The Incredible Whiteness of Being

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Review Article

*Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood.*
by Alexandra Fuller
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*Country of My Skull*
by Antjie Krog
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*The Whiteness of Bones*
by Sarah Penny
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People generally view the world from their own vantage point. Experiences of places, events, other individuals and groups, and even self, are apprehended through our own eyes, our own ears, our own skins, bodies and minds. It is from this ever-shifting centre that we evaluate all that impinges on—and that comprises—that experiencing self. Most people are, in a very general sense, self-centred; and this—in spite of structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism—remains valid.

And it is largely because readers expect to find this individualised viewpoint in autobiography that they are drawn to autobiography in the first place.

This is not to deny that there is a place (and a market) for testimonies of those who represent a group—and whose individuality is blurred behind their status as typical. A sub-genre of life writing which underplays the subjects’ uniqueness and stresses the subjects’ exemplary significance emerged in South Africa in the late 1970s and acquired some importance during the 1980s. These texts usually comprise collections of short testimonies by apartheid’s victims. The principal value of such testimonial collections, at the time of their appearance, lay not in their ability to convey details about the lives of unique personages, but in their implied allusion to
The experiences of countless others just like those whose stories were told. These texts give readers access not only to those who testify but also to the unknown women, men and children whose stories are not told but whose experiences are so very similar. Examples of these collections of mediated testimonies by apartheid’s underdogs include *We Came to Town*, *Sibambene* and *Working Women*. These slim volumes gather together the brief accounts of men and women who lived, each day, with the degradations of institutionalised racism and the grinding poverty it generated, implying (sometimes by including accompanying photographs of other, unnamed people) that the individuals *spoke for* others like them. Also part of this subset, but even more conspicuous for its emphasis on the narrative subject’s typicality, was the aggregated ‘life story’ recorded in *Thula Baba*. In this text, the subject and her account are amalgamations of a number of such people and their lives. Such a text shows not only that apartheid eroded human dignity for every one of its victims (represented by the various fictionalised characters) but also that apartheid effaced its victims: one name, one life story, being able to function metonymically for the millions, since racism is essentially inimical to individuality.

More recently, in post-apartheid South Africa, one can see something of this value placed on the subject’s representativeness in the testimonies of those infected with AIDS. The reader is meant to understand that the women and men who have come out and testified and who are ‘living positively’ are not anomalies, but their experiences and stories are shared by thousands upon thousands of others (on whose behalf—to some extent—they speak).

Another example of life writing in which the subject’s singularity is subordinated to her function as mouthpiece for the community, a non-South African text this time, is Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. This mediated testimony came to provoke a storm of controversy because researchers found that certain of the narrator’s claims about her experiences were false. She and her family had not—it was proven—been through everything she recounted. Menchú’s rebuttal—and that of her supporters—was that *since* she was representing her people, the Quiché Indians of Guatemala, everything she said was true of their experience as a people. The detractors were accused of being too literal-minded in their insistence on a factual record of the narrator’s life.

So there are instances in which life writing gives access to the typical, rather than the particular. Generally, however, even readers who are not quite so insistent upon verifiable historical accuracy may find generalised or symbolic testimonies less than satisfying. When an autobiography fails to convey a sense of a character who provides a singular source of apprehension and interpretation, when the autobiography records a bland sequence of occurrences, devoid of an inherent perceptual and narrating eye/I (to use Breytenbach’s favourite pun), it may succeed
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in drawing the reader because it conveys what are conceived of as larger ‘truths’ (as in the case of a witness to important events), but it will seldom succeed in drawing the reader into a relationship with the person implied or suggested by the autobiographical subject.

A large part of the dullness of barely individualised accounts derives from an unimaginative, crude use of words. If the words fail to depict a specific viewpoint, the reader will fail to imagine a specific viewer behind those words. For South African poet and critic, Stephan Watson, bland language—of which the cliché is an extreme example—marks not only an aesthetic failing, but also a moral one:

Linguistically, there is no greater form of indifference to other people’s suffering than the cliché. It is language’s original sin. To reduce the suffering of others to cliché is to negate what every sufferer knows: the paradoxical uniqueness of that suffering, its irreducible individuality, its distance from that human coldness which every cliché contains at its heart (9).

In Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood (London: Picador, 2002) Alexandra Fuller is equally adept at communicating human frailty, tragedy and humour. She deftly depicts her childish apprehension of reality. In Karoi, in Rhodesia, on a hot day,

... the heatwaves danced like spear-toting warriors off the grassland .... Grass, earth, air, buildings, skin, clothes all took on the same dust-blown glare of too much heat trapped in too little air (40ff).

Her mother is often ‘don’t-interrupt-me-I’m-busy-all-day’ (41), when she is not ‘The Leaning Tower of Pissed’ (31); a neighbour who has ‘rock-hard bosoms encased in twin-set sweaters’ and ‘hair like a grey paper wasps’ nest’ will not allow the child to sit on the doily-bedecked chairs that her ‘rash of small spoiled dogs’ (70) enjoy. Fuller’s accounts are vivid. For instance, she describes the day on which ‘a small plague of two missionaries descended’ (78): it was

... eye-ball-burning hot .... Our throats are papered with the heat; we sip at cups of cold, milky tea just enough to make spit in our mouths. The sky and air are so thick with wildfire smoke that we can’t see the hills .... Swollen clouds scrape purple, fat bellies on the tops of the surrounding hills (79).

Suddenly, the dogs are alert. What appears is a ‘vision’: two fat white men, ‘armed with thick, shiny black Bibles’ (80). The missionaries are given stale bread
sandwiches and tea in chipped mugs, eyed all the while by the dogs in whose flea-infested chairs they are sitting and whose repeated attempts to jump up onto their laps the two uncomfortable men deflect ‘in an offhand, I’m-not-really-pushing-your-dog-off-my-lap-I-love-dogs-really kind of way’ (82). They leave without having had a chance to ‘fight the good fight’, but with swelling flea bites on their white legs.

Given Fuller’s ability to do what good writers do—namely, allow the reader to share imaginatively in another’s reality—it is small wonder that her book has been so widely praised. It is likely, I would imagine, to appeal both to specialist literary scholars and to a popular readership. The same is unlikely to apply to more trite texts which employ prototypical or proxy subjects. Indeed, this is borne out by the fact that such texts are produced in relatively small numbers. It is the most evocatively written personalised accounts of particular people, or those written by extraordinary individuals, which remain in print. By and large, readers read autobiographies not to get generalised assessments of places and times (for this we turn to politics, history, sociology or anthropology) but to get a sense of what it was like for a particular person to live through particular events. In this respect, Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight is a wonderful read. One gets to feel that one has shared an intimacy with the author/narrator. In fact, this might more correctly be described as a sharing of intimacies—a whole string of them—with the central character as she grows up. So strong was this sense, for me, that I couldn’t help feeling that the reference to the author as ‘Alexandra’—when one has come to know her more familiarly as ‘Bobo’—is rather stiff and overly formal, even misleading. Much in the way that you use your full, legal name, only with strangers or for official purposes. And by the end of Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight I certainly did not feel as though Fuller was a stranger to me.

Fuller recounts in evocative prose the foibles, flaws and idiosyncrasies of her family, in (what was then) war-torn Rhodesia, and then later in Malawi and Zambia. We learn, for instance, of her mother’s penchant for drunken exhibitionism. ‘Mum’, much to the embarrassment of her husband and children, ‘has sung ‘Olé, I Am a Bandit’ at every bar under the southern African sun into which she has ever stepped’ (15):

‘Olé!’ Mum sings at the club on Saturday night. ‘I’m a bandit. I’m a bandit from Brazil. I’m the quickest on the trigger. When I shoot I shoot to kill…’ She cocks her hip when she sings and sometimes she climbs up onto the bar and dances and shrugs her shoulders, slow-sexy, eyes half-mast, and sometimes she falls off the bar again (65f).

Ironically, when wielding an actual gun, she can’t shoot straight.
At target practice she shuts her eyes and her mouth goes worm-bottom tight and she once put a round in the swimming pool wall and another time she shot a pattern, like beads on a string, across the bark of the flamboyant tree at the bottom of the garden. But she has never shot the target in the head or the heart where you are supposed to shoot it (66).

On their farm (purchased on credit in 1974), situated on the Mozambican border, this failing is serious. The farm is at ‘the very birthplace and epicentre, of the civil war in Rhodesia and a freshly stoked civil war in Mozambique’ (53). Bobo and her sister learn to load guns and practice target shooting; the family purchases a mineproofed Land Rover and collects an assortment of ‘huge’ dogs from the SPCA and from those left abandoned by civil-war fleeing farmers who ‘gapped it … without their pets’ (54). Her mother and father join the police reservists.

‘We were prepared to die … to keep one country white-run’ (23), her mother tells a visitor; we fought to maintain ‘an oasis’ in a continent which is ‘a bloody cock-up’ (18). Throughout, Fuller exposes the racism of her parents, herself and whites in general without flinching. The war they participated in was, they grumbled, ‘instigated by “uppy blacks”, “cheeky kaffirs”, “bolshy muntus”, “restless natives”, “the houts”’ (25). White children are exhorted not to undress in front of Africans or to behave like Africans by ‘cement mixing’ (mixing bread and tea together in their mouths when they eat) or picking their noses. Whites ensure that they do not use the same dishes as ‘Affies’.

Fuller grows up bossing adult servants and their children alike. On numerous occasions she threatens: ‘I can fire you if I like’ (140). However privileged the Fullers are, as the ones who are waited upon by numerous servants, finances and nerves are strained. The Fullers watch themselves being watched.

We drive through the Tribal Trust Lands to get to town, past Africans whose hatred reflects like sun in a mirror of our faces, impossible to ignore. Young African men slouch aggressively against the walls of the taverns. Their eyes follow as we hurry past, and we stare at them until they are swallowed in the cloud of dust kicked up behind the armed convoy and the mine-detecting Pookie and the snake of farmers coming into town to sell green peppers and mealies, tobacco and milk. Outside one of the African stores (which advertise Cafenol for headaches and Enos Liver Salts for indigestion and Coke for added life on bullet-pocked billboards) there is a gong hanging from a tree. When our convoy thunders through, an old woman squatting under the shade of the tree gets painfully to her feet and beats the gong with surprising vigour.
The sound of that gong echoes through the flat, dry TTL and bounces against the hills that border them. Anyone camped in those hiding, thick hills or crouched behind boulders by the side of the road can hear the warning. We know now that we are being watched. A blink of binocular glass against the rocks up in the hills. An unnatural sway of thigh-deep grass on a still day. The shaking foliage of a tree as branches are parted, then allowed to spring back. Mum sits back in her seat and slides the Uzi forward out of the window.

She says, 'Be ready to put your heads down, girls.' (58f)

Fuller's account is effective because it is so precise, discriminating and intimate. But it is effective, too, because it goes beyond the personal to evoke a sense of what it must have been like for many—perhaps most—whites during the Chimurenga (the civil war) and then after. After years of believing that God was on their side, they not only lose the war but discover that while there are many black heroes, there are 'no white war heroes' (151). As the schools become multi-racial, Fuller is amazed to discover that African children also have surnames and 'manners' (151) and that her white skin is the object of scorn. It is,

... the wrong colour. The way I am burned by the sun, scorched by flinging sand, prickled by heat. The way my skin erupts in miniature volcanoes of protest in the presence of tsetse flies, mosquitoes, ticks. The way I stand out against the khaki like a large marshmallow to a gook with a gun. White. African. White-African.

'But what are you?' I am asked over and over again.

'Where are you from originally?' (8)

And this brings me to a refinement of my earlier argument that it is the specific, the private, the personal that readers of autobiography tend to seek. They do seek this, but it seems to me that the self-representational writing which is most successful, most likely to be remembered, is that which can somehow simultaneously convey an understanding of how such experiences have significance beyond the singular and distinctive experiences of the narrating subject. I referred earlier to the self-centredness of autobiographical records. But of course, the narrating/focalising centre which readers seek to understand better is neither stable nor self-defined: much of who we are and how we perceive things (even our selves) is determined and shaped by our historical, political, cultural and—especially in southern Africa—racial circumstances. And it is this that marks Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight as a work of greater moment than might be expected of a record of the experiences of
an obscure white Zimbabwean.

Fuller lets the reader into the secret spaces of her life and that of her mother, father and sister, but she also lets us into the somewhat enigmatic lives of a broader community of white Rhodesians. Their lives were enigmatic because their values and beliefs and practices were taken for granted and hidden in plain view of those who were subjected to their economic, cultural and political domination. When Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Bessie Head and Frantz Fanon were examining—painstakingly and painfully—the meanings of being black, most whites were simply being. Inhabiting a skin which secured positions of power, meant that there was, for the vast majority of whites, no psychic necessity to scrutinise the hegemonic norms which they took to be simply, unquestionably, obviously normal.

But this has changed. More and more whites are reinterpreting past experience and identities and are, in the process, questioning the significance of race. Ex-patriot South Africa Stephan Taylor retraces Livingstone’s steps in search of what Taylor calls a dying tribe: the whites who have remained in post-colonial African states. Prompted by an interest (shared by others) in what it means to be white—in the context of Africa—Taylor’s Livingstone’s Tribe: A Journey from Zanzibar to the Cape has met with a ready readership. Earlier, Zimbabwean autobiographer, Peter Godwin, probed his life story for racial significance in Mukiwa (appropriately, the Shona word for white man). And a growing number of white South African autobiographers have also focused on this issue. Writers like Breyten Breytenbach (in all of his autobiographical writing, but perhaps most systematically in True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist and Dog Heart (A Travel Memoir)); Lyndall Gordon in Shared Lives; Riaan Malan in My Traitor’s Heart; Ian Player in Zululand Wilderness; and even, briefly, the late Marike de Klerk in her eponymous life story: all have questioned their racial identities.

Autobiographical attempts by whites from southern African to grow beyond the virtually unassailable and unyielding boundaries of their own hegemonic culture vary in approach. In The Whiteness of Bones Sarah Penny tells the story of her journey in the early ‘nineties through Africa with a friend, Cyril. Bearing in mind that during apartheid, white South Africans were generally prevented from travelling in most of Africa due to the OAU’s opposition to apartheid, the journey that she and her friend undertook was to a continent which was largely unknown to white South Africans. The venture is described by the publishers as Penny’s rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, from cultural myopia to a measure of comprehension of her ‘place in a country and a continent which had turned their backs on one another for over forty years’. (The quotation is from the publisher’s note, back cover.)
Penny was born in Cape Town in 1970 into an English-speaking, upper middle class, fairly liberal family—the kind that would never have supported apartheid or any sort of Afrikaner Nationalism. She typifies the non-conformist white liberal who is disdainful of crude racism. She feels quite secure in the knowledge that race and gender do not matter to her. But in Zimbabwe, at the Harare Show, when she and Cyril mix not with the whites who ‘kept to their own groups, and away from the crowd’, the women ‘closeted in the ranks of their men’ but rather with the Africans, she finds she has to keep ‘side-stepping to avoid being pinched. Hands seemed to shoot out of nowhere and grab at my breast or thighs’. She is forced to confront her own vulnerability as ‘a solitary white and a girl’ (116). And at the Falls, she is threatened by a group of hostile black men. She realises that her fear of rape is mixed up with her own previously unacknowledged racism:

Of course [rape] wasn’t the preserve of black men, white men raped too, but their inflictions did not summon the same blanket terror .... Across the enormous gulf, black society was alien and incomprehensible. Its members had been offered up to us as servants and now we feared that we would be offered up as victims (84).

Her callow assumption that her race does not matter because it does not matter to her crumbles when she is mocked and groped by black men. It strikes her then that non-racism and non-sexism are a lot easier on white liberal university campuses than out amongst ordinary African people who still bear the scars of racist oppression. Penny’s righteous rejection of racism as a schoolgirl—wrapped up in anti-Afrikaner prejudice and snobbishness (against those ‘who had no art in their soul’; 118)—now seems naïve. Re-examining her participation as a university student in anti-apartheid protests, Penny confesses to the element of smug self-satisfaction afforded by her activism, in defence of ‘the creed of the left’: ‘Non racism, non-sexism and democracy’ (120). The prospect of a democratic South Africa in the near future, she is shocked to discover, might mean ‘a curtailment of freedoms’ (121) for her, as a white woman. The slogans and ‘rehearsed ideology’ (121) of the liberal protester fail to be relevant and ring hollow. She finds that it is her race as much as her gender which marks her as a target:

This black/white thing, this man/woman thing—I wanted these divisions to be myths only, but they would not become myths. I am mocked because I am white, I am molested because I am a girl. If I pretend not to see the divisions, they will still exist and others will insist on them. Africa is a continent of polarisations.
To the black mass I am the enemy.
For the first time in my life, I was essentially aware of myself not as a young woman, but as a young white woman.
A member of the white race (118).

An especially contrite white South African is Wilhelm Verwoerd (grandson of the infamous Verwoerd). He comes to reject his membership of the Afrikaner volk as well as of the white race. My Winds of Change is his conversion narrative: conversion from die-hard Nationalist (and member of the junior Broederbond) to ANC member, from someone who realises with some surprise that ‘non-whites’ are people too (!) to non-racist; from typically patronising male to non-sexist; and from white Afrikaner to ‘pigment poor’ ‘afrika-ner’1. He prefaces the text with the following quote from the New Testament, urging confession upon sinners:

If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you;  
If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you (n.p.).

The barrage of confessions and testimonies which emerge from the TRC hearings cause another Afrikaner to interrogate her identity as an Afrikaner and a white South African. In her role as reporter on the TRC, Antjie Krog confronts realities which were so successfully obscured by the apartheid state. Her account of these traumatic experiences is given in the multiple-award-winning Country of My Skull. The revelations of those who testify open up a whole new set of truths which provoke self-questioning and ultimately, self-refashioning:

Is truth that closely related to identity? It must be. What you believe to be true depends on who you believe yourself to be (99).

Krog is sensitive to the fact that the worst perpetrators were either Afrikaners or they were the underlings of Afrikaners. She thus dedicates the book to ‘every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips’. However melodramatic this may sound, Krog’s position is neither simple nor certain: at times she lurches from recognition of and identification with the Afrikaans speakers (‘I go cold with recognition’, 90), to anger against, and fear and rejection of, the Afrikaners who are ‘the doers’, the ones who did not hide behind euphemism. They are, she says, the ‘nightmare of my youth’ (90). Their bodies can be objectified to be read not as the vulnerable corporeal selves of feeling human beings, but as composites of inscrutable sign systems:
I go sit in a bench close to them. To look for signs—their hands, their fingernails, in their eyes, on their lips—signs that these are the faces of killers, of The Other. For future reference: the Face of Evil (90).

Their very speech, in her mother tongue, is heard with the ear of an activist; it makes my tongue go dry” (90).

But the distances crumble gradually as she interviews each of the ‘white Afrikaner terrorist[s]’ (94) to find out what she has in common with them. For these interchanges she uses ‘all the codes I grew up with, and have been fighting against for a lifetime’ (92). She acknowledges that these men have families, have been cast adrift by the Afrikaner community and even by the very leadership who gave them their orders. She understands, too, that there is no clear answer regarding just what they can do to effect reparation and reconciliation (93). As she tries ‘to give evil a human face’ (97), she takes cognisance of the importance of the apparently banal admission that what they did was wrong, that ‘the central truth’ around which their lives have been built ‘is a lie’ (95). She both abhors and cares for these men (97) who ‘are as familiar as my brothers, cousins and school friends’ (96); she and they are part of the same culture, ‘that culture [which] over decades hatched the abominations’ (96) and which must now ask for amnesty. And the psychiatrist she consults for his interpretations of the interviews reminds her (and us) that these men did what they did so that the rest of the whites could feel secure in a ‘European’ South Africa (93).

It is a complicity which she comes to accept as her own and that of all ‘who did not do enough, who did not resist, who were passive’; this admission causes her skin to erupt in a rash (97). It is ‘the Leader[‘s]’ (98) refusal to acknowledge this moral guilt, his cowardly denials of blame, his failure to lead the Afrikaners out of the ‘guilt and despair’ and resentment which festers as the TRC testimonies emerge, which arouses her repugnancy on behalf of her father and mother and other ordinary Afrikaners, for whom being an Afrikaner is sacred and a source of pride and weighted with significance and responsibility and entangled with love of father, mother, family (98); of language and landscape (48).

Krog wrestles with psychic and bodily traumas of enduring the relentless barrage of testimony; she endures dislocation from her family (e.g. 48f). Moreover, in attempting to describe the process, she grapples with the ethics of narrative appropriation in reporting on the testimonies. She struggles with language’s limitations, straining to find the words to recount the eruptions of anguish; yet she is repulsed by her profession as wordsmith, as purveyor of misery:

No poetry should come from this. May my hand fall off if I write this.
So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don’t, I die (1998:49).

(Interestingly, these words echo those of her mother, writing almost 40 years earlier, about the assassination of the man who epitomises the other side, the side of the racists, namely, H.F. Verwoerd; (98)). Krog asks how language can transcend its own banalities, its deficiencies, to record grief, guilt, the torments of experience. The faltering, imperfect words of the victims burn into consciousness, the unconscious, and blur the boundaries of self and other.

Through the narrative Krog literally and figuratively comes to terms with pain-laced fragments of history, and in so doing she (re)locates herself in that past, in the present of disclosure and exposure, and in the future of the emerging new South Africa. She recognises gratefully that it is through the Truth Commission that a new South African-ness is emerging:

because of you
this country no longer lies between us but within
it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat
in the cradle of my skull
it sings … (278f).

The symbol of the new South Africa holds within it the promise of reconciliation between the unendurable knowledge of the past and the primal yearning for renewal, absolution and redress. In their life-writing many—though not all—whites from South (and southern) Africa are striving to measure up to the ideals of the new South Africa. Singing the multi-lingual new national anthem—which is itself a marvel of reconciliation—Krog says,

And I wade into song—in a language that is not mine, in a tongue I do not know. It is fragrant inside the song, and among the keynotes of sorrow and suffering there are soft silences where we who belong to this landscape, all of us, can come to rest (217).

All of the autobiographers referred to above have joined the growing ranks of those
whites who use autobiography not merely to record a kind of life, but to confess to all who care to listen to their racialised s(k)ins. In Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight Fuller draws us into her childhood world, a world coloured white by prejudice and privilege, yes, but also by fear and tragedy, by war and death, and by the manic determination to hang on to what is an increasingly in-credible whiteness of being.

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