



# The construction of split whiteness in the queer films *Kanarie* (2018) and *Moffie* (2019)

Grant Andrews

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After the end of formal apartheid, a number of South African feature films have explored queer white men in conservative social settings, with a particular focus on Afrikaans-speaking gay men. These films have reflected strict heteropatriarchal values within white Afrikaner culture where homosexuality is still often seen as a taboo topic. In this article I discuss two feature films with gay white male protagonists, *Kanarie* (2018) by Christiaan Olwagen and *Moffie* (2019) by Oliver Hermanus. These films both feature young men conscripted to fight in the South African Border War in the 1980s, but differ greatly in terms of genre, plot, and style. I argue that, while many scholars discuss whiteness as a general construct that affords privilege, the films demonstrate a split whiteness that is effected through the composition of particular shots and scenes as well as through the films' processes of production and reception. Whiteness is split into an invisibilised, assumedly critical perspective on the one hand, with transnational links to the Global North, and a hypervisibilised, reified, and criticised racial identity on the other hand, located specifically in the heteropatriarchal Afrikaner male. Queer characters in both films are able to split their identities and dissociate from uncomfortable parts of their whiteness, taking on an assumed criticality that highlights their own oppression and exclusion. The films thus dismiss the protagonists' complicity in white supremacy, and allow audiences to dissociate from their own complicity in anti-black violence and oppression. **Keywords:** South African film, queer film, Afrikaner culture, gay white characters, whiteness.


## Introduction

A number of queer Afrikaans films released in recent years have turned a critical eye to white Afrikaner male identities, particularly through excavating histories of queer oppression in a culture that is often imagined as overwhelmingly conservative in its attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Many scholars have explored white Afrikaner culture in South Africa as founded on traditionalist gender politics where "normative, white Afrikaner masculinity still operates to expel gayness from its self-definition" (Sonnekus 22). Afrikaner culture is thus discursively positioned as an outlier of a generalised progressive "whiteness" in South Africa, which is often made to seem universally accepting of queer identities, or as Andy Carolin (99) argues, "the normative power of whiteness mitigates the otherness of same-sex sexualities, while it simultaneously constructs an imagined transnational gay community that is blind to its own constitutive racialisation".

What ultimately emerges, in film as in broader social discourses, is the association of the language Afrikaans, and the culture it represents, with conservative (and geographically specific) gender and sexuality politics, whereas in contrast English-speaking white identities are associated with progressive politics that position themselves in Global North discourses of sexual liberation. In this article I analyse two recent South African queer films, *Kanarie* (2018) by Christiaan Olwagen and *Moffie* (2019) by Oliver Hermanus, to trace the linguistic and visual constructions of white queer masculinities in these films, and locate the ways that these representations engage with national and transnational networks of production and reception. I refer to other queer South African films to explore the complexities of representing whiteness and sexuality in the country.

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I argue that these two films exemplify forms of *split* whiteness, where whiteness becomes fractured and some parts of white privilege are discursively obscured and dissociated from by the protagonists of these queer films. Splitting whiteness allows for an assumed critical voice to be adopted by certain characters in the films as they ostensibly criticise the workings of white supremacy located in *other* white characters. The assumed critical element of whiteness in these films often interpellates Global North queer networks and assumes the Global North white audience, and thus is often located in English-speaking white characters. The whiteness that is criticised is rooted in the here-and-now (or there-and-then) of South Africa, and is often associated squarely with heteropatriarchal Afrikaner male characters. This splitting is present in the production and reception of these queer Afrikaans films.

I contend that recognising this split whiteness is significant in maintaining criticality in the face of *all* forms of white privilege and white supremacy, particularly as white supremacy intersects with dynamics of gender and sexuality in South Africa. The generalisation of whiteness as a construct in South African academic writing has obscured certain forms of privilege held by those who assume the “critical” white voice or who overidentify with these ostensibly progressive white characters, particularly audiences from the Global North who are able to split parts of themselves that are captured in the “villainous” characters in the films.

Since the end of apartheid, there have been very few white English-speaking queer protagonists in South African feature films, with the notable exceptions of the white lesbian lead character in Catherine Stewart’s *While You Weren’t Looking* (2015), and the English-speaking white gay love interest in the recent romantic comedy *No Hiding Here* (2021). By contrast, a relatively large number of films feature white Afrikaans-speaking queer characters or focus primarily on white Afrikaans cultures and their reactions to gay men: *Proteus* (2003), *Skoonheid* (2011), *Jimmy in Pienk* (Jimmy in Pink) (2013), *Die Stropers* (*The Harvesters*) (2018), and *Kanarie* (*Canary*) being notable examples. Lindsey B. Green-Simms also notes that “queer feature film in and about South Africa has [almost] exclusively centered on male relationships” (129) and largely ignore female same-sex sexualities. Here seems to be an implication that Afrikaans gay men in particular are an anomaly, an identity that disrupts norms and values of the conservative white Afrikaans cultures in ways that are fascinating to filmmakers and audiences, while white English-speaking queer characters are invisibilised through their taken-for-granted acceptability in the post-apartheid milieu. I read these constructions of white gay masculinities as operating in a colonial matrix that positions “global” audiences as unimplicated in South African racism and homophobia, reproducing a Euro/American-centric gaze that situates the origin and maintenance of apartheid squarely in the Afrikaner male body and shows resistance or victimhood to apartheid structures in the voice of the English-speaking white character. This is evidenced in the production of Hermanus’s films *Skoonheid* and *Moffie*, as both were produced in partnership with European production companies with European co-writers, and both received significant awards attention in Europe, with *Skoonheid* winning the Queer Palm at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. Both films also feature violent and domineering Afrikaner men victimising English-speaking attractive young white men who I argue are audience surrogates for the “global” liberal audience, demonstrating the splitting of these white identities. As Odie Henderson contends in a review of *Moffie*, “Hermanus is a Black director casting his film in an explicitly White gaze”.

The two films, *Kanarie* and *Moffie*, were selected for comparison as they both look back at a particularly volatile moment in South Africa’s history: the Border War of the 1980s where white men were conscripted into army service. These two films, the former directed by a coloured South African man and the latter by a white Afrikaans man, both engage with transnational queer networks and critically confront Afrikaner heteropatriarchal masculinities. I explore how the central white gay male characters obscure systems of oppression and white privilege that are broader than the heteropatriarchal Afrikaner nationalism that they critique, particularly racist violence perpetuated by the white gay characters themselves. As Chantelle Gray (5) explains in her analysis of *Kanarie*, “the humanising of white, gay male figures under apartheid potentially elides the complicity of all whites in white supremacy—if not through ideological interpellation, then through structural stratification (white privilege)”. Alissa Macoun’s explanation of assumed criticality is useful in thinking about these films:

[A] discourse of colonizing white innocence circulates in policy, academic and other spaces to reinforce and obscure progressive white investments in maintaining power relationships generated by ongoing colonising racist violence through presenting particular individuals, groups and institutions as non-problematic, and so not complicit in historical and contemporary violence. (85)

These narratives of white queer characters represent queer oppression in ways that situate the white gay man as *also* victim of apartheid, often alongside images of violence against black characters, and as therefore situated as (at least partially) ‘outsider’ to white privilege, a split white identity that allows for assumed criticality. We forgive the queer characters in these films for their complicity in racist violence, even as Olwagen’s protagonist seems consumed with his own suffering without reflecting on the racist system he is a part of, and Hermanus’s protagonist kills a black soldier.<sup>1</sup>

### Locating Afrikaans queer films

While South Africa does not produce many feature films per year, Emelia Steenkamp (4) notes that “Afrikaans is still the language in which the most local feature films are produced”.<sup>2</sup> Chris Broodryk (1) characterises Afrikaans cinema as “a cinema of political impotence, a cinema devoid of a political voice” and Steenkamp (4) adds that the majority of post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema is comprised of slapstick comedy and romance films that do not engage with racial politics or political tensions in South Africa. In effect, “South African films marketed to white Afrikaans audiences hardly ever offer historical accounts that authentically address the role of Afrikaans people in the system of apartheid, or which give nuanced, multifocal perspectives on history or the post-apartheid landscape” (Andrews 32). Steenkamp also adds that the majority of Afrikaans films reinforce a conservative white cultural identity that hinges on nationalism and Calvinist Christianity, referred to as “Afrikaner” identity, and the films thus do not cater to a multiracial or diverse viewership who speak Afrikaans; “contemporary Afrikaans cinema [...] still largely constitutes Afrikaner cinema” (Steenkamp 5). Gray (2) locates South African film as a space of “interweaving between the ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’”, engaging in global economies of production and consumption, but notes that “Afrikaans medium films are more often than not about and watched by white Afrikaners. This gives the impression that Afrikaans belongs to Afrikaners and Afrikanerdom (the culture of Afrikaners)” (11).

However, queer Afrikaans films have provided interesting counterpoints to this trend, as these films have been willing to return to the apartheid past and at least hint at the widespread violence and oppression against black people which is ignored in the majority of Afrikaans cinema, or to highlight lingering political and social tensions around conservative Afrikaner identities, as in *Skoonheid* and *Die Stropers*. In addition, the majority of these films are *not* directed or produced by white Afrikaans-speaking people; *Proteus* is directed by Canadian John Greyson in collaboration with South African Jack Lewis, *Die Stropers* by Greek-South African Etienne Kallos, and *Skoonheid* and *Moffie* by coloured director Hermanus. Many of these Afrikaans queer films thus seem to reflect an outsider’s perspective on Afrikaner culture, and the transnational networks involved in the production of these films adds to this framing. Kallos, in an interview with Daniel Dercksen, discusses his process of writing *Die Stropers*, a story about a rural Afrikaner family with two queer sons, in ways that demonstrate the splitting of white identities; he both ‘others’ Afrikaner people and identifies them with the system of apartheid, while acknowledging fragments of white privilege in himself and his own transnational cultural background that are never represented in his film:

I respect the way the Afrikaners work the land—they are devoted to it. And I like the new generation. I wanted to explore adolescence and tell a story about the first generation to be born completely outside of the Apartheid system. [...] How do you live with the weight of post-colonialism on your shoulders? Do we have to literally and figuratively burn the structures of our ancestors to become African? This is my experience too—the fracture and conflict inherent in being an African of European descent. The experience of fracture is important to me as a storyteller, to love and hate in the same breath, to belong and be a stranger at the same time. (Kallos, in Dercksen, “Writer-Director Etienne Kallos Talks about *Die Stropers* (The Harvesters)”)

Kallos seems to both universalise whiteness in these comments, yet particularises oppressive whiteness as being symbolised by the conservative Afrikaner family he represents in his film. This conflict of belonging in Africa is focalised through Afrikaner characters, and the other white South African cultures are backgrounded in this critical encounter with whiteness.

This dual insider/outsider status of white South Africans signals a significant split in geographical ‘home’, and often locates Afrikaners as ‘at home’ in Africa while situating other white South African groups who primarily speak English as ‘global’. Steenkamp (9) explains that the term Afrikaner “encapsulates the history of the meeting between Europe and the African continent”, rooting the identity in this particular geography. Many Afrikaners

resist an association with Europe and define themselves as ambivalently “African” (Verwey and Quayle 555). Additionally, the rootedness of the Afrikaans language in Southern Africa produces a further split from European identity, even though the language developed primarily from Dutch.

Gray (8) analyses how Afrikaans queer cinema, in particular the films *Skoonheid* and *Kanarie*, constitute a “hauntology” that allows suppressed histories to impact on the present through images that haunt identities in contemporary South Africa. She explains that “the politics of contemporary cinema almost always inhabit spaces that are connected to the expressions, materiality, immateriality, reality and indeed spectres of white supremacy” (8). Green-Simms argues that many queer South African films that focus on masculinities are engaged in forms of cutting—the films “break from (i.e. cut away and cut through) hegemonic and racialized forms of homophobia and hyper-masculinity” but also seem to resist imagined presents and futures that are more accepting of queer identities, “cutting off” these possibilities and “returning again to the heteropatriarchal and racial structures that continue to constrain the present” (131). The queer films, thus, are engaged in a form of truth-telling and resist simplistic concepts of “the progressive rainbow nation that the country tries to present” (124).

The Afrikaans queer films listed above indicate that this has become a niche but well-defined genre, and *Moffie*’s themes and focus fit neatly within this expanding genre. The majority of these films are tragic, depicting conservative cultural or social settings where queer characters are either repressed or oppressed, and contain violence against and exclusion of queer people. While all of the central characters in *Moffie* are English-speaking, much of the dialogue (and all of the homophobic abuse that constitutes the main thrust of the film) is in Afrikaans, and the lead characters have very few lines of dialogue throughout the film. Like the queer Afrikaans films *Proteus*, *Skoonheid*, and *Die Stropers*, the film focuses an almost anthropological, critical lens on Afrikaner culture, with a range of stock Afrikaner characters in supporting roles to highlight the heteropatriarchal masculinity that defined apartheid-era Afrikanerdom and characterised the nationalistic Afrikaner leaders of apartheid. Afrikaans queer films are also distinct from recent US or European queer cinema that circulate through mainstream transnational film routes, as recent Global North films with queer characters are much more diverse in terms of theme and approach, and have largely transcended the trope of queer narratives as tragedies or relegating queer characters to secondary roles in comedies, as in *Jimmy in Pienk*.

Both Carolin and Gray analyse these queer Afrikaans films utilising globalised definitions of whiteness as the empty signifier, where, as Richard Dyer (44) argues, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular”. As Carolin explains,

whiteness now functions as a way of camouflaging the otherness of same-sex sexuality. Whiteness in the present continues to be imbued with much of the normative power it exerted during the colonial and apartheid periods. The difference, however, is that while this whiteness was previously thought about as a privileged site of an imagined purity, in the post-apartheid period it evidences an inherent elasticity in which practices of racial inclusion outweigh those of heteronormative exclusion. (88)

Nicky Falkof (16) has looked specifically at the divergence in filmic representations between Afrikaans whiteness and English-speaking South African whiteness, explaining that there exists a “continued depoliticisation and invisibility of [English-speaking] whiteness. This is a longstanding historical trend in South Africa that has had a significant influence on post-apartheid conceptions of guilt and responsibility”. While Falkof locates the differentiation specifically within language and culture in the texts she analyses, I understand the split whiteness as a function of assumed criticality that is refracted through queer characters in the films I analyse, where even characters who might be Afrikaans-speaking can associate themselves with the critical outsider voice against oppressive Afrikaner white masculinity. I argue that heteropatriarchal Afrikaner whiteness in the two films I discuss, as opposed to *queer* Afrikaner whiteness or progressive Global North/ English-speaking whiteness, becomes a hypervisibilised signifier that obscures the complicity of *all* white people in systems of white supremacy that continue today. Through these films, whiteness is split in ways that situate violence against black bodies and queer bodies squarely in formal apartheid or conservative Afrikaner culture, often in ways in which queer victimhood is awkwardly paralleled with black victimhood to erase white queer people’s complicity in systems of racial oppression. This splitting is a type of dissociation, where the self is able to hide particular uncomfortable elements of whiteness through situating the benefits and cruelties of systemic racism ‘somewhere else’, in ‘those’ white people who can safely be criticised without really implicating those who do the critiquing.



### Christiaan Olwagen's *Kanarie*

*Kanarie* blends the genres of musical, comedy, and poignant drama. The film has biographical elements, as the script is based on the experiences of director Olwagen's long-time collaborator Charl-Johan Lingenfelder, who was also the writer and musical director of *Kanarie* (Pieterse). The lead character of the film, Johan Niemand (Schalk Bezuidenhoud), struggles to accept his sexuality as he experiences homophobia in the small-town setting where he was raised and later is expected to perform hegemonic masculinity in the military when he joins the army's choir group, called the *Kanaries* (Canaries). However, despite the unrelenting cruelty and almost suffocating environment that the military is shown to be in the film, "Johan finds others like him, and even if some, like Ludolf, are threatening at first, he finds *himself* through them" (Gevisser, emphasis in original).

In contrast to *Moffie*, the queer characters, Johan, his friend Ludolf (Germandt Geldenhuys), and Johan's romantic interest Wolfgang (Hannes Otto), are all Afrikaans-speaking. In addition, the Afrikaans-speaking crew, writers, and director, and the Afrikaans-language television channel kykNET who funded and co-produced the film, allow for the voices of Afrikaans-speaking characters to take on more authenticity and be much more clearly defined than in *Moffie*, where notably no Afrikaans-speaking character is represented as queer. Lingenfelder notes that the motivation for the film was to act as a type of mirror on Afrikaans culture: "I am Afrikaans and we made this as an Afrikaans film to be seen by Afrikaans people. [It's] time for people to stare into the mirror and realize that they can overcome their own demons, their own wars that they are constantly fighting within themselves" (Lingenfelder in Dercksen, "Charl-Johan Lingenfelder Talks about the Astounding New South African Film *Kanarie*").

*Kanarie* is also decidedly camp, with the gay male characters allowed to embrace non-normative gender expression, and to find intimacy and camaraderie with other gay men even if they cannot 'come out' in their oppressive environments. As Gevisser notes: "*Kanarie* abounds in Olwagen's deep appreciation of camp's power to 'dethrone the serious,' as Susan Sontag put it". This tendency to "dethrone the serious", however, also creates significant erasures in the film; images of violence against black people are significantly backgrounded in Olwagen's film. The mirror on Afrikaans culture Lingenfelder alludes to seems to primarily be a mirror reflecting homophobia, with racism and white supremacy pushed to the far edges of the narrative.

The film's embrace of camp is on full display in the opening scene. Johan is at his home with two female friends who dare him to walk down the street wearing his mother's wedding dress, and he confidently accepts their dare, lip synching to Bronski Beat's 1984 pop song "Smalltown Boy" as he marches down the street of what Gray (10) describes as a "typical Afrikaner town, devoid of any people of colour on the street". The lyrics of the song set up the tension of the film and the outsider status of the queer character: "The love that you need will never be found at home". As Johan marches, the scene is intercut with images of him wearing an outfit resembling British pop singer Boy George's iconic braids and ribbons. As the scene progresses, other boys, many of them shown in traditionally feminine situations like ballet dancing or arranging flowers, join in on Johan's march and perform a choreographed dance in the street; these boys represent younger versions of Johan experiencing homophobic bullying and exclusion. The scene displays a form of splitting in Johan's character; there is a fantasy life, linked to androgynous or queer European or American pop stars who are invoked throughout the film, and there is the Johan we see in military scenes where he is reserved, speaking in a quiet voice and almost always deferential. The splitting seems to engage in transnational queer networks, where associations with the Global North, through references to music and popular culture, signal an escape from the repressive Afrikaner culture that Johan finds himself in, seeking the "love" that he cannot find at home.

However, even as the music is an escape for Johan, it signals a splitting that might allow him to ignore his white privilege, and in the same way might allow the viewer to largely ignore the workings of white supremacy in the film. Gray (15) notes that political and social complicity of the *Kanaries* in the war effort is "drowned out by the spectacle of musical genre so that the spectres of the Border War and South Africa's role in the destabilisation of neighbouring countries to retain ownership of South West Africa/Namibia remains unchallenged. Thus, there is a denial of historical and contemporary complicity in the investment in white supremacy".

The young conscripts experience a barrage of demeaning homophobic and gendered language, with their superiors frequently using the words "*moffie*" or "*mofgat*", the latter word translating to "gay arse". Annel Pieterse (381) notes that the film is an invitation for viewers to reflect on culture, gender, and identity in South Africa, and acts as "an excavation of the violence and trauma inflicted on young men by state apparatuses of control and compounded within the family unit and the broader Afrikaans community". Green-Simms explains: "the

film does, in many ways, seem to be aimed at a white audience, especially a gay white audience, who might see themselves caught in the middle and might be comforted by seeing Johan's beautifully rendered, and admittedly arduous, journey to self-acceptance" (159). This imagined gay white audience is almost decidedly Afrikaner, due to the film's cultural specificity and the lack of an English-speaking audience surrogate that would more easily appeal to international audiences. The insular mirroring function of the film is demonstrated by the lack of international awards recognition or film festival presence in the Global North, especially when compared to the queer Afrikaans films produced by those outside of Afrikaans-speaking culture and more clearly framed for a Global North white gaze, like *Skoonheid*, *Moffie*, and *Die Stropers*. The insider perspective of *Kanarie* might be particularly significant in relation to the idea of white Afrikaner gay men being "caught in the middle" (Green-Simms 159), and the understanding and sympathy the audience feels for the gay protagonists allow for a type of redress for past violence against gay men, a sense that gay people are now accepted in Afrikaner culture, and even vindication for the *Kanaries* for their role in the Border War as they become the "critical" outsiders who conveniently ignore or explain away much of their complicity in apartheid.

Green-Simms explains that the film's position on apartheid is at best ambiguous. She notes that "there is a great deal of political and racial tension that is either cut out of the film or offered up momentarily only to be cut away from" (155), and:

it is hard to tell [...] whether *Kanarie* is itself silencing black voices or whether the film is registering this silencing in order to critique it. And likewise, though Johan certainly begins to open his eyes to the oppression around him, it is difficult to tell to what extent he becomes fully conscious of apartheid's injustices and aware of his own participation in the system. (157)

Pieterse (380) explains that images of black soldiers and a black man lying dead, displayed over the sounds of the *Kanaries* singing when they tour the border, show how "black South Africans were represented in the interests of Afrikaner Nationalist propaganda: as peripheral servile characters, or as dead terrorists". The reproduction of these images in the film, Pieterse argues, shows Johan's "dawning awareness of the injustice of the apartheid system, and how it impacts on his own personal expression" (380), and Gibson Ncube (97) similarly holds that "[b]y thinking of his role in the war, [Johan] unwittingly questions apartheid as a system that dehumanises people not only along the lines of race but also of sexual orientation". However, I argue that the latter concern of Johan's personal expression or the oppression of queer people significantly outweighs his reflection on broader injustices, especially racial injustices. Johan seems able to split his understanding of injustice within hypermasculine Afrikaner culture to be chiefly the effect of this ideology on queer white people like himself, and the images of racist violence are merely flashes in the periphery of his consciousness that signal his position as critical outsider, but that he never internalises. In fact, Johan's largest trauma in the film comes from a moment when a cow is shot at the border, and he imagines himself shooting the cow in a cutaway fantasy sequence rather than reflecting on the widespread *human* violence that happened at the border. Whether this cow's death is metaphorical for violence against black bodies is a link too subtly drawn in the film to render it meaningful (and even so would be an offensive metaphor), and the screaming of the cow is intermingled in Johan's fantasy sequence with the sound of bicycle bells that Johan associates with the homophobia he experienced as a child, subsuming this violence into his personal oppression.

The splitting of apartheid injustices, and almost complete dissociation with violence against black people, is shown in Johan's final desire, when he is named part of the programme coordination team of the *Kanaries*, to merge the song "Victims" by Boy George's band Culture Club with Afrikaans folk songs. In effect, he seeks to merge a Global North sensibility of queer acceptance with Afrikaner culture; Johan wishes to be part of the accepted group in the army's white supremacist ideology by incorporating a gay love song, rather than questioning this ideology in any meaningful way by, for example, wishing to incorporate an anti-apartheid struggle song, as this would seemingly be a step too far even in the film's fantastical world. This split whiteness is also demonstrated through a scene where an English-speaking white woman addresses the *Kanaries* after a performance, asking them if they have ever been to the black townships like other members of the Defence Force, and Johan responds: "That's not really the purpose of the *Kanaries* [...] We deliver a message of hope to those who have loved ones in the army". Johan might be speaking to the audience here about the purpose of the film as well—the purpose being never to stray into the uncomfortable truths of the injustices located in the townships, but to focus on a message of "hope" for gay Afrikaans-speaking men.

### Oliver Hermanus's *Moffie*

*Moffie* is set in 1981, and follows a young gay conscript in the South African Defence Force, Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brümmer), as he is subject to dehumanising treatment during his military training and eventually fights in the Border War. The film is based on the novel of the same name by André Carl van der Merwe published in 2006, but there are significant changes made to the narrative in the film. Green-Simms (194) explains that “in his adaptation Hermanus strips the novel of its romantic plot and makes it less a coming out story and more a deeply discomforting portrayal of what it means to come of age amidst such racist and homophobic violence”. In the film, Nicholas’s Afrikaans-sounding surname is taken from his stepfather, and Nicholas still has a strong relationship with his biological, English-speaking father, Miles (Michael Kirch). This change from the novel, where Nicholas’s biological father is Afrikaans, indicates the film’s approach to splitting white identities—Nicholas is haunted by the name that he adopted but that he does not claim, and despite being the audience surrogate who can be taken to be (assumedly) displeased with racism and apartheid ideology, the name indicates that his ‘progressive’, ‘critical’ whiteness will be subsumed in the ideology of his stepfather.

Mark Gevisser discusses the linguistic dimensions of abuse and exclusion in the film, explaining that “constant abuse is levelled primarily at black people, but also at the English-speakers among [the conscripts], whom they call *soutpiele*, ‘salt-dicks,’ to suggest a penis dangling in the ocean, because, unlike Afrikaners, Anglo South Africans are still perceived to have one foot in Europe”. It is absurd to compare these anti-English sentiments to the anti-black or anti-gay abuse in the film or to systemic oppression in South Africa, but the general effect of linguistic and cultural exclusion is still significant for the characters. These English-speaking protagonists are enmeshed in a brutal military environment and surrounded by Afrikaner men, and they are almost exclusively addressed in Afrikaans. Nicholas is constantly confronted with the Afrikaans word “*moffie*”, a homophobic slur often translated as “faggot”. Nicholas is both insider and outsider to whiteness in the film, and this split position is often reflected through language; the audience is meant to sympathise with Nicholas as a victim of abuse, and the imagined global audience is given access to the interiority of Nicholas and the other sympathetic characters, many of them queer, because they speak the familiar ‘global’ language of English and are confronted by the racist, homophobic characters who all speak Afrikaans.

On the train ride to his training, Nicholas meets his friend Michael (Matthey Vey) and the two bond when Nicholas assures Michael he is not Afrikaner despite his surname. The following scene is one of the most striking of the film: the train stops at a station where a black man is sitting on a bench. The boys on the train shout abuse at this black man—only Afrikaans abuse is audible—and Nicholas and Michael look on, seemingly dismayed. One of the boys throws a bag filled with vomit at the man, and a close-up of the black man’s face is shown as the train leaves the station. Nicholas and Michael are no longer visible, their complicity in the attack obscured by the other boys’ laughter. Green-Simms (195) explains that unlike scenes in *Kanarie* that cut away from violence on black bodies, scenes such as the assault on the black man “make undeniable the horror of white violence against black bodies”. Nicholas’s silence in the scene reads as disapproval, and the two boys are immediately cast as unimplicated in the racism that underpins their military training.

While Nicholas and Michael begin the film seeming innocent, the film suggests that the relentless training and the dehumanisation they experience condition them into compliant soldiers. Abuse is rained on the young white conscripts. The lieutenant tells them in their first day of training: “You scabs are now the property of the South African government [...] You are no longer someone. You are scabs. Bloody, puss-filled, useless scabs”. Gevisser notes that the innocence and attractiveness of all the young men in the film is highlighted by the historically-inaccurate depiction of their heads, not being shorn when they start basic training, accentuating a delicate youthfulness. In addition, the multiple early shots of the young men’s nudity, for example as they playfully swim together in a body of water near their camp, adds an eroticism to the visual design that contradicts the violence of the film; as Henderson acerbically notes, “the lingering camera gives off a ‘Military Twinks for Apartheid’ vibe”. Gevisser claims of the film’s design: “If Hermanus idealizes his young soldiers, its purpose, paradoxically, is to make real what has become a buzz phrase of our times: their fragile masculinity”. The intention seems to be to draw a contrast between the innocent and sympathetic conscripts and the cruel superiors who work to strip them of this innocence.

Michael is initially vocally critical of the war effort and apartheid ideology, asking Nicholas as they watch a propaganda video during their training: “Do you believe this shit?” and saying to a group of young women they meet in a nightclub, “You know it’s all bullshit”. In one scene, Nicholas and Michael clean their guns as they sing the

song “Sugar Man” by American singer Rodriguez, which was banned by the South African government, officially due to the song’s references to drug use; however, political references in Rodriguez’s music made him popular amongst anti-apartheid groups in South Africa and this likely influenced the ban. The moment of Nicholas and Michael bonding over the song, smiling as they sing it but simultaneously handling their weapons, demonstrates a split whiteness, where they locate themselves within transnational, liberal cultural flows while in training to fight in a pro-apartheid war. The implication is that Nicholas and Michael, just like many other conscripted young men, are unwilling participants, even victims of apartheid. This sentiment is repeated by the boys in Olwagen’s film *Kanarie* who, when asked why they are part of the war effort, protest: “We didn’t have a choice”.

However, the soldiers are not innocent for long. When Michael is speaking of going to the border with the young women in the nightclub, he says “*Ek voel fokol*” (I feel fuck all), explaining to them that this is the “army motto”. He later repeats this line when the soldiers arrive at the border between Namibia (then called South West Africa and under South Africa’s administration) and Angola to fight in the war. When they encounter a group of black children, Michael aggressively points his gun at them, seeming ready to shoot and perpetuate the violence against black bodies that is demanded by apartheid and by white supremacy generally. Nicholas eventually shoots and kills a black child in combat, and stands over the boy staring directly into his eyes as he dies, showing no emotion as the camera frames Nicholas’s face in a close-up shot; he feels “*fokol*”.

Both Michael and Nicholas are seduced into apartheid ideology, just as the viewer is seduced into forgiving these boys for their violence and almost exclusively feeling empathy for them. They are, after all, the primary victims in the film’s world, and the violence they inflict on nameless black bodies is never given the same weight as the violence inflicted upon them. The black characters, in effect, become little more than props in the tragedies of the conscripts, or as Henderson says of the black characters, “[t]heir suffering is the sole characteristic of their humanity”.

The anti-gay violence, however, is made viscerally real for viewers in multiple scenes that are shocking and disturbing to watch. During training, two boys, Baxter (Cody Mountain) and Hilton (Luke Tyler), are supposedly caught being intimate with each other in a toilet stall. The two appear with bruises standing in front of rows of other conscripts in formation, who wield guns and chant a call and response led by their lieutenant: “What are they?” “*Moffies!*”. Baxter and Hilton disappear after this scene, and the other soldiers speak about what likely happened to them, as Michael says that they would be sent to Ward 22, referring to the psychiatric facility that operated during apartheid and used “aversion therapy, hormone therapy, sex change operations and barbiturates in the 1970s and 1980s on young white homosexual men as a means to ‘cure’ them of their homosexual ‘disease’” (Jones 397–8). The faces of Michael and Nicholas are framed in close-up shots, looking concerned, while the Afrikaans-speaking soldiers joke about homosexuality and about who else might be gay in their group. The scene also shows close-up shots of Nicholas’s romantic interest in the film, Dylan (Ryan de Villiers), who pretends to be asleep but clearly internalises the exclusionary jokes voiced by the other young men.

The brutality of what these queer characters experience is starkly shown in a later scene where desire is interrupted by violence. The soldiers play volleyball, Nicholas admiring the shirtless Dylan and seemingly intoxicated by him. But the game, and Nicholas’s fantasy of developing a real relationship with Dylan, are interrupted when a group of soldiers run out of a nearby building chasing after Baxter, who had returned from Ward 22. Baxter looks around in desperation as the other soldiers shout for him to put down his gun, and he faces the group playing volleyball as he shoots himself in the head. The image of violence is meant to shock the viewer, signalling all that had been unrepresented about what Baxter had suffered at Ward 22.

The scene immediately cuts to the young men playing a violent game in their barracks. The game is a reworked version of spin the bottle, which usually is associated with burgeoning sexuality in adolescence. In this case the group spin the bottle to determine which other young man they will fight. The confluence of violence and sexuality is emphasised when Nicholas spins the bottle and it points to Dylan. Nicholas aggressively punches Dylan, perhaps a projection of the desire he wishes to reject in himself—the type of desire that had just led to Baxter’s death—or perhaps a fulfilment of the metaphorical intimacy that the game implies and that Nicholas is not allowed to express in any other way. As Carolin (92) explains of the moment, “[t]he intensity of their repressed feelings boils over, and Nicholas and Dylan viciously assault one another, giving effect to the hypermasculine heteronormative logic of the apartheid military”.

These multiple forms of violence, on black and queer bodies, indicate the necessary dissociation that the characters undertake in order to survive. Green-Simms explains that the film “dwells not on liberation but on



the lasting psychological damage done by apartheid's multiple dehumanisations" (162). But in its construction of split whiteness, of idealising the young white men and especially of centring the victimhood of the queer, English-speaking characters, the film also invites viewers to split their sympathy in the film and to *forget* the violence against black people that our protagonists effect. The real perpetrators, the film seduces us into believing, are the Afrikaner characters who abuse our queer protagonists or discursively exclude them, even when Nicholas callously kills a black child and feels *nothing*.

Sadly, the viewer, too, is led to feel little for this black child killed by Nicholas; Nicholas shoots in retaliation to what sounds like a gunshot, moments after running through a field of landmines; the child's face is obscured by shadows, making his age unclear and dulling the sympathy the viewer might feel; and the framing shots of Nicholas's stoic reaction last much longer than the shot of the dying child. Gevisser wonders: "Why does the camera linger, from Nick's point of view, for several uncomfortable beats after the victim's last breath? [...] Hermanus will not have Nick, or us, turn away: he wants to remind us who the real victims of apartheid were". But Nicholas does turn away, back to his privileged life in an almost fantastical closing scene at a whites-only beach where he reunites with Dylan, who had been released from Ward 22. Nicholas seems ready to move on from the war, to find love and intimacy. Dylan, however, is unable to enjoy the idyllic beach scene and retreats to a nearby public toilet, and it is Dylan's trauma and an elliptical stare from Nicholas, alone on the whites-only beach, that the viewer is left with in the closing moments.

*Kanarie* and *Moffie*, while both exploring the experiences of queer characters in the Border War during the 1980s, differ greatly in their approach. Gevisser explains that "*Kanarie* offers an unexpected counternarrative to *Moffie*'s world, inviting us into a military environment where gay boys could find their own space" since "beyond the homoerotic gaze, there is no sense in *Moffie* of what might be called a queer sensibility or gay community". In *Kanarie*, there is no explicit violence against gay characters and no reference to Ward 22 as in *Moffie*. On the other hand, while *Moffie* makes some attempt to show the queer white characters' complicity in apartheid, *Kanarie* seems even more forgiving of its protagonists.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have located the two films *Kanarie* and *Moffie* within Afrikaans queer cinema and demonstrated how whiteness does not operate in a singular way, but is split into an assumed critical form of whiteness and an undesirable whiteness that can be the easier subject of criticism, mostly for its homophobia but also peripherally through its association with racism and white supremacy. The adoption of this assumed critical whiteness is linked to characters' (and the audience's) associations with what is framed as Global North sensibilities of queer acceptance, but these dynamics, and the effective/affective vilification of only one form of whiteness in the films, obscures the multiple workings of white supremacy. In *Kanarie*, the assumed critical white character is the gay Afrikaner male, and his victimisation and reluctance to be part of the war, merely singing its propaganda and not inflicting physical violence, dismisses these characters' complicity in apartheid violence (and by extension, ongoing systemic violence in South Africa).

Through *Moffie*'s interpellation of a Global North audience and the audience surrogates of English-speaking queer characters, these characters are made to be overly sympathetic to audiences to the point where their complicity in apartheid is backgrounded, and the visceral, extremely uncomfortable viewing experience positions white supremacy almost exclusively in the figure of the heteropatriarchal Afrikaner male. This allows the audience to split these Afrikaner characters from the way that *all* white people (including those in Global North audiences who praise and award films like *Moffie*) are invested in transnational circuits of white supremacy in ways that directly or indirectly support racist systems like apartheid. As Sekoetlane Phamodi says in his critique of the film, entitled "Hermanus's Acclaimed 'Moffie' is Probably Not for Black Queers", the film's "decided refusal to examine the cost of [the white characters'] context and choices to their and our collective humanity only [reproduces] the tired trope of South Africa's whites as apartheid's facile victims rather than its passive collaborators".

It is of course important to excavate histories of oppression against queer people and to tell these stories truthfully. However, I argue that these films, through splitting whiteness, particularly in their queer characters, might reproduce harmful discourses of white supremacy as located *out there*, only in particular white identities like Afrikaner heteropatriarchal males, vindicating some white people who adopt the assumed critical, progressive voice of their complicity in everyday and systemic racism.

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## Notes

1. Janks and Dixon (1) explain that “texts have social effects”, suggesting that creative artefacts, like all texts, discursively interact with societies by reflecting, reinforcing, or challenging ideologies within specific cultural milieus. Thus, I speak about the audiences of these films in recognition of the way the films were received and disseminated in different communities with particular ideological investments in these texts. I often include myself as a viewer through the collective pronoun “we” in recognition of the discursive positionings which these films effect on audiences and how discourses within these texts reflect social norms and values that are prevalent in South Africa and abroad. For example, I argue that the positive reception of *Moffie* with European audiences, with multiple awards nominations from European bodies like the Venice International Film Festival and the British Independent Film Awards, reflects an investment in the critical outsider whiteness reflected in the film that is positioned as aligned with the Global North.
2. This trend has been shifting in the past few years as a greater number of English, Zulu, and Xhosa feature films are being released as the film industry grows, and streaming services like Netflix and Showmax have rapidly expanded audiences for South African multilingual films. However, there continues to be a disproportionate number of Afrikaans films with white protagonists released relative to the size of this population group, indicating “the economic advantages afforded by the legacy of apartheid that allows for [white Afrikaans people] to disproportionately produce and consume film media” (Andrews 31–2).

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