

'Reconciliation is not about being cosy': Narratives of Unchilding in Two Soweto Children's Books

Lourdes López-Ropero

Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Alicante ✉

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Abstract: While Black children were at the heart of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the iconic photograph of 12-year-old Hector Pieterse became a symbol of its brutality worldwide, attention to children's issues was secondary during the development of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which led to a deficit of acknowledgement of the system's impact on children and their participation in the struggle. This article focuses on two texts related to the student-led Soweto Uprising of 1976 and its aftermath: Adrienne Wright's graphic novel-styled *Hector: A Boy, a Protest, and the Photograph that Changed Apartheid* (2019), and Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang's picture book *Soweto Tea Party* (2022). Drawing on Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's notion of "unchilding," my approach will be to treat these stories as "narratives of unchilding" that expose the different ways in which Black children under apartheid were deprived of the conditions that make childhood possible, while also foreground their acts of defiance. These narratives articulate representative tropes of unchilding, ranging from systemic inequality, physical violence and the construction of children as dangerous Others, to land dispossession and the penetration of political violence into the most private spaces of childhood such as the home; and problematize ideas of child victimhood to include resilience alongside vulnerability.

Keywords: reconciliation, narratives of unchilding, postconflict women's writing, South African children's literature, *Soweto Tea Party*, *Hector*

ES 'La reconciliación no es cómoda': Narrativas de 'unchilding' en dos libros infantiles sobre Soweto

Resumen: Si bien los niños estuvieron en el epicentro de la lucha contra el apartheid en Sudáfrica, y la icónica fotografía de Hector Pieterse, de 12 años, se convirtió en un símbolo de su brutalidad a nivel mundial, la atención a este sector de la población fue secundaria durante el desarrollo de la Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, lo que provocó un déficit de reconocimiento del impacto del sistema del apartheid en los niños y niñas, y su participación en la lucha. Este artículo se centra en dos textos relacionados con la Revuelta de Soweto de 1976: la novela gráfica de Adrienne Wright, *Hector: A Boy, a Protest, and the Photograph that Changed Apartheid* (2019), y el libro ilustrado de Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang, *Soweto Tea Party* (2022). Basándome en el concepto de 'unchilding' de Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, mi enfoque consistirá en tratar estas historias como "narrativas de unchilding" que exponen las diferentes maneras en que la población más joven durante el apartheid fue privada de las condiciones que hacen posible la infancia, a la vez que subrayan sus actos de resistencia. Estas narrativas articulan tropos representativos de 'unchilding', que abarcan desde la desigualdad sistémica, la violencia física y la construcción de los niños y niñas como otredad peligrosa, hasta la desposesión de la tierra y la penetración de la violencia política en los espacios más privados de la infancia como el hogar; y problematizan las ideas de victimización infantil para incluir la resiliencia junto con la vulnerabilidad.

Palabras clave: reconciliación, narrativas de 'unchilding', escritura femenina posconflicto, literatura infantil sudafricana, *Soweto Tea Party*, *Hector*

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1. Introduction

Speaking of the Soweto Uprising that took place in Johannesburg in the years of apartheid, South African author Beverley Naidoo has asserted: “It was young black people who, in 1976, changed the course of history” (2007, 20). The student revolt that began in the township of Soweto on June 16 and which spread to many other townships and communities, marked the entrance of black South African children and youth in the anti-apartheid struggle, and became a turning point in the opposition to the apartheid state. In 1994, the regime was dismantled and the transition to democracy was facilitated by the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose role was to confront the violent past in order to promote forgiveness and reconciliation through the creation of a public platform for the voices of victims and perpetrators. Central to this testimonial process was the notion of “acknowledgement,” a dynamic concept that points to the collective recognition of known facts. The commission defined it as “placing information that is (or becomes) known on public, national record ... What is critical is that these facts be fully and publicly acknowledged” (TRC 1998a, 114). Despite the significance of children in the struggle, and the sacrifice of many for the freedom of their country “under the slogan of ‘liberation before education’” (TRC 1998b, 275), the commission did not pay sufficient or dedicated attention to the complexity of their experiences of victimization, or to their contribution as historical actors.

In recent years, critical reflection on transitional justice has transcended the boundaries of the social sciences to find a receptive arena of analysis in the arts. For example, in the volume *Justicecraft: Imagining Justice in Times of Conflict*, Lauren Balasco and her co-authors approach justice as a craft, as a process unbound by time that involves a diverse range of participants whose initiatives address injustice in situated ways with a potential to challenge normative frameworks. “Artistic interventions,” these authors argue, “offer alternative spaces of justice” (2024, 63). Similarly, the volume *New Critical Spaces of Transitional Justice* adopts a holistic and fluid approach that redraws the frontiers of justice to include minoritized actors, such as the unheard voices of young revolutionaries, and the critical spaces offered by the visual and performative arts, literature or film (Kurze and Lamont 2019, 2-3). In *Gendered Peace in International Law*, Louise Arimatsu and Christine Chinkin provide a useful summary of what the arts may offer when the implementation of legal norms is not satisfactory:

Victims and survivors may look outside the law for restorative justice. They may, for instance, draw strength from the inventiveness and creativity of those who use art forms –literature, music...street art...– to recount and memorialize what has occurred, to depict the impacts of events on populations, and to offer ways forward. Art works can provide graphic descriptions of atrocities, render visible the contributions of those whose contributions have been lost in the mists of time, or who have deliberately been marginalized out of existence, and provide expressions of hope. (2024, 243)

Framed within these developments, this paper draws attention to children’s literature as a site where institutionalized approaches to justice may be scrutinised and unattended demands for recognition may be addressed.

This paper offers an exploration of two children’s texts written by South African women authors that deal with the Soweto Uprising of 1976, and its aftermath in the 1980s: Adrienne Wright’s graphic novel-styled *Hector: A Boy, a Protest, and the Photograph that Changed Apartheid* (2019), and Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang’s picture book *Soweto Tea Party* (2022). Adrienne Wright is a debut author-illustrator, and Nokuthula Mazibuko has been regarded as representing “new talent” in the evolving field of post-1994 South African children’s literature (Lehman et al. 2014, 241). These authors’ Soweto stories are critically unexamined to date, despite their appeal and historical import. Besides, they are representative of what still remains a small body of children’s texts, as Soweto-themed books tend to be formatted as novels for older children and young adults (Inggs 2016, 11-20). *Hector* revisits the Soweto student revolt, which brought world-wide attention to the oppression of apartheid through the iconic photograph of 12-year-old Hector Zolile Pieterse, its most well-known child victim, after being killed by a ricochet bullet fired by the police. Before living in the US, Wright grew up in Benoni, a town close to Soweto and Johannesburg. An adolescent at the time of the uprising, she was able to see the photograph by Sam Nzima when it was printed in newspapers before it was banned by the government (Manning 2019). For the composition of *Hector*, Wright also drew on interviews she conducted with Hector’s mother and his sister Antoinette, and with Sam Nzima, who gave her permission to use the photograph (Manning 2019). *Soweto Tea Party* is set in the turbulent 1980s, and it is partly autobiographical, as it deals with the experience of growing up in an activist home with a parent under house arrest. The parent in the story is the author’s father, Fanyana Mazibuko, a prominent teacher and leader in the Morris Isaacson Highschool, a centre of student resistance in the heart of Soweto. Due to his involvement with the student and teacher protests, Fanyana Mazibuko spent much time in prison and under house arrest during the 1970s and 1980s.

The stories in *Hector* and *Soweto Tea Party* are approached as narratives of acknowledgement that capture the multi-layered victimization of South African children during apartheid, as well as their agency. In doing so, these narratives expose the phenomenon described by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian as “unchilding” (2019). This concept will be used as a critical lens through which to analyse the representation of children in the stories, and to underscore the limitations of the TRC’s attempt to acknowledge childhoods deeply affected by conflict. Before launching my analysis of the texts, in the section that follows I will discuss Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s conceptualization of unchilding, its application to the South African context, and the TRC’s efforts to engage with children’s issues.

2. Children, Unchilding, and the South African TRC

Shalhoub-Kevorkian associates the phenomenon of unchilding with settler colonial environments where native children are, from the moment of conception, surrounded by conditions that are incompatible with their development as children. For this scholar, unchilding is “the authorized eviction of children from childhood” (2019, 122) carried out within “a violent racial regime of control” (22) by means of “various modalities of violence” (27); by the construction of children as “dangerous, nonchild-like Others” (122); by dominance “over land and space, but also over the intimate spaces where children live: their homes, their schools” (126); and by a “global politics [of] ... action and inaction” (126). The subjects of unchilding embody the notion of the ideal, vulnerable victim, devoid of agency and relying on the help of others (Rudling 2019, 423). At the same time, Shalhoub-Kevorkian problematizes the discourse of victimhood and considers the possibility of these victims being “resilient,” to use Adriana Rudling’s categorization (432). Shalhoub-Kevorkian shows how children can resist the politics of unchilding, even if momentarily, through “acts of defiance” (2019, 139) that confront the strictures and structures that constrain them. In her analysis of unchilding, this scholar centres on the Israel-Palestine conflict, but other settings such as the US, Canada and Australia are also mentioned. Although the concept is beginning to be applied in other contexts, as for example the situation of racially minoritized children in Britain (Sirriyeh 2025), it has not been connected to black South African children under apartheid, whose lived experiences may aptly be described in terms of unchilding.

The apartheid state’s laws and structures affected black South African children profoundly. Townships like Soweto were segregated areas created in the urban peripheries as sources of cheap labour and were the outcome of land seizures and forcible removals of Black populations.¹ Being born in Soweto amounted to being born into a “dispossessed land,” a situation that for Shalhoub-Kevorkian is endemic to unchilded children (2019, 19). And during times of conflict even their most private spaces could be subjected to state control. The children’s opposition to the system, as evinced in the Soweto Uprising, turned them into dangerous Others in need of policing. As mentioned in the TRC report, “an undeclared war” was waged against children and young people, who became “primary targets of detention, torture, bannings, assassination and harassment of every description” (TRC 1998b, 254). Growing up in a conflicted society meant that there was an atmosphere of danger and violence that extended to places typically associated with safety and comfort like the home and the school. Schools became hubs of resistance and objects of surveillance and interventions by the security forces. Homes were also under threat of state penetration. For example, the report notes that the childhood of the “children of activists was often filled with fear of police intimidation and violence” (1998b, 266). The mobilization of children and schools in the liberation movement brought about a serious disruption to education. At the same time, education had been a central concern of the Soweto protest. The immediate catalyst for the mobilization had been the imposition of Afrikaans, the language of the ruling minority, as a medium of instruction in schools. This measure was not well received, as Afrikaans was perceived as the language of the oppressor, and one in which neither Black students nor their teachers were proficient enough. The imposition of Afrikaans would only bring more difficulty into an already troubled education system, which was the product of the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This reform put an end to mission schools, paving the way for a “separate and inferior” education system for black South African students which was grounded on the assumption that they “needed only to be educated, in the words of Dr [Hendrik] Verwoerd, ‘in accordance with their opportunities in life’” (TRC 1998a, 32). The deliberate “under-skilling” (32) of generations of children is an obvious form of structural violence.

The violent crackdown on the marching students on the morning of June 16, 1976, brought international attention to the plight of children under apartheid. A few months later the UN proclaimed 1979 as the International Year of the Child (IYC)—to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. The IYC was “a call for an inquiry into the state of the world’s children” (Patterson 2009, 56), and South Africa came to stand as a paragon of unchilding, as “one of the worst case scenarios for the challenges facing children in the world at the time” (68). By way of example, on the anniversary of the Soweto Uprising during the IYC, the UN convened an international seminar on “Children under Apartheid” chaired by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The seminar addressed the different manifestations of unchilding at play in South Africa, “poverty, infant mortality, the forcible separation of families, deprivation of education, and imprisonment, torture, and indiscriminate shooting of children in their struggle for justice”; they also noted the global dimension of unchilding, calling for an end to any form of international “collaboration” with the apartheid regime and the enforcement of embargoes and sanctions (“UN Holds International Seminar” 1979, 15).² WILPF denounced how schoolchildren were “kept in jail and many fle[d] on their own,” turned into prisoners and refugees by state repression (Segerstedt Wiberg 1979, 9). In addition to portraying children as helpless victims, the idea that unchilding may breed resilience through acts of resistance and empowerment was also echoed in the UN seminar, which acknowledged “the heroism of tens of thousands of children who defied bullets and truncheons to demonstrate rejection of apartheid and white minority domination” (1979, 15).

After the celebration of the International Year of the Child in 1979, another crucial opportunity for platforming the social realities of black South African children arose in 1997, when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission decided to hold special hearings on their experiences. The South African TRC was created

¹ ‘Soweto’ is an acronym that stands for ‘South Western Townships’.

² For WILPF’s involvement with the South African dimension of the International Year of the Child (IYC) in 1979, I am drawing on information gathered from the association’s international journal *Pax et Libertas*.

as part of the country's efforts to build a "historic bridge" between the violent past and a democratic and peaceful future (TRC 1998a, 103). It aimed at uncovering truths about the human rights violations committed under apartheid as a basis for reconciliation and sustainable peace because, as the commission's Chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, explained,

[R]econciliation is not about being cosy; it is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last. (Tutu 1998, 17)

The unchilding of Black children—very far removed from conceptions of childhood as a state of 'cosiness'—was a particularly disturbing aspect of the South African predicament that had to be acknowledged as part of the process of truth-telling and national healing.

The effectiveness of the TRC's Children's Hearings as a mechanism of acknowledgement, nonetheless, has been questioned on different grounds. In his contribution to the volume *Children and Transitional justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation*, Piers Pigou gives the South African commission credit for the "attention" paid to children's experiences at a time when there was no precedent for this type of engagement (2010, 119), but he remarks that children "were not an explicit target group," or constituted a detailed research focus in this process (156). As the commission's main goal was to expose gross human rights violations, it "largely obscured the broader experiences of children living under apartheid," how it affected them on different levels and in their everyday lives (153). Besides, the special hearings underexplored the "positive qualities and leadership" that children exhibited during their acts of resistance (153). Another issue that was raised had to do with the fact that minors were not allowed to testify before the commission to protect them from re-traumatization, a decision that has been interpreted as resulting in the marginalization of their voices and participation in the process of national healing (122-23), at a time when children's self-expression was the subject of advocacy. Actually, the signing of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which South Africa ratified in 1995, has led to tensions between the need to protect children, and the need to recognise them as "full human beings with their own personalities who are able to act in the world, express their views and participate in society" (Gidron 2015, 508). An illustration of this controversy was the letter that was read before the commission on behalf of 11-year-old Rudie-Lee Reagan, who complained that

there are some children who would like to testify and see the perpetrators brought to justice. Children whose parents have been killed should be able to tell the Truth Commission how this has affected them. ... children should be able to talk about things that hurt us like sexual abuse and violence. It will also be interesting, because it is about our countries [sic] history and we are not learning about this in schools. ("Letter" 1997).

Despite the scale of the violations committed against children, and the sacrifice of many for the struggle, it has been observed that their special hearings were "astonishingly brief" and "markedly under-attended" (Patterson 2009, 170), which casts doubts on the status that the youngest participants in the struggle were given in their society and country's transition to democracy.

Children's texts may enable spaces where children's lived experience of apartheid can be acknowledged more fairly and fully. It has certainly been highlighted that children's literature can be instrumental in processes of transitional justice and "complement" the work of official interventions (Gidron 2015, 516), and much work still remains to be done exploring this confluence. Besides functioning as narratives of acknowledgement about those directly impacted by the conflict, these texts may also serve to engage children in "thinking about conflicts" (508). As the child Rudie-Lee Reagan suggested in her letter to the TRC, difficult histories are not always adequately addressed in the school curriculum. The dissemination of knowledge about the violent past and the valuable lessons it holds for the present becomes particularly urgent once that history begins to recede in time. In this respect, the memory and significance of the Soweto Uprising is reinforced institutionally by the annual celebration of Youth Day on June 16, and by the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum located in Soweto. At the same time, however, the new, born-free South African generations are perceived as being little invested in commemorating this history, and even as "mostly a-political," despite their ongoing struggle with the legacy of apartheid (Simbao 2007, 67; Glaser 2020, 32). As embodiments of "futurity" with a potential to influence "the worlds they inhabit," children can be regarded as "privileged recipients" of memories that act as reminders of the need "to avoid repeating" the errors of the past (Hutchison and Snell 2014, 7-8), and to safeguard the rights that have been achieved. That is the reason why it remains crucial for post-conflict societies to mobilize education and the arts to foster an ongoing engagement with historical injustice that transcends the localized interventions of truth commissions and reports, and to circulate their teachings across the generations. The two texts under discussion in this article, *Hector* and *Soweto Tea Party*, have the potential to enable such conversations about the past. As I intend to show in the coming sections, they provide a memorable perspective on the Soweto student protests and their aftermath, acknowledging various forms of unchilding while problematizing the image of the children as helpless victims.

In my exploration of *Hector* and *Soweto Tea Party*, and drawing on Shalhoub-Kevorkian's framework, I will engage with what may be called 'tropes' of unchilding within these narratives, namely, the exertion of racially-based violences (physical, systemic), the othering of children as dangerous entities, the control over the spaces they inhabit, and the manifestations of agency by the child victims. Narratives have the power to provide *situated* accounts of events, and, taken together rather than in isolation, they may help to build a fuller picture of lived experience. In this respect, *Hector* and *Soweto Tea Party* are complementary narratives that place emphasis on different aspects of unchilding in the context of apartheid. While the former zeroes

in on the tropes of structural and physical violence, and the misrecognition of children as a dangerous threat to security, the latter gives special attention to the issue of spatial domination and the home as a carceral space. Both narratives, as we shall see, feature disruptions of unchilding.

3. Children as Dangerous Others: *Hector: A Boy, A Protest, and the Photograph that Changed Apartheid*

In *Hector*, Adrienne Wright narrates the events that led to the tragic image referenced in the title of her book. The picture was taken by photo-journalist Sam Nzima during the Soweto student protest of June 16 and was featured on the front page of the afternoon edition of *The World*, a prominent national Black newspaper from Johannesburg. The image quickly circulated internationally and became an emblem of the cruelty and injustice of apartheid, exposing it to the world. It showed the body of 12-year-old Hector Pieterse being carried by highschool student Mbuyisa Makhubu, after being hit by a stray bullet shot by the police; Hector's sister, Antoinette, accompanies Makhubu in the photograph as they both run to take Hector out of the street. What had begun as a peaceful demonstration against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in Black schools, escalated into unprecedented violence directed against children. When the police used tear gas to scatter the students, they retaliated throwing stones, to which the officers responded with lethal violence. Such reaction was, by all accounts, disproportionate and brutal, but even more so if we consider that "stone-throwing by children is usually a spontaneous reaction to circumstances and as such is neither prepared for nor planned" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, 88). Hector Pieterse's photograph provides the last panel of the story and the back cover for the book, but it nevertheless does not dominate the narrative. Through a succession of panel sequences, single, and double spreads, all rendered in soft pastel and earthy colours, emphasis is laid on showing the ordinary lives of Hector and his family in their township, as well as on the student mobilization. In terms of genre, his graphic narrative could be regarded as a "fusion text" (Evans 2013, 239), as it is an inspired combination of comic, graphic novel and picture book features.

Wright offers a dignified portrait of township life, as one that, despite poverty, fosters positive qualities in individuals and human relationships. These qualities are later displayed by the children during their acts of protest, countering the perception of them as dangerous Others. The story is divided into three sections, devoted to Hector, his sister Antoinette and Sam Nzima. Hector's section, the longest, takes us back to the weekend and the Monday preceding the student demonstration to show us his life as a young boy, exercising his right to play and rest³ through the practice of soccer and watching movies with his friends; but also doing chores, running errands for his neighbours, or visiting his grandmother after school. Through these interactions we see that a sense of care and support characterizes relationships within the family and community.

While the poverty and difficult living conditions of the township are not allowed to define the characters, this structural form of violence, constitutive of unchilding, is not overlooked either. Glimpses of hardship are given when we are told that Antoinette lives with her grandmother because her house is close to her school and that way she saves the train fare.⁴ A particularly revealing illustration is when Hector's mother calls him a dreamer—"You are always dreaming. Dreaming and joking"—because he asserts that "one day [they]'re going have a bathroom inside. With a hot tap and a toilet"; or when a pair of "tsotsis"—'robbers,' 'thugs'—try to steal the money that Hector's grandmother gave him for his mother. Similarly, signs of apartheid are shown when Hector and his friend go through a racially-segregated train station entrance, and when, on two different occasions, his mother reminds him that he should start counting in Afrikaans because "that's how it is going to be in school now."

In the way Hector's mother teaches her children compliance with apartheid policies, and in her seemingly hopeless vision of the future, we may see an indication of the intergenerational differences that would develop regarding the opposition to apartheid. It has been argued that in the South African context, "[i]t was the children that had to convince the elders that a better tomorrow would come," as evinced above in Hector's visions of home improvement; that "[they] had to quickly 'grow up' and assume the role of comforters to their mothers and parents," whose suffering they "witnessed" (Malisa and Malange 2013, 312-13). Indeed, an aspect of unchilding is "adultification," which happens when children "are prematurely exposed to adult knowledge, roles and responsibilities in their families" (Sirriyeh 2025, 6). The role reversal of children who act as comforters and protectors of adult figures is also shown when Hector avoids telling his mother that he was assaulted by some tsotsis, or when his sister hides the rumours of the student demonstration from her grandmother not to worry her. In this behaviour, we may see an intimation that the children do not want to augment the suffering that they had probably witnessed in the grown-ups.

While the story of Hector and the student protest is not written in the first person of a child character, the visual narrative enhances the trope of agency through self-expression and participation in an act of defiance. There is no doubt that the most powerful images in the book are those depicting the marching students challenging the status quo and thus unsettling the process of unchilding. These images are given prominence by the use of page-sized panels, single and double spreads. They show children as actors in the political struggle who make their voices heard, holding placards with slogans such as "We demand better education,"

³ Article 31 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child establishes that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (UN 1989, 9). <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/c8f540df-36ad-4e6c-8dbb-7af0ab7bde7f/content>

⁴ *Hector* is an unpagged book.

"Afrikaans must be abolished," or "Down with apartheid," and singing the forbidden anthem "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika"—'God Bless Africa.' This became "the rallying song against apartheid," but in essence was a "prayer/plea" for God to "intervene on behalf of Africans" (Malisa and Malange 2013, 308-9), and its use in the story underscores the peaceful character of the student march. The realism with which the children's faces are rendered is noteworthy. Each child is given a distinct facial expression that emphasizes their individuality and personal drive while they act as one body. The illustrations convey admirable qualities such as courage, energy, leadership, and unity. A particularly outstanding one is found in the Antoinette section, running across two pages and occupying a central position in the book. A panoramic snapshot of the march, the illustration emphasizes the demands made by the students, and the performance of their unity and peaceful defiance through the chanting of the banned anthem. As in previous images, the singing is represented by means of wavy song lines that glide over the marching children, but on this occasion the lyrics are given more fully in six lines.

The images of the student protesters are countered by others which show the police attempts to repress them, and the eruption of violence that leads to the death of Hector. The misrecognition of children as a threat to security that has to be contained through brutal repression is an emblematic example of the politics of unchilding. The trope of direct violence as a form of unchilding is foregrounded in the narrative through a selection of meaningful symbols such as the armed police officers, police dogs, hippo trucks blocking the streets, hurled stones, or flying bullets. The menacing dogs, considered by Sowetans "a symbol of police power, brutality and contempt" (quoted in Patterson 2019, 24), are a recurring presence in several illustrations. In addition to these elements, the iconic photograph of Hector Pieterse placed at the end of the story stands as the ultimate symbol of political violence against children during the South African struggle.

The power of children's texts also resides in their potential to create opportunities for young readers to interact critically with the stories they tell. As a narrative of acknowledgement, *Hector* may serve as a catalyst for the recognition of unchilding experiences that remain less visible. While Hector Pieterse has been memorialized as the first victim of the Soweto Uprising thanks to Sam Nzima's photograph, oral accounts suggest that another student, Hastings Ndlovu, was the first to be killed and, unlike Hector's, his death was not accidental but he was deliberately gunned down for being an agitator (Simbao 2007, 61). Besides, Mbuyisa Makhubu, who lifted Hector from the ground, had to flee the country to avoid being arrested by the apartheid police for his appearance in the photograph carrying Hector and exposing the horror of his death to the world; and he ultimately disappeared (62). Makhubu is briefly acknowledged in one of the add-ons placed at the end of Wright's book, but he is not featured in the story. The silences around figures like Makhubu and Ndlovu are gaps that the readers of this text can be encouraged to fill.

4. Carcerality and Cosiness in the Home-Space: Soweto Tea Party

Targeted at younger readers than Hector,⁵ Nokuthula Mazibuko's picture book *Soweto Tea Party* is equally effective in acknowledging the trials of childhood impacted by conflict. Set in the early 1980s at the height of apartheid, the story focuses on the experience of the children of imprisoned parents, giving prominence to this particular trope of unchilding, the domination over the private spaces of childhood such as the home. In particular, the story foregrounds the experience of the child as invisible witness to parental home arrest and is partly based on Mazibuko's own experience. In her own words: "There was this funny situation where people weren't allowed to come to our house and things like that, and my father was not allowed to teach. So, politics was always there, in the family space" (Taylor 2009). Despite the wealth of testimonies gathered by the TRC, Mazibuko has claimed that "there's still a 'lot of space' for the addition of 'smaller voices'" (Taylor 2009), such as that of the little child protagonist of her picture book.

Soweto Tea Party lends itself to be divided into two parts. In the first half of the story, Princess, whose first-person voice is foregrounded in the narrative, introduces us to her family and the effect that the conflict has on her everyday life. She represents the perspective of a child of a militant father held under house arrest who expresses her views about the unjust world in which she lives. Their Soweto home has become a place of confinement that "nobody is allowed to visit" (Mazibuko 2022, 6). Princess suggests playing tea party, making clear that "[t]he soldiers outside" are not welcome (12), and this event unfolds through the second half of the story. In an imaginative reversal that counters the idea of the home as prison, a number of legendary guests, all of them South African freedom fighters, cross the threshold of Princess' home to join her party. The tea party celebration amounts to a disruption of unchilding through play and can be regarded as a time of "carcerality interrupted," to use Shalhoub-Kevorkian's expression (2019, 134; emphasis in original).

The colour of the illustrations is used to draw a sharp contrast between the positive home environment and its bleak surroundings. The family members, their home and the party guests are rendered in a colourful palette, which conveys a sense of human warmth and vibrancy. The frequent use of double page spreads invites readers to immerse themselves in the home's pleasant atmosphere. Grey hues characterize the outside world of the township revealing streets occupied by the military and a society marked by conflict and unrest. In some of the illustrations, military vehicles can be spotted on the streets, and armed soldiers on the ground and on rooftops, keeping the township and Princess' home under close surveillance (Mazibuko 2022, 6-9). Despite the presence of political violence, the home is portrayed as a "cozy" space that projects a "sense of 'homeliness,' indicating belonging and comfort" (Krzywinska et al. 2026, 1172), although Princess understandably expresses 'non-cosy' feelings of fear and insecurity: "I am scared – there are army trucks

⁵ *Hector* is aimed at readers aged 7 to 11.

driving up and down our street” (Mazibuko 2022, 8). Her father is a representation of activist teacher Fanyana Mazibuko, “Baba” in the story. His positive attitude in harsh conditions points at the importance of “parenting” in alleviating the children’s experience of state violence, and hence of unchilding, through the provision of “emotional support” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, 75). Baba tries to instill in her daughter a sense of emotional well-being and resilience by appealing to her self-confidence with words such as “‘Princess, you are the kindest, smartest, most beautiful girl in Soweto! You have a twinkle in your eye and the sun shines when you smile’” (Mazibuko 2022, 9). In order to sooth her, he puts on Miriam Makeba’s famous song “Malaika, ndakupenda Malaika” —‘Angel, I love you, angel’—which has the intended effect on Princess: “with the music on, I can’t hear the soldiers’ truck outside” (11). By playing the music of South African singer Miriam Makeba, Baba encourages Princess to find joy and feel pride in her culture and identity.

The music also infuses the home-space with a spirit of peaceful resistance, an aspect that has been discussed earlier in relation to *Hector*. Miriam Makeba —nicknamed ‘Mama Africa’ by Nelson Mandela and others—was a vocal opponent of apartheid who became an exile in 1960, a fate shared by other musicians and artists (Malisa and Malange 2013, 304). Playing the music of a banned Black artist to muffle the sound of the soldiers patrolling the street is an act of defiance and opposition to unchilding and anticipates the subversive nature of the tea party that will follow. It is worth noting that in the themes of self-pride and cultural affirmation articulated through Miriam Makeba’s song and central to the picture book, we may see the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). This ideology was an important catalyst for the student protests and was influential in the Morris Isaacson Highschool where Baba/Fanyana Mazibuko was a teacher (Heffernan 2019). Aiming to decolonize the minds of black South Africans and restore their pride and dignity, this movement was an important factor in the reorganization of the Black struggle that began with the Soweto Uprising (Hirschmann 1990, 2-3).

The various guests that will unexpectedly knock on the door of Princess’ home are influential individuals who have been exiled, imprisoned, or censored by the apartheid government. Her imaginary tea party is an opportunity for Princess to turn her “incarcerated” home, where visits are prohibited, into a non- “incarcerating” space (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, 137), where she can thrive as a child through play. The first guest to arrive is Miriam Makeba herself, accompanied by musician Ntate Hugh Masekela playing his trumpet, both living in exile. After eulogizing the famous singer, Princess states that “the government does *not* like Mama Miriam Makeba” (Mazibuko 2022, 21; emphasis in the original),⁶ a pattern that is repeated in connection with the other guests. Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela are followed by writer Nadine Gordimer, whose anti-apartheid novels were censored in South Africa. Activist Winnie Mandela joins the celebration next, and the guest arrivals are crowned by the appearance of “Tata Nelson Mandela” (28), who brings the story to an end. The entrance of Mandela is a fitting finale to the guest arrivals, given his characteristic love of and concern for children as an emblem of the future (Patterson 2019, 118). Understandably, the guest list in Princess’ tea party is far from exhaustive and generates silences and latencies that readers could productively explore, as seen in the above discussion of *Hector*. The heroic entourage could thus be extended to include and acknowledge members of the younger generation of freedom fighters such as BCM activist Steve Biko and student leader Tsietshi Mashinini.

The phenomenal figures attending Princess’ fantasy party bring a message of hope and reconciliation to the girl’s home, despite the family’s adverse circumstances. The reconciliatory message is enhanced by Miriam Makeba’s love song playing in the background. Princess praises Makeba as the woman who “sings about love and peace” and “about building a new South Africa” (Mazibuko 2022, 20); and Mandela as “a man who wants all people to live together in peace” (28). At the same time, Princess’ story shows readers that, as Desmond Tutu writes, “Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. ... True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth” (2000, 218). Through the exposure of her unchilding in her own voice, and her opposition to this system, Princess contributes to the acknowledgement of the harshness of apartheid on children, as well as their role as agents.

5. Conclusions

Hector and *Soweto Tea Party* engage in a crucial period in South African history in the 1970s and 1980s when the stage was set for the country’s youngest citizens to play a fundamental role, against the backdrop of increasing young activism and societal turmoil. The centrality of children, both as victims of the inequities and violations of apartheid, and as actors in the struggle, was affirmed through the creation of special hearings within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which had been established as an instrument of justice that would pave the way for the transition to democracy by uncovering and publicly acknowledging gross human rights violations committed under apartheid. Given the proportions of the task at hand, the TRC’s attention to children-specific issues was limited, both in terms of the coverage of their experiences, and in their actual participation in the truth-telling process. While the mandate of official mechanisms of acknowledgement is constrained by time and protocols, interventions from the realm of the arts and literature enable an ongoing conversation with the difficult past and facilitate a fuller and deeper recognition of truths. Such interventions partake of an understanding of reconciliation as an aspirational long-term project that, in the words of Desmond Tutu, “is not about being cosy,” but demands a confrontation with uncomfortable truths, such as the ordeal of the Soweto generations of children, many of whom became prisoners, refugees or lost their lives in the struggle.

⁶ In the picture book, the emphasis on the word “not” is conveyed through the use of red and a bigger font size.

Drawing on Shalhoub-Kevorkian's concept of unchilding, my approach has been to treat Soweto-themed *Hector and Soweto Tea Party* as "narratives of unchilding" that acknowledge the different ways in which Black children under apartheid were deprived of the conditions that make childhood possible, but also their acts of resistance to these limitations. In doing so, these narratives problematise the idea of child victimhood to include resilience alongside vulnerability, and show how the work of contemporary women writers follows in the footsteps of female-led pacifist organizations such as WILPF, which were pioneers in bringing international attention to the plight and merit of Black children under apartheid. *Hector and Soweto Tea Party* together expose representative features or tropes of unchilding. These include physical and systemic forms of racialised violence as seen, respectively, in the use of force against the demonstrating students, and the poverty and precariousness of township life; the construction of children as dangerous Others which underpins the disproportionate use of violence to stop their defiance; and the political domination over the most private spaces of childhood such as the home, where activist parents would live under arrest, spaces which, like Soweto, are embedded into a broader regime of land dispossession and spatial segregation. Also importantly, these narratives feature disruptions of unchilding by means of peaceful protest, play, music, and the imagination.

Disturbing and powerful stories like these provide a valuable historical mooring and a grand mirror that can help in encouraging the new, born-free, post-conflict generations and young people elsewhere, to protect what has been achieved, take it forward and heed the lessons of the past. The legacies of all the young heroes of the struggle, those sung like Hector Pieterse, but also those unsung like Mbuyisa Makhubu, children like Princess and many others, are worth acknowledging, as the new generations of black South African youth live in the shadow of June 1976, which sets an inspirational example for young people worldwide.

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