some agency, the even more telling stereotype is that of Evelina, a domestic worker in Ryno's house and the Terreblanche house before that. Although Evelina's chicken livers and giblets are

legendary, as are a number of her other signature dishes, Evelina has only ever been referred to in the narratives of *7de Laan* and has never been physically featured on screen. This perpetuates the apartheid role of black servants as crucial to the day-to-day functioning of any given household, but ideally invisible so as not to disturb the “Masters” of said household.

Moreover, it is telling that all three of the examples referenced above pertain to brown or black characters. Even though all the characters in *7de Laan* are socially integrated, and arguably function as one happy rainbow family, when characters are depicted as being from a class other than working or upper-middle class, they are black or brown. This is not presented as a threat or a problematic situation and the fact that white characters are automatically excluded from the lower classes is not subjected to scrutiny or questioned. During apartheid, assuming all whites to be upper or middle class would have been the norm, but in current-day South Africa, poor whites are an increasingly visible social problem. This obvious ignorance towards class difference is reminiscent of Steyn’s (2001) *Don’t think white, its all right* narrative, where the pretence of a happy rainbow community functions to mask its inherent inequalities as unproblematic.

For Andersson (2003: 154), the inability of soap operas to deal with issues of difference in their narratives merely mirrors national patterns. Milton et al (2014: 405) similarly contend that, despite efforts to depict non-racialism, as the “meanings of citizenship, rights and belonging continue to be renegotiated, legacies of marginalisation still persist, and new forms of exclusion are created” in the narratives of *7de Laan* and the wider PSB context.

The construction of the South African imagined community in *7de Laan* can be interpreted in terms of Steyn’s (2001) *Whiter shade of white* narrative. According to her, this narrative entertains a construction of whiteness that disclaims any implication in whiteness – or any real reflection on the issue. Thus, even though *7de Laan* must conform to the SABC’s mandate, and it does so at first glance, it still employs narrative devices that perpetuate the white hegemonic order in Afrikaans

and make no effort at critical engagement with issues of gender, race or class, in the process perpetuating hegemonic constructions of white dominance. In this way, whiteness still functions as one of the organising principles in the narratives and representations in *7de Laan*.

The strategy of supposedly supporting a unified South African imagined community, or “pro-New South Africa discourses” is typified by Steyn and Foster (2008: 45) as “hot-from-the-oven”, but they stress that this “apparent” support for the transformation of the country “holds little danger of tipping the scales”. As such, *7de Laan* presents the easy way out since it is “more difficult to express open opposition to transformation, or to dismiss notions such as non-racism and democracy and still hold the moral high ground when in the presence of the ‘other’ who is now empowered to talk back”. Thus many whites are now “learning to hone the skills of prolonging inequities without openly owning supremacist positions” (Steyn & Foster, 2008: 46), and this is perpetuated by the narratives in *7de Laan*.

CONCLUSION

“So voorspelbaar soos die sepies op televisie” (*As predictable as the soap operas on television*).

Ironically, the above-mentioned comment is made by Hilda (one of the main characters in the soap opera) during one of the episodes under purview. From the preceding analysis it seems that *7de Laan*, quite predictably, perpetuates normative narratives of whiteness, even if it has been recycled or renamed as Marlene van Niekerk (1994: 271) claims.

Andreas Huyssen (1995: 7) states that what is viewed on television has reached the status of defining the “real”. In the 20th century, consumers’ personal lives became increasingly interwoven with mass-consumer and visual culture. Contemporary consumer-driven lives depend on the mass media to provide knowledge about the best and most recent products. This overlapping of mass culture and the personal

happens to such an extent that fictional characters from television or films enter the personal domain. As a result of these ever-changing circumstances driven by technological advances, which imply longer days, more stress, less accent on family life and religion, these holes and undesirable circumstances occur increasingly frequently. A prime example of these characters invading domestic lives is that of soap opera. As a genre it lends itself more readily to this infiltration into the private domain because of the continuous exposure of viewers to the characters. Viewers are more inclined to identify with these characters than those of any other serial form. This is because soap operas run for much longer, making it possible for particularly strong bonds to develop between the audience and the characters. Soap opera serves as a source for filling private spaces with consumer images. It becomes a kind of xenogamy;¹⁷ soap opera draws from the lives of consumers for inspiration, and vice versa. It is therefore pertinent that whiteness still functions as an organising principle in these narratives which are so obviously influential.

A number of theorists have focused on how this genre creates para-social relationships with the viewers, as well as the possible effects or implications of these relationships (Fourie, 1984, 2007; Pitout, 1996; Ang, 2007). However, my interest specifically lies in how these relationships and representations construct whiteness, which kinds of whitenesses it constructs and how these constructions can influence or guide viewers in decision-making processes as they pertain to identity construction and the politics of belonging.

It was concluded that, despite its emphasis on Afrikaans language and culture, the community in *7de laan* is still presented as a multilingual and multicultural one, albeit an ostensibly non-racial one. The narratives in *7de Laan* normalises multi-racialism by applying colour-blindness and in the process creates a seemingly non-racial community. Thus, even though the texts in question claim to represent the rainbow nation, they remain silent on overt issues of race and even of more implicit references to race. *7de Laan* presents a safe alternative to South African reality

¹⁷ The term “xenogamy” refers to cross-pollination, in this case, between soap opera and the audience, and vice versa.

“where individuals within a diverse society find sub-identities without any definitive ethnic, cultural or religious etiquettes”, in the process “presenting the Rainbow nation as the answer to the problems of the South African reality by undermining hierarchical and categorical distinctions” (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 30).

These representations are, arguably in line with the non-racial approach of the ANC government. In this regard, Steyn and Foster (2008: 29) note that [n]on-racialism, as an “attempt to build a society which is not skewed by racial (dis)advantage, is probably the main plank which drives the policies of the government led by the African National Congress”. Furthermore, there is an argument to be made that since *7de Laan*’s primary goal is entertainment, this utopian view and the aspirational aspects included in such a view are sufficient. Van der Merwe (2012: 47) posits that another possibility is that what is at work here is “the underlying fatigue some South Africans have of being politically correct”, and that texts like *7de Laan* provide a necessary escapism from such fatigue.

During the course of the chapter, however, I have repeatedly highlighted the problematic nature of representations like these. Van Coller and Van Jaarsveld (2009: 20–22), similarly, argue that identity formation is always a process of inclusion and exclusion. They view South African society as creolised, but stress that this creolisation is a process, not a state, thus not a mixture, but rather a creation of something new. They, however, emphasise that the main danger of the sort of “safe” multicultural, non-racial identity presented in *7de Laan* is the conscious suppressing and even denial of difference. *7de Laan* does not address the existing historical-cultural complexities at play in South Africa and there is a perpetual silence on the problematics prevalent in its society. The consequence of such representations is that it “creates an idealised reality where past inequalities and prejudices conveniently no longer exist or ever existed, and no longer have any influence on society” (Van Coller & Van Jaarsveld, 2009: 29–30).

Any problems are situated outside of the closed circle in which the narratives play out, and the Other remains a largely unseen outsider since the settings in which the

characters interact are closed to those marked as Other. Chidester (2008: 163) refers to this as a “boundary under patrol” where the narratives function to constantly redraw the “we-they boundaries”. In this case, there is a clear boundary between the homogenised rainbow community of the soap operas and the “Others” who threaten this homogeneity.

The denial of existing prejudices and these closely patrolled boundaries lead to a situation where narratives like the ones portrayed in *7de Laan* function as – what DiAngelo (2011: 55) refers to as – a kind of “protective pillow”, creating a social environment that protects and insulates whites from race-based stress and ultimately also lowers their ability to tolerate racial stress. According to her (2011: 55), “[w]hites are rarely without these ‘protective pillows’, and when they are, it is usually temporary and by choice. This insulated environment of racial privilege builds white expectations of racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress” which leads to what she calls “white fragility”. In South Africa, it is still possible, to some extent, for whites to lead segregated lives in a society that remains white dominated, at least economically. In this context, according to DiAngelo (2011: 58), whites receive “little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think about it critically or with complexity”.

This state is perpetuated by the unthreatening and uncritical depictions in *7de Laan*. All the whites are “good whites” because they are friends of people of colour (Thompson, 2003), and the whole cast is represented as a happy rainbow family, albeit only visually. *7de Laan* indulges in a representation of the rainbow nation that is not only an oversimplification of the concept, but also represents a construction of whiteness that does not reflect critically on issues of race or culture, in the process perpetuating “white fragility”.

Moreover, Steyn and Foster (2008) argue that representations of non-racialism (such as those in *7de Laan*) are utilised as a tool to perpetuate white dominance and reproduce racism. They (2008: 29) note that in NSAS (New South African Speak),

non-racialism is transmuted into the liberal power evasive colour blindness (Frankenberg, 1993) that has become ubiquitous in white discourses internationally. By denying the effects of racialization [sic], colour blindness is a powerful mechanism in building white consensus and enabling the reproduction of racism.

Both the perpetuation of “white fragility” as well as a denial of the use of colour blindness as a mechanism in enabling racism enables “an implicit agreement to misrepresent the world”, which Steyn (2012: 11) terms the “ignorance contract” (Cf. page 42). It entails “learning what not to know” and “what not to notice” (Steyn, 2012: 13). According to her (2012: 21),

[f]or dominant groups especially, it is not as much about accuracy as about how they would like the world to be, and having the power and resources to impose their desires, drives and will upon the social field and to effect social control, that is, to institute an ignorance contract.

Andersson (2003: 163) asks whether “a represented reversal of real life [has] the capacity to unleash some sense of transformatory if not revolutionary agency in the watchers of the soap?” Thus, could the utopian ideal of the rainbow nation in *7de Laan* really be interpreted as an effort to celebrate democracy? The analysis in this chapter suggests that when this soap opera shows its true colour(s), it merely reflects deliberate ignorance of the real situation in the country, securing whiteness’s hegemonic everydayness and cementing Steyn’s “ignorance contract”.

CHAPTER 7: THE FLEMISH CONTEXT AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

This analysis of Flemish soap opera, *Thuis* constitutes the second case study in the controlled case comparison in this thesis and is informed by the case study of *7de Laan* in Chapter 6. In line with the qualitative, Cultural Studies approach propagated here, the analysis of *Thuis* starts with a deep description of its situatedness in the Flemish and broader European context. To that end, and mirroring the structure of Chapter 5, this chapter contextualises Flanders and Flemish PSB, in the broader contexts of Belgium and Europe.

The contextualisation of Flanders and Flemish PSB in this chapter thus forms the background from which to take a CWS perspective on Flemish media, Flemish television and specifically Flemish soap opera. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's description of imagined communities, Dhoest (2004: 394) refers to "image communities" and posits that Flemish television is one of several sources of images to provide representations which give concrete shape to the abstract notion of the nation. An investigation into the nature of the Flemish imagined community, also as it manifests in Flemish media as an image community, is therefore instrumental to understanding Flemish nationhood. This, in turn, will facilitate an exploration of if, and how, whiteness functions as an organising principle in Flanders in general, but also how it translates into public narratives like soap operas, answering the second subquestion in this study (Cf. page 10). In conjunction with the information and analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 8, it provides some insight into the way in which whiteness functions in these societies and particular examples from their media output (Cf. subquestion 4 on page 10).

Flanders, like South Africa, is a multicultural, multilingual society. However, multiculturalism and diversity in these contexts differ markedly, and this contextualisation is therefore intrinsic to questions on the functioning of whiteness in this specific context. The introductory section of the chapter briefly looks at how

Flanders functions as part of the federalised state of Belgium and how it negotiated its cultural and linguistic independence in particular. Belgium's long history of migration and its concomitant integration policies as it relates to Flemish national identity are also investigated. As the chapter develops, I narrow the scope to focus specifically on issues relating to Flemish nationalism and identity and the Flemish imagined community. This broad contextualisation is followed by a section dealing with the development and functioning of the Flemish media, more specifically Flemish PSB and its role in the construction of a Flemish image community. As in South Africa, there are specific principles and policies governing the production and selection of programmes available on Flemish PSB. These policies impact on the representation of Flanders in these programmes and are, consequently, significant in an exploration of whiteness in the media. The final section of this chapter centres on Flemish television fiction. Domestic fiction has been a key role player in Flemish PSB from its inception, also in relation to the emancipation of Flanders. A specific focus on the role of the soap opera as a Flemish fiction genre serves as the final contextualisation and broad introduction to *Thuis* and Chapter 8.

7.1 Constructing the Flemish nation: the Flemish historical, national and cultural context

7.1.1 Flanders in the Belgian context

To understand contemporary efforts to represent the national imagined community, it is important to consider the specific historical and social contexts in which the development of the Flemish national identity (or identities) takes place.

Flanders, first and foremost, should be viewed as a part of the larger Belgian context. Belgium was proclaimed as kingdom in 1830, when it seceded from the Netherlands and was established as a modern nation through the writing of national historiographies and the creation of national symbols such as the flag and anthem (Morelli, 1996). It is a founding member of the European Union (EU) and hosts the

EU's headquarters as well as several other major international organisations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Belgium brought together northern-European Germanic Dutch-language regions and southern-European French-language regions. Even though, strictly speaking, it was a bilingual country, politically and culturally, French seemed to be the stronger language. The first decades of the Belgium Kingdom were characterised by the frenchification of the Flemish territory. Although censuses indicated ethnic heterogeneity, political power still remained in the hands of the wealthy, French-speaking population. Consequently, French was the sole language used in the government, the justice system and secondary as well as tertiary education systems. From the early 1860s (referred to as the Golden Sixties), however, Flemish-minded citizens started demanding cultural, political and economic power. This resulted in what is referred to as the Flemish movement¹ (Van Velthoven, 1989: 11–13; Jaspaert & Van Belle, 1989: 67-68; Vanhaesebrouck, 2010: 465). From the 19th century onwards, this process of cultural and political nationalism and emancipation was driven by the creation of Flemish “national” symbols (such as a flag and an anthem), as well as the rewriting of Flemish history and the invention of myths. This indicated the strong desire to construct Flanders as a unified, homogeneous region with a specific cultural and linguistic heritage (Van Velthoven, 1989: 11–13). The establishment of Flemish literature, cultural heritage and political claims led to the creation of a language border in 1963 and consequent state reforms in 1970. Today Belgium is a federalised state with two main regions: the northern, Dutch-language Flanders (approximately 6.4 million inhabitants) and the southern French-language Wallonia (approximately 3.6 million), apart from a third small German-language community, and Brussels (approximately 1 million) as the mostly French-speaking capital situated in the Flemish region (Economie: Statistics Belgium, 2015).

¹ The “Flemish movement” originated in the 1870s as a reaction to the “frenchification” of Belgium. It started out as a cultural movement against linguistic reform, propagating cultural equality, but later also included political and economic goals (Nielsen, 1980: 80; Jaspaert & Van Belle, 1989: 71; Van Velthoven, 1989: 11,).

Although, for the most part, the Flemish population does not ask for independence, there is wide support for economic and political self-sufficiency. Thus, while in South Africa, the overall contemporary drive is towards unification, in Belgium, the initially unified nation state became increasingly separated, with Flanders gradually turning into a national entity (Marx & Dhoest, 2013: 10). Hence, Flanders, unlike South Africa, is a politically and culturally emancipated subnational part of the larger federal state of Belgium. Furthermore, even though Flanders makes up a part of the larger Belgian nation, there are strong indications of a specifically Flemish community and identity with nationalist aspirations. According to Vanhaesebrouck (2010: 465), the canvassing on both sides for independence of these linguistic communities, “far beyond politics, has also shaped the cultural imagination on both sides of the linguistic border”.

The political emancipation of Flanders was a defining moment in the development of the Flemish identity. This emancipation was guided by a developing Flemish nationalism and the concomitant search for and construction of a Flemish identity. Not unlike the situation in South Africa, in this search for identity, language, history and national character occupied central positions. Koen Jaspaert and William Van Belle (1989: 67) assert that “Flanders ... is one of those areas in the world which is known for the role language and language choice has played in its political, economic and social history”. The “Flemish movement” supported the idea of a homogeneous, coherent national identity which (as mentioned previously) was contrasted, in particular, to the French-speaking Walloons.

Thus, especially in Flanders, there is what may be referred to as two types of nationalisms: a Belgian nationalism and a Flemish one. While people living in either Flanders or Wallonia generally identify as Belgians, there is also a clear movement towards a homogeneous Flemish national identity as referred to above. Jaak Billiet (2006: 52) characterises the difference between the Flemish and Belgian national discourses as follows:

The dominant Flemish national discourse has long been ethnic and romantic in nature; there is a strong emphasis on a “community” with

its own language, cultural tradition and origins. By contrast, the Belgian discourse puts the emphasis increasingly on the gathering of citizens with equal rights, regardless of their cultural origins. We can thus speak of an “ethnic” versus a “republican” nationalistic discourse.

Karel Vanhaesebrouck (2010: 465) questions the notion of what he refers to as “Belgitude”, a concept that allows the Belgians to name the feelings of belonging to a country that arguably does not exist since it is not united.² Thus, “to live in a country where there are Belgians of course, but where Belgium as a nation (on a psychological level) and also as a state (on a political and administrative level) is lacking” (Baetens, Bleyen & Van Gelden, 2009: 157). Moreover, for most Flemings, “Belgian-ness” remains associated with francophone ideas, and it is against this background that the idea of a “pristine Flemish cultural identity remains as prominent in many current debates as it always has been throughout the relatively short history of Belgium” (Vanhaesebrouck, 2010: 466).

7.1.2 The Flemish imagined community: an “us” versus “them” ideology

Vanhaesebrouck (2010: 474) suggests that, in the future, being “Flemish” “may in fact well signify an essentially hybrid and intercultural identity where cultures are fused and become fundamentally intertwined rather than living as independent entities next to one another”. In contemporary Flanders, however, such a conception of the Flemish imagined community is impossible because, despite concerted and visible efforts by policy makers to encourage integration, “adaptation” and an “Us-Them” ideology tend to dominate discourses on integration (D’Haenens, 2006: 137).

Central to this ideology is what can be referred to as “Flemishness” (or what Dhoest (2002) describes as the “Vlaamse Volksaard”). Flemishness refers to the perception that an inherent national Flemish character exists as being central to the idea of national identity. Taking into account the risk of ascribing a limited set of

² For example, in Brussels alone, 46% of the population is of foreign origin (Vanhaesebrouck, 2010: 466). Ethnicity is not measured in official Belgian statistics, but about 15% of the total population is of foreign origin (including other European countries) (Dhoest & Simons, 2009: 51).

characteristics to a diverse group of people, Robert Senelle (1999: 43-50), nevertheless, summarises characteristics associated with the Flemish as follows: He emphasises the centrality of language, culture and history in determining a Flemish national character and he, furthermore, typifies the Flemish as politically conservative, religiously tolerant, hard workers. This confirms Wim Verrelst's (1993: 185–189) conceptualisation of Flemishness as embodying a strong emphasis on history, strong links between the Flemish and the Dutch and a fundamentally peace loving nature.³

Linked to the above are various factors that contribute to this “Us-Them” ideology and the consequent struggles with hybridity in Flanders. These factors include the position of Flanders in relation to other communities in Belgium, language and terminological issues, the effects of migration, value incompatibility, the aftermath of 9/11 and the influence of right-wing politics.

Seen against the background of Belgian nationalism, Flemish nationalism is viewed as predominantly right wing, versus Walloon nationalism as left wing in character (Vanhaesebrouck, 2010: 467). Consequently, the Flemish aspirations for a homogeneous Flemish culture are often criticised by left-wing politicians and intellectuals as discriminatory or intolerant. The value attached to national unity and Flemishness implies an emphasis on similarity within and creates an opposition with “others” perceived to be on the “outside” – both within the nation state and beyond (Marx & Dhoest, 2013: 11). As a result, there is a tension between what Vanhaesebrouck (2010) calls a “pristine Flemish cultural identity” and the inherent diversity of the Flemish, as well as the Belgian nations. Related to the two types of nationalism identified by Billiet (2006) earlier, is the negative relationship between attitudes towards ethnic minorities and Flemish consciousness. According to Billiet (2006: 53), the “more Belgian people feel the more open they are towards

³ Ludo Abicht, Louis Baeck and Raoul Bauer (2000: 12–14), furthermore, list the following as typically Flemish characteristics: a Burgundian lifestyle, a dislike for authority and open-mindedness. Thus, even though there is general consensus on what Flemishness entails, the contradictory nature of these conceptualisations indicates that Flemishness also encompasses a variety of characteristics and no absolute identity is identifiable (Dhoest, 2002:46).

newcomers”, and, consequently, a person identifying with Flemish nationality might be more prone to exclusionary practices. Hence in Flemish society there is a definite reluctance to deal with the above-mentioned diversity.

All of the other factors mentioned above can to some extent be contextualised into what Essed and Trienekens (2008: 55) refer to as “Europism”. According to them, this entails

Europe’s turn to a defensive and inward looking stance, caught in unresolved tensions between secularism and the legacies of Christian religion, ridden by conflicts over the financial burden of aging societies when the national borders are closed for immigrants, the emancipation of (native European) women unfinished and the perceived threat of super sexist men from “other cultures” taken as an invasion. Europism characterizes [sic] too the fight over national and regional identities in the process of so-called European unification; the boldness of extreme right emerging from the fading memories of the Holocaust, as well as a host of other issues around assimilation and anti-immigrant sentiments.

In the Flemish context, it is arguable that Europism manifests in a number of ways. Flanders, for example, is a region with a long history of struggles around cultural diversity in the larger multilingual, multicultural context of Belgium. Up to the 1920s, immigrants came mainly from neighbouring European countries. However, from the 1920s onwards, Belgian policies of labour migration started recruiting workers from Eastern and Southern Europe. During the 1960s, large numbers of labourers migrated to Belgium from Morocco and Turkey. In 1970, the active recruitment of unskilled labour migrants ceased as a consequence of the economic crisis. However, labour migrations from EU countries as well as family or marital migration from non-EU countries continued.

Naturally, migration and integration do not take place without repercussions. In contemporary Flanders, the debate on the multi-ethnic society is becoming increasingly polarised, creating a binary opposition between the white, ethnically Flemish population, on the one hand, and immigrants (mostly Muslims), on the other (Dhoest & Simons, 2009: 51). According to Norbert Vanbeselaere, Filip Boen

and Joke Meeus (2006: 61), as in the case of many countries worldwide – there can be no doubt that out-group discrimination occurs in Flanders.

Sami Zemni (2011: 31) writes in this regard that even though major political parties in Flanders speak about tolerance, pluralism, openness and even multiculturalism, they still seem to generally accept the (fundamentally oppositional) idea that society is “best seen as a homogeneous entity and that immigrants should dissolve into this homogeneity”. Since Flemish citizens deem citizenship to be based on cultural heritage, it follows that foreigners need to fulfil a large number of requirements (customs, language, religion, norms, values, etc.) in order to be accepted as co-national. Vanbeselaere et al. (2006: 63) assert that Flemings consider their fellow in-group members to be “industrious, tolerant, modest, helpful” and multilingual. Hence a person is expected to exhibit all of these characteristics in order to be accepted as “real”.

To facilitate this, Flanders generally follows a principle of what is referred to as *integratie* (integration). In the 1990's the *Koninklijk Commissariaat voor het Migrantenbeleid*, defined intergration as meaning, firstly, that migrants have to assimilate where it is a matter of public order; secondly, they need to be encouraged to fit in and adapt “to certain social principles on which the indigenous (“autochthon”) majority seems to implicitly agree”; and finally, they need to adapt at “the level of the many cultural expressions so that they neither pose a threat to the public order nor the social principles that the country holds on to” (Zemni, 2011: 31). The integration policy enforces the idea of a gap between immigrants and the rest of society and this gap became even more prominent with the introduction of the policy of “*inburgering*”, which Zemni (2011: 31) translates as “making citizens”. According to Zemni (2011: 31), the *inburgering* policy dictates that immigrants, whether newcomers or children born in Belgium, are not considered full citizens and they all have to “go through an educational programme aimed at acquiring the language and necessary skills to live in ‘our’ society through the study of societal orientation, and guidance counselling on the employment market”.

These policies are indicative of the fact that Flemings are reluctant to accept immigrants as part of the Flemish imagined community. Not only do immigrants not share the Flemish cultural heritage, they are also viewed as individuals with their own specific cultural heritages. If an ethnic or national prototype implies that the Flemish culture be passed on to future generations it follows that immigrants, and the subsequent diversity they bring, may be perceived as a threat to the continuation of the Flemish culture (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006: 64). This conviction is “certainly strengthened by the possibility that Flemings ostensibly perceive immigrants also as people who want to preserve and develop their own culture, rather than to adapt to the Flemish culture” (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006: 64). Marta Cola, Kaarina Nikunen, Alexander Dhoest and Gavan Titley (2013: 84), however, postulate that in Europe, integration processes targeted at migrant and migrant-descended populations are often criticised for their neoliberal emphasis on individual pathways into inclusion which often include a politically repressive undertone of assimilation. In this regard, Eleonore Kofman (2005: 463) writes that in Europe, “immigration policies are directed towards selecting those who will be most advantageous to the economy, will fit into a pre-existing national culture, and not disrupt a supposed social and community cohesion”. Thus, even though the Flemish minister of home affairs (2004–2009), Marino Keulen, described his policy as a “compelling invitation to everyone who legally resides in our society and who wishes to build his future to participate actively in society: to learn the language, to know society’s basic values and principles and comply with them, and become independent as soon as possible” and this, at least, seems to invite inclusivity, the actual binary oppositions created are exclusionary and divisive (Zemni, 2011: 32).

Migration is thus represented by some as a threat to Flemish cultural identity and at the core of these polarising debates is what Dhoest (2014: 107) describes as a “terminological quicksand”. Unlike South Africa or America, where public discourse “concerning groups of people other than those historically dominant socio-politically has long since invoked the language of race and ethnicity”, Flanders, like much of Europe, has no explicit “race” discourse even though most European countries are described as multicultural societies (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009; Costera Meijer &

De Bruin, 2003). Irene Costera Meijer and Joost de Bruin (2003: 696) write that in the Netherlands, for example, a word like “race”⁴ “calls up associations with National Socialism or racism”.⁵ According to them, Dutch people prefer the use of “ethnicity” to “race” in an effort to avoid racist speech. The situation in Flanders is similar. The state, however, “through its public policy and administrative practices, does categorise the population along ethnic lines” (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 2), using birthplace as determining factor.

Related to the above is an ongoing struggle to accurately name and define non-EU migrants in Belgium. According to Dvora Yanow and Marleen Van der Haar (2009: 3), over decades “different programmatic solutions have been advanced, tried out, and retracted, each policy promoting a new set of terms for articulating the character of the problem. Still, the ‘problem’ remains”. Initially non-EU migrants were referred to as “foreigners” or “guest workers”, terms which encapsulated the idea of their temporality as well as their status as visitors with foreign nationalities. During the 1980s, however, when the more permanent nature of their presence in Belgium became evident, the term “migrant” was used, and from the 1990s, the term “*allochtoon*” (literally translated as “from another country”), as taken from the Netherlands, came into use to better describe second- and third-generation ethnic minorities (Marx & Dhoest, 2013: 15). “*Allochtonen*” (henceforth “allochton” as in English) refers to those of non-Belgian birth or ancestry as opposed to “*autochtoon*” (henceforth “autochton” as in English), meaning Belgian.

The terms “allochton” and “autochton” appear to be more appropriate options than their predecessors. However, even though this pair of terms may seem quite neutral, they are “not neutral in their effects” (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 4). They (2009: 4) assert that allochton, in particular, “carries some of the same emotionally punishing character[s] as US hyphenated identities” such as Irish-American or

⁴ Yanow and Van der Haar (2009:2) posit that the term “race” is intertwined with Nazi public administration processes and, consequently, its public use has been taboo since the end of World War II.

⁵ It should be noted that Costera Meijer and De Bruin’s (2003) research was conducted in the Netherlands and not in Belgium. However, some of their conclusions are applicable here, and they provide valuable insights into European, and especially Dutch, soap operas.

African-American. Moreover, while, in principle, it includes everyone with a foreign nationality, it is mostly used to describe people of non-European descent, specifically Moroccans and Turks. There also seems to be a lack of certainty about what exactly the term entails. Even though it officially refers to people who were born outside of Belgium, in practice, it is often used to refer to later generations as well, even after they have acquired Belgian citizenship. Most notably, the term is seldom used to describe white people, even when they are technically allochton.⁶

The fact that the term “allochton” is used in opposition to the term “autochton” is pertinent to the construction of an “us” versus “them” debate. This creates a “fixed binary opposition, reducing ethnic ‘others’ to essentialist notions of ethnicity and cultural identity” (Dhoest, 2014: 108). Ethnic minorities are thus othered and unified by the use of this vocabulary, even when used by those sympathetic to their cause (Dhoest & Simons, 2009: 51). There is no widely accepted alternative for the term “allochton”, although some hyphenated labels like “new-Belgians”, “new-Flemings”, “Moroccan-Belgians” and “Turkish-Flemings” are occasionally used.⁷ In this way, language is used to create binary oppositions which are, to a certain extent, fuelled by latent racism and which create a “white” versus “other” dichotomy. Hence this discourse, in all but name, remains a “racial discourse – one perhaps all the more powerful for doing so in disguise, as it were” (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 4). Even though policies aim to integrate allochtons into European society, the “metaphoric meaning carried in the allochtoon-autochtoon pair ... suggests that integration is not and never will be possible” (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 4). In this binary opposition of allochton and autochton, particularly as it pertains to the description of Western and non-Western people, “birthplace becomes not just a surrogate term

⁶ It might be instrumental to mention here that, during my stay in Antwerp, for example, I was not regarded as allochton because of my whiteness, despite the fact that I was born outside of Belgium. Essed and Trienekens (2008: 57) note in this regard that even though the definition of allochton includes children with one ethnic parent (even if the other parent was born in the Netherlands as well) the “offspring of a Dutch diplomat born and (partly) raised in, say, Brazil, would not be called ‘allochtoon’, but considered as Dutch as Gouda cheese”.

⁷ In contemporary Flanders, the term “allochton” is going out of fashion and is, for example, avoided by the newspaper *De Morgen*. While there is still no widely accepted alternative, “People with a migration background” and “ethnic-cultural minorities” are some of the newer terms suggested as possible replacements.

for 'ethnicity' but, as it brings ancient ideas of place and behaviour or character in play, a stand-in for 'race' itself" (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 27).

Owing to this polarisation, it seems that, even though nationality is a legal matter, being accepted as a Belgian citizen has less to do with legislation than with psychological processes (Vanbeselaere, 2006: 58). For Zemni (2011: 32), even when allochtons are official citizens and Belgian nationals, "they are not good enough as citizens, it seems, so are always prompted to become *ingeburgerd* to prove their ability to become 'good citizens'". Although official policies are in place, this has not led to consistent application of these integration policies and they often remain pragmatic in nature. Consequently, "allochtonen are not (really) part of the body politic", which contributes to the perceived existence of a "cultural gap" between migrants and Flemish society (Zemni, 2011: 32).

Apart from the rift created by terminology and policies, the racist political party, *Vlaams Belang*, with its extreme right wing stances, is another factor contributing to the nervous climate surrounding the multicultural society in Flanders (D'Haenens, 2006: 140). *Vlaams Blok* (renamed *Vlaams Belang* after the party was convicted for racism) is an extreme right party which gained a massive following from the late 1980s. According to Dhoest (2014: 107), the party "combined Flemish nationalism and ethnocentrism with blatant xenophobia, primarily targeting non-European ethnic minorities and deliberately capitalising on the cultural and economic fears of the Flemings", in this way being the main protagonist perpetuating xenophobia in Flanders.⁸ The popularity of *Vlaams Blok* in the early 1990s prompted a study on the attitudes of Belgians towards immigrants because, although *Vlaams Blok* is a Flemish national party in its leadership and upper ranks, the voters mainly support the party because of its emphasis on the immigration issue (Billiet, 2006: 36–38).

⁸ With reference to South Africa, it is of interest to note that *Vlaams Belang* was an avid supporter of the apartheid regime in South Africa. As recently as 2008, the president of the party, Bruno Valkeniers, publicly proclaimed that he did not disagree with the apartheid ideology (Cochez, 2008).

In 1989, a study found that Belgians felt particularly threatened by foreigners in matters relating to economic security. Furthermore, in 2003, 60% of voters were found to be opposed to granting voting rights in municipal elections to immigrants who had lived in Belgium for more than five years, and 40% of Flemings believed that the borders should be closed to asylum seekers (Billiet, 2006: 41).

Thus, despite its official politics on multiculturalism, ethnocentrism, latent racism (particularly regarding non-European immigrants) and discrimination are still prevalent in Belgium. Moroccan and Turkish communities are most commonly singled out as problematic groups when it comes to social and economic integration since “they form strong, geographically concentrated communities with high unemployment and poverty” (Dhoest & Simons, 2009: 51). Furthermore, because of the aftermath of 9/11, Islam is also perceived as a divisive force, both culturally and religiously.⁹ In this regard, Zemni (2011: 29) posits that the “‘xeno-racism’ that once focused on migration and targeted, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, immigrants, asylum seekers and foreigners has now been concentrated into the debate on Islam”.

This discrimination, furthermore, translates into economic and social inequality. A report of the Flemish Public Employment Service (VDAB), for example, showed that the unemployment rate among Moroccan and Turkish males is 6.2 times higher than that among Belgian males. The report concludes that the differential unemployment rate is only partially caused by differences in education and training, and that discrimination based on ethnic background contributes significantly to the divide (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006: 62). Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown that Belgium is the penultimate country in Europe in terms of the employment of migrants, and the Centre for Equal

⁹ In contemporary Belgium, particularly in Flanders, Islam has been cast as a political problem and Muslims have been framed by politicians and the media as a threat, resulting in what Zemni (2011: 28) refers to as “Islamophobia” and Essed and Trienekens (2008: 62) call the “muslimification of racism”. “The actual socioeconomic difficulties that Muslims (particularly those of Turkish and Moroccan descent) face are being redrawn as problems stemming from their culture and religion” (Zemni, 2011: 28). In 2010, Belgian senators, for example, approved a legal proposition that prohibits women from wearing clothing that hides their faces.

Opportunities and Opposition to Racism has shown, in its annual reports since the 1990s, that immigrants in general, but increasingly Muslims specifically, are systematically discriminated against in the housing sector and employment market (Zemni, 2011: 32). In addition, another study conducted by the Flemish government (VRIND, 1999) revealed that approximately 50% of Flemings consider immigrants to be unreliable (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006: 62) and that their (immigrants) perceived “unwillingness to adapt” is the reason for their “lagging behind” (Zemni, 2011: 32).

Hence in Flanders, diversity has completely different roots to diversity in South Africa. Instead of a black majority, historically dominated by a white minority, in Flanders there is a white majority feeling threatened by a diverse group of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, while South Africa’s history is one of explicit (and sometimes violent) conflict, the Flemish situation is less violent and more implicit. The fact remains, however, that the Flemish tend not to embrace linguistic, ethnic or cultural diversity and the above comments clearly show “that a relatively large proportion of the Flemish majority group does effectively treat members of ethnic minority groups in a hostile and harmful way” (Vanbeselaere et al., 2006: 62).

All of the above have implications for what is perceived to be the Flemish imagined community, also as it is represented in the media, and particularly Flemish soap operas. Are ethnic minorities considered to be a part of this imagined community? The next section examines Flemish media in order to determine how these contradictions regarding who are considered to belong to the Flemish imagined community translate into the public broadcasting media.

7.2 The Flemish PSB landscape and the representation of the nation

7.2.1 Background to the Flemish media

Flemish public media is situated in the wider context of European PSBs which have, historically, always played an important role in the protection of national cultures and identities (Cola et al., 2013: 86). They (2013: 86), moreover, write that

while most of these nations were long established and “imagined” as relatively homogeneous and monoculturally “white”, over recent decades [in the case of Belgium specifically from 2002 onwards], PSBs also started to receive accumulative responsibilities in terms of representing and addressing increasingly diverse and “multicultural” societies.

Cola et al.’s (2013) contention supports D’Haenens and Bardoel’s (2008: 343) statement that traditionally, “the political function of PSB in relation to democracy, pluralism and public debate was emphasized [sic], but more recently socio-cultural goals, such as serving social integration and cohesion, cultural bonding and bridging, have become more prominent”. Central to these sociocultural goals are critical questions regarding “recognition and representation in societies characterized [sic] over time by migration and settlement, and by public debates about difference, belonging and legitimacy” (Titley et al., 2014: 3). According D’Haenens and Bardoel (2008: 341), European broadcasters “hope to find a middle way, illustrated by a new emphasis on audience reach, referring to the classic BBC adage, ‘not all people all the time but all people some of the time’”.

Belgium has always been a stronghold of PSB. From the beginning of television broadcasts in Belgium, in 1953, television was integrated into the public broadcasting institution NIR/INR, which operated a television monopoly. The Belgian media system can be classified as “democratic corporatist”, similar to that of the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Germany. This model is characterised by “a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized [sic] social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 13). Most exemplary in this respect is the strong position of the Flemish public broadcaster, VRT, which is both supported and controlled by the government.

Although the NIR/INR was a unitary Belgian institution, television was separately organised in Flanders and Wallonia from the outset. D’Haenens et al. (2009: 51) write in this regard that Belgian broadcasting

clearly indicates the lines of the country's social and political divisions, as well as its linguistic and regional divides ... [and] the structure of public broadcasting parallels the evolution of the structure of the Belgian state, i.e. the shift from a unitary to a federalized [sic] model.

Consequently, Belgium does not have one "national" broadcaster representative of the whole region, and neither the Flemish nor French language broadcasters have any responsibilities towards the other regions (Dhoest, 2014: 110). All media are monolingual and oriented towards one of the language communities. Flanders, for example, has its own newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations. Hence in contrast to the situation in South Africa, in Belgium there is no single broadcaster trying to unite the entire country and its different languages (Marx & Dhoest, 2013: 20).

As a result, public broadcasting in Belgium was divided linguistically from the outset in 1953, with the Flemish broadcaster, in particular, aiming to stimulate "national" (Flemish) culture and identity (Van den Bulck, 2001). The Flemish "Belgische Radio en Televisie – Nederlandse uitzendingen" (BRT – Dutch language broadcasts) could thus literally unite Flemish viewers in front of their television sets. According to Hilde Van den Bulck (2001), during this period, broadcasting officials were dedicated to Flemish national cultural emancipation. Dhoest (2004: 398) confirms this by writing that the

young Flemish PSB was modelled on the BBC and privileged information and education ... this educational ethos was closely linked to cultural Flemish nationalism ... Television was clearly considered as an instrument for Flemish emancipation, which was mostly conceived in cultural terms.

Terms such as "our", "own" and "Flemish" were important themes in the early discourse about Flemish television. In this regard, the first director of Flemish television, Bert Leysen, was quoted as saying the following: "We will try to use this medium to show everything that our people can produce in the field of art and culture, entertainment and folklore; all the beauty and cultural riches our Flemish country possesses" (Dhoest, 2004: 399). With the liberalisation of the broadcasting market and the start of commercial broadcasting in 1989, "this cultural logic of

broadcasting was adapted to the more competitive context, but it did not disappear” (Dhoest, 2013: 56)

Regarding television specifically, this form of PSB has often been linked to nationhood, both in South Africa and abroad. Flemish nation building was thus accompanied by PSB policies and practices directed towards the “nation” (Dhoest, 2009: 307). Television played a key role in the discursive construction of a Flemish identity, which was crucial to its political emancipation. As in the rest of Europe, however, one of the enduring characteristics of this national imagined community was its predominant and seemingly self-evident whiteness (Dhoest, 2014: 110), which raises questions about the representation of the Flemish nation on Flemish public television. The following section examines the VRT, its public broadcasting policies and its representations of the Flemish imagined community.

7.2.2 Flemish PSB and the representation of the nation

As stated above, from the outset, the Flemish broadcaster NIR (later BRT, now VRT) operated independently from its French-language counterpart, and the separation was completed in 1977. Early Flemish public broadcasting was characterised by a “modernist educational mission, including a strong sense of cultural (and sometimes political) nationalism”, with the aim of promulgating and stimulating Flemish culture and using television in this process (Dhoest, 2009: 79). The national was thus an important priority from the inception of Flemish PSB.

The picture became less clear from the 1970s onwards. In the wider context of European PSB, the relative monopoly conditions were rapidly dissolving in the 1970s and 1980’s “through broadcast deregulation, intensified and ideologically buoyant commercial competition, and the fraying and extension of national media spaces through cable, satellite and media globalization [sic]” (Titley, Horsti & Hultén, 2014: 4), which meant that the broadcasting landscape shifted irrevocably. This also applied to Belgian PSB. The “cable bill” was introduced in 1987, which made room for commercial broadcasters in 1989, and VTM (Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij) in

particular. VTM became the most prominent competitor of the public broadcaster. According to Hilde Van den Bulck and Hallvard Moe (2012: 35), the liberation of the market and the introduction of VTM “took PSB’s breath away”. VTM’s successes led the public broadcaster to question its producer-oriented, cultural and educational broadcasting philosophy. Consequently, in reaction to the popularity of VTM and BRT’s diminishing popularity, the public broadcaster shifted its focus to more audience-oriented genres. Television fiction became less focused on the Flemish past and more preoccupied with depicting Flanders as it is today (Dhoest, 2009: 80).

Furthermore, in reaction to VTM’s success, the public broadcaster was radically reorganised and renamed as VRT in 1997. The relationship between the public broadcaster and the state was redefined, resulting in the introduction of a management contract, which is renewed every five years (Van den Bulck & Moe, 2012: 35). The government, together with the VRT, created several policies and instruments to promote awareness of ethnic and cultural diversity in public broadcasting:

Inspired by the efforts of the British BBC and the Dutch NPS, the Flemish PSB, VRT, signed a Diversity Charter in 2003 (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011: 198). This signalled the official start of the cultural diversity policies of the VRT. The Diversity Charter states that the “VRT wants to be a ‘reflection of the diversity in Flemish society, both in its programmes and in its staff’, opposing discrimination and guaranteeing equal opportunities” (Dhoest, 2014: 111).

These goals are reflected in the five-year management contracts between the Flemish government and the Flemish public broadcaster, which stipulate the responsibilities and mission of the public broadcaster. The goal was for the government to provide a certain level of freedom and independence through long-term agreements. “The scope of the remit reconfirmed PSB’s responsibility to educate, inform and entertain”, with the first contract (1997–2001) focusing in particular on ratings and audience research (Van den Bulck & Moe, 2012: 35). Once the public broadcaster managed to secure its market position, issues concerning

quality and diversity were raised (2002-2006). Diversity in the media's output as well as its staff constitutes some of the main stipulations. Recently, the diversity policy has been further expanded to include disabled people and senior citizens. The Flemish regulator of the media then monitors the public broadcaster as stipulated in the Diversity Charter (D'Haenens, 2006: 145). According to Van den Bulck and Broos (2011: 198), the Diversity Department translated the charter into a range of measures. These include the development of a more ethnically diverse work force, the improvement of on-screen diversity, the organisation of workshops with journalists and critical media watchers and the initiation of research efforts to keep track of developments.

In conjunction with the Diversity Charter, the VRT also created its Diversity Cell comprising two staff members in the institution who have the responsibility of supporting diversity. Their role is twofold. On the one hand, they are responsible for stimulating programme diversity by means of, say, workshops and discussion sessions aimed at raising awareness (as mentioned by Van den Bulck, 2001). On the other hand, they are responsible for attracting ethnic minority staff. An example of the latter would be offering paid internships in which members of minority groups can get to know the media (Dhoest, 2014: 112). Another example of an initiative to improve on-screen diversity was "Mira", through which the public broadcaster, together with film production house *Flying Carpet*, explicitly invited Dutch-speaking ethnic minority youths to enrol in a series of acting courses (D'Haenens, 2006: 145).

These management contracts and measures clearly indicate the VRT's commitment to an open and inclusive version of Flemish identity. It is charged with the explicit task of addressing and reflecting cultural diversity in society (Cola et al., 2013: 88) and its aim is to represent "members of ethnic-cultural minorities" by focusing on "reporting about allochtones" as well as "staff that is as diversified as possible". Their goal is to "create bridges between individuals, groups and communities, to contribute to a harmonious, pluralist and tolerant society where everyone can feel at home" (VRT, 2003 in Horsti et al., 2014: 112).

Furthermore, according to Dhoest (2014: 111), the Diversity Charter, with its emphasis on social integration, signals a move away from the ideas of multiculturalism¹⁰ which merely juxtaposes different cultures. Instead it wants to

play an important role in the further development of the identity and diversity of Flemish society and to contribute to the social cohesion and integration of all individuals, groups and communities, with a democratic and tolerant society as its aim (Dhoest, 2014: 111).

As set out in the most recent management contract with the Flemish Government (2012–2016), the primary task of the VRT is to reach all Flemings, including “new Flemings” through an inclusive and generalist programme offer. Even though the strengthening of indigenous, Flemish culture and identity remains a fundamental aim, it is stipulated that programming should also be a reflection of the diversity of Flemish society, representing the “possibility of living together in diversity, without necessarily explicitly referring to the issue” (Dhoest, 2014: 113). Consequently, more than in previous management contracts, diversity has now become a central policy. For the first time, these goals have been translated into

measurable diversity indicators, including the presence of at least 5% of new Flemings in the programmes made or ordered by the VRT ... [e]qually new is the duty to reach ethnic minority audiences, a target which is also studied yearly and translated into action plans (Dhoest, 2014: 88).

The Diversity Charter and Diversity Cell are supplemented with the Diversity Monitor which uses quantitative analysis to chart the representation of different groups in the media, with particular focus on factors such as gender, age and ethnicity (D’Haenens, 2006: 152).

According to Cola et al. (2013: 88), considering all these obligations and the numerous actions launched, one would imagine VRT to be a model of diversity. However, VRT has had diversity policies for a long time, and despite some successes,

¹⁰ In most cases, the initial paradigm of European PSB was what was broadly termed “multicultural programming” focused on “‘niche programming’ for specific groups, while also seeking to ‘explain’ minorities to the national audience. Almost uniformly, this generation of public service programming came up against a key question for recognition based approaches: what happens if ethnic minority audiences do not find themselves adequately represented in the media work aimed at them and about them?” (Tittley et al., 2014: 9)

the overall effects of the policies have been limited. Hence the effectiveness of the Diversity Charter is called into question by some theorists. In a study on the content and production of Flemish newscasts, for example, Van den Bulck and Broos (2011) could not confirm their assumption that news programmes would gradually portray more ethnic minorities in a less stereotypical way because of the Diversity Charter.

Thus, while the policies are in place, it seems that ethnic diversity remains largely absent from Flemish television. A study conducted in 2004, and repeated in 2007 and 2009, suggested that Flemish television still represents predominantly white people, with only 13.4% “racial-ethnic”¹¹ people across all channels. Furthermore, most “racial-ethnic” people on Flemish television appear in imported programmes, are not Belgian citizens, and do not speak Dutch, which means the “overall representation of Flanders is even less than the studies suggest” (Dhoest, 2014: 116). Similarly, despite actions taken, there was no visible effect on the diversity of staff with a mere 2.3% new Flemings employed in 2010, and findings of ethnic minority audience research, likewise, indicate a failure to reach these “new” audiences (Cola et al., 2013: 89). Dhoest (2014: 115), furthermore, contends that the few programmes explicitly dealing with ethnic diversity might be well intentioned, but still remain problematic in their “unwitting confirmation of a binary division between the ‘autochthonous’ and ‘allochthonous’ populations which are often treated as two homogeneous and opposed groups”.

According to D’Haenens (2006: 137) “[r]esearch has made is clear that the mainstream print and broadcast media have hardly managed to chart the need for and use of the media by ethnic minorities and therefore have failed in their function as a meeting place”. As a result, ethnic minorities in Flanders tend to not recognise themselves in the mainstream media and do not consider the one-sided images

¹¹ In order to acknowledge the “relatedness of ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ criteria of common sense categorization [sic], Essed (1996) suggested the notion of ‘racial-ethnic’ to account for the convergence of systems of racialization [sic] and ethnicization [sic]” (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 55). I find this term problematic because it implies the application of race and ethnicity to non-white groups only. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use this term as a replacement for what Belgian authors often call “coloured” because of the loaded and contradictory meaning of this term in the South African context.

presented in the media as a proper reflection of the multicultural society they live in. In this case then, it seems that Flemish media is not a reflection of the diverse Flemish reality (D'Haenens, 2006: 137). Dhoest (2014: 120), however, argues that even though PSB in Flanders is problematic, it is not hopeless. He argues that Flemish nationalism is not the problem since, despite its focus on Flanders, the public broadcaster is known (and even criticised by the Right) to be a progressive institution and while results are limited, the policies are in place.

Despite being hopeful, Dhoest (2014: 120) identifies a lack of awareness of its own “whiteness” and underlying social inequality as the main obstacles encountered by VRT. This is confirmed by Van den Bulck and Broos’s (2011) study referred to earlier. They posit that most senior newsroom workers are part of the Flemish majority, and the socialisation and training of new journalists – even ethnic minority journalists – therefore remain dominated by the ideology of the majority population. Furthermore, the majority of newsroom workers come from white middle-class homes and share the same political beliefs, which leads to a situation where (albeit subconsciously) stereotypes still influence newsroom decisions (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011: 207).

From the above it seems that, as in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, critics are sceptical of the actual changes in the PSB’s representation of the nation, despite numerous policies being in place. Flanders may have adapted its policies, but the question that begs answering is what the point of these policies is if they are not reflected in the media content and practices? While the public broadcaster purports to be a progressive institution, and its policies certainly paint it as such, research results clearly indicate that some of the prejudices and latent racism identified in 7.1.2 still manifest in its media output and content.

In this broader context of Flemish PSB, Flemish fiction, consequently, struggles to overcome similar obstacles. Since soap opera as a fiction genre is the main focus of this analysis, the aim of the next section is to provide a brief overview of Flemish

fiction and its development and role in the PSB context, particularly as it pertains to representations of the Flemish image community.

7.2.3 Soap opera in the Flemish context

According to Dhoest and Simons (2009: 307), Flemish television fiction, among other genres, has been regarded as a vital source of (sub)national representations for the public broadcaster since the beginning. With its inception, the focus of the public broadcaster fell on the national and cultural emancipation of Flanders, and domestic fiction and period drama in particular, were therefore predominant (Dhoest, 2007b: 57). Analysis of policies and production practices shows that the broadcasters of this period deliberately aimed to educate the viewers into “good Flemings” (Dhoest, 2007b: 57). After 1989, the public broadcaster’s focus was shifted to more audience-oriented genres and the aspirational goals of the previous phase were also slightly adapted. Soaps, sitcoms and crime dramas became the “holy trinity of fiction production” with “Flemishness” being treated as more self-evident, rather than something to strive towards (Dhoest, 2009: 80).

Fiction makes up a significant part of the offering on VRT and particularly domestic fiction plays an important role. Moreover, this offering makes VRT successful in competing with its commercial counterparts. According to Dhoest (2013: 57), despite the relatively small weight of “Flemish fiction in the totality of the schedules, there is an important increase of domestic productions in absolute terms and the rise of Flemish fiction becomes particularly clear when one focuses on prime time”. For example, figures for the 2009–2010 seasons reflect that on the first public channel Eén, 64.9% of the total of 323 hours of serial fiction broadcast in primetime is Flemish. Furthermore, while Flemish viewers can choose between a large number of channels, research shows that over half of the population tune in to the two main Flemish channels (Eén and VTM) daily (Dhoest, 2013: 57). Thus, in a market that is increasingly geared towards consumer satisfaction, “[h]ome-grown Flemish dramas continue to draw larger audiences even after the ending of the state broadcasting monopoly and the consequent proliferation of non-Flemish television” (Blanford,

Lacey, McElroy & Williams, 2011: 16). Specifically regarding the popularity of soap operas in small nations such as Flanders, Blanford et al. (2011: 15) write that

it is not surprising that locally produced popular forms such as soaps ... should be particularly attractive in a small nations context, since the concern of such genres with the everyday, the local and the culturally specific makes them particularly appropriate for representing what Billig has memorably termed “banal nationalism” and Endesor has called the “quotidian landscapes” of everyday settings that are imbued with significance that resonates with national imagery.

Hence, even though strongly culturally rooted fiction was replaced by international genres such as soaps and sitcoms, on both public service and commercial channels, these contemporary television fiction genres still evoke everyday life in Flanders. International genres and formats are adapted and indigenised, illustrating the popularity of the local, or at the very least, the “glocal”. The “Flemishness” of programmes still contributes to their success with domestic fiction invariably drawing larger audiences than imported American fiction. As in the case of Flemish fiction in general, Flemish soap operas are appreciated if and to the degree in which they provide “realistic” images of everyday life in Flanders. Dhoest (2009: 89) mentions that *Thuis*, in particular, is often singled out by recipients as a rather good and realistic programme in this regard. Buonanno (2008: 55) postulates that people “expect and are pleased to recognise themselves, their own social, individual and collective world, their customs and lifestyles, accents, faces, landscapes and everything else that they perceive as close and familiar”, which contributes to the popularity of local fiction.

Recognition and markers of cultural proximity such as language, culture and history – broadly considered as symbols of “Flemishness” – are often cited explicitly as reasons for preferring Flemish soap operas. In a reception study on Flemish television, it was noted that, when talking about Flemish fiction, respondents spontaneously referred to soap operas (Dhoest, 2009: 86). According to Dhoest and Simons (2009: 310), domestic soaps in Flanders are explicitly devised as a “mirror of society”. This argument resonates with Costera Meijer and De Bruin’s (2003: 697) reference to the “shadow community” created by the soap operas. For these

reasons, Costera Meijer and De Bruin (2003: 695) are optimistic about the potential of these texts to “generate talk about multicultural issues and in that way create (virtual) meeting points for various cultural groups”.

Consequently, even though these soap operas are not “essentially” national, they may be perceived as such because of their extreme familiarity. Dhoest (2009: 82) identifies the soap opera as the key genre in representations of Flemishness. According to him, if any genre is oriented towards providing pictures of social reality, it is the soap opera. It follows that important deductions can be made from these texts regarding the construction of the Flemish imagined community, also as it pertains to the construction of whiteness in this context.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that even though Flanders functions as one of the main regions in the larger federal state of Belgium, it also strives towards a unique and independent national identity as evidenced by the “Flemish movement” which originated in the 1870s. Considering the fact that it is a region with a history of struggles around cultural identity, however, a number of factors complicate the quest for a homogeneous, coherent national identity as propagated by the Flemish movement.

Despite the fact that contemporary Flanders is a strong and self-sufficient region, the residues of its “former underdog position” (Dhoest, 2014: 108) in the wider Belgian context results in a fierce defence of Flemish language and culture. Consequently, in Flanders “both external (The French-language Walloons) and internal (former migrants) ‘out’ groups are seen (by some) as a threat to Flemish self-dependence and prosperity” (Dhoest, 2014: 107). This “us” versus “them” mentality results in what critics claim to be the right-wing character of the Flemish national consciousness.

Thus, on the one hand, although Belgium is not a forced marriage of two opposing cultures, and while the majority of the Flemish population does not ask for

independence, this is one of the points of conflict. There is wide support for economic and political self-sufficiency and a definite loyalty to a specifically Flemish nationalism creating a rift between Flemishness and Belgian-ness. On the other hand, even though Flemish politicians and policies promote diversity, there is a definitive resistance to heterogeneity in what is considered to be the Flemish imagined community. Mirroring larger trends of “Europism”, this quest for homogeneity is reflected in Flemish integration policies which essentially demand that for (even second- or third-generation) immigrants to be accepted as Belgian, they need to be assimilated into Flemish homogeneity. These politics of belonging have resulted in what is referred to as the “terminological quicksand” of terms trying to define “new Flemings” with “racial-ethnic” groups consistently viewed as “not-yet-European” (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 55). In extreme cases, the perceived threat of immigrants to Flemish national identity and cohesion has resulted in “Islamophobia” (Zemni, 2011).

Concerning my focus on whiteness, one should note that debates around belonging in Flanders (as elsewhere in Europe) centre primarily on discourses of what it means to be a “real” European or Fleming, and this is usually connected to cultural heritage or ancestry. The reluctance in Europe in general, but specifically in Belgium, “to acknowledge ‘race’ or even ‘ethnicity’ as a formal category makes the question of ... ‘whiteness’ as identity complex and convoluted” (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 55). Yanow and Van der Haar (2009: 23), however, suggest that the logic applied to the allochton/autochton dichotomy implies that people from “non-Western” places are somehow “lesser” than those from “Western” places and that the latter (members of the unmarked category) present the “normal” condition. The application of the allochton/autochthon dichotomy, moreover, makes avoiding references to race possible since by pretending colour blindness or practising what

Mica Pollock would call colour muteness: people can rather easily suppress statements about race, about being white, about whiteness, about racism, exactly because there is ample space to be vocal about (perceived) cultural vices of allochtonen. Fear of the accusation of racism is dwindling because allochtonen are not considered to be a race (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 59).

This is reminiscent of the arguments presented in Chapter 2 regarding the functioning of whiteness, and taken together with the earlier argument about these terminological issues presenting an implicit racial debate, can be linked to the functioning of whiteness in the Flemish context.

Thus, despite the different trajectories I outlined in terms of the South African and Flemish contexts, some of the outcomes seem to be similar. In both cases there remains a “superior” group of whites feeling threatened by people of colour and insisting on some level of superiority. Essed and Trienekens (2008: 58) confirm this in writing that “[s]kin colour as a racist marker of belonging should not be underestimated” even though the “systemic nature of racism, everyday racism, is being denied and with that the acknowledgement that white skin colour is one of the criteria of inclusion in the community of ‘real’ European nationals” (2008: 68).

Even though this mentality also manifests in Flemish PSB, concerted efforts were made to create a liberal public broadcaster. To this end, a number of policies were introduced. The Diversity Charter, as well as the five-year management contracts between the public broadcaster and the government, illustrate the Flemish PSB’s commitment to adhere to notions of social responsibility and inclusivity.

The question remains, however, how successfully these principles are implemented in broadcasting practices. According to Cola et al. (2013: 85), existing research suggests that the media “are not particularly successful in addressing or including ethnic minorities beyond a limited range of genre programmes designed to recognise and ‘celebrate’ lived multiculturalism”. Despite the development of appropriate policies, catering for ethnic minority audiences still remains a challenge for Flemish PSB. Another factor that should be kept in mind is that diversity in itself does not guarantee a balanced representation of society at large. D’Haenens (2006: 153–154) posits that high “diversity at the level of programming does not necessarily translate into the audience being exposed to a great diversity of people”. In this regard, both Dhoest (2014: 110) and Van den Bulck (2001) refer to the unquestioned whiteness of both media practitioners and output. This is supported by the (be it

unwitting) application of the term “allochtoon” as the binary opposite of “autochtoon”. Efforts to address this continues. Apart from the Flemish PSB’s own initiatives, websites like “KifKif” – an independent online platform with perspectives on multiculturalism, integration and citizenship – also play a significant role in critically questioning issues relating to the media and multiculturalism (D’Haenens, 2006: 148).

The final section of this chapter was devoted to a brief look at Flemish fiction, and Flemish soap opera in particular, and its perceived role in the construction of Flemish national identity. Television, particularly domestic fiction, was historically regarded as playing a key role in the construction of Flemishness, and in the contemporary Flemish PSB context it is still viewed as crucial to the construction of this contested identity. The next chapter focuses on *Thuis*’s contribution to this discourse, with specific reference to the role of whiteness in the construction of the Flemish image community.

CHAPTER 8: *THUIS*

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 7, reference was made to the fact that in Belgium and the Netherlands, as in much of the rest of Europe, the notion of race remains largely unnamed, if not invisible. Furthermore, owing to the denial of systemic racism, white skin as one of the criteria of inclusion in the community of “real” European nationals is not explicitly acknowledged. Instead of skin colour, notions of citizenship, national identity, Western superiority and civilization are referenced when it comes to the politics of belonging (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 55-56). In line with this, Twine and Gallagher (2008: 16) aptly ask: “How is whiteness translated, understood and managed in a nation in which race is a legal category, but is invisible as an official public category in state discourses?”

If whiteness is indeed a criterion for inclusion in the European imagined community, albeit implicitly, it follows that it would also need to secure its hegemonic everydayness in the media. It is against this background that this chapter aims to investigate if, as was concluded to be the case with South African soap opera, whiteness functions as an organising principle in the narratives and representations in *Thuis* (Cf. page 10). In other words, how is whiteness translated, understood and managed in *Thuis*?

As proven in the previous chapter, Flemish media policies aim to create inclusive and representative depictions of the diversity in Flemish society, but theorists are critical about the success of these policies. Dhoest and Simons (2009: 307), for example, write that “[j]ust as the organization [sic] of television on the Flemish level is never questioned, so is its representation of Flanders taken for granted”. This chapter reflects critically on the way in which Season 17 of *Thuis* represents Flanders and the implications of these representations for whiteness.

The analysis of *Thuis* is informed by the analysis of *7de Laan* in Chapter 6. This chapter will thus be structured in the same way as Chapter 6 and unfolds as follows:

Building on the contextualisation of Flanders, Flemish PSB and Flemish fiction as elucidated in the previous chapter (Chapter 7), this chapter will start out by situating *Thuis* in this context. This entails a broad contextualisation of *Thuis* and a description of social reality as depicted in its narratives. This contextualisation serves as an introduction to the analysis of the soap opera, which is initiated by a graphical depiction of the family and social structure as per Liebes and Livingstone's (1998) example (Cf. Figure 4.1, page 90), followed by an in-depth look at the community as constructed by the settings and the characters operating in these settings. *Thuis*, like *7de Laan*, definitively qualifies as a community soap opera. The Flemish language and inherent Flemish culture, as represented in *Thuis*, contribute to the Flemishness (Vlaamse Volksaard, Cf. page 185) of the text and are discussed at length.¹ The final section focuses on an investigation of how difference and diversity are depicted in the soap opera and how this relates to the construction of whiteness.

The analysis conducted in this chapter, in conjunction with the analysis in the previous three chapters, functions as the groundwork for the final chapter which compares South African PSB, and specifically *7de Laan*, to Flemish PSB and *Thuis*, in an effort to draw conclusions about the functioning of whiteness across disparate media landscapes and in popular narrative forms.

8.1 Contextualisation

Thuis is a Flemish soap opera that is broadcast daily on the Flemish public service television channel één (*One*). één is hosted by VRT, which is the national

¹¹¹ In referencing "inherent Flemishness" I acknowledge the danger of essentialism. However, this notion (Cf. Page 185), albeit a vague and contested one, is part and parcel of the Flemish context where there is a tangible tension between what is broadly regarded as the "Vlaamse Volksaard" / inherent Flemish culture and the actual situation in Flanders, which is much more multicultural (Cf. Pages 185-194). My references should be read against this background.

broadcasting channel of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Because of this, *Thuis* is broadcast solely in Belgian Dutch² and contains no subtitles.

Thuis was inspired by the British community soap opera, *EastEnders* (Franco, 2001: 450) and was aired for the first time on the 23 December 1995, following which it rapidly became one of the most popular television programmes in Flanders. On 27 May 2011, *Thuis* aired its 3 000th episode, and in January 2014, episode 3 500 was aired. Second only to the other Flemish soap opera, *Familie* (aired on the commercial channel VTM³), *Thuis* is the longest-running television programme on Flemish television. It is broadcast in 30-minute instalments just after eight on weekday evenings. Unlike other soap operas, such as *7de Laan*, *Thuis* is broadcast in seasons which run from September to the beginning of June. During July and August (the summer holidays in Belgium), the show is on a production break. The episodes pertinent to this analysis are from the second half of season 17, which was broadcast from January 2012 to the beginning of June 2012.

As in South Africa, soap operas are a popular choice among Flemish viewers. Supporting La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005: 274), as well as Billig's (2005), arguments about "cultural proximity" and "banal nationalism" as appealing (Cf. page 61), Dhoest (2013: 59) writes that it is exactly the "everyday character" of soap opera that appeals to its viewers and makes it the most popular television fiction genre in Flanders. *Thuis*, like *7de laan*, enjoys indisputable popularity, beating the competing commercial channel VTM's soap opera, *Familie* (Family), as well as a former soap opera entitled *Wittekerke* (a fictional town, White Church), in viewership. On average, *Thuis* has close to one million viewers a day, which constitutes a significant percentage of the Flemish population (Dhoest, 2009: 82). Franco (2001: 452), furthermore, contends that the abundant press coverage of the

² According to Geeraerts (2001:2), Belgian and Netherlandic Dutch are examples of what is referred to in contemporary linguistics as "national varieties of a given language". For Geeraerts (2001), to use the term "Flemish" would be "doubly misleading" since it would suggest, firstly, that Flemish is an entirely different language to the Dutch used in the Netherlands, and secondly, it would incorrectly suggest that it is "more of a dialect rather than a standard language". For the purposes of this thesis, then, the language spoken in Flanders will be referred to as Belgian Dutch/Flemish Dutch and the specific language in *Thuis* as "soap Flemish"(Franco, 2001: 455).

³ Later to be changed to vtm.

soap “testifies to the popularity of the genre in terms of its ability to open up emotional and domestic issues for public discussion”, emphasising its role as a community soap opera.

As is customary in the soap genre, the narratives in *Thuis* revolve around the lives and loves of a closed set of characters all connected to each other in one way or another. On één’s home page (www.een.be) viewers are invited to watch *Thuis* by the following tag line: “Volg de perikelen van een Vlaamse familie in moeilijke en gelukkige tijden” (*Follow the trials and tribulations of one Flemish family during good and bad times*). Romantic, familial and friendship relationships form the core around which narratives revolve and characters, rather than events, drive these narratives. The soap opera is set in a fictional town in Belgium. The theme song tells the viewer that there is “Nergens beter dan Thuis” (No place better than home).⁴ During the introductory song, the prominent characters are featured performing everyday activities, going about their daily business, emphasising the everydayness of the soap. The *Thuis* theme song is prefaced daily by a brief recap of what happened in the previous episode, enabling viewers who might have missed an episode to catch up without any difficulty.

In contrast to the South African case, there are no commercial breaks during an episode of *Thuis*. *Thuis* is therefore longer than *7de Laan*, for instance, since it takes up the full 25- to 30-minute slot without interruptions, while its South African counterparts sacrifice between three and five minutes to advertisement breaks. Sponsoring messages⁵ before and after *Thuis*, however, are often linked to the soap

⁴ The theme song was adapted at the beginning of 2015, but the overall message remains the same. In the new version, viewers are welcomed home and reassured that there is no better place with the following: “Je bent thuis, we zijn blij dat je hier kan zijn. Goede raad van iedereen, warme armen om je heen. Je bent thuis, er is geen betere plek voor jou. Alles past hier in elkaar. Nergens beter dan thuis”. (*You are home and we are glad that you can be here. Here you will find good advice from everyone and warm arms will embrace you. You are home and there is no better place for you. Here, everything fits together. There is no better place than home.*)

⁵ Although één is technically commercial free, short “sponsorship messages” are broadcast between programmes. This differs greatly from the South African context where advertisers pay large amounts of money to advertise during the broadcasts of the most popular programmes, one of which is *7de Laan*, in this way creating revenue for the PSB. Article 91 of the VRT “Mediadecreet” (Media policy) stipulates that the sponsorship messages featured before and after any particular programme should

opera and employ the “Nergens beter dan Thuis” theme. An example of such an advertisement is for *Maggi* products using the slogan: “Gezellig Thuis eten” (*Having a hearty meal at home*) propagating the idea of eating in, using *Maggi*’s products, rather than going out for dinner.

In Chapter 6 (Cf. page 149), it was suggested that soap operas extend beyond the screen. In the case of *Thuis* this is confirmed by the elaborate websites and fansites devoted to the soap opera. *Thuis*’s official website, which is linked to the website created for the VRT channel, één, contains brief summaries of current episodes, a description of the characters, as well as information on the previous seasons of the programmes. It, furthermore, contains a live feed displaying tweets relating to the programme. Linked to the official *Thuis* website (<http://www.een.be.thuis>), *Thuis* also has an official Facebook group hosted by VRT. It is described as “De enige echte officiële pagina van je favoriete televisieprogramma, boordevol exclusieve previews en leuke extra’s (*The only official page of your favourite television programme, with exclusive previews and exciting extras*). At the time of writing, the *Thuis* group had 128 617 fans, and these numbers were growing daily. The site features daily updates on what is happening in the narratives with clips and photos providing viewers with sneak previews and “behind the scenes” glimpses. Apart from the above, there is also an official *Thuis* fansite (www.Thuisfansite.be), described as “De site voor en door fans” (*The site by and for fans*). The site contains polls, news, spoilers, bios, a photo gallery, extras and forums. During 2012, for example, Femke was voted as the most popular “Boegbeeld” (*Figurehead*) in a poll on the “Personage van het jaar” (*Personality of the year*). Viewers use these forums actively as platforms for the creation of meaning. *Thuis*, moreover, also hosts an annual “*Thuis dag*” (*Thuis day*). On this day viewers are afforded the opportunity to meet and interact with their favourite characters, and at the particular 2012 *Thuisdag* (held at the end of season 17), viewers also received Frankie and Tibo’s wedding album as part of the package.

in no way influence the content of said programmes. The content of these sponsorship messages is clearly demarcated and they are only allowed before and after programmes and not during, as is the case in South Africa.

Thuis addresses a national, or at the very least a regional, audience with national aspirations. This is evident in the depictions of the national imagined community as constructed through the setting, the cultural practices and other elements such as the language as it manifests in the soap opera. In this regard, Mar Chicharro Merayo (2013: 11) writes that the soap opera and telenovela “can play a socialising and educational role. On the micro-level, it offers a key to a reading of our immediate reality. It serves as a translation of our own experiences and proposes models of action to us”. With the goal of investigating how these depictions construct the Flemish national community or image community (Dhoest, 2004: 394), and consequently, which models of action it proposes (also as it pertains to whiteness), the next section delves into these issues as they manifest in *Thuis* as a community soap opera.

8.2 *Thuis* as a community soap opera

Thuis, like *7de Laan*, can be classified as a community soap opera. This particular soap model is viewed as the most distinctive European soap model. It follows that the constructions and spaces represented in the soap opera will, to a certain extent, be guided by the conventions of the community soap opera genre. According to Franco (2001: 449), in both Britain and Belgium, domestic community soap operas have proven “instrumental in the public service’s wooing of the national/regional audience in terms of ratings, image building and the process of enculturation”. She (2001: 453) furthermore argues that when judged according to its potential to shape culture and create shared experiences for people belonging to the same nation, soap opera qualifies as television “par excellence”.

In this context, *Thuis* is produced within a social-realist tradition drawing on a “tradition of popular, yet critically acclaimed Flemish serials such as *Skipper naast Mathilde* (Skipper and Mathilde) and *De Heren van Zichem* (Zichem’s Gentlemen)” which emphasised recognition and realism (Franco, 2001: 452). Dhoest (2013: 59), referring to Billig, describes Flemish fiction as a “perfect illustration of ‘banal’ nationalism” consisting of taken for granted and practically invisible references to

everyday life in Flanders. According to Dhoest (2013: 59), his own research has proven that the dominant tendency for viewers is to “judge Flemish fiction on its degree of realism, to compare it to (their own) reality and to comment on the level of recognition it evokes”. *Thuis* is generally considered to be “the” quality soap in Flanders (Dhoest, 2009: 82) based on its apparent realism. Franco (2001: 458) describes *Thuis*’s “Flemishness”, and consequent realism, as a combination of certain elements:

naturalistic language/traditions of performance, the familiar personages of local stars [...] established throughout their television career, a sense of nostalgia for a rural way of life and a defensive/conservative worldview tempered by a mild anarchism emblemized [sic] by the character of the rebellious working-class underdog as the locus of emotional investment.

Respondents in Dhoest’s (2009: 90) research confirm Franco’s contention in commenting on the recognisable settings, houses and villages represented in *Thuis*.

Merayo’s (2013: 5) observations echo those of Franco when she writes:

Thuis airs images about Flemish identity through its portrayal of class, genre, ethnicity, sexuality and region. The use of informal standardised language, realistic representation of their own traditions, the use of local television stars and the evocation of conservative and rural values, are some of the strategies used to exalt autochthonous culture.

What is significant about Merayo’s (2013) statement, however, is that she explicitly connects the construction of the Flemish imagined community to autochthon culture, which suggests that allochtons are not viewed as part of this imagined/image community. This suggestion ties in with previous arguments regarding the exclusionary practices evident in Flemish society and the role or place of allochtons in it.

Despite this, *Thuis* is mandated to present the diversity of Flemish society, and its classification as a community soap opera also speaks to these ideals. The sections to follow explore the construction of the Flemish imagined community in *Thuis* with specific relevance to the depiction of the community, the use of language, the manifestation of cultural practices and the depiction of diversity.

8.2.1 Graphic depiction of *Thuis*'s family and social structure

Liebes and Livingstone (1998) identify a specific family structure unique to the community soap opera, distinguishing it from, say, the dynastic form of the genre. Below is a depiction of the family, social and romantic structure of *Thuis*, which clearly corresponds to Liebes and Livingstone's (1998) depiction of these structures in community soap operas (Cf. Figure 4.1, page 90):

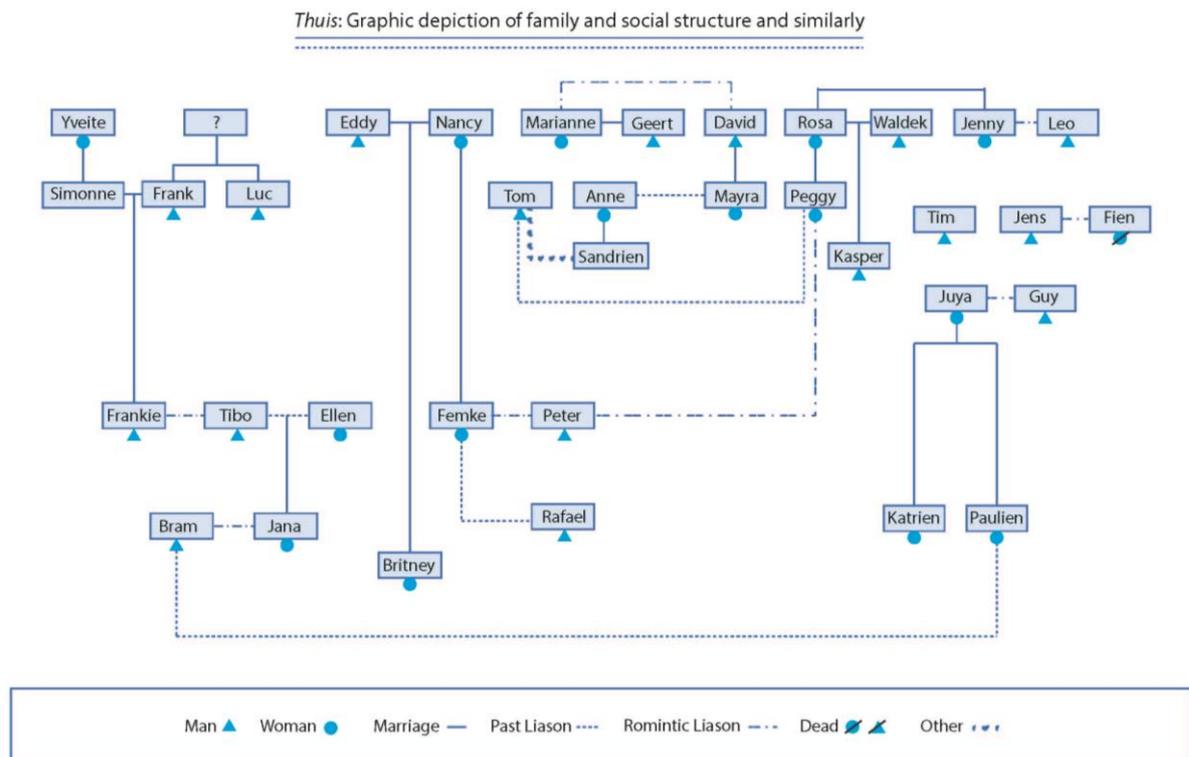


Figure 8.1: Graphic depiction of *Thuis*'s family and social structure

True to the nature of the genre, family is depicted as being central to the narratives of *Thuis*. During season 17, for example, there are five main families around which the narratives are built. They are the Bomans family, the Bastiaens (De Decker) family, the Verbeek family, the Van Capelle family and the De Grote family. In accordance with the characteristics of the community soap opera, the characters are linked to each other through familial relationships, romantic relationships or business interests, as illustrated in the depiction above.

8.2.2 *Setting and community: social and cultural reality as constructed in Thuis*

Community soap operas, in particular, award prominence to the community in terms of representation, representing a wide range of ordinary characters from different generations and personalities. They promote the utopian ideal of a harmonious “all-embracing” neighbourhood. The choice of name for the soap opera, namely *Thuis*, is evidence of this since it immediately creates a utopian feeling of familiarity and proximity. Both the theme song, as well as the themed sponsorship messages before and after the broadcasts, moreover, suggest, not only that the topic of the soap opera is home (home connoting both the family and the community) and elements associated with it, but also that the viewer is able to invest in this “home” and “feel at home” while watching the soap opera. The fact that it is set in an anonymous, yet “architecturally representative Flemish village” (Franco, 2001: 454) similarly supports this utopian view. *Thuis* is set in an imaginary Flemish village somewhere in the vicinity of Leuven.⁶ The fact that the setting resists concrete geographic references, yet employs recognisably Flemish traits, makes it universally applicable and encourages viewer identification with a setting familiar to them.

Sponsor messages featured before and after broadcasts of *Thuis* actively entrench the soap opera in the lives of its viewers and create links to realities familiar to the viewers. *D&L* sauce, for example, uses the analogy of fishfingers without *D&L* tartaar sauce being like someone without *Thuis*. Towards the end of June, just before the season ended, sponsor messages for the annual “*Thuisdag*” abounded. Apart from sponsor messages featuring the actual *Thuisdag*, other companies also used this as an advertising opportunity: Electrabel (a Belgium-based energy corporation), for example, was featured before and after *Thuis* episodes using the slogan: “*Spaar jouw energie voor de Thuisdag*” (Save your energy for *Thuis* day).

⁶ Frankie and Tibo’s wedding, for example, is officiated in the Leuven Town Hall, and the 2015 “*Thuisdag*” took place in Leuven, which supports *Thuis*’s situatedness in Flanders, while still creating a fictional Flemish setting which functions as universally appealing to Flemish viewers.

Thuis emanates a conservative middle-class value system which perpetuates the ideal of the nuclear family (Franco, 2001: 459). The centrality of family and familial relationships to the soap genre, in this case, strengthens the connotations with home and the familiar. Relationships are depicted as central in *Thuis*, not only romantic relationships, but also familial relationships and friendships.

According to Geeraerts (2001: 8) “*Thuis* ... hardly ever goes abroad”, and all the action is situated within the confines of the village. Thus, true to the inherent characteristics of soap opera, *Thuis* is set in a number of interrelated, but closed, settings. In this closed setting, the interiors range from “humble to well-to-do” (Geeraerts, 2001: 8), which is indicative of the community of *Thuis* as constructed of working-class to upper-middle class characters interacting in settings indicative of such a life style. The characters mostly interact and work in these common public places inside one geographical neighbourhood. For the most part, these settings are also domestic, interior settings, elevating the domestic over the public sphere. Even public spheres are incorporated into the private (e.g. *Zus&Zo*), emphasising the closed nature of the settings. Moreover, the concentration of both related and unrelated characters under a single roof is so dense that it creates the opportunity for intimate as well as casual encounters to take place indoors (Franco, 2001: 456). The implication of these carefully demarcated settings is that they are closed to anyone perceived as outside of the community, thus protecting the community against the threat of heterogeneity.

Each of these settings plays a role in the daily developments of the narratives as well as in the characterisation of each persona through the *mise-en-scène* used. *Mise-en-scène*, for example, articulates social class. (The settings as well as their specific contributions to the characterisation and narratives are identified and discussed in Addendum B).

In these settings, characters are depicted as participating in specific cultural activities. According to Dhoest (2009: 310), domestic Flemish soap operas are, supposedly, devised as “mirrors of society”. Viewers in Dhoest’s (2009) research, for

example, recognise the portrayal of life in soap operas as the portrayal of life in Flanders. One respondent is quoted as identifying these representations as “[t]he routine, really, having a beer, going out with the friends, business life, private life”. Instances of “Flemishness” identified by the respondents in Dhoest’s (2009) research mainly centre on food and drink, in particular the habit of going to a bar and having a beer.⁷

In the episodes pertinent to this analysis, characters were frequently represented meeting for a “pint”, perpetuating this Flemish tradition on screen. Frank and Waldek, for example, go out for a beer to celebrate their collaboration with *Sanitechniek*, and Frankie and Bram are often featured sharing a beer when they arrive home from work. Both Frank and Waldek are also involved in Eddy’s beer brewing, which turns into the source of many humorous moments. These three characters later team up with Geert and David to produce their own brand of beer called *Slurfke*, named that way because of Nancy’s pet name for Eddy. Furthermore, whereas Marianne is depicted as frequenting fancy restaurants, the other characters mainly frequent the *Zus&Zo* or *De Noorderzon*, and buy their food from the local frituur (french fries shop) or bakkerij (bakery), both of which are Flemish staples. Characters are depicted as eating sandwiches (or rather *broodjes*), or French fries (*frietten*) which, together with beer, are perhaps some of the seminal elements of Flemish cuisine. Another specific example of cultural specificity is Rosa, the owner of a prominent guest house in the soap opera, baking a “Driekoningen taart” (Three kings tart), a tradition inherent in Belgium and other European countries⁸ in which she hides a coin. Similarly, the Flemish tradition of having lunch at midday is compounded when Frank, one of the characters, comments: “Tussen twaalf en een eet elkeen” (*Between twelve and one everyone eats*).

⁷ It might be argued that drinking beer is a universal social activity, but Belgium, in particular, is renowned for its beer and beer-drinking culture. There are approximately 180 breweries in the country and almost every beer has its own uniquely shaped glass.

⁸ Driekoningen is a celebration which takes place on 6 January. It has its roots in the Christian tradition and is related to the three wise men that followed the star and found the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem. Tradition dictates that an object (usually a bean or coin) is hidden in the tart and that the person who finds the object is allowed to wear a king’s crown for a day (Driekoningen: oorsprong en tradities [sa]).

Franco (2001: 455) confirms the construction of an inherently Flemish community and setting when she writes that *Thuis* represents

an imaginary yet recognizable [sic] fictional space composed of slices/icons of small town Flemishness (church, French fries stalls, Belgian beer ads, cafés, petit-bourgeois furniture and decoration) emphasized [sic] by verbal invocation of an imaginary international (Spain, Italy, London, New York) indirectly confirming that the space is a Flemish town in Belgium.

Thus, although it elides place, it does create a closely knit, linguistic and cultural community populated by stereotypical Flemish characters, which Franco (2001: 445) views as “walking repositories of cultural behaviours and attitudes” as the utopian ideal for the Flemish imagined community. Merayo (2013: 4) highlights the fact that representations such as these are not ideologically neutral when she writes that

representation[s] of cultural elements such as folklore, music gastronomy, dress codes, rituals and so forth, is yet another way of recreating a community. Thus, the discourse of fiction can be used by political powers to promote the local language and the autochthonous culture of a region or nation.

Apart from Flemish cultural practices, the text often invokes references to American popular culture. Jens, Tim, Katrien and Paulien, for example, have an American movie night with “American” hamburgers. In another episode, Rosa refers to her long-standing nemesis, Marianne, as “Cruella de Ville” referencing the evil witch from the popular Disney movie *101 Dalmatians*. Popular American music and artists, in particular, are also referenced in the narratives. Perhaps the most prominent reference of this nature is Nancy’s affinity for Britney Spears, and especially her hit song: “Hit me baby one more time”. Nancy listens to this song in anticipation of Eddy’s return and also dresses like a school girl (in the same way as Spears is dressed in the music video of the song) when she attempts to seduce Eddy. Their toddler, Britney, was also named after this pop musician. These examples are pertinent since they are all related to dominant Western culture, and no instances of any other cultural practices are incorporated into the narratives. This is indicative of the fact that the community and setting are closed to the Other and practices relating to them.

As a supposed mirror of Flemish society, *Thuis* incorporates a number of salient issues, displaying a commitment to addressing socially relevant problems or issues. During the period of analysis, storylines about murder, breast cancer, anorexia and bulimia, drug addiction, violence against women, rape, sexually transmitted diseases, post-traumatic stress syndrome, sibling incest and mental instability were aired. In all of the cases mentioned, friends and family are depicted as concerned and invested in these issues and soap opera's predilection for talk creates an ideal opportunity for these social issues to be discussed at length from a variety of different viewpoints. There is always a risk for social issues of this magnitude to be represented in a rather simplified way, but the predilection for talk creates an opportunity for these issues to be sympathetically explored. In the storyline relating to anorexia and bulimia, for example, the issue of societal norms of what constitutes ideal beauty comes under the microscope. Critique is raised against the pressure society puts on young girls to conform to a certain stereotypical ideal of beauty. Not only the social issues, but also their roots, are thus addressed in the narratives of *Thuis* compounding its potential for social education and the distribution of socially relevant information.

Despite the portrayal of socially relevant issues, Franco (2001: 455) summarises the construction of the community as having an imaginary quality, which thus remains

anonymous, geographically unspecified and suspended in time in order to represent and unify the Flemish viewers. This abstract, fictional space established through editing/juxtaposition of tropes and imaginative constructs of Flemishness, combined with the programme's slow narrative pace, limited number of characters and an overall static visual style, conspires to an insular universe and involuted worldview.

This abstract construction of a defensive, conservative, inward-looking community (Franco, 2001: 467) suggests nationalist overtones, even if no explicit references are made to the nation or nationalism. Furthermore, the closed nature of the settings in the soap opera can be read as indicative of the insider-outsider tension, with the insiders largely represented as Flemish-speaking, white Europeans. The construction of such a closed, homogeneous community can be linked to the current debates about integration in Belgian society at large. The Flemish imagined community, as

constructed in *Thuis*, seems to be markedly autochton, and therefore constructed as binary opposition of everything allochton, even if only implicitly. According to Twine and Gallagher (2008: 16), “these two mutually exclusive terms (allochton and autochton) frame the debate around citizenship and belonging in terms of ‘real Dutch’ and ‘not quite Dutch’”.

Hence this utopian ideal of a Flemish community seems to be a fairly homogeneous one, focused on a representation of the autochton. Merayo (2013: 11) emphasises the role these depictions play in the politics of belonging when she writes that “as well as being a transmitter of culture, television fiction can serve to homogenise world views and foster the perception in the viewer of belonging to a community”. This assumption is further explored by manifestations of language and culture in the narrative in the next section.

8.2.3 Language

According to Geeraerts (2001: 1), soaps are “particularly interesting from the point of view of everyday language” since they supposedly reflect everyday life which implies easy identification for spectators. Consequently, the use of language in *Thuis* should reveal something about the imagined community it constructs. Owing to the fact that the Flemish nation was formed within the federalised state of Belgium, language and culture, rather than a shared geographical location, form the core elements in what Franco refers to as its “contrastive self-identification”. On the one hand, culture and language serve as a symbol and means of identification, and on the other, as opposition and replacement of the French language and culture (Franco, 2001: 455). According to Merayo (2013: 4), through the use of language and tradition, soap operas show on screen what a nation is.

Belgian Dutch is the only language spoken in *Thuis*. Seen in the context of the unofficial divide between French-speaking Wallonia and Dutch-speaking Flanders, language is crucial in the construction of Flemish identity. The characters in the soap opera speak an informal “everyday Belgian Dutch” (Geeraerts, 2001: 1), which can

be classified as something between standard Dutch and dialect, commonly referred to as “soap Flemish” or “*verkavelingsvlaams*”.⁹ Franco (2001: 455) posits that soap Flemish is used in an attempt to overcome dialectical variation across regions. Its use is the most powerful marker of Flemish cultural identity in the soap opera when viewed against the background of the historical suppression of the Flemish language by the Francophone bourgeoisie and the Dutch standard.

Partly because of Flanders’ inherent link to French-speaking Wallonia, some French words are, however, employed by the characters, as would be the case in reality. Examples of these include: “*merci*” and “*voilà*”. Apart from Flemish and French, characters also use some English words, especially as a part of informal conversations. This is indicative of the global influence of English as a world language, but particularly of American popular culture, as displayed in popular cultural references which also manifest in the text. Femke, for example, jokingly calls Rafael a “loser” when she beats him at a board game. Peggy, similarly uses the English word “creep” to describe Axl when he starts stalking her. When Marianne, a character who prides herself on her upper-class stature and usually behaves accordingly, wanted to show her petulance towards Geert, and after a disagreement she dismissed him with “whatever”. In another scenario, when Luc is under the impression that he is being flirted with in a bar, he tells Eddy: “I am getting lucky tonight”, invoking a specific informal type of English to indicate that he might not be going home alone. Thus, even though the Flemish language is regarded as the primary manifestation of Flemish identity, the influence of other languages, particularly American English, speaks to the globalisation of national cultures. As was the case with cultural practices identified in the previous subsection, it is pertinent to note here that the only other languages incorporated, or viewed as influential, are markedly Western and white.

⁹ These terms can be linked to the importance of the Flemish mother tongue as part of Flemish cultural heritage and identity. According to Franco (2001: 468), the term “*verkavelingsvlaams*” or “soap Flemish” refers to “informal spoken Flemish that is gaining ground in day-to-day exchanges”. A comparative-historical study (Geeraerts, 1999) revealed that “soap Flemish” as spoken by soap actors and the majority of the Flemish population is more dialectical than “‘soap Dutch’... [and] Flemish soaps contribute to the growing linguistic distancing from the Dutch standard”.

Even though soap Flemish is the only language spoken in *Thuis*, different characters do speak different dialects, further contributing to the construction of various identities. In this way language is used as a way of expressing characters' social identities. According to Geeraerts (2001: 10), there is a clear correlation between the language used by a character and his or her social position. Hence, Marianne, who is depicted as representing an upper-class character, would, for example, speak in a more reserved dialect than Frank, who is a blue-collar worker running his own handyman business. The extroverted nature of the lower-class characters is expressed through their use of sexually explicit language, dialectic phrases and swearing or shouting, whereas the upper-class characters speak a more standardised Belgian Dutch (Franco, 2001: 462). It is noteworthy that the use of swearing, name calling and sexually explicit language is common to *Thuis*, in contrast to other soap operas (also *7de Laan*) in the community soap genre. Nancy, a cleaning lady ("*poetsvrouw*") who is obviously from a lower class than some of the other characters, is a prime example in support of Franco's (2001) point. She is often depicted as speaking or acting in vulgar or inappropriate ways, challenging the perceived social decorum. Indicative of her spontaneous, if slightly crude, personality is her affectionate nickname for her husband Eddy. Nancy calls Eddy "Slurfke",¹⁰ explicitly invoking their sexual relationship, albeit in a light-hearted and affectionate way. When Eddy resolves his post-traumatic stress issues and his consequent erectile dysfunction, he announces this to Nancy by saying: "Big Slurf rules!"

Language is thus employed as a mechanism to individualise characters and create more three-dimensional characters. This is also apparent in the use of metaphors, similes or expressions that are unique to the Flemish language.¹¹ When Yvette is worried her health might fail her before she is able to see her grandson tie the knot, for example, Frank jokingly consoles her by saying "onkruid vergaat niet" (weeds are

¹⁰ Slurf can be loosely translated to English as meaning "proboscis" which refers to an elongated appendage from the head of an animal. The example that comes to mind is an elephant's trunk, which in Afrikaans would be referred to as a "slurf". The obvious phallic shape of these appendages connotes it to the penis.

¹¹ It is interesting to note in this regard that most of these metaphors have also found their way into the Afrikaans language and are used in South Africa for almost exactly the same applications.

not that easy to destroy). Other examples include “Twee handen op een buik” (Two hands on one belly), “Kip zonder kop” (Chicken without a head) and “Liever druk dan duimen draaien” (Rather busy than twiddling thumbs).

However, even though language is clearly used as a mechanism to create varying identities, it is significant that the identities represented in *Thuis* only reflect variations that fall within the homogeneous construction of autochton Flemish identity. Where there are references to possible influences exerted by other languages, these are all Western languages (such as American English or French). According to Dhoest (2013: 59), there is nothing explicitly nationalist about *Thuis*, and it does not overtly support Flemish nationalism or separatism, and while this is true, the use of Belgian Dutch in *Thuis*, as in Flemish society, clearly carries ideological significance in perpetuating Flemishness, albeit implicitly. Furthermore, the fact that Belgian Dutch is represented as the sole language supports the internal homogeneity invoked in the previous section. It is logical that a Flemish language programme is under no obligation to include any other languages or cultural practices (Turkish, for example). However, the application of language and the depiction of culture in the narratives of *Thuis*, taken together with all other contributing factors, might contribute to the construction of a predominantly white, Flemish norm. This notion is further explored in the next section with specific focus on difference.

8.2.4 *Diversity and difference*

This section investigates the representation of diversity and difference in *Thuis*, primarily as they pertain to class, gender and ethnicity. Costera Meijer (2001: 207) writes that “[u]nlike North American and European soap operas, Dutch popular drama was in the year 2000 populated by black, lesbian and gay characters”. At first glance, the situation is no different in *Thuis*. Since the early 2000s, there have been concerted efforts by several Flemish programmes to include ethnic minorities and, in recognition of its efforts in this regard, *Thuis* was awarded the “Integration Prize” by the Belgian Turkish Union in 2007. However, in congruence with the internal

homogeneity created by the setting, as well as the language and cultural practices, as discussed above, careful analysis of the representations in *Thuis* reveals a predominantly white, heteronormative and homogeneous imagined community.

As far as depictions of class are concerned, with the exception of Marianne and the rest of the Bastiaens/De Decker household, all the characters in *Thuis* are arguably middle or working class. Hardly any explicit reference is made to class and most of these references pertain to Marianne. In one instance, Marianne and Ann specifically discuss Frank, Waldek and Eddy's perceived lower class when conversing about David's involvement with the brewery. Nancy also displays an awareness of class difference in addressing Marianne as "Madame Marianne". In another instance, when David is staying over at the Bastiaens house while recuperating from his eye operation, he requests a beer with dinner. This triggers a conversation with Marianne in which she expresses her aversion to beer and its connotations claiming that people with class drink wine while beer is associated mainly with people she views to be of a class lower than her own. David jokingly describes beer as a drink for "*boeren*" (which ostensibly denotes a lower class), while wine is a more complex drink. The fact that David teasingly refers to Marianne's upper class may be subversive in that he pokes fun at her perceptions about her elevated status. The fact that these two characters subsequently become romantically involved in an extramarital affair, however, is indicative of the fact that class differences can be easily renegotiated in the context of the soap opera.

In addition to the professional status of characters and the references above which indicate class differences, social class is "coded in terms of visual representation, lifestyle, behaviour and speech" (Franco, 2001: 461). As pointed out in the previous section, language is used as one indicator of a specific character's class. The difference in Marianne and Geert's appearance and dress code compared with those of Frank or Nancy, for example, serves as another case in point. Franco (2001: 462) asserts that "[l]ower-class females dress more tartily than their upper-class ... sisters", and this is certainly true when one compares Nancy's dress sense to that of Marianne, or even Rosa and Jenny. Eddy, Nancy's partner, correspondingly performs

as belonging to a lower class than some of the other characters. Eddy sports a number of prison tattoos, and his fondness for drinking *Cara Pils*¹² can also be connoted to his status as “white trash”. *Thuis* covers a wide spectrum of classes ranging from working class (plumbers, domestic cleaner) to lower- and upper-middle-class characters (lawyers, doctors). However, even though class differences are depicted in the narratives, membership of the community takes precedence and acts, to some extent at least, as an equalising measure. This is characteristic of the community soap opera genre, but also perpetuates the homogenisation of the community.

In terms of gender representation, *Thuis* represents a broad range of possible identities for viewers to associate with. Apart from the broad range of male and female identities, with the representation of strong female roles characteristic of soap operas, *Thuis* presents a wide spectrum of sexual and gender identities as well. During season 17, for example, apart from a variety of heterosexual characters, two gay characters, namely Frankie and Tibo, were key players in the narrative. Moreover, season 17 featured three lesbian characters, Anne and Mayra who are in a longstanding relationship, and Ellen, Jana’s mother. Ellen and Tibo were university friends and he impregnated Ellen when she expressed the need to have a baby.

Moreover, *Thuis* does not shy away from explicit displays of affection in same sex couples. Both the gay and the lesbian couple are often depicted as displaying public affection. This is significant since, while other soaps have included same-sex couples, intimacy in these couples is often merely suggested rather than explicitly depicted in the way romantic affection is shown between their heterosexual counterparts.

Gender issues are also sometimes referred to in a comedic way. When Luc is planning a promotional page in order to create more exposure for *Sanitechniek* and

¹² *Cara Pils* is one of Belgium’s cheapest beers and a 33 cl can sells for approximately €0.29. It is considered a beloved icon of white trash culture in Belgium. During May 2015, the public reacted vehemently to suggestions (from the *Colruyt* group that sells the beers) to change the beer’s name to “Everyday Pils”. Owing to the public’s reactions, a decision was taken not to change the well-loved name of the beer (Colruyt houdt vast aan Cara Pils, 2015).

needs models to pose for the visuals, for example, Frankie jokes and volunteers to pose with Bram as “gay plumbers”. Unlike the representation of overtly queer personas which are often derogative or humorous stereotypes, the satirical way in which Frankie refers to his own sexuality is indicative of his own and other characters’ level of acceptance and comfort with these identities.

Despite this acceptance, the narrative also represents some of the diverse reactions of other characters to same-sex relationships. When Frank is congratulated by his colleagues with his son’s upcoming nuptials, David assumes that Frankie is marrying a woman. This triggers a conversation about assumptions like these and both Frank and Eddy display uneasiness with the topic of same-sex marriages. While Eddy overtly displays his homophobia here, and Frank his obvious discomfort, this scenario serves to question the assumed normativity of heterosexuality. These instances, to some extent, contribute to negating the taboo of openly referring to gay or lesbian relationships and stereotyping them, particularly in soap operas.

Dhaenens (2012: 443), however, notes that, notwithstanding the “growing interest of soap operas in gay characters and gay-related themes, it should be stressed that soaps are part of a popular media culture dominated by the discourse of heteronormativity”. According to him, the consequence of this is that “both gay and straight characters are represented as reiterating and consolidating these heteronormative values” and, consequently, the “progressive potential of a gay presence in popular television series is often downplayed” (Dhaenens, 2012: 443).¹³ Dhaenens’ (2012) argument can be substantiated to some extent by the fact that both the same-sex couples in the narrative actively pursue the myth of the nuclear, heteronormative family, with Frankie and Tibo getting married and Anne adopting Sandrien.

¹³ Even though season 20 falls outside the scope of this analysis it is noteworthy that during this season (in conjunction with Bruce Jenner’s “coming out” as transgender), Frankie (now separated from Tibo) announced that he had started hormone therapy in order to transition into a woman (De bom barst in *Thuis*: Franky wordt vrouw). Fans on Twitter referred to him as the “Bruce Jenner of Flanders”. Narratives such as these are not only contradictory to the argument formulated here, but also revolutionary in the soap opera genre.

Race (or ethnicity) perhaps remains the most contentious issue when it comes to representation of diversity in *Thuis*. Mention was made of the fact that Dutch people prefer to use terms like “ethnicity” rather than “race” in an effort to avoid racist speech (Cf. page 190). Moreover, Costera Meijer and De Bruin (2003: 696) contend that “‘colour’ and related notions like ‘white’ and ‘black’ are relatively neutral terms”, suggesting that they are used or interpreted in a different way than in, South Africa, for example. However, respondents in Costera Meijer and De Bruin’s (2003) research still exhibited a reluctance to talk about the subject of race indicating that, regardless of the different terminology used in Europe, it remains a touchy issue. This uneasiness also manifests in the narratives of *Thuis*.

Dhoest (2009: 56) describes Flemish fiction as “mostly white” confirming Franco’s (2001: 460) contention that *Thuis* “represses difference of ... ethnicity”. The research she conducted found that, at the time, few efforts were made to incorporate or even introduce characters from ethnic or sexual minorities. However, as stated above, since the early 2000s, there has been a concerted effort to include ethnic-cultural minorities. *Thuis* first introduced the Moroccan plumber, Mo, and later added more minority characters such as Mo’s daughter, Aisha, the Moroccan medicine student, Youssef, the Polish plumber, Waldek and, recently, the law student, Lynn (Dhoest, 2014: 114). While Mo’s character was an illustration of how hard (if not impossible) it is to create a single three-dimensional, representative minority character, he was a laudable and noted presence in Flemish primetime television, which is generally white (Dhoest & Simons, 2009).

In a study comparing *Thuis*, *Familie* and *Wittekerke* (three Flemish soap operas, with the first broadcast on één and the second two broadcast on VTM), Dhoest and Simons (2009: 55) found that *Thuis* performed best at representing diversity with the (first) four long-standing ethnic minority characters mentioned above. All four of them, according to Dhoest and Simons (2009), were represented as rounded characters. Mo, for example, was a kind-hearted Moroccan plumber with a heavy accent, his daughter Aisha, a well-integrated law student, and Waldek, an extremely nice and integrated Polish character. More generally, Dhoest and Simons (2009)

found that *Thuis* is clearly preoccupied with the representation of diversity. At the time of their analysis, for example, in terms of gender, the credits portrayed nine male and nine female protagonists, and characters from different classes were represented in the narrative. This contrasts with “the all-white casts of the commercial soaps, as well as the all-white comedy and crime drama broadcast on public television in this period” (Dhoest & Simons, 2009: 55).

Even though the situation looked somewhat different for the period analysed within the scope of this chapter, there is no arguing that *Thuis* does attempt to represent some ethnic diversity. During the period relevant to this analysis, there were three characters from ethnic minority groups represented in *Thuis*. Lynn, a Moroccan law student working for Tom De Decker, Waldek, the Polish character mentioned previously, and Kasper, Waldek and Rosa’s adopted son, who returns home towards the end of season 17.

It is arguable, however, that all three of the above characters can be viewed as “good allochtons” (to adapt Steyn and Foster’s (2008: 34) trope of “good blacks”) since they are represented as being well integrated into the Flemish community. Lynn’s character, for example, does little to contribute to a nuanced representation of allochton identity. Apart from her obviously different skin colour, she performs white and Flemish. She is the adopted daughter of extremely rich, white parents, and there are no references to her ethnic roots. She performs the same normative practices as all the other characters in the soap opera, with her main crisis being her rebellious nature which manifests primarily in her aversion to her father and her promiscuous behaviour. It is arguable that such a representation may be seen as a welcome move away from ethnicity as the key defining trait and that in the range of minority characters there should be room for representations that are not solely about race. However, seen against the backdrop of the homogenisation of the whole *Thuis* community, as well as the fact that she is the only “coloured” character in the narrative during season 17, the fact that she performs “white” remains problematic. Lynn poses no threat to the dominant autochton ideology of the text, and therefore

perpetuates the utopian ideal where any threats to internal homogeneity are situated as outside of the closed community of *Thuis*.

Waldek and Kasper's characters pose similar problems in the context of representation of diversity. Firstly, both of them are white and European, which at least qualifies them as "Western allochtoon" (Yanow & Van der Haar, 2009: 15) and thus, per definition, less threatening to the taken-for-granted whiteness of Flemishness than Moroccan, Turkish, and especially Islam allochtons. There are, furthermore, no references to Waldek or Kasper's roots apart from occasional references to Waldek's surname (Kozinsky), which indicates his Polish origin and minimal references to Kasper's gypsy background. Like Lynn, neither of them performs any cultural practices outside of the Flemish norm. The only behaviour deviating from the norm is the fact that Kasper deals drugs. While there is an argument to be made for the three-dimensional representation of characters, one could also argue that, considering Kasper's roots as a gypsy, his devious characteristics and dishonest activities might be seen as stereotypical. No dominant racial or ethnic stereotypes are challenged, even though Kasper is depicted as displaying moral values in his attempts to change his ways. Despite the fact that one needs to note that it is difficult for ethnic characters to carry the full burden of representation, it is hard to miss the homogeneous way in which these characters are depicted. Respondents in Costera Meijer and De Bruin's (2003: 698) research on Dutch soap operas, for example, were critical of the apparent "whiteness" of ethnic characters and "referred to the absence of a different set of signifiers", and it seems that this is also applicable in this instance.

The fact remains that the presence of difference alone does not ensure a nuanced depiction. Most ethnic minorities' difference, for example, is diffused in the white working-class community (Franco, 2001: 460), and the same applies to the homonormative behaviour of the gay characters, which are largely assimilated into the predominant heteronormativity of the text. No explicit references to difference are made in the text and, even where difference is acknowledged, the soap opera adheres to the "utopian community genre according to which difference can be

overcome in time of crisis, if only for the benefit of others” (Franco, 2001: 464) and the greater good of the community.

These depictions do have implications for *Thuis*'s ability to adhere to the mandates of the VRT. One instance where the influence of the soap opera extends beyond the television text is in “soap talk”. Costera Meijer and De Bruin (2003: 695) identify soap talk as active and productive, but emphasise that it exists only “with resources and within contexts which are not of the audience’s choosing – so the talk also reveals the limitations of the available discourses and identity positions”. Consequently, the meanings viewers are able to construct are limited to those “that the matrix of text and context enables” (Costera Meijer & De Bruin, 2003: 695). Hence while the gender and class identities represented can possibly create a “discursive community between viewers and characters” (Costera Meijer & De Bruin, 2003: 700), the limitation of the available discourses and identity positions regarding diversity is problematic to people’s belonging in the soap community. *Thuis* offers little opportunity for reflection on cultural and ethnic differences to its Flemish audience, and runs the risk of merely perpetuating the homogeneous status quo. This perpetuation is akin to Steyn’s “ignorance contract” as referenced in Chapter 2 (Cf. page 42).

CONCLUSION

Thuis is produced in the Flemish PSB tradition and its content, as evidenced in the analysis in this chapter, certainly speaks to image building and enculturation. This chapter was devoted to analysing what the offerings of this public service soap opera say about the Flemish culture, how it could contribute to shaping this culture and how whiteness manifests in its narratives as an organising principle.

The broad contextualisation of *Thuis* in the Flemish fiction genre confirmed that it belongs to the most popular soap form in the public service context, namely the community soap genre. The social-realist tradition in which the soap opera is created places it in an ideal position to deal with socially relevant issues in a culturally

specific way. Owing to its popularity, the soap opera extends beyond the screen, for example, into online communities, or as the topic of conversation manifesting in soap talk, which contributes to the image community it creates.

It was argued throughout this chapter that *Thuis* makes no explicit references to nation building and that the value of its contribution to nation building, or discourses around social issues, lies in what Billig (1995) refers to as the “banal nationalism” represented in its texts. Even without explicit references, taken together, all these banal representations can be used in an effort to “distill the unarticulated givens of *Thuis*’ social structure as indicative of the agenda of the society” that watches the soap (Franco, 2001: 453). Moreover, while it is true that the open-ended nature of the soap opera genre negates a single reading of the text, it is possible to specify the dominant “ways in which it invites its viewers to produce meaning” (Franco, 2001: 450). These processes of meaning making were explored through the specific focus on the representation of the community and the settings used to construct this image community, the manifestation of language and culture in the text and, finally, the representation of difference. The community constructed in *Thuis* functions as a microcosm representative of the Flemish lifestyle. Its situatedness in a fictional Flemish town creates a feeling of an insular community with little or no interaction outside the demarcated spaces. While this is characteristic of the soap opera genre, it simultaneously strengthens the idea of a homogeneous, unified community. Seen in the Flemish/Belgian context with its integration policies, such a closed community is certainly reminiscent of the allochton/autochton debate, and its emphasis on homogeneity perpetuates this exclusionary discourse.

In conjunction with the closed spaces represented in *Thuis*, the sole use of Flemish Dutch as well as the representation of everyday Flemish practices as being inherent in the characters contributes to the construction of a homogeneous community. It was noted that some American influences are visible in the language use and the popular cultural activities of the characters. This is significant because of the underlying implication that the only other linguistic or cultural practices viewed as

influencing Flemish communities are decidedly Western. The overall ideology, however, remains one of an unspoken loyalty to Flemishness.

While there are certainly concerted efforts to represent ethnic minorities, the representation of these minorities, to a certain extent, still perpetuates Flemish homogeneity since they are presented as fully integrated and well versed in the Flemish ways. The problem that remains is the creation of nuanced representations other than the dominant white, Flemish identity. In this regard Dhoest (2009: 306) aptly poses the question of whether ethnic minority audiences are at all part of the Flemish “imagined community”. According to him, Belgian broadcasters have, until recently, largely ignored ethnic minorities, both on screen and as potential audiences. He (2014: 115) argues that there are

simply too few ethnic minority characters or people on screen for them not to carry a heavy burden of representation ... In this respect, Flanders [and *Thuis*] has some catching up to do in order to get in line with contemporary thinking about complex, changeable, “intersectional” identities.

The representations of gender and sexual identity in *Thuis* are more nuanced than the representations of ethnic difference. The narratives do not shy away from dealing with the complications involved in same-sex relationships, also as it pertains to marriage, infidelity and child rearing. In this regard, the text does negate the stereotypical and essentialising way in which some soap operas deal with sexual difference. There is, however, still an argument to be made for the heteronormativity of the gay and lesbian characters present in *Thuis*, and this is problematic since heteronormativity (and even homonormativity) was identified in Chapter 2 as one of the ways in which whiteness assimilates difference. This argument is strengthened by the emphasis on the nuclear family, even in “alternative” households. Dhaenens (2012: 443–444) articulates this point as follows:

Instead of disrupting the hegemonic supremacy of heteronormativity, gay characters are portrayed as reiterating and consolidating patriarchal and traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Hence these representations are considered anything but queer.

Despite all of this, it remains true that *Thuis* does attempt to include minority characters as it pertains to ethnicity, gender and class. It is, however, important to take into account the complex and fluid nature of identities created through these intersections of gender, class and ethnicity. Hence when viewing identity as complex, intersectional and changeable, it is possible that, even though characters representative of ethnic or sexual minorities are present on screen, ideologies of whiteness are still perpetuated. In Costera Meijer's research (2001: 207), she found that "white does not so much denote a colour as neutral standard". She aptly warns that if "no one challenges these particular demands of the seemingly self-evident 'natural' or 'realistic' story line, it continues to be taken for granted" (Costera Meijer, 2001: 221). Taken together, all the representations above do seem to perpetuate an invisible normative whiteness as referred to by Steyn (2001) in Chapter 2. Normative whiteness does not refer merely to colour or ethnicity, but encapsulates certain dominant manifestations of class, gender and religion which make mere presence insufficient in countering these dominant ideologies. Contrary to challenging homogeneous constructions then, these representations run the risk of perpetuating Steyn's (2012) "ignorance contract".

Notwithstanding the efforts to represent ethnic minorities, and in conjunction with the issue of representing a nuanced version of disparate identities, the problem seems to be that the Flemish nation still remains depicted as a fairly homogenised entity. In reaction to this internal homogeneity, Dhoest (2009: 51) calls for an exploration of the assumed ethnic homogeneity of the nation both on and off screen. He, for example, finds it problematic that the term "allochthonous"¹⁴ is used as an overarching concept that does not acknowledge the inherent diversity of ethnic minorities in Flanders. According to him, there is an assumed homogeneity in these groups "which tends to essentialise ethnicity and cultural identity". This assumed homogeneity of ethnic groups pitted against the internal homogeneity of Flemishness, as represented in the text, supports the creation of an insider/outsider

¹⁴ It is important to note here that there is an active move against using the term "allochtoon" because of its negative connotations and that phrases such as "people with a migration background" or "ethnic-cultural minorities" are manifesting, especially in the mass media.

binary mentioned earlier. In this specific analysis, a counter-argument might be that none of the allochton characters belong to what might be considered the “usual suspects”, namely the Moroccan or Turkish communities, which makes it possible to argue that *Thuis* represents an atypical diversity, at least in comparison to other Flemish programmes, and this could be considered as challenging the essentialising of the Other. The flipside of this argument, however, remains that the homogeneous Flemish society created in the soap opera, where even the allochtons are integrated and perform an innate Flemishness, still perpetuates this insider/outsider binary.

In Chapter 4 reference was made to Riessman (2008: 540) and the questions he identifies as relevant to narrative analysis. According to him, it is important to identify whom the story was constructed for and to what end, how it is composed and what it accomplishes. From the above it is clear that *Thuis* is constructed primarily with a homogeneous Flemish audience in mind, and this is supported by the cultural resources drawn on or even taken for granted as well as the storehouse of cultural plots the narratives call up. Riessman (2008), furthermore, recommends that one also needs to take into account whether there are any gaps or inconsistencies which might suggest preferred, alternative or counter-narratives. While there is room for alternative readings as far as class and gender are concerned, the analysis in this chapter seems to support the dominant ideology of heterosexual, middle-class whiteness as the norm.

Costera Meijer (2001: 207-227) succinctly points out that soaps are “part of the process by which social change is brought about and acted upon” and that precisely because they have a tendency to go on for years “they provide such a rich source for monitoring cultural change, or, for that matter, resistance to cultural change”. The analysis of *Thuis* in this chapter proves that it does mirror the society it originates from, in particular, in representing the homogenising efforts characteristic of the integration policies of the country. Furthermore, even though race is not explicitly referenced in Dutch communities or in these integration policies, one should consider the fact that whiteness (as it is understood by proponents of CWS) does not refer only to race, but also encompasses other hegemonic constructions

such as patriarchy, heteronormativity and homogeneity in particular. Hence according to this definition of whiteness, it seems that it does function as one organising principle in the narratives of *Thuis*.

CHAPTER 9: COMPARISON OF *7de LAAN* AND *THUIS*: A CWS APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

This chapter should be read in the context of the purpose of this thesis, which is to determine how whiteness is constructed and positioned in a sample of South African and Flemish soap operas and how these manifestations can be read as possible indications of local, as well as global, discourses on whiteness in the media. In an effort to achieve this goal, at the start of the thesis, I identified a number of subquestions (Cf. pages 10). Building on the literature review and the analysis of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* (Cf. Chapters 5–8), this chapter presents the answers to these questions as they have emerged from the study.

A comparative analysis provides the opportunity to look beyond the usual national framework applied to context specific research. This might clarify not only the similarities some contexts share, but also the specificities of a particular nation, its diversities and, in particular, the role of whiteness in these nations. Comparative analysis denaturalises the media and reduces the risk of assuming certain aspects of media representations to be “natural”, and consequently draws attention to aspects that may be difficult to detect when the focus is on one national case alone (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 2). Hallin and Mancini (2004: 5), however, stress the fact that it is risky to generalise across nations which cannot be known in equal depth. Thus, owing to my situatedness in the South African context, a controlled case comparison was identified as suitable (Cf. page 11-12) and *7de Laan* remains the primary focus of the thesis. In conjunction with the structures of Chapters 6 to 8, but also taking into account the specific goal of a controlled case comparison, this chapter unfolds as follows:

The first section comprises a brief comparative analysis of the South African and Flemish historical and contemporary contexts. It systematically explores similarities and differences between South Africa and Flanders in order to provide a better view of their shared issues and national specificities. The focus falls specifically on aspects

of identity construction and diversity, which are prioritised in each country's public media and discourses and how this is linked to discourses of whiteness. In the context of PSB, this is followed by a comparison of how the social structures, settings and communities, language use and representation of diversity in the two soap operas construct the imagined communities of each context. From the comparative analysis, a number of rhetorical strategies employed to maintain whiteness in both texts emerge. The final section focuses exclusively on the South African situation and, using the comparative analysis as a guideline, identifies the ways in which *7de Laan*, as a product of South African popular culture, constructs the South African imagined community and perpetuates hegemonic discourses of South African whiteness.

9.1 Contextual comparison: nationalism, diversity and PSB

The fact that the two regions this analysis seeks to compare are situated in the global North and the global South respectively already indicates that there will be vast differences. Such a North-South divide with South Africa, as part of the larger continent of Africa, being a Third World country and Flanders operating in a First World context has implications for nationalism, diversity and media in the two contexts. These issues are addressed in this section.

The investigation into the national contexts of both South Africa and Flanders (Cf. Chapters 5 and 7) clearly indicates the different themes, denotations and connotations linked to issues of nationhood and even "unity through diversity" in both countries. While race (or, perhaps more accurately "ethnicity" in the Flemish case), language and culture are prominent themes in both contexts, the South African history of violent conflict and minority rule contrasts with the Belgian and Flemish history of more passive and covert integration policies. In South Africa, race oppositions and the institutionalised racism of the apartheid regime are explicit themes, whereas in Belgium, race is only implicitly a theme and linguistic, cultural and ancestral distinctions are the primary focus. Moreover, in Belgium, contemporary nationalism is more connected with regional unity, distinctions in the

nation state (Flanders versus Wallonia) and integration policies focusing on homogeneity, whereas South African ideas of nationhood hinge on unity in diversity, on the one hand, and discourses of racial domination, segregation and discrimination, on the other. Despite clear historical and social differences and divisions, however, in both cases, we witness a contemporary struggle to define the nation. In conjunction, these differences are illustrative of the varied inflections of nationhood across the globe, while emphasising that “the national” remains “important as a basis of cultural identity in the contemporary world” (Waisbord, 2004: 375) and that nations continue to grip people’s imaginations even in contemporary (globalised) society.

In terms of diversity, South Africa and Flanders differ radically, primarily because the former is clearly both larger and more diverse. Flanders is similar to a South African province in terms of size and population and it is relatively homogeneous with a white majority of about 90%. The South African population is much larger and racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically more diverse. Diversity is therefore a much more central theme in South African politics than in Flanders, where unity on the Flemish (not Belgian) level is primordial although threatened by migration issues.

Despite these radical differences, in essence, what both countries have in common is a discourse about unity in diversity, on the one hand, and residual racial imbalance and white privileges, on the other. Through the unequal division of capital of all kinds, and even despite an influx of newer and different kinds of capital (be it economic, educational, social or cultural), old patterns of white dominance persist. For example, South Africa was rated as third on a list of countries with high inequality in 2011 (based on the Gini index measuring the distribution of family income), while Belgium is ranked 126th (CIA World Factbook). Despite Belgium’s better rating, however, structural inequality is still prevalent as it pertains to the education, employment and overall socioeconomic situation of non-European ethnic minorities. This leads to the lowest activity rate for non-EU migrants across Europe (69% as opposed to an EU average of 78%) (Eurostat, 2011).

From the outset it is clear that whiteness is conceptualised differently in these two nations. In South Africa, whiteness functions both as an explicitly visible racial identity and category, but also as a construction and discourse of domination linked to numerous hegemonic practices such as heteronormativity, Afrikaner nationalism and patriarchy. In Flanders, where racial issues are avoided, whiteness, partly because of its uncontested majority status, is less often referenced in terms of racial identity, but remains linked to normativity (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 54). It therefore plays a role in hegemonic discourses about the politics of belonging. This is evidenced in the allochton/autochton dichotomy which, albeit implicitly, is partly predicated on skin colour. Regardless of these different conceptualisations, whiteness plays a role in the construction of both national imagined communities.

According to Waisbord (2004: 375), the media contributes greatly to the “persistence of the national in a supposedly postnational era” and it follows that the issues highlighted above also manifest within both media contexts. From the preceding analysis it is evident that, while emphasis on unity is clearly an issue South African and Flemish PSB media mandates have in common, in Flanders it is mostly a matter of a quite implicit reinforcement of linguistic and cultural identity, whereas in South Africa, it is more explicitly related to the unification of the racially, linguistically and culturally diverse country. Multiculturalism and diversity in Flanders differ noticeably from how these ideas manifest in South Africa. Even though a multiplicity of metropolitan cultures exists in Flanders, especially in the larger cities like Antwerp, the majority of the inhabitants of Flanders are Flemish-speaking white Europeans. A representation of Flanders that reflects this majority group is taken for granted and Flemish television implicitly supports this agenda. Thus, despite concerted efforts to create more representative media outputs, as well as producers and ownership, in both cases there is still inevitable inequality. Media ownership remains predominantly white, and even where this is not the case, class or social differences still dictate production and consequently target audiences (Cf. e.g. page 132-133). So, even though the public service broadcasters of both countries are geared towards creating a unified idea of the nation, they simultaneously – particularly regarding content and ownership/production positions – perpetuate

some of the ideas their policies attempt to counter as evidenced in the work of Van den Bulck and Broos (2011), for example (Cf. page 201-202). Similarly, in both cases, homogeneity is a key characteristic of the discursive construction of the nation, even when diversity is a central theme in this discourse. This is apparent in the ANC government's non-racialism rhetoric and the Belgian integration policies, which both emphasise homogeneity. In both cases, rhetoric and policies, however, do not necessarily speak to each other. For example, while the ANC proclaims to be following the principles of non-racialism, its BEE policies suggest otherwise. Creating a unified notion of the nation is, furthermore, complicated in both contexts by issues such as tensions between government and society, migration, immigration, xenophobia and the variety of different national visions in competition with one another. These politics of belonging and the consequent power struggles play out in the products of mass culture created in the PSB contexts of both countries. *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, respectively, function as examples of this.

9.2 Beyond the national framework: whiteness in *7de Laan* and *Thuis*

Both *7de Laan* and *Thuis* belong to the community soap opera genre which is a popular choice in the context of PSB. Moreover, both of the relevant soap operas serve as important and vastly popular "flagship" programmes for their respective PSB channels as well as occupying primetime slots on these channels. Following Liebes and Livingstone's (1998: 157) definition of a successful soap as one "which has a relatively long history and high ratings", both of these soap operas qualify since they have both been on the air for more than a decade and consistently score some of the highest audience ratings in their particular contexts. "Banal nationalism", cultural specificity and the inclusion of recognisable settings were identified as prevalent in both texts (Cf. Chapters 6 and 8), all of which speak to community soap opera's preoccupation with realism.

Moreover, these instances of banal nationalism and cultural proximity are an indication that both soap operas are prime examples of the indigenisation of an international genre displaying localised content even while they adhere to the

conventions of the global genre, proving La Pastina and Straubhaar's (2005) point about the popularity of cultural proximity. *7de Laan*, for example, has the connotation of being "Proudly South African".¹

The indigenisation of soap operas can be linked to the persistent relevance of the nation, even in the context of globalisation and can be read as a reaction against the "Americanisation" of popular media productions. Even while these soap operas are modelled on an international genre and contain some of the archetypes and storylines characteristic of the genre, and they can thus not be completely divorced from Western examples, the local storylines, instances of cultural proximity and presence of "banal nationalism" make it possible to classify them as indigenised. It is because of this that the representations in these soap operas can be taken as revealing something about the societies that produce them, while simultaneously providing these societies with ideas on social life and the terms that govern it (Fourie, 1984, 2007; Pitout, 1996; Ang, 2007). Hence it is instrumental to delve into exactly what is presented as normative behaviour and how this influences the construction of the communities depicted in the soap operas.

The characteristics of the community soap genre, as well as the indigenisation of the two soap operas, inform the creation of meaning in these texts, while simultaneously situating them ideally to comment on identity construction and contribute to the construction of new and positive identities. The structure and characteristics of the fictional settings and communities represented in these soap operas, the cultural practices depicted and the way in which language is used, all contribute to the creation of a highly specific, preferential view of reality, also as it pertains to whiteness. The rest of this subsection is devoted to exploring this view.

¹ "Proudly South African is the 'buy local' campaign launched in 2001 by government, organised business, organised labour and community organisations (the constituencies represented in the National Economic and Labour Development Council – Nedlac) to boost job creation and pride in [the] 'local' by promoting South African companies and their 'homegrown' products and services" (Proudly South African [sa]).

9.2.1 Imagined communities

The imagined communities depicted in *7de Laan* and *Thuis* are both close-knit and consist of ordinary characters from different generations living together in harmonious, all-embracing neighbourhoods. According to Modleski (1982: 85), soap operas are typically set in small towns and involve two or three families intimately connected to each other. Although *7de Laan*'s setting is perhaps more urban (owing to its connotations with Johannesburg), both *Hillside* and the fictional village in which *Thuis* is set connote small town living, neighbourliness and a focus on the everyday. These connotations to home and the familiar are supported by the titles of the soap operas, with *Thuis* literally referring to the home and *7de Laan* connoting familiarity because almost every South African town has a 7th Avenue. These suggestions of home and the familiar are, furthermore, confirmed by the sponsor messages and advertisements featured before and after both soap operas and during *7de Laan* (Cf. e.g. page 217). All of the above, in conjunction with the fictional, yet familiar, nature of both settings as represented in the recognisable activities and personas, make it possible for viewers to identify with the inherent "Flemishness" of *Thuis*. *7de Laan*, similarly, presents a non-threatening version of the utopian rainbow nation ideal which invites viewers to feel at home.

In Chapter 3 (Cf. page 54), the closed setting was identified as one of the enduring characteristics of soap operas. This is applicable to both soap operas. All the action is centralised in these unified, closed communities and all the characters are depicted as sharing similar ideals relating to conservative middle-class values and the nuclear family. Characters are depicted as participating in the same cultural practices and there are scant, if any, references to political issues or religion. It seldom happens that characters venture outside the closed space of the fictional community. While closed settings are congenial to soap operas, in this case these closed settings are used as rhetorical devices which create a visual metaphor for the normative behaviour outlined above. These normative constructions can be read as presenting a specific take on the politics of belonging within the represented South African and Flemish communities. Nira Yuval-Davis (2011: 5) writes in this regard that the

“politics of belonging comprise of specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these projects in very specific ways and in very specific boundaries”. Hence belonging to the imagined community of *7de Laan* or *Thuis* requires the practice of normative behaviour, represented as the utopian ideal for the society these soaps depict.

Adrian Favell (1999), in turn, “defines the politics of belonging as the ‘dirty work of boundary maintenance’” (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 3), and Chidester (2008), similarly, refers to representations such as the above as a “boundary under patrol”. In both cases the invisible boundary of the utopian soap opera setting is protected against any perceived threats to the in-group’s physical solidarity and cultural unity. These closed settings create a sense of purity and internal homogeneity which is protected against intruders or outsiders by regulating contact with anyone perceived as Other. If threats emerge, it is rarely from the inside and more likely from an unseen outsider. Christine Sleeter (1996: 261) suggests that these images of a homogeneous in-group bonding, and the metaphor of the closed setting “have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of oppressed groups, and re-drawing we-they boundaries”.

Linked to the patrolled boundary in these texts is the conversion of public spaces to private ones. In Chapter 3, reference was made to Allen (in Gledhill, 2003: 352), who comments that the construction of the soap opera world is, for the most part, an interior one. In this process, an equation of public and private spaces takes place. *Oppikoffie* or the *Zus & Zo*, for example, are both public places, which also function as settings in which the private matters of the characters play out in a community familiar to them. These private spaces contribute to the creation of a boundary between the soap opera world and the world “out there”, minimising the danger of interaction with difference or the Other.

When an insider portrays unacceptable behaviour, this behaviour is internally reformed, restoring the particular insider to his or her former status as “good”.

Furthermore, when characters are censured for misdeeds, these reprimands are invariably from an internal source and the character is reprimanded for violating the inner group's expectations rather than violating a larger societal norm. The scenario in *7de Laan*, where Diederik claims to be overlooked for promotion in *Oppikoffie* because of his whiteness (Cf. page 170), is a case in point. He is reprimanded by his fellow *Hillside* residents, realises his mistake and, as a result, is welcomed back into the "in-group" of "good whites".

Furthermore, when it is not possible to deflect guilt on to an outsider, Otherness is created in in the form of the "bad white body" (Foster, 2003: 137). The eternal "super-bitch" is one example of internal badness. Gita McGregor, in *7de Laan*, is an example *par excellence* of the evil female protagonist. She is the bad character against which all other characters' goodness can be opposed.² The character of Nancy in *Thuis*, is another example of how *not* to behave. Nancy's often vulgar and inappropriate behaviour constructs her as marginal "white trash" and functions as confirmation of the centrality of "normal whiteness". Neither Gita, nor Nancy, however, are depicted as absolutely bad or vulgar. Both of them are represented as three-dimensional characters with an internal struggle where their good characteristics are also highlighted, which ensures their access to the in-group. The possibility of reform and re-integration into the utopian ideal is always imminent, and the homogeneous equilibrium is therefore constantly restored.

The homogeneous construction of both imagined communities displays the characteristics linked to whiteness as a location of structural advantage. These characteristics were identified by Foster (2003) (Cf. page 20) as heteroperformativity, homogeneity, bravery, the nuclear family, rationality, class and civilisation. By this logic, both communities are depicted as essentially "white". Moreover, seen against the background of what Steyn (2012) calls the "ignorance contract", it seems that both soap operas present a homogeneous "feel good"

² It is interesting to note here that Gita is also one of the only English-speaking characters in *7de Laan*, which adds another dimension to her "bad whiteness" and distances her from the Afrikaans-speaking "good whites".

community, which enables viewers to continue believing in the viability of such an amended reality and, in so doing, perpetuates ignorance. Despite the main purpose of these texts to entertain, the specific viewpoint from which the imagined communities are constructed allows for the kind of “protective pillow” (DiAngelo, 2011: 55) required to insulate whites from facing their position of privilege. These tendencies are also identifiable in the application of language in both texts.

9.2.2 Language

Language plays a key role in the comparative analysis of *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. Firstly, the close relationship between Afrikaans and Dutch was one of the determining factors in the decision to compare these two texts. Apart from the fact that Afrikaans has Dutch roots, both these languages are particularly salient as markers of identity in their respective contexts (Cf. Chapters 6 and 8). The use and application of both languages in these texts construct the politics of belonging in a specific way.

In the South African context, Afrikaans is the mother tongue of two distinct language communities, namely the white, Afrikaans-speaking community, on the one hand, and a large, brown, Afrikaans-speaking community, on the other. Its main connotations, however, are of being the language of apartheid and the (white) oppressor. When taking into consideration its negative connections to Afrikaner nationalism, as well as the highly polarised nature of South African society, it is clear that Afrikaans plays an ambivalent, but important, role in the South African nation-building project. In the Flemish context, Belgian Dutch is a vital indicator of belonging to Flemish society, in particular, in distinguishing Flemings from the broader Belgian society and Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium. Moreover, Belgian Dutch is one of the seminal requirements for integration into the Flemish community, a marker for the degree to which ethnic minorities are integrated into “Flemishness”.

In the imagined communities of *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, language, similarly, plays a crucial role as part of the community's identity. In *Thuis*, Flemish Dutch is the uncontested primary language spoken in the text. *7de Laan* is multilingual and includes English subtitles, but is broadcast predominantly in Afrikaans. Even though multiple languages are used in *7de Laan*, all the characters still ostensibly accept and understand Afrikaans to be the primary language. While there are some characters who speak English as well as other African languages, it seldomly happens, and everybody switches to Afrikaans seamlessly and without hesitation when an Afrikaans-speaking person enters the conversation. In conjunction with the construction of the community outlined in the previous subsection, language thus functions as a unifying factor in both texts and contributes to the creation of a homogeneous in-group.

Not only the languages used, but also the ways in which they are used are significant to the politics of belonging. While both soaps use a standardised version of their primary language, *Thuis* incorporates different dialects as an indication of the class differences of the characters, and *7de Laan* uses quirky idioms and related language use to individualise some characters. In *7de Laan*, however, the use of standard Afrikaans is classified by Milton (2008: 268) as "deterritorialisation" and the lack of intralinguistic diversity ultimately contributes to a homogeneous construction of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, which is contrary to the actual diversity of its speakers.

The fact that the casts of both soap operas share a primary language might be read, on the one hand, as language fulfilling a transformative and unifying role. Moreover, hosting Afrikaans as well as Flemish programmes is in line with the language policies of both public broadcasters. On the other hand, however, particularly in the South African case, it could also be read as a sort of escapism, where one particular language is used free from the guilt of excluding other languages. These problems, specifically with regard to *7de Laan's* application of language, are reflected in the fact that it has come under the scrutiny of the public broadcaster and that changes to its language policy are imminent. According to the SABC, Afrikaans in the soap will

be reduced to 80% and the SABC will be monitoring the texts of the soap opera to ensure language representativeness (Swanepoel, 2015: 35).

The language choice in the two texts also differs in that, in *Thuis*, the primary language, Belgian Dutch, is linked to the construction of a subnational identity, while the use of language in *7de Laan* is specific to only two language communities in the country. Even with the SABC's suggested changes, 80% of the text will remain in Afrikaans. While it is not my intention to read prejudice into a text that is specifically created (until recently at least)³ in Afrikaans, for a predominantly Afrikaans audience, the fact remains that Afrikaans is an ideologically loaded language. Read in the context of its history as the "language of the oppressor" (Cf. page 88) and Odendaal's explicit connection of Afrikaans to white people (Cf. page 146), together with the use of English as the second most prominent language in *7de Laan*, one cannot help but notice the underlying white ideology of the text. Thus, while *7de Laan* is aimed at a primarily Afrikaans audience, the construction of an almost completely Afrikaans community as representative of South Africa remains problematic. Regarding *Thuis*, even though the use of Belgian Dutch is in line with the public broadcaster's primary audience, and some degree of regional variation is included, its sole use is indicative of the homogeneous construction of the Flemish nation and the stringent integration policies which oppose the diversity the public broadcaster aims to represent onscreen. Hence in both cases, language is used to patrol the boundaries of the closed communities and belonging is constructed linguistically as well.

9.2.3 Diversity and difference

In contrast to the primarily monolingual nature referenced above, both soap operas attempt – at first glance – to represent diversity in terms of class, gender and race (or ethnicity). In both cases, the viewer is presented with a utopian ideal of everyone

³ As part of the larger project to give the soap opera "new life", at the time of writing this thesis, the SABC mandated that the text of *7de Laan* be written in English and then translated into Afrikaans (Swanepoel, 2015: 35).

living together in one community without fear of victimisation, discrimination or prejudice. The South African society is represented as a non-racialised rainbow community and the Flemish society as a homogeneous community into which all present ethnic minorities are successfully integrated. Both soap operas present heteronormative gender and sexual roles as the standard and class differences, although present, are depicted as easily bridged. In line with the characteristics of the genre, the soap operas pose the potential to present liberating female roles as well as showcasing more female characteristics such as giving the males feminine traits (such as a predilection for talk and emotion), which negates patriarchy. Moreover, both soap operas include strong female roles with Gita and Charmaine in *7de Laan* and Marianne and Anne in *Thuis* as examples of powerful and successful women.

Characters representative of different social strata are part of each of the communities. Both soap operas are, however, aspirational in the sense that class differences are not presented as problematic to upward mobility. Errol is an example of a character in *7de Laan* who liberates himself from his lower-class status (Cf. page 174) and, in *Thuis*, Nancy quite easily organises a job for her husband Eddy when he is released from prison, emphasising the ease with which characters are integrated into the middle-class norm. Class-related problems are thus resolved quite effortlessly, perpetuating the homogeneous nature of the community. Despite the relative ease with which class differences can be overcome, as well as the fact that it is never referred to as a race issue, however, it is telling that in *7de Laan*, all the whites are upper or middle class, and only black or brown characters are depicted as coming from a lower class.

It seems that brown characters are viewed as a sort of intermediary between white and black characters. Linked to the above is the fact that in *7de Laan* attempts have been made to depict interracial relationships, but only between brown and white characters, never between white and black or brown and black characters, thus “playing it safe”. Concerning class, it is also mainly brown characters who are presented as upwardly mobile, with Charmaine, Vince and Zander as owners of

some of the key businesses in “Die Laan” (see Addendum A – at the time of writing this thesis, the only black business owner in the storyline was a silent partner in the *Hillside Times* and she was awarded hardly any screen time). As far as representing racially specific cultural practices, one traditional black wedding was featured in *7de Laan* a number of years ago. However, when issues such as these are screened, it is always in the form of a “themed” issue, specifically dealing with race matters, and not depicted as part of the everyday life of the community. It is arguable that such “themed” issues emphasise these practices, giving them more prominence, but at the same time these are constructed in such a way that they fall outside of the daily lives of the main characters – a “cultural experience” as it were. During season 17, no such representations were featured in the narratives of *Thuis*.

Hence race and matters relating to race or ethnicity fall mostly outside the purview of both soap operas. Other than the examples above, even though both soap operas, but *7de Laan* in particular, include characters from various races or ethnicities, the behaviour of these characters is rarely marked as race specific and, consequently, they all perpetuate normative behaviour, perpetuating whiteness as “no-Culture” (Frankenberg, 1993: 204). It is arguable that (as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter) these homogeneous presentations are created in order to provide an ideal for a self-evidently diverse society, but, in contrast to such an argument, the fact remains that mere presence is not enough to truly reflect the actual racial diversity of both societies.

The presence of absence can thus be identified as a rhetorical device used in both texts for the perpetuation of invisible whiteness. In relation to the representation of diversity, this device is employed differently in the two texts. In *Thuis*, ethnic minorities, particularly during the period analysed for this thesis, are not really present on screen, while in *7de Laan* the more representative cast does little to address the absence of any real discourse on racial issues or difference. Giving more prominence to such issues might reveal the inherent whiteness of the text and bring the ideologies and practices presented as normative into visibility. Thus, although different approaches are taken, both result, once more, in the perpetuation of white

normativity. Screen presence, in both cases, does not solve the problem of racial and ethnic representativeness. In *7de Laan* in particular, language also functions to homogenise the cast. While all the black characters speak Afrikaans in addition to their mother tongues, only one white character (Marco) and no brown characters speak any African languages. Even the way in which multilingualism is applied in the text therefore constructs Afrikaans as normative. The verbal silence on race-related issues, furthermore, contributes to the construction of internal homogeneity. In *Thuis* in particular, despite the integration of some ethnic-cultural diversity, race remains largely invisible and definitively unspoken. This could be read as a reaction against the critique that ethnic-cultural minorities are mostly represented as tied to their cultural background and the problems associated with it (in, for example, the news). However, as a consequence, cultural diversity is effaced and the problems related to the co-existence of people with different cultural backgrounds are side-stepped. Even though both texts avoid any explicit claims to race or the centrality of a particular race, their perpetual silence resists any critical reflection on the centrality of whiteness. It is exactly through this presence of absence that the programmes manage to perpetuate whiteness's normative status and defend its perceived purity.

A significant difference between the two texts is their levels of engagement in issues of gender diversity. On this topic, Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 147) assert that community soap operas have more nuanced and three-dimensional gender roles. From the comparative analysis it is clear that issues of gender diversity and sexual identity are addressed in more depth in *Thuis*, as evidenced in, for example, the gay and lesbian couples and their prominent roles in the narrative. This situation mirrors tendencies in society at large since it is arguable that in Belgium, and the European context in general, homosexuality has been incorporated into the norm and LGBT⁴ rights have become part of the "national" imagined community.⁵ The level of critical engagement with gender issues is evidenced in the representation of different opinions about same-sex marriages and the questioning of heterosexual marriage as

⁴ Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

⁵ This could, however, also be viewed as homonationalism at work (Cf. page 254).

the norm when Frankie and Tibo's wedding is discussed (Cf. page 228). In contrast, in *7de Laan*, the only reference within the scope of the analysed period was a stereotypical representation of camp performance with the purpose of comic relief,⁶ or arguably, ridicule. Similarly, but outside the scope of the analysed period, the only (presumably) gay character in *7de Laan* was also presented as overly feminised and camp. In these instances, entertainment was clearly the main goal. While the primary purpose of both texts is entertainment, the reluctance to address uncomfortable issues in *7de Laan* is also indicative of the more conservative nature of South African society and, to some extent, this is reminiscent of patriarchal, apartheid society where certain issues were taboo. Sheila Croucher (2002: 316) writes in this regard that "[s]ame-sex sexualities are foreign to, and inconsistent with, true Afrikaner identity". "Afrikaner" identity, in turn, is linked explicitly to whiteness, and in this way, *7de Laan* enforces heteronormative behaviour as linked to whiteness.

Mason Stokes (2001: 191) views heterosexuality and whiteness as normative co-partners in the construction of power. Linked to this, and central to both soap operas, is the prominence of the nuclear family (even as a myth). Despite the crumbling of the family structure in various narratives, the myth of the nuclear family is still propagated as the ideal in both soap operas. Heteronormative performances of marriage and parenthood are also considered to be well-performed whiteness. In both soap operas, such performances are presented as well-performed citizenship and considered the behaviour accepted and promoted by the in-group. Frank and Simonne in *Thuis* are a case in point. Even though their relationship has been tested in numerous ways, it has withstood the test of time and, in the narratives relevant to my analysis, they are depicted as performing successful family life with shared dinners and minor conflicts which are resolved and overshadowed by their affection for each other and their son. When Frankie announces that he is marrying Tibo, Frank laments the fact that he will never have a grandchild, again

⁶ Diederik was hypnotised and instructed by "Ferdie the Friendly Hypnotist" to act "gay" which resulted in an overtly camp performance stereotyping gay behaviour. This performance was, furthermore, ridiculed by the fact that the audience of Ferdie's show found Diederik's performance hilarious, reducing camp performances to the domain of humour.

emphasising the importance of the nuclear family and the heteronormative practices inherent in it.

Because difference cannot be completely avoided, some less extreme performances of differences are appropriated or assimilated into the dominant group. Examples of these assimilations are “acceptable” performances of homosexuality and class or racial difference. Maikey (2012: 126) refers to this as “homonationalism” which is defined as “the normalization [sic] and integration of certain ‘more acceptable’ queers into the nationalist ideal”, a strategy which is certainly relevant in *Thuis*, but still falls outside the purview of representations in *7de Laan*. Visual racial diversity in *7de laan*, and to a lesser extent in *Thuis*, is similarly assimilated into the norm. The same applies to class. Although there may be some difference in the social status of some of the characters in a particular soap opera, what is characteristic of these texts is that through intermingling and intermarrying, class distinctions can become blurred (Modleski, 1982: 86). Thus, even though there are different classes in *Thuis*, for example, this is not presented as an enduring threat but rather glossed over or used for comic relief, and in so doing tolerated or absorbed into the homogeneous in-group.

Through homogenisation, both cases, to a certain extent, mirror national patterns of lack of dealing with issues of difference. While *Thuis* clearly deals with issues of gender and sexual diversity in a much more nuanced way than *7de Laan*, the narratives of both soap operas support the construction and maintenance of white hegemony. It is arguable that *7de Laan* represents “pro new South Africa” discourses, but these instances offer little more than superficial support and exert no tangible influence on the status quo. As Everatt (2012: 17) contends, non-racialism often implies lip service rather than action, and this is also applicable to *7de Laan*. Similarly, despite being awarded the “integration prize” the relatively homogeneous nature of the *Thuis* cast mirrors the general reluctance towards integration issues in Flemish society. Furthermore, the presence of difference alone does not guarantee nuanced depictions, and even the depiction of same-sex

relationships in *Thuis* still runs the risk of reiterating and consolidating heteronormative values (Dhaenens, 2012: 443).

In the previous section, mention was made of Foster's (2003) identification of practices, or characteristics, linked to whiteness and this is connected to the argument regarding whiteness as intersecting with other discourses of privilege (for example, heteronormativity, homogeneity, rationality, class and civilisation) which mutually reinforce each other. Also related is the argument presented earlier regarding the way in which whiteness mutates and evolves. Through this evolution, both texts manage to incorporate characters representative of different ethnicities, classes and genders, while still foregrounding homogeneous normative performances. In both soap operas, these hegemonic discourses are normative practices portrayed as the ideal behaviour in the soap communities. In this way, whiteness, as a construct, becomes an umbrella term encompassing all of the above. Consequently, not only race, but also all other issues threatening the status quo, is perceived as a threat to its hegemonic status. Normative representations of sexuality, gender and class all work together to create a homogeneous representation of a closed community characterised by normative whiteness. This, again, facilitates an "us" versus "them" rhetoric where behaviour deviating from the norm is marked as Other or outsider. In this way, characters in the soap opera manage to discount any complicity in tensions created by difference since these tensions are situated outside the scope of the microcosm.

Both communities are thus essentially represented as epitomising behaviour associated with whiteness. Perhaps the main difference between the two lies in the actual reality of the two contexts and the way in which whiteness is conceptualised in these realities. The South African text is mandated to construct (a version of) the rainbow nation as representative of the diverse, colourful, reality of the country. In Flanders, considerably fewer efforts are made to present ethnic minorities owing, at least in part, to the fact that they are minorities, and the white majority functions, not only in the soap opera, but also in Flemish society, as the norm. Thus, in *Thuis*, the community is represented as Flemish, and therefore white by association, since

the majority of inhabitants of Flanders are Flemish-speaking white Europeans. In *7de Laan*, despite efforts to represent a rainbow community, the normative practices are not representative, but instead, mostly white or Western, which is a contradiction to the South African reality.

9.2.4 Mutton dressed as lamb: homogeneity tinted white?

The contextual comparison in the introductory section proves that, while the contexts in which the soap operas relevant to this analysis are produced differ significantly, in both cases, the social context and the resultant production policies put pressure on these texts to be more representative of the inherent diversity of both contexts. However, the comparative analysis indicates that both texts resist or negate these pressures to be representative to some extent.

Three rhetorical devices emerge from the analysis as being central to the maintenance of whiteness as hegemonic ideology. These are the presence of absence, the boundary under patrol and the construction of the audience as part of the “inner circle”.

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) (Cf. page 34) identify six communication strategies or performative actions which function to hide whiteness and white skin privilege. The “presence of absence” (Chidester, 2008) is related to their second communication strategy, namely to speak of whiteness in the negative, or as a lack or absence of race or ethnicity. The absences in the soap operas are as important as the presences, and these absences, or silences, function as vital rhetorical devices in both texts. According to Chidester (2008: 160), not all silences are created equal, and some silences become an intention rather than an absence of sound. In other words, silence becomes rhetorical when it is a conscious choice. If there is an insistence on presence as a carrier of meaning, it follows logically that absence similarly constructs meaning.

Both texts often display absences in terms of the representation of diversity as well as an absence of overt discourse on anything relating to difference. While both soaps include socially relevant issues as is characteristic of the community soap genre, and both texts have included concerted attempts at representing diversity,⁷ neither grapple with issues of integration, nor the difficulties of adapting to a society consisting of multiple cultures. These absences make it possible for one of whiteness's most enduring characteristics, namely ignorance, to thrive, since it merely functions as the uncontested norm. Whiteness is thus not maintained by any overt rhetoric, but rather by its everydayness (Shome, 2000: 366).

In addition to the rhetorical silence on racial issues, the analysis also brought to light the fact that both texts present a closed setting, which enforces the idea of insiders being insulated against "the world out there" and thus also against heterogeneous outsiders. This is in line with Foster's (2003) argument (Cf. page 21) that whiteness and related dominant performances provide a centre against which anybody not belonging to the group can be classified as Other and marginal. Owing to the fact that whiteness's existence is dependent upon its binary opposite, it is fuelled by a fear of hybridity and dependent upon a rejection of such hybridity and an elimination of internal difference. To a certain extent this is mirrored in the normative, internally homogeneous constructions of society in both *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. However, even though the community is constructed as internally homogeneous, McKee (1999: 13–14) rightly states that there is a wide range of images of whiteness as evidenced by the incorporation of accepted gender and class differences in these communities. This multiplicity of articulations of whiteness makes it possible for whites to identify, albeit internally, as diverse.

Against the backdrop of this internal homogeneity, "bad" characters are introduced as outsiders and interlopers rarely pose a permanent threat to the group's internal homogeneity. Such interlopers are usually only present until the denouement of a

⁷ In the case of *7de Laan*, for example, the traditional wedding and the interracial relationship depicted in earlier episodes (and mentioned previously) are such instances, but these "themed" episodes were treated as such and not depicted as part and parcel of South African life.

particular narrative thread and are almost always brought to task, in effect serving the purpose of confirming the efficacy of the moral high ground occupied by the insiders and re-establishing equilibrium.

Even though explicit binaries, such as whiteness versus blackness, are not evoked in the texts, whiteness as the norm defines itself as *not* bad, evil, irrational or uncivilised. The in-group is defined against the perceived evil of the unseen out-group, and all complicity in discrimination or the perpetuation of difference is located externally. Hence all the homogeneous practices associated with whiteness (as the binary opposition of all that is considered unfavourable) are depicted as the characteristics of the homogeneous soap opera society, and any deviant behaviour is situated outside of this closed circle and marked as Other. In this way, visual and performed whiteness can function in the closed settings of both soap operas without any significant racial threat, confirming DiAngelo's (2011) notion of the protective pillow and Steyn's (2012) "ignorance contract".

The third rhetorical device that emerged from the analysis is the way in which the audience is constructed as part of the in-group in the soap opera, making it possible for them to also deny any complicity in the perpetuation of discrimination in the same way as the characters they view on screen. Viewers are able to shift accountability and guilt regarding discriminatory practices existing in South African society elsewhere in the same way in which their favourite characters project these on to the evil outsider. Even though both texts are presented as colourless or non-racial, both of them, at least to some extent, perpetuate whiteness. The impact of these normative constructions, absences and boundaries is particularly salient when understood by audiences as a choice, and the fact that these soap operas serve to "reinforce perceptions of whiteness's centrality as a racial subjectivity among some viewers" (Chidester, 2008: 170) has implications.

Soap opera texts are open and this encourages a number of readings of any given storyline. However, similar to Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 156), I consider it necessary to acknowledge the fact that "texts constrain audiences and that the right

balance has to be found between the recognition that audiences are active and the acknowledgement of the restrictions imposed on this activity by the text". It is therefore possible that in Flanders, but even more so in South Africa, these programmes afford viewers an opportunity to see whiteness as central.

Viewers are not encouraged to see *7de Laan* or *Thuis* as an unrealistic picture of contemporary race relations, but rather as "an idyllic setting free of any explicit discourse on race or accusations of racial domination, a safe haven for those viewers most heavily invested in preserving a sense of whiteness as an unspoken marker of privilege" (Chidester, 2008: 168). Consequently, it is possible for viewers to see both soap operas' homogeneous (in execution if not in composition) communities as reflective of their own segregated material experiences as well as of television's highly segregated landscape (Chidester, 2008: 169). Dwight E. Brooks and James A. Rada (2002) note that media messages on race often reinforce whiteness as a central position, while also promoting it as a philosophical site. White perspectives and hegemonic, normative perspectives are continuously presented as the logical point of view, negating difference and hybridity, a fear of which lies at the heart of whiteness. Even viewers who have felt little or no advantage in being white are promised an opportunity to claim centrality. In this way, both soap operas contribute to what Chidester (2008: 170) refers to as "the overall visual/cultural web that continues to enable whiteness' mute, pervasive privilege" in both of these contemporary societies. According to Alison Bailey (1998: 40), white people can only develop anti-racist identities if they "get out of those locations and texts where they feel at home ... [and] put [their] privileged identities at risk by travelling to worlds where [they] often feel ill at ease and off-center [sic]", an opportunity not presented by either of these texts.

Wasserman (2008: 262) posits that popular cultural texts provide a "symbolic construction according to which viewers can construct a collective ... identity". Viewed from this perspective, the homogeneous treatment of the image/imagined communities in both soap operas are problematic. The three rhetorical devices identified here illustrate a tendency for these texts to construct a particular view of

society where the nature of the closed society with all the “absences” and all the things that are left unsaid make it possible for whiteness to thrive, but also to adjust fluidly to changing circumstances without any immediate threats. Whiteness is presented in these texts as something “that is invisible, working in the background as a standard, not of one particular way of being in the world, but as normalcy, as universalizability [sic], of just ‘being the way things are’” (Vice, 2010: 324), a sort of banal perpetuation of the dominant ideology. Despite the fact that both texts attempt to represent a version of diversity, they both perpetuate its opposite, namely sameness, presenting the viewer with homogeneity tinted white, mutton dressed as lamb, or Van Niekerk’s (1994) same trash recycled under another name (Cf. page 143), so to speak.

9.3 The case of *7de Laan* and the “hot potato”

Against the background of the preceding sections, this section presents my findings regarding the way in which whiteness functions specifically in a South African soap opera. Apart from the manifestations of whiteness in *7de Laan* which overlap with those in *Thuis* (and possibly in other popular cultural narratives) Steyn’s (2001) narratives (Cf. 38–43) are also present, which provides us with clues specifically about South African inflections of whiteness. Arguments made by Steyn (2012) about the perpetuation of what she calls the “ignorance contract” are especially prevalent in this South African example.

In contrast to the situation in European countries, for example, whiteness in South Africa does not occupy a position of self-evident power, both because of whites being in the minority and the current hegemonic struggles in a country still burdened by the aftermath of apartheid. These hegemonic struggles caused what De Klerk (2010) refers to as an “inescapable awareness of race in the South African context”. This, furthermore, implies an inescapable awareness of whiteness specifically, which contradicts one of its most enduring characteristics in other contexts (such as Flanders), namely its invisibility. According to De Klerk (2010: 42), however, despite (or possibly owing to this) “whiteness as privileged and privileging signifier seems to

have gone into hiding, quite probably to preserve itself". Whiteness in South Africa seems to find itself in a quite contradictory situation. Because its hitherto status of dominance and hegemony is threatened, it faces the need to speak, while at the same time remaining silent in order to defend its historical privilege. De Klerk (2010) invokes the metaphor of a hot potato to illustrate how whiteness in South Africa is thus variously juggled. Evidence of this can also be found in the representations of identity in *7de Laan*.

With specific reference to South African soap operas, Milton (2008: 263) argues that, even though "a quick glance at the main characters who form the core casts of these shows reveals an attempt to balance representations in terms of race, class and gender" an "[i]deological analysis, ..., asks not only *who* is represented, but also *how* and by *whom*" (Milton, 2008: 264). Thus, exactly how does the rainbow nation, as represented in *7de Laan*, look and function?

The first element that is instrumental in answering Milton's (2008) question is the fact that even though the cast is visually representative of a multiracial society, white cultural practices and beliefs are still represented as normative without any explicit reference to this state of affairs. Hence there is no reflection on or questioning of the fact that *7de Laan* presents a multiracial cast who all ostensibly share the same cultural practices. All the characters in the soap opera accept these homogeneous cultural practices as the status quo. Moreover, other culturally specific practices such as traditional African cooking, dancing or dressing, are, for the most part, absent. This rhetorical silence can be linked to debates on post-racialism and a consequent colour-blind approach, also as proposed by the ANC government (Cf. pages 118). While the ANC's non-racialism rhetoric demands it to be colour blind, this has proven impossible as evidenced by its BEE policies, which are a necessary measure to empower the historically disempowered. Thus, can *7de Laan* contribute successfully to identity politics in South Africa and contribute to rectifying past and current wrongs and remain colour blind at the same time?

For some, silence is based on the perception that explicit references to race can be viewed as racist. However, in this case, it is also possible that this colour blindness and (im)moral silences function to perpetuate whiteness. This could be indicative of Steyn's (2001) of *Don't think white it's all right* discourse. Chidester (2008: 160) writes, in this regard, that "silence becomes an intention rather than a simple absence of sound", and Colin Chasi (2013: 388) confirms this in writing that "silence is a means or resource by which communication may be acted out with efficacy". By simply avoiding to "think white" and remaining silent on these issues, *7de Laan* presents a scenario and community which are ideally geared towards perpetuating Steyn's (2012) "ignorance contract".

This colour-blind approach, where characters in *7de Laan* seldom act in a race-specific way, also evokes the *Whiter shade of white* narrative (Steyn, 2001). According to Steyn (2001), this narrative entertains a construction of whiteness that disclaims any implication in whiteness – or any real reflection on the issue. When this utopian equilibrium of race-less performances is disturbed, the prominent characters in the soap opera are constructed as overtly disclaiming any implication in whiteness in line with this narrative. In the case of South Africa, however, it takes on an additional meaning, since race as a marker of identity is highly prevalent and whiteness cannot (as is the case in other contexts) hide, which supports De Klerk's (2010) comments on the precarious position in which South African whiteness finds itself. Hence even though whiteness is visible, the blame is shifted on to the "bad whites", making it possible for the majority of white people to continue believing that the problem resides elsewhere.

Apart from the cast, the settings in *7de Laan* also perpetuate whiteness. Linked to the cultural resources and the "storehouse of cultural plots" (Riessman, 2008), which dictate the perspective from which the text is represented, are the social spaces represented in the soap opera. Even though it may be argued that the nature of the soap opera dictates that certain social spaces are shared, the question here is about the choice of social spaces as well as the social class and/or cultural practices they connote. All the shared spaces depicted in *7de Laan* connote urban, middle-class,

predominantly Eurocentric practices and places. It is arguable that this is representative of a segment of South African society, and that a single soap opera can only represent a certain number of social and cultural spaces. Seen against the backdrop of the SABC's mandate and the specific codes and practices identified in this chapter, however, it is problematic that the nature of these representations remains one dimensional and from a specific ideological point of view. Moreover, the fact that *7de Laan* purports to present a multiracial society, and then does the opposite, is contradictory. Even in an urban, middle-class setting, the cultural practices, spaces and hobbies of a multicultural society would be diverse, as is the case in Johannesburg, for example.

Language was identified as a key player in identity construction in both soap operas, and the ideological connotations to Afrikaans have been discussed at length. Despite policies that dictate the opposite and the fact that the visibility of Afrikaans on national television is significantly smaller than 20 years ago, it seems that the ideologies perpetuated by this selection of episodes from an Afrikaans programme have not changed significantly (this is also confirmed in Van Lingen's, 2014, research; Cf. pages 163 and 167). Even though Afrikaans is presented as exhibiting transformative potential, for example, by incorporating black characters who speak the language and in the process defining new subjectivities by drawing on other discursive and cultural practices, in essence, what we find is an Afrikaans text that still perpetuates the same dominant ideologies associated with Afrikaans during apartheid (patriarchy, heteronormativity and white dominance).

Owing to its utopian nature and the idealised representations of the nation in the text, it is arguable that *7de Laan* is created as a mirror "for" South African society, rather than "of". However, even though the setting is fictional, the inclusion of real-time references from the South African reality such as the local stars featured, or the inclusion of the 49M campaign, creates the illusion of verisimilitude rather than of an idealised mirror for society, which can create the impression that what it is presenting is an existing, viable alternative to reality (Cf. pages 276 and 282 for my argument on what viewers may/may not use).

In the case of *7de Laan*, it is perhaps not visual whiteness in particular that is pervasive, but rather the homogeneous nature of the characters who all subscribe to similar performances, which might be read as perpetuating whiteness, even when performed by brown or black characters. It is clear that the narrative decisions made in *7de Laan* have ideological implications and that, taken together, all the instances of normative white behaviour do construct the rainbow nation in the *Laan* as Afrikaans speaking and white, or hold up a mirror representing it as such.

CONCLUSION

The controlled comparative model used to conduct the comparison in this chapter fulfilled two purposes. Firstly, it shed some light on the way in which whiteness functions as a hegemonic ideology in a sample of mass media products, even across diverse settings. This chapter, as well as the previous four chapters, illustrated not only the unique nature of two different contexts, but also some overlaps in the way whiteness is articulated. Secondly, however, it also crystallised the unique ways in which whiteness manifests in a sample from the South African mass media.

From the broad contextual comparison it is clear that the interaction between complex societies and governmental ideas on what national unity entails manifests in, and also to some extent governs, public media. It was, furthermore, clear that ideas around diversity and inclusivity differ not only from context to context, but also that there is not always clear consensus on this in a specific national context, or consequently, in its respective media. These challenges in dealing with diversity have, in both contexts, led to a restructuring of the PSB's mandates on representation and its policies on diversity. Ironically, homogeneity was identified as a key characteristic of the discursive construction of the nation in both contexts, even as it contrasts to diversity. The South African metaphor of the rainbow nation is a case in point. Even though the rainbow, by definition, implies diversity, the ANC government's non-racialism policies have a homogenising effect on representations of the rainbow, which also manifests in products of popular culture. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991: 1242), however, cautions that "ignoring difference within groups

contribute to tension among groups” and identifies this as one problem of identity politics.

With specific reference to the texts under purview, the fact that the treatment of contemporary social issues and a sense of community were pertinent in both soap operas supported my classification of both as belonging to the community soap opera genre. One of the most relevant characteristics of the community soap opera is that, in the context of PSB in particular, it plays an educational role precisely because of its incorporation of social issues. It is against this background that I questioned the type of information and education dispensed by these soap operas in an effort to answer how whiteness possibly functions as an organising principle in *7de Laan* and *Thuis*, both of which are mandated to represent the diversity referred to above.

7de Laan and *Thuis* present particular narratives of identity and construct image/imagined communities from a particular vantage point. These constructions inevitably create certain boundaries that have implications for the politics of belonging. In this regard, Yuval-Davis (2011: 3) writes that

The boundaries the politics of belonging are concerned with are the boundaries of the political community of belonging, the boundaries which, sometimes physically, but always symbolically, separate the world population into “us” and “them”. The question of the boundaries of the Andersonian “imagined communities” is central in all the political projects of belonging. The politics of belonging involve not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers (within and outside the community) but also their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents.

Riessman’s (2008) questions (Cf. page 103) were instrumental in trying to determine how *7de Laan* and *Thuis* construct belonging, in particular as it relates to ideologies of whiteness. In the comparative analysis of the communities constructed, the use of language and the representation of difference in the soap opera, emphasis was thus placed on determining whom the stories are constructed for and to what end, how they are composed and what they accomplish. The cultural resources drawn on, or

even taken for granted, as well as the storehouse of cultural plots the narratives call up, were all taken into account.

In the case of *7de Laan*, the community is represented as being free from the burdens of contemporary South Africa, an aspirational, utopian community in which it is possible to transcend class differences and race and gender issues are conveniently side-stepped and thus not consequential. In *Thuis*, the community is represented as utopian in the sense that class differences can be overcome, heteronormative same-sex relationships are celebrated and, as far as racial-ethnic differences are concerned, the whole cast is successfully integrated into a homogeneous autochthonous ideal.

Owing to its elusive nature, I cannot claim the absolute dominance of whiteness in the soap operas I analysed. Essed and Trienekens (2008: 54), however, remind us that the “notion of whiteness easily invokes essentialist notions of race even when critical studies of whiteness are more about cultural normativities, political appropriations and social-economic practices, privileging whites compared to other populations”. Thus, exactly because whiteness is not about essentialist notions and it is a process involving various material and social practices, I argue that, when viewed as a whole, the practices, spaces and identity constructions in both texts are perpetuating whiteness and the ideologies associated with it.

The analysis revealed that both soap operas make use of three specific rhetorical devices to construct belonging to their imagined communities, and in the process also perpetuate dominant ideologies of whiteness. The first rhetorical device identified was silence or absence. According to Riessman (2008: 540), one should take into account whether there are any gaps or inconsistencies in a specific narrative which might suggest preferred, alternative or counter-narratives. I suggest silence on matters of race and, to some extent class and gender issues, to be such gaps that contribute to establishing whiteness as a system of dominance. My argument for the centrality of whiteness in these texts does not rely on essentialist notions of race, but on how other cultural normativities, such as heteronormativity,

for example, work together in maintaining privilege. The fact that these texts are silent on any issues that might create dialogue on the politics of belonging, and in the process perpetuate homogeneity, reinforces its potential to perpetuate ignorance.

Furthermore, the construction and use of a homogeneous inner circle was also identified in both texts as securing the normative status of whiteness. In the case of *7de Laan*, this underpins the ideal of the existence of a society without any significant challenges to the status quo. Anything challenging this status quo is situated outside the inner circle, and the in-group is thus free from any guilt in causing inequality or strife. *7de Laan*, thus functions as a “safety pillow” buttressing Steyn’s (2012) “ignorance contract”. *Thuis* represents an inner circle in which the practices and culture of the majority are taken to be the uncontested norm and which, as elsewhere in Europe, is predominantly, and self-evidently, white. In this regard, Foster (2003) (Cf. page 17) mentions that there is plenty of evidence that whiteness continues to avoid the radar screen of cultural and social consciousness in Europe. In *Thuis*, like in Flanders, the imagined community emphasises the integration of ethnic minorities, rather than questioning the normative functioning of whiteness. However, race or ethnicity is not explicitly referenced, and belonging is constructed along the lines of what is considered to be Western and non-Western. The sixth communicative strategy used to hide whiteness and white skin privilege (as identified by Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, in Chapter 2), is applicable here, namely “claiming European origins to avoid claiming whiteness”.

Finally, I argued that both texts construct their target audiences as adhering to normative white practices or beliefs by including them as members of the “inner circle”. Soap opera sets create a feeling of verisimilitude and literally function as a setting or background extending from the living rooms of its viewers. Always viewed from the same, familiar vantage points, these sets and the well-known characters in them invite viewers to belong to the familiar *7de Laan* community, or to feel “at home” in *Thuis*, and to identify with the social roles of the characters (Pitout, 1996: 168), thus making them complicit in the denial of privilege depicted in the texts. I

argued that, despite changes in the broadcasting policies, and even with *7de Laan's* popularity waning somewhat, both soap operas remain unequivocally popular, which leads me to believe that the popularity and value of these programmes lie not only in entertainment but, at least in part, in their defence of a certain hegemonic privilege with which the audience associates.

All of these devices construct the relevant imagined communities as homogeneous. This is problematic because the creation of such unity and homogeneity always implies the exclusion of difference. The result is a type of forced homogeneity which glosses over the underlying differences in both nations and reinforces dominant ideologies of whiteness.

The number of similarities and overlaps between the way whiteness is perpetuated in the South African and Flemish context is important precisely because of the way in which the contexts differ. I argued that when whiteness is threatened or destabilised, it reacts by making itself visible and naming itself, deflecting attention by creating new Others to define itself against, or assimilating and appropriating Otherness to redefine itself. In these ways, whiteness's centrality is still claimed by the visual rhetoric in both texts. Even though it was concluded that whiteness as subject position is more destabilised in the South African context, instances of all of the above were identified in both contexts. The fact that whiteness manifests in similar ways across contexts is indicative of its power. The similarities between the two case studies seem to indicate that the normative representation of whiteness is not something that is exclusive to South African soap operas or South African popular culture. These similar manifestations speak to whiteness's power of endurance, but also point to its constant evolution, to the nature of whiteness as a process, rather than an absolute entity.

The differences I identified, however, do indicate that whiteness as a phenomenon and dominant ideology also manifests in unique ways in different contexts. Unlike in Flanders, diversity in South Africa is a much more pertinent discourse, one which causes the hegemony of whiteness to be threatened. Similarly, the fact that whites in

South Africa are the minority distinguishes conceptualisations of whiteness here from the way in which it is conceptualised elsewhere. Owing to this, *7de Laan* constructs and represents race, and whiteness, differently to *Thuis*.

Perhaps the most pervasive difference between the two texts lies in how these shows are conceptualised. In Chapter 8, reference was made to Dhoest's (2009: 310) (Cf. page 218) claim that Flemish soap operas are devised specifically as mirrors "of" society. Read with this in mind, the reluctance of the text to deal with racial issues and integration makes more sense since it is a reluctance that, to some extent at least, manifests in Flemish society as a whole (the naming of European and non-European citizens as *autochton* and *allochton* respectively is a case in point). In contrast, it is arguable that *7de Laan* is devised as a mirror "for" society, which implies that it is not depicting reality but an ideal of society. This might serve as counter-argument for all my criticisms against the unrealistic representations in the text. The South African society, as depicted in *7de Laan*, is a utopian one. The significance of this utopian depiction, however, lies in the fact that it represents a South Africa in which no racial tension exists (or no racial tension is acknowledged), and the normative practices and languages are those associated predominantly with white and, to some extent, brown people. This construction is dauntingly reminiscent of apartheid South Africa and therefore problematic even as a mirror for society.

The final part of this chapter was thus devoted to observations about the particular way in which whiteness is constructed as a subject position in the South African context. Even though the remains of the ideologies of apartheid still shape social relations today, white South Africans are faced with reinterpreting themselves. In *7de Laan*, this is done by deferring any complicity to outsiders and by presenting a utopian ideal in which different races and classes peacefully co-exist in a community governed by normative white practices as a mirror for South African society. Thus, despite whiteness being under threat in the South African context, it was concluded that *7de Laan* is an example of one instance where its power is adapting but still very present.

It is clear from my analysis that there is no concrete definition of whiteness or its origin. De Kock (2010: 15) contends that the term “whiteness” as a sign should be viewed as a trace, and not an essence. According to him, it is not possible to capture or contain “a category description as referentially fractured as whiteness”. This confirms Shome’s (2000: 368) understanding of whiteness as a process, rather than an absolute entity. According to her (2000: 368), this process is constituted by various social and material practices in which whites, and often “Others”, are invested and through which they are continually produced. Granted, the suggested restructuring of *7de Laan* is indicative of the fact that the normative functioning of whiteness is being questioned, and it is arguable that the SABC’s suggested changes constitute an effort to change this dominant system of identity construction, but, as explored in this section, the suggested methods run the risk of making little or no difference, and consequently merely enforcing Steyn’s (2012) “ignorance contract”. Considering the contributions of these soap operas and other television programmes “to this reinforcement of perceptions of whiteness as a subject position, then, is also to acknowledge the considerable forces that stand in the way of our society’s efforts to deal effectively with enduring patterns of racial discrimination and violence” (Chidester, 2008: 171), which in turn is a powerful motive for scholars to persist in interrogating mediated representations of race. I would like to propose a contrasting approach to that of colour blindness, namely that of critical, engaged citizenship – an approach that entails suspending our silences to try and break the colour-blind discourse of universality (Herakova, Jelača, Sibii & Cooks, 2011: 378).

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

The main research question this thesis sought to answer was as follows: How is whiteness constructed and positioned in the South African soap opera, *7de Laan*, and the Flemish soap opera, *Thuis*, and what are the possible implications of these constructions for local as well as global discourses on whiteness in the media?

In conjunction with the above, this thesis endeavoured to answer a number of subquestions relating to the origin and history of the construct of “whiteness” and CWS as a theoretical approach and its relevance in the South African and Flemish contexts, specifically as it pertains to the analysis of mass media texts like *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. It, moreover, sought to explore if and how whiteness functions as an organising principle in the narratives and representations of these soap operas with the emphasis on potential similarities and differences. Finally, the goal was to draw conclusions on the possible implications of these differences and similarities in the wider context of the way in which whiteness functions in the media.

In an effort to answer these questions, I opted for a controlled case comparison of a sample of one South African and one Flemish soap opera, both of which belong to the community soap opera genre and are important as flagship programmes in their respective PSB contexts. Despite a number of similarities between the two contexts, they still differ significantly, and this afforded me an opportunity to highlight both the consistencies and particularities in the ideological patterning of representations of whiteness, across seemingly unrelated domains, to illustrate its pervasiveness.

This chapter is devoted to a terse description of the answers to these questions as they emerged from my analysis. I start out with a brief summary of the chapters that made up the thesis with specific references to the subquestion addressed in each chapter. This is followed by the conclusions drawn and the possible limitations identified in the study. Based on these, I make some suggestions for possible further research on the topic. Finally, I elaborate

on the implications of the study and its possible contributions.

10.1 Summary of chapters: structure and synthesis

The story of the origin of my thesis is a fairly elaborate one. My attention was first drawn to whiteness and the critical study thereof after listening to a presentation by Melissa Steyn at a SACOMM Conference in 2006. This piqued my interest in the theoretical field of CWS since I had, for quite some time, been struggling with my own white subjectivity and attempting to engage with it critically. From there the thesis developed fairly organically since the work I was doing as part of a larger NRF-funded project looking at the role of Afrikaans television in identity formation lent itself quite readily to an analysis of the manifestations of whiteness. A ten-month Erasmus Mundus scholarship, spent as a resident at the University of Antwerp in Belgium, afforded me the opportunity to introduce a comparative component to my analysis by comparing the work I was doing on *7de Laan* with the way in which whiteness manifests in the Flemish soap opera *Thuis*. Flanders presented a unique opportunity since, while there are many parallels to be drawn between Afrikaans culture and Flemish culture, whiteness manifests differently in a Flemish and European context, compared with its manifestation in a South African one. In essence, what I had here was an opportunity to contrast and compare texts originating in the North-South divide, which made it ideal for a study seeking to explore the way in which whiteness manifests in a sample of South African, Afrikaans popular culture. Given my embeddedness in the South African context, the choice to use a controlled case comparison allowed me to keep South Africa as the central case study in my thesis, grounding it firmly in the context in which it originated and still affording me the opportunity of comparison with the goal of exploring the specificities of South African whiteness. Chapter 1 was devoted to a broad introduction to this study and focused on the research questions pertinent to this thesis.

The logical first step for me was to properly investigate the concept and construct of whiteness and, from there, to proceed in understanding the aims and development of the discipline of CWS. Consequently, Chapter 2, as my first literature review chapter, was aimed at answering my first subquestion by examining whiteness and CWS. It also functioned as the theoretical grounding of the thesis. Whiteness, for the purposes of my project, is defined

not as something that essentialises race, but rather as an ideology, a process, a culture and “a sense of privileged location” (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 54). It was conceptualised as a code for communicating cultural meaning through performance, and I argued that soap opera narratives constitute one such performative instance. Because whiteness is multifaceted, contextually bound and fluid, there can be no absolute definition of what the concept entails. The constructedness of whiteness, its normative nature and the performative strategies used to adapt these constructions were highlighted as some of its key characteristics. Dyer (1997), as one of the original proponents of CWS, contends that CWS involves the exploration of white people in white Western culture. I posited, however, that there are also instances outside of Western culture where whiteness has been a dominant ideology, as in the case of South Africa. The final part of Chapter 2 was therefore devoted to looking specifically at whiteness and CWS in the South African context. Owing to intersections of race with other dimensions such as gender and class, not only the representation of white people is relevant when taking a CWS approach, and identities are frequently depicted in ways which can be viewed as perpetuating dominant white ideologies precisely because of these multiple axes creating fluid whiteness.

My approach was clarified as being in line with the most recent wave of CWS in which the analysis of diverse cultural sites, such as products of the mass media, public policy debates, social relationships and state discourses are central (Twine & Gallagher, 2008: 15). The topic of this thesis clearly falls into this category because of its goal to analyse the manifestation of whiteness in mainstream media, which speaks to all of the above.

If I was to prove my contention that soap opera narratives constitute a performative instance which can be fruitfully analysed for manifestations of whiteness, it followed logically that my second literature review chapter would look at the soap genre. Chapter 3 was thus devoted to a review of the literature on soap opera. This chapter also partly addressed subquestion 1 as it relates to the construction of identities in and through mass media texts. I concluded that the characteristics and aspects of soap opera examined throughout Chapter 3 can be interpreted as producing a “slice of life” indicative of the societies in which they are created. Moreover, soap operas create a space in which it is possible to negotiate, but also perpetuate, dominant ideas about identities and ideologies. Similar to Modleski (1982: 88–

105), I argue that soap opera “may be in the vanguard, not just of TV art, but of all popular narrative art”, and that contrary to the popular belief that it constitutes mere entertainment, it presents a unique vantage point from which to study the construction of the imagined community of a particular nation. Even though soap operas were initially created for the entertainment of a female audience, contemporary ones reach a much more diverse audience. It was suggested that soap opera’s potential to function as more than mere entertainment, for example, by including socially relevant issues that are intimately intertwined in the lives of their viewers, may have some influence on the perception or awareness of these issues. One of the issues identified was national identity, and as part of this, whiteness. Based on this, I proposed to look at the narratives of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* in an effort to analyse how these texts make sense of whiteness in their respective contexts.

Building on Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 set the process in motion by outlining the methodological approach taken to the study. It highlighted the qualitative nature of the thesis, clarified my sampling methods and outlined my research methods and strategies of analysis. Specific attention was paid to Wester et al.’s (2006) version of a controlled case comparison as the main method of analysis in the thesis. It was my contention that a comparative methodology would enable me to improve my understanding of my own country and challenge claims to universal applications of CWS, while also evaluating the scope and value of the phenomenon of whiteness and contributing to the international understanding of this phenomenon.

As part of the qualitative approach outlined in Chapter 4, Chapters 5 and 7 were devoted to a rich description of the two pertinent contexts with a specific focus on the historical, national and cultural contexts of both South Africa and Flanders. The goal was to delineate how these contexts influenced, and still influence, the construction of South African and Flemish identity.

In the South African case, struggles to construct a South African imagined community are fraught with contradictions and tensions linked to unity through diversity and the celebration of a rainbow identity amidst the ANC government’s conflicting rhetoric of non-racialism versus racially marked policies such as BEE. In this context, whiteness functions

differently from other countries where it constitutes the uncontested majority. South African whiteness, consequently, adapts differently when its hitherto hegemonic status is threatened or questioned, which, unlike the situation in Europe, for example, happens explicitly and not covertly. The country's historical developments are also mirrored in the PSB's transition from a mouthpiece for the ruling apartheid government, to a key role player in the democracy of the country. Recent shifts in the media, however, once again threaten the role of the PSB as an independent voice, with the ANC government increasingly trying to manage and control media output with the introduction of a number of restrictive policies. These tensions relating to policies and the politics of belonging also manifest in the country's media output, particularly PSB which is mandated to adhere to certain principles regarding the representation of the nation. South Africa's mass media is deemed an important conveyor of the identities and interests of the country's population and as such constitutes a vital sphere of social life in the country (Zegeye & Harris, 2003: 1–2). In this context, many academics are critical of the ways in which the media disregards the actual diversity in society, also in its production of fictional narratives for entertainment.

Chapter 7 contextualised Flanders as a subnational entity within the larger Belgian context. Flanders is an independent linguistic community with national aspirations. Besides being part of the overarching Belgian identity, Flemish national identity is influenced by factors such as language and terminological issues, the effects of migration, the influence of right-wing politics and larger discourses on the politics of belonging, such as Europism. In contrast to the South African case, where race is a fairly explicit issue on the agendas of politicians, policy makers and citizens alike, in Belgium, as in various other European countries, there is a definitive reluctance to acknowledge "race" or even "ethnicity" as formal categories, with the emphasis rather being placed on cultural roots. This makes the question of whiteness as an identity in Flanders "complex and convoluted" (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 55): cultural racism is more prevalent than biological racism, "racial-ethnic" groups are viewed as "not-yet-European" and the terminology used to describe non-EU citizens, however inadvertently, enforces the divide between Belgians and foreign citizens. Owing to this, Flemings are reluctant to accept immigrants as citizens and, as in South Africa, xenophobia is also prevalent (Billiet, 2006: 44).

In recent decades, immigration and the subsequent questions of legitimacy and belonging have caused PSB policies to be revised in the European and therefore Flemish contexts. One of the factors emphasised by the Flemish PSB is the integration of ethnic-cultural minorities into everyday practices of national belonging through the depiction of rituals, common interests, and what Billig (1995) calls “banal nationalism”. The goal, however, remains to provide programming for all which speaks to an “assumed national, cultural commonality” (Tittley et al., 2014: 7). Although some theorists argue that this integration does not take place through forced homogeneity, but rather through “routine practices of shared belonging and communal heritage”, the construction of such shared values and practices does have implications that are detrimental to diversity. Hence, as in South Africa, homogeneity or non-racialism is perpetuated to the detriment of diversity and difference.

Chapters 5 and 7 therefore set the background against which the analysis of *7de Laan* and *Thuis* was conducted. Fourie (2007: 242) posits that one is able to learn about different cultural and social norms by watching soap operas. In chapter 6, I set out to determine which cultural and social norms are given a voice in *7de Laan* and whether or not whiteness functions as an organising principle in its narratives. While soap opera texts are open to multiple readings, these texts remain structured in such a way that certain readings are proposed over others (Livingstone, 1998: 37). In this regard, Van der Merwe (2012: 53) succinctly argues that in the case of *7de Laan* it is “still very much a one-sided affair with a strong emphasis on Afrikaans language and culture”, particularly white culture. This is corroborated by Damon Boyd (2006: 12), who writes that the creators of *7de Laan* “remember the golden days of Afrikaans television and everything that was good and warm about it and they are so overcome with emotion that they fail to recognize [sic] their memories as clichés”. I similarly found that, despite some cosmetic changes, *7de Laan* presents a version of South African society which constructs the rainbow nation uncritically as an Afrikaans utopia, while still perpetuating hegemonies associated with whiteness. *7de Laan*'s audience are thus presented with a particular take on South African society, one which is, arguably, not on par with what is happening the South African reality.

Chapter 8 delved into the way in which these discourses play out in the fictional narratives of *Thuis*. In response to the second subquestion, I concluded that, even though whiteness functions differently in the Flemish context, it can still be identified as one of the organising principles in the narratives of the soap opera. Through its representations of banal nationalism, *Thuis* constructs a homogeneous utopia of the Flemish imagined community which is mostly silent on issues relating to race and class, but does present a greater diversity in terms of gender and sexual roles than its South African counterpart. Taken together, however, it was concluded that the representations in *Thuis* can be read as perpetuating invisible normative whiteness.

The soap operas, in both cases, certainly constitute spaces for democratic deliberation, but domination remains an issue, and as Milton (2008: 255) asserts, “we need to look beyond the ideological surface to see the social and historical forces and struggles which generate ideological discourses, and to examine the cinematic apparatuses and strategies which make these ideologies attractive”.

In Chapters 5 to 8, the case studies were conducted by means of a systematic narrative-textual analysis of the communities constructed in each soap opera, the role of language in these constructions and the representations of diversity in both texts. Based on this, Chapter 9 in particular, focused on answering the third and final subquestion. It was my contention that the agenda of concerns, values and metanarratives in the soap operas can be seen as being indicative of the agenda of the society in which the soap operas are produced and viewed (Liebes & Livingstone, 1998: 151). Despite the fact that soap opera is a globalised format, its indigenisation makes it possible for these texts to be relevant to their specific contexts. For La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005: 276), the hegemonic role of America as the “cultural avatar of modernity” is in decline, and countries such as South Africa and Belgium are beginning to represent “a more familiar or proximate, regional or cultural-linguistic, form of modernity”. Both soap operas address the national (or subnational) audience in a language familiar to them as well as communicating values and common sense assumptions inherent in their contexts, thereby engaging in a process of enculturation which promotes a sense of belonging for a particular group of viewers (Franco, 2001: 453). Soap operas were thus ideal for the purposes of this study precisely because of the tension between its global

format and its indigenised nature. In essence, they represent nationalist expressions in a globalised format.

Three discursive devices were identified as functioning in both texts to perpetuate dominant ideologies associated with whiteness. These devices are the absence of presence, the construction and maintenance of a closed setting by carefully patrolled boundaries and the creation of particular subject positions for viewers, all of which function to perpetuate white ignorance.

On the one hand, articulations of whiteness in *7de Laan* are similar to those in *Thuis*, but there are also nuanced differences giving these articulations a specifically South African flavour. In moments when whiteness is comfortable in its hegemony, as in Flanders (and Europe at large), it constructs itself as the norm (Shome, 2000: 368). On the other hand, whiteness in Flanders is also significantly more stable than South African whiteness which – as the metaphor invoked by De Kock (2010: 15) in Chapter 2 illustrates – is rather like a hot potato: variously juggled.

One of the most prominent differences between the two texts lies in the extent to which diversity is demanded by their respective contexts and, consequently, in the perceived threat to whiteness's normative status. In contrast to *Thuis's* visually homogeneous community, this threat to whiteness in *7de Laan* is addressed by utilising a cast, which at face level, is representative of the rainbow nation by explicitly including, at least visually, characters from various ethnic groups. Owing to the fact that in practice, however, the dominant culture depicted remains white, this tactic involves conflating the ostensibly white character of the soap opera with nationality rather than race (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) and presenting the South African nation as "colourless". The final section of Chapter 9 was devoted to unpacking the specific ways in which whiteness function in the South African context.

10.2 Conclusions and implications

I maintain that the media, and more broadly popular culture, matter greatly in the everyday construction of the national imagination (Edensor, 2002). Barnard (2006: 39) argues convincingly that popular culture (and therefore mass media), alongside political and social institutions, in South Africa chronicles the transformation of the country as well as imaginatively and materially creating a new South Africa. Similarly, in Flanders, mass media, in particular public television, have played a crucial role in defining Flemish national identity since the 1950s (Van den Bulck, 2001; Dhoest, 2004). It was against this background that I analysed the two soap opera texts with the explicit goal of determining the role whiteness plays in their constructions of the nation.

The comparative element of the analysis sensitised me to variation and similarity, stressing the specificity of seemingly general concepts and ideas as they manifest in popular cultural texts. For example, while concepts such as “unity”, “diversity” and “national identity” are applied in the contexts of both South African and Flemish media, it becomes apparent that these terms have different connotations in each context. The same applies to the presence of whiteness in the soap opera texts relevant to this thesis.

A comparative analysis encourages researchers to clarify the scope and applicability of the concepts they employ and, in this case, highlighted the fact that whiteness is interpreted differently in South Africa and Flanders. Essed and Trienekens (2008: 68–69) argue that in a Dutch (and I posit that this interpretation is also relevant to Flanders) context, whiteness as a theoretical concept is not explicitly applied, but they admit that

from an academic point of view, it is possible to identify a number of ingredients that also have been identified as instruments of whiteness ... including whiteness as structural racial advantage, as boundary marker, as relational category and as a site of privilege ...

For them, “European-ness” probably means “‘white’ (whichever way white gets defined), plus something else”. Following this line of thought enabled me to draw some conclusions about how whiteness functions as an (or one) organising principle in the narratives of the two selected texts.

At face value the findings revealed nothing unexpected. Soap opera is a highly stylised form, and community soap opera, in its focus on a specific community, moreover, dictates a certain narrowness in the scope of characters, topics, and perspectives that are likely to be dealt with. True to the characteristics of the genre, both soap operas present a utopian ideal of the imagined community of their respective contexts. However, even if utopian images are the goal, the question remains whether the utopias presented in *7de Laan* and *Thuis* are in fact utopian or whether they persist in perpetuating dominant ideas about belonging and, consequently, a utopia for a select few. The politics of belonging, also as they play out in soap operas, inevitably include struggles around the determination of what is involved in being a member of such a community (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 3).

In Chapter 4 (Cf. page 102) mention was made of the “why tell” function of a narrative. It is crucial to question which voices are given preference. Analysis of the narratives chosen for each soap opera, as well as the way in which they extend beyond the text in the form of “soap talk” and the formation of para-social relationships with viewers, emphasises that soap operas do function as a forum for communication, and also for intercultural communication. The findings of the comparative analysis, however, reveal the limitations of the available discourses and identity positions presented in *7de Laan* and *Thuis*. Hence, in essence, what we find, even in the utopian constructions of communities in both soap operas, is a construction of who belongs and who does not.

In my analysis it was clear that, in their quest to present utopian ideals, the texts in question avoid explicit references to race (or ethnicity), and in so doing, actively perpetuate ideas about whiteness and its centrality. According to Yuval-Davis (2011: 8), “[s]ituated gazes can delineate boundaries of recognition and care even within Utopias”. In these cases, silence can be viewed as a statement of belonging. Not all silences are the same. Being silent, for example, cannot be equated with being silenced. In this instance, simply disregarding the chosen silences of these texts would imply that the unquestioned social norms and values of whiteness remain unscrutinised and hence unquestioned. Depictions of imagined communities that are silent on matters of race and other differences are problematic. As Ben Pitcher (2009: 2) succinctly points out:

the existence of cultural difference – whether understood in terms of race, ethnicity or religion – has become fully acknowledged as a constituent part of the societies within which we live today. In this most basic of senses, and irrespective of the extent to which it is tolerated, celebrated or condemned, multiculturalism describes the widespread recognition that we can no longer be in any doubt as to whether or not cultural difference is here to stay.

The narratives identified throughout the scope of this thesis have the potential of creating what Mills (2008) calls a “feel-good” history for whites in South Africa. It creates a situation where it becomes possible for whites to impart this amended reality to their children “enabling subject positions for them that will be characterized [sic] by ignorance” (Steyn, 2012: 8) perpetuating the ignorance contract identified by Steyn as lying at the heart of a society structured in racial hierarchy, such as South Africa, but also to some extent Flanders. In both cases, what we witness is assimilation into white ways which is “advanced through tropes of ‘progress’ and ‘upliftment’” (Steyn, 2008: 40). The onus of adaptation falls on the racial Other, thus minimising the amount of adjustment required of whites. The processes involved in the creation of whiteness include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences, which are depicted in the soap opera narratives as being commonly shared by all, but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people (DiAngelo, 2011: 56). In the soap operas, the “non-race” of the characters perpetuates this idea that it is afforded to all people, while in reality this is not the case.

In chapter 3 (Cf. page 3.3.2) it was argued that soap operas have the innate potential to function on a political level. This implies that, even within the restrictions of the genre, it is possible to present self-critical, race-cognisant versions of whiteness such as the ones called for by Ndebele (2000: 24 – 47) and Frankenberg (2011: 10). However, in both soap operas, the “kinds” of whiteness presented remain uncritical and in both cases it functions to perpetuate white ignorance, rather than race-cognisance.

This being said, however, there are no clear-cut solutions for the problematics outlined above. One issue that emerges in this context is tension between the desire to provide role models and positive images of a self-evidently diverse society, and the actual racial, economic and class differences in both societies. Should public television “show it as it is” and explore the persistent racial divisions in society, or rather provide examples of society as

it could and should be? Producers interviewed in Costera Meijer and De Bruin's (2003: 701) research, for example, informed them that they "often felt as if they could not do the right thing. Black characters were either not black enough or too black". This resonates with an argument presented by Costera Meijer (2001: 222–223) in an earlier project where she claimed that when "discussing the narrative construction of ethnicity, basically, several 'ground rules' are at work. Either you show people's difference and do justice to their different cultural background and risk stereotyping them, or you show people's sameness and risk 'whitening' them." With only a number of characters carrying the full burden of creating representative diversity, this is difficult to solve. Since these characters are often singular, it is hardly possible for them to represent a whole community. The limited numbers of characters from ethnic minority groups present in *Thuis*, for example, are not able to evoke the actual diversity present in Flemish society at large or in ethnic minority communities. In *7de Laan*, this should be easier to achieve since diversity in South Africa is much larger in scale and visibility than in Flanders, but some of the same issues remain.

One possible suggestion in this regard might be that, instead of creating a (potentially artificial) image of a unified yet diverse society, it might be better to strive towards openness to all kinds of diversity in a variety of combinations and intersections. Only a multiplicity of diverse images could accurately represent the inherent diversity of both contexts. The inclusion of more gender, class and racial diversity in the "banal" storylines of soap operas (instead of treating them like "themed issues"; cf. pages 156 and 251) may be the only way to represent the actual diversity in society. Diversity should be part and parcel of the representations in the text, rather than "making it strange" by incorporating, say, token instances of African tradition or homosexuality. Similarly, as opposed to the colourless depictions, representing characters that show an awareness of their own whiteness and grappling with it, for example, might negate the perpetuation of the ignorance contract. In the context of the indigenisation of the genre, such representations also present rich sources for unique narratives.

Even if the above is possible, however, one should take cognisance of the fact that exposing viewers to a multiplicity of viewpoints and ideologies does not automatically guarantee their critical interaction with these viewpoints. Rogers (1995: 329), for example, admits that the

potential for struggle or the negotiation of meaning exists, but she poses the following questions: “What if viewers fail to recognise the subtext? ... Instead of constructing subversive readings of soaps, many viewers simply fail to recognise latent discourses ...”.

Lamuedra and O’Donnell (2013: 60) similarly argue that the

concepts of resistance and active audience, both connected to active citizenship, have been subjected to a great deal of criticism arising from research showing that resistance and subversion among audiences are not necessarily as challenging as they sometimes had been taken to be.

If this is the case, it is certainly possible that critical representations of whiteness in soap operas may go unnoticed by viewers.

Despite the difficulties in representing a nuanced version of a diverse society, the fact remains that soap operas do have subversive potential. With regard to gender and sexuality, for example, Dhaenens (2012: 443–444), writes that popular soap operas

may represent gay characters or gay-related themes that expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function, on the one hand, or transgress social and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality and identity on the other, thereby functioning as queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living.

As an example of how the influence of soap opera extends beyond the screen, in this case manifesting in queer resistance, Dhaenens (2012: 444) writes about fan-produced texts. According to him, fans are producing cultural products based on the original soap opera series and uploading them as “webisodes”, which he identifies as possible texts for queer resistance. The same is possible for negotiations of whiteness, and the potential of these texts cannot therefore be ignored or uncritically negated as mere entertainment.

10.3 Limitations of the study

The closing comments in the previous section hinted at some of the possible limitations of the study. The qualitative nature of the analysis, and by implication the interpretation of validity applied to this thesis, as well as the choice of a controlled case comparison obviously negate the possibility of replicating this study and claiming universal results. The study is therefore by definition limited in terms of scope and repeatability. In addition, some critics

argue that quantitative approaches work best for comparative research. Even when conceding that the validity of quantitative cross-national data is sometimes questionable, proponents of quantitative data still claim that qualitative methods are dubious when conducting comparative analysis since its data is reliant on the local knowledge of the researcher. Consequently, both the qualitative methodology employed here as well as my own local knowledge might be considered as limiting. Raymond A. Morrow and David D. Brown (1994: 218), however, present an argument to counter the criticisms against using only quantitative methods in comparative research:

From a critical theory perspective the fundamental difficulty with using statistical analysis is that it is based on the relations between variables, while explicative and comparative analyses ... are based on discerning structural relations within and between mediations – relations that turn on the dialectic between human agency and social structure.

Thus, while I acknowledge that qualitative methods might hold some limitations, I maintain that, for the purposes of this study, it was the most appropriate paradigm. Deep descriptions of and my own imbeddedness in the contexts in which the analysis took place afforded me the opportunity to draw interpretative conclusions which would not have been possible with numerical or statistical analysis.

Secondly, it should be acknowledged that focusing on a selection of episodes from one soap opera per country provides only a limited slice of popular culture and mass media from the pertinent contexts. While this presents some of the same problems highlighted above (namely limiting the study in scope and repeatability), focusing on only two texts enabled me to conduct a deep analysis, which would not have been possible had I used more texts.

Similarly, the focus on Afrikaans texts in the South African context automatically implied the presence of a number of dominant ideologies and practices that would have manifested differently had I analysed another example of South African soap opera. Given the parameters of the NRF project within which this thesis was conceptualised, however, no other South African soap opera would have been relevant for my specific purposes. Moreover, with specific reference to the construction of whiteness and given the soap opera's target audience, it is arguable that *7de Laan* was more valid for my purposes than some of the other South African soap operas might have been.

Finally, the decision to conduct a comparative analysis necessitated a framework which guided the analysis in a specific way. This resulted in a focus on particular categories which emerged from my preliminary analysis. Even though my analysis of these categories was extensive, I acknowledge that a single case study would have left room for more in-depth textual analysis. It is possible that additional aspects might have been elucidated in single case studies and that a deeper reading of each text might have been possible, but for my purposes, this falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Furthermore, conclusions drawn from a narrative textual analysis often remain provisional and should be followed through in an audience reception study. While this might be a possible shortcoming of the analysis presented here, Liebes and Livingstone (1998: 155) contend that narrative analysis contributes to the larger body of research on a certain topic since it acknowledges the fact that texts constrain audiences and that the “right balance should be found between the recognition that audiences are active and the acknowledgement of the restrictions imposed on this activity by the text”. While extending this project to include a reception analysis would certainly enable me to test my findings, the narrative analysis conducted in this thesis provides rich data from which to determine the relevant questions to ask in such an endeavour, and consequently, creates fertile ground from which to expand the project.

Regarding my specific choice to use CWS as a theoretical approach, a possible limitation might be that it is dangerous to generalise findings on the manifestation of whiteness (Cf. page 27) and apply them across contexts without caution. Moreover, one runs the risk of contributing to “identificatory mobility” (Cf. page 28), presenting whiteness as a-historical and de-contextual. To avoid this, great care was taken to contextualise my case studies and articulate the nuanced differences between the manifestations of whiteness in the two contexts. While whiteness and race in general in South Africa operate as highly visible, for example, in Flanders, race and whiteness specifically, is something that remains inherently invisible and unquestioned.

Linked to the above is the implicated risk of once more essentialising whiteness as a construct. Applying CWS without caution is risking the same thing I am criticising, namely

overstating homogeneity at the loss of heterogeneity, and in the process contributing to the binary divide. Furthermore, imbuing whiteness with certain attributes (such as heteronormativity) might in and of itself be seen as an enactment thereof, and thus a perpetuation of its dominance. Whiteness differs from context to context, and as I pointed out exhaustively, it is not an absolute or singular construction, and should not be viewed as such. The goal of CWS for the purposes of this thesis was not to contribute to essentialising whiteness, but rather to make the “centre” visible and, in the process, vulnerable to interrogation (Cf. 10.4 for an elaboration of this argument).

Moreover, in adopting a CWS approach to the analysis of these texts, it should be clear that this theoretical approach does not present a “silver bullet” (Cf. page 28). The shortcomings or possible pitfalls of CWS were highlighted in Chapter 2 and, consequently, it should rather be seen as an approach which can be complementary to related approaches such as Critical Race Studies. Its relevance and value to this specific thesis, however, are clear.

The three discursive strategies present in both soap operas (as identified in Chapter 9) might be limiting if they are read as exhaustive. I do not exclude the possibility that other discursive strategies could emerge if a similar study were to be conducted using a different sample. One should keep in mind what De Kock (Cf. page 33 and page 44) refers to as the counter-gesture. In the tension between attempting an elaborate analysis within the confines of one study, and taking into account the necessity to summarise and conclude, it is crucial to be aware of the dangers of oversimplifying the matter.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter 4, I acknowledge the limitations of using nations as units of analysis since they are not self-contained or homogeneous. As Appadurai (2006: 3) puts it, no nation is “free of the idea that its national sovereignty is built on some sort of ethnic genius”, and therefore the process of recognition has always been fraught with the tensions of the politics of belonging. For the purposes of my specific comparative analysis, I needed to use the nation as a unit of analysis since it provides one with a comprehensible unit even when said unit is contradictory in the way it wants to be a community despite its imagined nature (Cf. 10.5 for my argument on the pervasiveness of the nation as subject of analysis). It

is my hope that the limitations to such an approach were countered by the comprehensive descriptions of diversity in both contexts.

The possible limitations highlighted here do not, however, limit the contribution of comparative and literature analysis to theory building on a topic, in this case the soap opera and its ability to represent whiteness. All limitations addressed here can be solved with further research, as suggested in the next section.

10.4 Suggestions for further research

Livingstone (2003: 494) writes that “[i]n the end, however we determine and defend our choices in cross-national research, we should resist the fantasy that by this means a complete, comprehensive account can be produced”. As outlined in the limitations of the study, I acknowledge the possible shortcomings of my project and contend that these shortcomings can be addressed by further research on the topic. Some of the the conclusions drawn, moreover, open up new avenues for further research as suggested below.

My first suggestion would be to test the findings of my analysis by expanding the controlled comparative case model further and incorporating more cases. An expanded controlled case comparison would also ensure more variation and solve the risks of essentialising and homogenising as outlined in the previous section. It might, likewise, be valuable in testing the validity of the model I developed, as well as the discursive practices I identified. Added to – but also contrasting – the idea of expanding the project to include more case studies might be to test the findings in a more in-depth textual analysis consisting of a single / singular case studies which will address one of the weaknesses of my current project, as suggested in the previous section. Moreover, conclusions drawn from a narrative textual analysis often remain provisional and should be followed through in an audience study.

Considering the rich data generated from the controlled case comparison, another possible expansion of this project could be to delve into the de-Westernisation of media theory. In particular, not only more research on globalisation, but also the indigenisation of genres in

this context, could be valuable contributions to the de-Westernisation of media studies if explored further. Reference was made earlier to Buonanno's (2008) argument on the subversive potential of the indigenisation of genres as well as contraflows, and to my mind, that is one topic that could be fruitfully explored in the larger project of de-Westernisation. Even though it remains international – read Western – genres that are being adapted, and there is a generally accepted view that there are two South Africa's,¹ their adaptations reveal something about the (non-Western in the case of South Africa) context in which they are adapted, in this way building and adapting Western-dominated theories and analysis and in the process contributing to a more comprehensive approach. As Ray (2012: 241) posits, it is not about reinventing the wheel, but in this case, rather about approaching it from a different angle.

At the outset of this thesis mention was made of the tension existing between the national and the global when it comes to defining concepts such as the nation, unity and diversity. In this regard, an additional avenue which might be explored is what has been revealed by systematically starting each comparison with the South African case study. I, therefore, (keeping in mind the complications identified in the previous paragraph) suggest that it would be viable to investigate the effect of foregrounding “objects of study located outside the West”, which Waisbord and Mellado (2014: 364) view as a helpful way in which to “expand the research agenda and probe the conventional analytical parameters of Western-based scholarship”. There is a possible contribution to be made in considering non-Western cases in order to go against universalistic claims based on context-specific Western knowledge and, in the process, aiming to create transnational dialogue (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014).²

In terms of CWS as an approach, it would also be possible to supplement the findings with an additional study following a complementary approach, such as Critical Race Studies. This

¹ There is a generally accepted view (which can be connected to Mbeki's “I am an African speech” referenced in Chapter 5) that there are two South Africa's, one steeped in Western epistemologies and the other not.

² I do, however, acknowledge that I am still using theories and approaches that have a Western origin, both because I have been trained in Western traditions and I am still working in the institutional structure of Western/Northern academia. Like Ray (2012: 239), I view this as natural and even desirable. He postulates that to speak in a different language would make one incomprehensible to one's audience.

might emphasise how race, as a master discourse, facilitates the construction of social hierarchies and influences the politics of belonging.

At the outset, I identified a gap in the literature on whiteness in the media. To this end, I think that more research exploring the tendency for media representations, as well as genres, to confirm white normativities, positions and audiences and govern productions would be useful.

10.5 Contributions of the study

It is my contention that the conclusions drawn from the controlled case comparison and the answers to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1 have the potential to contribute to the body of work in three distinct areas or discourses.

At its core, this thesis contributes to the knowledge of the phenomenon of “whiteness”. The application of CWS as a theoretical approach to this thesis, and the consequent shortcomings of this approach, highlighted in the limitations of the study, can be seen as contributing not only to CWS as a theoretical field, but also to a critical reflection on its merits. It has become clear that an analysis approached from the theoretical perspective of CWS cannot focus on race only, since constructions of whiteness encapsulate more than race (this is particularly clear when considering the Flemish part of this analysis, since race is actively avoided in European discourses and yet instances of white hegemony were still identifiable). Like Sasson-Levy (2013), I suggest an adapted version of CWS, and the analysis of hegemonic ethnicities, which interrogates how these groups both “mark and unmark the boundaries between themselves and Other groups in order to maintain their privileged status” (Sasson-Levy 2013: 28). I would suggest an investigation into not only the maintenance but also the shifting of boundaries as it were; articulated differently, an interrogation of the “counter-moves” which enable whiteness as the dominant ideology to adapt. Strategies such as ignorance, non-racialism, the creation of internal diversity and strategic presences of absence or silence were, for example, identified as some of the ways in which these boundaries and narratives of power and belonging are shifting. All of this can assist in critiquing whiteness as “no-Culture”, as Frankenberg (1993: 204) calls it.

Seshadri-Crooks (2000: 158–159) argues that it is necessary to develop a “new adversarial aesthetics that will throw racial signification into disarray”, and that given the fact that that “race discourse was produced in and through visual culture it is necessary that the visual itself be used against the scopic regime of race”. The concrete contribution of this thesis, most importantly, lies in a critical investigation of how all of the above manifests in a specific example from popular visual culture. Previous studies have outlined manifestations of whiteness in film and literature, as well as the print media, but no studies on the discourses of whiteness in fictional television narratives were found in my review of the literature. There seems to be a persistent gap in the theoretical literature on whiteness in the media. One of the factors contributing to this gap might be the fundamentally paradoxical nature of whiteness referred to earlier. According to Chidester (2008: 158), for example, whiteness presents itself as being open to examination “at the same time that it refuses to be interrogated”. Much of whiteness’s rhetorical power lies in its ability to avoid any explicit statements about race, and its perpetual silence resists any critical study (Chidester, 2008: 158). It follows that there is a lack of literature on this subject because, at least until recently, whiteness as an identity was not engaged in overt racial discourses which make up a large part of racial (or media) scholarship. As a result of this, it seems that few researchers have considered the “extent to which consumption of racialized [sic] media might speak to and reinforce white audience’s perceptions of themselves as white people and of whiteness as a subject position of stubbornly enduring power and privilege ...” (Chidester, 2008: 158). In a qualitative paradigm, describing and understanding are key, and by using existing theory and applying it to television texts the goal was to test, validate and build on existing whiteness theory, and in the process open up new avenues of theoretical enquiry. It is hoped that this, as part of the larger body of work on media messages’ complicity in furthering racial divisions, might be a useful step in contributing to understanding racial discourses in South Africa.

Herakova et al. (2011: 382–383) write: “I was silent because I felt I belonged, I was phrased, created, performed as belonging ... Home, once interrogated, is a place we’ve never seen before.” According to Shome (2000: 367), and this was also the aim of this thesis, the hope in this research on whiteness is that by making the everyday functioning of the normative and privileged locus of whiteness visible to whites and non-whites, whites can perhaps begin

to see, “to talk about race, to say the unsayable, to face the taken for granted” (Herakova et al., 2011: 383), and in so doing, stop participating in its positioning. Interrogating “home” and making it strange, certainly brought me face to face with my own whiteness and the particular way in which my own subjectivity is constructed.

In attempting this, one should be cognisant of the inherent problems with some approaches to CWS. It is often critiqued for shifting the focus back to whiteness, and more precisely on to “white versions of whiteness, including white guilt, how they confess shame, or, the other way around, deny racism, absolve themselves from responsibility for existing racial injustices, or express discomfort at the idea of white identity” (Essed & Trienekens, 2008: 53). Moreover, for some whites, this focus on white identity creates opportunities to talk about race without having to talk to blacks. Hook (2011: 30) writes in this regard that it is arguable that proponents of whiteness studies exemplify each of the critiques they put forward. He writes that

on the one hand there is the charge that I fall prey to the tactics of an attempted “ex-nomination” of myself from racism and whiteness alike, that I simply repeat at a higher level what I critique, and do so via a false separation of myself from various “declarations of whiteness” ... Aligned to this is there is a sense that a narcissistic self-concern still predominates here, and that it is this – a form of white guilt – that ultimately provides the compass of the critique in question.

Together with Hook (2012: 30), I acknowledge that a self-redeeming defence is not what is called for in such instances, but that the “demonstration of such failings, the very fact of their recognition, may itself prove an important halfway point in an ongoing project of critique” and consequently contribute to the new white humanity referenced by Ndebele (2000) at the start of this thesis. In highlighting these and other possible issues with CWS as a theoretical approach, it is my hope to contribute to the actual goal, namely to make whiteness visible, accountable and owned.

With specific reference to South Africa, the work done in this thesis, moreover, contributes to South African CWS in particular. The South African proponents working in this discipline were identified in Chapters 1 and 2, and this thesis adds to their body of work. Literature on whiteness, and literature on whiteness in the media, in particular, is fairly new and limited. I

emphasised throughout the thesis that whiteness manifests differently in the South African context than elsewhere, which also makes it possible for South African CWS to contribute something new to the field as a whole.

Concerning the application of CWS as a theoretical approach to the analysis of Flemish soap opera, this thesis contributes to the virtually non-existent literature on whiteness in Flanders and the wider European context. It is my contention that such work should be further explored since it brings another perspective to discussions of belonging as well as ethnicity in the Flemish context by explicitly introducing race which, as argued in Chapter 7, is something largely overlooked in Flemish and European media analysis.

The second area or discourse to which this study makes a contribution is to the discipline of Media Studies in general. Despite the fact that the era of broadcast television as the prime mass medium might be crumbling, the pervasiveness of the texts analysed here makes it clear that we should be cautious in declaring the “death” of television. In South Africa, this is even more pertinent given its Third World status and the fact that it is behind European countries, such as Belgium, in terms of access to new media forms. Despite this perceived end of television as the prime mass medium, I argue that television as a mass medium is still adapting and, consequently, remains relevant. Moreover, within the paradigm of the television medium, the national remains an important organising principle and frame of reference for analysis pertaining to production, content and audiences.

This being said, one of the main contributions of my comparative analysis lies not in the dense description of each context, or even in the similarities identified, but rather in the attempt to transcend the national framework in the analysis. Through my comparative analysis I have attempted to distance myself from taking the national for granted, responding to the criticisms against “methodological nationalism” which implicitly consider nations as self-evident, discrete, self-contained and relatively homogeneous entities for research (Beck & Grande, 2010). At the same time, this does not lead me to relinquish the national as unit of analysis, for throughout my analysis, I was confronted with the importance of national contexts and the national specificity of concepts like unity, diversity and national identity.

With reference to South African media studies in particular, and as part of the NRF project referenced throughout the thesis, this study contributes to the analysis of the role of Afrikaans fiction and the construction of the imagined community as it plays out in the South African PSB context. Milton (2006: 4) writes in this regard that while the media in general has received

a fair amount of attention in South Africa with regard to its identity as a cultural industry acting as both a reflector of the political conditions and a political agent in its own right (Price, 1995, Kellner 1995, Livingstone & Lunt, 2000), the Afrikaans media and communication environment have attracted only intermittent attention.

She (Milton 2006: 8) acknowledges the work that the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies in Natal and the Unisa School for Communication Studies have done to generate an understanding of the social considerations that need to be taken into account by policy makers and regulators. However, according to her, “there is little to no engagement with the impact of Afrikaans broadcasting on identity formation in the South African public sphere”. In analysing *7de Laan* as an Afrikaans text in the South African PSB context, my thesis speaks to this gap as identified by Milton (2006), paying specific attention to the role of whiteness and constructions thereof in the larger discourse of the politics of belonging on Afrikaans television.

Analysing manifestations of whiteness in the Afrikaans soap opera *7de Laan* could promote an understanding of aspects of contemporary South Africa and contribute to interpreting current struggles relating to the politics of belonging as this manifests in the PSB domain. The argument for the relevance of the media in constructing identity and belonging does not need to be unpacked here. It is my hope that the analysis of *7de Laan* sheds some light on the role this Afrikaans soap opera, and others, can play in civic engagement. Through these fictional narratives, it is possible for viewers to process conflicting issues relating to social values, norms and identities. Moreover, it stresses the potential of affect and pleasure as resources for citizenship. Owing to the fact that a world-view can subtly be transmitted through serial dramas, it is necessary to interpret what we are being presented with in the mass media and which resources are made available to us.

When seen in the light of current protests about the use of language (at universities, for instance) and the tensions between whiteness and other racial identities in South Africa, it is clear why some of the content of *7de Laan* is problematic in the way it constructs its viewers and their subject positions in society. Perpetuating ignorance does little to critically engage with the struggles in South African society. The problem lies not in the fact that the soap opera is aimed at a specific section of the South African population, but in the way in which it represents this section of society, and in the misplaced ideas about ideological dominance and ignorance that it perpetuates for white South Africans and all other South Africans who are represented or invested in these narratives. In an effort to comprehend how and why racial tensions persist in South Africa, it is conducive to interrogate contemporary cognitive constructions of white utopias, these islands of well-being and prosperity (Fourie, 2002: 20, Cf. page 127) which, arguably, still operate in media discourses today. It is my contention that an understanding of the notion of “whiteness” and its taken-for-granted normativity can contribute to our understanding of racist discourses in everyday situations as well as the experience of everyday racism. In this way, it is my hope that the thesis can contribute to the dialogue and scholarly work focusing on identity politics in postcolonial environments.

Finally, within the context of Media Studies, authors such as Buonanno have been producing a body of work relating to the indigenisation of genres, and it is to this, and the indigenisation or localisation of theory in general, that I believe my final contribution lies.

In asking questions about the cultural specificity of particular television cultures and productions, and in being careful of not imposing Eurocentric or other Westernised assumptions on our understandings of such cultural formations, a possible contribution lies in a reversal of what Gunaratne (2009, 2010) calls a “centre-periphery structure in the social sciences” (Ray, 2012: 238). By starting and ending with the South African case, this thesis challenges the centre-periphery dichotomy. In this way, analysing global television culture may also be a way of enhancing cross-cultural understanding, by highlighting the subtly different meaning structures that people in other parts of the world inhabit. Television drama, and especially soap opera, is a particularly valuable means to this, because it deals so prominently with the cultural intimacies of feeling.

Linked to the localisation of knowledge and the creation of a context specific Media Studies is the fact that, by focusing on South African and European soap operas, this thesis contributes to the theorisation of the genre. As pointed out, soap opera no longer remains a strictly American genre, and comparative work on this genre shifts the focus to its international flows and the indigenisation of the genre. For Buonanno (2008), work on the indigenisation of genres has a possible subversive element, and I argue that this also pertains to the analysis in this thesis. In nations where whiteness makes up a part of national identity, it follows that such texts are also rich sources for the analysis of the manifestation of whiteness.

It is in relation to the above that the final contribution to the localisation of knowledge is made. I emphasised that CWS had its origin in America and Australia, and that it is a fairly new theoretical approach in the South African context. Reference was made earlier to Dyer's (1997) conceptualisation of CWS as theorising the white, Western subject. However, in conjunction with other theorists working in this discipline, this thesis contributes to work done on whiteness in a context where it operates differently than in other "heartlands of whiteness", in particular because of its situatedness outside the scope of overtly Western culture. Because whites are in the minority and whiteness consequently functions differently here, proponents of CWS in South Africa are contributing to a unique application of CWS when theorising South African whiteness. Seen in this way, one of the limitations of the study identified in 10.3, namely my own situatedness and subjective approach, functions as an advantage and affords me a unique opportunity to contribute to the discourse. While CWS remains a Western theoretical approach, its South African application has potential for emphasising unique manifestations of the phenomenon of whiteness. In this regard, Ray (2012: 247) emphasises that "whatever is done from ... a non-Western perspective ... needs to add to insights that already have been gained by scholars working in the 'Western' traditions. The stress should be on evolving powerful theories". This thesis writes into the evolving theory of CWS and contributes to a uniquely South African, but also Belgian, viewpoint on this theory. Ray (2012) emphasises that theory and research stand in a relationship of mutual dependence. According to him (2012: 238) "[t]heory limits the set of questions that can be asked for the purpose of research, and research in turn draws a dynamic shifting boundary around what is to be theorized [sic], while also leading to the

progressive perfecting of existing theory". It is my hope that this research will contribute to South African CWS and, because of its South African specificity, also add to the set of questions that can be posed within this discourse.

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ADDENDUM A: Contextualising 7de Laan

THE SETTING

Hillside Heights: Situated in the centre of the suburb of *Hillside*, this old residential building consists of small apartments above shops such as *Oppikoffie* and *Eclectic E*, which are prominent in the narrative. Characters often interact in the foyer of the building, which features the stairs to the apartments as well as the entrances to the two abovementioned shops. *The Heights* (as it is colloquially referred to by the residents of *Hillside*) houses the bulk of the characters. It is owned by Gita McGregor and Oubaas van Zyl acts as the super. Other characters that live in apartments in *The Heights* include Altus and Paula, Emma, Oubaas and Hilda and Kim, Ntabiseng and Annelie (who share the girls' flat).

Oppikoffie: *Oppikoffie* is a coffee shop located on the ground floor of the *Hillside Heights*, directly opposite *Eclectic E*. It is owned and run by Charmaine Meintjies. Many of the younger characters are introduced into the soap opera by starting out as waiters in *Oppiekoffie*. These include, amongst others, Annelie, Bernard, Diederik, Kim, Pieter and Phulani. *Oppikoffie* serves as catalyst for the start of new narratives, since characters often meet here for business purposes or to discuss events or news featured in the *Hillside Times*. In the episode aired on the 29th of January 2013, for example, the characters are featured gathering around and catching up on news and gossip after Aggie and Lindile returned from holiday.

Eclectic E: *Eclectic E* is an up-market fashion boutique located opposite *Oppikoffie* on the ground level of *The Heights*. It is owned and run by Felicity Daniels (who is a successful fashion designer with her own fashion label entitled *Felicity's Fashions*) and her husband Herman (who also owns *Theron & Terreblanche*). Annelie is the assistant and recently became co-fashion designer after completing training in France. One of the storylines featured during the six months of analysis was of Annelie launching her own line and her subsequent fashion show. *Eclectic E* is portrayed as central to specifically the female characters who often rely on the

boutique for outfits, facilitating a lot of discussions centring on important social events happening in *Hillside*.

The Hillside Deli: *The Deli* is owned and run by Vince Meintjies, with Hilda De Kock as assistant. Similar to *Oppiekoffie*, the Deli is a space frequented by all the characters for the purposes of both social and work-related discussions. Vince also often caters for other events hosted in *Die Laan*.

The Hillside Bookshop: Owned by Ryno Lategan and run by Matrone Netta Nortjé and Marcel (Ryno's partner), the bookshop frequently hosts book releases, often featuring the original authors guest-starring as themselves. Due to Matrone's constant provision of free coffee and sweet baked treats, the bookshop functions as a prominent space in which characters meet and converse.

The Hillside Times: *The Hillside Times* is the local community newspaper with Ryno Lategan as editor-in-chief and Aggie Ngwenya as office manager. Journalists working at *The Times* (as it is colloquially referred to) include Ntabiseng, Bernard Jordaan, Errol Pieterse, Paula van der Lecq-de Bruyn and San-Mari van Graan. Emma le Roux later joins the team and Zander Meintjies acts as representative on all legal matters. The content of *The Hillside Times* often serves as a central trigger for a discussion of newsworthy events driving the narratives. For example, when Bernard starts the drive for collecting and making toys to donate to the children's ward of the hospital, this is prominently featured in the newspaper and extensively discussed by the characters and the community.

Bruynwaves: *Bruynwaves* is a creative events organising company owned by Altus de Bruyn. He employs Vanessa Meintjies, Diederik Greyling and Sifiso Ndlela. *Bruynwaves* often organises events hosted in *Die Laan*. These include, for example, fashion shows featuring *Eclectic E's* collections. Due to this it is often a central space for the discussion of important events and happenings in *Die Laan*.

Theron & Terreblanche: *T&T* (as it is colloquially referred to) is the local sporting equipment and outdoor shop, owned by Herman Croukamp. He employs San-Mari van Graan, Lindile Hadebe and later on Kim Conradie. *T&T* also houses the *Hillside gym* where the characters often meet for exercise, creating another space in which narratives develop.

O'Malleys: *O'Malleys* is the local sports pub where the young crowd hangs out. *O'Malleys* often provides the backdrop for first dates, developing romances and social events. Several of the characters have also worked here as waiters or barmen during the course of the show. Examples of characters that have worked, or work, in *O'Malleys* include Bernard and Pieter.

Stasie Ses: *Stasie Ses* (Station 6) is a cocktail bar which also serves light meals. This latest addition to the social venues featured in *Die Laan* is owned and run by Marko Greyling. Matrone Netta Nortjé does the catering, preparing specifically “Boerekos” and comfort food associated with traditional Afrikaans cooking. *Stasie Ses* often features local artists. During the six month period of analysis these included: Snotkop, Arno Carstens, Lindie Stander and André – “die vriendelike hipnotiseur” (André the friendly hypnotist) (31/03).

Ryno's house: Owned by Ryno Lategan, this old-style mansion is a popular venue for business meetings, house parties, book launches and even wedding receptions. Evelina (the housekeeper who is frequently referred to but never physically shown) is famous for her giblets and other breakfast treats. Pieter van Heerden and Bernard Jordaan (Ryno's nephews) share the house with him and his partner Marcel. Breakfast in Ryno's house is often used as backdrop for discussion of current events in the storyline.

Charmaine's house: Charmaine's house is a homely, traditional house which has served as home for a number of younger characters. Charmaine often takes in and looks after stray characters in her capacity as the earth mother figure. Adopted orphan Errol lives with Charmaine permanently. Kim Conradie and Diederik Greyling

are amongst the characters taken in by Charmaine in the episodes relevant to this analysis.

Other places that are also featured, but which are less prominent, include: Bonita's flower shop, *Hillside travel*, the *Le Petit Paris* restaurant, the Church, the *Mostly Matisse* restaurant and the *Hillside Clinic*.

Spaces featured in the narratives but never as an on-screen space include: The pharmacy, the butchery, The Cherry on Top (restaurant), Laura Lee's Beauty Salon, the Police station and the Magistrate's Court.

ADDENDUM B: Contextualising *Thuis*

THE SETTING

The *Zus & Zo Bed and Breakfast*: The local bed and breakfast is owned and run by Rosa and Jenny Verbeeck. After Jenny's previous business, *Ter Smissen*, was burned down by Marianne, she used the insurance money to start a bed and breakfast with her sister, Rosa. Rosa's husband, Waldek, and her daughter Peggy also live here. The *Zus&Zo* is represented as a comfortable middle-class institution which provides the backdrop for the trials and tribulations of the Verbeeck family. The restaurant, furthermore, provides a space for other characters in the soap to interact. Frankie and Tibo's wedding reception, for example, was hosted in the *Zus&Zo*. Taxi Leo is also situated within the *Zus&Zo* building creating the effect of an enclosed community where characters both live together as well as employ one another (Franco, 2001: 456).

***Taxi Leo*:** *Taxi Leo* is a taxi service owned and run by Leo Vertonghen. Europe has a much more developed public transport system than South Africa. As is the case in the rest of Europe, and in contrast to South Africa, public transport such as busses, trams, trains and taxis are primary means of transportation, which makes this representation of a local taxi business specific to the European and Flemish context. The control room of Leo's business is situated in the same building as the *Zus & Zo* and Leo employs several of the young characters in the soap opera. In the episodes relevant to this analysis he employed Jens De Belder, Rafael Campo, Femke De Grote, Mayra Magiels and Kasper Kosinski. Leo also previously employed Mo, a Moroccan character formerly featured in *Thuis*. During the aftermath of Fien's murder, the *Taxi Leo* office provided a safe place for Jens, where he was supported in his loss by both friends and colleagues. *Taxi Leo*, however, also functioned as the headquarters of Kasper's (the adoptive son of Rosa and Waldek, and a former member of a group of touring gypsies) drug dealing operation – unbeknownst to Leo. At the end of season 17 Femke runs over Simonne with one of Leo's taxi's after taking cocaine which she bought from Kasper.

Sanitechniek: *Sanitechniek* is the local plumbing business, co-owned by Luc Bomans, Frankie Bomans and Bram Schepers. Frankie and Bram share an apartment above *Sanitechniek*. After Guy is found innocent of the murder charges brought against him, Luc hires him to work at *Sanitechniek*. However, not only his co-workers, but also *Sanitechniek*'s clients react negatively to Luc's decision. This is exacerbated by Paulien and Katrien's distribution of flyers warning the community that there is a murderer in their midst. This causes *Sanitechniek* to lose a lot of clients. In an effort to help out his father, Frankie arranges that *Klus&Co*, the handyman business run by his father, Frank (who is also Luc's brother) and Waldek, be given some of *Sanitechniek*'s extra business. However, when *Sanitechniek* loses clients due to employing Guy, Frank conspires behind Frankie's back to win over said clients to his own business, which causes a family feud.

Frankie's apartment: Situated right above *Sanitechniek*, Frankie shares his apartment with his best friend Bram. Tibo (Frankie's boyfriend) regularly stays over and towards the end of the analysed period he moves in, resulting in Bram looking for his own apartment. The dinner / breakfast table in Frankie's apartment serves as a central point for the development of the narrative since a lot of conversations take place here. When Tibo meets his 15 year-old daughter, for example, a lot of the narratives around this topic develop in this space. Frankie and Tibo are a gay couple and depictions of their intimate romantic relationship is often featured here, which makes this a central space for the construction of gender roles in the soap.

Marianne Bastiaens (formerly De Decker)'s house: Marianne's house is often featured in the narrative and, in contrast to some of the other spaces featured in *Thuis*, the interior of the Bastiaens house is indicative of the family's upper class status. Marianne and her husband Geert share the house with her daughter Anne, Anne's partner Mayra and Anne's adopted daughter Sandrine. Marianne's lavish mansion houses the doctor's practice of her husband, Dr Geert Bastiaens and her daughter, Dr Ann De Decker. Towards the end of the analysed period a part of the house is also renovated to house Mayra Magiels' (Ann's partner) jewellery studio. Marianne is very aware of her social class and insists that her status be respected.

For example, during Mayra's renovations she objects to having Frank, Waldek and Eddy doing reparations in her house since she considers them to be of a lower class. She also warns David against collaborating with them in their beer brewing venture for these reasons. The breakfast table in Marianne's kitchen is central to the development of the narrative. Here Ann, Mayra, Marianne and Geert have breakfast every morning with both Tom and Nancy often interrupting or joining, creating an ideal space within which to discuss issues pertinent to the narrative and, in so doing, driving it forward.

Tom De Decker's apartment: Tom (Marianne's son) and Peter are partners in *De Decker Attorneys* whose offices are situated in Tom's apartment across the road from *Sanitechnik*. Tom also employs Lynn, who is a law student, as administrative worker in order to help her gain experience while she finishes her studies. During the period analysed, the office was featured often in connection to Guy's court case, since Tom represented Guy when he was accused of Fien's murder.

De Noorderzon travel café: Owned and run by Peggy Verbeeck, *De Noorderzon*, doubles up as a fusion restaurant and travel agent. Peggy employs Simonne, Julia, Femke and later Paulien, which makes *De Noorderzon* central to narrative developments concerning the Bomans, Van Capelle and De Grote families. Characters often meet in the *Noorderzon* for either pleasure or business and it is typically the place to catch up on gossip about the community. Peggy's rape also takes place here.

Julia Pelckmans' apartment: Julia shares her apartment with her two daughters, Paulien and Katrien Snackaert. The apartment serves as backdrop for discussions on family, as well as romantic issues, and is often featured after the death of Fien because of Julia's romantic involvement with Guy and the fact that Fien was a close friend and colleague of Katrien's. Katrien's anorexia and bulimia mainly develop in this space. Both Jens and Tim are frequent visitors to Julia's apartment.

Tim's apartment: Tim and Jens share an apartment in the same building as Julia. Narratives related to Jen's stalking of Guy primarily plays out in this space. Furthermore, because of Tim's vocation as police officer many of the crime-related storylines also develop here as Tim investigates them.

Femke's apartment: Femke de Grote shares her loft apartment with her boyfriend Peter and half-brother Rafael. At the beginning of the analysed period Femke is torn between her love for Peter and her incestuous relationship with her brother (whom she met in Spain and fell in love with before realising that they were related). The apartment is central to the developments in this storyline and it is also where Rafael stabs Peter after Femke's miscarriage. During the course of the analysed period both Nancy and Peggy live in the loft with Femke for short periods in an effort to support her after she lost her baby and Peter.

Nancy's apartment: Nancy De Grote (mother of Femke de Grote) lives in a less well-to-do apartment with her toddler Britney. She works as a cleaning lady in Marianne Bastiaens' house and the *Zus & Zo*. Britney was fathered by Nancy's husband Eddy who is in jail in Russia at the onset of the period of analysis and later returns to Nancy after his release. Nancy and Eddy are depicted as belonging to a lower class than the rest of the characters and their mannerisms and performances can be seen as binary opposites to those of Marianne and the Bastiaens household.

Simonne and Frank's house: Simonne and Frank (the parents of Frankie Bomans) share their house with Yvette Backx, Simonne's mother. The lounge area and breakfast table are often featured either for discussions about happenings in the community or humorous events, usually featuring Frank and Yvette. The décor, as well as Frank's demeanour and performances situate them specifically as working class.