

White South African New Women and cultural mobility in the first half of the 20th century

White South African New Women is an umbrella term by which I refer to a heterogeneous group of women of European descent who, while living in South Africa, variously conceived of their identity, and variously positioned themselves between Afrika and Europe. Moreover, categories such as South African, Afrikaner, or English, which they applied as national identifications, did not always correspond to the language – Afrikaans or English – to which they referred as their mother tongue or in which they wrote. Also, they represented various class backgrounds and had diverse opinions on female social roles. This group included middle-class writers, social reformers, trade union activists, working-class playwrights, suffragists. What they did have in common was, first of all, the white skin colour, which determined their position in a colonial society. The concept of the New Woman, in turn, denoted a modern female identity which emerged as a reaction to modernisation process marking the beginning of the 20th century in South Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Based on extensive library and archival research, mainly in South Africa, but also in the Netherlands and in Great Britain, the project will map circulation of feminist and socialist thought between Europe and South Africa. The materials which will be analysed include published texts – books, press articles, novels, and theoretical writings, as well as letters and other personal documents. These writings representing various approaches to feminism and socialism will be juxtaposed in order to demonstrate how they functioned as spaces of conflict, inspiration, or intertextual exchange.

This aim of this project is threefold. First, it sets out to locate South African white women's involvement in the international networks of feminists and socialists. In this way, it will show how white women, geographically separated from the European centre, followed European progressive thought and what local forms this thought took in South Africa. It will also address the question whether these international movements offered Afrikaner and English women in South Africa a possibility to overcome national animosities, an aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Did texts conveying socialist and feminist message create imagined communities above national identifications? Second, how did mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion work as regards race, gender, and class? This question arises from the observation that international movements, aiming at inclusion, i.e. giving power to a bigger part of society, in practice excluded certain social groups: first wave feminism excluded non-white women and South African socialism resulted in the creation of separate white and coloured trade unions. Therefore, the project sets out to describe how Afrikaner and English women used feminism and socialism to assert their white identities in pre-apartheid South Africa. The third issue concerns the correlation between gender, race, and class and the character of cultural mobility: what circumstances facilitated and what prevented the circulation of various progressive ideas?

The project is motivated by the fact that none of existing studies offers a comprehensive picture of the interconnectedness between English, Afrikaans, and Dutch literary and cultural traditions in South Africa in the first half of the 20th century where white women are the principal actors. Thus, the intended research will result in a picture of actors and networks, which emphasises the implications of the intersecting categories of race, gender, and class and their impact on the identity formation and cultural mobility in a colonial context.