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# *Alternation*

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**Editors**

Thengani H. Ngwenya (Articles)  
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# The Historical Dimension of South African Autobiography

Thengani H. Ngwenya

South African autobiographical writing has a long and varied history. Dating back to the colonial era marked by such historically distinctive works as Kingsley Fairbridge's *The Autobiography of Kingsley Fairbridge* (1927) and Francis Carey Slater's *Settler's Heritage* (1954), autobiographical self-representation has undergone various mutations and the autobiographical form itself has assumed many sub-genres. The essays collected in this issue cover such diverse forms of life writing as fictional autobiography, autobiographical fiction, life-stories, conventional autobiographies and collaborative autobiography. Mainly because of its strong historical dimension, autobiography serves the crucial function of reflecting, analysing and interpreting the racial, ethnic, class and gender differences in the South Africa community. As shown in the articles in this issue, writers of autobiographies, life-stories, autobiographical novels and other forms of life-writing have offered personalized interpretations of and challenges to hegemonic ideologies and institutional practices in the history of South Africa. Thus while (re)writing history, autobiographers also provide invaluable insights and perspectives into the complex history of South Africa.

This long overdue special issue on South African life-writing seeks to provoke critical and theoretical debate about the social (historical and political) functions of autobiography. By focussing on the life-histories of formerly marginalised autobiographers this issue seeks to foreground the capacity of the autobiographical form to play a key role in the construction of new post-apartheid self-empowering subjectivities.

The eight articles collected here examine the use of autobiography to (re)construct individual and collective identities. As evidenced by their pluralistic theoretical approaches all contributors seem to agree that any attempt to recover and reconstruct the past through narrative is essentially an act of interpretation shaped largely by the writer's circumstances at the time of writing, narrative conventions, the writer's intentions and the culturally defined codes of self-signification. Jerome Bruner's (1993:38) conception of the autobiographical process has a particular

pertinence to the understanding of autobiography underpinning most arguments raised in this special issue:

I take the view that there is no such thing as a "life as lived" to be referred to. On this view, a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience - and of reconstruing and reconstruing it until our breath or our pen fails us. Construal and reconstrual are interpretive. Like all forms of interpretation, how we construe our lives is subject to our intentions, to the interpretive conventions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language.

Most of the articles in this issue focus on the autobiographies of black women written and published during the apartheid era. Perhaps this is an index of the extent to which women have relied on autobiographical narratives to create and sustain a sense of identity in the face of their double marginalisation as blacks and as women. Gina Wisker's wide-ranging analysis of counter-hegemonic self-representation explores the function of autobiographical 'fiction' in the struggle of women to construct 'authentic' self-identities and to challenge those identities imposed on them by the dominant discourses of race and patriarchy. Similarly, Nancy Bazin's article tackles the various modes of self-representation within the mode of fiction in the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The new political dispensation in South Africa has made it possible for South Africans of all races to begin to discern and articulate interconnections between ethnic, racial and linguistic divisions in order to create a sense of shared 'nationhood'. South African critics and writers have a lot to learn from postcolonial theorists and critics who have provided us with a useful constellation of concepts, ideas and theoretical approaches with which we can begin to understand and describe the complex condition of South African multiculturalism. Premised on the notion of cultural hybridity, J.U. Jacobs's article interrogates the concept of cross-cultural translation in South African autobiographical writing from a postcolonial theoretical perspective. Jacobs debunks the myth of ethnic essentialism and demonstrates how the black South African autobiographers reflect the cultural and linguistic interchange that is a feature of South African cultural life. Graeme Rosenberg's carefully researched essay on the versatile writer and thinker Jordan Ngubane, illustrates the multiple identities of a black man who in many ways anticipated the cultural hybridity of the post-apartheid era in South Africa in his conscious combination of Zulu nationalism, African nationalism and liberal values. The issue of multiple sites of identity formation also constitutes the theme of Stephen Meyer's essay on Johnny Masilela's autobiographical stories, *Deliver Us from Evil*.

Vanessa Farr's insightful article looks at the interrelationships between

feminist theory and collaborative autobiography. Farr's essay is not simply a formal explication of selected life-stories but also serves to highlight the often neglected issues relating to the production, publishing and marketing of the life-stories of illiterate or semi-literate women. Thengani H. Ngwenya's article on ideology and self-representation challenges the application of some postcolonial theoretical concepts such as 'transculturation' to the description of cross-cultural relations during the early stages of the colonial encounter.

As shown in most articles in this issue some autobiographers tend to see themselves as members of social groupings created by the convergence between dominant ideologies and material circumstances. Thus most autobiographers define themselves in racial, ethnic, gender and class categories. These are not analytical paradigms imposed by critics and analysts on these texts but they are the logical consequences of a political ideology premised on racial and ethnic division. Thomas Thale's essay examines autobiographical self-portrayal in which the autobiographical self is presented as a member of a fairly distinct social group.

What became increasingly clear to me as I prepared this issue was the remarkable flexibility of autobiography as a form of writing and field of research. I was reminded of James Olney's (1986:64) remarks about the inherently 'hybrid' nature of autobiography:

As to its literary status, I should think autobiography is doubtless the most impure of any writing performance that can make any sort of claim at all to being 'literature'; but the saving grace here is that if autobiography is forever an impurity in the realm of literature, it also insinuates itself into all sorts of other disciplines and endeavors—history, psychology, anthropology, sociology—and contaminates them to such a degree that they can hardly sustain any claim to being 'science' (Olney 1986:64).

As I read these articles in the eight months it has taken me to edit this special issue I was struck by autobiography's unprecedented capacity to foster a truly interdisciplinary understanding and co-operation between apparently distinct disciplines.

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# 'No World as Yet for What She has Done': Re-memory and Revisioning in Bessie Head and South African Women's Autobiographical Writings

Gina Wisker

## Introduction

Bessie Head's perceptive analysis of the social alienation which first her mother, and then she herself experienced (Vigne 1991:65) locates the difficulties of self-recognition and expression faced by many South African women under apartheid. This difficulty could easily lead to silence but, for the women considered here, it has led instead to exploration and expression of the individual's experiences as both individual and part of the community.

Bessie Head's letter (above) locates her sense of identity in the context of her mother's tragedy—incarceration in a mental home because of her relationship with a Black African servant—Bessie's father. There was, then, no space, no world for Toby Birch (her mother), and very little more for biracial, creative women. Bessie Head's own exploration and location of her creative and cultural identity is developed in relation to her own position, in South Africa, before and during the apartheid era. Hers is a testimony and an imaginatively engaged exploration of alternatives to racist oppression, both informing and enabling us to contextualise the autobiographical and fictional works of other South African women who also explore and establish identity in a historical, cultural and geographical location of which there is—or was — 'no world' and no word for much of what they have to do and say:

Telling our stories, using the 'self as subject', shows the intersection between the individual and the larger forces of our history. In telling our stories we attempt to understand both intellectually and emotionally. We each have a story to tell, in its uniqueness and commonalty, but also in its constructedness. In remembering in the present, we begin to realise that parts of our past are waiting to be reclaimed, re-visioned and told as we

of the apartheid era is that of fictional autobiography, a space chosen by women to construct, explore and express their own versions of their lives. In our reading of South African women's fictionalised autobiographies written under the shadow of apartheid, our own post apartheid critical lens looks now in their work for continuities and discontinuities between that turbulent past and, for South Africa, the differently turbulent present. There are ways in which, in negotiating the expression of versions of their own identities and feelings, women's autobiographies are dialogues between an oppressive and silencing present and a resisting, culturally generated, self-creating individual voice. They are a very good place to begin to look again at South African writing, and to look also at our (for me, my own, very limited, no doubt partial and skewed) critical and personal responses to the changes gradually emerging in the New South Africa.

The semi-fictionalised and more documentary autobiographical works of Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Lauretta Ngcobo, Ellen Kuzwayo and women of the COSAW (Congress of South African Writers) collective (whose work is collected in *Like a House on Fire* 1994) represent varied, differently successful versions from different South African contexts of the wish to reconstruct, and represent the self in the face of social, political and textual master narratives which would seek to silence such representations.

As Betty Govinden points out, absolutely essential for those (South Africans, women among them) who wish and need to establish a sense of history and continuity in which to place and define their developing identity, is the reading of those whose work provides a literary and personal heritage. Such reading was denied, not available, in South Africa to students and ordinary readers alike. Instead, the imperially constructed 'Great Tradition' with its particular totalising discourses dominated the curriculum and insidiously enabled the construction of versions of the self which silenced or deferred, labelling as irrelevant so many culturally affected personal responses, both critical and creative:

There was a curious collusion between apartheid and colonialism and that this came to bear especially in the literature that we studied at school ... Literature was confined to English Literature, to that which was written 'a long time ago'. Oral and popular literatures as well as local and contemporary writing of black South African peoples were not even considered as being marginal or secondary. It simply did not exist (Govinden 1995:173).

On the one hand, apartheid conditions and curricula prevented people from sharing ideas and experiences with other races, people from other origins, preventing the recognition of similarities and uniquenesses. On the other hand, in its imposition

and valorisation of a particular version of what literature 'was', it denied, devalued and actively removed from access any writing about the variety of lives of Black and 'coloured' South Africans in particular, but also of white European and Afrikaner originated South Africans. 'The crude personal and private was only to be lived and endured' (Govinden 1995:175), never inscribed, read, reflected and built upon, used as a lens to see oneself in perspective. Well organised, controlling, formal education was denied them—how then to envision and imagine a past and a self? This led to an 'insidious stranglehold on the creative imagination' (Gilroy 1987:175).

What validates the experience of an artist is knowing that somewhere out there someone will acknowledge and share your deepest thoughts, your joys, your pain, your muses. Yet in South Africa we have lived for a very long time in the stifling isolation of our separate worlds both as individuals and as groups. Only now do we, as South African writers and artists, self-consciously grope and reach out to find fellow South African kindred spirits (Ngcobo 1994:1).

Creative isolation has been damaging to generations of South African readers and writers. Now their work is being written and read, and many women are recuperating versions of their past lives through the explorations and expressions of the various forms of autobiography.

### Autobiography

Autobiographical writing has always been viewed with a mixture of voyeuristic fascination, as Barbara Burford, quoting Grace Nichols might put it 'a little black pain undressed' (Burford 1987:37), and with critical scepticism. Indeed, it used to be termed a critical fallacy to read autobiographical inferences in the work of any writers, and autobiography itself was considered a very poor relation of 'real writing'. The relationship between versions of autobiographical writing and fiction, the role the transmuting imagination plays, are key issues here. As Lauretta Ngcobo (1994:2) points out:

For what is art but life purified? As writers we need to be carefully discerning and vigilant in seeking to find our expression through art. For somehow we must strive to keep fact, truth, fiction and art separate. The function of the writer is not to record truth verbatim like a reporter. Neither is it to present total fantasy, unrelated to reality and lived experience. It is not the raw truth, the raw events of our embittered days of violence. Essentially writing is about the truth contemplated through the crucible of the imagination, and therefore truth becomes art.

Autobiography is an increasingly contested genre. It is both critically suspect and yet richly enabling, depending on your critical stance. Its assertion of the uniqueness and wholeness of the individual subject, it could be argued, is itself a conditioned product of a westernised, masculinist ideological position. For Aboriginal women writers, South African women writers and other Black women writers autobiography, by prioritising the experience of the individual's uniqueness over that of the community, of other women and by writing out of a westernised, romantic legacy of the importance of the dominant experiencing self, it *seems* to deny the shared similar experiences of women under racism and patriarchy. However, this exclusivity is neither an intended nor an achieved project. In the hands of African American, Aboriginal and South African women writers, autobiography has been reshaped and reclaimed. Not only does it enable the expression of the subject position, but it enables an expression of each woman, as subject and also as a living, breathing product of a specific set of cultural contexts. Black women authors write autobiography in assertion of individual identity and of the value of the identities and experiences of other Black women. Ruby Langford (Aboriginal) and Ellen Kuzwayo (South African) both write as the individual 'I' and as a member of the collective community 'we', their identities constructed by and a projection of the experience and identities of the communities from which they grow. The autobiography of Ellen Kuzwayo 'puts aside the rhinoceros hide, to reveal a people with a delicate nervous balance like everyone else' (Head 1990:89). The documentation of human suffering is terrible she notes, but at its end:

one feels as if a shadow history of South Africa has been written; there is a sense of triumph, of hope in this achievement and that one has read the true history of the land, a history that vibrates with human compassion and goodness (Kuzwayo in Head 1990:89).

Born into a family with land tenure, Ellen Kuzwayo was taught to be a Christian and to serve others. Her move from a rural background, as a child, to the slums of Johannesburg, is one familiar to many South African women, and charted elsewhere in Miriam Tlali's *Soweto Stories* (1989). The men move to the city for work to pay the poll taxes, and starving women follow, working in domestic service. Ellen Kuzwayo, looking most particularly at the difficulties faced by women in these dreadful conditions writes:

it is not easy to live and bring up children in a community robbed of its traditional moral code and values; a community lost between its old heritage and culture and that of its colonists (Kuzwayo in Head 1990:90).

She charts the violence and injustices of the 1976 Soweto unrest, including her own and her son's detention.

Gail Reagon (1994:34f), in 'Ellen Kuzwayo and Ways of Speaking Otherwise', positions Kuzwayo's texts as 'both oppositional and testimonial':

The testimonial dimension in Kuzwayo's autobiography is not a unproblematic assumption of her typicality, that she is representative enough to stand in for the black South African community or for all black women. Rather, it points to the trenchantly political or interventionist nature of the narration. For Kuzwayo, the personal 'I' is inescapably bound to the collective 'we'; her identity is constituted as an extension of the community

Motherhood in relation to motherlands empowers Kuzwayo in her autobiography *Homelessness* and a sense of place paradoxically coexist, as does individual identity and the individual as community member. Through all of this the position of the Black South African mother is one of empowerment, which turns the conventionally disempowering and silencing around. Like Wicomb, Head and African American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in particular, hers is a dialogic work: she speaks from these dual, previously oppositional or dichotomous positions, and this is in the face of the kinds of dominant discourses which would render black women and autobiography absent, silenced and devalued. Of course, under patriarchy, racism and sexism, it is difficult to escape entirely the discourse which these have shared, and also to escape accusations at least of falling into the other various traps women have discovered in writing of their lives and the lives of others, such as essentialism, and suggestions of homogeneity. Tensions remain in the work, as they do in that of Wicomb and Head. How could the truly radical alternative autobiographical work refuse dominant discourses and constraints entirely, since the self and the representations of the self are themselves constructed from such dominant pressures and discourses? Gail Reagon finds Kuzwayo's project in revaluing motherhood and identity as ultimately unsuccessful, accusing her of homogenising Black womanhood into a universal earth mother figure. She says:

In her commendable attempt to write and speak the specific and valid experience of the South African black woman she reproduces or replicates the very paradigm she sets out to undermine and replace. Her monolithic sisterhood becomes as naturalised (and therefore suspect) as the dominant white minority or black patriarchy that she wishes to problematise (Reagon 1994:38).

But this is only one rather predictable way of evaluating a work which

speaks of the individual as a member and a representative of the community. All forms of autobiography have been treated most recently as suspect, a critical perspective which necessarily results in the kind of imperialist response of which many Black writers have rightly complained. In the 1980s the 'subject' and subject positions were, in particular, viewed with suspicion and even hostility, their ontological security severally questioned, their right to any statement, constructed as they were by context and a plethora of forces, most questionable. Thus a critical abhorrence of the subject and subject position posed particular problems for both women and colonised peoples, for whom there was and is a very specific need to break silence and assert identity, write about the self and the history of the self in order to achieve a sense of being, identity and security in the world. For marginalised and silenced women in particular this was and is no time to bow to the critical effacement of the subject, but a time instead to write the self, work out and reclaim identity through this writing process, aware of its constructedness. There are many different versions and choices, made along the axis of fiction and autobiography. Maya Angelou chooses to use 'I' when retelling her stories, and infuses her narrative with philosophising about life and its values (Angelou 1970; 1974; 1976; 1981; 1986; 1990). Sally Morgan, the Aboriginal author of *My Place* (1987), also uses 'I' but, like other Aboriginal women writers, including Ruby Langford (1989), her stories are not merely her own, but also of others in her family. Versions of events spiral and circle around, forming a sense of a shared community autobiography.

Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb each create a fictionalised character based on themselves and write of her pains and pleasures. In Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) there is a liberation of expression in the intermixing of everyday realism and surreal night-time horrors, felt as equally real by the protagonist. Forms of autobiography provide particularly authentic first person testimony of history and experiences otherwise rendered second hand through other written versions including journalism. As with the early slave narratives, testifying to one's experience has always had strength and authenticity for Black communities. When allied with the need to frame, control and make sense of experience rather than merely record it, and to construct an 'I' figure, a fictionalised version of the self, an awareness of the problematic, a constructed status of this authentic voice emerges. Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb develop semi-fictionalised autobiographies whose protagonists closely resemble, but also differ from themselves. There is no polarisation of critical choices. They are both authentic *and* constructed, interpreted; they represent the self and the community.

Gillian Whitlock's *Autographs* (1996) in collecting examples of autobiographical forms both avoids the stereotyping often associated with autobiography, and celebrates the diversity of these 'disobedient subjects':

There has been an ongoing assumption that autobiography will prove a quarry for confirming familiar national myths, that the 'quest for personal identity' must involve asking fundamental questions about national identity. This approach has resulted in some self-fulfilling tendencies, so that retrieved materials for critical attention have come from salted mines, depressing the variety of the genre (Whitlock 1996:xix).

Bessie Head and Zoe Wicomb are impressively creative in the genre. As Black or 'coloured' (i.e. mixed race) women writing under apartheid, both Head and Wicomb seek to explore their own histories, their identities, and also to represent marginalised and silenced subjects. In so doing, they and other South African women writers who choose semi-fictionalised autobiography and a more documentary autobiography as their form—Lauretta Ngcobo, the Congress of South African Writers women's collective, Ellen Kuzwayo and others—both creatively utilise and subvert the master narratives which would seek to subjugate their experience and prevent its expression.

### Bessie Head

If all my living experience could be summarised I would call it knowledge of evil, knowledge of its sources, of its true face and the misery and suffering it inflicts on human life .... What has driven me is a feeling that human destiny ought not to proceed along tragic lines, with every effort and every new-born civilisation throttling itself in destruction with wrong ideas and wrong ways of living (Head 1990:63).

From a position of self-imposed, creatively necessary exile, Bessie Head's semi-fictionalised autobiographical work realistically and metaphorically explores the recognition of self, defiance of silence, and refusal of imposed identities. In *A Question of Power* (1974) Bessie Head/ Elizabeth her protagonist/ fictionalised autobiographical self is a product of a hidden, silenced and denied mixed race union. She is, herself, a space and a silence because there not only is 'no world as yet' for what her mother has done, but also no language to express what she is or can be. Into this space emptied of meaning enter the power struggles of oppressive racist and sexist discourses.

Blinkered totalitarianism cannot bear very much debate: all forms of racial and cultural intermixing are anathema to it. Silence and denial are frequently the only responses available to those who themselves embody cultural intermixture. Of Nyasha, the British educated Southern African girl in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous*

*Conditions*, (1988), Anthony Chenells (1996:69) comments, referring to the destructive, silencing results of her version of cultural intermixing: 'it is produced from a space within two cultures which, lacking language, cannot name with any precision its own contingencies'.

This silencing and space is the place from which Bessie Head begins to write and, like Dangarembga and Wicomb, her work itself negotiates a dialectic of culture, difference, and expression. As Desiree Lewis argues: 'Head's restless struggles both against and with available narratives, forms and discourses were rarely univocal, linear or intentional ones' (Lewis 1996:77).

Crucially, Bessie Head deals with the destructive constraints and repercussions of the Immorality Act (1927, amended 1957: the official embodiment of the taboo against interracial sexual relations in South Africa), as they affect her own life and identity by a subversive, creative and imaginative response. The versions of her own origins, which she writes and re-writes in her fictions and her letters, represent a deliberate and determined effort to bring to life and voice her silenced mother and the culturally unacceptable child which Bessie was under apartheid. Finding and voicing hidden roots and origins, recalling history, is a powerful first step towards establishing a full sense of one's own identity, especially for those whose marginalisation and silencing deprives them of a sense of history from which to begin. Imperialism and patriarchy have ensured the dominance of certain master narratives which effectively relegate women, Black people and Black women in particular, to positions of absence and silence. African American women writers have constructed a maternal lineage tracking back to Zora Neale Hurston, and African women preceding her, seeking, as Alice Walker puts it, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), a way of expressing the hidden creativities of their silenced mothers. History is very important to writers *and* readers. Jayapraga Reddy comments: 'Our writing tradition and culture can only be strongly built if we have a sense of the foundations on which we are building' (Reddy 1994:74).

As a response to the oppressions and the negations of self offered by the master narratives, Bessie Head literally recreates for herself in her letters a version of her mother and, while not actually giving her mother a voice, speaks for her in telling her story. She begins to create an identity for herself out of this version of her mother in letters and narratives. Her white, wealthy mother's relationship with a black stable hand led to her designation as insane and her incarceration in a mental home where she gave birth to Bessie, who was removed from her. She died six years later.

'She sought some warmth and love from a black man' and:

when the family found out they succeeded in classifying mother as insane, sped her down away from the family home in Johannesburg to a small town, Pietermaritzburg and locked her up in the Pietermaritzburg Mental hospital

where she gave birth to me .... I was then removed from her .... She was never let out of the mental hospital and committed suicide when I was six years old (Head 27:119).

Of her mother, whose defiance of the race laws stands for a rejection of the policing of her own thoughts and selfhood, Bessie Head says, stressing the tragedy of her time and context 'I still say she belongs to me in a special way and that there is no world as yet for what she has done. She left me to figure it out' (Vigne 1991:65).

As a first generation bi-racial, 'coloured' South African, Bessie Head was subjected to the full dehumanising force of apartheid. After choosing exile in Botswana, she was only able to gain a full sense of her own citizenship when her literary reputation finally persuaded authorities to let her have a passport (1979). She could then travel to conferences and sign books abroad, a Botswanan passport helping establish her always rather beleaguered sense of identity. Bessie Head's early work appeared in *The New African*, alongside that of Lewis Nkosi and Es'kia Mphahlele. Unlike the political, worldly often sensationalist, journalistic work of her colleagues in *Drum*, Bessie Head's writing was more personal and 'apolitical'. She refused political activism and was sceptical about religion, although equating the idea of 'unholy places' with those clearly intolerant and oppressive—notably the South Africa of her youth:

I have continually lived with a chattering sense of anxiety—that human beings are unfortunately set down in unholy places, and Southern Africa may be the unholyest place on earth (Head 1990:27).

When she moved she chose Botswana wisely, as the editor of her autobiographical writings, Craig Mackenzie comments:

The sense of Botswana's almost uninterrupted African history had an immediate and profound influence on her, a victim of almost total deracination in the land of her birth (Head 1990:xvii).

In Botswana her writing developed and then flourished, but first she had to work through expressing and exploring her own breakdown, which took place in 1969.

Of *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head (1990:69) says:

I had such an intensely personal and private dialogue that I can hardly place it in the context of the more social and outward-looking work I had done. It was a private philosophical journey to the source of evil, I argue that people and nations do not realise the point at which they become evil; but once

trapped in its net, evil has a powerful propelling motion into a terrible abyss of destruction. I argue that its form, design and plan could be clearly outlined and that it was little understood as a force in the affairs of mankind.

*A Question of Power* expresses the protagonist Elizabeth's restless struggle to find a sense of her own identity and a sense of belonging. Her daytime productive and creative work with crops in the experimental Utopian community of Motabeng contrasts horrifically with the increasing intrusion and engulfment of her night-time, nightmare world peopled and invaded with mythical, allegorical figures of power who attempt to impose upon her destructive and limiting identities. Sello and Dan resemble medieval mystery play or Chinese myth figures. Familiar, they turn terrifyingly into seductive, sexually perverse and patriarchal figures, products of her imaginative revolt against her own internalised sense of social and political contradiction. Increasingly invading and disabling her days, their struggle for power almost destroys her.

Bessie Head transmutes the painful material of her alienation, isolation and mental breakdown in Botswana into Elizabeth's story. The realistic/ surrealistic tale is both particular in its detail—one woman's breakdown—and representative in its nightmarish dramatisations of the divisive, destructive effects of internalising the oppressions of race and gender under apartheid. Like her namesake (Bessie is often a shortened form of Elizabeth), Elizabeth settles with her son in a community to whom she was initially a stranger. Amidst his mother's breakdown, 'Shorty's' normality and everyday demands bring moments of everyday demand and joy—eventually helping her to throw off the terrible constraints of this destructive power play. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (1893), Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before Dark*, (1972) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Head's novel charts a woman's breakdown, (and breakthrough) in the face of absurd power politics.

Startling events in the fictionalised autobiography are exact parallels of reality, even the pasting of notices outside the post office in Serowe, accusing Sir Seretse Khama (Sello, in the book) of obscenity and cannibalism. This latter act helped confirm Bessie's breakdown. She was confined in hospital for a while, returned and confined again several times over a period of two years, finally emerging with a greater sense of ontological security, and the creative energy to write it through. The fictionalised autobiography *A Question of Power*, the novel *Maru* (1971) and, to a lesser extent, the works also featuring Serowe—*When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *Serowe, Village of the Rain Winds* (1981)—are about her life, and also a testimony to the harshness of life in South Africa and the potential for Utopian change. Of the loathing for South Africa which has denied and silenced her, she says of Elizabeth:

She hated the country. In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had lived the back-breaking life of all black peoples in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or to loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated. There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond that, there wasn't any life to the heart, just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks (Head 1974:19).

and:

I perceived the ease with which one could become evil and I associated evil in my mind with the acquisition of power (Head 1974:77).

This is the connection which lies behind the drama of *A Question of Power*. Breaking down and identifying evil with everyday people she saw around her in Serowe, as part of a larger evil, Bessie hallucinated and moved into a world where she engaged in a war with evil. 'She felt herself to be part of a soul drama, a new act of the eternal conflict between good and evil. She believed her strange birth and destiny to be part of a large pattern of things' (Stead Eilerson 1995:129). She thought of herself as involved in reincarnation, aligned herself with the biblical King David, and became embroiled in a tripartite relationship of Biblical, historical and then local proportions. This translates into an internal drama involving 'the grandeur of her destiny, the inexplicable cruelty of and evil of her torturer and her distaste for sexual corruption' (Stead Eilerson 1995:130). Although at this period in her life she was involved mentally with such dramas, she could also distinguish between this and her daily life. She was filled with fears of her own death, and with racially inspired disgust at her difference. Bessie Head wrote through some of these feelings in *Maru* where Margaret the Masarwa or Bushman is ostracised in the village, considered the lowest of the low because of her racial origins. In 1969 this internalisation of racism was torturously real to Bessie. *Maru* was published in 1971. These years were written through thoroughly and identified with more directly in the fictionalised autobiographical form, *A Question of Power*. Bessie had a breakdown at Christmas 1970. Howard, her son, went to live in the care of the Moores, where he flourished, and she was hospitalised. Tom, the young aid worker/ draft dodger who had become her friend visited, and care, gardening and letter-writing gradually returned her to a hold on life.

In *A Question of Power* what rescues Elizabeth from the violence of the play of evil upon her, is similarly her involvement in the agricultural scheme, the local

garden, and her young son. The characters who appear in Elizabeth's mental drama are important in the scheme of Bessie's life and development, one, a bolt-hurling-Medusa, reminds her of her alienation, her status as not quite pure African, her inability to truly relate to her people. Medusa tells Elizabeth 'Africa is troubled waters .... You'll only drown there' (Head 1974:44), emphasising Elizabeth's failed sexual prowess and active attempts at goodness. Elizabeth identifies with the suffering poor, expecting rejection by Dan whom she initially loves, but then comes to recognise as an attacking bully whose sexual perversions are nightly paraded before her with a succession of mistresses. Her daily life is filled with gardening work. Tom, the Peace Corps worker, her son Shorty and friend Kenosi consistently sort her out and re-involve her in the gardening. The rhythms and structure of the novel echo a descent into mental hell. From daily normality in the garden and some gradual intrusions by Sello and Dan, Elizabeth is plunged into a total depression, the dramatised evils dominating her nights and then days. She works through a drama of evil and sexual perversion, before gradually coming to terms more with her own life and position and returning to sanity.

It is internalised racism which produces this alienation, pain, and then breakdown. Dealing with it creatively, through writing her life out in fictionalised autobiographical form, is a cathartic experience which exorcises the demons. The narrative provides a controlling shape to what is initially perceived and experienced as pure evil:

Her first drafts of *A Question of Power*, when she still called it *Summer Flowers* were hardly to be distinguished from some of the descriptions of her own life she had given friends. She saw herself singled out for an incomprehensible assault of evil. She had come to the conclusion that it was necessary for the clearing of a lot of junk out of the soul (Stead Eilerson 1995:149).

In a letter from South Africa to a friend (to DB 1963), Bessie Head (1990:14) comments on the obvious hatred and provocation of even white liberals to Black people, and her own disempowerment in the face of this:

You can't think straight about anything if you're hating all the time. You even get scared to write because everything has turned cock-eyed and sour (Head 1990:14).

Lewis notes of the posthumously published *The Cardinals* (1993), which explores the story of Head's father, in the fictionalised figure of a fisherman Johnny, who fathers Ruby from an interracial relationship. Negotiating sensitive and personal

subject matter, interrogating and critiquing the damage done by racism, Bessie Head is well aware of necessarily breaking new ground formally in her work. This novella:

Illuminates her alertness to the ways master narratives shape the public domain of writing and the fictions available to marginal subjects. It also reveals the way she both subverts and reproduces dominant meanings and codes, struggling with a vision which available codes are not able to sustain (Lewis 1996:77).

Bessie Head exposes and critiques the dangers of internalising a version of racism, exploring how the ways in which its naturalising discourses ensure an unquestioning uptake and application. She exposes through replicating the naturalising discourses and yet represents the absurdity of discrimination on the basis of appearance. Seemingly unpolitical, it is highly politicised and aware.

*A Question of Power* is formally an ambitious book. The long periods of assault on Elizabeth's senses have been found dull by some readers. However, their intensity and tone are appropriate to the extent and relentless inescapability of racism and sexism and can be usefully compared with James Joyce's fictionalised autobiographical protagonist, Stephen's, religious experiences in the retreat in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1902).

When, in 1984 Heinemann wrote to Bessie suggesting she write her autobiography, she said she wished to call it: 'Living on a Horizon' because it describes someone who 'Lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and living experience' (Head 1993:277). She intended to set up a workshop to research her papers and put more of her Botswana life (20 years as against 27 in South Africa) in the book and she sent an outline. The publisher they sought to take it, Hamish Hamilton, rejected the proposal, comparing it with Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and wanting more about her childhood. Two collections of stories appeared, then *A Bewitched Cross-Roads* (1984), a historical novel about Serowe. Its sales were hurt by sanctions against anything South African but sold well in the village. She then agreed to hand the autobiography over by the end of 1986 but never finished it, and died in April that year.

It was almost as though the books wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstances that seemed to me a howling inferno (Head 1990:77).

Gradually there is coming into shape a world for what Bessie's mother and Bessie herself did, and it begins to appear in the creative imaginative challenge offered by her written world. Bessie Head's fictionalised autobiographies are cathartic. They exorcise the horrors of her own and others' experiences of power based on oppression and racism. But they do more than this. In their emphasis on breakthrough, realisation of identity and self-worth, and in their formal challenge to the 'master-narratives', they suggest and embody new hope for a future based on relationships of equality and creativity.

### Zoe Wicomb

The centrality of memory in authorship is crucial in Zoe Wicomb's story sequence *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) which figures the growing up, education, and return from the UK of Frieda Shenton, Wicomb's protagonist/ representative of herself in the novel/ fictionalised autobiography. In terms of a continuum from documentary autobiography to fiction, Wicomb's work would appear some way along the 'fictional' side of the continuum.

Dorothy Driver points out that Zoe Wicomb's work refuses stable categories of 'black' and 'woman' to represent the diversity and difference of South African 'non-white' life. She was more able to speak out about South Africa rather than the exile country of her choice (Head's Botswana, Wicomb the UK) because of the intersection of Black consciousness and feminism from which she writes, the very variety and difference of life in South Africa where the coloured or Black African, and certainly in relation to being female, attracted Wicomb's creative exploration. The intermingling over the years between Griqua and South African Dutch settler Afrikaners did not lead to equality but to the designation of the mixed race people as 'non white' or 'coloured', which led to the denial of the right to vote, economic and educational deprivation, and censorship of sexual relations with whites. Several of Zoe Wicomb's stories mourn the forced deporting of people to new, probably well serviced, lands away from their old homes and behaviours. Wicomb's short stories represent the interweaving of different perspectives and experiences, different points of view which circle around the controlling point of view of Frieda Shenton, as a child, student, then returned from the UK.

In this way there is a dialogic relation between the different versions of life in South Africa. So in 'Behind the Bougainvillea', a story Dorothy Driver (1996) examines at length, Frieda waits at the white doctor's, in the yard because of her colour, which relegates her to a secondary position but is still able to be treated. Her privileged and successful education at a white school, then as a student in the UK, highlights the strangeness and yet familiarity of the kind of rejection and colour prejudice which is an everyday way of life back home. Rescued by Henry Hendrikse,

the Black South African freedom fighter, and walked off from the hot yard, her interlude offers her some escape and some minimal relationship with the more engaged political aspects of what it means to be Black and politically aware of the hierarchies of colour in apartheid South Africa. A brief sexual encounter with Henry evens some kind of score, smoothes out differences (her previous elevation because of colour—he is not 'coloured' but an African ANC member). The experience is the opposite of sexually sensitive, merely begun by recognition and tacit agreement. This is part of Frieda's placing of herself back in her own complex society, but the consciousness does not analyse the event in this way, merely recording it. As Driver (1996:49) points out:

*If You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* destabilizes and decentres the subject as part of its political engagement with various discourses at work, their effect is not one of annihilation, for the social cross currents or webbing of identity are recognised rather than repressed within the text and often comprise the characters' self representations.

The text has, she argues, a celebratory resistance to the 'unified self' stereotype. Certainly in this, it is clear to see the interweaving of selves offered to Frieda upon her return, and the range of family and other voices in debate around her and in her consciousness. Frieda is a 'coloured' woman who recognises the politicisation of Black consciousness, yet her education has been in a white system. Hers is a pivotal position, stirred to extra effect by her awareness of her own gender politics. However equal she might feel herself to be, on return, her gender renders her subordinated, and in South Africa, her particular hue also labels her. Like African American women writers Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker in particular, Zoe Wicomb refuses to dichotomise gender and ethnicity. In her case, the positions of being both woman and South African are crucial and equal. (Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) met with criticism from Black male critics in particular, because of its portrayal of abusive Black men. She should, they suggested, fight the cause of African Americans before she worried about gender differences.) Like Walker, Morrison and Angelou, Wicomb writes from a position of being a woman and a South African. Driver (1996:51) says of her work:

It is a writing ... fully worthy of the story of black women's resistance to racist and capitalist exploitation and suppression, and to the ongoing battle to bring gender into current political negotiations .... Wicomb's particular combination of Black consciousness and feminism, where each mode of thinking contradicts and informs the other, permits her to trace in a South African context the ways subjectivities might be differently constructed

through a recognition of the dynamic between specific experiences and desires, on the one hand, and political demands, decisions and discourses on the other.

Wicomb's is a contribution to a rich subject position which revalues women's roles, and reclaims the language she speaks from the coloniser who would sanitise it of local references. She writes about the mixture of words from different language contexts.

Wicomb's work does not express such a sense of disillusionment and potential for disorientated self destruction as some of Head's autobiographical work. She is of another generation, and read Head's work only while living in England in the 1970s. Wicomb has a different sense of exile and identity, and although her stories negotiate fissures between identities and the imposed racial tensions and differences in South Africa, nonetheless the cohesion of her central protagonist, Freida Shenton, unifies the whole of her work, which does not dissolve into the record of breakdown as does Head's. Her responses are those of a younger generation more able to find identity and voice, although still remaining troubled by the tensions of South Africa:

Her writing bears witness to a history of deprivation, yet it also suggest ways which subvert this history: not through political or economic change but through a psychological change whose major route is in re-writing representation (Driver 1996:45).

We find in Wicomb's writing a creative response to the stimulus of reading Bessie Head and reflecting on her own very different life experiences. Wicomb's difference from Head is not merely one of generation, however. As a highly educated woman, she has had full access to an international literary canon in the context of which to situate her own work. Her position as acclaimed critic and teacher, alongside her creative work, enables a complex dialogic relationship between life and art, both of which are engaged with living in apartheid and, more recently, post-apartheid South Africa. Additionally, while Head lacked identity and context in terms of a language community, Wicomb writes from an established language community position. The kinds of silencing and absences which Wicomb, Head and other South African women writers have suffered have made it difficult for them to do what was more possible for African American women stories, read back through their mothers and grandmothers, although we must not forget that, for Alice Walker, the re-discovery of Zora Neale Hurston, whose work she then brought to light and new fame, was crucial in helping establish this link and history. It is early days even now for South African women to speak and work together towards a recognition and

expression of their criticism of sexism as well as their criticism of racism, as forms of oppression. Lauretta Ngcobo (1994:1) talks of the circumstances which silenced and separated and the image that is being repaired:

... in the past, South African women have found it difficult to acknowledge a common sisterhood. This has militated against our alliance in the fight on gender issues within a very sexist society.

## Like a House on Fire

How do you internalise an intellectual memory in a way that allows you to act on it? (Braude 1994:266).

*Like a House on Fire* contains many examples of creative and autobiographical work by South African women writers of the different racial groups, testifying to their experiences. The full autobiography/ fiction continuum is referred to as 'stories' in the context of the book, indicating the creative and imaginative intermixing with the factual, and the range of work. Carol Lett's 'Transitions' intermixes memories of her grandfather and great-grandfather, whose violent death remained a rumour to her, with dates and events in her own life, each of which marks a response to the condition of living under apartheid. Born 'in December 1959, a few months before the horror of Sharpeville, when a number of people, including children, were shot dead by police' (Lett 1994:3). She moves from this period of protest at the Pass Laws to the birth of her daughter 'in June 1990, a few months after the long-awaited release of Nelson Mandela' (1994:3). Selected, significant memories parallel South Africa's development to the post-apartheid era. Like several other pieces in the collection, this is selective documentary biography which interprets factual events in a symbolic manner. Dynana Kukana's 'The Bush Call' (1994) records an event in her childhood in Makeleng, Botswana when, skipping school with some friends, she spent a day in the bush picking fruit, nuts and berries and spotting wild animals: 'I also had opportunity to see a kudu disappearing fast round a corner. I wondered what it was running away from' (Kukana 1994:17). The wonder of the day is dissipated by recalling how angry her father could get should he find out her truancy. Dynana passes out when she hears a lion has been terrorising the neighbourhood, and the bush where she has been. The tale is lively and dramatic. It is also a rite of passage, a tale of growth and change, with a moral. Conflating terror at the lion with actual food poisoning from the berries provides a moment of both factual and symbolic shock, leading to her decision to avoid the potential and real terrors of the bush.

The full continuum of documentary includes an interview with Gillian Slovo who wrote *Ties of Blood* (1990) after the assassination of her anti-apartheid political activist mother, Ruth First. *Ties of Blood* is semi-autobiographical, featuring Jewish families through the history of South African political struggles and deals particularly with her parents' generation:

I used to deny totally that it was autobiographical, which is rubbish. It obviously has huge autobiographical elements. The people trace the historical development that my family is part of ... it is a kind of catalogue of the anti-apartheid movement in the twentieth century, and because my parents were so active in it, obviously they participated in its development. (Braude 1994:264 [interview with Gillian Slovo])

A departure from her earlier detective fiction novels, this fictionalised autobiography enabled Gillian Slovo to deal with her Jewish history, that of her parents and of the anti-apartheid movement, shaping it through fictionalising elements and her autobiographical take on events. Transferring family memory of European Jewish persecution to the context of South Africa is central to *Ties of Blood*. Slovo's interview and novel relate imaginative shaping and coming to terms with experiences to fuel and recognise her parents' and her own political activism. One fictional incident exemplifies the ways in which memory plays tricks, related to Slovo's (1994:266) question 'How do you internalise an intellectual memory in a way that allows you to act on it?'. When Jacob and Rosa go canvassing in a white Afrikaner area, Rosa suddenly remembers that Jacob was the kid she met in 1936 at the school gates. Initially memory of an incident of her own prejudice failed her: she could not connect that vivid part of the past to him in the present:

Rosa blushed. How could she have forgotten: how could she not have recognised him? the smile on the face of that scrawny boy with a *yarmulke* on his head was embedded in her memory. She saw it all as if it were happening in front of her: herself and Sarah, arm in arm, insulting the stranger in their midst (Slovo 1990:230).

Memory can be highly selective. Semi-fictionalised or fictionalised autobiography opens up emblematic as well as actual moments for the memory, and for the imaginative, creative work. It is important to recognise and shape the past in order to live on beyond it, dealing with personal, historical and political pains and needs around oneself. Slovo notes of her semi-fictionalised ways of exploring, expressing and managing her own and her parents' past as Jewish inhabitants of South Africa:

I'm using these constructions of Jewish identity as an example of the need to confront the past in order that the underlying vulnerabilities are acknowledged and put to rest, so as not to re-emerge in unaccountable ways (Braude 1994:274 [interview with Slovo]).

Autobiography, then, can dramatise, shape and deal with intellectual as well as emotional experience.

## Conclusion

Autobiographical writing in the full range from the highly documentary to the variously fictionalised autobiography is crucial in the establishment of a sense of identity. It is of particular importance in the emerging voices which express the culturally and historically developing individual and national identity of South African women whose identity constructs, expressed in colonial and apartheid discourses, were constrained and silenced. South African women's autobiography springs from several sources, fulfils several crucial roles, negotiates and refuses the dichotomies of nation/ self, post-modern/ subject, gender/ race, fiction/ documentary autobiography. Women's autobiographical writing helps to negotiate re-memory and the reclamation of a silenced past, to construct and represent versions of identity of the self in the context of community. This is crucial in the development of a national identity which does not wish to merely establish its many selves then remain marginalised, but to recognise itself as part of the community of the world. A role of women writers in this project is to seek to engage issues of race, ethnicity, colour—in many instances of Black consciousness and its effects—and of gender. Speaking out from the 'triple burden' of race class and gender, and speaking for themselves creatively and imaginatively, Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Lauretta Ngcobo, Ellen Kuzwayo and, among others, the women of the Congress of South African Writers, express in their work resistance, representation, creative visioning and re-visioning:

The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. The mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking. The sound of silence breaking makes us understand what we could not hear before. But the fact that we could not hear does not prove that no pain existed. The revolutionary must listen very carefully to the language of silence. This is particularly important for women because we come from such a long silence (Rowbotham 1983:29).

Autobiographical writing provides a liberating form for such imaginative, reflective, remembering and shaping expression.

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## Nadine Gordimer's Fictional Selves: Can a White Woman Be 'At Home' in Black South Africa?

Nancy Topping Bazin

Growing up in South Africa where only 5.6 million people are white out of a population of 37.9 million, Nadine Gordimer became increasingly conscious of her whiteness<sup>1</sup>. The colour of her skin instantly signalled 'oppressor' to black South Africans. Her whiteness imposed upon her a social and political identity that she rejected; yet, it was like a face she could not wash off, a mask she could not take off. As she said in a 1978 interview, 'In South Africa one wears one's skin like a uniform. White equals guilt' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:94). She often sought to separate her personal identity from that of her racial group in order to be welcomed rather than be shut out (or even shot) by those for whom whiteness signified 'enemy'. Must she go into exile, or would she eventually feel 'at home' in her native country? Writing helped to clarify her thinking on these matters, because in her fiction she could imagine a variety of probable scenarios in which an array of fictional selves could act out possibilities<sup>2</sup>.

When Gordimer says, 'I think that all novelists are in effect writing one book' (Bazin 1995:582), she can be seen as recognising her own persistent quest through fiction to find meaningful and relevant ways to feel 'at home' in black Africa. Her novels explore answers to the question she posed in a 1959 essay

<sup>1</sup> For studies of 'whiteness', see Daniels, Dyer, Fine, Fredrickson, and Keating. See also, issue 73 of *Transition: An International Review* 7,1, which is devoted to the concept of 'whiteness'.

<sup>2</sup> Gordimer critics such as Clingman (1986), Cooke (1985), Ettin (1992), Newman (1988), Pettersson (1995), and Wade have noted autobiographical details that appear in Gordimer's work. My approach compares facts and fiction to demonstrate not parallels with Gordimer's historic self but protagonists as projections of possible selves. The flexible term 'life writing' (Kadar 1992:4,10; Jelinek 1986:188-89) rather than 'autobiography' (Myers 1988:192) fits what Gordimer does. Her personal drama forms the core of her fiction.

entitled, 'Where Do Whites Fit In?' Although she acknowledges only *The Lying Days* (1953) as autobiographical, all of her novels have an autobiographical thrust behind them. Therefore, despite the appearance of social realism, Nadine Gordimer's novels are more psychologically revealing than previously noted<sup>3</sup>. Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), is autobiographical in a traditional sense, but her other novels require an expanded definition of autobiographical fiction. Existing theory does not and perhaps cannot (for lack of sufficient examples) embrace gracefully her special approach to life narrative as projection of imagined selves into a probable future. In many ways, her fantasy selves have a kinship not just with the genre of autobiography but also with the genre of science fiction. Just as science fiction writers imagine alternatives to societies and peoples as they exist, Gordimer imagines a variety of lives for herself in order to appraise which ones would enable her to live harmoniously in post-revolutionary South Africa. Survival is a very personal and powerful incentive for her exploration—through autobiographical fantasies—of how to 'fit in'. Only occasionally do Gordimer's books reveal details of her life or facets of her personality, but frequently they focus on ways for a white woman to survive in a black-majority nation.

The prominence in Gordimer's writing of her desire to belong suggests that it extends deep into her psyche. In interviews, she recalls with bitterness how her mother withdrew her from school, because she had a 'rapid heartbeat' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:131). Since this 'heart ailment' was not a serious malady, Gordimer asserts that it 'should have been ignored' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:301,132). However, her mother was 'unhappily married' and, therefore, overly possessive of 'delicate' Nadine and unconsciously attracted to the doctor (Bazin & Seymour 1990:132). After Nadine's removal from her schoolmates at age eleven, she was tutored for three hours a day until she was 'fifteen or sixteen' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). As a result, Gordimer spent these years almost entirely 'with older people'—her mother's friends. She told interviewer Janikka Hurwitt: 'I got to the stage where I could ... hardly talk to other children. I was a little old woman' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). Gordimer remembers this experience as excruciatingly lonely—'a terrible thing to do to a child' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). As her notebook of book reviews, written at age fifteen, reveals (Gordimer Manuscripts Box 4, Folder 21), her intellectual ability was so far beyond the average young person's

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun found that dependence on male approval dominates the way many women present their autobiographical selves. For examples of the need for black male approval in Gordimer's novels, see Bazin (1993:31-40; 1995:147f; 2000). In women's autobiographies, Spacks (1980), Mason (1980), Heilbrun (1988), and Conway (1999) observed that many women allowed themselves to seek power not for themselves but for another's cause.

that she would have been somewhat isolated anyway. She acknowledged that in her hometown of Springs, Transvaal, she had to conceal 'the activities of the mind and imagination' for they would be 'suspect' (Gordimer 1987:11). But, as a teenager, she discovered that her femininity was the means by which she could relate to her peers. She explained:

My only genuine and innocent connection with the social life of the town ... was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least I felt and followed sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of communion I could share. Rapunzel's hair is the right metaphor for this femininity: by means of it, I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as—alone—in the mind (Gordimer 1987:11).

Later in life she again saw sexuality as a bridge to the 'other'—but this time to those on the other side of the 'colour bar'. Her desire, expressed in her writings, to 'fit in', to feel at home may be rooted in this early experience of isolation. Gordimer was thirty before she could even begin to forgive her mother for what she had done to her. By the time her mother died twenty-three years later, in 1976, they were reconciled (Bazin & Seymour 1990:132)<sup>4</sup>.

As tensions and violence between blacks and whites increased through the years, Gordimer had to decide whether to stay in South Africa or go into exile. As a hybrid—a white of European descent yet born in South Africa—she could not comfortably 'go home' to England or Latvia, her parents' countries of origin. She clarified in an interview why Zambia, which she had considered, could not be the solution:

I discovered I was only a European there, just like any other white person. I took that very hard. At least in South Africa, even if I get my throat cut, I'm an African (Bazin & Seymour 1990:93).

However, even at home she did not fit in. She could not identify politically with the majority of whites, because they supported apartheid. As a radical in support of black-majority rule, she was an outsider even to liberal whites. In short, she rarely enjoyed a sense of belonging; yet she had always longed to be accepted.

<sup>4</sup> In June 1998, someone who had attended Gordimer's mother's funeral service at the Brakpan crematorium told me Nadine came but left immediately afterwards, not waiting to greet people. Her mother, Nan Gordimer, is still held in high esteem for her role in making the local Red Cross a success. A woman who recalled Nadine as a schoolgirl said she was a bright but difficult child (see Gordimer 1988). Nadine's sister Betty, by contrast, was remembered as a 'normal girl'.

Since she wanted to stay in South Africa, she determined to prove herself worthy of acceptance by the blacks. To those long oppressed under apartheid, her white skin declared her guilty until she could prove she had rid herself of the mentality of colonialism and white supremacy in which she was reared. Through her fiction, I contend that she imagined a variety of scenarios, testing what would work or would not work in various political and historical situations. Her survival was at stake<sup>5</sup>.

Only one of her fictional selves was murdered—an Englishman in *A Guest of Honour* (1970) whose name was Evelyn James Bray. Perhaps making this fictional self male was a way to maintain a certain distance from the possibility of a similar fate. Gordimer described this novel as being about 'someone who tries to justify his presence in Africa beyond the colour of his skin' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:93). Bray is killed by a group of blacks simply because his skin is white. The description of this murder is one of the most moving passages in Gordimer's work, and it reveals how powerfully Gordimer could imagine the situation. Unexpectedly, as Bray is driving along, he finds the road blocked; then suddenly he is surrounded:

They had his legs out of the car and the back of his neck hit the rim of the floor and he was deafened, his voice became a silent scream to him as pain felled him for a moment, but then a brute strength burst up in him and he got to his feet, he was aware of himself staggered [sic] gigantically to his feet among men smaller than he. Then he was below them, he was looking up at them and he saw the faces, he saw the sticks and stones and bits of farm implements, and sun behind. Something fell on him again and again and he knew himself convulsed, going in and out of pitch black, of black nausea, heaving to bend double where the blows were, where the breath had gone, and he thought he rose again, he thought he heard himself screaming, he wanted to speak to them in Gala but he did not know a word, not a word of it, and then something burst in his eyes (Gordimer 1970:492).

Bray and the other protagonists in her fiction represent 'alternative destinies' or 'alternative lives' (Gordimer n.d.:6,8). They are, to some extent, fictional selves<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> In an essay in *The Private Self*, Walker (1988:278) claims that 'a distinguishing characteristic of women's autobiographical writing ... is the variety of roles or poses women adopt in an apparent effort to find one that fits both the self and the public'.

<sup>6</sup> In their 'Introduction', Brownley and Kimmich (1999: xiii) point out that the 'concept of multiple selves has been a liberating one for many feminist critics because traditional ideas of selfhood go hand in hand with unity, and the notion of a unified, essential self has historically been more appropriate for a man's life than a woman's'. Jill Conway (1999:6) emphasises that we like to read autobiographies—and, I would add, fiction—because 'We like to try on new identities'.

Bray's end could conceivably be her own.

In her interviews, Nadine Gordimer repeatedly refers to the 'one story' each novelist tells. Each novel embodies in a new way the same basic tale. Her core story presents a white protagonist who aspires to shed the colonialist mentality and to become increasingly radical in politics. The first step is to reject the white supremacist politics of parents. When Helen Shaw does so in Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days*, she becomes isolated and alienated from her childhood 'home'. Nor could this protagonist find complete satisfaction in her home with her white boyfriend. From *The Lying Days* on, the white male in Gordimer's novels typically loses the respect of the white female, because he is increasingly unable to fulfil his role of 'protecting' the white woman, solving the problem at hand, or adjusting to the rapidly changing demands of the revolution in progress. Paul in *The Lying Days* (1953), Tom in *Occasion for Loving* (1963), Mehring in *The Conservationist* (1974), Bam in *July's People* (1981), Joe in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and Ben in *None to Accompany Me* (1994) are examples of such depictions of the inadequate white male. To survive, therefore, the white woman is left to her own devices (See Bazin 1991:122-23; 2000).

Gordimer's works suggest two ways for the white female to gain acceptance among black South Africans: radical political action and sexual liaisons with black activists. Political action could allay white shame and help the cause. Although Tom in *Occasion for Loving* (1963:287) might think blowing up a power station would make sense, not he but Jessie 'would help someone to do it, perhaps, in time'. In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), Rosa Burger gives up a sensual life with a white man in Paris to return to South Africa where, not surprisingly, like her communist parents before her, she finds herself in jail. In *A Sport of Nature* (1987), Hillela gains the trust of black activists and, in time, becomes a leader. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Vera Stark heads efforts to restore land to the blacks.

Sexual attraction also facilitates activism by white women in the movement for a free South Africa. Such attractions may even play a role in the woman saying 'yes' to the danger she will incur. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966:94), Liz knows flirtatious black activist Luke Fokase will probably make love to her, because that is all he can offer in exchange for the use of her grandmother's bank account for the cause. In *Occasion for Loving* (1963) Jessie watches with interest Ann's affair with Gideon. Young, English, and more sensual than political, Ann is at first strangely oblivious to and innocent of the racist attitudes that could mar such a relationship. However, the racist individuals she and Gideon encounter make her realise that a permanent relationship with him would be impossible. Similarly sensual and apolitical, the 'sport of nature' Hillela initially assumes the roles of radical and activist only to please and help the black men she loves. Hillela's greatest love is for Whaila, a South African revolutionary. But he is assassinated, and she realises her

dream of a 'rainbow family' is not possible at that moment in history. Hillela does annihilate her whiteness, however, through her one daughter who is as black as her father. Sexuality could erase the black/white dichotomy, but society is not ready for this utopian vision.

Gordimer had two children, one from each of her marriages—a girl and a boy. One of her primary preoccupations in her fiction is with parent—child relationships and a concern that the children have been neglected because of the parents' desires for personal liberation through politics or sex. Max was too busy being political to be a father to Bobo in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966). In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), parents, who were insensitive to their daughter's feelings, allowed Rosa's heart to be broken while using her to play the role of a girlfriend for political purposes. The parents in *My Son's Story* (1990) neglect their children, Will and Baby, for politics and/or sex. Baby attempts suicide to try to pull her father's attention toward her and away from his mistress, Hannah. Hillela's mother and later her father abandoned her to be with their lovers in *A Sport of Nature* (1987). In Gordimer's 1994 novel, Vera Stark's daughter never forgave her mother for neglecting her during a love affair. Lies and betrayals within the family, parallel those rampant in the world of politics.

Eventually, Gordimer's novels show the coming to power of the black female, dislodging the white female from her place beside the black male in the revolution. In *My Son's Story* (1990:235), when Hannah learns that the wife of Sonny, her 'coloured' lover, has been arrested for revolutionary activities, she ends their affair. Formerly guilty of dismissing Aila as a conventional housewife, Sonny and Hannah are both amazed to learn that Aila had gone on missions across the border to South African rebels in Lusaka (Gordimer 1990:262); she had silently and secretly become a more respected revolutionary than her husband. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Sibongile (Gordimer's first fully developed black female character) becomes more respected politically than her black husband. Compromised by past activities, he is being moved out—relegated to writing history—as she is being moved into a prominent position. For white South African females, in 1994, sexuality is no longer a politically correct bridge into the black world. Many black females had earned their place and their due respect and could now be depicted as friends and professionals. Gordimer's black female characters could no longer be restricted to being vague presences in other parts of men's lives.

The right to belong in South Africa seemingly requires that white women leave their white families in order to keep 'moving on'—a favourite Gordimer concept (See for example *My Son's Story* 215). When Helen Shaw recognises that white supremacy is an untenable world-view, she rejects her natal family. When Maureen, the white protagonist in Gordimer's 1981 novel *July's People*, watches her husband, Bam Smales, lose his master bedroom, his credit card, his vehicle, and his

gun, all symbols of past power, she abandons not only him but also their three small children. Maureen runs for help first to July, who has power in his native village, and then to the black revolutionaries in the descending helicopter (see Bazin 2000). She is more likely to survive as a lone female than she would be as the wife and mother in a white family. This situation is repeated in Gordimer's 1994 novel *None to Accompany Me*. Vera Stark's children are grown, so she does not have to eject them from her house; but she does sell the family home without informing or consulting her children or her husband, Ben. Ben is visiting their son in London; suddenly, he no longer has a home in South Africa. Vera has moved into a small cottage in the backyard of a close black male friend, Zeph Rapulana. In case she needs Zeph's protection, she has a key to his house (Gordimer 1994:323).

The position of the white woman in the backyard dramatises a power shift. In *The Lying Days*, published in 1953, Helen Shaw sought permission for a black university student, Mary Seswayo, to reside for a short time in a small building in her parents' backyard. Such an arrangement was not socially acceptable, so her parents refused. In *None to Accompany Me*, published forty-one years later, the white rather than the black woman lives outside the main house in the yard. The white woman has learned to subordinate herself to the blacks in power. The white, not the black, is marginalised in 1994.

However, the symbolic positioning of the white woman does not mean that she lacks power. To fulfil the author's fantasy, she must find a central place in the new society. Her 1994 character Vera Stark was chosen to help write the new constitution for South Africa. In July 1998, Gordimer was selected as the United Nations Development Programme ambassador for South Africa. How could either one be more trusted or accepted than that?

Nor did Vera Stark have to sleep with a male to receive her honour. Finally, she is happily 'alone'. Indeed, like Maureen, in *July's People* (1981), Vera was obviously convinced that to survive and find her place in black society, she must be unencumbered by a white family. She had to end the split between her private white life and her public black one. Once again, she has crossed the 'colour bar'. Like Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), she has relinquished her white identity.

In order to be accepted, Gordimer's protagonist has given up her home and family, her white identity, and her sexual life. Gordimer said of Vera Stark in *None to Accompany Me* (1994),

She sees the baggage of her life as something which she took on and wanted and wouldn't have been without, but she doesn't want it dragging around with her forever (Lazar 1997:160).

Gordimer plays down the abandonment of sexuality by saying, 'Vera's getting old, so

maybe she is leaving sexuality behind her' (Bazin 1995:582). Like Rosa Burger, Vera Stark has concluded that the personal life is 'transitory' whereas the political life is 'transcendent'; she has chosen to commit herself to the political (Gordimer 1994:305). Finally, she feels comfortably 'at home', with an appropriate role to play in the creation of equality for all South Africans.

Gordimer reports that her sense of being a hybrid and an outsider has diminished. She has achieved a sense of belonging. In her final Charles Eliot Norton lecture, published in 1995 in *Writing and Being*, she reviewed again her feelings about 'fitting in' as a white in South Africa: before the liberation, 'I was aware that although I could say 'my country'—blacks did not dispute the claim of birthright—I could not say "my people"' (Gordimer 1995:133). She elaborated:

Until every law that set me aside from black people was abolished, until we were all to be born and pursue our lives everywhere in the same right, governed by the free choice of all the people, my place would not know me. No matter how I and others like me conducted ourselves, we were held in the categories of the past. The laws that provided that more money be spent on a white child's education than on a black's, that a white worker be paid more than a black worker, that black people could be transported like livestock to exist where whites decreed—all this had to go.

The exiles had to come back to their rightful home; the prisoners of conscience had to be received on the mainland from Robben Island, and to walk out of Pollsmoor prison; those who had been harried and cast out had to take up the seats of power where their persecutors had ruled so long (Gordimer 1995:133f).

All this 'came to pass' (Gordimer 1995:134) and the miracle happened. South Africa became a postcolonial nation. In Gordimer's words: 'That other world that was the world is no longer the world' (Gordimer 1995:134). England is no longer *the* place to be. Europe is no longer *the* place for a writer to go (see Ashcroft 1989:4). Finally, says Gordimer (1995:134): 'My country is the world, whole, a synthesis. I am no longer a colonial. I may now speak of "my people"'. The freeing of the colonised in turn frees the coloniser.

When Gordimer returned to South Africa after a 1994 trip, she wrote of her place of birth and of her rebirth:

[I] found that the province where the mining town stands, the very region in which I was born, the old apartheid Transvaal, was no longer; was itself reborn, reconstituted, renamed in a transformed South Africa. I had come back to Gauteng; it means 'place of gold'. I was born in that place, but it is

only now that I can feel undivided identity with it, the place where my colour doesn't matter, where I have no rights denied others. Such a place is the only real face of home (Gordimer 1995:36)<sup>7</sup>.

She no longer feels that she walks in the uniform of 'whiteness'. She believes she can put the past behind her, start afresh, and be judged, not solely by the colour of her skin but rather by her actions and commitments. In her fiction, Gordimer had used her imagination to explore a variety of ways (personal gestures, radical politics, interracial sexuality) to transcend the 'colour bar'. She knew that overcoming it would not only free the blacks but would also free herself from all the hated meanings and connotations of 'white' in South Africa.

In 'That Other World That Was the World (1995:115)', Gordimer writes:

I shall never write an autobiography—I'm much too jealous of my privacy, for that<sup>8</sup>—but I begin to think that my experience as a product of this social phenomenon has relevance beyond the personal; it may be a modest part of alternative history if pieced together with the experience of other writers.

Indeed, her life does have relevance beyond the personal, and the essence of it is recorded in her novels. At the core of those books is Gordimer and the principal problem she faced from the late 1940s on: how to survive and truly belong in the land where she was born.

However, Nadine Gordimer's optimism and contentment may be illusory. As she knows, until the harsh poverty of most South African blacks is eliminated, they will not look at her and think 'one of us'. Instead, they will see her as rich and, therefore, privileged. For those who do not know her—and even perhaps for some who do—she may still be a class 'enemy' despite her claim that she has 'no rights denied others' (Gordimer 1995:36; 'The Face of Home'). Her white skin is still a 'sign' reminding most blacks of the continuing gulf between rich whites and poor blacks.

<sup>7</sup> The reality in Springs, Gordimer's hometown, is quite different from her utopian vision. In my quest to see the old library she had loved and the location of her father's jewellery shop, I suddenly realised, prompted by a stranger, that my husband and I were the only white faces on those downtown streets. I was advised by a man of Indian descent that we were in danger and should leave.

<sup>8</sup> Mitzi Myers (1988:193) suggests that most women do not feel free to be totally honest in their self-representations. Instead, 'women's discoveries of self take a more circuitous route [than men's]; their self-representations wear camouflage'.

The violent death suffered by Englishman Evelyn James Bray in *A Guest of Honour* (1970) ironically happened after the revolution had ended. Today private ownership of guns (for protection against crime) is common in South Africa. A wall and gates protect Gordimer's home and, like many homeowners, she and her husband have posted the frequently seen sign, 'Armed Response'. The presence of weapons brings the potential for violence into private homes, increasing the possibility that a loved one or friend may either fire the gun or receive the bullet. The person who picks up that gun and fires may be your own son. Suddenly he is a murderer. Then what? This is the subject of Gordimer's 1998 novel, *The House Gun*. In it, she creates one more scenario of what could happen in the life of an upper-class white woman in South Africa. Nadine Gordimer is preparing herself psychologically for living with this form of danger. She is testing how she feels and how she can cope. This novel, like her earlier ones, offers one more possible scenario. It reflects not only the social reality of contemporary South Africa but also the inner life of the author who prepares her continually-evolving 'self' for all eventualities. She eases her fears by confronting them in her fiction.

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## Cross-cultural Translation in South African Autobiographical Writing: The Case of Sindiwe Magona

J.U. Jacobs

### Introduction: Cultural Translation

Translation takes place at the border crossings between cultures. Etymologically (from *transfere, translatio*), J. Hillis Miller (1996:207) reminds us, it means to be carried from one place to another, to be 'transported across the borders between one language and another, one country and another, one culture and another'. Translation is a way of negotiating, for various and often conflicting reasons, the frontiers that demarcate distinct cultural zones—in the words of Sanford Budick (1996:11), translation 'necessarily marks the border crossing where, if anywhere, one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it, to further its development, to capture or enslave it, or merely to open a space between the other and itself'.

One of the most frequently performed acts of cross-cultural translation in South Africa today is to be found in the shortened version of the national anthem, which is officially encouraged by the Government, and which comprises four different languages. It begins with the opening verse of 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika', the Xhosa hymn with which black South Africans identified themselves in their struggle for liberation. The second verse continues the hymn in its Southern Sotho version with the refrain, 'Morena boloka/ Setjhaba saheso'. The third section consists of the opening four lines of 'Die Stem', the anthem whose cadences lie at the heart of Afrikaner culture, its linguistic identity and its attachment to the land:

Uit die blou van onse hemel  
 Uit die diepte van ons see  
 Oor ons ewige gebergtes  
 Waar die kranse antwoord gee

The new national anthem then concludes with a quatrain from 'Die Stem' in the English translation.

The hierarchy of languages in South Africa is rearranged in this medley of Nguni, Sotho and Germanic tongues with which the Rainbow Nation sings of itself. After IsiZulu (approximately 22%), IsiXhosa represents the second largest number of mother-tongue speakers in the country (approximately 18%), Sesotho (Southern Sotho) the seventh (approximately 7%), Afrikaans the third (approximately 16%), and English the sixth (9%) (See Webb 1992:28). The other seven of the eleven official languages in South Africa—IsiZulu, IsiNdebele, SiSwati, Sepedi, Setswana, Tshivenda and Xitsonga—are represented in the national anthem only through their language-group association. Each linguistic threshold in this new anthem marks a moment of both inclusion and exclusion, of continuity as well as discontinuity. The Xhosa refrain to '*Nkosi sikelel' i-Afrika*' is shadowed by its Sotho equivalent in the second section. The adoption and repetition of the English name for the country, '*South Afrika/ South Afrika*', at the end of the Sotho refrain prepares for the more abrupt code-switch to '*Die Stem*'. The evocative Afrikaans text with its unhappy legacy of an exclusionary nationalism is, in turn, shadowed by and subsumed into the more stilted English refrain, which has perhaps only ever expressed a carpetbagging nationalism. It is ironically appropriate that English, which is effectively the lingua franca, should finally convey the cultural and linguistic reality of the new South Africa in two lines that acquire a new meaning in this context: 'Sounds the call to come together/ And united we shall stand ...'.

The national anthem exemplifies the larger question that I wish to examine in this article: whether Edward Said's thesis about the post-imperial world might be no less true of post-apartheid South Africa: that 'all [its] cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic' (Said 1994:xxix). I do not wish to suggest a facile equation of apartheid and imperialism (although Breyten Breytenbach 1986:53ff has said that in apartheid can be seen the ultimate disfigurement of the colonial mind). In the new democratic South Africa, however, as in postcolonial cultural analysis, the term 'identity' is probably too static and centripetal a concept to accommodate the merging of various cultures during and after apartheid. Ethnic essentialism was the myth on which apartheid based its belief. Paradoxically, apartheid produced the very counter-discourse to its separatist ideology; South Africans have from the beginning translated themselves across its divisions.

The multiple translations enacted by the text of the new national anthem symbolise not only the co-presence of different cultural worlds in this country, but also the spirit of dialogue that characterises the post-apartheid state. If there is one thing that permits us to interpret the present South African rebirth in terms of the Renaissance in Europe five centuries ago, it is precisely this celebration of mental plurality that enables cross-cultural dialogue to take place. In this connection, the

theorist Karlheinz Stierle has developed a general thesis about the development of translation that is particularly suggestive for South Africa today. Initially, he argues, translation signified a relation between subject and object, and not between subject and subject (see also Budick 1996:12f). In the ancient and medieval worlds, *translation* (of imperial discourse, of religious instruction) took place within a hierarchical structure, along a vertical axis. With the Renaissance—and especially the figure of Petrarch—Stierle maintains, came modern man and his capacity to live in different worlds and to enjoy the complex 'copresence of cultures' (Stierle 1996:64). 'It is the fundamental plurality of Renaissance that is the condition of the new dimension of dialogue', he says. In the Renaissance translation began to take place horizontally, and no longer vertically and hierarchically. Translation now came to mean a relationship between subjects:

Renaissance is at the same time the discovery of plurality, perspective, dialogue, polyphony. Culture now means, as Leonid Batkin puts it, the culture of the communication of cultures (Stierle 1996:65).

It is to this, Stierle (1996:66) concludes, that in the modern world we owe our condition of living 'in multiple cultural contexts' and of having 'the daily experience of the mutual translation of cultures within ourselves'. Through its polyphony, the South African national anthem provides those who are singing it with a moment of special awareness of this contemporary truth of the constant cross-over between cultures.

Precisely how the shift from a medieval, hierarchical and unidirectional translation paradigm to a reciprocal, more egalitarian one occurred, and the cultural implications of this for the change in South Africa from apartheid state to democratic state, may be more clearly understood in terms of the three earliest types of religious and cultural translation distinguished by Jan Assmann in his essay, 'Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability' (1996). The first is *syncretism*, which, however, is not to be mistaken for simple fusion or merging of cultures. Syncretism, Assmann (1996:34) says,

describes a kind of merging which coexists with the original distinct entities. The local identities are not altogether abolished; they are only made transparent, as it were. They retain their native semiotic practices and preserve their original meaning.

Syncretism is not direct translation into another culture; what happens is that local identities are translated into a third set of cultural and linguistic practices (Assmann takes Hellenism as his example) where

sents a final stage in the coming together of self and language: its 'act of composition', he argues, reaches 'back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity formation, and [reaches] forward into the future to fix the structure of this identity in a permanent self-made existence as literary text'. The developmental model on which Eakin (1985:219) bases his theory of autobiography begins with the acquisition of language, then leads to the origin of self-awareness (which he calls the 'I-am-me' experience), and culminates in the 'self-conscious self-consciousness' of autobiography. All three of these moments of self-definition yield 'a constitution of self' in which language 'is not merely a conduit for such self-knowledge but a determination and constituent of it'.

I am obviously not concerned here with the initial acquisition of language which, as Steven Pinker (1994) shows, is less of a cultural artifact than a function of the brain's neural circuitry: the biological adaptation to communicate information—a faculty that Pinker prefers to regard as an instinct. Language, he maintains,

is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is more distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently (Pinker 1994:18).

Or, as he also puts it on the same page: 'people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs'. What is relevant for my purpose here is the way South African autobiographical writers recapture and emphasise in their 'process of self-discovery and self-creation' (Eakin 1985:3) the linguistic thresholds in their lives: those culturally significant moments in their early identity formation when, already self-aware and grammatically competent in their mother tongues, they first have to define themselves in relation to an/other language. To take a recent example: towards the beginning of her autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990) Sindiwe Magona describes how, as a Xhosa child in a rural village in the Eastern Cape, she first encountered white people—*abelungu*—with their strange appearance and language. Her recollection of the meeting both recreates the linguistic moment and converts it into a significant stage in the larger design of her life story:

That whatever they said was nothing I understood simplified our transaction for me. By taking away the need for comprehension, I was left unhindered and unhampered by having to strive for coherence. Since what they said was incomprehensible to me, it followed that if, in reply, I said some incomprehensible nonsense, they would understand it perfectly, that being their way of talking.

The logic of a child facilitated what now, as an adult, I find excruciatingly difficult; communication:

'Shwe-shwehn-shwehn shwehn', we heard them say.

'Shwen, shwe-shwen', we replied.

We addressed them in the gibberish they spoke (Magona 1990:11f).

Early on in *Down Second Avenue* ([1959]1971:12) Ezekiel Mphahlele records a similar liminal moment on his first day at school when, as a Sotho-speaking child in the rural Northern Transvaal, he was introduced to the English alphabet:

There we were, a mighty crowd in a large hall, and the old teacher in front of us; an elderly, tired-looking gentleman. I still wonder how he managed us, if he did at all. There we were, chanting away the multiplication tables and word spelling: M-A-T, indicating each letter by clapping of hands. The teacher bellowed out: 'F-O-X, *fokos*; B-O-X, *bokos*; F-I-X, *fikis*', which we echoed while we marveled at the look of the words on the board and the miraculous sound of them.

Like Magona's life story, Mphahlele's traces his crossing of a language threshold into a knowledge of English that will culminate in the award of a Masters degree. And in one of the most memorable incidents in *Tell Freedom* ([1954]1990:154) Peter Abrahams describes how, as an Afrikaans-speaking 'Coloured' child from the Vrededorp slums, he was moved to go to school for the first time at the age of eleven by a young Jewish woman's reading to him from *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare* and introducing him to the world of storytelling. In a fragmented, subjective narrative he tells of his entry into literacy, into narrative in the standard code, English, and, ultimately, into self-narration. He recites the alphabet in full, rehearsing the rhyme through which he was taught to read:

C is letter in the alphabet

A is a letter in the alphabet

T is a letter in the alphabet

Put them together and you have a cat.

—and then asks his teacher: 'Please, miss .... Are all the books in the world made from the alphabet?' She replies: 'Yes, all the books in the world are made from the alphabet', and he can only respond: 'Jee-zus!' The retrospective autobiographer, Peter Abrahams (1990:161, e.a.), recognises that with,

Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a

view the past through the lens of the present, weaving an inter-textual narrative (Govinden 1995:170-183).

The project for post-apartheid South Africa is not dissimilar from that of the autobiographical writer. South Africa must come to terms with and shape its distant and immediate past, recognise a version or many versions of itself and move on to build a new future. Inevitably the story a country tells itself, particularly a country with a history of such strife, denial and division, will itself involve a struggle to face up to painful and contradictory memories, and shape them. But the act of self-recognition and shaping of self is crucial for post-apartheid South Africa as it is for the writers of autobiography, who must first reflect and shape versions of themselves and their history in order to project and deal with it. And if autobiography seems to offer a particularly self-absorbed, subjective, shaped account, it is salutary to think of how the recording and representation of history itself is history as a shaped, selected and interpreted version. History is not fact but text. Autobiography has much in common with it, being a shaping of experience also. Meanwhile, post-modernism is criticised for its awareness of the constructedness of 'reality', its own fictional and metafictional awareness—it is too artificial, too controlled and then too conservative (Brink 1998:18).

There are several versions of autobiographical writing, as Govinden's quotation (above) suggests. The self, used as subject in the personal story, is also a construction. The semi-fictionalised account differs from factual record, using the self as subject to investigate, explore and illustrate specific incidents and elements of a life. South African women's autobiographical writing ranges along the full continuum, from highly factual, documentary autobiographical record, through the semi-fictionalised autobiography, to fiction informed by personal experience. Trying to pinpoint exact nuances would be difficult and dangerous. That writing by a variety of South African women does exist along this continuum (and different modes exist sometimes in the same work) leads us into the debate about the differing value of testimony and imaginative fictions. To avoid disputes I will normally use the term 'semi-fictionalised autobiography' to indicate a range of autobiographical record (necessarily partly a shaped construction), and the transformation into an imaginative fictional form. This, I hope, leaves space to debate some of the issues of the potential of autobiographical record and of fictional writing without prioritising.

Representation, and re-memory, as explored in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and re-visioning through the autobiographical account are powerful choices for South African women writers enabling, as they do, a creation, a seizing and embodying of subjectivity and identity. Autobiography is a form of reclamation of voice, of empowerment. Through engaging in re-memory, through re-investigating and imaginatively re-envisioning the past by way of the lens of the present, individual

and community stories can be told, constructed, and interpreted. For silenced Black South African women the semi-fictionalised autobiographical form has been crucial. This is particularly so both under apartheid and in the post-apartheid era when understanding self, community, culture and history are important steps in creating a new nation. Exploring and shaping individual experiences in semi-fictionalised autobiography helps the recognition of the value of individual selfhood, and places this selfhood as part of a developing, culturally contextualised version of community history and community present.

In the apartheid period, Black women's fiction was only rarely produced, and often banned. In exile, Bessie Head (1969; 1974) led the way in semi-fictionalised autobiography, while Noni Jabavu (1960; 1963) and Ellen Kuzwayo (1985) produced more directly documentary autobiographical works. Zoe Wicomb also brought out her fictionalised, autobiographical short story sequence/ novel; *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), whilst Jayapraga Reddy produced *On the Fringe of Dream-Time and Other Stories* (1987), and has been working towards a novel. Miriam Tlali published *Muriel at the Metropolitan* in 1975, *Amandla, a Novel* in 1980, and *Soweto Stories* in 1989 (her works were produced within South Africa). Lauretta Ngcobo's *Cross of Gold* (1981) was banned in South Africa, Farida Karodia wrote *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and *Coming Home and Other Stories* (1988), and Agnes Sam produced *Jesus is Indian and Other Stories* (1989). We are not looking at a vast body of literature, but at a marginalised, silenced group whose power is only now beginning to be felt as their work becomes more readily available both within and outside South Africa.

Cultural contexts affect, condition, encourage and prevent forms of reading as they do forms of writing. South Africa is in the exciting, challenging, often contradictory process of reinventing itself. Voyeurs, viewers, readers, audiences, critics, we are looking for new work which gives voice to the new processes and experiences, and seek to find new ways to re-read and re-interpret writing, particularly resistance writing from the apartheid era. Many of us in the UK adopted very clear, political stances (minimal, confusingly felt to be useful) against the dehumanising racism of South Africa. We refused to buy South African oranges, boycotted businesses with interests in South Africa, supported the renaming of student bars after both Nelson and Winnie Mandela, and celebrated Mandela's release and then inauguration in 1994 as long distance-fans viewing the dawning of a new era. In the new democratic dispensation, critical opportunities appear open to us now to revisit both the published and the suppressed and to investigate anew the narratives of resistance which sought, under apartheid, to express the ironies and ambiguities of those years of imaginative and cultural silencing and exile.

A particularly appropriate place in which to seek the narratives of imaginative, creative expression and resistance against the oppressive contradictions

*new self-consciousness*, was born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books.

From this moment on, he will live in two, equally real and potent worlds, that of Vrededorp and that of books. And the world into which he has crossed will eventually enable him to give significance to his life in the other one.

Abrahams's (1990:311) statement at the end of *Tell Freedom*, 'Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa', is to some extent belied by his text itself. Like those of Mphahlele and Magona, the story of his life is shaped by the constraints of his language, just as his language is determined by the constraints of his past. The reader is made aware of how, from time to time, Abrahams is brought to the threshold of unfamiliar languages: the Zulu of a childhood friend; the English spoken by an Indian in Vrededorp, as incomprehensible to him as the Indian vernacular he hears from the mouth of a young friend, the 'clicking Hottentot language' of the woman he knows only as *Hotnot Annie* (Abrahams 1990:65), or the African language he hears spoken by an old black vendor. Each encounter with a new language, we are told, contributes a different discourse to the moulding of Abrahams as autobiographical subject. On the one hand, a sympathetic teacher makes him appreciate the 'rich body of Afrikaner literature and the beauty of the language itself', and, on the other, he is won over to black American culture by Robeson's 'Old Man River', Negro spirituals and the writings of the Harlem writers, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer.

Abrahams describes the ethnic mixture of his street in Vrededorp as consisting of Zulu, Basotho, Bechuana, Barolong, Coloured and Indian. Although there are no extensive insertions of any of these vernaculars and dialects into the appropriated English of Abrahams's narrative (he was guided by a teacher to model his English on the Bible), his polyglossic society is nonetheless evident in the tags that mark the English text as non-native: food-names in Sotho (*moeroga*, 28) and in Afrikaans (*mielie pap*, 29, and its poorer African version, *magou*, 100); animal names (*springhaas*, 44); colloquial Afrikaans epithets (*klipkop*, 36), forms of address (*kêrel*, 138), and expletives (*jou moer*, 82); the apartheid language of deference (*baas/ basie*, 39); urban African institutions such as the savings club, *stokveld* (118); African borrowings from Afrikaans (*doek*, 59)—all contribute to dialogising the narrative together with the words of Stephen Spender, Bing Crosby and the Hail Mary.

Five years later, however, in what can still be regarded as an early-apartheid narrative, Mphahlele in *Down Second Avenue* (1971) is more consciously a linguistic and cultural broker. At home, he says, they spoke Northern Sotho, but outside it was 'a mixture of Afrikaans and Sotho' (89). The text includes and translates in context the Sotho names of country foods such as '*lengana*—wild herb' and '*serokolo*' (59);

bird-names such as the 'long-tailed *monope*' and '*tsemedi* the hang-bird'; customary sayings such as '*Mantlalela, Mantlalela*—the river is full, the river is full' (7); respectful forms of greeting such as *Thulare!* (66), and the lament of a woman over the death of a child, '*Jo, Jo-we! Me-weh!*' (60). The township idiolect is equally represented, from satirical Afrikaans nicknames for whites such as '*môre kom*—come tomorrow' (57) to the Sotho term for thugs, *malaita*, and the names coined for lethal home brews such as '*skokiaan ... fermented yeast ... sebakpale-masenke*—one-that-leans-against-the-fence'; *bophelo-bontenne*—I-am-tired-of-living' (68). Other tags are more elaborately glossed by means of footnotes: Afrikaans pejoratives such as *outa* and *aia* (78), Sotho terms for relations such as '*makoti*—Daughter-in-law' (107); assimilations from Afrikaans into township argot, such as *skelm* (79) and the Afrikaans colloquialism '*outjies*—Boys' (100); and coinages which combine African and Afrikaans words, such as the name of a black member of the police liquor squad, '*Makulu-Skop*—Big Skull' (109).

More so than Abrahams, Mphahlele crosses and re-crosses linguistic thresholds deliberately to mediate discourses. It is as a university-qualified non-native teacher of Afrikaans that he criticises the racist bias of the language in school text books (155), and parodies the sentimental idiom of working-class Afrikaners (91). It is as a Sotho that he comments on the more heavily accented English of Zulu speakers, and reproduces the South African Indian dialect (96). It is as an English graduate that he mimics Fanakalo, the pidgin which he calls 'a stupid mixture of all the Bantu languages with English and Afrikaans', in a satirical episode to expose the ignorance of a mine compound manager at a classical concert by blacks (170). In his final exchange with the Nationalist bureaucracy about obtaining a passport, Mphahlele leaves the reader with an example of its oppressive discourse: he is made to wait, and told that '*Die groot baas is nog besig*—the big boss is still busy' (198).

In the 'Epilogue' to *Down Second Avenue* Mphahlele (1971:205) speaks of the development his writing has undergone since the publication of his first short story collection, *Man Must Live*, in 1947:

In ten years my perspective has changed enormously from escapist writing to protest writing and, I hope, to something of a higher order, which is the ironic meeting between protest and acceptance in their widest terms.

His autobiographical text belongs to this 'higher order' of South African writing which combines, in the widest sense, protest against injustice with a culturally complex definition and acceptance of self. Despite their history of segregation, the black South African subjects of these autobiographies are effectively the discursive products of what Françoise Lionnet (1995:8ff, e.a.), following the Cuban poet, Nancy Morejón, prefers to call '*transculturation*'. Preferring this reciprocal concept to the

unidirectional notions of 'assimilation' or 'acculturation', Lionnet (1995:11) defines transculturation as

a process of cultural intercourse and exchange, a circulation of practices which creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms and empirical activities among the different interacting cultures.

### Transculturation: The Case of Sindiwe Magona

Like Abrahams's and Mphahlele's earlier works, Sindiwe Magona's late-apartheid, two-volume autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992), makes it clear from the outset that the subject has been shaped in a cultural 'border zone' where, Lionnet (1995:8) says, 'a complex syncretic cultural system comes to replace two or more ostensibly simpler cultures'. Double-consciousness, bilingualism and biculturalism are the characteristics that Lionnet (1995:27) attributes to the postcolonial 'writer who lives and writes across the margins of different traditions and cultural universes'. Magona, even more explicitly than Abrahams or Mphahlele, foregrounds in *To My Children's Children* her South African split subjectivity in the story of her rural Xhosa childhood in the Eastern Cape, the family's move to the townships of Blaauwlei and Guguletu, her education as a teacher, her pregnancy, struggle for survival as a domestic worker in Cape Town, marriage and subsequent desertion by her husband before the birth of their third child. In a self-conscious fusion of Western autobiographical and Xhosa oral conventions, the narrative recounts the urbanisation of Magona's family and her experience of the discriminatory educational and economic system. It also documents for her grandchildren their Xhosa cultural heritage: its religious beliefs and practices, ritual incision of children, other coming of age ceremonies, and conventions of birth, courtship, marriage and mourning. Sindiwe/Cynthia Magona (1990:71) repeatedly presents herself as straddling two cultural systems:

I had come to accept the existence of two far from compatible worlds, the one my world of traditions, rites, and ancestor worship and the other, the world of 'civilization' that included school.

It is particularly in the linguistic construction of its subject that Magona's text can be seen to resemble in some respects what Lionnet (1995:39) has called *auto-ethnography*:

a new genre of contemporary autobiographical texts by writers whose interest and focus are not so much the retrieval of a repressed dimension of

the *private* self but the rewriting of their ethnic history, the re-creation of a *collective* identity through the performance of language.

Magona's cultural division is reinforced by her deliberate strategy of including numerous Xhosa 'interferences' (again to use Lionnet's term) in her English-language narrative. These are all translated in the text itself, either in parenthesis or else in parallel, so that the precedence given to her mother tongue may provide access to her Xhosa cultural matrix: Xhosa names for relatives by blood or by marriage (4,154); the *iintsomi* or fairy tales by means of which children were socialised among amaXhosa (6); children's play chants (8); the formulas of storytelling and riddles (13); tongue-twisters (35); the names for traditional healers (57); the praises of her clan by which she was ceremonially inducted into womanhood (69); customs of renaming and terms of respect for members of families joined through marriage; onomatopoeic words, such as '*Nkqo! Ngqo!*' for knocking; and a whole range of Xhosa proverbs.

The cultural binarism suggested by this parallel text is not, however, absolute. Magona's South African world is a polyglossic one, multi- rather than bicultural, its discourses not simply conflicting but often supplementary, and sometimes complicitous. Magona's text finally presents a subject not only in translation from one cultural context to another, but also in retranslation. Traditional Xhosa proverbs are applied to changing circumstances: by her father when he loses his job ('I return with it', 43), and by Magona to describe black teachers' salaries ('There is a penny short', 97), or what passes for black education ('going with those going', 98), or the husband who has deserted her ('he is dead wearing a hat', 167) or her destitution ('The cat took to the hearth', 169). On the other hand, the text also includes the figurative language coined from the experience of Africans in the cities: such as the township women's cry of warning about an imminent police raid ('It is red! It is red!'), the terms for contrasting township gangsters ('spoilors' or *oomanwaza*, 95) and country yokels ('*iimurhu*'), or for a parent's achievement in having put a child through school ('*Ndifundisilie*', 93). One of few instances where Magona's text comes close to presenting what Chantal Zabus (1991:102) has called 'relexification ... the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon', is when she presents in dialogue form the bus journey conversations of Cape domestic workers whose often transliterated accounts of their 'madams' reveal the Xhosa or Afrikaans source language. Margaret Daymond (1995) has persuasively shown how Magona's development of this subject position in her fictional writing provides her with a more complete self-understanding.

Magona's education in English, which begins informally with mimicry, continues more formally at primary school under Bantu Education and at Lourdes Secondary School in the Eastern Cape where she also becomes familiar with the

Latin Liturgy. The story of her education in the wider sense, however, often finds her ambiguously positioned discursively. The first time she hears her mother referred to as a 'kaffir' is in Xhosa by a young coloured man. She learns by working for Greek and British immigrant families that exploitation of domestic workers is not the sole preserve of white South Africans. She realises that the 'emerging poor-white' Afrikaans family she works for in the suburb of Ottery are, caught in their 'twilight zone' between country and city, 'neither here nor there' (157), paradoxically as close to her own situation as the colour of their skin has removed them from it. From her domestic employers she also discovers the incongruous language of confidentiality and distance, the third-person subjectivity of these women who refer to themselves as 'The Madam'. One of the most significant discursive choices Magona makes is when at the beginning of *Forced to Grow* she rejects the harsh Xhosa term for a husbandless woman, 'idikazi' in favour of the cold comfort of what she perceives as the kinder English epithet, a 'has-been'.

Whereas in the first volume of her autobiography Magona largely presents herself as someone straddling incompatible cultures, in the second volume, with its bilingual dedication to her mother, all the ambivalences and paradoxes in her story enable her to be seen more clearly in terms of what Said (1994:170), following the anthropologist, Victor Turner, regards as a *liminal* figure: a threshold entity or mediating character. In South African terms this may be seen as a black person who through her marginalisation has come to a particular understanding of her society in all its contradictions and, containing them in herself, is able to knit its cultures together. Magona learns not only about African chauvinism when the father of her three children walks out on her, but also about its collusion with white chauvinism when she is professionally discriminated against as a woman teacher. The fundamental ambivalence of her position becomes painfully evident as she has to battle for survival on the borderline between independence and charity, realising that in order also to be a father to her three children she has to neglect being a mother to them. The second part of the autobiography tells of the way she absorbs the multiple contradictions in her life story. She learns to bear the skeptical perception that other Xhosa women have of her in the dual roles of mother and scholar. She comes to value her mother's final initiation as a Xhosa witchdoctor while she herself is improving her qualifications as a teacher and becoming reinstated as a member of the Church. The opportunity of a better job in Bantu Administration also gives her access to her husband's file, which reveals to her how apartheid legislation had destroyed her own family life, like that of countless others. In the ethnic spectrum represented by her fellow students at the South African Committee of Higher Education, Magona has a vision of 'the wealth of human diversity that is South Africa's' (Magona 1992:102), of the 'brilliant rainbow' of 'people whose cultures and ancestors were poles apart'. Ironically, it is through her love of English literature that she comes to

appreciate Xhosa writing, just as it is her mastery of English and Afrikaans that enables her eventually to learn—and teach—the grammar of her mother tongue. All the contradictions in terms of which she comes to define herself climax during the students' revolution and schools boycott after Soweto. As she herself puts it: 'I became part of the problem' (Magona 1992:161). 1976, Magona says, was the year in which the centre shifted. Her disgust with the inferior education system for blacks could not entirely outweigh her dismay at the large-scale cowardice, corruption and coercion underlying much so-called 'reform'. The fury and confusion of this period brought into dramatic relief her own equivocal position:

I had seen it coming, and yet when it came, it did not have one face, it did not have one mind and it certainly did not speak one language. Indeed, it spoke no known language at all (Magona 1992:163).

On the one hand, despite her concern, she is dismissed by certain whites as not being representative of suffering blacks because of her standard of education; on the other, because of her regard for education she is held by some blacks to be a counter-revolutionary and an informer. During this bewildering period of complex allegiances, she is torn apart with the country.

The self that has been revised and repossessed at the end of Magona's narrative, however, is one that is able to accommodate overlapping identities and to reconcile different epistemologies. It is as the outcome of the process of cultural creolisation recorded in her life story that she describes how she had to hurry home to South Africa from her graduation at Columbia University, where she obtained a Masters degree in Social Work, because her youngest brother was coming out of the Xhosa traditional circumcision school and she had to be there for the coming-out ceremony. Sindiwe Magona's autobiography is both a 'transformative and performative' text in Lionnet's sense of the term: it subverts the conventional apartheid conceptual paradigms of oppressor and victim, and it does so in a work 'of self-invention through and in language' (Lionnet 1995:34).

### Cross-cultural Discourse in *Mother to Mother*

Despite the general thrust of cross-cultural translation to overcome difference, it must persist, of course, since difference is what defines a culture. Wolfgang Iser explains this conundrum, for example, with reference to history as a discourse that is essentially cross-cultural, having grown by telling the story of the differences between cultures. As a 'form of cross-cultural interrelationship' (Iser 1996:246) history is doubly encoded: on the one hand, it articulates the various translations that have taken place across the dividing line between cultures into a developing narrative

of the overcoming of difference, while on the other, difference has to be maintained precisely as a measure of cultural progress and superiority. Furthermore, he argues, difference also persists *within* a culture. Traditions survive in a culture as an inheritance that is received or a heritage that is recast, 'either reinterpreted or appropriated in accordance with prevailing standards or needs' (Iser 1996:245), and thereby becoming subsumed into the particular cultural narrative. At certain historic junctures, however, Iser argues, the experience of crisis splits a culture apart, and a rift develops which divides the culture 'into an inaccessible past and a helplessly stricken present' (Iser 1996:247). The present becomes alienated from the past, the past can no longer serve as a mirror to refract the present, and to compensate for the loss of such a mutual mirroring a discourse has to be construed to allow for mutual interpenetration between present and past. The implication of these attempts at mutuality, between a culture and its traditions as well as cross-culturally, is that

the difference between past and present or between cultures can never be eliminated, for the past can never become a present again and one culture can never be totally encompassed by another (Iser 1996:248).

Experience of crisis at such a historic juncture leads therefore to cultural self-critique. A cross-cultural discourse begins to emerge, Iser says, which is not simply the assimilation, appropriation and communication which constitute translation. Operating at the interface between different cultures, such a discourse 'establishes a network of interpenetrating relationships' (Iser 1996:248) which both allows for a 'mutual impacting of cultures upon one another' and functions as 'a clearing station in which cultural differences are juxtaposed and sorted out' rather than smoothed over.

The effective civil war in South Africa during the period leading up to the first democratic election in 1994 may be seen to represent the kind of critical, historic juncture that Iser speaks of. A discourse was required in the late 80s and early 90s that could go beyond the language of cultural translation, one that was prepared to recognise the divisions within cultures and to engage with the differences between them, and one that was overt in its cultural self-critique. Sindiwe Magona's first novel, *Mother to Mother* (1998), makes an important contribution to the emerging cross-cultural discourse from this period in South African history. The self-reflexive text, with its very title symbolising a relationship between subjects, not only engages directly with the mutual interpenetration of white and black culture in South Africa, and of indigenous and foreign cultures, but it also attempts to understand an afflicted black South African culture in relation to its past traditions. In a recent interview, Magona has spoken of the 'therapeutic' function of writing both in recording and providing an engagement with the past and in freeing the writer to move on into the

future (in Meyer 1999:87). Her narrative enacts, furthermore, a number of important generic cross-overs: from autobiography to biography, from biography to the novel, and from history to fiction.

The incident at the heart of the narrative, as Magona explains in a preface, is an actual historical event: the killing of the American Fulbright scholar, Amy Biehl, by a mob of young blacks in Guguletu in August 1993. The killing was made all the more senseless and ironic by the American student's voluntary work to help black people in this country prepare for their first truly democratic elections and her sympathetic involvement in their social customs and problems. Magona explicitly sets out to juxtapose two worlds: that of the victim, whose appalling death was received with universal grief and outrage, and that of the killer. Magona's text does not presume—is finally unable—to imagine the former, and can only tentatively speculate about it; of the latter, however, she asks:

... are there no lessons to be had from knowing something of the other world? The reverse of such benevolent and nurturing entities as those that throw up the Amy Biehls, the Andrew Goodmans, and other young people of that quality? What was the world of this young woman's killers, the world of those, young as she was young, whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction? (Magona 1998:v)

Of this world Magona is partly qualified to speak—albeit from her present situation in the United States—and she does so in the voice of the narrator, Mandisa, the mother of one of the killers, who tries to explain, without excusing his actions, to the victim's mother the South African world of intra- and inter-racial violence that her son has inherited. In her narrative the stricken Mandisa contemplates the gulf between the South African background of her son, Mxolisi, and the unimaginable one, to her, of the young American woman by positioning herself as narrator in terms of the unbridgeable divide between white and black South Africa. Consequently, Mandisa's narrative, in which the events leading immediately up to the killing are imbricated with episodes from her own and Mxolisi's past, confirms for her black South African readers the experiences they have lived through; it informs white readers of a history of oppression in which they have participated with varying degrees of complicity; and its account of lives overdetermined by cultural and racial difference conveys to a foreign readership something of the crises of late-apartheid South Africa. Mxolisi's story cannot, however, simply be subsumed into his mother's story of her own life, any more than her autobiography can simply be assimilated into the larger fictional narrative, or, for that matter, Magona's novel can simply be translated from the particular historical situation in which it has its context. Just as

the different cultural worlds are juxtaposed in the text, so are the various biographical, autobiographical, fictional and historical narratives, discursively differentiated in a complex dialogue between cultures and genres. Some measure of understanding, the text suggests, may come from presenting and thematising difference, and not eliding it.

The cross-cultural discourse in *Mother to Mother* is conducted largely in terms of the life stories of Mandisa and Mxolisi. Their narratives, paired and yet separate, record lives that are in many ways typical of those of the majority of urban black South Africans. Mandisa's account of her early youth in the tin-shack location of Blouvillei, and her family's forced relocation, together with thousands of others, to the soulless township of Guguletu, resembles in its larger contours many of the autobiographies written by other black South Africans. In certain—although of course not all—respects Mandisa's descriptions of her schooling under Bantu Education, and of the beginnings of her own sexual awareness and of the pregnancies of her young friends, resemble Magona's own autobiography. Mandisa's mother's obsession about her daughter's virginity and the humiliating examinations to which she regularly subjects her may be a distinctive feature of the fictional character's youth, but there is some correspondence to Magona's own early life in Mandisa's being sent to rural Gungululu to live with her grandmother, and in her unexpected pregnancy, her customary marriage to China, the father of her child, the breakdown of the relationship between herself and China, his abandonment of her, her having to find work as a domestic employee, and her subsequent relationship with Lungile, the working man who is the father of her other two children. Magona's autobiography sits suggestively alongside Mandisa's story.

Mandisa's story is also similarly told as a form of 'auto-ethnography' (to return to Lionnet's term), documenting a world of Xhosa traditional beliefs and social customs stemming from 'the times of our grandmothers and their grandmothers before them, [when] African peopled lived to see their great-great-grandchildren' (Magona 1998:32). And like Magona's own story, Mandisa's evokes this traditional world to record its contact with new circumstances that either distort its values and practices or negate them completely. The traditional Xhosa forms of politeness that Mandisa recollects belong to the past of the rural village, Gungululu, 'where children were named according to the spaces between the years of rain' (Magona 1998:99). The world of the urban African under apartheid is presented in terms of severance from these values. For example, the diasporic eviction from Blouvillei is unthinkable to one old inhabitant since, as he says, 'The afterbirths of our children are deep in this ground. So are the foreskins of our boys and the bleached bones of our long dead' (Magona 1998:55). For Mandisa, patriarchal customs become oppressive when, after the birth of her child, her father and uncles go ahead with the arrangements for her marriage to China, despite the fact that they have already

rejected and denounced each other. 'Asikokuzibophelela nenj'enkangeni oko? Is that not tying oneself to a dog in a patch of nettles?' (Magona 1998:13) she asks, resorting to the Xhosa idiom to express her predicament. The payment of the *lobola*, her reception into her husband's family home, the custom of bringing wedding gifts to the members of his household, the ceremony of renaming the young wife and naming her child, the duties expected of the new wife, or *umakoti*, her period of *ukuhota*, or initiation, which, ironically, is usually supposed to end with the arrival of the first child—all these are voided of meaning by the enforced partnership of Mandisa and China.

The discourse of Xhosa cultural tradition is tested throughout Mandisa's narrative. When the four-year-old Mxolisi innocently reveals the hiding place of two young student activists to the pursuing police, only to witness the consequences of his deed when they are shot dead before his eyes, he withdraws into total silence, so that Mandisa finally appeals to the healing powers of a traditional *sangoma*. Mandisa interprets the descent of the young into murderous gangsterism after the general breakdown in education in 1976 as a disregard for *ubuntu*, or traditional humaneness. The barbarous execution by 'necklacing' represents to her a grotesque violation of language and of the very being of these children who refer to themselves as 'students' or 'comrades'. The juxtaposition of cultural worlds is highlighted at the very beginning of the narrative when, reflecting on the Congress of South African Students having ordered the school children to join Operation Barcelona, a campaign in support of their striking teachers, Mandisa questions her own wisdom in having sent Mxolisi 'to the bush' (10) for the traditional Xhosa initiation ceremony six months earlier.

Like her autobiography, Magona's novel is (again to use one of Lionnet's terms) a performative text in the way it conducts its cross-cultural discourse through language. The conflicting cultural worlds are articulated in Mandisa's narrative; her translations and glosses constitute a virtual parallel text that gestures toward the overcoming of difference, but finally testifies to difference and a rupture with the past. The polyglossic text conveys something of the cross-cultural assimilations that have occurred in the multi-lingual South African society, but the italicised non-English words and culturally idiosyncratic expressions also signify unbridgeable differences. Xhosa words and expressions constantly remind the reader that Mandisa's linguistic world is not an English one. The names of foods, such as *umngqusho*, or 'broken-corn-with-bean meal' (21), berries from the wild *intlokotshane* bushes and *ibhosisi* vines (56), and *mphokoqo* (150), evoke an African world of rural resourcefulness and urban poverty. Mandisa's own childhood and that of her son are recalled through the names of their games: *ikula*, or jump-rope (33), hide-and-seek, *infumba* and *qashi-qashi* (146). Her heritage is also evident in the Xhosa modes of greeting and forms of address recorded in the narrative, such as

*Bajita* (11) and *Kwedini* (62) for comrades and for young boys; *Mntan'omntan'am* ('Child of My Child', 102) for a grandchild; *Mntuwenkosi* ('Man of the Lord', 116); *Mfundisi* for the minister of church (186); and 'Middle Father' (*Tatophakathi*) and 'Little Father' for paternal uncles (124). Some of the Afrikaans borrowings that she uses, such as *hokkie* (6), *lawaa* (164), the game *poppie huis* (33) and the foods *vetkoekies* and *skaapkop* (49), are innocent; others, like the naturalised epithet *boesmans* (34) for Coloured people, are as racist in Xhosa as in their source language. The rupture between the cultural past and its present state of crisis is most pointedly symbolised in the Xhosa naming customs that Mandisa describes: whereas she had decided to call her son Hlumelo ('Sprig'), her husband's people bestow on the child the name *Mxolisi* ('He, who would bring peace'—136) as a token of the healed rift between their families.

Mandisa also pays tribute to the collective wisdom of her culture through her use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Traditional formulations are brought to bear on contemporary conditions, and as these proverbs and idioms are reactivated, the truths that they contain are—often ironically—validated. Mandisa quotes her mother as not wanting 'anyone to say she had raised a rotten potato' (94) to justify her regular inspections of her daughter's virginity, and she also recalls her mother's prophetic admonition, '*Isala kutyelwa sibona ngolophu!*—She who refuses advice will learn through burn marks!' (98). To tell of her subsequent pregnancy, Mandisa quotes her grandmother's comment about her obvious condition: 'With time, you know that if you have kneaded, the dough will certainly rise' (112). To convey something of her confused sense of losing control over her children, especially *Mxolisi*, Mandisa, like her mother and grandmother before her, also resorts to a Xhosa proverb, '*ukulunga kwenye, kukonakala kwenye*, the righting of one, is the undoing of another' (9). She disapproves, she says, of *Mxolisi's* 'gallivanting up and down the township like a sow that's littered during a drought' (71), and when he denies any implication in the necklacing carried out by certain of his student comrades in the township, Mandisa can only retort: 'As amaXhosa say, *ityal' alingomafutha, alithanjiswa*, guilt is no cream with which one anoints oneself' (159). It is in the dialogue in particular that Magona draws attention to the source language by providing parallel translations in the narrative at precisely those moments of heightened cross-cultural drama, from the disbelieving responses of the inhabitants of Blouville to their forced removal, to the hapless *Mxolisi's* betrayal of the Comrades, and the police raid on Mandisa's dwelling-place after the killing of the American girl.

Most importantly and most dramatically, it is in the political slogans and songs that Mandisa's narrative signals and enacts the gulf between cultures as well as within her own culture. Out of the call-and-response patterns of Xhosa tradition come the contemporary freedom chants such as *Siyanqoba! We overcome!* (14); the toyi-

toyi, *Ngubani lo? NguMandela! Ngubani lo? NguSobukhwe! Baziintoni? Ziinkokheli!* (17); various other utterances that have become part of the liberation discourse, including the militant chant of the youth, '*AmaBhulu, azizinja! ... Whites are dogs!*' (74f); and the mass slogans, '*ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET!*' (206) and '*AMANDLA! NGAWETHU!*' (209).

As in her autobiographical writing, it is finally to her own orally mediated past that Magona turns in her fiction to try and understand how Mandisa's son has come to kill another mother's son. She chooses a tragic, visionary moment in African history to mediate the incomprehensible present. Recalling her grandfather, *Tatomkhulu's*, teaching about the history of her people and their resistance to colonial oppression, Mandisa rehearses the story of Nongqawuse's dream and the Xhosa nation's slaughter of all their cattle and burning of their fields in 1857 in the hope of driving the *abelungu* into the sea, and the catastrophic consequences of this collective action. Strangely, this part of Magona's text is essentially rendered in English with only some Xhosa tags to signal the source culture. The story of Nongqawuse provides a rhetorical rather than a fictionally realised conclusion to Mandisa's narrative. She asks the American mother, her sister in sorrow and now sister in comfort, to consider the possibility of her daughter being the 'perfect atonement of her race' for centuries of injustice, and of *Mxolisi* being the 'perfect host of the demons of his' (201)—in effect, to blame on history what happened in Guguletu on that fateful afternoon. As Mandisa—and her author's voice is barely concealed beneath hers—explains:

Nongqawuse had but voiced the unconscious collective wish of the nation: rid ourselves of the scourge ...

One boy. Lost. Hopelessly lost.

One girl, far away from home.

The enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race. The consummation of inevitable senseless catastrophe.

I do not pretend to know why your daughter died ... died in the manner in which she did. Died when the time and place and hands were all in perfect congruence; cruel confluence of time, place and agent (Magona 1998:210).

Purely as a novel about the killing of Amy Biehl *Mother to Mother* may be unsatisfactory: the individual life stories may not be able adequately to contain the manifold historical circumstances that led up to the event, nor may the mythologised history be sufficiently integrated into the fictional construct. What Magona has, however, succeeded in creating is a complex discursive zone in which different

cultures interact and interpenetrate across the borders between orality and writing, autobiography and biography, and history and fiction.

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# Auto/ Biographical Narratives and the Lives of Jordan Ngubane

Graeme Rosenberg

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In South African historiography over the past two decades, autobiographies and personal narratives have been used to engage with theoretical issues of culture, identity and consciousness, to help recast 'revisionist' accounts of class formation and capitalist development<sup>2</sup>. Life histories have been used to explore the complex web of class, racial, gender and ethnic identifications through which peoples' lives have been shaped, and to address questions of human agency. They have been especially important in approaching history 'from the bottom up', to rewrite South African history in terms of the experiences of ordinary people. This has included work on African politics, with which this article is primarily concerned. African nationalist politics in Lodge's work, for example, has been rooted in 'grass-roots' community experience. In *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (1983), he traces the post-war rise of the nationalist movement essentially as a process of interaction between the strata of political leadership and local communities at 'grass-roots' level, each with localised day-to-day grievances and local histories of resistance. This transforms an understanding of nationalist politics provided by earlier, largely 'institutional' accounts<sup>3</sup>. However, in approaching African political history 'from below', Lodge

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Shula Marks and Paul la Hausse for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article. It arises from my current doctoral research for a biography of Ngubane.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of such developments in South African historiography, see Brown (1991). A growing literature is exploring the potential of personal narratives to recover the historically muted voices of women, working class people and Africans. See, for example, Personal Narratives Group (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Both Walshe (1971) and Karis & Carter's (1972-1977) series focus primarily on organised politics sustained by the actions of African elites. Although these works refer to the extent to which such institutions were more broadly representative, the nature of their popular support (or lack of it) is not examined in detail.

downplays the importance of ideologies and the role of the strata of political leadership. Recent historiographic concerns tend to focus on 'grass-roots' to the exclusion of the intelligentsia. Intellectual or ideological differences remain only partially explained by reference to social differentiation between groups and factions, while the thinking of individuals is examined within these collective frameworks of political groups and factions.

Important questions remain about the complexities and nuances in the thought of the African intelligentsia. As Lodge demonstrates, it was their interaction with people at 'grass roots' level that sustained the liberation movement. Moreover, it was through the communal imaginings of such people that it also became a *nationalist* movement that sought to direct the struggles of diverse communities. Yet nationalist visions have been both contested and ambiguous<sup>4</sup>. Partly engaging with such issues, a growing body of work focuses on the complexities of social stratification and consciousness, and the structural ambiguities of the African intelligentsia (see especially Bradford 1987); and Marks 1986). Challenging any simple notion of a distinct 'African petty bourgeoisie', they explore an intersecting web of identifications based around race, class, gender, ethnicity and region. Significantly, many of these are biographical studies, tracing such complexities in the lives of individuals<sup>5</sup>. Yet while these works explore aspects of the identities and consciousness of the African intelligentsia, few focus specifically on intellectual history. A history in these terms would be important in itself, as well as contributing to more nuanced understandings of political history and the ambiguities of social formation. The collected writings and speeches of individuals, autobiography and intellectual biography offer important avenues for further research in this area, in order to trace in detail a number of simultaneously competing and intersecting intellectual strands, and the ways that these crystallise into 'usable' ideologies.

Jordan Ngubane's career is one such potential avenue. A prolific if controversial member of the African intelligentsia during much of the twentieth century, he produced both a large body of writing and a series of detailed autobiographies. A history of his life and thought highlights some of the complexities, not fully evidenced in existing literature, of African intellectual history, and can provide insights into African elite identity formation. The ways in which it

<sup>4</sup> The literature which does focus on the constructive capacities of such communal imaginings—contrasting with the way Lodge downplays the role of ideologies—tends to focus specifically on Zulu nationalism. Here, the emphasis on the 'constructedness' of Zulu identity is largely a critical one. See, for example Marks (1989); Mare (1992); and Golan (1994).

<sup>5</sup> See Willan (1984); Couzens (1985); and La Hausse (1992). Marks's work cited above also focuses on individual figures.

can do so, however, depend upon the ways in which his life is 'written', and the ways in which it is 'read'. His own writings, the recollections of former colleagues, and his scattered appearances in historical literature present either partial or conflicting views of his identity. While his lengthy autobiographies present the most fully elaborated versions of his life and thought, they are problematic accounts. Moreover, much recent debate about autobiography has emphasised the connections between self-representation and self-construction. In the process of writing his past, Ngubane sought to reconstruct his identity in the present. Thus his autobiographies reveal most about his consciousness at the time of writing. Yet, I will argue that they can also be interpreted to offer insights into the longer history of his life and thought. Such a reading, however, requires knowledge of Ngubane's life and evidence of his thought from sources other than his retrospective accounts—sources which are at times complementary, at times, contradictory.

## 2 Who was Jordan Ngubane?<sup>6</sup>

Jordan Kush Ngubane was born in 1917 in Ladysmith in Natal, the son of a semi-literate Zulu-speaking policeman, who had upwardly mobile aspirations for his children. Jordan was educated at local mission schools of varying denominations in Dundee and Ladysmith, and also learnt about 'traditional' Zulu custom and history from family members and peers. At school he was a bright pupil, and at the age of sixteen he entered Adams College, Natal's most prestigious school for Africans. In his final year at school, he took a correspondence course in journalism, and began contributing to *Ilanga lase Natal*, the English and Zulu weekly newspaper which voiced the concerns of Natal's educated African population. He matriculated with good results in 1937, and was offered a permanent job on *Ilanga*. Ngubane's early journalism consisted largely of social satire, but became increasingly infused, by the early 1940s, with biting social and political commentary. At the same time, he became a key member of a small but growing group of dissatisfied 'young intellectuals' in Durban. They were beginning to challenge the older generation of African political leadership which was deeply divided within Natal, and isolated from national politics, when Ngubane was transferred by the newspaper's owners, in 1943,

<sup>6</sup> The following biographical sketch was compiled from a range of sources indicated below. My concerns are largely with the political and intellectual aspects of Ngubane's life. As with self-representation, the selection and presentation of data deemed relevant to another's life in a biography is influenced by the perspective of the author. Of more immediate concern in this article, however, is the way in which a biographical account is shaped also by the nature and extent of available source material, especially where these are apparently contradictory.

to work on *Bantu World* in Johannesburg. There, he was a founder-member of the militant, nationalist ANC Youth League, and he co-drafted its constitution and manifesto with A.P. Mda and Anton Lembede in early 1944. At this time he married Eleanor Madondo, a mission-educated, articulate and politically well-informed nurse. Together they had two children.

In 1944 Ngubane returned to Natal to take up the editorship of *Inkundla ya Bantu*, at that time a monthly journal serving mainly the northern Transkei and southern Natal. The group of African businessmen who owned the paper intended to expand it to a national weekly. This was eventually achieved under Ngubane's editorship, and *Inkundla* became 'the country's leading forum for the expression of African political opinion' (Karis & Carter 1977:115) of the day. Initially Ngubane used the paper to campaign for uniting Natal's deeply divided African political factions under the leadership of the veteran A.W.G. Champion. *Inkundla* remained independent of any particular political organisation, and Ngubane directed it towards political and cultural 'Nation Building', thus generally supporting the efforts of the Congress Youth League. By the late 1940s he also led the Natal branch of the Youth League, and campaigned against Champion, this time in favour of Chief Albert Lutuli. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ngubane suffered prolonged periods of ill health. In 1951, this combined with financial difficulties and increasing government suppression, leading to *Inkundla's* collapse.

In the early 1950s, Ngubane drifted from the ANC, which he saw as increasingly compromised by the growing influence of mainly white and Asian communists. In 1953, he resumed his journalistic career, co-editing *Indian Opinion* with his friend, Manilal Gandhi, until Gandhi's death in 1956 when Ngubane took over the editing on his own. In 1955 he joined the recently formed Liberal Party of South Africa (LPSA), a multi-racial anti-apartheid group led mainly by whites. Ngubane rose to become its national Vice President—the Party's highest-ranking African member. At the same time he kept in close contact with some of the nationalists within the ANC who in 1959 broke away to form the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). In 1958 he attended the All-Africa Peoples' Conference in Ghana as a representative of the LPSA, and this stimulated his broad but critical interest in pan-African affairs. The following year, he joined the PAC upon its inauguration, and helped the party leadership to communicate with independent African states through his diplomatic contacts. Following the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, a Consultative Conference of African leaders was called to co-ordinate the activities of the various anti-apartheid groups. Ngubane chaired the Continuation Committee formed at this conference, charged with organising follow-up 'All-In' conferences. However, partisan divisions could not be overcome, the PAC and LPSA members of the committee resigned, and these initiatives failed. Soon thereafter, Ngubane was charged, ironically, under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was convicted,

acquitted, and then banned in 1962, as a result of which he decided to flee the country.

He spent the next eight years in Swaziland where he became involved in the politics of decolonisation. Although for security reasons he had to keep a low profile, he was a founder-member and key ideologue in the multi-racial Swaziland Democratic Party, until its rout in the 1964 elections. In exile, Ngubane's career as a journalist came to an end and he concentrated instead on book writing. In this he was partially successful; several of the many manuscripts he produced in subsequent years were at least published if not widely read. In 1969, after several years of separation from his wife and family, Ngubane moved to America, initially to lecture on South African affairs at Howard University in Washington DC. By this time, in the face of internal political dissolution within South Africa, Ngubane thought that the ethnic 'homelands' being created by the apartheid regime could be used as important political platforms, and he threw his weight behind Chief Buthelezi, who had been his friend since the mid 1940s. In the States Ngubane acted as Buthelezi's 'informal ambassador', and lobbied the US State Department and African diplomats to take a more positive view of the 'homeland' leader. In the States he also began a lasting relationship with a white nun, Bernice Wardell, who renounced her faith soon after their acquaintance. Encouraged by her searching curiosity, Ngubane turned to theorising about the philosophy of *ubuntu* ('African humanism'), which increasingly infused the religious, cultural, political and historical aspects of his thought. In 1980, Buthelezi arranged for Ngubane's return to South Africa, hoping that he could provide an incisive strategic analysis for *Inkatha* and use his journalistic experience to improve *Inkatha*'s public relations machinery. Ngubane joined the *Inkatha* Central Committee at Ulundi but failed to make a substantial impact in either of these intended roles. He remained preoccupied instead with more philosophical notions, until he died in 1985.

Jordan Ngubane's career thus followed an idiosyncratic trajectory. Without a lasting home in any political organisation, and by self-consciously carving out a career for himself as a critic, Ngubane remained something of a dissident, if at times influential, voice within African politics. His political roles were often 'behind-the-scenes', as he campaigned on behalf of others, and in the press sought to influence opinion. He was also an important intellectual figure, at all times in his career extending beyond narrowly political commentary, writing extensively on political philosophy, history, African literary culture and esoterics. Indeed, in his memoirs he recorded that had he not been drawn into the political fray as a young journalist, he would have pursued a career as a creative writer. In the event, he tried his hand periodically at fiction writing, with some success, and was also noted as a literary critic.

For these reasons, he is both a fascinating and an important figure in twentieth century South African history, but at the same time he remains a somewhat elusive figure. This is despite the public nature of his career, the numerous writings

he produced throughout his life, including detailed autobiographies, the lucid memories of former friends and colleagues, and the significant but limited academic attention that his contribution to South African history has received. In terms of scholarly studies, Ngubane has been the subject of a BA dissertation, a PhD thesis, and a chapter in a book about the African press<sup>7</sup>. However, all of these studies deal exclusively with the 1940s, and in particular with his work as editor of *Inkundla*. They contain little if any discussion of the remainder of his career, and also concentrate on the journal itself rather than on the thought of its editor. Unsurprisingly, Ngubane also appears frequently if fleetingly in studies of African politics, and to a lesser degree in literary studies. Depending on the period under discussion, he is usually referred to alternatively as 'one of the founders of the ANC Youth League', an 'African journalist', 'a prominent African liberal', or 'an *Inkatha* ideologue'<sup>8</sup>. While it is true that he was all of these things, when taken together such brief allusions do little to provide an account of the complexity of his thought, and do not attempt to explain his differing roles over time. Thumbnail biographical sketches of individuals that appear in accounts of African politics rely on referring to people's official roles in organisations, their professional status, ideological labels, and the use of such dichotomies as 'moderate-radical'. Such descriptions do little to reflect the complexities of individuals' motivations and intentions, nor do they begin to unpack the meanings of the descriptive labels themselves<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to the disjointed picture of Ngubane gleaned from his scattered appearances in academic literature, the perceptions of people that knew him as a friend or colleague also differ widely. They compete to pull Ngubane's place in history, and an understanding of his life, in different directions. Individuals who knew and worked with him at various stages in his political career each wish to claim him as one of 'their own'<sup>10</sup>. To those who knew him primarily as a fellow-member of

<sup>7</sup> These are: Eales (1984); Ukpanah (1993); and Switzer & Ukpanah (1997).

<sup>8</sup> For mentions of his role in the 1940s and early 1950s, see Walshe (1971), Karris & Carter, Vol 2 (1972-1977). His autobiographies are cited frequently in both as a source of information on the ANC Youth League. For passing references to Ngubane's role as an African liberal, see especially Vigne (1997) and Robertson (1971). Ngubane appears as an *Inkatha* ideologue most conspicuously in Golan (1995). His contributions as a literary critic are mentioned in Couzens (1984).

<sup>9</sup> Jane Starfield (1988:19). It should be noted, however, that even thumbnail sketches are certainly better than no personal histories at all. Karis and Carter's Volume 4 (1977), *Political Profiles*, is invaluable in this respect.

<sup>10</sup> The following remarks are based on interviews conducted with a number of Ngubane's former acquaintances. They are to some extent generalisations, but nevertheless serve to highlight the various claims made upon his life.

the Liberal Party, he is remembered as a like-minded humanitarian whose anti-racism was profound and outstanding. Thus Benjamin Pogrund, for example, describes him as 'a remarkable South African, with a great breadth of vision and a depth of non-racism which was highly unusual at that time in anyone, whether black or white'<sup>11</sup>. Such memories are undeterred by the fact that in later life, Ngubane spurned the friendship of his former liberal colleagues. They tend to explain this by citing rumours that 'he ruined himself with drink' and suspicions that 'he became racist'<sup>12</sup>. The 'real' Ngubane, in such memories, was the anti-racist moralist they had known; this was his greatest contribution to South Africa.

There are contrasting claims made on Ngubane's legacy by African nationalists of the PAC, which Ngubane joined upon its inauguration in 1959, much to the chagrin of many within the Liberal Party. According to PAC supporters, Ngubane was, at heart, one of them—'he was a nationalist to the end'<sup>13</sup>. In their view, when Ngubane 'hobnob[bed] with the liberals', this was a temporary, tactical 'blunder' rather than a genuine indication of his thinking at the time. The fact that his involvement in the PAC was largely informal does not discourage one member's claims about his loyalties, that 'he supported the PAC because he was friendly to the PAC people and he understood the ideas of the PAC'<sup>14</sup>.

According to his more recent colleagues in *Inkatha*, however, it was Ngubane's long-standing friendship with Buthelezi, dating back to the mid 1940s, which defined his loyalties. They claim Ngubane from the same perspective that views *Inkatha* as representative of the 'true spirit' of the ANC as it was up to 1949. According to one young *Inkatha* member who knew Ngubane from 1980, 'his vision, political vision, was similar to the IFP, or the old ANC as it was propounded by the founding fathers'<sup>15</sup>. As a founder of this 'true spirit' of the early Youth League, Ngubane's later support for *Inkatha* is indeed a potential, if ambiguous, source of credibility for such claims. Little wonder then that despite his muted reservations about the organisation, *Inkatha* lays claim to his heritage. Ngubane was buried in 'traditional' Zulu manner in Ulundi in a large ceremony from which his former friends were excluded. His papers remain in the hands of the KwaZulu Monuments' Council, which cautiously guards his memory by restricting or forbidding access to much of the material he bequeathed.

<sup>11</sup> Author's correspondence with B. Pogrund, 22 June 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interviews with Randolph Vigne, London, 21 February 1997, and Ken and Jean Hill, Durban, 23 September 1997.

<sup>13</sup> This and the following quotes are from author's interview with A.B. Ngcobo, Ulundi, 14 September 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Joe Mkhwanazi, Durban, 25 September 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Thami Duma, Ulundi, 16 September 1997.

To further complicate these competing memories, some of his former colleagues wish rather to see him as 'other', to distance him from themselves. In particular, his considerable contributions to the revitalisation of the ANC during the 1940s are generally overlooked by ANC-aligned intellectuals, who prefer to focus on Mandela, Sisulu, Tambo and others during that period<sup>16</sup>. Thus he is omitted from the gallery of ANC 'heroes' of the past, for in a heroic history his bitter criticisms of the 'communist dominated' ANC in the 1950s overshadow his important contributions of the 1940s. If his contributions are conceded at all, they are done so only reluctantly. Remembering Ngubane's role in the 1940s, I.C. Meer, for example, remarked on his 'very articulate, logical journalism ... even if much of it was rationalisation'<sup>17</sup>.

Thus Ngubane's roles were seen by at least some of his colleagues to be mutually incompatible. It is little wonder, then, that when he came to recording his memoirs, Ngubane stressed that the human mind was inherently 'many-sided', and that life's purpose was to develop this many-sided potential. But this 'many-sidedness' and the element of 'elusiveness' is not simply the result of a controversial political career. Ngubane was a complex and varied thinker. His intellectual output as a journalist, writer, political strategist, public speaker, critic and scholar straddled the fields of political commentary, social satire, literary and artistic criticism, fiction, history, political science, Egyptology, cosmology and moral philosophy. And as his career progressed, his moves from 'African nationalist' to 'liberal' to 'Zulu patriot' were accompanied by shifting tensions between a number of intellectual strands. Through these shifts, Ngubane sought to forge an identity for himself, an identity that was both complex and fluid. Moreover, he did so in the context of South Africa's systems of racial domination, which left little room in which African intellectuals could manoeuvre—especially for those, like Ngubane, who sought to make a living out of the free expression of their ideas. Ngubane's efforts to forge an identity for himself were thus played out within shifting boundaries of restricted political and intellectual spaces. It is within this process—the interaction between Ngubane's own intellectual labours and the changing, multi-layered worlds he inhabited—that one must seek to recover this 'elusive' figure.

Although Ngubane provided detailed accounts of his own life and times, they are problematic historical sources. On the one hand, the autobiographical act itself forms part of the way individuals construct their identity. In presenting particular versions of the past, his autobiographies reveal most about his view of him-

<sup>16</sup> Lodge identifies several strands of ANC-aligned historiography. Apart from the 'Africanist' strand of the 1940s, of which Ngubane was himself an important part, all overlook the importance of such thinkers as Ngubane (Lodge 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Notes from author's telephone conversation with I.C. Meer, Durban, 27 March 1997.

self and the identity he tried to assert at the time of writing. On the other hand, in presenting these views (however skewed) of his own past, they can simultaneously reveal something about that past. In order to separate what they reveal from what they conceal and distort, however, sensitivity to a host of interpretive issues is required by the reader. As the Personal Narratives Group, writing with reference to women's life stories, assert:

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they *are* revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past 'as it actually was', aspiring to a standard of objectivity .... We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them .... Only by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms that guide them, and the relationships that produce them are we able to understand what is communicated in a personal narrative (Personal Narratives Group 1989).

Part three of this article explores these issues, tracing Ngubane's autobiographies as particular acts of self-representation, written in specific contexts, at particular moments and for specific purposes. It outlines the differing forms they took, relating these to the changing contexts in which Ngubane represented and re-presented himself. The final part explores some of the themes of the only available complete manuscript, which was completed in 1977. This is in many ways a controversial account. Both the interpretive language and theoretical framework of the narrative, and a number of 'factual' details contained in it, are contested not only from some of the directions outlined above, but also, in some cases, by Ngubane's own earlier writings.

### 3 The Politics of Self-Representation

Ngubane worked on his memoirs for a period spanning three decades, essentially producing two sets of accounts. None were published, and few complete manuscripts exist. Ngubane first began recording his life story during the mid 1950s, when he was in his late thirties. As far as available information indicates, an autobiographical manuscript first appeared in 1957, provocatively entitled 'Forty Years a Kaffir'<sup>18</sup>. By 1960, he had updated the work, and considered the more liberally inclined title, 'My Brother, the Human Being'<sup>19</sup>. During the early 1960s, he further updated the account,

<sup>18</sup> It is this version that is cited several times, regarding the rise of the ANC Youth League, in Walshe (1971).

<sup>19</sup> A synopsis and preface of this manuscript are held at the Alan Paton Centre, Vigne papers, PC86/4/1/8, file 15.

and extracts from an untitled manuscript produced in 1963 are widely available to researchers<sup>20</sup>. Thereafter he appears to have discontinued the project for several years, while in exile in Swaziland. During the 1970s, in the United States, he returned to the task of producing his memoirs. In 1977, a greatly expanded version, consisting of 'about 216,000 words' appeared. It bore the title 'After the Collapse of Apartheid. An Inside View of Race Politics in South Africa'<sup>21</sup>. This is the latest and only complete available version, although a slightly expanded version entitled 'South Africa: The Promise and the Glory' appeared approximately a year later<sup>22</sup>.

The timing of Ngubane's earliest attempts at autobiography coincided with a period in which a number of black South African writers turned to autobiographical forms of representation. Ngubane was to some extent part of the vibrant literary culture of the 1950s, which centred around Sophiatown<sup>23</sup>. From Natal he contributed several short stories to *Drum*<sup>24</sup>, and was also one of the adjudicators for the journal's prestigious annual short story competition. He published a novel in Zulu in 1957, which proved popular until it was banned in 1963. In autobiographical and other works, writers in the 1950s shared a common concern to bear testimony against the increasingly repressive system of apartheid<sup>25</sup>. By the 1960s, many were forced into exile, from where they often completed and published their personal accounts (Bahn

<sup>20</sup> Tom Karis and Gwendolyn Carter added around 150 pages of the 1963 manuscript to their extensive microfilm collection of South African political materials. These sections deal with the period from the 1940s to the early 1960s, omitting Ngubane's childhood, schooling and early journalistic career. This document is cited several times in volume two of *From Protest to Challenge* as a source of information on the ANC Youth League. These extracts are untitled and undated, although on p.238 Ngubane identified 'the time of writing' as 1963.

<sup>21</sup> Copies of this version are held by a handful of university libraries including Yale, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, and the University of the Witwatersrand.

<sup>22</sup> This latest known version is generally unavailable for scrutiny, however, as it remains the property of the executors of Ngubane's will. One of them, a publisher in Durban, intends to edit and publish the work himself at some future date, although this has been his unfulfilled intention for several years. While the document certainly merits publication, it requires substantial editing.

<sup>23</sup> For an evaluation of the Sophiatown writers, see especially Chapman (1989).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, 'The Answer he Wanted', December 1951, and 'Man of Africa', August 1956. Both are reproduced in Chapman (1989).

<sup>25</sup> For a further discussion of the many reasons why South African writing became increasingly infused with autobiographical content in this context, see Watts (1989:Chapter 3).

1984:23). Ngubane's efforts at autobiography share much of the context of these writers, but his works also differ in important respects from their broadly literary autobiographies. Their thinking was, according to Lodge, 'profoundly shaped by an industrial urban culture,' which produced 'an exciting and powerful literature of short stories, social reportage, and personal testimony.' Unlike Ngubane, however, they did not engage directly with ideological expositions or 'any nationalist-inspired exploration of the past' (Lodge 1991:127).

From the outset, Ngubane approached his life story explicitly as a political autobiography, tracing his role in African politics in South Africa, offering the reader an 'inside view'. Even within this 'sub-genre' of political memoir, however, his work incorporated a variety of forms. As George Egerton indicates, this 'sub-genre' has historically included varying combinations of:

contemporary descriptive recording of political events and impressions in diaries or journals, where one has been a participant in or observer of the events; retrospective narration of political engagements together with explanatory and interpretive reflections; autobiographical portrayal of one's life in politics, with childhood, education and personal development given full treatment; biographical depiction of political contemporaries from personal knowledge; revelation of the inner working of a political system based on personal acquaintance with 'the hidden springs of power'; and, in its most ambitious mode, portrayal not only of one's political life but also of the times in which this career occurred—in other words, contemporary history (Egerton 1994:xii-xiii).

Ngubane's memoirs contain elements of all of these forms. As he periodically updated the work, his intellectual preoccupations, sense of audience, and personal and political motivations shifted, and the form of his memoirs became increasingly polymorphous. In particular, his later set of accounts incorporated extensive historical, philosophical and cultural interpretation, breaching the conventional boundaries of the genre of autobiography.

The political nature of Ngubane's early efforts set them apart, not only in content but also in the motivations and intentions of the writer, from his literary counterparts. As Egerton comments, '[t]he intentional and, even more insidious, the unconscious element of personal interest operating in political memoir represents its most distinct and endemic defect' (Egerton 1994:344). The extent of such interests operating in his memoirs can be measured by comparing the accounts with Ngubane's other writings of the time, and by tracing the changing fortunes of his career as a writer and political commentator. Much recent debate about autobiography as a literary 'genre' has been about the relationship between

autobiography and fiction. Whereas even supposedly 'factual' autobiographical accounts are partly fictional, fiction can also be seen as partly autobiographical, revealing something about the author even when this is unintentional. These connections have been particularly close in South African writing since the 1950s. The works of Es'kia Mphahlele, for example, have deliberately inhabited, and thus blurred, the boundaries between these genres. Mphahlele's autobiographical fiction and his fictional autobiographies can in fact be read together as an almost seamless whole. In Ngubane's case, there is a similarly close relationship between his political memoirs and his other writing, most of which was ostensibly 'non-fictional' and 'non-autobiographical'. This is not because he deliberately inhabited the terrain between 'political autobiography' and 'political theory'. Rather, during the period he worked on his autobiographies, his other writing activity shifted from journalism to more theoretical work (see especially Ngubane (1963)). His autobiographies incorporated lengthy polemical passages that are almost identical to parts of the more scholarly works written at the same time. In turn, his theoretical works can be read as partly 'autobiographical' in that they document his political vision as it changed over time. It is an advantage afforded by extensive research for a biography—and the fact that Ngubane was a prolific writer—that a number of complementary sources are available to trace these shifts, and contextualise the ways in which Ngubane presented himself over time.

Ngubane's first set of accounts was an ambitious and controversial attempt at autobiography, history and political theory, as he sought to weave his own story into an historical and theoretical analysis of African nationalism in South Africa. The 1963 document detailed his own life from his childhood years, family life and schooling, to his entry into Natal politics as a journalist on *Ilanga*. It continued with details of his political career, seeking to explain the goals he set himself and the role he played as an African nationalist. He presented himself as a 'back-room' activist, as a founder of the ANC Youth League which, he wrote, intended to work as a 'pressure group' within the ANC, and as a journalist influencing public opinion in the press. By public campaigning for his preferred political figureheads, and through behind-the-scenes 'intrigue', he also wrote of himself as a 'king-maker' within the ANC. In the mid 1940s, he wrote, he was a key figure in reuniting the divided political factions in Natal under the leadership of AWG Champion. He claimed that although he disliked Champion's autocratic style and conservative outlook, he made this 'difficult choice' because Champion alone could overcome factional divisions. Less convincingly, he also claimed that he foresaw that as provincial leader, Champion would eventually discredit himself, and pave the way for a more suitable nationalist leader in Natal. Ngubane claimed that from the mid 1940s, he began to groom the initially reluctant Albert Lutuli for this future role, by simultaneously drawing him into the political fray and by shielding him from Champion's capacity to suppress potential rivals. By

the late 1940s, he continued, he had masterminded Champion's downfall, by gradually isolating him in political circles. Contentiously, he claimed that he was instrumental in ousting Champion's 'ally' on the national scene, the ANC President-General A.B. Xuma in 1949, in order to weaken Champion's position. When Champion was defeated in 1951, Ngubane further claimed that he convinced his reluctant colleagues in the Natal Youth League to sponsor Lutuli—seen by many as too moderate—for the Natal Presidency. Having succeeded in this, he continued to write that in December 1952, he was largely responsible for thrusting Lutuli into the position of President-General of the ANC.

The 1963 account continues with discussion of his move to the Liberal Party in 1955, although its coverage of his role in the Party is less extensive than discussion of his involvement in the ANC, even though he was the Party's most prominent African member. He claimed that he joined because of his commitment to a universal morality, and was 'hounded out of Congress' by the left. He also wrote of his support for the 'humanist' wing of the PAC, led by Robert Sobukwe, as opposed to the 'extremist' group. Throughout the narrative, Ngubane outlined his political philosophy of African nationalism, which was infused with liberal-democratic principles, and also critiqued at length the ideologies of communism and Afrikaner nationalism. He appealed frequently to the history of the ANC, which he charted from its formation in 1912, to demonstrate how his outlook both bore the legacy of the ANC's founders, and also adapted itself appropriately to historical developments. Lengthy sections also seek to demonstrate how the Communist Party had historically been a prime cause of divisions within African politics. The work concluded with a warning that in the wake of the Sharpeville shootings of 1960, South Africa was rapidly heading for a 'bloodbath'. He then appealed to the international community to pressurise South Africans on all sides to peacefully 'negotiate a settlement to the race problem' through a series of compromises.

Ngubane's presentation of himself as a 'king-maker', and particularly his role in Lutuli's rise to prominence, have been contested both directly and indirectly. Eales, in particular, rejects Ngubane's claims as an 'elaborate alibi' to cover up for his 'embarrassing' support for the conservative Champion in the 1940s. Switzer and Ukpanah argue that Ngubane was an important campaigner in many of these leadership contests, but that his claims are exaggerated. General literature on the politics of the period details a wider range of factors leading to Xuma's ejection from office than those suggested by Ngubane. Most strikingly, Lutuli's own autobiography, in which he charts his transformation from an apolitical schoolteacher to President General of the ANC, neglects any mention of Ngubane<sup>26</sup>. Contemporary

<sup>26</sup> *Let My People Go: An Autobiography* (1962), was written, like Ngubane's account, during a personal quarrel between the two men.

evidence, ANC records, and Ngubane's journalism of the time support Switzer and Ukpanah's brief evaluation. Ngubane was indeed an important campaigner in leadership contests in Natal in the 1940s and early 1950s, although his account exaggerates his personal impact by overlooking the more complex range of shifting alignments amongst the regional elite. His role in influencing leadership contests at the national level are less clear<sup>27</sup>.

The distortions in Ngubane's memoirs were shaped by a number of personal and political motivations. By the time he began to record his life story in the 1950s, he had indeed made a considerable personal contribution to the transformation of the ANC which took place during the 1940s. He had gained intimate knowledge of the events and personalities surrounding the rise of the ANC Youth League. Aware of the historical importance of these developments, but also of the lack of adequate records, he thus set out to disclose his 'inside' knowledge. Indeed these manuscripts have since proved important sources of information for historians of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s. However, by the time he was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, his political career had taken a radical departure. From the early 1950s, he split from the mainstream of the ANC leadership as it emerged during that decade. He attacked what he saw as communist influences in the ANC, more vociferously than many fellow-nationalists who shared similar reservations. He objected especially to the nature of the emerging Congress Alliance. By placing each of its member groups on an equal footing, he argued, the Alliance diluted the aims of the ANC, which alone represented the majority, and most harshly oppressed, group. Ngubane's narrative thus engaged with the ideological debates which took place within Congress in the 1950s, seeking to convince the reader of the dangers of communist influences in the ANC.

If Ngubane entered into polemical ideological debates in his autobiographies, he also entered into disputes of a more personal nature. By 1956, his attacks on communist influences in the ANC had degenerated into a series of published personal exchanges between Ngubane and Lutuli, then President-General of the ANC, and a former close friend<sup>28</sup>. The two men had known each other since the late 1930s, and had developed a relationship that was clearly of great importance to Ngubane. The personal clash of 1956 left a sense of bitterness on Ngubane's part, and they did not resume cordial relations for some years after that. In his memoirs,

<sup>27</sup> His exact role in the leadership realignments of the period is yet to be fully appreciated and is thus traced from details in the biography from which this article draws.

<sup>28</sup> Ngubane published these in *Indian Opinion* in March to April of 1956. See also A. Lutuli, 'A Reply to Mr. Jordan K. Ngubane's Attacks on the African National Congress', CPSA papers, Ga93.

Ngubane elaborated at great length on the closeness of their relationship, and his role in Lutuli's elevation to prominence. He stated that Lutuli's election as President-General of the ANC in 1952 was the fulfilment of his own personal goal of providing the nationalist movement with a suitable figurehead. He presented Lutuli's rise to leadership as part of his own long-term strategy to direct the course of the nationalist movement from behind the scenes. Ngubane's exaggerated account, like Lutuli's failure to mention Ngubane's campaigning on his behalf, needs to be viewed within the context of the 'personal clash' taking place at the time of writing. Ngubane went to great lengths to establish the closeness of his and Lutuli's thinking as African nationalists during the 1940s and early 1950s. He inferred that subsequently Lutuli betrayed the nationalist cause by allowing himself to be manipulated by communists, who were pursuing their own agenda.

Although Ngubane's thinking shared much with nationalists within the ANC in the 1950s, his relationship with them was somewhat ambiguous. In 1955, he found a new political home in the Liberal Party of South Africa which had formed in 1953. He did so with considerable reservations, but also with compelling moral conviction. Amongst other things, he was painfully aware that 'to say a man is a Liberal, is, politically speaking in this country, not to pay him a compliment. The non-European regards the word Liberal as virtually synonymous with traitor or spy'<sup>29</sup>. Certainly, this was the view of many nationalists in the ANC, and his move to the LPSA opened him up to personal criticism from those with whom he otherwise had much in common. At the time when Ngubane was writing his first set of memoirs, therefore, his reputation in African political circles required defence from several angles. He was in a minority in the contemporary ideological debates, he sought recognition of his role in Lutuli's rise to leadership, and he also felt the need to defend his move to the Liberal Party. But Ngubane did not write the account simply in order to vindicate himself in the eyes of an African leadership from which he was becoming increasingly distanced. In part a result of this distance, his account was in fact intended primarily for a white and international readership. Within the Liberal Party, Ngubane delivered numerous speeches at meetings. He found that both his credentials as an African political activist and his articulate speeches were met with keen interest by many whites, particularly university students, and also from interested foreigners. Indeed, Ngubane's role within the Liberal Party was to 'cross the colour line' and attract white interest, rather than to draw in African members<sup>30</sup>. This opened up new opportunities for him to present African politics as he saw it. Indeed he circulated his autobiographies for comment amongst some liberal friends. It was largely through

<sup>29</sup> Ngubane, 'Memorandum on the African and the Liberal Party', LP papers, APC, c.1956.

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Peter Brown, Fort Nottingham, 28 September 1997.

their help and encouragement—some were authors or otherwise connected to the publishing industry—that he could hope to have the work published.

In 1962, Ngubane left South Africa and moved with his family to Swaziland. When he learned that he was due to receive a banning order, as he explained to his literary agent,

I promptly decided to flee the country. Every penny I had earned in my life had been from writing. I had never done any other work and to give up writing at 46 and start a new life I found a little too much. In any case [under the terms of the ban] I could not leave the Inanda district to get a job as a clerk in nearby Durban<sup>31</sup>.

Shortly after he arrived in Swaziland, Ngubane succeeded in having *An African Explains Apartheid* published. However, in Swaziland he found that his activities were also severely restricted, and the opportunities which seemed to be opening up for him as a writer and commentator in the 1950s dissipated in the 1960s. The course of his career took a new, and this time more uncertain direction. After initially updating his autobiography in 1963, he appears to have discontinued the project for several years. Although he conferred with fellow exiles on an individual level, he remained distanced from both the ANC and PAC in exile. In addition, he began to drift away from his Liberal Party friends, losing all personal contact with them apart from a handful of brief reunions in subsequent years. Ngubane was thus forced to cast about for new intellectual outlets, and address himself to new audiences. Rather than pursue his autobiography, as a number of other exiled writers did at the time, he began to write about broad contemporary issues of pan-African relations, the Cold War, and the implications of these on South Africa's liberation movement. During the mid 1960s, he attempted to find a sponsor to fund travels to newly independent African states, in order to write a series of critical examinations of 'Free Africa' which would appeal to international—both western and African—readerships<sup>32</sup>. He failed to find such a sponsor, but remained in Swaziland and pressed ahead with his study. This, like the autobiography, remains unpublished<sup>33</sup>. By the end of the decade, having failed to publish any further works, Ngubane began to reconcile himself to winding down his political and writing careers, and to settling on his smallholding farm.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Ngubane to Howard Moorepark, 27 August 1963, Ngubane Papers, KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

<sup>32</sup> Letters from Ngubane to Howard Moorepark, 27 August 1963 and 31 August 1964, Ngubane Papers, KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

<sup>33</sup> 'Africa's Crisis of Isolation', Ngubane papers, c.1965.

In 1969, however, he seized on an opportunity to revive his political-intellectual career, once again, in a new direction. He secured a grant from the Ford Foundation and landed a temporary lecturing job at Howard University, which allowed him to move to the States. There he could once again embrace the role of political spokesman, this time on behalf of Buthelezi, who had simultaneously taken up leadership of the Zulu Territorial Authority. Ngubane lectured, toured, and lobbied the US State department and African diplomats in Washington DC, as an 'informal ambassador' of Buthelezi, and also as an independent scholar<sup>34</sup>. He remained irreconcilably distanced from the ANC in exile, even though Buthelezi himself enjoyed a measure of co-operation with the ANC until the end of the 1970s. In the context of growing American interest in Africa, and particularly in South Africa, Ngubane found new opportunities as a writer. Throughout the 1970s, he produced a number of manuscripts, some of which were published<sup>35</sup>. In updating his autobiography, Ngubane both updated his own life story, to include his life in exile, and added substantial philosophical and historical analysis. One might expect to find in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid', completed in 1977, a clear account of his decision to support Buthelezi in the 1970s, given that he had previously played influential roles in the ANC and LPSA. However, the way in which Ngubane updated these later memoirs provides an explanation only in abstract, often obscure, terms.

A comparison of the 1963 extracts and the 1977 version shows that Ngubane essentially added to rather than revised the earlier text, inserting into it a number of reflective comments and passages, and appending several new chapters on to the end. Thus the form of the 1977 autobiography is both polymorphous and inconsistent. The account up until 1963 consists of an earlier text overlaid with a number of insertions. The sections dealing with the period 1963 to 1977 were written in a different way. Although lengthy, they contain relatively little personal detail. Ngubane's years in Swaziland are dealt with very briefly, and most of the extensive account of the 1970s is dealt with in theoretical terms, reproducing arguments that

<sup>34</sup> Details of these activities are provided in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid', and are confirmed by the contents of the Ngubane Papers. This includes a number of reports and petitions he submitted to various bodies during the 1970s, including, for example, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

<sup>35</sup> Published works include 'South Africa's Race Crisis: A Conflict of Minds', in Adam (1974); a novel *Ushaba: The Hurtle to Blood River* (1974); the esoteric *Conflict of Minds* (1979); and 'Shaka's Social, Political and Military Ideas', in Burness (1976). His major unpublished works in this period include his expanded autobiography; a comparative study of South African and American race relations (a project funded by the Ford Foundation); and a lengthy manuscript, 'Buntu: the Philosophy and its Practice', Ngubane Papers, 1977.

appear in his other writings of the time. That he did so reflects Ngubane's distance from the centre of South African politics during his exile years, and also the nature of his intellectual preoccupations at the time of writing, in which he sought to retrieve an ever more distant past.

His method of updating the autobiography results in a multi-layered representation of himself. On one level he allowed the analyses in his earlier text, which outlined his liberal brand of African nationalist philosophy, to remain. By the 1970s, however, his intellectual preoccupations had shifted considerably, as he articulated an elaborate philosophy of *ubuntu* (African humanism). He inserted into the earlier text a number of passages which reinterpreted his thinking throughout his career, in the light of his contemporary outlook. Thus while the earlier account of the 'intellectual struggles' that led him to a liberal nationalist position remain intact, he attempted to impose over these a strong sense of continuity in his motivations, identity and thought. In exile in America during the 1970s, intellectual currents surrounding the Black Power movement there as well as the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and the re-emergence of Zulu nationalism in South Africa profoundly affected his thought. In his works of the 1970s, Ngubane developed an elaborate and essentialist philosophy, which drew on earlier strands in his thought, and incorporated some of these newer influences. His formulations of this philosophy, which he usually referred to as *ubuntu*, varied, but at its centre lay a set of assertions about the nature of 'the African mind'<sup>36</sup>. This distinctively African 'quality of mind' was based, he argued, on a humanistic conception of man's relationship to the universe, and an 'evaluation of the person'<sup>37</sup> that above all else, respected people as individuals and valued the development of an individual's 'many-sided mind', regardless of race or creed. This moral outlook, and its associated cosmology, argued Ngubane, was expressed in the totality of (sub-Saharan) African traditions of thought, cultural practices, social institutions and political initiatives, which all emanated from a common source, ancient Sudanic or, as he termed it—'Sudic'—civilisation. In his work he referred extensively to examples from the Zulu past and present, but stressed that although this was the specific case he knew best, Zulu culture was but one variant of the broader unity of sub-Saharan African cultures. His theories thus represent a blend of Zulu ethno-

<sup>36</sup> Although *ubuntu* simultaneously became a rallying point for *Inkatha* ideologues and Zulu nationalists, Ngubane's writings on the subject reflect a greater historical and philosophical depth and sophistication, and a more sustained focus on the pan-African context, than do other writers or rhetoricians on the subject. Despite—or perhaps because—of this, his impact on *Inkatha* ideology was limited.

<sup>37</sup> This and other phrases that I have placed in parentheses appear frequently in all of Ngubane's writings from the 1970s onward.

nationalism and strands of Afrocentrism, then emerging in the States, which stressed the cultural-historical unity of all 'black' Africans.

Ngubane drew on then current debates in America in the field of Egyptology, which centred on questions of the racial origins of ancient Egyptian civilisation, the nature of Nubian civilisations, and their influences on ancient Greece and other European civilisations. The French-educated, Senegalese scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, argued most powerfully the case both for positive contributions of ancient African civilisations to the Western world, and centred on Egypt as the historic root of a supposed contemporary cultural unity of 'black' Africans. These and associated ideas coalesced from the late 1960s into a coherent 'Afrocentric' school of thought in the USA<sup>38</sup>, based around a number of University campuses which included Howard College, where Ngubane was initially based. He became increasingly interested in Egyptian cosmologies and religious practices, although he avoided entering into speculations about the 'racial' make-up of ancient Egypt<sup>39</sup>, and preferred to claim that sub-Saharan African cultures derived from ancient 'Sudic' civilisation. He theorised that these cultures share a distinct moral tradition of African humanism or *ubuntu*, which he increasingly juxtaposed with what he termed 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' traditions: the various European-derived intellectual traditions including communism, fascism, Afrikaner nationalism, as well as capitalism and Christianity<sup>40</sup>. With this novel formulation he attempted to posit an essential difference between the peoples of Africa and those of Europe, by drawing together the diverse Western traditions into a single family sharing the same underlying 'evaluation of the person'. What characterised 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' moralities, he argued, was the importance that each attached to 'the group'—whether based on economic class, race or religion. Thus in South Africa, he argued, white racism oppressed Africans as a group, while Africans continued to value people as individuals. These two opposing moral traditions, he wrote repeatedly, meant that underlying racial conflict in both

<sup>38</sup> For a critical analysis of such thought, see Howe (1998). Howe dates the emergence of a distinct Afrocentric school of thought to the formation of a 'Black Caucus' within the US African Studies Association in 1968, although he also traces similar strands of thought back to the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>39</sup> Ngubane collected several hundred volumes on Egyptology, which are now housed at the KwaZulu Cultural Museum.

<sup>40</sup> In his writings on the subject, Ngubane conveniently avoids mention of a Western liberal ethical tradition. A broadly liberal combination of universalism, individualism and humanism differs in few essentials from his own conception of *ubuntu*. The 1977 autobiography glossed over his role in the Liberal Party of South Africa, which he seems by that time to have regarded as insignificant.

South Africa and the United States was a 'conflict of minds'<sup>41</sup>.

When Ngubane returned to the task of writing his memoirs in the 1970s, he did so with the ambition of narrating his life story within this broad historical-philosophical framework. Partly, it was an attempt to reconcile his new-found sense of identity at the time of writing, with his previous 'selves'. As such, the act of re-writing his life was itself part of the process of reformulating his identity. However, Ngubane was also re-interpreting his past (and presenting his philosophy) with specific audiences in mind. In casting his account within a broad 'civilisational' framework, it would be familiar to African-Americans engaged in seeking to root their contemporary identity in ancient Egyptian or Nubian civilisations. Ngubane sought to demonstrate similar linkages between ancient and present day African societies. In his 1977 autobiography, he used a combination of sophisticated argument and unsubstantiated inference, to piece together a lineage of political, religious and moral thought running through from ancient 'Sudic' civilisation, to pre-colonial Zulu society, to the twentieth century Natal African intelligentsia, of which he and, importantly, Buthelezi, were members. Despite some of these resonances with Afro-centric intellectual currents, however, Ngubane remained something of a lonely figure in American Africanist academia<sup>42</sup>. His awareness of his intended audience derived in large part from his personal relationships in what was for him largely an alien environment. At the time of writing his later memoirs, Ngubane had formed a personal relationship that inspired him not only to elaborate on his more philosophical constructions, but also to explain his own past within such a framework. In 1970 he met Bernice Wardell, a white nun and schoolteacher who at the time was undergoing a crisis of faith. As they developed an intimate relationship, she became increasingly fascinated with the theological implications of Ngubane's thought, and eventually 'converted', as he later put it, to *ubuntu* (in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid'). Her searching curiosity inspired Ngubane to elaborate further on the subject, and indeed her financial support, after alternative sources of funding dried up for him in 1973, allowed him to do so. In 1977, Ngubane gave her the original manuscript of his tract on *ubuntu*, on which he wrote:

You and I had spent years talking about Buntu, the Person, The Law, and The Environment. You finally asked if I could spare the time to write a book

<sup>41</sup> Ngubane had since the late 1950s theorised about an essentially moralistic conflict between two 'irreconcilable outlooks' in a racially divided South Africa, but did not until the 1970s argue that these outlooks were rooted in the ancient histories of Western and African civilisations.

<sup>42</sup> In his 1977 memoirs, Ngubane complained bitterly that his African-American colleagues failed to perceive the 'fundamentals' of racism as he did.

on my understanding of Buntu to enable people like you to understand more clearly the goals of my struggle and the meaning we were trying to give to freedom. You wanted answers to the questions you raised in Buntu. The present effort presents answers to some of your questions<sup>43</sup>.

In writing his autobiography, Ngubane's perceptions of how his intended readership would respond to the narrative were informed by his personal relationship with Wardell, and her apparent receptiveness to his theories. The subtleties of this relationship form an important part of the context in which Ngubane represented himself<sup>44</sup>. In addition to their mutual companionship, Ngubane was both Wardell's philosophical mentor and financial dependent, she was both his sponsor and muse. That Wardell was herself writing her own autobiography at the same time encouraged Ngubane to strengthen the connections between his 'previous lives' and his contemporary elaborate philosophical-historical constructions<sup>45</sup>.

His sense of audience was also shaped by the partially favourable responses of diverse groups of people he addressed during lecture tours in America in the early 1970s. In the preface to 'After the Collapse...', he stressed the educative intentions of his work. He aimed to give westerners 'an inside view of the forces which shape thought and action and fix final goals in the majority group' in South Africa. Presenting himself as representative of 'the majority group' by invoking his credentials as an activist, he argued that *ubuntu* was the guiding force shaping Africans' thought and action, in contrast to the more practical appeals that ANC-aligned intellectuals simultaneously made to international audiences. Although the 1977 memoirs reproduced many of Buthelezi's strategies for negotiated change, the account did not simply conform to the political demands of international diplomatic campaigns by rival organisations. His more central preoccupation at the time was to contest versions of history from a range of commentators of South Africa, in a similar

<sup>43</sup> Hand-written note attached to 'Buntu: the Philosophy and its Practice', Ngubane Papers, 1977.

<sup>44</sup> For an extended consideration of personal power relationships in the production of autobiography, albeit in the case of a more unambiguously dependant diarist, see Swindells, 'Liberating the Subject? Autobiography and 'Women's History': A Reading of *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick*', in Personal Narratives Group (1989).

<sup>45</sup> Ngubane mentioned Wardell's autobiography in the hand-written note cited above. Wardell's papers are held at the KwaZulu Cultural Museum, but access is subject to severe restrictions, and it is at present unknown whether any autobiographical manuscripts survive. The few writings of hers that are accessible, display a preoccupation with the primacy of moral and metaphysical world-views in directing individual and communal life.

vein to the self-appointed task of Afrocentric scholars in the States. In the preface to 'After the Collapse...' he wrote that he intended to record for posterity his experiences and inside knowledge because, 'after the collapse of White domination, African scholars will need to rewrite our history' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.15). He cited the works of such historians as Jack and Ray Simons and Edward Roux as the kind of 'white perspectives' from which such a history would have to be wrested. Moreover, in the autobiography, he was himself attempting to rewrite that history, continuing a somewhat fragile tradition of Zulu nationalist historiography. Recognising his limited potential to rewrite history as an individual, he also devised a number of schemes to promote further research into an *ubuntu*-inspired history. In these efforts, he departed somewhat from *Inkatha*'s more immediate concerns and failed to find sufficient support from within the organisation to bring these to fruition.

#### 4 Reading Ngubane's Lives in 'After the Collapse of Apartheid'

Writing about early West African cultural nationalists, Farias and Barber (1990:3) point out that their efforts

involved the simultaneous affirmation of the worth of African culture(s) and the need for Africans to take on board Western modernity. From this conjunction flowed many variant conclusions, all of which shared, however, a characteristic ambiguity and often a submerged irony.

This 'characteristic ambiguity' was shared by two such West African figures, Edward Blyden who 'privileged the modernising impulse', and Agyeman Prempe whose vision was 'biased towards restoration of a vanished past'. Each of these two figures, continue Farias and Barber,

took to its limit one of the possibilities inherent within the arena of 'cultural nationalist' discourse in a way that diminished its counterpart, generating two views recognisably produced from the same discursive materials but with diametrically opposed results (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.4).

In the South African context, and decades later, Ngubane grappled with a remarkably similar set of tensions, in his role, like those of Blyden and Prempe, as a mediator between cultures<sup>46</sup>. Within his own life, however, he progressed through more than

<sup>46</sup> This is of course a common condition affecting other South African figures. For such tensions in the earlier careers of Tiyo Soga, Sol Plaatje and John Dube see respectively, Williams (1978); Willan (1984); and Marks (1986).

one of the 'variant conclusions' suggested above. At different times and in various combinations, Ngubane embraced, rejected and reworked various aspects of both European and African cultures<sup>47</sup>. His shifts from African nationalist to liberal intellectual to Zulu patriot were partly expressed by his changing sense of 'national' belonging. The boundaries of the 'imagined communities' with which he identified shifted from a pan-ethnic African nation, a non-racial South or southern Africa, the Zulu nation and 'black' Africa as a whole. Accompanying this was a shifting historical vision, as well as changing emphases on cultural assertion, and spiritual conviction.

As a student at Adams College Ngubane received, and indeed eagerly consumed, a mission-school education. He joined the American Congregational Church and for a time was a 'militant Protestant', as he put it (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.129). He mastered the use of the English language<sup>48</sup>, and throughout his career wrote almost exclusively in that language. As a young journalist on *Ilanga*, he presented himself as a self-confident intellectual, positing education as the route towards African progress in the modern world. His view of the African past was ambiguous, scorning the 'backwardness' of tribalism, but also seeking to recognise the positive achievements of the past. He read the works of European philosophers avidly, and developed a fondness for European classical music. He absorbed liberal moral and political democratic principles. He referred to himself as a 'republican' and rejected 'tribal' authority and all forms of hereditary rule.

During the 1940s, he devoted himself to promoting, above all else, African interests as he saw them, and involved himself in the internal reorganisation of the ANC. Through both political organisation and cultural assertion, he embarked on African 'nation building', looking towards a future for Africans in South Africa as equals amongst the 'free nations' of the world. At the same time, he sought inspiration from the past, and viewed the expansionist efforts of Shaka, founder of the Zulu nation, as a precursor to modern 'nation building'. While he identified himself with the 'African nation' through a shared experience of racial

<sup>47</sup> Ngubane's cultural borrowings were in fact more eclectic than the (problematic) 'African-European' dichotomy suggests. Through contact with Indian communities in Natal he developed an admiration for the Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha*. This was perhaps a familiar influence on a number of Africans at the time. More unusually, he became interested in Hinduism, and for a time adeptly practised an advanced form yoga, which, he claimed, successfully cured his chronic asthma. (Author's interview with Pat Poovalingham, Durban, 29 September 1997.)

<sup>48</sup> Ngubane's parents spoke only Zulu. His earliest contributions to *Ilanga* in 1936 and 1937 are in Zulu, but by the time he matriculated the following year he was confident enough to write in English.

discrimination, he continued to regard himself as amongst the most progressive section of African society. Within African society, he denied that class divisions had any but 'academic' significance, and viewed social cleavages along the lines of education and the embrace of modernity versus adherence to tradition. By the late 1940s, through his lifestyle as well as intellectual labours he identified himself firmly with the educated section of African society in Natal and South Africa. He wore Western style clothes<sup>49</sup> and established a nuclear family with two children, car, and house and garden on freehold land<sup>50</sup>.

During the 1950s, as he increasingly mixed in non-racial circles, Ngubane championed the syncretic culture of modern Africans, which he lauded as nothing less than 'a new people in history'<sup>51</sup>. As a group, he argued, they had learned from the military defeats of the nineteenth century to borrow positive elements of both European and African cultures. On this basis, he stressed potential common ground between black and white in a future non-racial 'greater South Africa'. By the 1970s, however, Ngubane de-emphasised the syncretic nature of modern African culture. He looked towards the ever more distant African past in order to rely wholly on African cultural resources, and he increasingly juxtaposed European and African culture. He wholly rejected Christianity, and asserted his belief in the ancestors and a 'traditional' cosmology. Although he continued to write mainly in the English language, at home in South Africa he spoke Zulu and demanded the same of all others in his household<sup>52</sup>.

In revising his autobiography in 1977, Ngubane presented African and European-derived cultures as mutually incompatible. He sought also to emphasise

<sup>49</sup> Even for a member of the twentieth century African intelligentsia this is a point worth making, in light of some of the friction Ngubane's appearance caused him throughout his life. As a young schoolboy, his peers 'said I thought I was a White man because I wore polished shoes, a clean white shirt and pair of trousers, grey stockings and a grey cap every schoolday like White boys ... my peers did not like that'. (Ngubane, 'After the Collapse ...', p.38.) Later in life, as a lecturer in Washington DC, Ngubane 'was very, very miserable, because he was regarded as an Uncle Tom at Howard University. He wore a suit and tie—[in the context of Black Power America] these were all symbols.. (Author's interview with Cathy Brubeck, London, 20 April 1998.)

<sup>50</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Mazisi Kunene for pointing out the connection between Ngubane's decision to have only two children, and his largely 'western' life-style.

<sup>51</sup> He increasingly pinpointed Seme's writings on the birth of 'a new and unique civilisation' in 1906 as the beginning of this historical movement. (See P. Seme, 'The Regeneration of Africa', *Royal African Society*, vol.5, 1905-1906.)

<sup>52</sup> Author's interview with Naledi Ngubane, Pietermaritzburg, 21 September 1997.

continuity in his own motivations and role(s) throughout an apparently diverse career. Essentially, he sought to demonstrate that in the face of racial oppression in South Africa and then during exile, *ubuntu* had always been his guiding principle. Inherited from earlier generations, and particularly his father, he argued, this essentially humanist moral philosophy had guided his political decisions and shaped his ideological responses to racial oppression. The repetitive assertions and argumentations through which he elaborates this claim, and which thus overlay his life story, no doubt reveal most about the author, and the particular nature of the 'variant conclusion' he had reached, at the time of writing. However, while he imposed a strong sense of unity over his past 'selves', he also left intact discussions of his earlier intellectual 'struggles' from the 1963 manuscript, which are not always compatible with such a view.

The 1977 manuscript is thus polymorphous, multi-layered and inconsistent. On the one hand it is richly detailed and offers unique information on several aspects of his life, particularly his early years and life in exile, as well as important 'inside information' on Natal politics in the 1940s. On the other hand, it is a problematic source on his intellectual shifts, through which he arrived at his contemporary sense of identity. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which his insistence on continuity hints at the precise nature of some of the central tensions which produced, at different times and in different circumstances, each of the 'variant conclusions' that he reached. These changing circumstances in which Ngubane forged an identity for himself were often highly restricted. As a dissident voice amongst an African elite itself confronting increasingly restricted political spaces, Ngubane had to carve out a career for himself in a variety of roles. At various stages he addressed himself to markedly different audiences, and the modes of public expression that were available to him were limited<sup>53</sup>. That his political allegiance varied, reinforces the appearance of a constantly reinvented self. Ngubane did not use the often obscure language of *ubuntu* until the 1970s<sup>54</sup>, and this indicates both his outlook at the time, and his detachment from practical politics. However, his insistence on continuity in the 1977 memoirs can also suggest longer-term intellectual preoccupations, which in the language of *ubuntu* were being expressed in a way that he did not, or could not have done earlier.

<sup>53</sup> These shifts, while hinted at in part two of this paper, are traced in greater detail throughout the biography.

<sup>54</sup> In this new 'language', Ngubane repetitively used numerous phrases associated with his philosophy of *ubuntu* without always explaining what he meant by them. Where used in this article, I have placed such phrases in parentheses. While I have indicated the central thrust of Ngubane's philosophy of *ubuntu* in part three above, the topic deserves further research.

'After the collapse' provides a lengthy and fascinating account of Ngubane's childhood and family background, although it is a problematic account. No alternative sources relating to his childhood are available with which to compare these recollections<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, it is clear that he used the earlier text, into which he inserted passages about *ubuntu*. By the time he did this, his memories of childhood had of course been subjected to a series of reinterpretations, and thus he unavoidably failed to recapture his childhood view of the world. Nevertheless, the 65 pages that he devoted to his childhood and family life provide a valuable account of the 'historical, cultural and racial influences which shaped thought in my home and acted as the moulds in which my outlook was cast as I grew up'<sup>56</sup>. Staking a claim to a distinct childhood inheritance was no easy task for Ngubane, as the range of these influences was eclectic, including recognisably 'modern' and 'traditional' elements, but also the multiple dislocations brought about by rapid social change in Natal during the inter-war period<sup>57</sup>. Ngubane experienced this most profoundly within his own family life, and recounted at length his recollections of the 'divergent minds' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.58) of his various family members. His grandmother, for example, was an 'uncompromising Zulu' who imparted to him direct memories of a precolonial Zulu state. In contrast, his mother acquiesced in the Christian faith, disregarding the ways of her 'heathen' forebears.

His father, Jan Ngubane, is portrayed as a complex and ambiguous figure, and also his most important formative influence. As a policeman Jan Ngubane remained economically dependent on the state, and suffered humiliation in the tasks he was required to perform. Yet he remained determined in his aspirations for a better life for his children, and worked hard to provide them with the best available education. Ngubane wrote that beneath his father's outward deference to white authority, lay an attitude of defiance, although in the circumstances he had to avoid confrontation and instead pursue long-term goals. Jan severely punished the young Jordan when he responded rashly to incidents of racism. Although it is unclear how Ngubane regarded his father's severity at the time, in later life he perceived that his father deliberately groomed him to engage in struggle for greater freedom, and to do

<sup>55</sup> Carter and Karis omitted these sections of the 1963 manuscript from the microfilm collection. Ngubane's surviving sibling, Juliet, was highly reluctant to talk about her brother or family background, as she disagreed with his 'dangerous' political activity. (Author's interview with Juliet Mkhwanazi, 12 September 1997.)

<sup>56</sup> Ngubane, 'After the Collapse ...', p.82. For a discussion of several other writers' treatment of their childhood during the same period, see Shear (1989).

<sup>57</sup> For Africans' experiences of social change during this period, see especially Bradford (1987); La Hausse (1990); Marks (1986); and other works by these authors.

so by relying on clear reasoning rather than emotion<sup>58</sup>. He claimed that his father, who lacked formal education, sent him to mission schools to give him access to the workings of 'the white mind', so that he could 'combat' white society on that level. This perspective fits too comfortably with the thesis that Ngubane elaborated in *Conflict of Minds* in 1979, and it is unlikely that Jan Ngubane would have regarded mission education in quite this way. It is more likely that he viewed it primarily as an opportunity for self-improvement. Although there is a lack of alternative sources on the exact nature of Jan Ngubane's political consciousness, the autobiography provides a number of important clues about his thinking, such as his reading habits, his uneasy relationships with the rural policemen he commanded, his responses to the beer-hall boycotts of the late 1920s, and his admiration of particular leading African figures. Such clues can be combined with the historical literature on Natal in the inter-war period, to provide an outline of the tensions in Jan's own thinking, and the example he provided his son<sup>59</sup>.

Given the diversity of his childhood influences, Ngubane recounted his early 'struggles' to reconcile his own experiences of racism, his father's frustrations, and the varying, often stifled, attitudes of defiance amongst his family members, as well as the evident tensions within the local African communities in the towns in which he lived. At the same time, he drew these diverse influences into a single theme. Each family member, he wrote, had responded in different ways to the historical situation of 'defeat'. This theme runs through the narrative as a whole, and Ngubane presents it as a central dynamic in his life. As a child, he wrote, '[t]he atmosphere in my family made it impossible for me to come to terms with defeat' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.17). He thus evokes his experience of childhood as an explanation of his subsequent role as a political activist. The successes and failures of his career are framed within this militaristic metaphor, and he likened his 'back-room' role as a propagandist, campaigner and ideologue to that of a 'foot-soldier in the armies of African Nationalism'. He extended the theme of defeat and rising from defeat to provide the central dynamic of Zulu history, while he modified this metaphor to present twentieth century African nationalism as an 'evolving revolt'<sup>60</sup>. In this way

<sup>58</sup> Ngubane's analyses of African political factions in the press frequently drew on such distinctions between emotional/ rational or heroic/ realistic responses.

<sup>59</sup> See footnote 46 above. Revealingly, Jan Ngubane collected the works of Petros Lamula, whose career as an interpreter of cultures has been recovered in *La Hausse* (1992).

<sup>60</sup> Ngubane's use of militaristic imagery, derived in large part from his view of Zulu history, is highly ambiguous, and bears comparison with Buthelezi's use of such symbols. On the one hand, by the 1970s, Ngubane opposed the tactics of armed resistance adopted by the ANC and PAC, and sought to demonstrate that South

Ngubane situated his own life story within these histories, summing up his life as follows:

I had never seen myself as anything but a foot-soldier in the armies of African Nationalism. My duty to myself was to do everything I could to restore to my people everything that had been taken away or stolen from them. My weapons for doing this were the Sudic or Buntu evaluation of the person, my many-sided mind and my environment. I fought to the best of my ability and used my weapons and opportunities as best I could. I hurt very many people in the process and pleased many more. A soldier offered his life to his people to guarantee victory for them... For him, victory was the thing to live for. He could apologise only if he contributed to defeat. But in an evolving revolt like ours, there could be no defeat because we had risen from a situation of defeat and chosen to move forward with a determination and relentlessness which no power could stop. We would stumble and fall in the process, but our destiny was forever to rise and march. I fell down many a time; but I also rose from each fall. By the middle of 1977... signs were not lacking that we had brought apartheid to its last days. I had given our struggle everything I had. I apologised for nothing and regretted nothing (Ngubane 'After the Collapse', p.695).

Throughout the narrative, Ngubane asserted that the philosophy of *ubuntu* motivated him to 'rise from each fall'. In his earlier career, however, he did not use such language in any of his writings. To what extent does this perspective provide new insights into his life, or does it contradict earlier writings and therefore indicate only his thinking at the time of writing?

In 1933, at the age of sixteen, Ngubane entered Adams College, and thereafter began a career as a journalist. As a student, several of his essays were published in the school journal, and in his final year he also began to contribute news reports to *Ilanga*. Thus from his late teens there are alternative sources to his multi-layered autobiography with which to reconstruct his life and thought. As a journalist

Africa's 'race crisis' was essentially a 'conflict of minds'. By using imagery of war, he sought to communicate to a largely American audience that this abstractly-defined conflict was nevertheless a matter of life-and-death. On the other hand, he also raised the spectacle of a 'race war' or, as he also put it, 'a return to Blood River'. This betrayed his own very real fears, especially during the Soweto revolts, of an uncontrollable spread of violence. At the same time he sought to heighten such fears amongst his readership in order to encourage them to accept his (and Buthelezi's) proposals for negotiating a solution.

and writer from the late 1930s to the late 1950s, he left extensive records of his responses to events as they unfolded, and numerous outlines of his political and intellectual outlook. These earlier writings can be used to compare his later representations of his past, with what he expressed at the time. Such comparisons can partly overcome the problem of 'factual accuracy' in autobiography, although not in any simple way, as his newspaper articles and other writings also need to be contextualised. In the autobiography, Ngubane identifies several key historical moments that each had a profound impact on his thought. Discussions of these, left over from the 1963 text, emphasise the changes that these events wrought, while passages inserted during the 1970s simultaneously claim continuity in his outlook, claiming that his response to each situation was inspired by *ubuntu*.

Firstly, he wrote that his experience of mission education caused considerable 'intellectual struggle'<sup>61</sup>. He recorded how he was attracted by the teachings of his school-master, Edgar Brookes, and absorbed Christianity and a universal, individualistic morality. At school he developed a fondness for classical music and began to read European philosophy and history—and was particularly interested in the French Revolution. He struggled to reconcile these new influences with his family background and sense of belonging. In hindsight, he was bitter about his experience at Adams. He wrote that the 'cultural arrogance' of missionaries towards Africans meant that they aimed

to convince us that we had emerged from a non-world in which we had no history and no culture and had achieved nothing in all the centuries we had roamed the African countryside .... The education I received did not deepen my understanding of the Zulu or African experience; it made me a non-person who did not belong to the White world and did not belong to the African world (Ngubane, 'After the Collapse', p.115-116).

At the time, however, he expressed enthusiasm about the influence of Adams College and its role in creating an educated intelligentsia<sup>62</sup>. However, this apparent contradiction needs to be contextualised. Ngubane praised the school in its own journal, and no doubt the young Ngubane was aware of the scrutiny of his teachers. Moreover, he did so in 1935, the year of the American Zulu Mission's centenary, in

<sup>61</sup> For a more detailed account of Ngubane's schooling, see G. Rosenberg, 'Mission Education and the Zulu Intelligentsia: Jordan Ngubane at Adams College, 1933-1937', paper presented to the African History Seminar, School of Oriental and African Studies, 6 May 1998.

<sup>62</sup> Ngubane, 'The Role of Adams College in the Life of the Bantu', *Iso Lomuzi* 4:2, 1935.

which Adams College hosted a number of elaborate and self-congratulatory celebrations. The eighteen-year-old Ngubane could hardly have expressed dissent at the time<sup>63</sup>. That he expressed bitterness in later life about 'deculturation'<sup>64</sup> and the denial of African history at Adams draws attention to other aspects of Ngubane's activities as a student. In 1936 he wrote an essay defending the much maligned Zulu king, Shaka<sup>65</sup>. He also responded keenly to the formation in 1936 of the Zulu Society, which aimed to re-evaluate the Zulu past, preserve suitable customs, and record oral traditions<sup>66</sup>. These suggest that as a student he did indeed struggle to reconcile notions of progress, as evidenced in the first essay, with the need to recover the Zulu past. Although he only later wrote in terms of *ubuntu*, the underlying tension was evident in his student writings. Where his memoirs do differ from earlier evidence is in the assertion that his experience at Adams made him a 'non-person'. His early journalism in the years after matriculating indicates that he emerged with much self-confidence, and he enthusiastically asserted the need for a modern education to foster African progress.

Secondly, the sheer destructiveness of World War Two, he wrote in the memoirs, led him to reappraise his attitude towards Europe:

Something fundamental seemed to have cracked or gone wrong somewhere in the inner structures of White civilisation. That was the beginning of my quarrel with the Graeco-Romano-Hebraic evaluation of the person (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.132).

By the end of the War, he continued, 'my faith in Christ had been shattered' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.135). During this time, he wrote, he replaced his largely Western vision of progress with an ideology of African nationalism inspired instead by the '*ubuntu* evaluation of the person'. His writings of the time were not

<sup>63</sup> The many student protests at mission schools in South Africa around the time of the war did not affect Adams until after Ngubane had left.

<sup>64</sup> Ngubane began to employ such concepts during his comparative research between South African and American race discrimination in the early 1970s. As did widespread debates about the 'Africanisation' of school curricula in America at the time, his study focused to a large extent on the relationship between formal education and African cultural 'self-definition'.

<sup>65</sup> Ngubane, 'Chaka: the Warrior Administrator', *Iso Lomuzi* 5:1, 1936.

<sup>66</sup> It also sought to campaign for greater official recognition of the Zulu Regent, Mshiyeni. A number of its leading figures were teachers at Adams College and it enjoyed the patronage of Brookes. For an analysis of Zulu Society, see Marks, 'Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity ...'.

expressed in these terms, although he did stress the need for African self-reliance and the construction of a distinctively African culture. Moreover, although he edited a newspaper which was African-owned, his modes of expression were nevertheless constrained. He struggled as an African journalist not only to advance particular political causes, but also to maintain an independent African press under increasing threat of depoliticisation and commercialisation from white, monopolistic ownership<sup>67</sup>. What he could express was also limited by the political language available at the time, and by the demands of 'nation building'. The pressing needs for political organisation and mobilisation, as well as differences in opinion, meant that the ideological vision of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s was partially and unevenly developed<sup>68</sup>. It also meant that few nationalist intellectuals in the 1940s elaborated a detailed historical vision. Because pre-1912 African history was necessarily one of disunity, it could not easily be retrieved and presented for the nationalist politics of the present. Ngubane attempted to do so to some extent, but his historicising efforts in the 1940s were muted by these considerations. Most of the numerous biographical sketches of African figures produced in the 1940s were of ANC leaders or cultural figures of the twentieth century. The demands of 'nation building' meant that he only occasionally rehabilitated pre-colonial African figures. In doing so, Ngubane asserted that the nationalists of the 1940s traced their lineage back beyond the formation of the ANC in 1912 to precolonial rulers, and particularly Shaka, whom he reinvented as 'the real father of African nationalism' (Ngubane 1949).

Thirdly, in 1949, he witnessed the anti-Indian riots in Durban. This experience shook his sensibilities, and, he wrote, left him 'torn between my commitment to the person regardless of race or colour' (Ngubane 'After the Collapse ...', p.298b) and the ANC Youth League's doctrine of African nationalism. He explained that having confronted the brutally violent potential of heightened race-consciousness, he drifted towards the non-racialism of the Liberal Party. While he explained his move to the Liberal Party as a result of the shocking potential of the Durban riots, he proceeded to skip over much of his high-profile involvement in the Party. This silence reveals a sense of regret over this period of his life. Rather, his brief mentions of the Liberal Party are anecdotes that serve to demonstrate that most

white liberals, he found, were ultimately unable to genuinely 'confront the challenge of belonging to Africa.' Many of his former Liberal Party colleagues remember a genuine friendship 'across the colour line'. His later rejection alerts a reader of his writings in the 1950s, which often propagandised on behalf of the Liberal Party, to a sense of self-doubt. Given that his role in the Party opened up otherwise unavailable opportunities for him as a writer, and his attempts to 'radicalise' the Party's policies, the doubts he expressed before joining may well have lingered throughout the 1950s, but were expressed only later in his autobiographies.

From the 1950s onwards, in his autobiography, Ngubane details no further 'intellectual struggles', and his account of the latter part of his life is linear. Changing circumstances led him only to apply a fixed philosophy, the result of the intellectual 'journey' of his youth. Ngubane's other writings provide evidence that deeper tensions in fact persisted longer, and that he 'arrived' at his 1970s conception of *ubuntu* only after a longer history of shifting ideas. His writings of the 1950s in particular outline his commitment to democracy, individual liberty and a non-racial vision. His autobiography remains silent on his involvement in the Liberal Party, even though there is considerable continuity between his 'liberal' outlook and philosophy of *ubuntu*, with their respective stresses on individualism and humanism. Perhaps it is by remaining silent on this part of his life that he was able to simultaneously assert his *ubuntu* philosophy, and deny an intellectual debt to what he termed 'Graeco-Romano-Hebraic' civilisation.

While his life story was thus written from the perspective of the present, he simultaneously retained earlier discussion of intellectual tensions, and through his insistence on continuity, also presents a challenge of interpretation. This demands close attention to the contexts in which his earlier writings were produced, and the availability of different forms of expression. And if one seeks to trace the interaction between human agency and social structure in his life, it suggests the extent to which these contexts were highly restricted and shaped his shifts from African nationalist to liberal intellectual to Zulu nationalist. Moreover, Jordan Ngubane was born seven years after the formation of the Union of South Africa. He died just nine years before South Africa's first non-racial, democratic election. Thus although he lived all his life in South Africa under formal white rule, as a child his consciousness was informed by his relatives' memories of past independence. In his last years he anticipated the reality of the 'collapse of apartheid'. Taking a long view of African history, as Ngubane increasingly did, the period of formal white rule in South Africa was a short one. His autobiography presents an argument that the impact of white supremacy was less important—or at least less unambiguous—in shaping African identities than the view often presented in South African historiography. If read in this way, Ngubane's autobiography partly succeeds, although it overstates an African essentialism. In addition, his attempts to interweave his life story into the broad histories of Zulu and

<sup>67</sup> For an historical outline of the African press, see the introduction in Switzer (1997).

<sup>68</sup> Thus the philosophical appeals of the League's first President, Anton Lembede, were often dismissed by his colleagues as abstractions. The development of Lembede's own vision was halted by his premature death in 1947. See Edgar & ka Msumza (eds) (1996). While the 1949 Programme of Action represents the culmination of the League's efforts in the 1940s, it is largely a practical programme.

African nationalisms as well as relate these to the history of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, were highly ambitious. Not only did he extend the scope of his autobiography beyond more conventional boundaries of the genre, but his historical formulations, blending Afrocentric and Zulu ethnonationalist discourses in novel ways, remain obscure.

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## Intersubjectivity and Autobiography: Feminist Critical Theory and Johnny Masilela's *Deliver us from Evil—Scenes from a Rural Transvaal Upbringing*

Stephan Meyer

The following essay is a preliminary attempt to applying the philosophic insights of contemporary feminist<sup>1</sup> critical theory to a literary autobiographical text. The text is Johnny Masilela's *Deliver us from evil—Scenes from a rural Transvaal upbringing*. In this collection of thirteen interlaced autobiographical short stories (scenes), Johnny Masilela recreates and reinvents<sup>2</sup> his own emergence as a nascent subject. This nascent subject emerges in quantum leaps, prompted by situations in which he has to place himself, negotiating a variety of positions relative to others, and the particular claims they make on him. As such these scenes challenge the strong postmodern thesis that categorically equates postmodern theory and life to the death of the subject at the hands of discourse, as well as the weaker version that diagnoses a debilitating fracturing of the subject under the pressure of a multitude of identities. These stories are rather an indication of the extent to which the subject and complex relations of contingently constructed intersubjectivities are co-constitutive (*gleichursprünglich*), and how both *autonomy* and *solidarity* emerge from negotiating multiple relations of

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas I draw on feminist writings, some feminists will rightly remark that the following essay's main thrust is not the *emancipation of women* and the *critique of patriarchy*. They might conclude from that, that my use of these theories is a disarming of the original feminist intention informing them. However, that I have drawn on these feminist theories as theories of the critique of domination and theories of emancipation *in general* is not meant as a denial of their specific feminist intention, nor do I wish to imply that a specifically feminist critique of *Deliver us from evil* is unnecessary. On the contrary. Unlike Honneth (1994) though, I take consideration of feminist theories of recognition as imperative to contemporary theory as such.

<sup>2</sup> His terms taken from the dedication.

contingent similarity and difference between subjects. The essay could also be understood as a plea for replacing the classic notion of autonomy as non-interference with a notion of autonomy as non-coercion. This goes along with a revision of the modern monological universalisation principle in intersubjective terms.

Insisting on the co-constitution of authentic *subjectivity* and *intersubjectivity* requires paying attention to two aspects of human existence in their connection to each other. It requires clarifying: ways in which subjectivity and intersubjectivity arise from each other, and how they impact on the mature and autonomous self who acts in solidarity with others in a democratic public sphere. This means tracing the way in which the subject (in this case Masilela) comes to narrate his version of his own youth as budding maturity and autonomy in various relationships of dissociation and solidarity with other selves. Seen from the first person participant perspective of the autobiographer, narrating this process is not a struggle for a different voice simply for the sake of difference. What is at stake, instead, is how he comes to integrate the claims of a multitude of mutually exclusive different voices and subject positions in one life. If Masilela's voice acquires a particular difference, then it is the difference arising from the process of grappling with a Babylonian multiplicity of subject positions and discourses, of migrating between the different claims of more or less established voices, of blending them into one life, thus forging, through a narrative of the self, an albeit contingent, but not therefore less real, discursive identity. His often expressed disquiet at his difference and exclusion is not to be mistaken for the disquiet of an outsider banished to the exile of his own designs beyond the pale of all existing discourse where he has to invent himself *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, he rather displays the disquiet of the cultural migrant (partially) initiated into, and grappling with several discourses at once. By marking the thresholds to be crossed in passing from the 'core' of one discourse into the other, Masilela delineates his course (which is increasingly also the course of many persons in a late modern, multicultural world) through the field of similarities and differences. This traversing of discourses, practices, and subject positions insulated against each other is not, however, to be confused with a pick and mix synthesis through the liquidation of the differences between them. It constitutes a process of multiple contaminations which undermines dichotomous exclusions, as well as questioning and establishing multiple alliances between discourses. As such it is a critical confrontation with the power secured by the self-immunisation strategies of discourses and practices based on reified essentialisms.

Two aspects of the relationships between subjectivity and intersubjectivity thematised in Masilela's autobiography will be treated here. After (I) a brief introduction to the background and the main point of one version of contemporary intersubjectivist theory which I find particularly insightful, I shall move on to these two topics. Section II (a) illustrates the mutual eruption of the subject and his intersubjective relations. Section II (b) deals with the effect of relations of

domination on the public sphere, and contrasts this with relations of reciprocal recognition, which foster autonomous subjects who live in solidarity with each other. For section II I rely largely on the insights found in Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love*. Section III deals with the process by which an autonomous subject who can live in solidarity with others, is constituted through negotiating different relations of similarity and difference. For section III I draw on Seyla Benhabib's *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*.

## I

### Autobiography and the Intersubjectivist Paradigm in Contemporary Feminist Critical Theory

The authors whose theories form the constitutive paradigm to the following reading of Masilela's autobiography share certain premises which make it possible to group them together under the title 'third generation feminist critical theorists'. This places them in a lineage commencing with the founding fathers [!] of the Frankfurt School. With their radical critique of occidental reason as degraded to a mere instrument, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse initiated one of the enduring critiques of modernity. As a representative of second generation critical theory, Jürgen Habermas has argued against postmodernism and his Frankfurt School mentors that modernity, rather than being rejected, still needs to be completed (Habermas 1981:12). Habermas shares the Frankfurt School's view that the pathologies of modernity are the result of a truncated instrumentalised reason. Yet he holds against them that there is still another aspect of reason, which he terms communicative reason, which needs to, and can be, socially concretised (Habermas 1969:62-65). A society based on communicative reason (i.e. reason generated in unconstrained communication between subjects) will finally bring to fruition the promised but as yet only partially developed fruits of the Enlightenment, to wit autonomy, justice and authenticity. Third generation critical theory, of which the feminist version is one strain, while sharing Habermas' belief in the possibility of and need for emancipation, is sensitised by contemporary postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment tradition and its role in the oppression of that which is not white and male<sup>3</sup>. They counter the strong postmodernist thesis of the death of the subject with a critical theory of the self situated in intersubjective relations to other selves. In short, they hope to steer clear of the problematised modernist notion of the isolated subject represented by

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive historical overview of first and second generation critical theory, see Wiggershaus (1994). For a feminist response to Habermas, see Meehan (ed.) (1995).

Cartesianism on the one side, and those (Foucauldian) postmodern positions (e.g. Judith Butler's<sup>4</sup>) which view subjects as dissolved into reigning discourses of power.

As feminists who see the need for an emancipatory theory and practice, third generation critical theorists object that a view of the subject as submerged in, or fractured into incoherence by discourses of power, undermines the possibility of theorising subjects as critical agents who can use those discourses as instruments of reflection and emancipation. The strong postmodernist claim regarding the death of the subject, (see for example Benhabib), *dissolves* the subject *into* the (con)text, which consequently results in the dissolution of 'concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy' (Benhabib 1992:214). As Benhabib puts it, 'Not only feminist politics, but also coherent theorising becomes impossible if the speaking and thinking self is replaced by 'authorial positions', and if the self becomes a ventriloquist for discourses operating through her or 'mobilizing' her' (Benhabib 1992:216)<sup>5</sup>. In the place of a theory of a dissolved subject, she recommends 'the view that the subject is not reducible to 'yet another position in language', that no matter how much it is constituted by language, the subject retains a certain autonomy and ability to rearrange the significations of language<sup>6</sup>, [which] is a

<sup>4</sup> For simplicity sake, I have bracketed the question whether Butler's position is correctly interpreted by these authors. Butler herself deals with this in Benhabib, Butler *et al* (1995:127 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> For similar views, see: Di Stefano, Bidy Martin, and Patricia Huntington (1997:187-191) amongst others. 'The postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centred inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organised movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency' (Di Stefano 1990:76). Because certain aspects of Foucault's thought 'suppress questions of subjective agency', rendering 'self-determination unthinkable' (Martin 1993:276), Martin calls for theory which 'attempt[s] to remove questions of identity from the exclusive ground of the psychological or interpersonal and ... open[s] up questions about the relation between psychic and social life, between intrapsychic, interpersonal, and political struggles [in which] identity is thrown onto historically constructed discursive and social axes that crisscross only apparently homogenous communities and bounded subjects' (Martin 1993:289).

<sup>6</sup> For purposes of publication, this version of a longer argument leaves out a section (IV) ('Discursive intersubjectivity and the sociocultural means of interpretation and communication') which deals with the need for, and the scope available to, discursively constituted subjects to alter the discursive conditions of their own

regulative principle of all communication and social action' (Benhabib 1992: 216).

The weak version of the death of the subject thesis to which these feminist critical theorists subscribe, *situates* the subject in the context of various social, linguistic and discursive practices without *dissolving* her into them. Such a contextualised notion of the subject retains some of the attributes traditionally ascribed to it in the modern enterprise. In Benhabib's scheme of things, 'some form of autonomy and rationality could then be reformulated by taking account of the radical situatedness of the subject' (Benhabib 1992:214). Such a notion of the multiple relatedness of the situated subject, a polyphony of intersubjectivities is, however, not to be confused with an attitude of anything goes, a subscription to the incommensurability thesis and an abandoning of all critique. On the contrary, the conception of the relative positions of subjects to each other in relationships of greater or lesser domination identifies the need for emancipation, while the assumption of equality informing all speech acts aimed at reaching an understanding —agreement constitutes a basis for the rational critique of domination<sup>7</sup>. As such, these theories also provide insight into the ways in which subjects attain autonomy (i.e. non-coercive co-existence) to the extent that they negotiate a multiplicity of relations of belonging and non-belonging in late modern multicultural life<sup>8</sup>.

While agreeing with those (postmodern and feminist) critics who reject the notion of a unified collective subject whose emancipation constitutes the history of the world (e.g. Hegel and Marx) these critical theorists do not deny the importance of collectivities as such. As an alternative to the strong version of a collective emancipatory subject they insist on retaining the notion of contingent and loose collectives (shifting and partial alliances on concrete issues rather than on what is held to be shared essences) which can aspire to, and achieve (albeit not linearly) some sense of emancipation. This means giving priority to *universal norms* over uniform *collective identities*.

My hunch is that certain autobiographical writing constitutes a rich field for

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making as theorised in Nancy Fraser's *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*.

<sup>7</sup> See Habermas' inaugural address 'Erkenntnis und Interesse', especially part VI, reprinted in Habermas 1969.

<sup>8</sup> For a sustained expression of the connection between intersubjectivity and multicultural identities see hooks and West (1991), and Benhabib's treatment (1996:1-34) of Hannah Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen. For an analysis of the intersection of intersubjectivity and multicultural identities in literary texts, see Percy Mabogo More (1994).

the type of 'soft' empirical support appropriate to these theoretical claims<sup>9</sup>. If this is asking too much, then they at least help to illuminate the theses. Autobiography has an advantage over (social) theory, which tends to accentuate the outside objectifying perspective of the observer with the accompanying aim to identify and create space for different voices articulating their specific difference. Autobiography can also articulate the inside subject perspective of the process of negotiating a way through different discourses towards non-repressive universalism<sup>10</sup>. Such a narrative reflection (from the participant perspective) on this ongoing process of negotiating different discourses and their accompanying social practices and spaces, in turn foregrounds the thresholds between such discourses and their accompanying subject positions. It is the crossing of these thresholds between life forms in (ever so little) quantum leaps which both marks their insulation against each other and their openness to alternative ways of being. It also delineates the trajectory of the subject who takes ever more universalising positions as he leaves behind him the self-immunising enclosure of a single subject discourse and incorporates into his identity views from other traditions which can find universal acceptance (see the discussion of Benhabib in section III below)<sup>11</sup>. Describing these experiences in individual and collective developmental terms means that they are more than just ecstatic boundary experiences (Bataille) or a merging of horizons (Gadamer). Following these crossings from the insider perspective of the autobiographer adds clarity to this emancipatory aspect as seen from the outside by the social theorist. What may be more easily misconstrued from the social theorist's observer perspective as relativistic shifts between incommensurable paradigms, is corrected when combined with the participant perspective of the autobiographer. From this added perspective the subject's construal of these crossings as learning experiences which build critical

<sup>9</sup> Carol Gilligan has made a related observation: 'At present, I find that women writers, and especially African-American poets and novelists who draw on an oral / aural tradition and also on searing and complex experiences of difference, are taking the lead in voicing an art that responds to the question which now preoccupies many people: how to give voice to difference in a way that recasts our discussion of relationship and the telling of truth' (1993:xviii). Maria Pia Lara's *Moral Textures* (Polity, Cambridge 1998) explicates a similar view relying on the theoretical work of Benhabib, Habermas and Wellmer, and the autobiography of Lessing and Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen. Unfortunately the extremely relevant insights she expresses there became available too late for inclusion in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> On the importance for theory to be able to take both positions, see Habermas (1992:93-94).

<sup>11</sup> For Habermas phylogenetic and ontogenetic moral development theory drawing on Marx and Kohlberg, see 1976 and 1983 respectively.

skills, enabling the self to evaluate and adopt discourses and practices in terms of their emancipatory potential and universalism, becomes more evident.

## II The Co-constitution of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity: Domination, Mutual Recognition, and the Public Sphere

In *The Bonds of Love* Jessica Benjamin follows a double strategy. Drawing on Habermasian formulations (prefigured by Fichte and Mead), she suggests that the narrow, patriarchal psychoanalytic focus on the intra-psychic should be extended to include relations of intersubjectivity in which capacities are described which 'emerge in the interaction between self and others' (Benjamin 1988:20). The genealogical relationship between the subject and her intersubjective relations to others is usually stipulated as an alternative, between either the chronological and logical primacy of the subject or alternatively the primacy of the intersubjective and of discourse (as the most developed form of the intersubjective). The position elaborated by Benjamin, holds that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are *gleichursprünglich*, i.e. that, as far as the genealogy of the individual subject goes, subjectivity and intersubjectivity arise from each other<sup>12</sup>.

Since becoming a self depends on the ability to enter into relationships of mutual recognition, the intersubjectivist approach insists that the development of relative autonomy always has to be connected to the development of relatedness (Benjamin 1988:25). It holds that 'the other plays an active part in the struggle of the individual to creatively discover and accept reality' (Benjamin 1988:45). However, identification does not function 'as a bridge to the experience of an other' but 'only confirm[s] likeness. Real recognition of the other entails being able to perceive commonality through difference' (Benjamin 1988:171). In this process of attaining a balance between autonomy and dependence, the different sexes are differently situated. Boys, for example, while benefiting from their difference from their mothers in that they more easily find in them a different other with whom to enter into such a relationship of mutual recognition, run the risk of overemphasising 'difference over sharing, separation over connection, boundaries over communion, self-sufficiency over dependency' (Benjamin 1988:76), while girls tend to face the opposite danger.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin's claim is not that subject—subject relations should be prioritised over subject—object relationships. What is claimed though, is that a subject who enters into both types of relations in the sphere appropriate to each, displays a more developed form of what it means to be a subject at all than a subject who confuses intersubjective relations with instrumental ones.

On the basis of these theses, Benjamin rejects the 'fatherlessness' theory of absent authority as explanation of the deterioration of the modern public sphere with its concomitant surrender to the fascist leader and authoritarian institutions. In contrast, she ascribes such conditionless submission to the failure to receive recognition from the authoritarian father—'it is not the absence of a paternal authority—'fatherlessness'—but absence of paternal nurturance that engenders submission' (Benjamin 1988:146). As long as private and public relations are predominantly relations of domination and submission, they remain trapped in the familiar Hegelian dilemma:

If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist. A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognizing the other. Domination is the consequence of refusing this condition (Benjamin 1988:53).

On the other hand, relationships based on mutual recognition open the door to the possibility of the Arendtian ideal derived from her description of the polis. This ideal sees freedom as an achievement of collective action in the public sphere. It is understood as freedom *with*, as opposed to freedom *from* others, and can only be achieved when participating subjects are not required to dominate others, or to accept being dominated by others (Arendt 1967:34). The underlying ideal of autonomy is not one of monological non-interference, but one of non-coercion, i.e. the dialogical formulation of norms acceptable to all affected by them<sup>13</sup>. While a feature of all societies, domination takes a special form in mass society with its proclivity to authoritarian institutions. In mass society the public sphere has turned into 'an arrangement of atomised selves [which] cannot serve as the space between self and other, as an intersubjective space'. Where care is restricted to the private sphere and autonomy to the public 'social life forfeits the recognition between self and other' (Benjamin 1988:197). Only through a rearrangement of the split: public—private; autonomy—care, making the 'direct recognition and care for other's needs' possible in public too (Benjamin 1988:202-203) can this deficit of modern society be countered, and the problem of domination dealt with.

Two of the theses proposed here by Benjamin are illuminated in Masilela's *Deliver Us from Evil*. The first pertains to the genealogical interconnectedness of

<sup>13</sup> Habermas (1983:75,103) summarises this in the discourse ethical universalisation principle, according to which only those norms are legitimate which can be agreed upon by all affected by them, i.e. which find universal consent.

subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The second deals with the importance of intersubjective recognition for the constitution of relations of solidarity and care in the private and public spheres. In the rest of section II I shall (a) give an illustration of the genealogical co-constitution of self and intersubjectivity with specific reference to the mutual constitution of interiority (as one aspect of what it means to become a self) and the realisation of one's similarity and difference from other subjects; and (b) look at the ways in which patriarchy (as one example of a failure to deal with difference) can obstruct the realisation of relations of solidarity across difference.

#### (a) *The Genealogical Co-constitution of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity*

The co-constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, while evident throughout *Deliver us from evil*, attains a certain concentration in 'Merry Christmas'. In this story this mutual constitution crystallises at the intersection of: emotions (as a specific form of interiority), the recognition and denial of the different sexedness of the body, presence in a public space shared by others, as well as withdrawal to the privacy of self-reflection. 'Merry Christmas' constitutes a departure from 'At the canal'—which immediately precedes it—in that it shows the eruption of reflective consciousness of differently sexed bodies. In 'At the canal', Masilela describes how he and the Afrikaner farmowner's son Peet, fail to note the sexedness of their bodies, because they are in this respect similar, while noting their race because it functions as criterion for their differential treatment. i.e., the body and its specific sex is taken for granted. The sexual similarity of the two boys urinating into the canal draws no attention to itself in Johannes' mind because it has not yet taken the detour via sexual difference through which its own self-relation will become reflexively mediated rather than immediate. In other words, the phallus is still naturalised, it has not entered the symbolic domain yet, and it is not yet an object of shame. As similarity, sexual similarity still goes unnoticed, i.e. it remains outside consciousness.

In contrast, 'Merry Christmas' narrates the emerging consciousness of the specific sexedness of the narrator's own body in the face of its difference from other, differently sexed bodies, as experienced in a public space. The story consists of two parts: the first is the train trip with his Granny to Warmbaths where he will spend the Christmas holidays and during which he gets to know the girl Vuyisile; the second deals with the shame when Vuyisile chances upon him on Christmas morning as he is emptying his urine out of the chamber pot. The tracing of the process by which the penis, previously taken for granted, is denaturalised and enters the domain of consciousness and the symbolic happens in two steps: firstly, by not being able to urinate, the penis thrusts itself upon his consciousness, thus heightening the young Johannes' reflective consciousness of his body as liability:

At last Johannes fell into a heavy sleep, only to be awoken later by a burning sensation in the area of his bladder .... All the while his insides burned like a hot iron. He had to relieve himself, soon (36).

Whereas on the farm this constituted no problem, and relieving himself into the canal with Peet had constituted an act of unquestioned phallic bonding, the very same act, this time into a chamber pot in his Granny's presence, presses upon him an awareness of his embodiment as a source of distress. In the second step, when Vuyisile chances upon him emptying out his urine of the previous night, Johannes becomes conscious of himself as a differently sexed body, separating him from the girl with whom he had aligned himself only the day before.

At this point a multiplicity of factors emerge, thus constituting a quantum leap in Johannes' development towards authentic autonomy. He realises the complexity of other subjects, and consequently of his relationship with them, i.e. that other subjects with whom he had associated himself on the basis of similarity may have dimensions by which they differ from him, which results in turn in a greater realisation of his own complexity. Also connected to this is the discovery of change in relations to others and, on the basis of this, changes in the identity of the self when an alliance with another person which was based on a specific similarity is shattered, once differences are recognised. More than the realisation of difference on its own, it is especially these shifts which shatter certainties previously unnoticed because they were taken for granted, thus heightening the subject's awareness of himself as similar to and different from others. This is exactly what happens when the secret alliance Johannes had entered during the train trip with the more modern Vuyisile against his more traditional grandmother, is shattered from one moment to the next<sup>14</sup>.

In all of this, the emotion of shame plays a pivotal role. It is the common ground from which a nascent self-consciousness and an awareness of the similarity and difference of the self in the presence of others emerges. Johannes' shame (i.e. an expansion of his interiority, and with that his awareness of his subjectivity) arises in the presence of a relation to others, especially in relation to those who constitute a difference from the self, namely *Grandmother* and the *girl* Vuyisile. This initiates a struggle between embracing the body (on which his association with the white boy Peet with whom he urinates into the canal is based), and rejecting the specific sex of

<sup>14</sup> 'Johannes could not believe his eyes when the old lady started mixing the food with one wrinkled bare hand, then licking her messy fingers! Blushing, he threw a quick glance at Vuyisile. She rolled her eyes, clearly amused. His heart beating furiously against his breast, Johannes refused to eat when Granny asked him to join her' (34).

the body (which is the basis of his difference from the black girl Vuyisile). When he goes out in the morning to throw out the contents of the pot, his Granny remarks:

'Look at what is the time! A grown-up like you, staggering from the house with the calabash of shame in your lazy hands' (37).

This distress about his embodied self is spurned on by the people in the streets ululating at him when he appears with the chamber pot. It is driven beyond what is bearable when Vuyisile, the girl he had secretly, though silently aligned with against his Granny on the train the day before, also appears. In her presence his externalised excretion which now foregrounds difference rather than similarity (as it had done with Peet) becomes an extreme source of shame. Now his own and specific embodiment thrusts itself upon him in Vuyisile's presence. In its excretion which is associated with his previously unproblematised sex, he becomes conscious of his difference, forcing him to question his former alliance with her. In order not to risk their bond he reflexively denies this by throwing away the chamber pot:

Johannes froze. Then, in a panic of rage and embarrassment, he swung around and hurled the chamber pot in the direction of the front door .... The chamber pot hit the front wall with a bang. White enamel chips flew in all directions.

The people in the street laughed and ululated and whistled.

Johannes broke into a run, bolted for the front door and disappeared into Granny's house. His whole Christmas Day at Granny's was spent indoors, wide-eyed at the bedroom window, blushing (37).

What is significant about the emotions of shame and embarrassment is that they constitute an act of *reflection on the self in the presence / awareness of others*<sup>15</sup>. Thus in one blow a distance to others and a distance to self are established. While constituting an expansion of interiority these emotions are clearly not the result of isolated Cartesian reflection upon the mind, but arise as emotion in the presence of others. At the same time they are not restricted to the public space, but continue to haunt the boy who spends the rest of Christmas day blushing at the window. An

<sup>15</sup> Note the various references to interior (private) and exterior (public), and the way they are related: physiological (his filling bladder and the excreted urine); architectural (the inside of the house, the window, and the outside street); social (he by himself and in the presence of others); emotional (him being shamed by others, and his own feelings of shame, rage and embarrassment in their presence).

awareness of self and other, interior and public are revealed to be co-constitutive.<sup>16</sup> Difference has become a constitutive element of Johannes' relationships to himself and to others. Both these differences created by self-reflection constitute the divide across which recognition is possible—a divide which can be bridged by the different types of reciprocal recognition inherent in both care and reason, and which does not mean the denial of solidarity simply because of the consciousness of difference.

*(b) Domination and Solidarity*

Masilela's concern in *Deliver Us from Evil* is less with the obvious public brutalities of authoritarian repression, than its intimate and subtle version (Foucault's micropower) which often underlies such obvious brutality. His writing, 'which is aimed ... at identifying aspects of black life beyond the political rhetoric' (Rode & Gerwel 43), is a *rediscovery of the 'ordinary' forms of power*. It is a sharp-eyed unmasking of the subtle machinations of micropower in apparently neutral domains, which go unnoticed in a society where blatant brutality reigns, but is not less insidious for that. Masilela's stories cover the range of this 'ordinary power' from the benevolent authoritarianism of the Afrikaner farmowner Venter and Chief Maloka ('the feared one' (68, 70)), to the authoritarian benevolence of his own father, Reuben Masilela.

That Johnny Masilela does not identify any single centre from which these various forms of power emanate is both a function of the fact that he seems to imply that there is no such single centre, and that his concern is with the relations of domination as they are found in the rural outskirts. Rural life is characterised by the accumulation of power in various non-identical nodes. The subjects at these nodes in fact exercise their power more effectively to the extent that they are mutations, reiterating a selection, rather than all the qualities, of the more powerful subjects at such nodes. For example, whereas Venter finds himself at a node where racial, economic, and patriarchal power accumulate, Reuben Masilela mainly dispenses over the latter. In this way Venter's power can both penetrate the private household of the Masilelas in the person of the patriarchal Reuben Masilela, while not having to compete with Reuben as an equal to himself in the economic sphere. The more or less subtle and disguised exercise of power, reaching into even the most secluded geographical areas (like the rural former Transvaal) and into all domains of life (including dress code, see 'I Want Granny'), are both the logical continuation of and precondition to the obvious brutality of grand apartheid under which those subjected

<sup>16</sup> In Taylor's (1988:15) words, 'The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame'.

by fascism (including Reuben Masilela) suffer. Venter's benevolent authoritarianism<sup>17</sup> which is thematised in the opening story of this collection, finds its counterpoint in the second and third stories 'The headmaster' and 'The Oil lamp', in which the brunt of Johannes' father's authoritarian benevolence is brought to bear on his pupils. When Johannes' mother, Henrica Masilela, notes about the children of the area that,

'I am afraid they seem to attend [Sunday school] because they fear the cane'.

Reuben Masilela replies,

'So the cane is working .... I, no the two of us, Henrica, have a moral obligation to bring them together and start a church. We owe it to the Good Lord. You continue with the Sunday school. The cane option will have to be considered from time to time, unfortunately' (20).

One of the most common figures of domination Johnny Masilela unmasks in these scenes is that of males disguised as benevolent fathers. Although found at different nodes of the social web, a reiterating and cumulative ripple effect allows each individual patriarch to draw on the concrete support of other similarly placed males, as well as on the image of the benevolent father pervading the various symbolic cultures. A further multiplication of patriarchal power in the disguise of the benevolent and yet / therefore strict father occurs when it is the same male who plays the role of benevolent father in a variety of domains. So, for example, Reuben Masilela is the authoritarian *teacher*, who disciplines the pupils according to the dictates of his Zobo watch ('The Headmaster'); the authoritarian *husband* who confronts his wife with an ultimatum to succumb to the dress code demanded by Mrs Venter ('I Want Granny'); and the authoritarian *proselytiser* who will terrify his flock into salvation as seen in the quote above.

Since patriarchy is not the only principle of domination, a pecking order based on the accumulation of assumed racial and class superiorities regulates the relations between the benevolent and authoritarian fathers (Venter, Reuben Masilela, Chief Maloka). As a black person who does not own the farm on which he lives, Reuben Masilela obviously cannot exercise the same power as Venter and his wife who, in addition, dispose over financial and racial power too. But as a man and a husband, he can capitalise on the power afforded to other men in the patriarchal hierarchy to secure his own position relative to those (like his wife and pupils) he in turn subjects. So when the white madam (in 'I Want Granny') exercises her arbitrary authority over him, he uses this as an opportunity to consolidate his authority over his

<sup>17</sup> See part III below.

wife. Despite the power it affords him over those he in turn dominates, the lack of reciprocal recognition that characterises such a hierarchy carries its own frustrations with it for Reuben Masilela. His own power both feeds on and is curbed by the power bestowed on him by those who in turn dominate him. When his mother-in-law reminds him of this in a letter complaining that he let the white man name his son (12), he further reveals his own impotence in a tirade of displaced aggression against his pupils, rather than challenge the authority of those oppressing him too.

In such a situation where autonomous selves are not fostered in relationships of reciprocal recognition, society can degenerate to a mass of technically reproduced atoms in which all difference is liquidated, authenticity impossible and a desiccated if not demagogically manipulated public established. In 'Letter to Raisibe' Masilela illustrates how the liquidation of the autonomous individual, the construction of identical atoms, and the loss of ability to connect to others, resulting in a public sphere emptied of care, go hand in hand. Often these characteristics to which late modern urban society is prevalent, make it impossible to sustain traditional forms of solidarity based on kinship or finding oneself in a common locality. This is evident from Johannes' realisation that:

There are so many people here that it is not possible to do the good things that Granny taught me. Granny taught me to help carry the baggage of the elderly. It did not matter even if they were strangers. But here there are so many people that even if one did not offer to help the elderly, one's Granny would never know. Everybody here seems not to care about everybody (55).

The recognition of the failure of traditional ethics raises the question about what forms of solidarity are appropriate given modern social structures.

Yet another instance of the breakdown of solidarity is evident in 'Letter to Raisibe'. Masilela's description of his abortive attempt to operate as a go-between for his uncle to declare his love to a woman he was too afraid to address himself. It is no coincidence that Uncle Jeremiah is unable to initiate this intimate intersubjective connection and that he is also a member of a church in which he is reduced to a lamb (45-46), who, like the rest of the flock, is herded into identical obedience to the authority of the pastor. Precisely because the individuals in this collective are stripped of an autonomous identity, they are unable to relate to each other directly and as autonomous and different subjects. They are reduced to identical yet isolated monads (Jeremiah: 'Write that I live in this room all by my own. And that I am very lonely'—48) who confuse acting in uniformity with each other to relating to each other. This acting in uniformity (as substitute for granting recognition to different subjects) is only possible through the mediation of the commands of the pastor to whom they all subject themselves. In short, unity is reduced to uniformity and the

social fabric is held together by the tether of the leader of the pack. If we grant the correctness of Benjamin's claim expounded above, that an autonomous and authentic self, and a nurturing public sphere are preconditions for each other, the struggle for the one goes hand in hand with the struggle for the other (as Masilela illustrates in the closing stories of the collection).

The ideal of a solidarity in which subjects are neither dominated nor have to dominate others is systematically hampered by the authoritarianism pervading Masilela's life. The false option such societies offer, namely to dominate or be dominated, is evident from Johannes' fantasies of violent retaliation in response to authoritarian behaviour: when his friend Suzy is humiliated, he says, 'I felt like walking up to the young teacher, punching him in the face and making his nose bleed' (60). Johannes' and the other youths' confrontation with Chief Maloka's authoritarianism in the last two stories constitutes an attempt to find alternatives to the previously described domination and uniformity. It is preceded by Johannes' realisation that there are alternatives to apparently naturally constituted group identities like those of a *volk*. The option of forming groups beyond the pale of a single criterion like ethnicity, and on the basis of choice has dawned on him. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. With the recognition that collective identities are (if not fully then at least largely) constructed, goes the realisation that they arise from the agency of their members. In the act of consciously aligning himself to a group on a political issue which questions the purportedly undeniable and natural givenness of ethnic and racial identities, he does not only question his father's naturalist dichotomies of race—'You are either white and a farmer, or black and a farmworker' (22). More importantly, he also crosses the threshold between a discourse of natural belonging and the passive acceptance of a given identity which that implies, to a discourse of an identity constructed in the act of consciously engaging in contingent alliances.

### III

#### Interactive Concrete Universalism and Narrating the Multiply Situated Self

Two aspects of Seyla Benhabib's critique and reformulation of the Enlightenment project can contribute to an understanding of the problems confronted by persons growing up in the South Africa of *Deliver us from Evil*. They are, firstly, her reformulation of the notion of the *subject*, and secondly her reformulation of the *universal* ideal. Both of these reformulations flow from a shift from the metaphysical philosophy of consciousness to a postmetaphysical philosophy of intersubjectivity (Benhabib 1992:4-6). Turning to the first she notes that '[t]he self is not a thing, a

substrate, but the protagonist of a life's tale' (162). Like Benjamin, Benhabib (1992:5) suggests that we see subjects as finite, embodied creatures, who become themselves only through interaction with other, similarly placed concrete selves, adding that this is connected to the ability to construe a narrative unity of the self:

I assume that the subject of reason is a human infant whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be satisfied, and whose self can only develop within the human community into which it is born. The human infant becomes a 'self', a being capable of speech and action, only by learning to interact in a human community. The self becomes an individual in that it becomes a 'social' being capable of language, interaction and cognition. The identity of the self is constituted by a narrative unity, which integrates what 'I' can do, have done and will accomplish with what you expect of 'me', interpret my acts and intentions to mean, wish for me in the future, etc).

Identity (understood as both continuity of the self, and as distinguishing difference from other individuals) is thus a narrative construct which relates the becoming of the self to other more or less similar and / or different selves. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Benhabib (1992:198) adds that,

from the time of our birth we are immersed in a 'web of narratives', of which we are both the author and the object. The self is both the teller of tales and that about whom tales are told. The individual with a coherent sense of self-identity is the one who succeeds in integrating these tales and perspectives into a meaningful life story. When the story of a life can only be told from the perspective of others, then the self is a victim and sufferer who has lost control over her existence. When the story of a life can only be told from the standpoint of the individual, then such a self is a narcissist and a loner who may have attained autonomy without solidarity. A coherent sense of self is attained with the successful integration of autonomy and solidarity.

Becoming human, and constructing a narrative identity, thus requires that in addition to negotiating multiple relationships of similarity and difference, that the narrator integrates both participant (i.e. subject) and observer (i.e. object) perspectives<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor has argued for a similar connection between the language of narrating oneself and of situating oneself as ways of becoming a person: 'things have significance for me, and the issue of identity is worked out, only through a language

This notion of the subject as doubly constituted—firstly in negotiating relations of concrete situatedness with other subjects, and secondly through narrative reflection integrating participant and observer perspectives—may, taken on its own, result in a relativistic ethic. Benhabib avoids this by connecting the intersubjective notion of the subject to a reformulation of the Enlightenment notion of universalism. Whereas modern moral philosophy in the Kantian tradition abstracts from difference in order to construe an abstract universalism based on the assumption of universally existent essences, she favours what she calls concrete interactive universalism (Benhabib 1992:11):

Interactive universalism acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid ... [I]nteractive universalism regards difference as a starting point for reflection and action. In this sense, 'universality' is a regulative idea that does not deny our embodied and embedded identity, but aims at developing moral attitudes and encouraging political transformations that can yield a point of view acceptable to all. Universality is not the ideal consensus of fictitiously defined selves, but the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy (Benhabib 1992:153)<sup>19</sup>.

Engaging with others, contextually immersed in the details of relationships and narratives and paying attention to the standpoint of the particular other, then becomes the basis of a concrete (as opposed to a generalised) universalism (Benhabib 1992:149).

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of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues' (34). 'A language only exists and is maintained within a language community ... One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it' (35). 'I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding ... A self exists only within what I call "webs of interlocution"' (36). Taylor and Benhabib part ways though in that Benhabib holds that attaining this narrative unity is only possible in conjunction with attaining a post-conventional moral universalism.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise statement of this distinction also see Nancy Fraser 'Towards a discourse ethic of solidarity' *Praxis* 5,4:425-429, 1986.

Interactive universalism requires knocking down the 'parish walls' immunising discourses and practices against critique from a global community of different discourses (Benhabib 1992:228). Through this engagement with other, differently situated selves, the subject enters the position of the social exile and expatriate to her own tradition, thus using these different positions to formulate, in conjunction with those other subjects, universal norms i.e. norms acceptable to all from their different concrete positions (Benhabib 1992:227). We can now turn to these two aspects of Benhabib's theory of the subject as they pertain to *Deliver Us from Evil*, i.e. to the way in which Masilela achieves a nascent interactive universalism through the narration of the construction of a multiply situated self.

*Deliver Us from Evil* is a constructive narrative of negotiating a multitude of relations of similarity and difference out of which an autonomous subject arises who can act in solidarity with others<sup>20</sup>. The simplest of these relationships are the binary ones (e.g. that between Johannes and his mother, Johannes and the Afrikaner farmowner's son Peet, Johannes and his grandmother). Yet, even when one binary relationship is foregrounded, its complex nature only becomes evident in the light of the network of other relationships within which it is set, so that no single binary

<sup>20</sup> Although Makgoba's specific way of putting it brackets the internal shortcomings of Modernity and implies a linear social evolutionism, it is more explicit in its statement of the issue at stake: 'I am a product of humble beginnings who has become sophisticated with time, exposure and experiences; hence my complexity. I have had to cross many barriers, to compromise, to balance, to take unpopular decisions or causes; but also to cross within 40 years many generations and centuries of human development. My life has been packed with activities and decisions. My village people at Schoonoord lived in the late 16th century compared with the UK and the USA and that is where I started my journey on the 29 October in 1952 and what I had to cross to reach the late 20th century in 1996. How individuals and nations cope with these dramatic but missing links in development is not only a mystery, but also a nightmare. My parents and family were ordinary folks who did things in the most extra-ordinary way. The way we were brought up was always a combination of these two extremes. Throughout my life I have consciously tried hard to maintain and reproduce these themes of extremes in my daily activities, i.e. to remain the village African boy but also to be a sophisticated modern scientist when the occasion demands it. It is these indeterminate and at times uncertain positions accompanied by rapid movements, the shifts, the adjustments and the intellectual jumps, that I have found exciting, challenging, fun and an important driving force in my life. I sometimes find it most satisfying to be living on the edge, or taking issues to the limits of debate, emotions, temperament or anger. These are the limits that break new ground and bring intellectual orgasm' (Makgoba 1997:xviii).

relationship is abstracted from a constellation within which it operates, which impacts on it, and which it in turn influences. In 'At the Canal' Johnny Masilela makes this clear with reference to the ways in which his relationship with his mother is interlaced with his relationship to Peet, and how the relationship between Peet's mother and Johannes' mother in turn impacts on this<sup>21</sup>.

Situating himself in these various binary constellations, and recognising the ways in which the different relationships impact on each other is, however, only the necessary first stage in Johannes' developing autonomy. The second stage (as we saw in II (a)), is to deal with the ongoing and unexpected changes in these initial constellations by which they lose their apparently natural and static character. Whereas his relationship to his parents had been to them as a unit, the recognition of the differences between them, and more so, the recognition of the changes in their relationship to each other<sup>22</sup>, as they separate and divorce, pose a new kind of challenge to Johannes. He now has to deal with another variable in addition to his initial relationships of difference from and similarity to Peet, his mother and Grandmother, namely with changes in these relations of situatedness. This requires extending the range of his agency to include the ability, not only to differentiate, i.e. to distinguish similarities and differences, but also to adapt to changes in the constellations whose parts he had differentiated<sup>23</sup>.

For Johannes, becoming an autonomous self means negotiating the multiplicity of naturally given, contingently constructed and shifting relationships of similarity and difference through acts of self—and of heteronomously ascribed belonging. This crystallisation of a self-reflective subject, increasingly growing aware of its interiority as well as its situatedness relative to other selves is sign-posted by

<sup>21</sup> 'Yes, Ma scolds, but only the farmworkers'.

'You lying! You lying! Your mommy scolded my mommy the other day. My mommy does not work in the tobacco fields'. Silence. Then again Johannes: 'Why does your mommy scold at black people?'

'I do not know. Maybe because the black people don't want to work' (26).

<sup>22</sup> 'If Mama is in a singing mood, she does not sing "Nader my God by U" or "Die Stem" or Jim Reeves as Daddy would have preferred. She sings about Mississippi and New Orleans' (52).

<sup>23</sup> This rather dyadic approach focusing on the relationships between individual subjects is of course a simplified part of the picture. Another part is the relationships between individuals and groups as well as between groups, which focuses on collective subjects, which arise from any mixture of given, acquired, appropriated and assigned identities like sex, gender, class, geosocial location (i.e. rural as opposed to urban upon which traditional as opposed to modern are often superimposed), language, race, physiognomy, religion, education etc.

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<sup>20</sup> Although Makgoba's specific way of putting it brackets the internal shortcomings of Modernity and implies a linear social evolutionism, it is more explicit in its statement of the issue at stake: 'I am a product of humble beginnings who has become sophisticated with time, exposure and experiences; hence my complexity. I have had to cross many barriers, to compromise, to balance, to take unpopular decisions or causes; but also to cross within 40 years many generations and centuries of human development. My life has been packed with activities and decisions. My village people at Schoonoord lived in the late 16th century compared with the UK and the USA and that is where I started my journey on the 29 October in 1952 and what I had to cross to reach the late 20th century in 1996. How individuals and nations cope with these dramatic but missing links in development is not only a mystery, but also a nightmare. My parents and family were ordinary folks who did things in the most extra-ordinary way. The way we were brought up was always a combination of these two extremes. Throughout my life I have consciously tried hard to maintain and reproduce these themes of extremes in my daily activities, i.e. to remain the village African boy but also to be a sophisticated modern scientist when the occasion demands it. It is these indeterminate and at times uncertain positions accompanied by rapid movements, the shifts, the adjustments and the intellectual jumps, that I have found exciting, challenging, fun and an important driving force in my life. I sometimes find it most satisfying to be living on the edge, or taking issues to the limits of debate, emotions, temperament or anger. These are the limits that break new ground and bring intellectual orgasm' (Makgoba 1997:xviii).

relationship is abstracted from a constellation within which it operates, which impacts on it, and which it in turn influences. In 'At the Canal' Johnny Masilela makes this clear with reference to the ways in which his relationship with his mother is interlaced with his relationship to Peet, and how the relationship between Peet's mother and Johannes' mother in turn impacts on this<sup>21</sup>.

Situating himself in these various binary constellations, and recognising the ways in which the different relationships impact on each other is, however, only the necessary first stage in Johannes' developing autonomy. The second stage (as we saw in II (a)), is to deal with the ongoing and unexpected changes in these initial constellations by which they lose their apparently natural and static character. Whereas his relationship to his parents had been to them as a unit, the recognition of the differences between them, and more so, the recognition of the changes in their relationship to each other<sup>22</sup> as they separate and divorce, pose a new kind of challenge to Johannes. He now has to deal with another variable in addition to his initial relationships of difference from and similarity to Peet, his mother and Grandmother, namely with changes in these relations of situatedness. This requires extending the range of his agency to include the ability, not only to differentiate, i.e. to distinguish similarities and differences, but also to adapt to changes in the constellations whose parts he had differentiated<sup>23</sup>.

For Johannes, becoming an autonomous self means negotiating the multiplicity of naturally given, contingently constructed and shifting relationships of similarity and difference through acts of self—and of heteronomously ascribed belonging. This crystallisation of a self-reflective subject, increasingly growing aware of its interiority as well as its situatedness relative to other selves is sign-posted by

<sup>21</sup> 'Yes, Ma scolds, but only the farmworkers'.

'You lying! You lying! Your mommy scolded my mommy the other day. My mommy does not work in the tobacco fields'. Silence. Then again Johannes: 'Why does your mommy scold at black people?'

'I do not know. Maybe because the black people don't want to work' (26).

<sup>22</sup> 'If Mama is in a singing mood, she does not sing "Nader my God by U" or "Die Stem" or Jim Reeves as Daddy would have preferred. She sings about Mississippi and New Orleans' (52).

<sup>23</sup> This rather dyadic approach focusing on the relationships between individual subjects is of course a simplified part of the picture. Another part is the relationships between individuals and groups as well as between groups, which focuses on collective subjects, which arise from any mixture of given, acquired, appropriated and assigned identities like sex, gender, class, geosocial location (i.e. rural as opposed to urban upon which traditional as opposed to modern are often superimposed), language, race, physiognomy, religion, education etc.

the use of pronouns<sup>24</sup>. The shift from the omniscient narrator of the first five stories (who refers to Johannes and all the other subjects in the third person), to the first person narrator *I* (associated with Johannes), to other *I*'s (e.g. the last story which takes the form of a letter written by Johannes' Granny to his father) and various collective *we*'s and *they*'s indicate the evolving ability to concretely situate the self in various relationships to other selves and integrate both the participant and observer perspectives. There is a clear shift from the abstract position of the omniscient narrator, to the concrete *I* and then to concrete other narrators, like Granny. The shift from *he* to *I*, while indicating an increasing ability to situate himself in relation to others from his own perspective, is not, however, a suspension of the distance to the self which is a mark of autobiography as well as a mature self who can participate in an ideal speech situation (Habermas 1983:53-127). This distance is indeed sustained throughout the collection, by Johnny Masilela referring to himself with the name given to him, i.e. Johannes<sup>25</sup>. In the first five stories Johnny Masilela appropriately refers to himself and others in the third person, thus reflecting the facticity of the context into which he was born and over which he himself had no influence. They represent an original state of subsumption under the heteronomy of discourses and practices of others, which precede his own agency. The ability to integrate a distancing / objectifying look at himself and the context of his making with an insider perspective and his Granny's perspective on him, indicates the extent to which he is able to situate himself relative to others, and to attain the type of universalising perspective Benhabib holds up as ideal. It also expresses the extent to which, as an adult, he has achieved the ability necessary to combine positions of the in—and outside, thus knocking down the parish walls safeguarding him from other's criticism.

Significantly the very first story, 'The Farmhouse,' thematises the non-linear and open-ended process of negotiating the claims of a multiplicity of subjects, discourses, and practices upon Johannes right from the outset. The presence of two influential forces in his life is cleverly suggested in the counterpoint between the title 'The Farmhouse' (where Venter, the Afrikaner farmowner lives with his wife and son

<sup>24</sup> Compare the more widespread first person autobiographical perspective to J.M. Coetzee's consistently third person use in referring to himself (*Boyhood*; 1997), and Joubert's mixture in *Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena*. For a theoretical treatment of the importance of the use of pronouns in the rational and moral development of the subject and her intersubjective relationships, see Habermas 1991.

<sup>25</sup> The caption to the first photograph—"The author Johnny Masilela, then a couple of months old, relaxes on the lap of Kleinfontein Farm School pupil Mapula Kgasi"—pays witness to the fact that this relationship is differently experienced when it comes to iconic (photographic) rather than symbolic art forms like writing.

Peet) and the first words of the story 'Henrica Masilela ...' i.e. his mother's name<sup>26</sup>. The possibility and complexities involved in negotiating these multiple claims is evident in the act of his mother's crossing at least two geo-social spaces in her more or less involuntary visit ('she was expected to take the baby to Venter' (5)) to the master's house. As members of the educated class, the Masilela family displays a certain social and geographic mobility allowing them (on commanded invitation) to cross (otherwise strictly imposed) race boundaries, albeit in restricted and prescribed ways. This geo-social mobility is succinctly captured in the photograph at the beginning of the story 'The Oil Lamp' (16) to which the caption reads:

Kleinfontein Farm School headmaster Reuben Masilela, with his sister Sarah, pose in front of the *Chevrolet* at their father's farm in Winterveldt. Note Mr Masilela's 'upmarket' outlook, complete in pyjamas and a gown (16, e.a.).

The reality of such mobility in the stratified society in which Masilela grew up, is questioned by the ease with which Henrica Masilela traverses the space of the tobacco fields in which the labourers toil, in order to reach the Venter family farmhouse. This mobility is not without ambivalence and risk. Entering the private, inner sanctum ('the respected house of the Venters'—6), of the Afrikaner farmer's livingroom in which there are '[p]ictures of generations of white people on the walls next to a rifle and the heads of wild animals' (7-8), she is exposed to, and exposes her son too, to the claims of an extremely ambivalent tradition.

This first crossing, which is also a positioning, sets a pattern in Johnny Masilela's life. It is that of the self migrating through various spaces of belonging and alienness, always aware of the claims inherent in each of these spaces, and always negotiating ways of dealing with those which confine him to apparently natural

<sup>26</sup> This figure is repeated in 'I Want Granny', which deals with the break-up of his parental home under a combination of racial and patriarchal tensions. Whereas the title of the story evokes a space away from home, the opening sentence locates Johannes at home: 'Our house is a Big House' (50). Only well beyond the middle of the collection and after the opening story 'The Farmhouse', does Johannes emphatically express a belonging to his own ancestral home. But this expression of belonging goes hand in hand with a wish to leave it and go to his Granny's, despite the fact that that too had been a place of distress for him when he was younger. Compare to the similar ambivalence of the opening line of J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, 'They live on a housing estate' which also expresses a distance from himself, by using the third person pronoun, yet expressing belonging in an intimate description of the yard he grew up in (Coetzee 1997:1).

identities. These experiences have sharpened the mature author's perceptions of the whole range of strategies of in—and exclusion of the society he grew up in, which he skilfully portrays in the Venters' response to his and his mother's visit to the farmhouse. These strategies range from a spontaneous welcome, to subtle appropriation and open rejection. The farmowner Venter's warm-hearted welcome is augmented by what might seem like an act of a welcoming acceptance, but is in fact an act of appropriation. In naming Johannes after his own father, Venter exercises what Walter Benjamin has identified as the archetypal Adamic act of control. The act of naming, which is an introduction into symbolic culture in general, is at the same time a calling into a specific symbolic culture, an expression of a claim on the named. By naming him and thereby exerting a claim of a specific symbolic culture, Venter partially appropriated him into his own lineage, partially estranging him from the symbolic culture of his own primary caregivers and biological ancestors, continuing a trend already followed by Johannes' parents. As his Granny complains:

You, Reuben and Henrica, say in your letter the name of the child is Johannes. And you say the name came from the white man. Well, the two of you have adopted the ways of the white man. Tell me if you have not? Tell me because, like the white man, you drink tea with milk in it, in mugs made of polished bone. Johannes? But did I not say in my last letter that the child be named after his grandfather, Makhohlo, my own husband? (12).

As a three week old baby Johannes obviously does not yet have the agency which enables him to use the media of symbolic culture (e.g. to name himself) thereby situating himself in the world relative to other subjects and to objects. As both Benhabib and Taylor have pointed out, this is the constant fate and possibility of subjects, i.e. that they live at the interface between their own telling of themselves, and others' narratives about them. Babies (as an example of those who do not dispose of the means to name themselves yet) are of course always subject to a person / persons who exercise the power to name them. What the name is, as well as who the person who does the naming, thus reveals not so much the obvious existence as the specificity of the power exercised. Tellingly, in this case, the person who names Johannes, i.e. who induces him into symbolic culture, is not a primary caregiver or anyone in his family, but the Afrikaner farmowner Venter, who furthermore bestows an Afrikaans name on him:

'This cleft on the chin. He's just like my own father, the oubaas. Now let me think about it. Ah, his name shall be Johannes. Johannes Gawie Venter, that was my father. Like your little Johannes here, my father had this cleft chin. How is the name, Henrica?'

'I think it is a good name, baas', replied Henrica, not really liking white people wanting to name other people's children (8-9)<sup>27</sup>.

What Venter in the naivety of his benevolent authoritarianism probably considers an act of welcoming and honour, Johnny Masilela, the now autonomous subject of that appropriation reveals, as an all too obvious act of appropriation.

That Venter chooses to situate Johannes in his own lineage by picking out and underlining a similarity between his own father and Johannes—rather than the dissimilarity between his own son Peet's 'red hair' (8) and Johannes' 'shiny black hair' (7)—is indicative of the way in which symbolic culture and the material world are related in the generation of power. It illustrates the way in which symbolic constructions of identities are based on the arbitrary selection—and classification—of apparently distinctive material similarities, thus paving the way for classifications with which relations of domination are 'justified'. Ironically, the arbitrariness with which Venter chooses a similarity (rather than a difference) and one specific similarity (rather than another) questions the whole dogma of essentialised and definitive similarities and differences on which the collectivities of apartheid was founded (and which Venter, as Strijdom's host, is likely to have supported to a more or lesser degree). This arbitrariness of the way in which certain material features attain certain values in their transformation into symbolic culture, is an indication of the extent and nature of power exercised by those who control the symbolic culture. The other side of the same coin is that it is also an indication of the scope open to use symbolic constructions in countering such exercises of power, thus altering the constellation of the relations between Johannes, his father and himself, Venter deems himself to have established and sealed<sup>28</sup>.

The enthusiasm of Venter's act of rapprochement makes him naively oblivious to his own disrespect and barely concealed appropriation. In this he represents that version of abstract universalism which Benhabib has identified as typical to Enlightenment authors like Kant. In this paradigm, inclusion of the other under the abstract universal can only be had on the basis of similarity. Venter's apparent solidarity with Johannes is a solidarity of similitude. In Benjamin's terms

<sup>27</sup> For a similar induction into Christian western culture through namegiving and simultaneous fixing of the image (read: naturalising the essence) with a photograph as narrated here by Johnny Masilela, see Paulina Dlamini: 'On this same day I was baptised, in the company of others, by the *umfundisi* Haccius. I was given the name by which the angel had addressed me: Paulina. I was overawed by the events of that day. The Reverend Reibeling told the two great *abafundisi* about my vision and *umfundisi* Harms took a photograph of me' (Filter, Dlamini *et al* ; 1986:84).

<sup>28</sup> For the significance of this, see Fraser in *Unruly practices* and *Justice Interruptus*.

his association through identification confirms likeness and fails to construe a bridge of recognition to difference (1988:171). What is not similar, falls beyond the pale of a universal humanity based on what is taken to be common between essentially identical subjects. For Venter, inclusion under the universalist rubric of humanity can only be had at the expense of difference. Because association (it is questionable if solidarity is the appropriate term here) in Venter's scheme of things is based on identification (of the similar) rather than recognition (of difference), he has to go to absurd lengths to establish similarities which legitimate to himself association across difference.

As a writer who has come of age, who can now fend and speak for himself, and who can situate himself relative to Venter's initial positioning of him, Johnny Masilela can respond to this by subtly revealing Venter's manipulations—'Venter ordered that Henrica, holding the baby in her arms, sit on a bench'(10) (emphasis added). Thus he unmasks the naiveté of the benevolent dictator who fails to see the contradictions in having had both Henrica and her son Johannes in his house as well as hosting (J.G.) Strijdom (9) the proponent of white *voogdyskap* (custodianship) over African people. By unmasking Venter's manipulation in his own autobiographical narrative of becoming, Masilela contests the continued grasp of benevolence as well as the grasp of Venter's positioning of Johannes on himself, thereby repositioning himself relative to both Venter and his earlier self.

As narrating author who can situate his dis/similarity to Venter's father in the context of other dis/similarities, Masilela establishes an (albeit contingent) autonomous self at the interface of ascribed (e.g. his first name—Afrikaans) and self-acclaimed identities (writing in English under his anglicised name). This sense of an autonomous, yet situated self, springs from his keen awareness of the risks constituted by crossing intricate networks of dis/similarities, and forming partial and contingent alliances with various individuals and groups. Whereas Venter expresses a claim of Afrikaner culture on Johannes by giving him his first name, the author Johnny Masilela, now adept in the use of the symbolic medium of writing and narrating himself as subject of his own life story, stresses the importance of that other set of dis/similarities expressed in his surname.

Unlike Venter he is, however, more aware of the risks and contradictions involved in claims of comparison that accompany acts of situating the self:

Henrica and her baby looked immaculate in their new clothes, if one chose to compare their garments to the rags worn by those working in the tobacco fields. But such comparisons did not matter much to the farmworkers, for they all acknowledged that Henrica and her husband Reuben were educated and deserved better. Reuben Masilela was headmaster of Kleinfontein Farm School, where Henrica was the only other teacher.

Did the difference really matter? No, it didn't because the farmworkers had a deep understanding of the suffering the Masilelas had endured before they could cuddle and kiss a baby of their own (6).

This back and forth between comparing ('if one chose to compare') and refusing to compare ('But such comparisons did not matter much to the farmworkers') is an indication of the complexity in establishing similarities and difference, and the pitfalls arising from basing solidarity in these. While asserting the possibility of comparison, Johnny Masilela is also aware that such comparison might show up (class) differences, questioning a solidarity based on (ethnic) similarity. In order to avoid the critique that such a denial is an ideological promotion of his own class position, he follows the suspect strategy of camouflaging it as a denial coming from the workers, 'But such comparisons did not matter much to the farmworkers, for they all acknowledged that Henrica and her husband Reuben were educated and deserved better'. In all of this, what is most significant though, is the questioning of the motive behind such comparisons—'Did the difference really matter? No, it didn't because the farmworkers had a deep understanding of the suffering the Masilelas had endured before they could cuddle and kiss a baby of their own', implying that solidarity based only on categories of similarity and difference is built on shaky ground.

Most importantly, the maze of contradictions raises the question whether these comparisons deserve the importance ascribed to them. Doesn't getting bogged down in such comparisons rather obscure the reason why they might have been initiated at all, namely to understand those similar and different from us in order to live in solidarity with them across categories of similarity and difference? The hidden conclusion to be drawn from this passage seems to be that what matters is not primarily similarity and difference as such (although they may be relevant too), but the ability to act in solidarity *across divides of non-oppressive similarity and difference*. In the last three stories, which narrate Johannes' conscientisation and involvement in school and regional politics, this insight comes to fruition. The youths realise that the arbitrary primacy of ethnic identity imposed on all under the apartheid regime (and on which even some traditional leaders like Chief Maloka's power is based) is at odds with the ideals of (interactive concrete universalist) solidarity. When their teacher is threatened by retrenchment ('The future was becoming uncertain for Die Vader, being a descendent of the Amandebele-A-Moletlane in the Northern Transvaal, and equally uncertain for all others who were not of Setswana origin' (65)), the students challenge the notion of an ethic of supposed shared origin and natural similarity with a universalist ethic of a constructed solidarity across imposed difference. In their revolt against Chief Maloka (the 'feared one' (70)), Johannes bears a poster 'Down With Tribalism!' (72) thus challenging the traditionalist power and unity based on uniformity derived from common ancestry,

with a solidarity based (at least to a larger extent) on more universalist norms of justice.

The extent to which Johnny Masilela succeeds in weaving various narrative positions into a life story is indicative of the extent to which he can construct norms in line with the requirements of interactive concrete universalism. It also indicates, as Benhabib argues, his nascent ability to acknowledge 'the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid' (Benhabib 1992:153). Universalism in this sense is thus not the search for universal similarities as sole basis for solidarity, with its converse, difference, as basis for exclusion and domination. It is rather the search for norms which can be shared by all, irrespective of the differences between them.

#### IV

In conclusion I would like tentatively to indicate some larger theoretical implications of the foregoing pages:

- The first is the doubt regarding Gilligan's (1993:xviii) claim (fn 8 above) that it is especially African-American women writers who 'are taking the lead in voicing an art that responds to the question which now preoccupies many people: how to give voice to difference in a way that recasts our discussion of relationship and the telling of truth'. Johnny Masilela's autobiographical short stories make it clear that ascribing this special role to African-American women writers is misconceived. It furthermore raises doubt about the strong unilateral (and monocausal) connection Gilligan implies between sexual (racial, and geographic) identity on the one side, and a specific moral stance on the other.
- Johnny Masilela's treatment of the common genealogy of self and intersubjectivity, and their role in the development of an autonomous, yet acting in solidarity in a democratic public sphere questions the false dichotomy which has acquired widespread currency: i.e. the polarisation between a so-called European individualism and a so-called African collectivism.
- Although I have concentrated mainly on the way in which intersubjectivity is thematised by an autobiographical author, I hope it has given an indication of the promise the intersubjective approach holds for other aspects of (autobiographical) writing. These other aspects include relations between author(s) and reader(s); and relations between oral narrators and writing authors (as in the collaborative life writing of 'Poppie Nongena' and Elsa Joubert, Katie Makanya and Margaret McCord, and Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya and Katherine Kendall). Foregrounding the common intersubjective nature of these various aspects of (autobiographical)

writing has the advantage of clarifying ways in which they are connected and which go unnoticed in studies which separate the thematic approach from reader response theory, and an aesthetics of production.

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## 'Making this book is a strange thing to me': *Singing Away the Hunger* and the Politics of Publishing in Collaborative Autobiography

Vanessa A. Farr

### I Feminism and Life Writing

One of the great successes of the second wave feminist movement is that it has, foregrounding the importance of the lives of 'ordinary' women, paved the way for an explosion of life writing by those who have not previously been seen as significant social players, or indeed, as capable of recording the stories of their own lives<sup>1</sup>. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, feminism has been an influential force in re-thinking previously rigid boundaries that separated disciplines such as anthropology from sociology, philosophy, and literary studies. It has also been particularly effective in its analysis of how traditional epistemologies exclude 'knowers' on the basis of their race and class<sup>2</sup>. In this, feminist thought has opened new spaces from which to consider the production of autobiographical writing.

The influence of feminist methodologies, particularly in the area of collaborative life histories, can be seen to good effect in works recently published in South Africa. This paper will focus on one such project, Mpho Nthunya's *Singing Away the Hunger*<sup>3</sup> (edited by Kendall and published: Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997; London: Souvenir Press 1998), in which powerful bonds of friendship, political commitment and resource sharing, shaped and directed the development of the life history<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the inclusive nature of the term 'life writing', which I use throughout this paper, see Marlene Kadar (1992: 4).

<sup>2</sup> See Harding (1987) and, for an African context, Mbilinyi's (1992:32f) additions to Harding.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Singing*.

<sup>4</sup> This paper is based on interviews conducted with M. Nthunya and K.L. Kendall on 24 October 1998, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and with M. Nthunya in Roma Valley, Lesotho on 5-6 June 1999. The interviews form part of a larger inquiry into women's experience of literary production in South Africa.

My interest in such projects was originally piqued by my observation that feminist debate, although it has focused on the more intimate aspects of collaborative life history production, namely, on challenges relating to the relationships between the participants in the project, has overlooked the processes by which the results of such compacts enter the public realm. This oversight is a dangerous one, especially considering the fact that a central aim of feminist politics has been to undermine the traditional division between the 'public' sphere of masculine endeavour and the 'private' sphere of feminine influence. If feminists are to emphasise that life histories play a significant part in the larger project of redefining existing social, economic and political structures, then attention must be paid to the instruments of literary production. In order to further the feminist commitment to transform androcentric, racist, and classist traditions about who has a life to write, feminist theorists need to attend to every stage of life history collaboration. It is insufficient to identify the problems of silencing, appropriation, and the undermining of authority in the process of writing, if the effects of these hindrances are not also examined as they emerge during the course of publishing and distributing the life history that is produced.

## II Publishing in the New South Africa

South Africa boasts one of the most sophisticated publishing systems in Africa, but despite this, it is estimated that only 5% of the population has easy access to books. It is clear that the legacy of colonial and apartheid linguistic policies is still paramount in dictating what gets published. In 1996-97, 51% (17 512) of the books published in the country were in English, mother tongue of only 9.52% of the population, and 28.3% (9 721) in Afrikaans, home language of 14.97% of South Africans. By contrast, there were only 1 180 (3.4%) publications in isiZulu, which is spoken by 22% of the population<sup>5</sup>. This distribution mirrors the much-debated problem of indigenous-language expression on the continent as a whole, where the preponderance of works published are in colonial languages. Moreover, such stark figures also highlight one of the legacies of apartheid policies, which developed an educated white elite and promoted its cultural production at the expense of all others who lived in South Africa.

In the new democratic political dispensation, South African publishing houses seem to be paralysed by conservative fiscal policies and an entrenched and immovable view of the country's readership. There is only a limited commitment to an active consideration of strategies for accessing manuscripts that bring to light the

<sup>5</sup> Sources: *Southern African Books in Print* Cape Town: Books in Print Information Services, 1998 and *South Africa Survey 1996-1997* Johannesburg: Southern African Institute of Race Relations, 1997.

lives of previously marginalised people<sup>6</sup>. Part of the reason for this, as Judith Lütge Coullie points out, is that there exists 'little or no market' for texts aimed at the black working-class readership, which continues to be plagued by 'widespread poverty ... [so that] few can afford to purchase books' (Coullie 1997:141). In addition to this lack of resources is the problem of book distribution, which continues to closely mirror class divisions in South Africa. Bookstores in the country are concentrated in historically white middle-class areas, and they are exclusive and expensive: as a writer whom I interviewed put it, they are "like boutiques"<sup>7</sup>. The distribution of books into working class urban areas and into rural South Africa is proceeding at a discouragingly slow pace<sup>8</sup>.

Existing resources for new writers, such as Basil van Rooyen's *How to Get Published in South Africa: A Guide for Authors*, and the Publishing Training Project's *Directory of Book Publishing in South Africa*, assume a high level of literacy and familiarity not only with the workings of commercial publishing, but also with the use of reference guides. It is clear that both handbooks are aimed at those who already have a reasonable chance of successfully submitting manuscripts for consideration. The economic underpinnings of this approach are clear, given that the development of new writers is a costly and time-consuming process for a publishing company to undertake. Thirty-six out of a total of a hundred and seven (68%) of South African publishing houses fall into the turnover band of R0-R99 999, and many of these small houses are those which focus on the promotion of new writing (Van Rooyen 1996:9). Their margin for development is, consequently, frustratingly small. This lack of resources means that publishers have, on the whole, contributed little to redress the injustices of apartheid policies on cultural development. Many houses are now in a stifling situation in which, in the midst of bitter complaints that the publishing industry in South Africa is in a state of crisis, publishers are still unenthusiastic to mobilise their potential to tap new markets<sup>9</sup>. This sluggishness is worsened by the failure of government to institute a book development policy:

<sup>6</sup> This assessment is based on interviews in 1998-1999 with editors at large publishing houses, and with NGOs developing adult literacy materials in South Africa.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Dynana Kukama, 22 May 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Based on interviews with Beulah Tambado, *Easy Reading for Adults*, 23 June 1988 and Elisabeth Anderson, Centre for the Book, 18 September 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Some exceptions to this situation do exist, among them houses such as David Philip and Ravan, which have continued in their tradition of promoting resistance literature. Kwela Books, which is based in Cape Town, has a policy of promoting the writing of previously disadvantaged South Africans. It does not, however, publish collaborative autobiographies (interview, Annari van de Merwe, 17 November 1999).

beyond commissioning a report in 1997, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology has done little to kick-start the growth of a vibrant culture of reading and writing in South Africa.

As the above account indicates, the problem of raced privilege remains central in South Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa, it is clear that the collection and publication of life stories as a means to democratise access to print is a matter of considerable political importance. But the end of apartheid has also led to uncomfortable new questions which interrogate the processes by which life writing is produced, and which critically re-examine the influence on such projects of theoretical systems such as feminism.

### III Feminism and Life Writing in South Africa

The production of poor black women's stories has a substantial history in South Africa<sup>10</sup>. After 1976, and well into the 1980s, 'researcher-scripted autobiographical texts,' i.e., the stories of the 'functionally illiterate [whose] testimonies had to be transcribed by those who had access to the print media' were a commonly utilised political tool whereby 'white academics sought to expose the hidden horrors of lived experiences of apartheid' (Coullie 1997:133). This form of resistance, which was undoubtedly a fairly effective means of forcing white South Africans to understand the realities of the apartheid system, was not without its difficulties. Although politically well-meaning, such texts participated in the country's complex history of 'voicing' which simultaneously 'unvoices,' a process whose effects are still being keenly felt.

Shireen Hassim and Cheryl Walker, writing in 1993 about the problem of black women's under-representation in academia, discuss how

in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the writings of white feminists began to give voice to a hidden history of women's political activity, and to the oppressive and exploitative conditions under which black women lived.

Because of the overarching importance of the anti-apartheid struggle, however, such writing inadequately challenged 'problematic aspects of the relationship between black and white women .... [Then,] 'working together in the struggle' meant that 'relations of power and privilege between black and white women were rarely openly confronted' (Hassim & Walker 1993:528-529). These conditions created what Hassim and Walker label 'a false sisterhood' in which opportunities to confront the

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Belinda Bozzoli (1991) *Women of Phokeng* and Hanlie Griesel, (1987) *Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza*.

differences between groups of women were submerged by the struggle for national liberation. Now, in the post-apartheid era, such differences have exploded into the open: inter-racial collaborative life history projects between white academic women and poor black women have come under renewed scrutiny, and increasingly, such ventures have met with resistance from black intellectuals who have identified, even in projects which purport to be liberatory in intent, an implicit 'unvoicing'. The question of who speaks for whom has been asked with renewed vigour, and often, inadequate theorising on the problems of raced difference, or ill-concealed racist and classist imperatives, are identified on the part of the dominant member of the collaboration. In such cases, talk of friendship and shared vision may, as Anne E. Goldman argues in a discussion about collaborative life histories in the United States, 'mask editorial imperative and ... justify intervention when that intercession, albeit unacknowledged, comes into conflict with the speaker's own interests' (Goldman 1993:190f).

Now that black South Africans have achieved recognition as the authors of their own political destiny, they have also more loudly claimed their rights as potential recorders of their own lives. Ultimately, their emancipation positions individuals to reject practices which represent them passively as subjects for generalised accounts that juxtapose the researcher-as-individual against the subject-as-collective. The days when the name of the white collector of life stories could dominate the text while the subjects of the stories appeared only as "Voices" or "Women" are over<sup>11</sup>. Now, ordinary people who survived the ravages of apartheid wish to commemorate, in their own words and under their own names, their survival and defeat of an unjust system.

Self-definition was a central goal of the anti-apartheid movement, which has opened up space in the newly democratic South Africa for the assertion that personal experience confers recognisable expertise. This idea is reflected in the new education system that is being implemented in the country, *Curriculum 2005* (C2005), which, incorporating an approach called 'Critical Outcomes and Lifelong Learning,' admits the need to identify and acknowledge prior experience. Under this rubric, learning is seen as

... a lifelong journey. The whole educational process is organised to help train learners in practising the critical outcomes so that the learners

<sup>11</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine paratextual elements such as titles, it is important to note that a similar disembodiment and unvoicing of subjects was also implicit in the titles of life story collections from other parts of Africa. An example is Jean Davison's *Voices from Mutara: The Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*.

eventually become skilled in life-role ('real life') performances of the critical outcomes ... an opportunity must be given for learners to display prior learning .... [This] comes from all sources: the home, the community, informal and out of school experiences as well as from previous training at school (WCED 1998:2-5).

This recognition of knowledge and experience gained outside the formal educational system is a development which reflects two significant trends in feminist academic research: firstly, that it is necessary to engage the subject of research and facilitate her or his involvement in shaping the project in meaningful ways; and secondly, that life experience must be recognised as having comparable value to formal education. It is a vital move forward in a country in which the formal schooling experience of so many people was so seriously disrupted.

Since educational books are the mainstay of the publishing industry in South Africa, the publication and distribution of an increasing number of texts written by previously silenced South Africans would attest to the importance of this recognition; it would indicate that real changes were underway in the country's beleaguered education system; it would, above all, imply that the process of transforming the hearts and minds of South Africa's divided populace is well underway. In reality, as innovative a venture as C2005 may be, it not difficult to criticise it as idealistic and beyond reach for the majority of teachers, many of whom received poor training under the old dispensation and continue to labour in badly equipped, overcrowded, and even dangerous environments. The material conditions under which the majority of South Africans suffer in the present have changed very little. This has a direct impact on the way in which life histories continue to be produced at this moment, because the preponderance of South Africans live far outside a reading culture and are subject to restrictions such as inadequate education, money, and time. All these factors combine to prevent them from self-authorship, or even from conceiving the possibility of such an experience. Apartheid may have ended, but the effects of poverty on black South African's sense of self-worth, creativity, and potential are still being felt (Ramphela 1995:206-209). For now, the inclusive language of the new Constitution and attempts to re-make the education system have had little measurable effect on the emergence of new writing.

#### IV Theories of Collaborative Life Writing

Yet the stories are there to be told, and in abundance. As in other parts of the world where historical disadvantages dictate contemporary practices, however, the publication of the life histories of poor black women in Southern Africa continues to come about almost inevitably as the result of a collaboration between one who is

educationally disadvantaged, and one who has access to the world of books and writing.

In 'The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write,' Philippe Lejeune argues that there are two types of 'collaborative' autobiography. First, he discusses the (usually secretive) works that are produced by a 'ghost-writer' for a famous or wealthy person who needs assistance in writing his or her memoirs. A basic assumption underpinning this kind of autobiography is that it involves 'an exchange of services between people who, to different degrees, [are] all capable of writing' (Lejeune 1989:186). The second type of collaboration has more resonance for the Southern African situation. It is one which produces the life story of a member of the 'controlled classes,' whose personal life is 'studied from above, from an economic and political point of view' by a member of 'the ruling class, either in the committed intellectual milieu or among the general public' (Lejeune 1989:199-203, e.i.o.). Such a collaboration, Lejeune contends, usually assumes that the writer is possessed of advanced writing skills which the object of her or his study has not assimilated. Furthermore, such ventures always require, he observes, that someone with resources—money, education, space to write, access to a means of publishing the completed work—combine forces with someone who has none of these, even though she or he may be recognised as being in possession of a life story which she or he is uniquely able to tell. Exemplars of such an alliance are 'M'e Mpho Nthunya and K.L. Kendall. Kendall's description of their first meeting illustrates the experiential chasm between them:

Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya was supporting eleven people on her salary as a "casual labourer"...when I met her. I was...a Senior Fulbright Scholar, teaching creative writing and English literature (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:164).

In Lejeune's view, power imbalances must dominate such projects—even though the 'autobiographical speech' thus produced is intended to 'neutralize...the opposition between the one who is entitled to speak and the one who is not' (Lejeune 1989:204). Ultimately in such projects, Lejeune argues, there can be no avoiding the fact that, '[at] the same time that it is a form of rescue or help, intervention is an act of violation or voyeurism, a form of abuse of power' (Lejeune 1989:210).

Lejeune, from his position at the forefront of developing approaches to life history production, is not alone in identifying the paradox of power at the heart of the collection of the life stories of those who do not write. His is only one of the important influences which has led to the practice in innovative life history projects for the author to reflect on the problems of control, authority, and authenticity in producing the story. Anne E. Goldman contends, along similar lines to Lejeune, that

collaboration is axiomatically violent. She quotes Patricia Zavella's view that there will be 'inevitable conflicts which arise in any effort at communication: disagreements, misunderstandings, differences in emphasis, corrections, amplifications, questions.' Recording these conflicts is a vital part, she maintains, of 'emphasizing what should be a crucial admission in...interracial collaboration: the question of difference' (Goldman 1993:191f).

Feminist praxis, however, has focused specifically on ways to overcome the effects of such problems of difference. Thus feminists are able, 'while...relinquishing the goal of unity around a shared social experience as women—a shared experience we know does not exist—to mobilise solidarity around those specific goals which can be shared' (Mbilinyi 1992:46). Without ceasing to examine the complexities of the power relations inherent in 'speaker-editor collaborations' (Goldman 1993:178), feminist life historians differ markedly from Lejeune in their understanding of the impetus which underlies the production of such work. Far from being what Lejeune labels as a process of 'rescue or help,' from within the feminist framework, collaborative life histories form part of an explicitly political undertaking which seeks to radically alter existing social conditions<sup>12</sup>. Extensive feminist theorising on the challenges inherent in collaborative work have led to important developments in how such ventures proceed. From within this tradition, Carole Boyce Davies is able to reject Lejeune's somewhat bleak view that collaboration invests extraordinary power in the writer and his implication that the storyteller is a victim rather than a co-controller of the narrative that is produced (Davies 1992:7f). Through reference to a number of feminist life history projects, she overturns Lejeune's contention that, in collaborations with 'those who do not write,' the exchange between the writer and her model is 'one way, without reciprocity' and that 'the model is left unchanged by the investigation' (Lejeune 1989:210f). On the contrary, Davies observes, feminist and socialist life histories have focused on developing 'a nonhierarchical approach that eschews prescribed format and goes for friendship, shared work, responsibility,' thus opening up space for the discussion of the material that is produced (Davies 1992:6). As Judith Lütge Coullie explains, collaborative life histories—despite their shortcomings—continue to provide a politically significant space from which intellectuals can participate in the process of social transformation (Coullie 1997:141).

## V Power and the Publishing Process

Feminist investigations of power in collaborative autobiography have proceeded with

<sup>12</sup> See (Behar 1993; Davies 1992; Kadar 1992; Mbilinyi 1989) for evidence of this political stance. See Goldman for an analysis of the difficulties which continue to beset such collaborations.

care and have resulted in a wealth of new methodological approaches to the collection and creation of life histories. Nevertheless, the important contributions that many projects have made to the break-down and redefinition of previously patriarchal, racist and classist ideas about who has a life to write, and with whom they can embark on such a project (Kadar 1992:11), are not enough to fundamentally alter the processes of the production and distribution of such works. It is in these arenas that lines of racial, ethnic, and class difference are most rigidly inscribed.

There comes a time in the assemblage of a collaborative life history when it must leave the carefully negotiated world in which it was produced in order to enter the literary marketplace, an area in which, as I have shown in my discussion of publishing in South Africa, traditional power imbalances have remained largely unchanged and unexamined. Ultimately, it is in this public terrain that power imbalances between speaker and editor are starkest, for the exigencies of publishing are such that hard-won advances in arbitrating difference within a collaboration can be dismissed at a stroke.

The complex power relations that are an implicit part of publishing collaborative life histories has been largely overlooked by theorists. Although Lejeune, Davies, and Goldman all refer to it in passing, (Davies 1992:10,13; Goldman 1993:179; Lejeune 1989:199) none of them attends in any detail to the question of how such stories come to enter the public realm. In examining this occluded area, I shall offer some indication of how a failure to problematise the processes of literary production preserves an area in which conservative ideals continue to determine whose life stories are ultimately published. I shall show that publication is not, in itself, a guarantee of sensitive presentation, marketing, and distribution, all of which play an important part in contributing to the book's success. I shall draw attention to practises which have persisted in re-inscribing lines of race and class privilege even when this is antithetical to the spirit of feminist collaboration, and demonstrate that the failure of editors, publishers and distributors to radically rethink their approach to writing which comes from the margins has troubling implications for the carefully negotiated partnerships that produce anti-sexist, -racist and -classist life histories. Finally, I shall propose that the publishing houses' refusal to deal directly with disadvantaged women, has a negative impact on the potential development of new writing within that sector of the population.

The successful production of collaborative life writing relies implicitly on the fact that the editor of the narrative has pre-existing knowledge of the functioning of publishing as an industry. This might sound like a rather peculiar observation: clearly, the very idea of making a book would be inconceivable if one member of the collaboration were not comfortably literate, and it would be pointless to embark upon this project if publication were not the ultimate goal. It is, however, a point worth thinking about because it marks the place, in the production of 'the autobiographies

of those who do not write,' at which the chasm between the privileged and the less privileged member of the collaboration is widest. In the case of *Singing*, as Mpho Nthunya often reiterates, the idea of a book of her own and its publication was so remote as to be unthinkable: 'Books are not part of our lives,' she writes (personal interviews and Nthunya 1997:1). For Kendall, however, it was obvious that 'M'e Mpho's storytelling talent could—and should—be put onto paper. Paradoxically, the epiphanic moment of 'discovering' her genius, which marked the beginning of the closest and most rewarding working relationship of Kendall's life, was also the point at which the distance between Kendall and 'M'e Mpho loomed largest. For Kendall, the collaboration with Nthunya would potentially form an important part of an existing literary canon:

as we were walking down the mountain from 'M'e Malebohang's house on that first day, I instantly envisioned a book by 'M'e Mpho. It was a kind of revelation to me, a surprise, and a vision that guided my work. I could see clearly that this would be another book to add to the shelf where Carolina de Jesus' *Child of the Dark* sits. I had used *Child of the Dark* in writing workshops with women in prison, and I had wished in those years that there were another such book (Nthunya 1997:154f)<sup>13</sup>.

For Nthunya, however, it was simply inconceivable that she might take her place in the world of letters. Kendall had tried 'to give her an idea of what a book about someone's life looks like' by providing her with a copy of Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*. Kendall's sense was, however, that it was 'too hard for her to read, [and] made her tired'<sup>14</sup>, rather than serving as an inspiration for what her own published life history might be like. While Nthunya entrusted Kendall with her narrative and took pleasure in telling her stories, her most concrete connection to the project, at the outset, came from the supplementary income that working with Kendall provided<sup>15</sup>. That delimited for her, its usefulness. It was not until the first day that she saw her stories typed that she could relate her work with Kendall to the end product, a book (interviews and Nthunya 1997:155).

Because Kendall was part of the community of feminists in the 70s who conceived [the] goal [of] giving voice to poor women and so-called third world women' she had become quite sensitive to the fact that the publishing industry

<sup>13</sup> de Jesus, Carolina Maria. 1962. *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina de Jesus*. Translated from the Portuguese by David St. Clair, illustrated with photographs. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, and Souvenir Press, Ltd., London.

<sup>14</sup> Kendall, e-mail to the author, 13 May 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Nthunya, 1997, ch. 23; interviews; Kendall, e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999.

'assumes a very high degree of literacy [and] familiarity with books... [and makes] assumptions...about people who publish books'(e-mail, 31/3/99; interview). As an academic writer, Kendall could claim some familiarity with the book industry. She has a deep knowledge not only of how writing is introduced into the public realm, but also of how certain voices are excluded from this realm: 'Publishing', she writes, 'is almost always only possible for people of privilege, but ... it is possible to break through that barrier of privilege, if someone who has privilege (like me) devotes herself to sharing it' (e-mail, 31/3/99). This understanding allowed her to plan from the outset that Nthunya's story would defy the odds and be turned into a book. Where Nthunya 'could not imagine such a thing as authorship of a book,' Kendall could. She could also, knowing the paucity of works by and about African women, assure Nthunya that 'people are hungry' for stories such as hers (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). Her intention to publish the results of the collaboration was a fundamental aspect of how the project proceeded: it was her sustaining vision during the years of recording, transcribing and polishing which produced the manuscript of *Singing*.

It would be inaccurate to imply that Kendall's understanding of the literary marketplace would render painless her association with a publisher, and indeed, she assumed from the outset that the process of finding a publisher for the work would be a trying one. She also assumed that this was going to be the loneliest part of the experience for her, deciding that she would have to undertake this part of the project without any motivation other than her own belief that the book must enter the public realm. Kendall explains, and in interviews, Nthunya concurs that

'M'e Mpho never really believed that her stories could be made into a book. She laughed at me throughout the years while we worked on it, driven primarily by my obsession to make it happen, and secondly by her amused curiosity to discover what this might mean (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:165).

What this might mean did not, it is clear from Kendall's words here, include that Nthunya would learn the intricacies of book production. 'Sharing her privilege,' here, meant to Kendall that she should use her experience to manage this most difficult aspect of the project alone. She would spend 'far more hours typing, re-typing, arranging, marketing, editing and proof-reading the material than 'M'e Mpho spent telling [her] the stories' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). Nthunya would be presented to the world as the author of a book, but would be shielded from the technicalities which would frustrate its delivery.

Describing how *Singing* "was sent off to one publisher and then another" (Nthunya 1997:166) in the United States, Kendall says,

all of this took a whole year, and, maybe a little more than a year, and my

heart was in my throat the whole time. It was such a beautiful book, and I so wanted it to be published (Interview 24 October 1998).

As this trying process continued, however, Nthunya, in Kendall's words, 'simply went on cleaning the guest house and forgot about it' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:166). Kendall did not consider Nthunya's participation in this part of the book's production to be at issue because, she explains,

'M'e Mpho's vision is failing, she has no patience for reading proofs, and she is not interested in editorial decisions such as when to use italics or where to insert paragraph breaks (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:167).

Furthermore, Kendall writes,

I viewed [publishing] as another secretarial task which was beneath her, just some of the drudge work I was happy to take on so that the job could get done .... I found it exciting, because I knew each step brought us closer to the goal of getting her work into the world, and I was perfectly happy to do it myself. I'm a persistent hoop-jumper ...<sup>16</sup>.

Two years after the publishing of her book, Nthunya agrees with this view. She did not know how books were made, could not follow Kendall's vision in this area, and still feels that the entire process of making books is a mystery (interviews).

Surrounded by printed matter, with easy access to bookstores, journals, the Internet—all privileges which are so innate to the lives of professionals that they become invisible—experienced writers implicitly participate in the economy of literacy, and are able to factor into the very process of writing the realities of the literary marketplace. Publishers not only participate vigorously in this economy, but, in fact, dictate its terms: after the University of Natal Press had sold them the American rights for *Singing*, Indiana University Press sent to Nthunya and Kendall a form which

... starts out: 'Where did you get your advanced degrees?' It already assumes that you have advanced degrees and not just a B.A. And then: 'What are your other publications?'; 'What friends do you have that might give your book a favourable review?'; 'What other books have you read that might be in a class or a genre with this one of yours?... Well I thought it was hilarious, and I filled it out, instead of just writing down a dumb refusal, I

<sup>16</sup> Kendall, e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999.

filled it out with 'M'e Mpho's details. And it was very, very funny. And I faxed it back to them and I got an immediate e-mail of apology saying, 'We realize it wasn't appropriate but it just went out because it goes out to all our authors,' and so on. And then when Souvenir Press did it, we got an almost identical form (Kendall, interview) (e.a.).

This incident confirms what I have highlighted above: Kendall's actions in the area of publication problematise the careful negotiation of power that is so important to her in her work with Nthunya. As Kendall observes, it would be impossible for Nthunya, the author of *Singing*, but a woman who describes herself when it comes to the process of writing her book as 'starting to go to school, sub A' (interview), to participate in the established academic process of bringing her story to public attention through an academic press. To publish with the University of Natal Press (UNP) was Kendall's decision alone; it was not her first choice, but was one to which she resorted after running out of the money and energy necessary to keep the manuscript in circulation<sup>17</sup>. Although she considered the arrangement to be less than ideal, her decision to publish the book through a local university press was, nevertheless, based on her knowledge that the chief advantage of such a choice is that 'academic presses keep books in print for a longer time than commercial presses.' This would be important for a book like *Singing* because 'it takes time for people to hear about it and read it, it takes time for college professors to learn about it and consider assigning it in classes' (e-mail, 31/3/99). When she is faced with Indiana UP's customary paperwork—which, befitting an academic press, is based on the assumption of a high degree of literacy that excludes women like Nthunya, Kendall is placed in an equivocal position. Her replies, which are intended to point out the inappropriate nature of the press's standard procedures, have the paradoxical effect of unvoicing Nthunya, of speaking *for* her rather than *with* her. In her afterword to *Singing*, Kendall is emphatic in her assertion that "this is [M'e Mpho's] book" (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:171), and this clearly underlies her dismay at the Press's assumption that they are dealing with her as its primary creator. Her prevarication, nevertheless, underlines her anxiety about the power imbalances that are implicit in this part of the work. Although she has convinced herself that her actions are justified, for the sake of publishing the book, I would argue that it troubles her to be wholly responsible as 'editor, agent, and advocate, [taking care] of the business of

<sup>17</sup> There are presses in South Africa which are committed to publishing and promoting works such as *Singing*, David Philip, Ravan, and Kwela Books among them. However, Kendall was led to believe that UNP was her best option. 'I gave up and let UNP have it just because I was tired and broke', she writes (e-mail to the author, 31 March 1999).

getting the book out' (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168). In order to achieve this goal, Kendall's privilege, the fact that she herself holds an advanced degree which permits her to send *Singing* to an academic publisher, is uncomfortably brought into play. While Kendall objects that Nthunya's place as the author of her own book is undermined by the questionnaires they received, her surprise at their exclusive nature seems, in the circumstances, rather disingenuous. Kendall's desire to highlight the fact that Nthunya could not cope with the formalities of publishing might be read, here, as an attempt to 'blur in a disturbing way the question of responsibility' (Lejeune 1989:192): to suppress her troubling recognition of her absolute power in this area of the collaboration, and her concomitant choice to act, here, in a way that is not true to every other aspect of her work with Nthunya.

The question is, why should such a demurrer be so important to Kendall in her role as editor of *Singing*? Anne E. Goldman suggests, in her reading of several collaborative autobiographies produced in the United States, that 'editorial imperative' may be masked 'to justify intercession when that intercession, albeit unacknowledged, comes into conflict with the speaker's own interests' (Goldman 1993:191). She goes on to observe that the editor of a collaboration often 'insists simultaneously on the urgency of the speaker's need to textualise her life history and the urgency of editorial intercession,' but points out that whoever 'initially prompts the telling of a life story, the process of collaboration itself constructs a subject quite distinct from the authority who writes her own history without the assistance of another' (Goldman 1993:193). What is important in the case of *Singing* is that the dream of making Nthunya's stories into a publishable book is Kendall's alone: it is she who hankers after the prestige of authorship and delights in imagining the recognition and authority that this will bring to Nthunya. By contrast, Nthunya, because the idea of it is unimaginable to her, seems to have had no interest whatsoever in the public appearance of her life history. She indicates no urgency to preserve her story in written form and appears, indeed, bewildered by the book and its foreignness, and unsure of its utility: 'I try to imagine what I can do with a book written by me,' she writes. 'I think of my mother. I imagine that I can give this book of English words to her, and because of the wisdom of heaven, she can read it' (Nthunya 1997:3).

Nthunya is confident of her status as a storyteller (Nthunya 1997:150-159) and as a result of this, participates comfortably in the process of telling her stories to Kendall. She is not, however, certain of anything beyond this, and firmly refuses to be drawn into the unimaginable—and here, Kendall fails her. Having convinced Nthunya of the possibility that her spoken stories can be transformed into words on paper, Kendall demurs at extending her awareness to an understanding of the realities of authorship that exist beyond making a manuscript. In so doing, Kendall implicitly upholds the publishing industry's assumption that everyone who makes a book does

so from within a privileged relationship with the literate world. Nthunya's laughing expressions of disinterest in the production of the book became Kendall's justification for handling not only its publication, but almost all the paratextual elements of the book—its title, preface, and cover design<sup>18</sup>. It is here, I would contend, that her willingness to shoulder the burden of getting the book published corresponds most clearly to that violence which Goldman claims is inherent to inter-racial collaborative projects, even though it is violence in an area which Goldman herself has not thought to examine. Her anxiety about emphasizing the book's authenticity is acutely obvious in Kendall's Afterword to *Singing*, and her role in the book's publication continued to haunt her in a subsequent book tour to America in which she and Nthunya were met with considerable scepticism about who was really its primary author. The difficult question that is raised here is, what constitutes authorship? The 'artistic activity was all [Nthunya's],' Kendall claims (Kendall in Nthunya 1997:168), but the organisation and the public aspects of the book were out of her hands. In its realisation, Kendall's attitude to Nthunya's capacity to fully participate in their project defies her political commitment to eschew paternalistic methodologies; but more troubling than this, if one keeps in mind Gerard Genette's observation that paratextual elements play a crucial role in mediating an author's intentions to the world (Genette 1997), it muddies the question of who can rightfully be considered the primary author of *Singing*.

*Singing Away the Hunger* has, in mid 1999, effectively disappeared from sight in South Africa. Poorly advertised and distributed, it attracted small notice from the outset. Its cover design, a watercolour drawing of a photograph of Nthunya, has misrepresented the book. Kendall describes how

Several times I found the book in South African bookstores filed among novels, and once among novels for young adult readers. That's what the cover art suggests, I think (e-mail to the author, 99/05/13).

Why has this situation arisen? Part of the responsibility must be taken by University of Natal Press, which has failed to live up to its promise to promote and distribute the book in South Africa. Would the Press have shown more commitment to the book if they had respected Nthunya's authority after Kendall left South Africa? Would they have sent her on a book tour of the country similar to the one she went on in the United States? Would Nthunya's royalties, which have been paid in a lump sum with no account of how they were derived, have been larger and more regular? Would it

<sup>18</sup> Significantly, Nthunya had complete control over the photographs in the book. This was another area in which she had expressed confidence in her competence (interview; Kendall, e-mail to the author, 27 May 1999).

be possible to find *Singing* in large bookstores in South Africa, which is not currently the case?

Yet another part of the responsibility for the book's marginalisation is Kendall's, but here, the blame is more difficult to apportion. As I have argued throughout this paper, theories of collaboration have failed to problematise the processes of publishing. This means that there are no guidelines which might have directed Kendall differently. Even if she had committed herself to developing Nthunya's capacity to deal with her publisher, it is highly unlikely that her actions would have been recognised and respected by the publishers with whom she dealt: after all, institutional transformation requires vision and dedication from within as much as pressure from without. It is also necessary to consider what the broader effects of Nthunya's involvement might have been. Would she now be capable of writing and publishing all the stories that she still has in her? Would she be able to facilitate the production of the stories of women in Lesotho which are being brought forward, in vain, now that there is no-one like Kendall to support their production?<sup>19</sup>

By excluding from their processes those who are at the margins of print culture, collaborative editors and the publishers of books crush the capacity of rural woman like Mpho Nthunya to develop a sophisticated understanding of their power as writers in the community. Nafissatou Diallo argues that African women, when they write autobiographies, speak with a commitment to emphasising their communal identity. Thus, participating in a project which tells the life of one person is a potent means of placing oneself at 'a point of transition between preliterate and literate cultures' (quoted in Hitchcott 1997:20), and has significant ramifications for the voicing of the marginalised. It is important, as Mirriam Moleleki writes in her autobiography *This Is My Life* (1997), to 'know that people are going to read our stories, and they will know who we are' (Moleleki 1997:1), not only for the enjoyment of public recognition, but also because rural women life historians who are acknowledged as authors, *and who know how books are made*, can understand their texts as path-breaking works which may lead to the production of the life stories of others like them:

...maybe people will come to us and ask, 'How did you write that book?' Stories give encouragement to a person, you know. Maybe there are more people with bigger histories in the community, and from this book, maybe it will bring other people together in the same way (Moleleki 1997:1-2).

If it is to transform itself to reflect the complex range of literacies in South Africa, and to participate meaningfully in the democratisation of access to print in the

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Julia Chere for bringing the latter question to my attention.

country, life historians must influence the South African publishing industry to devote itself to developing what Elizabeth Eisenstein describes as the 'itch to publish.' The editors of collaborative life histories need to recognise that sharing their privileged access to literacy implies more than merely unearthing competent story tellers and transposing their words into print. They must respect the gravity, for women like Mpho Nthunya, that movement into the realm of books implies a complete break from the anonymity of oral culture:

The wish to see one's work in print (fixed forever with one's name...) is different from the urge to pen lines that could never get fixed in a permanent form, might be lost forever, altered by copying, or—if truly memorable—carried by oral transmission and assigned ultimately to 'anon' (Eisenstein 1968:23)<sup>20</sup>.

Even if, as is the case with Nthunya, it is only the picture on the cover that identifies it to her community as her book (interview), she is convinced of the book's power as an object that can mediate her experiences to the world. She wants 'people who know how to read and have time to read, to know something about the Basotho,' and to 'hear the stories from women like me' (Nthunya 1997:2), to tell her story in her own voice and to be recognised as the teller. She is demanding the right of her work to participate in a world which is much broader than the confines to which her race, class, and gender have relegated her; and why should this process of self determination, of being recognised as the transmitter of one's own life story, not be extended into the realm that is entered once the story is ready for publication?

'I don't know people who publish books, don't know where to send a book if I could write it,' says Nthunya at the start of her autobiography (Nthunya 1997:3). The publishing system is mysterious to the majority of Southern Africans, for whom books are a small part of life. For an ordinary person, someone who, like Nthunya, knows of no-one else who has ever written a book, and who lives in a world where "only some 5% of the population makes up the general book buying public, and most of these individuals are white, middle class [citizens]" (Perold, Chupty & Jordaan 1997:2), the idea of writing a book is ludicrous. And even if such a notion were conceivable, in South Africa, 'access to the publishing process[is] still a white protected thing'<sup>21</sup>, which implies, for the vast majority of black women, a total reliance for the production and publication of their story on collaboration, and further, on their collaborator's membership of the circles in which writing and books

<sup>20</sup> This resonates with Virginia Woolf's contention, 'I would venture to guess that Anon ... was often a woman' (Woolf [1929] 1977:55).

<sup>21</sup> Mary Ralphs, Publishing Training Project, personal interview, 18 May 1998.

are produced. When this level of impuissance is so deeply inscribed, what use is it to shift perceptions that black people in Southern Africa can and should pen their own stories?

Barbara Smith contends that 'freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press' (Smith 1989:11). Smith quotes this slogan from the early women in print movement in her discussion of the founding of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, which began, after a long struggle, because a desire for autonomy, independence, and control over images of themselves was expressed by women of colour in the United States early in the 1970s<sup>22</sup>. Smith's words, and the struggle of black feminists in the USA to establish alternative entry points into the literary marketplace, shed light on the significance of the participation of disempowered women in South Africa in the publishing process, and highlight the need for the development, here, of a similar extension of ownership. It is indisputable that the experience of creating and sharing one's life story in print is transformative, and as such, is a vital site from which to celebrate and strengthen the vision of a democratic society. Mpho Nthunya's view of her book says this with moving eloquence: it is "mehlolo—a miracle, or a wonder" (Nthunya 1997:1), something which brings immense comfort in a difficult life:

I am so happy to make this book. It's just like the Bible to me. I read it every day. When I am lonely I just go to my room and take it and read it where I like, I just open like a Bible, like this. I find what can I read .... I feel like I am dreaming....And really I know that this are my story, but I didn't think that one day I can save this story in a book (personal interview).

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<sup>22</sup> *Kitchen Table* came into being in 1981 and was the longest-running independent black feminist publishing house in the world. It was owned by the black feminist collective who ran it. The Press encountered financial difficulties throughout its life and finally ceased trading in 1998.

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## Ideology and Self-Representation in *The Calling of Katie Makanya*<sup>1</sup>

Thengani H. Ngwenya

Social historians and anthropologists who have studied the social and cultural consequences of the encounter between Africa and the colonising Western countries have commented on the characteristic world-view of the Africans who embraced the coloniser's religion and its underlying cultural and political outlook<sup>2</sup>. As also shown in their own writings and utterances, Africans who converted to Christianity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem to have understood the implications of accepting the religion of the Christian missionaries and the lifestyle associated with it: they were expected to renounce or radically re-define their own traditional belief systems, values and cultural practices and to adopt an alien world-view which was presented as having universal applicability and validity. As Albert Luthuli (1962:19) puts it in his autobiography, *Let My People Go*:

The revolution which Christianity brought into the lives of converts was profound, as can perhaps be imagined. Conversion meant an entirely new way of life, a new outlook, a new set of beliefs—the creation, almost, of a *new kind of people* (e.a.).

This process of cultural and moral transformation which has been variously described as assimilation, deculturation, acculturation and, most recently, as transculturation, was characterised by numerous inherent ambiguities and contradictions.

Obviously, conversion to Christianity and its underpinning cultural system did not simply entail a displacement of one world-view by another, but involved complex processes of accommodation and adjustment between the contending

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the EACLALS conference at the University of Tübingen, Germany, 6-11 April 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See David Welsh (1971); Norman Etherington (1978); Gail Gerhart (1978); Shula Marks (1986); Absalom Vilakazi (1965) and Bernard Magubane (1979).

cultural systems. Françoise Lionnet's (1995:11) assessment of the dynamics of the colonial situation echoes what has become the fashionable view of most contemporary postcolonial theorists on this issue:

It is not assimilation that appears inevitable when Western technology and education are adopted by the colonized, or when migration to the metropole severs some of the migrants' ties to a particular birthplace. Rather, the move forces individuals to stand in relation to the past and the present at the same time, to look for creative means of incorporating useful 'Western' tools, techniques, or strategies into their own cosmology of *Weltanschauung*.

To suggest, as Lionnet does in the above-quoted statement, that the colonising and colonised cultures were interacting on equal terms in a relationship marked by reciprocity, seems to me to be a tendentious misrepresentation of the relationship of domination and subordination which characterised the colonial era. Any assessment of the colonial encounter which suggests that the colonised *deliberately* chose those aspects of the colonising culture which they found 'useful' for their purposes is bound to lead to a distortion and misrepresentation of colonial cross-cultural relations. Obviously, conscious choice and selection are incompatible with 'ideological coercion' which was the logical consequence of military conquest or invasion and dispossession. Postcolonial theorists and scholars who have taken it upon themselves to be the writers and interpreters of African 'history' have coined the term 'transculturation' to denote what they see as the essentially reciprocal nature of the colonial encounter. Mary Louise Pratt's (1992:6) conception of transculturation is in line with this fashionable trend in postcolonial theory:

Ethnographers have used this term [transculturation] to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.

Perhaps the analytical concept of 'transculturation' is not the most appropriate conceptual tool to describe colonial cross-cultural relations characterised by military conquest and the subsequent ideological manipulation which saw both the covert and overt coercion of the colonised into adopting the ideas, attitudes and values of the colonising nations. What is often overlooked by social scientists and critics who use this term is that the 'subordinated or marginal groups' were coerced physically and ideologically into the acceptance of alien cultural values. Whether

they later regarded the adopted moral and cultural outlook as inherently valuable and functional is beside the point. The effect of the inescapably hegemonic character of the ideology of the colonisers and the missionaries on the lifestyle and values of African converts to Christianity cannot be over-emphasised. As T.J. Jackson Lears (1985:568) reminds us,

we need ... to recognise that the concept of hegemony has little meaning unless paired with the notion of domination. For Gramsci, consent and force nearly always coexist, though one or the other predominates.

As demonstrated in Katie Makanya's<sup>3</sup> self-portrayal in her autobiography, the underpinning ideology of a civilisation the code words of which were 'rationality', 'enlightenment', 'progress', 'morality' and 'justice' gradually gained acceptance among the converted Africans and provided the language or, more appropriately, a discourse of self-definition for the converted African Christian community. As a way of legitimating and reinforcing their newly acquired identities, the converts often presented themselves as having a fundamentally different moral and cultural outlook from the traditionalists. As Paul la Hausse (1993:196) rightly points out, there was an unbridgeable chasm between traditionalists and the Christianised African (Zulu) community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

As 'civilised', 'progressive' and, most importantly, 'respectable' members of colonial society who had left the 'backward' cultural and social organisation of pre-capitalist Zulu society behind them, the *kholwa* faithfully believed in the 'promise of Queen Victoria'.

Social historians who have written on the mission-educated African intelligentsia of the early twentieth century tend to focus on the inevitable contradictions and ambiguities evident in the moral outlook and practices of the *amakholwa* community and often portray the newly converted African Christians, quite rightly, as 'people of two worlds'. While this interpretation is obviously valid, it is also true that the *amakholwa* community exhibited qualities which clearly distinguished them from those Africans who clung to traditional beliefs and practices. As David Welsh (1971:300) rightly points out:

There were, of course, many gradations between the views of the *kholwa* class ... and those of traditionalists. Many *kholwa* people could not share

<sup>3</sup> To distinguish between Katie Makanya's two roles as author and character I use her surname to indicate the former role and her first name to denote the latter.

the missionaries' intolerance of traditionalism, ..., and many members of the independent African churches, too, saw no reason why Christianity and traditionalism should be regarded as mutually exclusive. But in general the *kholwa* people saw themselves as a special class, set apart from traditionalists and entitled to a measure of equality with the whites.

Thus the apparently deliberate valorising of the notion of 'cultural hybridity' evident in McCord's portrayal of Katie Makanya has the, perhaps unintended, effect of blurring the very deep-seated differences between the *amakholwa* social group and the traditionalists. In his essay on John Dube, R. Hunt Davis (1975-1976:515,527) offers a fairly accurate description of the status of what he describes as the 'acculturated Africans':

His [Dube's] membership in the *kholwa* class provide him with the basic identity that he shared with the others of the educated African elite. The common element in all their lives was the fact that they had ceased to form part of so-called traditional African society.

David Welsh (1971) and Norman Etherington (1978) have shown that what distinguished the Christianised Africans from the traditionalists was the former's rejection of the cultural beliefs and practices which are seen by the latter group as central to African culture. These include the veneration of the ancestors (*amadlozi*), polygamous marriages (*isithembu*), the bride price (*ilobolo*) tradition, and reliance on traditional healers (*izinyanga*) and diviners (*izangoma*) for spiritual, mental and physical well-being.

This paper examines the effect of colonial Christian-liberal ideology in shaping self-conception and self-portrayal within the mode of collaborative autobiography. Like most life-stories of multiply marginalised people who wish to leave a record of their achievements for posterity, Makanya's story raises questions about the relationship of the editor of an oral life story and the narrating subject, the danger of misrepresentation inherent in collaborative autobiography and perhaps most importantly, the issue of 'speaking for others'. In an essay provocatively entitled 'The Problem of Speaking for Others' Linda Alcoff (1991-1992 6f) reminds us that:

...there is a growing recognition that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. In other words, a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech.

These and other related issues have received a fair amount of critical attention in the work of Philippe Lejeune (1989); Anne McClintock (1991); Carole Boyce Davies (1992); Anne E. Goldmann (1993); and Judith Coullie (1997). However, it is worth pointing out that, for historical reasons, edited life-stories are increasingly becoming a common feature of South African publishing industry<sup>4</sup>.

The conception of ideology utilised in this paper is drawn from Rosalind Coward and John Ellis's book, *Language and Materialism*. Relying on the Althusserian view of ideology Coward and Ellis (1977:67) explain the constitutive function of ideology as follows:

It [ideology] is the way in which the individual actively lives his or her role within the social totality; it therefore participates in the construction of that individual so that he or she can act. Ideology is a practice of representation; a practice to produce a specific articulation, that is, producing certain meanings and necessitating certain subjects as their supports.

As I hope to show, Makanya's self-portrayal in her life-story is largely shaped by the ideology of enlightenment underpinning the work of the American missionaries in South Africa. It is this ideology, functioning as a 'practice of representation', which provides her and her editor with the 'appropriate' language of self-definition. In Makanya's life-story, metropolitan representations of the colonised other are reinforced and validated by what seems to be her deliberate reliance on both the 'discourses' and the moralistic philosophy of the missionaries in describing her own experience. Thus instead of offering a counter-hegemonic interpretation of her subjectivity, Makanya presents, through her editor, a self-portrait which largely reflects the ideology of moral and social transformation underlying the civilising project of the missionaries. Betty Bergland's (1994:160) account of the function of ideology in 'creating' the autobiographical subject has a particular pertinence to Makanya's autobiography:

Because autobiographical subjects reproduce prevailing ideologies, the issues raised by autobiography are not simply literary or historical, but cultural ones. If we consider culture in the broadest sense to be what is prescribed and what is prohibited, then as autobiographies naturalize certain subject positions they serve to prescribe these positions and guarantee social relations implied by the subject.

<sup>4</sup> As a genre of life-writing collaborative autobiography is gaining increasing popularity in South Africa. Editors or facilitators include E. Joubert (1978), S. Marks (1987); S. Bourquin (1986) and K.L. Kendall (1996).

*The Calling* is the product of collaboration between Margaret McCord the daughter of the American Board missionary doctor, James McCord who founded the McCord Zulu Hospital in 1909. Recognising the historical significance of her 'calling' as Dr McCord's first assistant and the inherent value of her various social roles, Katie Makanya appealed to McCord's daughter to preserve her story in writing for future generations (McCord 1995:3f). Katie's elder sister, Charlotte Makgomo Maxeke who earned herself the enviable title of 'Mother of Black Freedom in South Africa' had written her autobiography although it was not published. Her story would have had a far greater appeal than Katie's because of her prominence in a multiplicity of national roles including that of teacher, social worker, politician and founder of the Bantu Women's League of South Africa. Like her sister with whom she was always in competition, Katie Makanya wanted the story of her life to be told<sup>5</sup>. According to Margaret McCord, Katie believed that a book about her life as Dr. McCord's assistant would fill the gaps and omissions in Dr. McCord's own autobiographical book of his life in South Africa as a missionary doctor<sup>6</sup>.

While critics and general readers may read Makanya's life story as history, ethnography or even as 'fiction', Margaret McCord wrote *The Calling* as a very close friend of Katie's who had been prevailed upon by the latter to publish her story. *The Calling* is the story of a retired semi-literate black woman written by her younger and more educated white friend. The story was told orally and recorded on tape in 1954 and, forty years later, transcribed, edited and presented as a readable narrative in book form. In one of the early reviews of the book when it appeared in 1995 it was hailed as 'a moving act of feminist retrieval' by a reviewer who went on to remark:

Even in her extreme old age Makanya had a zest for life, demonstrated in her determination to leave a record of her experiences. It is this zest that Margaret McCord captures in her biography of a courageous woman whose history is both individual and emblematic of the lives of many black South African women (Kossick 1995:34).

In keeping with the status of Makanya's book as a carefully researched quasi-ethnographic collaborative autobiography<sup>7</sup>, my discussion will focus on what I regard

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with Margaret McCord, 3 August 1999, Durban. For the impressive biographical sketch of Charlotte Maxeke, see E.J. Verwey (ed): *New Dictionary of South African Biography*.

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Margaret McCord, 3 August 1999; Durban. James McCord's autobiographical book is entitled *My Patients Were Zulus* (1946).

<sup>7</sup> In her acknowledgement, McCord mentions the names of people who assisted her in various ways with the research which formed part of the writing process.

as McCord's attempt to 'balance' African traditionalism and Western modernity in the process of 'writing up' her friend's oral story. The process of 'writing up' requires a structuring interpretive framework provided by the competition between Katie and her elder sister as well as by the inevitable discrepancies between African traditionalism and Western modernity.

Although most African Christians of Katie's time often displayed largely ambivalent attitudes towards some aspects of Western culture, she seems to have had no major reservations about what she saw as the inherent superiority of the imperial culture. Her rather dismissive attitude towards traditional African cultural values and practices is confirmed by her consistent self-portrayal as an almost fundamentalist Christian who has completely renounced traditional beliefs and practices. However, in the process of writing her story McCord attempts to problematise issues of identity and consciousness by portraying her as 'a person of two worlds'. Thus for McCord, editing the oral version of Makanya's story involves more than merely giving the reader an 'accurate' account of Makanya's understanding of key events in her life. Among other things, the editing process entails the conscious deployment of interpretive and analytical skills, an attempt empathetically to understand her subject's experiences, as well as reliance on the conventional techniques of story-telling such as plausibility, narrative sequence and credible characterisation. Moreover, like an ethnographer, McCord assumes the apparently incongruous role of participant-observer in Makanya's life. As James Clifford (1988:34) points out, the ethnographer combines the perspectives of 'experience' and 'interpretation':

'Participant observation' serves as shorthand for a continuous tacking between the 'inside' and 'outside' of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts.

I will argue that McCord's strategically positioned editorial comments (all seven of which are captioned 'Durban 1954') which form part of the text, suggest her awareness of her rather precarious position as a writer and analyst of Katie's oral narrative. In these 'interludes' McCord adopts a self-reflexive and analytical perspective as she comments on the actual recording and writing process. As I have explained elsewhere<sup>8</sup>, in these 'editorial interventions' McCord cleverly anticipates the criticism of those readers who may be critical of the privileged white intellectuals (including writers like McCord) who arrogate to themselves the right to *speak* for the

<sup>8</sup> See Thengani H. Ngwenya's review of *The Calling of Katie Makanya* in *Southern African Review of Books* 39&40, 1995:6f.

underprivileged black women. In the first of these 'editorial interventions' McCord (1995:n.p.) records the following revelatory dialogue between her and Katie:

When you were little you slept in my bed, ate my food, played with my children. When I was too busy to answer your why-why-why, you tied my baby John to your back and pretended that he was your brother. You were like a daughter to me.

It would not be inaccurate therefore to categorise Makanya's life story as a mode of autobiographical writing which Paul John Eakin has aptly called 'the story of the story' in which 'the story of the other, of the informant ..., is accompanied by the story of the individual gathering the oral history' (Eakin 1998:70f). For McCord, interviewing Makanya also entails reliving significant events and occurrences in the history of her own family<sup>9</sup>.

## I Formative Experiences

Although *The Calling* is presented to the reader as a 'true story' like most autobiographies, it could also be easily categorised as 'fiction'<sup>10</sup>. Makanya's moral outlook is so typical of the Westernised African elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that McCord could easily have created a fictional yet credible character of Katie Makanya on the basis of historical accounts of the behaviour patterns and attitudes of her social group. Clearly, Makanya's autobiography is not simply a story of a woman who was 'called' into the Christian faith to serve as a missionary doctor's general assistant as suggested by the book's title, but it is also a story which provides valuable insights into the discourses which in part 'created' and sustained the class of the converted Africans (*amakholwa*).

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of converted Africans was their willingness to give up their African names and their eagerness to adopt the so-called Christian names. The name change was supposed to be emblematic of significant

<sup>9</sup> See Thengani H. Ngwenya's review of *The Calling of Katie Makanya* for a discussion of McCord's relationship with Makanya and the interweaving of this relationship into the published text. Significantly, it is Katie who gave Margaret McCord her Zulu name, Ntombikanina when the latter was an infant.

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford (1986:6) reminds us that 'the word fiction as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways in which they are systematic and exclusive.'

changes in moral consciousness and self-conception. As the children of 'progressive' parents, the Manye (Katie's maiden name) children all had so-called Christian names inscribed in the family Bible by their almost fanatically religious mother:

Ma was not like other mothers who told their children they were born in the time of this war or that war. Ma was an educated woman. She wrote everything down in the family Bible. First the record of Charlotte's birth, and then 'a second daughter, Katie, born on July 28, 1873 at Fort Beaufort in the Cape of Good Hope .... Pa was a Christian too, but not in his early years, and he did not altogether put aside the customs of his people. He called her by her home name, Malubisi—which means 'Mother of Milk'—because she was born at milking time' (McCord 1995:9f).

As shown in the depiction of Katie's father in this passage, the editor's intention seems to be to give the two competing world views (African traditionalism and Western modernity) equal and balanced representation in the book even when this is not entirely warranted by the people and events she is describing. For example, Katie's African name was rarely, if ever, used outside the extended family and there is no mention in the book of any significant African custom of which the missionaries disapproved but which Katie's father did not give up. So it is not entirely accurate, on the evidence of the text, to say that 'he did not altogether put aside the customs of his people' (McCord 1995:16). However, portraying him in this manner serves to reinforce and validate the writer's narrative and analytical framework.

Apart from their function of giving added authenticity to the events described in the book, the photos which take up the first eleven pages of the book text serve to foreground Katie's 'transcultural' status. In their arrangement there seems to be a deliberate attempt on the editor's part to juxtapose images and symbols of African traditionalism with those of Western modernity. Although there is ample evidence in the autobiography itself to suggest that Katie had, as far as this is possible, renounced African and, more specifically, (Sotho) customs and traditions, McCord consciously presents her moral sensibility as characterised by cultural hybridity which is often portrayed as a consequence of Katie's own choice<sup>11</sup>. For instance, when Katie is with the traditional Batlokwa community of Soekmeaar whom she repeatedly refers to as 'heathen', the editor, assuming the role of an omniscient narrator who has privileged access to her 'character's consciousness describes her as follows:

<sup>11</sup> See Katie's response to Dr McCord's question about believing in traditional healing methods (p. 178).

As the days passed, Katie felt that even though she was a Christian girl, she belonged among the heathen Batlokwa. It seemed to her that all the years of her life had been one long journey home to Soekmekaar (McCord 1995:80).

Characterising the young Katie in obviously self-contradictory terms as a 'Christian girl' who also belongs to the 'heathen Batlokwa tribe' is part of the editor's strategy to give the two competing world views a semblance of equality. Perhaps unwittingly casting doubt on her own assessment of Katie's moral awareness, the editor goes on to tell us how she could not adapt to the lifestyle of her age-mates in Soekmekaar and ultimately had to leave for Johannesburg to look for an educated Christian husband (McCord 1995:90). As her father's birth place, the rural village of Soekmekaar could only be a symbolic cultural 'home' for Katie, her real home would be in the shanty towns and mission stations of Johannesburg and Durban where people of her class and aspirations had congregated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in search of a way of life which suited their interests and aspirations.

When the Manye family went to settle among the Batlokwa tribe of Soekmekaar both Katie and her elder sister Charlotte had been to London as members of the African Native Choir which toured England from 1891 to 1893. The membership of this choir included teachers, clerks, nurses, social workers and other educated Africans. The selection of Katie and her elder sister Charlotte who was already a trained teacher, confirmed their class status as members of the very class-conscious emergent black petty-bourgeoisie of the time.

Mainly because of her Christian upbringing as well her exposure to British manners, Katie found it difficult to adjust to traditional life in Soekmekaar. When her playmates told her stories that were part of their community's folklore she would reciprocate by telling them about her experiences in London:

... they told Katie stories about Huvana, a little man who lived in the reeds and tossed a magic spell on anyone who came too near. In return Katie told them of all the wonders she had seen in London. The girls laughed at her stories, knowing such things to be impossible, just as Katie laughed at theirs (McCord 1995:81).

Katie is shown to be both an insider and outsider in most of the groups or situations described in the book: she is a Christian who has discarded the customs of the so-called heathen relatives yet she seems to appreciate the practical value of some traditional beliefs and customs. For instance, she finds the way the heathens treat unmarried mothers more humane than that of the Christians (McCord 1995:81). She also seems to take her grandfather seriously when he says he will come back from the dead in the form of a snake to protect his family (McCord 1995:85,89).

## II Katie as a Domestic and Social Worker

After moving to Johannesburg in search of employment and a life that would accord with her tastes and interests, Katie joined the largely unskilled urban community in the informal settlement of Doornfontein. But the fact that she had been to England and could speak fluent English set her apart from the illiterate country girls who came to Johannesburg to sell their labour as domestic servants. Nevertheless, because of her lack of training the only job she was likely to get was that of a domestic worker. In her first job when she accidentally mentioned things she was not supposed to know as a domestic worker her employer suspected her of being a witch with magical powers. McCord (1995:103) describes her ambiguous status as follows:

Everywhere she went it seemed that she was set apart—in England because her skin was black, in Kimberley because she had lived too long among the English, in Ramkgopa's village because she was a Christian, and now here in her work because Mrs Height thought she had magic powers.

Mrs Height could not have guessed that Katie as a 'Christian girl' would never think of herself as even remotely connected with traditional African beliefs and cultural practices. The most articulate spokespersons of the *amakholwa* community who saw themselves as mediators between the two cultures openly declared their opposition to traditional beliefs and customs. A typical comment in this regard was made by John L Dube in his 'Address to the Chiefs and People of the South African Native Congress', presented in absentia on his appointment as president in 1912:

Upward! Into the higher places of civilisation and Christianity—not backward into the slump of darkness nor downward into the abyss of the antiquated tribal system. Our salvation is not there, but in preparing ourselves for an honoured place amongst the nations<sup>12</sup>.

In line with her deliberately ambiguous portrayal of Katie Makanya, McCord's attempts to create 'contact zones'<sup>13</sup> marked by mutual exchange or reciprocity between African traditionalism and European modernity. For example, Katie's grandfather (referred to as the Old Man in the book) and the chief of the Batlokwa tribe (Ramkgopa) are presented as articulate spokespersons of the indigenous Sotho

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa*, p.53.

<sup>13</sup> According to Pratt (1992:4) contact zones are 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.

culture. By recreating convincing dialogue between Katie's mother and the Old Man on such controversial topics as arranged marriages, ancestor worship, traditional medicine and other cultural practices McCord ensures that the defining features of both cultures have an equal representation in Makanya's life story.

Katie's first job as a domestic worker was hardly consistent with her own chosen status as a member of the educated African elite. However, in an urban environment in which jobs were scarce she had to play the role of an unsophisticated country girl in order to keep her job. Things began to change when she joined her husband's church, the American Board Mission. She soon became an outspoken member of the Women's Association and was subsequently asked to act as interpreter to Mr. Dickson who had been hired by the Chamber of Mines to teach black workers about the dangers of intoxicating drink. Like her later role as Dr. McCord's assistant, this was a job befitting her status and self-conception. In an attempt to make her message accessible to mine workers most of whom were illiterate, Katie spoke to them in their various home languages using appropriate African imagery and exploiting their prejudices and fears:

'Are you afraid of my words?' she shouted back in Xhosa. 'Then you are right to be afraid. Because my words are not the words of a woman. I am the mouth of the white *inyanga* who comes to warn you of the evil spirits waiting for you in all the drinks you buy from the old witches in this town. Pretty soon the spirits will burn you up inside until you die' (McCord 1995:124).

Adopting the perspective of the enlightened social worker Katie spoke to her own people in what is supposed to be their 'language'—the language of superstition and apparently irrational fears and beliefs. Following the example of her sister Charlotte who was then an active member of the Temperance Movement in America, Katie began visiting women in other churches, schools and even shebeens urging them to join her new Temperance Union. As a person who judged everything from a religious perspective, Katie regarded her job as having an inherent moral and social significance. Although she was always busy she was contented with her efforts:

There were meetings to plan, parades to lead, and songs to teach to the children after school. At last her life was complete. Even without a high school education, she was doing important work. If Pa could see her now, he would be proud. Charlotte, too, would think she was doing an important work (McCord 1995:125).

In many ways Katie's involvement in social and humanitarian projects was in emula-

tion of her sister Charlotte Maxeke whose achievements are nothing short of phenomenal. The following extract from an entry in the *New Dictionary of South African Biography* illustrates both her versatility and commitment to improving the quality of life of her people:

Maxeke was known country-wide for her political activities. In 1918 she was the driving force behind the establishment of Bantu Women's League of the South African native National Congress (SANNK, African National Congress; (ANC) after 1923). As president of the Women's League she led a delegation to Prime Minister Louis Botha in 1918 to discuss the question of passes for women as proposed in an amendment of the pass laws (1995:169).

### III Katie's Calling

When the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899 Katie and her family had to move from Doornfontein in Johannesburg to Amanzimtoti Mission Reserve in Natal. Katie must have believed that her marrying a Zulu brought up and educated in an American Board Mission station was God's plan for her to meet Dr. James McCord for whom she worked for 35 years. From the perspective of hindsight Katie could see everything she did prior to her meeting the missionary doctor including her education and her visit to Britain as forming part of the long preparation for her job as Dr. McCord's general assistant. Being a Christian who could read, write and speak English and six indigenous languages and who also had a keen interest in the improvement of her people's standard of living were her most outstanding credentials for this job. In his own autobiographical account of his life in South Africa Dr. James McCord (1946:119) explains Katie's role as follows:

Katie Makanya faithfully carried out any work assigned to her, but her knowledge of six native dialects made her so invaluable as interpreter that I kept her much of the time in the consulting room.

Although her relationship with Dr. McCord was characterised by mutual understanding, respect and loyalty what really kept them together was their shared religious beliefs. According to Katie, Dr. McCord was doing God's work and needed the support and assistance of educated Africans (McCord 1995:178). Interestingly, the uneducated Zulus believed that Dr. McCord had trained secretly under a famous *inyanga* (Zulu traditional healer) because he understood and could treat what they regarded as uniquely African diseases, especially those caused by the dreaded 'evil spirits'. When Dr. McCord jokingly asked Katie whether she also believed these stories about his secret

initiation into traditional medicine she was deeply offended by what she saw as a sign of the doctor's failure to understand her moral outlook as an 'enlightened' African. Katie's response to the doctor's question as carefully paraphrased by Margaret McCord (1995:178) is worth quoting at length as it reveals the definitive features of both her moral consciousness and self-conception:

He had no right to ask her such a question, not when he knew she was a good Christian like her mother and her grandfather and her great-grandmother .... Not when he knew she had lived among white people in England. Not when he knew her own sister had graduated from a university in America and even now was building a school among the heathen in Soekmekaar. Not when she had also left her husband and her eldest son alone in the country to follow him in God's work.

This generalised yet comprehensive and detailed account of Makanya's insight into her own moral awareness is at the core of her autobiographical self-portrayal in *The Calling*. As readers we can only grasp the significance of Katie's self-conception if we look at the *assessment* given above as McCord's interpretation of the key constitutive features of Makanya's moral awareness and concomitant self-conception.

As a Christian, Katie was sceptical of the value of traditional healing methods and wouldn't have anything to do with traditional healers. However, when her own son was suffering from what the doctors diagnosed as a nervous breakdown, she desperately tried all possible remedies. But when his condition did not improve she began considering something that would have been unthinkable to a person of her beliefs and convictions—seeking help from traditional healers. When she ultimately decided to consult an *inyanga*, she was prevented from entering his home by his messenger who told her to go back home as she was not welcome. This incident raises a number of knotty questions not only about the veracity of McCord's presentation of this incident but also about the interpretive and selective nature of the editing process: was Katie refused assistance because she was a known Christian, or because she worked for a white missionary doctor, or is this one of the instances of deliberate distortion of events by the editor for the sake of portraying Katie as consistent in her beliefs, or did Katie, for obvious reasons, prefer this version of this incident? Sadly, Katie's son was eventually sent to an institution for the incurably insane.

#### IV Katie's Political Outlook

Obviously, the influence of religion on African converts was not confined to spiritual matters. Katie's involvement in politics is thus in line with the dominant world view

of moderate black leaders such as John L. Dube, the first president of the African National Congress. Like Dube, Katie regarded herself as a *hamba-kahle* (moderate) person as opposed to radical members of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union such as Bertha Mkhize and Violet Makanya. Katie is therefore describing her own moderate political orientation when she says of Dube: 'John Dube doesn't rush about like a wild bull, frightening everyone. He looks for the right path, one that may be a long way round but will in time take him safely home' (McCord 1995:214). There seems to have been a direct correlation between the political outlook of leaders such as Dube and Albert Luthuli and their religious beliefs. To most of them political problems which required militant political mobilisation appeared as moral issues. As Luthuli (1962:39) explains in his autobiography:

It became clear to me that the Christian faith was not a private affair without relevance to society. It was, rather, belief which equipped us in a unique way to meet the challenges of our society. It was a belief which had to be applied to the conditions of our lives; and our many works—they ranged from Sunday School teaching to road-building—became meaningful as the outflow of Christian belief.

Confirming Luthuli's views, Gail Gerhart (1978:34) offers a convincing account of the attitudes of mission-educated leaders of the African National Congress during this period:

Though not cut off from contact with traditional society, this African elite was in many ways alienated from traditional customs and norms. A belief in the superiority of European culture was basic to its world view, and its goals were unabashedly assimilationist. Having come through the experience of missionary boarding schools, it was well steeped in the liberal and Christian presumptions which prevailed in these institutions, including the optimistic liberal faith in the inevitability of progress.

Besides moral reservations which provided an ideological deterrence to political agitation by the oppressed, there was also the obvious military superiority of the white man's army to contend with. Thus when the Zulu chief Bhambatha Zondi led a violent rebellion against the British rulers of the Natal province in 1906, African Christians and other 'loyal natives' considered his actions not only foolhardy but also as unacceptable on moral grounds. As McCord (1995:180) remarks, Katie's views on this matter reflected those of the African elite in Natal:

Katie, like most of the educated Christian Zulus, was dismayed. How can a

little chief like Bambatha (sic) do this when our great King Cetshwayo, failed? the people around Durban asked .... To stop Bambatha (sic), some of the Zulus formed their own cavalry regiment, the Natal Native Horse, to fight on the side of the British.

Dr. McCord, urged by the white officers most of whom were sons of the missionaries, enlisted as a medical officer to care for the wounded in the Native army. This episode provides a graphic example of ideological divisions between the politically-aware radical traditionalists on the one hand and Christianised Africans on the other hand. The willingness of the latter to take up arms against their own brothers is evidence of the unbridgeable chasm between these two groups. James McCord explains the attitude of Zulu volunteers in rather facile terms when he says, 'none of our natives saw anything incongruous in fighting their own people, for the Zulus have always practiced intertribal warfare' (McCord 1946:153). To attribute this division to Zulu military history, as James McCord does, is to ignore the potent role of ideology in shaping self-conception and social roles. Besides, McCord seems to have overlooked the obvious fact that this was intra-tribal warfare as distinct from what he terms 'intertribal warfare'.

Both Margaret McCord's and Katie's reflections on the past are shaped by dominant discourses of the latter's time as well as by the editor's analytical paradigm without which a coherent, plausible and interesting story could not have emerged. As I have tried to show, the imposition of an analytical framework on the subject's oral story often results in misrepresentation. However, it must be pointed out that the distortion of events and misrepresentation of ideas and ideologies constitute an inevitable feature of life-stories which originate from oral testimony. This inescapable shortcoming, however, does not detract from the capacity of edited life stories to provide opportunities for multiply marginalised people like Katie Makanya to enjoy the well-deserved status of active participants in the drama of history.

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## Community and Narration in Emma Mashinini's *Strikes have Followed me all my Life*

Thomas Thale

This paper investigates the construction of self in the autobiography of Emma Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989). I draw on the insights generated by poststructuralism, which has problematised the relationship between language and the writing subject. For poststructuralists, 'language is not the expression of unique individuality; it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific' (Weedon 1987:21). I will therefore read Mashinini's autobiography as a discursive construct in which the author uses narrative to organise her experiences, and, in the process, impose a pattern on her life which is dictated by the demands of storytelling.

While I generally align myself with feminist scholarship, I am wary of essentialising female identity. Many contemporary scholars have questioned the idealisation of 'sisterhood' which takes no account of other subject-positions<sup>1</sup>. Chandra Mohanty (1991:57) cautions against the use, as an analytical category, of 'womanhood' which defines women primarily as victims of various forms of chauvinism. Such a classification, Mohanty warns, has the unintended effect of giving women an 'object status'. To understand the concerns and motivations of female (and male) writers, it is therefore imperative to ground texts in their historical context. Indeed, many female writers manage to carve a space for themselves in the social hierarchy despite the prevalence of patriarchy.

Among black South African autobiographers, Emma Mashinini stands out, first as a female worker and, secondly, as a second generation urbanite without much attachment to the countryside. At the time of writing her autobiography, Mashinini was working as the Director of the Division of Justice and Reconciliation for the Church of the Province of Southern Africa and she retained a strong loyalty to the trade union movement, which she had served for eleven years. Indeed, her autobiography can be read as a personalised account of the advent of the Commercial

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Newton and Rosenfelt (1985:xvii), and Personal Narratives Group (1989:19).

Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA). Although the text traces Mashinini's life from her birth in 1929, the accent of the unfolding narrative is on the period from the 1960s to the 1980s—years in which she occupied a public space, first as a worker, then as an activist, and finally as a detainee. The autobiography documents the development of the author from a submissive and docile housewife to an independent trade unionist of international repute. This article sets out to interrogate the manner in which Mashinini locates her identity in work and activism. The argument developed will be that in her autobiography, Mashinini places herself at the centre of 'the community' to derive the moral authority to speak for herself and on behalf of others who share her sense of community. It is her capacity as a culture-broker which enables her to construct images of community in her autobiography. The community to which she belongs is never static but shifts constantly to signify such diverse categories of people as the family, the trade union, black women workers, the Black Consciousness Movement, the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress, black people generally and her immediate neighbourhood. 'Community' is therefore a very unstable and relatively romantic concept. Bozzoli (1987:5) makes the observation that:

The good connotations of 'community' rest in its ability to conjure up images of supportiveness; of a place of kinship ties, of rest and rejuvenation; of cross-class co-operation.

It is in relation to these positive connotations of community that Mashinini constructs her identity in *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*. Stuart Hall (1996:112) defines identity as 'the names we give to different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past. This conception of identity, with its emphasis on historical and rhetorical rather than biological underpinnings of identity, helps to cast light on the construction of self in Mashinini's autobiography.

Mashinini's recollection of her life pivots around three crucial determinants: work, activism and imprisonment. In her autobiography, she spares only ten pages to narrate the first twenty-seven years of her life. She thus deliberately glosses over her life prior to her political conversion to accommodate the public profile she paints for herself. By de-emphasising her role in the domestic realm, Mashinini makes a conscious effort to contest the conventional and prevalent prescription that women occupy the private sphere whilst men dominate the public domain. The next thirty-seven pages (pp.13- 50) focus on her trade union career, and this thread is continued in the last pages of the book, following her description of her release from prison. The focus on her role as an activist corresponds with her stated motivation, in the book, that she is setting out to document 'the evil of the apartheid regime' (110). Her detention, which lasted about six months from November 1981 to May 1982, is

accorded almost the same space as her career—about thirty-seven pages (pp.51-88). In other words, the two experiences of activism and detention are accorded equal significance in Mashinini's autobiography. It is instructive to consider Mashinini's other reason for writing the autobiography, since she ostensibly wrote the book to alert future detainees to the conditions in detention (86). The autobiography was therefore conceived of in functional terms.

### Faltering Start in Childhood Memories

In the first part of her autobiography, Mashinini recreates memories of childhood which epitomise her formative experiences. Her sense of community at this stage of her life, is, for the adult Mashinini, a parochial one. In looking back, she identifies the family unit as having been the locus of her development at this stage of her life. Mashinini's recounting of her childhood is ambivalent. On the one hand, she re-invents her childhood as a period of relative comfort and tranquillity. Her reconstruction of her childhood is underscored by the influence of her mother—in particular, the latter's love of beautiful ornaments (Mashinini 1989:5). She writes, of her childhood, that '... the memory of our little house in Toby Street always fills me with happiness, and with gratitude to my mother for creating such a home for us' (5). Mashinini's representation of her childhood resembles that of Ellen Kuzwayo in her autobiography, *Call Me Woman*, since both of these writers construct childhood as a time of relative comfort though, in the case of Mashinini, her parents were in fact impoverished.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the poverty in which she grew up, she writes of her childhood that '... we also went to the better schools ...' (3). Her childhood home is portrayed as a pleasant dwelling, where music, cleanliness and beauty are defining features<sup>3</sup>, the emphasis on beauty specifically accompanying a belief in middle-class mannerisms<sup>4</sup>. This romantic rendition of childhood is, however, mediated by her account of certain devastating occurrences.

Mashinini identifies her parents' divorce, her first marriage at the age of seventeen, and the destruction of Prospect Township and of Sophiatown, as crucial historical markers. These three experiences are seen retrospectively as threatening to Mashinini's sense of collective consciousness. They constitute, textually, impediments in the development of the author towards communal wholeness. The divorce of her parents underscores, in Mashinini's text, her sense of loss, of what

<sup>2</sup> See Mashinini (1989:7) on documenting the impoverishment of her childhood.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Kuzwayo (1985:62) remembers her grandmother's immaculate cleanliness. Mashinini (1989:3,5,10,98) highlights her love of beautiful things.

<sup>4</sup> See Mashinini (1989:5), and Kuzwayo (1985:63) for their respective descriptions of the garments they wore in their childhood which, in both cases, single them out from other children.

could have been. The trauma of this episode is captured when she writes: 'The happiness of this home was shattered for me when my parents separated' (6). Kuzwayo also displays this sense of loss when she describes a similar episode in her life. She says, 'My whole life had tumbled away' (Kuzwayo 1985:107). In response to this sense of dislocation, the two women turn to marriage to 'normalise' their lives.

Following the rift between her parents, Mashinini sees marriage as an avenue to restore the lost equilibrium in her life. Marriage is looked to as a form of escape from the misery precipitated by her parents' divorce. The decision to marry is also motivated by economic necessity. In her autobiography, Mashinini looks back with regret at her attempt to recreate the family unit as a repository of moral values. Writing with the benefit of hindsight, Mashinini notes of her first marriage: 'I married so young, at the age of seventeen: I had no school to go to, and no stable home of my own' (7). In short, she had no institution to which to belong and was therefore cut off from the community.

What is notable in Mashinini's narration of her life-history is that her first marriage is dismissed as time wasted. Her childbearing experience (she gave birth to six children from 1947 to 1956) is never focused upon and is accorded only a paragraph in the autobiography. The same applies to the birth of her last-born, Nomsa, and the good fortune of her marriage to Tom Mashinini, her second husband. Even the premature death of three of her children is only mentioned in passing. Such silences reinforce on the picture Mashinini wants to paint of herself as a liberated woman with a public profile.

Mashinini married her first husband, referred to in the autobiography only as Roger, when she was just seventeen years old. The source of Mashinini's decision to marry can be traced back to the exigencies of life for black women in the slumyards of Johannesburg in the 1940s and 1950s. Such was the situation in these areas that 'Many women maintain[ed] it [was] not safe to be without a husband who always gives a home some form of respect. A home without a husband is defenceless in urban townships' (Longmore 1959:72). Women therefore felt that they needed male protection to survive in the cities in the middle of this century. To make matters worse, home ownership in the townships was the prerogative of married couples (see Bonner 1988:395). It is in this light that we should appraise Mashinini's need for a spouse referred to in the first part of her autobiography. She initially went on a tireless search for her father who had deserted her, then later took refuge in marriage. Social dislocation was a common feature of urban life for black South Africans in the 1950s<sup>5</sup>. Many black families disintegrated, largely because of the poverty and squalor

<sup>5</sup> See Bonner (1988:61,395), and Longmore (1959:61). The latter author was struck by the unstable nature of black urban marriage in her study of the Eastern Native Township covering the period between 1950 and 1957.

which had been pervasive in the cities since the 1920s<sup>6</sup>.

It is against this backdrop that we should understand the premium placed on marriage in this patriarchal milieu. Mashinini portrays her first marriage as a regrettable chapter in her life, characterised by wife-battering, endless domestic chores, 'and then you had this extra person to bother about—a husband'(14)<sup>7</sup>. Following the failure of her first marriage, Mashinini turns to political involvement to recreate her social bond.

### Community as a Bearer of Self-Knowledge

Emma Mashinini's conception of community is broadened following the failure of her marriage. Her walking away from her husband is depicted as the moment when she takes control of her life. No longer would she accept the socially sanctioned role of an acquiescent and submissive housewife<sup>8</sup>. Her divorce is represented, in the text, as a moment of release and it is after the closure of this episode in her life that she demonstrates greater initiative. Her life's course, as constructed in her text, is consistent with the life-stories of activists, in which '... the narrative shows how activism operates to mediate the construction of self with social, political and cultural processes' (Ginsburg 1989:62).

Mashinini's life becomes more purposeful as she takes up positions of responsibility at work and, more significantly, within the trade union. Her entry into wage labour further gives her life some sense of direction. Her gender identity is henceforth redefined in terms of work and activism. In narrating her involvement in these social institutions, Mashinini positions herself as a custodian of community values. She channels her energies towards activities which she sees as reinforcing her bond with the community. Eddie Webster (1985:14) remarks that 'production must be conceived not only as a material process—involving the instruments of labour—but also as a social process—involving activities whereby people transform both their circumstances and themselves'. Mashinini suggests in her autobiography that her subjectivity changed in fundamental ways following her entry into the labour market.

<sup>6</sup> For the adverse effect of poverty on urban African families, see Longmore (1959:63,108), and Bonner (1988:398). Mashinini (1989:11) herself considers poverty as one of the factors which precipitated the break-up of her marriage, see Mashinini.

<sup>7</sup> Her description of her first marriage mirrors that of Kuzwayo, who writes of her first marriage to Ernest Moloto that 'My image of married life was far removed from the torture I was exposed to', in *Call Me Woman*, p.124.

<sup>8</sup> She asserts her independence, for instance, when she insists on buying a car in her own name, see Mashinini (1989:94).

It was in 1956 that Mashinini joined Henochsberg, a factory which manufactured uniforms for government forces. Her memory of Henochsberg, where she worked for nineteen years (from 1956 to 1975) is linked to her dual role as a worker and a mother. Each of these roles places strenuous demands on her, and her only break comes on Sundays when she goes to church. Cock and Emdon (1987:457) note that:

In reality, the link between the two roles operates to reinforce women's subordinate position in society. Women are viewed as less effective and competent mothers because their work role interferes with their mothering role, and as less effective and competent workers because their responsibilities as mothers interfere with their work.

Mashinini documents the untenability of her position when she provides details of her daily routine—from her poor working conditions to the demands of her household chores. In her own words:

You were working for a target. You'd know there was a target you had to meet, and at the back of your mind you were concerned about the welfare of your children. You would be torn in two, because you were at work and in your mind you were at home. This is the problem of the working mother: you are divided. You are only working because you have to (14).

Management at Henochsberg enforced the piece work system to obtain maximum productivity from their workers without an equivalent increase in the rate of pay. As Webster (1985:31) explains, the piece work system implies that:

In order to earn a subsistence wage workers must strain their labour power, which then provides the employer with a justification for cutting prices. Surviving today means working harder tomorrow for the same wage. The only way to avoid the piece work trap is for workers to combine and collectively reject it.

The strain work put on Mashinini can only be appreciated if it is acknowledged that 'Work and its effect move in a continuous circle from the family to the factory and the factory to the family. Domestic and public labour are inextricably bound with each other, and reinforce each other' (Institute for Black Research 1990:45). However, Mashinini does not portray herself as a passive victim of these factors. At work, she becomes a shop-steward and a supervisor. These positions of responsibility

are apparently thrust on her, since she represents herself as a self-effacing woman who accepts leadership positions rather reluctantly. In her own words, 'I have never sought to be elected to positions of such responsibility, but when they have been offered to me I have found great fulfilment in the work they entail' (29). Mashinini presents herself as accepting such challenges not to advance her personal interests but to benefit the larger community. As she reflects, about her past, '... during those days, in the factory I worked in, there was one strike after another. And this has followed me all my life. Wherever I am it seems there must always be trouble' (22). This citation highlights the significance of the title of her autobiography, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, with its emphasis on the turbulence of Mashinini's life. The narrative of the text revolves around her survival of the strikes referred to in the title.

She presents herself as a selfless person whose activities reinforce the spirit of community. She further portrays herself as a resilient woman who rises above all adversity. She is from the outset a rebellious spirit, ready to take on those who threaten her sense of community. In retrospect, she considers her efforts to force her father to be responsible towards her to be an assertion of her rights, as she avers: 'I think that was my first fight for human rights, my own right to have a father' (7). In a similar vein, she writes of herself that: 'I have always resented being dominated. I resent being dominated by a man, and I resent being dominated by white people, be they man or woman' (24). In the world of Mashinini's autobiography, these two memories of childhood serve to anticipate her political activism. She suggests that her rebellious spirit has had a long duration, and her involvement in trade union politics becomes a logical expression and culmination of her sense of defiance.

Significantly, her presence at the ANC conference held at Kliptown in 1955 is portrayed as a moment of awakening, 'an eye-opener' (24). Her autobiography is indeed a *Bildungsroman*, focusing as it does on the development of the author/protagonist from ignorance to 'true' consciousness. On several occasions, Mashinini contrasts her present awareness with her past consciousness. For instance, she records her gratitude when Mr Herman, her manager at Henochsberg, offered to assist her in funding her child's university education. In looking back, she writes, 'Now I would say back to a question like that, "It is the salary you give us that makes life impossible". But then it never occurred to me' (27). She highlights the extent to which she has developed from the person she was in the distant past.

Mashinini considers the trade union she founded in 1975, the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA), to have been a crucial locus for her personal development. To enhance her political awareness, she had to acquaint herself with the relevant literature on Labour Law and related topics. She writes of this dimension of her life that, 'In a way, this was my university education, at last, my chance to study. And I was lucky to have a man like Morris Kagan to talk to me and

say, 'Here are the books. Read' (32). Mashinini thus regards activism as personally fulfilling. She has fond memories of the managing director of Allied Bank describing her as 'a very competent person' (44). That she has recorded this incident in her autobiography highlights the value she attaches to being recognised, especially by her adversaries. The knowledge Mashinini acquires enables her to steer her trade union in a positive direction. Leadership is never easy and constantly puts demands on her. As a leader, Mashinini portrays herself as morally unimpeachable. For example, we see her keeping scrupulous records of union funds (37). She implicitly contrasts her steadfastness as a leader with the inconstancy of two figures, Lucy Mvubelo and Johnny Rampeba. Mvubelo and Rampeba occupied crucial positions within their trade unions and were trusted by workers. However, they were bribed by their respective managements and started subverting the interests of their trade unions (see Mashinini 1989:13,34). Unlike these two, Mashinini portrays herself as rejecting an offer to be a manageress and preferring instead to establish a new trade union for commercial workers (29).

Apart from using the trade union to create a sense of community, Mashinini also invokes sentiments of nationalism to buttress her sense of belonging. In her recollection of the 1976 Soweto uprisings, she specifically outlines her relationship to Tsietso Mashinini, a student leader who was a driving force behind the riots (38). This self-positioning suggests that Mashinini had her finger on the pulse of the national upheaval which characterised the 1976 riots. It is a device which nationalises Mashinini's individuality.

Even Mashinini's personal experiences are sometimes imagined within a nationalist paradigm. In trying to account for her first husband's mood swings, Mashinini writes: 'I know that Roger felt very moody sometimes after work because they may have screamed and shouted at him for some mistake that anyone could have made' (11). She therefore generalises her marital problems as symptomatic of the problems faced by black people in general.

In a different context, Mashinini exalts the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress as the legitimate bearers of community values. Her description of these organisations conveys her unequivocal support for them: 'There have been two organisations for my people and they have been banned. These are the Pan-African Congress, the ANC and now the UDF' (119). She also defends the need for trade unions to embark on nationalist campaigns<sup>9</sup>.

Sometimes Mashinini's sense of community becomes gendered, as when she advocates the creation of female solidarity networks. A ready example is when she writes:

<sup>9</sup> See Mashinini (1989:119), where she insists that until the ANC and the PAC are unbanned, the trade unions will promote the national struggle.

Women in the townships are very lonely because their husbands tend to leave them at home when they go to soccer matches, or to the movies, or to taverns to have a drink with the boys. The stokvel meetings change from one member's house to another and you are to serve tea or drinks (17).

Mashinini positions herself at the core of female forms of social bonding. Informal organisations of women, it has been illustrated, are critical to the proper functioning and maintenance of group cohesion in women's organisations.<sup>10</sup> It is regrettable that Mashinini does not dwell much on such informal networks, as they might have shed more light on crucial moments in her formative experiences. She mentions, for instance, that she was invited by friends to attend the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the ANC in 1955 (23). However, these friends remain anonymous, and the role they played in the ANC unclear. Furthermore, the reader is told that Lucy Mvubelo was instrumental in procuring employment for Mashinini, but we are not told how the two women met.

The concept of community in Mashinini's text is, in other instances, racialised to refer to black people in general. This racial presentation of community highlights the common experience of racial segregation experienced by black people. For instance, Mashinini points to the racialisation of the labour force, as when the position of cashiers in retail stores is made exclusive to whites (37). In response, she deploys a reverse discourse<sup>11</sup>, for example, when she defends the need for CCAWUSA to retain its black racial identity. This focus on the racial imperative of struggle is often underpinned by the principles of the Black Consciousness Movement. For example, she observes that:

Most of my people have damaged skins, just because we thought that if we were light we'd have the same privileges as the whites. When you are working side by side with someone with a lighter skin in a factory and you find they're given preference, it's hard not to believe a lighter skin is better for you. Now black consciousness has saved us from hating the colour of our skin (9).

<sup>10</sup> See Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1989:85-96), where she points at the factors behind the mobilisation of women workers at Duke Medical Centre. Sacks highlights the decisive role played by 'center women' in reinforcing the spirit of oneness among the workers. Informal networks in this case, bolstered the trade union organisation.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall (1992:255) observes that 'the discourse of anti-racism ha[s] often been founded on a strategy of reversal and inversion, turning the "Manichean aesthetic" of colonial discourse up-side down'.

Mashinini's observation here is supported by the conclusions reached by Frantz Fanon. Fanon uses the concept of 'hallucinatory whitening' to describe this attempt by colonized blacks to pass for white. In his celebrated study of the psychology of colonised subjects, Fanon (1967:11) notes that:

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for 'denegrification'; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.

Mashinini invokes the Black Consciousness philosophy to caution blacks against trying to escape their blackness. Her reference to 'my people' clearly has racial resonances. Her racial conception of community is undergirded by an unwritten code of conduct. Following her release from prison, Mashinini lives in fear that she may be called to testify against her comrades. The idea of being a state witness fills her with dread because, as she points out, 'the community can never accept you having been a state witness' (94). As a custodian of community values, she feels bound by a particular ethic which she believes strengthens her social bonds.

### Enemies Within

On several occasions, the community constructed in Mashinini's text is subjected to both internal and external threats. Her sense of community is undermined by beliefs and practices she finds inimical. Most notably, she considers sexism and violence to be inconsistent with the development of a community spirit. She indicts her colleagues within the trade union movement for their practice of excluding and marginalising women. She attacks in particular the sidelining of women unionists, as displayed by the absence of female representation in the executive committee of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). She takes issue with the COSATU logo, highlighting its masculine image (118). Here, she reflects the reality that the marginalisation of women, even where they are in the majority, has been a blot in the history of resistance movements in South Africa<sup>12</sup>. Mashinini wishes to purge her community of such forms of intolerance.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, the usurpation and ultimate disintegration of the structures established by women in Crossroads, in Josette Cole (1989:63-69). Female interests were also marginalised in the 1950s within the ANC, in spite of the conspicuous role women played in ANC campaigns of the time. See Lodge (1983:146).

A more serious threat to the existence of community solidarity, according to Mashinini, is that of violence. Writing in the turbulence of the 1980s, Mashinini reserves a chapter in her book to grapple with internecine violence within the black community. Whilst it is easy for Mashinini to moralise against State violence, such as the bombing of Khotso House and of COSATU House and the violence perpetrated by the right wing, (122-125) she is unable to explain violence which is turned inward. She considers such violence detrimental to the development of community spirit, and puts the ultimate blame on the state. She is at pains to shift the responsibility away from the community, as she argues:

The authorities have skilfully manipulated black people, creating ethnic divisions by encouraging malicious rumours, and turning black against black rather than against their real enemy, which is apartheid (123).

This kind of rationalisation, however, fails to sustain Mashinini when she suffers a personal loss with the murder of her son-in-law, Aubrey Mageza. Following this devastating experience, Mashinini admits that: '... for a time I was in a moral conflict ... My concern for the increasing violence among my own people grows daily' (126). Her sense of community is, therefore, jeopardised by this endemic violence, and precipitates a crisis in Mashinini's imagined sense of community. She is more assured when she engages external enemies of her community.

### External Threats

Early in her narrative, for example, Mashinini describes the destructive effects of the forced removals she experienced as a child in the 1950s: 'That vibrant community of Sophiatown also disappeared, a few years later, when Sophiatown was declared a white area' (4). In this instance, she perceives the development of Sophiatown as a community as having been destroyed by the policies of the Apartheid State. However, the symbolic sense of community survives such adversities. More serious, is Mashinini's imprisonment which precipitates a serious breakdown in her relational sense by assuming an intensely personal form.

### Prison and Narration

Detention triggers a collapse in Mashinini's moral universe, and her imprisonment takes on a starkly racial character, since she suffers her ordeal at the hands of white policemen and white prison warders. In a different context, Barbara Harlow notes of prison experience that:

Critical to the ideology of the prison apparatus is the elimination of any collective or relational sense on the part of its victims, a sense which the political prisoners struggle to maintain as part of their strategy of resistance (Harlow 1987:151).

This 'relational sense' is critical to Mashinini's self-invention in her autobiography. It is whilst in prison that Mashinini experiences a sense of isolation and breakdown in her sense of community. Cut off from the world whilst in solitary confinement, she writes of this experience that:

I had spent so much time with white police, surrounded by white people. It was a white woman who had refused me chewing-gum, and a white woman who had put those bracelets on me (92).

The racialisation of Mashinini's representation of prison experience stands in contrast to her emphasis on non-racialism in the rest of her autobiography. Her moral outrage here is directed at everything white. Whiteness becomes a symbol of moral decadence, while blackness implicitly represents the forces of good—the source of her moral strength. In detention, Mashinini writes that she was:

... glad to see a black person, even a black police person ... with my envy of white people, now to be surrounded by them made me realise again how stupid that was, to envy that skin or hair. It was no privilege to be among them. It was a misery and a deprivation (69).

Whites are to Mashinini, in this instance, morally depraved. However, as Stuart Hall (1992:254) points out, 'You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject'. Mashinini is trapped within the ideological framework of her tormentors. Paul Gready (1993:489) uses the concept of 'the power of writing' to describe the discursive contestations between prisoners and the authorities in South Africa. In his terms, Mashinini has, in the above instance, been 'rewritten within the official "power of writing"' and her sense of self has been subverted.

She cannot, however, reconcile her subverted self with the ideals for which she has striven. To compound matters further, she describes herself as having noticed apprehensively, whilst reading the graffiti on the prison wall, that previous occupants of the cell had been morally debased criminals. She is shaken, and her assumed role as a custodian of community values is undermined. As she writes, '... it began to torture me, because I thought I was not a criminal' (86). This disintegration of her

moral world precipitates her mental breakdown, and sometimes assumes an intensely personal form, as when she cannot remember the name of her youngest daughter (86).

It should be clear, then, that imprisonment has a devastating effect on Mashinini. She becomes very ill and suffers memory lapses after her release. To retain the moral high ground and to re-establish her sense of community, she insists on being the ultimate victor. She refuses to concede defeat when she ignores her doctor's advice to retire from the trade union. In her own words, '... to have [retired] before, when I came out of detention, would have been to tell the government that they had won' (115). Her refusal to capitulate thus becomes her first act towards the restoration of her sense of self as a worthy member of the community.

This paper has charted the premium placed by Mashinini on the need to sustain community values: her sense of community in her autobiography is ubiquitous. The argument has been that Mashinini uses community as a fluid concept to refer to different social categories. She invokes past experiences as precursors of present-day struggles. Her activism is seen as a fulfilment of childhood proclivities. Her narration is teleological, as she posits continuity in otherwise disparate experiences.

Mashinini sees herself as a crusader for the maintenance of positive community values. She portrays herself as a resilient woman who survives the harsh treatment she suffered in prison. To recreate her moral universe, Mashinini remembers episodes from the past which vindicate her moral values. For example, she has pleasant memories of black women workers striking for an unfairly demoted white woman at the Germiston branch of Checkers supermarket in 1983 (117). Furthermore, she has a particularly fond remembrance of the victories won by CCAWUSA under her leadership. She feels vindicated, for instance, when employers who had previously refused to negotiate with her come to the Union headquarters in a desperate effort to settle disputes with their workers. She mentions three instances in which previously intransigent employers solicit her intervention in labour disputes (see Mashinini 1989:36,46,101). To further buttress her sense of triumph, Mashinini recounts with relish the presence of black activists at the funeral of her former colleague and mentor, Morris Kagan (32). Finally, Mashinini writes passionately of her visit to Neill Agget's grave, in the company of Liz Floyd:

Here we were two women together: myself, a black woman and Liz Floyd, a white woman I've always respected and honoured. But with this friend we shared, this dead friend, we became as one (105).

This episode is portrayed in Mashinini's text as a realisation of the non-racial ideal. Her tone is triumphant as she celebrates her victory over the segregationist policies of the Apartheid State.

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## Space and Identity in Jayapraga Reddy's Unpublished Autobiography, *The Unbending Reed* and her *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*

Betty Govinden

... we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, news-paper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death (Rushdie 1991:12).

### Introduction

In this article I consider Jayapraga Reddy's unpublished autobiography, entitled *The Unbending Reed*, and her short stories collected in the publication *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. I read the two texts contrapuntally, drawing attention to the complex connections between the double narratives of disablement and enablement at work in these two disparate examples of her writings, the one autobiographical and the other fictional. I explore issues of identity, self-representation and representation in the light of Reddy's autobiographical and imaginative writings, drawing attention to differences in spatial configurations in the two writings.

### Background of Reddy's Career as a Writer

Reddy was born in 1947, and until her death in August 1996, lived in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. She began writing from the time she was twelve years old, when she published her first story, 'The Lost Tube of Toothpaste'. When she was in Std. 4, she

wrote a short story, which she sent to the local magazine, *The 1860 Settler*, where was published with acknowledgement. Her first play, 'The Balloon Seller', was all written at this time.

Reddy was fortunate to enjoy a prominent career as a writer and the story her publication success is unique among Indian women writers in South Africa. A chronological survey of her achievements shows a slow but steady incorporation of her work into the mainstream of South African writing. In 1975 the BBC broadcast her short stories, 'The Love Beads' and 'The Stricken Land'. 'Nandi's Secret Friend', a short story for children, was also accepted by the BBC. In the 1980's the short stories that were accepted by the BBC were published by *Staffrider*, and new ones were included, such as the 'The Slumbering Spirit', 'Market Days', and 'A Gift for Rajendra'. The last story was also broadcast by the BBC. In 1984 her play, 'The Web of Persuasion', was produced by the SABC. In the same year *The Reader Digest* published 'The Slumbering Spirit', under the title 'The Awakening Spirit'. The story was translated by Reader's Digest for its international editions in several languages, including Hindi for its readership on the Indian sub-continent. In 1988 Skotaville published her short story collection, *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. In 1988, the retrospective edition of *Staffrider*, *Ten Years of Staffrider* included her short story, 'The Spirit of Two Worlds'. Reddy also presented a manuscript to the SABC in 1989, entitled 'Release to the Wind'. In 1991 Annemarié van Niekerk's anthology of South African women's short stories, *Raising the Blind* included her short story 'Friends', which had appeared in the collection *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*. Her short story, 'Web of Persuasion', was adapted for radio and television by Franz Marx. It was hailed as a huge success but Reddy bemoaned the fact that the script was changed considerably.

All these publications were by well-known publishers, and were aimed at a wide reading public. It is noteworthy that the short stories that were selected were those that provided a wide range of South African contexts, dealing with racial relations ('The Slumbering Spirit'), experiences in an Indian extended family set-up ('The Spirit of Two Worlds'), and domestic tension related to race, class and gender ('Two Friends'). Reddy notes, in her introduction to her collection of short stories the writing is determined inevitably by living in a particular place. 'One derives one's creative spirit from this land of a myriad contrasts. There is no "typical" South African way of life' (Reddy 1987:Foreword). It would seem that her work was included in various anthologies for its very contribution to the 'myriad contrasts' that comprise South African life. While the short stories are not directly autobiographical they do draw from some of the experiences that Reddy would have been familiar with and which she records in her autobiography. Some of these are experiences of uprooting through the Group Areas Act ('On the Fringe of Dreamtime') and of being confined to a wheel-chair ('A Gift for Rajendra').

Reddy's autobiography, *The Unbending Reed* was submitted for publication to Skotaville. More recently, it was sent to two overseas publishers, but she had yet to hear from them when she died in 1996. A publisher had actually requested that she write the autobiography, presumably anticipating a great deal of interest in her story on the strength of her creative work. A short extract was published in the COSAW collection of writings, *Like A House On Fire—Contemporary Women's Writing, Art and Photography* (Horn, Mabie et al:1994), in which the autobiography was described as 'forthcoming', but to date the autobiography has not been published. The autobiography, a simple, linear account of her life, with a great amount of detail of her illness, may not have been considered as interesting as her short stories. What seems to have been ignored is that the very act of writing, rather than the content itself, was the real achievement. Gloria Anzaldua has called attention to such 'organic writing'—'It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue' (Whitlock 2000:0).

### Reddy's Development as a Writer

Unlike Goonam's autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*, in her autobiography Reddy presents a narrow, almost self-absorbed, personal narrative. She recounts her early childhood, and events of her life as she grew older, to a few years ago. Her physical disease of muscular dystrophy is centrally placed in all the life stories that she narrates. In some ways the autobiography might be seen as a one-dimensional text, where her disability and concern for her physical condition is a central pre-occupation. A parallel and inter-related strand is that of her development as a writer, of the difficulties and successes she experienced in getting herself into print. It is her desire to overcome the restrictions imposed on her by her infirmity, her physical bondage, that influences her intention to become a writer.

Although Reddy has asserted in the Foreword to her short stories that she is not readily disposed to speaking of herself, in the autobiography she does give important personal details of her life, details that would have otherwise remained unknown. In the Foreword she speaks of her inclination as a writer to be 'a very private person' (1). She observes that 'solitude teaches one the beauty of silences, those long silences that deepen and stretch into eternity' (1). There are huge tracts of her emotional and psychological life of which she remains silent, but she does focus on the physical details of her diseased condition, with almost obsessive concern. The ambivalence of telling her story and being reticent about it is best captured in the anecdote of photo-taking she recounts early in the autobiography. Her grandfather was against capturing 'an image of oneself' (2).

Her story begins with Kesa, her elder brother, and herself growing up quickly and briskly. What is immediately clear is that he was born with a neuro-

muscular disease. Kesa looks perfect in a photograph that she is looking at, and then the family confront the truth that he has muscular dystrophy. His death is poignantly described and the real import of the impending separation, the severity and finality of death, is brought home to her when his pet cat walks away, never to return again:

Then Prill walked in. Through the front door he came, tail erect and marched with a purpose towards the Coffin. He put his front paws on the coffin and peered in. The mourners were sufficiently roused out of themselves to stop weeping, and watched as her turned and walked out the way he came in. We never saw him again. If anything that day, succeeded in bringing home to me the finality of death and the rending pain of loss, it was that (15).

Reddy and her younger brother, Mags, are also smitten with the disease, and spend their entire lives valiantly coping with it. The controlling element of Reddy's identity is that of her own physical disability, which determines how she is accepted and what life experiences she will enjoy. If there is a 'preoccupation with self', as there usually is in black woman's autobiography (Watts 1989:108), in *The Unbending Reed* it is particularly so because of Reddy's need to live with muscular dystrophy as a black person and as a woman in South Africa. She is conscious that she is positioned peripherally because of her physical disability. She constantly observes, with amusement, concern and sadness the attitudes of those around her towards her disease: 'Over the years I have become used to being treated as some kind of curiosity specimen' (17). She writes of the prejudices towards her, and of her being treated as if she were totally ignorant (16). This attitude, she constantly reiterates, is only due to the lack of awareness and education among others on how to respond to her condition.

Reddy refuses 'the victim image', and in this she is supported by her grandparents and parents, with her parents being strong adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses church. The door-to-door evangelising approach of this church would have appealed to Reddy in her confined condition. There is strong family support for Reddy, as she is loved and affirmed by her immediate as well as extended family. There is deep admiration and love for her parents, her aunts and uncles who think differently, who provide her with the emotional and psychological nurturing to develop a positive sense of self. In this respect her story is similar to Noni Jabavu who, in *The Ochre People*, also speaks of the moral support of family in the face of wider social problems (see Watts 1987:115). A sense of family also plays an important role for Mayat, Sam and Goonam, with different members of the family being decisive influences in the authors' lives. Most of the writers speak of their mothers particularly as being important influences. Reddy constantly refers to her

mother as a 'pillar'; her image of her mother as a strong woman is captured poignantly in the epigraph, 'A woman is like the reed, though she bends with the wind, she does not break', from which the title of her autobiography, *The Unbending Reed*, is drawn. She notes in the 'Dedication' that the autobiography was 'To the memory of my Mother, Esperie (Bommie) whose dedication, discipline, farsightedness, courage and endurance made life a lesson in grit'. Reddy's mother might not have played an important public, or activist role, but she was a decisive influence in her family life. Reddy also claims a nurturing role for herself, and this is seen particularly in her relationship with Mags, as she assists him in coping with his own muscular dystrophy.

To encourage her in striving to be independent her parents and grandparents also believed strongly in the liberating power of education (23), and of education for girls in spite of much prejudice against this. Reddy's parents saw 'education' as a means of her attaining independence. Her mother's moralising tone has a familiar ring about it: 'If you have wealth, you can lose it. Fine things can be stolen. But nobody can take your education from you' (47). It is the need to improve, to develop, to cope with her handicap, that makes it imperative for her to gain an education.

Reddy experiences great difficulties in securing education owing to her physically disabled state, and this is exacerbated by her being black and female. Her disability made going to school difficult, and there are graphic accounts in her autobiography of her seeking admission at a school. It is the time of the 'platoon school system', deployed to cater for the lack of adequate schooling facilities for black children. The principal refuses her admission, showing the extent to which prejudices against handicapped individuals went unquestioned. The efforts of an African nurse from 'Cripple Care' pays off as she insists that the principal admit the new pupil. Reddy describes the attitudes of people towards her, and the unsuitability of the school for children like her—there are 'stairs everywhere', and the toilets are far away. Further, there are forty in a class; and the teacher had been teaching from the age of fifteen, with no suitable teaching qualifications. In spite of all the 'inconveniences' she endures, she manages to be at the top of her class, and enjoys many friendships while at school. She continues with her studying through correspondence courses when completing her education at the normal schools proves difficult. She uses this educational background to develop self-sustaining careers, such as part-time teaching and free-lance journalism.

More importantly, 'education', whatever form it took, is seen as a pre-requisite to writing books, and this is for Reddy a way of asserting an identity that is undermined by the prejudices of those around her and a way of claiming her freedom (Van Niekerk 1994:70). This is generally true of black women writers in South Africa; the lack of education presents them with significant hurdles, as Daymond points out. 'For black women who chose to write stories (as against telling them) and

to write in English, questions of education and opportunity are what would have first controlled their activity' (Daymond 1996:193). In Reddy's case, education is deemed necessary for writing, which in turn is necessary to overcome the debilitating effects of muscular dystrophy.

Reddy displays the strong urge to read whatever she could lay her hands on, and this is an important part of her preparation in becoming a writer. She later uses this knowledge to run a small nursery school from her home, and to free-lance for a local newspaper. In reading voraciously she responds to the available colonial education of the time. Shirley Chew, in her book *The Unbecoming Daughters of Empire* (1993), shows the ubiquitous nature of colonial education in different contexts. Ironically, such education is usually a Eurocentric one, and this is true for Reddy as well. Unlike Zoe Wicomb, in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), and Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1991), Reddy does not develop a trenchant critique of the language and culture of the coloniser. Indian women writers, such as Mayat and Goonam, try to find a balance between an English, colonial education and an Indian traditional one, where the family languages, cultural values and, in Mayat's case, religion, are assiduously learnt and assimilated. Sam, in 'Jesus is Indian', describes the need to assert non-western cultural values and reinterpret the kind of Christianity that is transmitted to Her. However, Reddy embraces and assimilates her colonial education with alacrity and in an uncomplicated way, and this English cultural affiliation shapes her identity almost entirely. She does not show a reflexive awareness of her development as a writer, or of self-as-writer.

It is Reddy's colonial education that instils in her a special desire to visit England. She does make a trip to England with members of her family and ten others, as part of a special sponsored tour for handicapped persons. Her trip makes her all too aware of the discrepancies between Britain and South Africa, especially for disabled persons. Although the arrangements for the tour are poor, Reddy speaks of a dream come true as she goes to all the familiar sights that she had known from her reading of English Literature—Oxford, Stratford-on-Avon, The Lake District, Abbotsford (the home of Sir Walter Scott). She even manages to make a trip to the BBC for an interview. Phyllis Ntantala records in her autobiography, *A Life's Mosaic* (1992), that when she was in England she visited familiar sites from her reading of English literature. In living in the world of mainstream English literature Reddy, like Ntantala, is presumably enjoying escape not only from 'South African social realities' (Nuttall 1996:6) and her own physical handicap, but is expanding her imaginative world, as 'books and reading (are) adopted by the narrating self as signs of an "intellectual" identity' (Nuttall 1996:9).

### Writing the Body

Reddy's muscular dystrophy directly influences the assertion of her identity through writing, the search for wholeness and the need to claim a 'self'. In most South African black women's writings—Bessie Head, Zoe Wicomb, Gcina Mhlophe—the body, gendered and racialised—plays a significant part in the formation of subjectivity. Apart from race and gender, ethnicity, location and politics may also be linked to the way writers assert and negotiate their identity. The 'double jeopardy' that feminists have usually talked about is extended, in Reddy's writing, to a *multiple* one, making her work a unique and classic study in the 'politics of otherness' among autobiographical writings by black women in South Africa.

Writing, in her condition, she points out, was a 'profession that was highly suited to me' (10). It gives her the satisfaction of 'putting down your thoughts on paper and seeing a whole new world taking shape. A world you created' (10). Not able to participate more actively in that world, she is able to observe it, comment on it, and develop a fictional and imaginary and imaginative world out of it. In an interview with Annemarié Van Niekerk, Reddy states: 'I especially enjoy creating a whole world of my own which outreaches any possible confinements' (1994:74). 'Writing the body' is indeed a way of transcending the body's 'infirmity'. Sidonie Smith's cogent critique of autobiographical writing from the point of view of the politics of the body has particular relevance to questions of identity in Reddy's autobiography. Smith notes that '... those positioned peripherally to the dominant group, those claiming and/or assigned marginalised identities, find themselves partitioned in their bodies ...' (Smith 1993:10). Reddy's body is 'taken back and honoured on the way to speech and writing' (Smith 1993:177). Smith prompts exploration of the specific body that is claimed in the autobiographical text; of the implications for subjectivity of the body's positioning (Whitlock 2000:28).

Kathleen Komar states that many women writers 'exploit an interior space that is not biological but psychological, a space that is eventually re-exteriorized in the form of the literary text itself' (Komar 1994:97). The limitations that women generally experience makes them use the literary text as a public space. This is certainly true of Reddy, whose confinement through her disability, made her determined to overcome her condition through writing. While she does not engage in intense reflection of interior experiences, her sexuality, she does use her writing to reflect on the affairs of the world and create an important literary space for herself. In Reddy's attempt to 'write the body' then we see two main facets. One is a narrative of bodily disability, exacerbated by the fact that she is black and a woman; the other is a narrative of enablement. Her increasing disablement as a person, the unfortunate bodily inconvenience she experienced, is juxtaposed by her increasing enablement as a writer. Writing affords her imaginative compensation and affirmation at the same time that she is enduring increasing physical deterioration.

There is a contrast between the confined world that she has to inhabit as a person and the imaginative world that she is able to portray in her fictional writing. The physically straitened space which she inhabits is quite different from the unconstrained spaces of her imagination. Although her disability put in her path many impediments, she fashions an alternative self through her writing. In extending her sense of self, she is able to realise her social self in a measure that is quite remarkable—because of and in spite of her illness. Reddy transcends the limitations of her physical body to inhabit diverse racial, gendered, social, religious, and cultural bodies.

The physical locations which her short stories depict include hospitals ('A Dream at Sunset'), temples, the market ('Market Days'), townships and rural areas. While she does paint a wide canvas, she still generally depicts circumscribed domestic spaces. The geographical sites are very similar to the domestic and township spaces that one is familiar with in Durban and its environs.

At times Reddy uses experiences that surrounded her illness as grist for her fictional writing. Some of her short stories depict confinement, similar to her own. In the short story, 'Celebration', an old woman is confined to her room. In 'A Gift for Rajendra' we encounter a boy who is disabled, with the realisation that he will never walk again (8). An itinerant barber, who is now redundant because of modernised services, is appreciated as he finds a mother wanting to give her son Rajendra, confined to a wheelchair, the gift of regular haircuts; the barber's itinerancy is then seen as a blessing. The character of the barber is based on a real life person Reddy knew in Clare Estate. Other short stories are set in hospitals; it is evident from her autobiography that, owing to her condition, she is taken to hospitals on several occasions. Conversely, she develops the silences in her autobiography into fictional accounts in her short stories. For example, private, emotional longings or experiences of love, marriage and childbirth, which are not alluded to in the autobiography, are written about in her short fiction.

Her personal condition enables her to become an acute observer of events and persons around her. As she writes in her autobiography, 'Memories, impressions and thoughts all form part of the process. Then there is the observer in you, the observer that sees too much, whose perceptions are sharper than normal, whose heightened awareness enables him to sense things beyond the obvious' (10). And given her frailty she writes short sustainable pieces. The autobiography follows the style of her short story writing in that it comprises vignettes of various incidents in her life.

## Spatial Restrictions and Apartheid Society

While the dominant trope that determines her narrative self-construction in the autobiography is that of her disability it is located in the context of racial divisions of the apartheid state. The story of Reddy's disability is played out in the context of apartheid's separate spaces. Alongside her physical constriction owing to her disability, Reddy is also restricted to the spatial worlds dictated to by apartheid. Through segregation apartheid is directly responsible for the construction of racial identities, and in Reddy's case it is exacerbated by her handicapped state.

The space that is depicted in Reddy's writings is a racially hierarchised one, and highlights the 'spatial politics of difference' (Blunt & Rose 1994:19) in South Africa, with the personal and the public being interwoven. It is to be seen in the context of the socio-political economy of apartheid and the Group Areas Act. Durban is the site of the original Group Areas legislation, designed specifically to keep the movement of Indians in urban areas in check, and separate Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indians from one another. Reddy recalls that previously integrated living that was destroyed: her aunt, Mutha, had a farm in New Germany, now an African township (Clermont); and an African women with a large family—who owned a cow and supplied milk to the neighbourhood in Clare Estate but had to sell her home and move out of the area.

The attempt to separate racial groups on the basis of cultural differences influences identity construction. Robert Thornton's observation in this respect shows the calculated severity of apartheid. He states that South Africa is:

known for its apparent totalising system of social engineering in which the vision of 'apartness', apartheid was implemented through massive and violent spatial dislocation of much of its population in terms of a rationalised bureaucratic master-plan of a total differentiation of spheres of life based on race and (what was the name for its architects) culture (In Werbner 1996:142).

The places that one could call 'home' and that shaped one's identity were not mere accidents or the result of personal choice and means. Of its broader implications, Viswesaran notes: '(For) if it is geography that symbolizes the field, and anthropology's problematic epistemological site, then ... it is demography that radically symbolises "home", and, I would argue, anthropology's reterritorialized epistemological site: who lives in what neighbourhood and why; who went to what school and why' (Viswesaran 1994:106).

The autobiography shows Reddy and her family confined to separate areas set aside for Indians. We have numerous examples of separate schools, separate

libraries, and other facilities. Ela Gandhi also recounts a similar story in an interview with Diana Russell (1989:135):

Ever since I could remember, I was aware of living in the apartheid system. I travelled to school by train, and I always had to use the non-white compartments. Often I would see that the white compartments were empty, while ours were full, sometimes necessitating my standing all the way from Phoenix to Durban, which is about a forty-five minute journey. The amusement parks were only open to whites, the beaches were separate, and so on. These things made me bitter and aware that the whole system is inhuman. And the Africans suffered more than the Indians.

The tendency to 'collapse space' in this way began in the early indentured years, where Indians of different languages and castes, were forced to live together. In the 'new leavening process' that inevitably evolved, a pan-Indian culture began to emerge, alongside internal differences (Haraksingh 1990:8). With this kind of living during the apartheid era, what occurs is a consolidation of this constructed communal life, where 'community' was developed and reified on essentialist notions of race and ethnicity.

Is Reddy, then, constructing an 'ethnic autobiography', and is this the result of the 'social ethos of (the) pluralism' of apartheid (Viswesaran, 1994:8)? Linda Warley (1993) points out that 'spatial location is crucial to post-colonial autobiographical self-representation', that we tend to ignore the geographic and ethnocentric bias of Euro-American autobiography. She argues that 'forgetting of the locatedness of the subject speaks of an imperialist assumption of centrality that has never been possible for the post-colonial writer' (1993). Warley stresses 'that the particular geographic and micro-spatial location of the autobiographical 'I' must be read as an important element of textual identity, for *all autobiographical subjects are located subjects* (even European ones)' (1993, e.i.o.). This is clearly evident in Reddy's writings, especially her autobiographical writing, where she is constrained to write largely about the confined apartheid areas in which she was forced to live.

Reddy does not strive to be overtly political, but her work is situated against the larger questions of race and apartheid. In conversations about her writings, she states quite simply that she writes, and does not reflect on her identity as a writer in any self-conscious way in terms of gender, race or class, or political affiliation. She does point out, though, that 'if you are reflecting life in this country and the effect change and restrictive legislation has had on its people, then your work inevitably becomes political' (Van Niekerk 1994:71). Encountering some of the evils of apartheid personally, she writes, 'Not for the first time, I seethed at the idiotic laws that strangled life in this country' (108). At the time of her growing up—the 1950s—

there is severe entrenchment of 'separate development'. *Black Consciousness* was to become more firmly established by the 1970s, when a younger generation of Indians would identify with a larger black identity (Reddy's cousin, Saths Cooper, became a stalwart in the Black Consciousness movement and an ardent anti-apartheid activist, and was imprisoned on Robben Island).

Alongside her personal story of her physical trauma, Reddy recounts this wider story of dislocation and displacement. She herself is poised on the 'fringe of dreamtime' as she recalls in the autobiography a lost world that she enjoyed with her extended family, and of the existential anguish of uprooting. This narrative strand is positioned alongside her principle concern for her distraught physical state. In this the autobiography may be seen as documenting both a personal as well as a collective history. In the autobiography there is a strong sense of communal memory, intertwined with personal memory. With constant control of individuals by apartheid policies, many communal memories were scripted as personal memories. Memory is especially potent in Reddy, who writes, 'so many things stand out sharply in my mind, as sharply as peaks against a winter sky' (11).

Reddy's story shows the family's continual movement from one place to another. She writes of the constant uprooting and relocation due to the Group Areas legislation that they were subjected to. Reddy's family moved to different places in Durban and its surrounding areas. Reddy's story begins with her growing up in the 1960s in Briardene, a semi-rural area then outside Durban. Her father was born in Briardene, and worked for Bakers Limited as a 'van boy', delivering bread by horse cart. This place, where she spent the first four years of her life, has a strong hold on her imagination. She remembers that Briardene 'was a place full of rugged hills and valleys with deep mysterious shadows', with an unreality about it: 'Today Briardene is no longer an Indian area but it still retains that haunted quality reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights*' (11). In drawing from her imagination, Reddy occasionally claims wider world of the cosmic and infinite through her writings. Her love of storms, the wilderness, and hills becomes readily evident, and shows a desire to reach beyond the ephemeral, mundane, and local.

From Briardene the family then moves to the city, to Hampson Grove, to live with her 'granny'. Reddy writes of life here—the hustle and bustle of life in this part of the urban area—Hampson Grove, Warwick Avenue, Ajax Lane, Wills Road, where many Indians lived in the 1950s. She notes that the 'area in which we lived no longer exists as I remember it. A freeway runs right through it, flattening the quaint, interesting roads. Long before that however, people were forced out of the area through the group Areas Act' (18). These are the same places that Phyllis Naidoo recalls in her writings, as she consciously tries to transgress the apartheid boundaries. Naidoo gives a different feel to these places through her experiences of shebeen life there and its vibrant multi-racial character.

Because of the uprooting, a sense of loss, and the memory of that loss, become inevitable motifs in Reddy's writing. Initially there was the uprooting of Indians from their ancestral homes. These hints of 'the motherland', and of a 'lamenting for their motherland' (Rooke 1953/1990:10), are particularly evident among the first generation of Indians who set foot in South Africa. While Reddy's father was born in South Africa it is the grandfather who came from 'farming stock ... in India' (22). This sense of loss was then exacerbated by colonialism and apartheid, or at times, by personal tragedy. Her grandmother, Mungamma Reddy, for instance, has to move from their farm at Roosfontein, which is situated beyond the city, in the suburban spaces of Westville. She gives up her farm in Roosfontein and moves to the city on the death of her husband. She is an emotionally strong woman who earns her keep by selling her wares at a stall in the Indian market, but the experience of leaving her old family home is heart-rending:

Mungamma returned to Roosfontein, the day the old wood and iron house was pulled down. An old tree grew on the road, a silent witness to events. She stood under its familiar comfort and wept. For a home is more than brick and mortar, its laughter and memories, pain and joy, warmth and sharing, living and being born, growing and developing. It's togetherness. It's a place to return to when everywhere else has palled, an eternal truth so poignantly made in the parable of the Prodigal Son (23).

Memory is often linked to a sense of place, particularly those places from which her family are removed. There is a longing for the lost countryside. Flora and fauna are an intrinsic part of Reddy's story. There is regret that this quality of existence has to make way for inevitable, creeping change. 'The beautiful wilderness was carved up and sold...Everyone lauded the changing environment, labelling it progress and improvement' (29). The wilderness and the bushes gradually recede. 'We no longer see that many birds and butterflies. Fireflies used to be so common but I no longer see them. Spiders, frogs and snakes have all become rare' (29). It was the time when an iguana would come to bask on a neighbour's front lawn (29). What emerges through the descriptions in the autobiography is a strong sense of violation of the idyllic countryside. This violation of nature is also the result of the denudation caused by apartheid policies.

The experiences of dislocation due to apartheid policies and practices are not peculiar to Reddy, but is a common thread that runs through many examples of South African literature by Black writers. Ronnie Govender in the Epilogue to his collection of short stories set in Cato Manor, *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories*, writes of the loss that so many Indians experienced when they had to move from Cato Manor to Chatsworth:

## CATO MANOR

silence now and bush  
 no more Discovery Road  
 no more Trimborne Road  
 no more hopscotch  
 no more ripe mangoes from Thumba's yard  
 Cato Manor, you have done your penance  
 amid crumpled eviction notices  
 (Govender 1996:159).

This death of 'Cato Manor', as recorded in literature, is similar to that of Sophiatown described by Bloke Modisane and Can Themba, or of District Six by writers such as Alex La Guma and Richard Rive (Ehmeir 1995:27f). These separate places become symbolic of the spatial location of apartheid society, and is a theme that is also taken up in Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight*, and in Goonam's autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*. Recently, the memoir of Pushpam Murugan, *The Lotus Blossoms on the Eastern Vlei*, documents the history of families living in Magazine Barracks in Durban, before the removals between 1964 and 1966. While Ronnie Govender depicts the effects that 'Cato Manor' had on men, Reddy and Karodia show the loss that both men and women experienced through such 'relocations'. Similarly, in her autobiography *Call me Woman*, Ellen Kuzwayo tells of the world that was lost by her family when they were forced to move in 1974 from their freehold farm which they had owned from the 1880's. And Pippa Green speaks of the 'bulldozers and jackhammers of apartheid' that destroyed Ozzie Docrat's home in Pageview around 1978, a story that is recorded by David Goldblatt in *South Africa the Structure of Things Then* (Green 1998).

### A Range of Subject Positions

In her short stories Reddy attempts to transgress this ethnically and racially constricted world that she depicts in her autobiography. She writes of different race groups interacting with one another, crossing race and class barriers ('Snatch the Wind and run'), creating, where possible, integrated worlds. Persons from different race groups may interact with one another in the same household, mainly through a master-servant relationship (as in 'Celebration', 'The Stolen Hours', 'Friends'). There are those who make a conscious effort to interact with others from racially different neighbourhoods ('Snatch the Wind and Run' and 'The Slumbering Spirit'). Some go beyond the racially defined relationships that Reddy generally depicts in her autobiography and transcend the Manichean world dictated to by apartheid ('The Slumbering Spirit'), and others find it difficult to do so ('On the Fringe of

Dreamtime'). While she does not paint a wide regional landscape, as do Sam and Karodia, she moves from crowded city sites ('Market Days'), to peri-urban and suburban settings ('The Spirit of Two Worlds'), to rural ones in Natal ('A Gift for Rajendra' and 'A Dream at Sunset').

Under-girding all her short stories is the unmistakable reality of apartheid life in South Africa, and all that comes with it—racial tension and conflict, bigotry, dislocation, materialistic aspirations, a yearning and desire to be accepted in an alienating world. Highlighting the 'ordinary' rather than 'spectacle', Reddy writes of quotidian reality rather than of the macro-political world. She shows the effects of racism and racial prejudices at an individual, domestic and personal level. There are both fissures in racially-defined relationships as well as valiant attempts to bridge such schisms. We see a tension between acceptance of conventional racialised thinking—of the place of white dominance as part of the order of things—and incipient resistance to it. Like Sam and Karodia, there are instances of prejudice and discrimination among oppressed groups themselves, or empathy with other oppressed race groups.

At the same time as she writes of other race groups, her personal experiences makes her sensitive to the experiences of Indians, especially in relation to dislocation and loss, and she does write about these in her short stories, producing a collection that provides a cultural kaleidoscope of South African life. In her poignant short story, 'On the Fringe of Dreamtime', Reddy shows how the strong bonds between humans and the natural environment are severed. She tells of the story of an Indian man (it is significant that he is nameless) who returns to his old homestead, now turned into a 'Group Area' for whites:

He ran his hand along the arm of the branch which was still as strong as ever. Here his father had hung a makeshift swing, by tying two ends of a rope to the branches and placing a sack over it for a seat .... To him it had been more than an ordinary tree. He had come to love it in all its moods and it became a symbol of safety, a source of strength like a sturdy reliable friend (6).

The tree stands as a link to a lost life, as it conjures up memories of the past:

The mistiness of memory cleared and he became aware that everything else about the place was strange and unfamiliar. Only the tree remained, a silent witness to time and its pain. There, on the fringe of dreamtime, he could hear echoes of past laughter and knew once more the searing pain of heartbreak (62).

The evocative descriptive shows the extent to which it was possible to dream unhindered of a time when there was a tacit connectedness with all things. It also heightens the dereliction and alienation of the present:

Down at the stream, he imagined he heard his mother slapping the washing on the stones and singing the folk songs of her youth .... The crabs would crawl out of the water .... He and his brother would sit on the rocks and watch them, fascinated .... They were at one with all of creation ... (65).

The short story also shows that the Group Areas legislation was to directly influence the creation of identities, where 'ethnicity was constructed within a politics of nostalgia that sentimentalised the loss' (Wicomb 95).

Most important, the short stories show a range of subject positions and identifications, in Reddy's attempt to constitute a new ethical whole, as she recreates and restores a sense of community destroyed by apartheid. Drawing from the peculiar socio-political aspects of living in South Africa as a rich narrative resource, she presents life situations confronting persons of all population groups.

In 'The Slumbering Spirit' is about a young Coloured boy named Terry who grows in confidence and self-awareness through the love and attention from a surrogate mother. It is set in the period before the group Areas Act divided the different race groups, and there was a neighbourhood of Coloureds, Indians and Whites and Chinese living together. Terry's family are sceptical of his friendship with a White woman, but Terry appreciates that the woman has time for a young person such as he, lost in a large family of ten:

Miss Anderson had given him something, something more precious than anything material. Years later, he was to recognise it for what it really was. But standing there in the cool night air, with a lift of the heart, he remembered a gentle old woman on a sun-warmed stoop. She had given him time and friendship, and something else which his fourteen-year-old mind was too young to analyse. It was awakening, an awakening of the slumbering spirit to mutual sharing and communication and sympathetic understanding and that was something he would carry with him for a lifetime (120).

The picture of a loving woman, as depicted in 'The Slumbering spirit' (19), is similar to the kind of neighbours Reddy herself had when her family lived in Hampson Court. In her autobiography Reddy notes that 'the woman of the house, a plump motherly woman, loved children, even though she had four of her own' (19). As pointed out earlier, Reddy is also loved and affirmed by the women in her family—

her grandmother, aunts and her mother. She understands well the transfiguring effect that such love can have on an individual.

Reddy takes a critical view of those who show race and class prejudice. She portrays complex inter-race relationships, as in the short story, 'Two Friends'. In this short story, the 'madam', Sadhana, who is married for eleven years, is trapped in a boring marriage. She indulges in watching films on television to pass the time away. Her domestic employee, Bessie, brings her little daughter, Phumza, to work, and Asha, Sadhana's daughter, and Phumza become 'two friends'. Asha, who seems angry at being neglected by her mother, tramples her doll, while Phumza looks on with horror, especially since she nurtures a secret desire to own a golden-haired doll of her own. Phumza nurses the doll, putting it on her back 'in the manner of generations of African mothers' (110). She is bonding with the 'child' in a way that Sadhana does not seem capable of in relation to her daughter. When Asha sees this she demands her doll back, and Bessie, all too aware of the limits of a 'friendship' tempered by class and race differences, tells her daughter to return the doll. Sadhana, in the meantime, watches the scene with amused detachment, and is unable to see that she is caught in a conflict in which she is both estranged and estranging. She is oblivious to the inter-implicative bond between master/madam and servant, self and other, and the way this is played out between her and Bessie and their children. Bessie's silence and acquiescence shows her in the role of non-person or subaltern, and Reddy is suggesting a racial and class polarity that prevents a sisterhood across these oppressions.

The short story, 'The Stolen Hours', also depicts the experiences of a domestic employee, who dreams of wearing a much-coveted dress owned by her employer. The employee wears the dress when the family are away on holiday, and spends a few glorious hours imagining herself in another world. Domestic employees, mainly African women, with no institutional other to oppress, are a permanent underclass, and Reddy is conscious of their plight. In her autobiography, she speaks a great deal about her relationship with her domestic employees (102), as she is dependent on them. She also describes her own reservations and prejudices, although in her short stories, she transcends them. (It is worth noting that Rosemary, mentioned in the autobiography, still works in the Reddy home at Clare Estate, and is the housekeeper for the brother Mags.)

Reddy does not confine her short stories to experience peculiar to Indians (as is generally true of her autobiography), but is also able to write imaginatively and emphatically of relationships among Africans themselves. In her short story, 'The Love Beads', the typical love triangle is given a new twist. Jacob, a rickshaw driver, is involved in an accident, and taken to hospital, where he meets Mandy, a nurse. In a world of hardship and impoverishment, and separated from his wife by apartheid laws, he feels a strong attraction to the nurse—'her sweetness reminded him of the

sweetness of swiftly flowing streams. Her warmth was like the warmth of the sun in winter, gentle and welcome' (Reddy 1987:22). He luxuriates in the attention he receives at the hospital, and imagines fleetingly that he is falling in love with Mandy. He soon comes to realise that the nurse is going to get married, and that he has to live his own life, and value what he has. He begins to appreciate his wife's faithfulness and gentleness towards him, fingering the love beads, of red, yellow and black, given to him by her: 'He fingered the beads absently. Then he realised what an important link the beads were between his life in the city and his life in the Transkei. It was a link that was umbilical' (Reddy 1987:23).

### Gendered Spaces and Identity: Living in the Yard

In Reddy's writings, identity is spatially defined not only in terms of race, but also of gender. In Reddy's autobiography there are descriptions of racially separate spaces, but in many instances these are also gendered spaces, with their own 'female subculture'. When the family moved to Clare Estate, Reddy describes a striking picture of communal life, of 'living in the yard', a common space between homes that is usually used for social interaction. 'The yard' is at once a private and public space—private, as it is peripheral to dominant white places, and public, as it provides interaction for those who are marginalised. It is also a gendered space, where women gather together to converse or pursue domestic tasks traditionally assigned to them. Reddy describes the daily, ordinary routine and rituals of Indian women who are juxtaposed in such communal spaces.

In the autobiography there are vivid scenes of women working at daily, ordinary, gendered chores—winnowing rice, cooking on open fires, cleaning vegetables or preparing sheep heads for consumption (Reddy bemoans the fact that a scene of the sheep-singeing was left out of her script [*Web of Persuasion*] when it was sent for publication. It is likely that this was seen as too 'culturally idiosyncratic' for western readers. It is also referred to in the short story, 'Market Days'). Life revolves around food, and with this, the sharing of taboos, such as those pertaining to the eating of pork and beef. We read of an itinerant seamstress, with her treadle sewing machine, who periodically becomes the focus of attention. Modern luxuries are sparse, with all the neighbours using the only fridge in the yard. In the need to survive, women play a central role, and act, as usual, as stabilisers of communal living. During their time together they share gossip, but also details of their own personal lives, of abuse or disappointment.

In relation to the yard-space, Brinda Mehta ponders on a 'reconfiguring of the politics of the household' in her interesting analysis of the Indo-Caribbean home. Mehta argues that 'serving as community space, the yard also provides the necessary space to establish a centre for political and social advising for women, resembling a

village panchayat or council...Female power is thus located in the dual capacity to negotiate one's way through the inner machinations of the home as well as through life's forces, represented by the yard and its capacity to function as a microcosm of a more global, external exchange' (Mehta 1997:10).

These liminal, communal spaces, then, help women create, shape, modify and claim identity. Are these recuperative spaces as Kathleen Komar suggests, enclosed female spaces, reminiscent of the womb? Are they seen as places of confinement in which women are contained and separated from male social space (Komar 1994:91)? In Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight*, the kitchen becomes the space where the women meet and strategise about dealing with the world. While recuperative in terms of gender and class, it also provides community in the face of a dehumanising public life in terms of race. Dorothy Driver notes that the 'search for a self-constituting community is important because of the damage done to Black South Africans in an apartheid culture' (Driver 1990:232). This is particularly so for Black women, given their marginalisation at several levels.

Yet, in the closed communal context we see an eclipsing of any introspective, psychological probing of living in a segregated society. Goonam is only able to claim a critical, interpretive voice against such alienation from the wider South African community when she has moved out of the false security of a confined racially-constructed communal space. And Phyllis Naidoo appropriates an apartheid goal as the liberatory space for the creation and celebration of racial solidarity and a sense of community with persons of different racial groups.

It is this implicit critique of racialised and gendered spaces that makes Reddy in her short stories, in contrast to her autobiography, depict a wider and more intricate canvas of social relations in the context of racial and gender divisions. The women in Reddy's autobiography are resilient and assertive, supporting their men in decisions that have to be made. In her short stories a more complex picture of women in domestic spaces emerges; they are found in varying and diverse social relationships, some stifling and others liberating. The women may be seen as struggling between individualistic inclinations to be free and independent, and traditional, conservative influences that pin them down. There is a negotiation and appropriation of private, gendered spaces, or an attempt to transcend their confines to recreate female identity.

The dire effects of the changing times on family and communal relationships are alluded to constantly. In 'The Spirit of Two Worlds', seething conflict between an older, conservative mother-in-law and a younger, modern, daughter-in-law develops. Reddy draws on the narrow conformity and claustrophobic atmosphere of the extended family, or kutum, the gendered roles that are usually assumed in these domestic contexts, and the pressures, both internal and external, that come to bear upon it. The story takes us into the world of South Africa's cramped council-house

and tenement living. Sharda, the daughter-in-law, longs to be independent, to live on her own, and to go out to work. She wishes to claim an alternative space, both literally and metaphorically.

Family life is centred in the domineering matriarchal figure of the mother-in-law, who expects compliance. The mother-in-law works hard to keep the family together, running a market stall in the city, and resisting any threat to a carefully constructed and 'stable' sense of family. Her own work outside the home is based on sheer survival; she cannot understand why her daughter-in-law should choose to work to escape 'boredom'. A state of boredom, the mother-in-law reflects, is surely a modern disease: 'Her mind went back over the years searching for something which remotely resembled this malady, but there was nothing. There had been hardships, countless sacrifices which had been made willingly, much pain and heart-break and some rare and memorable moments of joy and happiness, but never boredom' (11). After the son and daughter-in-law leave to make an independent home, and their first child arrives, the mother relents, thereby preserving the ritual bonds of the extended family.

In her TV drama, 'The Web of Persuasion', Reddy explores this question of women's independence in the face of traditional constraints. The play, deftly juxtaposing the old world and a new emerging one, begins with several conversations among guests at the scene of an Indian wedding. There is a stark contrast between the conversations of the adults and those of their children. The women talk of the way children behave 'these days'; they recall how weddings were conducted previously, and of the times when there was more land for the joint family system. They are conscious of differences in linguistic preferences, wealth and even complexion—'best to marry your own kind' (4).

Mrs Singh wishes for an arranged marriage for her daughter Indira, while Indira prefers, instead, to go to university to study law. The mother asserts, 'I know what is best for you and my plans are made' (7). Indira sees the way her sister-in-law is trapped in an unhappy marriage. 'I want to enjoy my life before I'm tied down to a husband and children'. When the two families meet and the ritual of serving the tea is endured, Indira begins to realise that Anil, the 'arranged' suitor, feels just as uncomfortable as she does about the whole affair. The two resist their family's overtures, and find that they could be friends by fighting a tradition that is mindlessly perpetuated. 'My mother is doing what her mother did, and her mother. Daughters must be married off. I wish I were a man' (18).

Indira wishes to assert her independence. 'I'm not a parcel to be wrapped up and handed over as a gift, Ma. I have a mind. I have feelings and I have a right to choose .... If you wanted to sell me for the best offer you should have kept me in purdah' (25). The mother is the voice of tradition, sectarianism and patriarchy: 'Rights, rights. You talk about rights. You are a child. You are a girl, and you are a

Hindu' (25). Indira tries to run away, but is resigned in the end to her marriage, when she is presented with two options only, accepting the partner that has been chosen for her, or being abandoned to a life of loneliness, thereby bringing 'disgrace' to the family. The play ends with the prospect of the two, Indira and her husband, beginning to understand each other, and accommodating each other's ambitions.

In the short story 'A Time to Yield', however, a woman's resistance is not accommodated but transformed into acquiescence. We witness a domestic scene before a wedding day, mainly among the chief women players of the occasion—bride, her mother, sister, and grandmother. Zainab, the young bride, is experiencing doubt, anger, reluctance, bitterness, and dread, at the prospect of being forced into marriage against her wishes. The rest of the women around her play ambiguous roles, forcing her to be submissive, to endure, and accept her lot, in the hope that she will be happy, that love will grow during the marriage. And inverted sisterhood is evident as pressure is exerted on the bride to adapt, to acquiesce. For women caught between tradition and modernity, and seen as the pillars in social relations, conformity and compliance is the expedient route. Here Reddy writes of the restlessness, the conflict and anxiety that women experience over traditional roles, but does not depict outright revolt. However, in the short story, 'Celebration', Shamala the female protagonist embroiled in a suffocating marriage, realises that she can give the story of her life a different ending if she wills it. Beginning a new life by transforming the gender identity imposed on her is her 'celebration'.

### Conclusion: Infirmity, Identity, Writing, Voice and Power

Reddy's autobiography is about a self concerned primarily with its own physical handicap and disease. In her autobiography she constantly returns to the problem of her helplessness. Yet hers is also a powerful story of the overcoming of the body's infirmity and helplessness, of claiming power, through carving out an identity as a writer. The power and influence that she claims is not social (her passing away in 1996 went almost unnoticed), economic or political, but moral. Visweswaran argues that identities are constructed by power:

Autobiographies are, of course, fictions of the self, but in my view, this emphasis on pluralism leads to a notion of 'trying on identities', which obscures the fact that identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically constituted (Visweswaran 1994:8).

Reddy's life shows a struggle against any such deterministic, 'historically constituted' identities that might have been conferred on her, especially in view of her physical

condition. While very different from other women writers in respect of her physical disability, there is still an interesting resemblance between Reddy and the other South African women autobiographers that have emerged of late; these writers validate their experiences through writing and gaining narrative control and discursive power, writing of the very experiences that were marginalised by apartheid history. The political role of autobiography for South African women writers that Jane Watts (1987:115) spells is, I believe, a view that has direct bearing on Reddy's writings:

Autobiography is the South African writers' answer to ... interference with their consciousness—they use it to try to reverse the conditioning process in order to free themselves, through reassessment of their entire growth and development, of their mental subjugation, to remake their consciousness .... Writing becomes a request for reassurance that they in fact have an identity, that they have rescued the fragments and shards of a personality from the systematic official attempt to eradicate it.

South African Black women writers have used the genre of autobiography to recreate identity. We see this explicit political purpose through 'life-writing' in Black women's autobiographies such as those of Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* (1991), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), and Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Women* (1985). Jane Watts sees the autobiography as a 'self-making process' for the South African Black writer. She points out that it is 'a means by which they can find the balance between themselves and the outside world and investigate that tension between the subjective and objective that orders our whole life' (Watts 1987:114). We notice in Reddy's case that it is through her identity as a writer, an identity that is part of and an extension of her 'life-writing', that she is able to transcend the constrictions of disabled/racialised/gendered spaces, the circumscribed spaces that she as a Black woman with a physical disability is forced to endure.

What is evident, then, in Reddy's writing, both autobiographical and imaginative, is an implicit womanist, rather than a feminist, interpretation of her experiences and the world. Laura Donaldson (1992:21) points out that womanism 'affirms the interweaving of oppressions and incorporates sexual, racial, cultural, national, and economic considerations into any politics of reading'. This calls for a constant re-reading and interrogation of the 'politics of location'. Moving beyond the narrow individualism that is typical of Western autobiography, and showing, in Donna Haraway's (see Pfeil 1994:211) words, 'a different normative genealogy for women's liberation' than mainstream feminism, the 'paradigm of the self' (Friedman 1988:46) that Reddy creates and recreates in *The Unbending Reed* emphasises a relational feminine self. Such 'cultural autobiography' (Friedman 1988:43) is

inevitable for Black women such as Reddy who developed a sense of self that is inseparable from her sense of community—as she defined it, and was defined and constructed. In engaging in a powerful and persuasive 'politics of articulation' both in her life and in her writing, and 'in representing elements of the 'self', which are considered 'other' by dominant systems of representation [we see] that an act of reclamation, empowerment and self-definition occurs' (Parmar 1990:116).

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## Literary Theory— The Long and the Very Short of It

Damian Garside

### Review Article

*Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

by Jonathan Culler

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For those of us in the literary studies 'game' who grow ever more baffled, if not outright scared, by the plethora of material being produced on literary theory every year the title of this book could not be more appealing. Is there not perhaps a hidden promise of the quick overnight 'fix' that will miraculously resolve all anxieties about this abstrusely conceptual, and often horribly philosophical area that those in the discipline find themselves increasingly forced to venture into in order to be sure that they and their ideas are still current and still making good academic 'sense'?

Culler's, book which is suspiciously about the same length, breadth and thickness of the dreaded and despised undergraduate's study guide (fitting snugly into the average sized top pocket of a shirt or bomber jacket), certainly bucks what would appear to be the current trend towards the mega-collection, a prime example of which would be the recently published anthology of theoretical material edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (1998). This all-inclusive 1000 page plus solid tome, which constitutes the absolute polar opposite to Culler's book on the literary theory book size spectrum, contains everything under the sun from Marx and Hegel, through Bakhtin and Horkheimer/Adorno to Malcolm McClaren and would seem to be an indispensable addition to the libraries of all those readers who are interested in literary theory or need to acquaint themselves with a representative slice or sample of theoretical writing that includes many of the most seminal pieces of analysis or inquiry. For quite different reasons, they should also think seriously about Culler's book, whose great merits (and minor failings) I hope to present in the course of this

review—never sacrificing depth for accessibility, it would make a useful addition to any literary student's or literary academic's library of indispensable theory texts. It certainly should not be dismissed out of hand—which might be the initial reaction of those who pride themselves on their knowledge of the terrain. Theorists and analysts of the postmodern (many of whom have, or believe they have, acquired the status of intellectual gurus) might be tempted to see in a work of such abbreviation, yet another troubling 'sign' of the consumer commodification of the academic world, the equivalent of such postmodern phenomena as the two-minute media byte, and the theme parking of cultural history, here taking the shape of a rather opportunistic exploitation of a particular market (undergraduates in literary studies flummoxed by the now inescapably theoretical bent of the field, as the 'monster' that is literary theory becomes an ever more important component of literary studies at even its most basic level).

Notoriously difficult to write, as I am sure many of us know all too well, introductions can be problematical—since it is the natural assumption of a reader that they point towards greater knowledge, in part the greater knowledge of an author who feels we are not up to encountering the main course, the thing itself: hard theory, at this stage. Pointing the reader on that road, (and for this reason they have to be very reader-centred) they can have a dangerous power, since they are likely to shape and frame reader attitudes for years to come. For this reason I am glad that Culler's introduction is nothing if not balanced and level-headed, qualities that he has managed to combine with an ability to be imaginative and innovative in his approach to conceptual issues and problems in the field. As his text proves: the subject, Literature, needs a theory that is prepared to move or think laterally: that it can be fluid and flexible enough to articulate a sense of what this most fluid, flexible and open-ended institution/ phenomenon can achieve. If it is in the nature of the subject, Literature, to demand innovativeness and subtlety from its theory (and theorists) then Culler certainly does not disappoint: innovativeness is the book's most impressive feature. This quality proves to be particularly important in allowing Culler to articulate a finely balanced both-and /neither-nor 'double' sense of Literature, of theory and of the relationship between them, which allows him to avoid the pitfalls of the usual chronological accounts, as well as the kind of ideological bias that has sometimes marred Terry Eagleton's forays into this area.

Whilst there is nothing in Culler even remotely like the polemicism we find barely beneath the surface of Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Culler's and Eagleton's texts share a common appraisal of the corrective capacity, and for this reason the necessity of theory, particularly in confirming the constructedness and relativity of the notions of social identity that are so often 'naturalized' as part of the strategies of ideological dominance. Culler's sense of the possible abuse of theory as 'a source of intimidation' and 'resource for constant

upstagings' does produce the book's one moment of satirical inflection, as he mocks the unfortunate prescriptivism heard all too often in seminar and common rooms around the world:

'What? you haven't read Lacan! How can you talk about the lyric without addressing the specular constitution of the speaking subject/ Or 'how can you write about the Victorian novel without using Foucault's account of the deployment of sexuality and the hystericization of women's bodies and Gayatri Spivak's demonstration of the role of colonialism in the construction of the metropolitan subject? (p15)

Ultimately such voices do the discipline no favours. Discourse is power—and Foucault's analyses (that is simultaneously a critique) of discourse as power has with no small irony itself become a pretty potent power discourse for some upwardly mobile academic autocrats.

In my view, what we have in Culler's book is an instance where condensation and precision go hand-in-hand, producing a very small volume that is paradoxically (at times astonishingly so), a work of synthesis, one however that does not claim to answer all the questions, and in no way appears to wish to deny or limit the object of its inquiry. In fact, it presents a whole new re-contextualisation of Literature which emphasises literature as a 'paradoxical' institution, its own both-and/ neither-nor 'double' (to use the term I used earlier). The way he defines Literature raises all sorts of interesting issues/ questions and avenues for further thought and inquiry. On page 27 we are told that literature is 'an institutional label that gives us reason to expect that the results of our reading efforts will be 'worth it' (one can almost sense the Zen master's knowing smile at the impatient young deconstructionist desperate to see the text crack under the pressure of his desiccating intellect, and to observe its semiotic codes unravel, thrillingly unfold with the speed of a computer printout. On page 41 he tells us (and this should be taken as a salutary warning) that literature is as much cultural 'noise' as it is cultural information.

However one defines literature one should always err on the side of the hopelessly open-ended and totally implausible. As Culler points out—literature gives its name to both the utterly conventional *and* to the utterly disruptive. It is the only place where a Jane Austen and a Jean Genet can be said to have anything in common. And where, as readings change and new times and fashions give their own sense to literary texts, yesterday's prim and proper New England spinster, can become the unrepentantly Dionysian Madame de Sade of Amerhurst<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See Camille Paglia's potent re-reading of Emily Dickenson's 'Sadean' poetry in the final chapter of *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson* (1992).

In articulating these positions (informed by a sense of the excessive and resistant qualities of language and linguistic meaning) Culler produces gem-like moments of incisiveness as he cuts through those standard old issues and debates that have outlived their usefulness<sup>2</sup>. His philosophical sensitivity to language<sup>3</sup> and to the way in which theoretical problems simply dissolve in the face of linguistic understanding reminds me of Wittgenstein, a problem-dissolving philosopher whose best work also tended to appear in slight volumes. Culler ventures into an area that seems peculiar to Wittgenstein when he presents the idea of the 'game' of Literature—that to play the (language) game of Literature one has to accept the symbolical and the paradoxical and eschew the literal and the obvious. Thus to answer the question 'what is Hamlet about?' in a way that *doesn't* immediately refer to symbolic meaning/ psychological truth or ideological forces shows that you are not versed in the rules of this particular game.

To put the matter of Culler's brevity less philosophically, what has allowed him to produce so self-consciously slim an introduction to literary theory is that he has simply trimmed off all the fat—avoiding all the non-issues and non-questions and cutting to the chase (or rather, to what he perceives the chase to be). Unerringly, Culler homes in on the crucial questions (of a philosophical, political or institutional nature) that have been posed by the impact of the new on established notions. The net achievement is surely to get readers (many of whom will be undergraduate students) to think more critically and self-reflexively about the wider issues that relate to the study of Literature and the reading and interpretation of literary texts. In an ideal universe (which contains at least one dedicated undergraduate student who reads and thinks, per university course per university) this will at least incline (inspire being no longer in the teacher's lexicon) students to raise their own questions of meaning and relevance. One of the more crucial questions regarding the continued status and meaning of Literature emerges from his analysis of the relationship between the study of Literature (since the advent of New Criticism characterised by the practice of 'close reading') and the developing field of Cultural Studies with its more natural

<sup>2</sup> An example of such a false issue would be the issue of the 'inside' versus the 'outside' of Literature, that Tony Bennett addresses with such rigidity (dare I say monolithic brutality?) in *Outside Literature* (1990). The issue collapses as Culler finds his own neither/ nor solution: 'sometimes the object has features that make it literary but sometimes it is the literary context that makes us treat it as literature' (p 27).

<sup>3</sup> The philosophical astuteness on display here is largely a product of Culler's use of the ideas of two key contemporary philosophers. At a number of points Culler makes clear his indebtedness to the feminist philosopher Juliet Butler, and Anthony Appiah, the philosopher of language.

inclination towards sociological and semiotic perspectives. Culler raises the issue (and it is also clearly a concern) that if this intrinsic skill of close reading, the practice that really defines the study of Literature as something distinctive, is lost or excluded, then the discipline will become little more than a branch of sociology.

Thus whereas Culler has clearly sacrificed any kind of breadth, the same cannot, surprisingly, be said for depth as he presents a cohesive, convincing, a thoroughly level-headed narrative of such a wide and constantly burgeoning field as it pursues its major focus, what he characterises as being 'the major shifts in interpretation brought about by shifts in theoretical discourses'.

True to his concern with literary theory as 'a force in institutions' rather than 'a disembodied set of ideas' (p. 123) Culler has structured his text around the key questions and areas of debate within literary theory, producing a volume that does not attempt to present any kind of survey of modern or contemporary literary theories, though it does include a useful appendix of theoretical schools and movements. Culler shows that theory is a term that not only has a history and a politics, but is something ingrained. For Culler theory (all theory, not just literary theory) involves a process of challenge, debate and revision, it is a process that is never complete, and which should never take itself for granted<sup>4</sup>:

Theory then offers not a set of solutions but the prospect of further thought. It calls for commitment to the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you proceed (p. 122)

Yet, if for Culler it is quite clear that the tried and trusted old assumptions no longer hold, that nothing can be taken for granted and that everything has to be argued for, I also sense to some degree, an inclination to treat the new orthodoxies in the same way. Readers may be surprised at my arriving at this conclusion since Culler would seem to take so much of the new orthodoxies on board. However, he never gives us the impression of feeling constrained to mouth the usual post-Saussurean platitudes. The case of how he uses Saussure is indicative: Saussure is presented as the 'place' where people approaching theory for the first time need to re-orientate themselves, and yet having made this fairly predictable (if not unavoidable) first move, he starts to make all kinds of innovative and imaginative applications and extensions of the very arguments and material that seemed so staid and unexciting in that dull classic *Structuralist Poetics* (if anyone still uses this text to teach structuralist theory I would be most surprised!) (1975). That Culler's status as one of the gurus of Structuralist Theory remains undiminished is evidenced by the fact that Culler wrote the

<sup>4</sup> Here Culler has much in common with Terry Eagleton.

introduction to the section in Rivkin and Ryan devoted to Structuralism ('Structuralism and Linguistics'), the only other 'guest' to provide an introduction to a particular section being Louis Montrose (for the section devoted to historicist modes of interpretation).

Consequently, what we have here is a text in which Culler's skill as a taxonomist underpins his philosophical acumen and imaginative insight as he mixes standard 'new' positions and very innovative applications and extensions of this thinking. Particularly impressive is his use of the concept of performative language something that is also explored with exciting results by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (1995), to produce what is in effect, something of a redefinition of Literature—a redefinition that asserts the value and significance of this artistic/communicative form. He asserts that, as performative, Literature 'takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world' (p. 98). In the chapter on performative language, the significance of which I have already attested to, his theory of poetical 'extravagance' is a gem, and his exploration of the theoretical *aporia* between poem as verbal structure and poem as event is most stimulating for any reader interested in poetry as both form and phenomenon.

This would come as something of a surprise to the reader after the much more predictable tack of the first few pages where Culler assumes what may not seem to be but are in fact by now very conventional stances—as when in the first chapter 'What is Theory' he presents a very potted history of representation in Western Philosophy from the obligatory 'already-deconstructed by Derrida' post-structuralist perspective. This is of course the starting point that we would expect a deconstructive elucidator to take. As is the case with philosophical issues, the implications from an in-house dispute about the old Platonic distinction between appearance and reality can have enormous implications from practices in the conceptual frameworks of other disciplines. One small step for Derrida, this metaphysical exercise in deconstructing Rousseau's notion of writing as 'supplement' one giant leap for literary-lecturer kind. Derrida makes a very early entry into the text (first mentioned on p. 2 and then dealt with more substantively on p. 5), and Foucault enters on p. 9 (re his analysis of the relationship between power and sexuality, and the extreme denaturalisation of the idea of the sexual). Culler makes the case for the striking difference between them, the one concentrating on texts, as theorist of the literary in theory, the other concentrating on social practices and formations as the revealer of the power strategies of discourse.

As he runs through the possible (and limited) definitions of the term 'Literature'—from the Russian Formalist/Prague Structuralist notion of 'Literature as the "foregrounding" of language', through to 'Literature as Fiction', as 'aesthetic object' and as 'intertextual/self-reflexive construct', the strengths and limits of these perspectives are demonstrated in shedding light on the idea of the literary. No quick

and final answers are provided: the Formalist and Structuralist positions who positions on the issue of the distinctiveness and difference of Literature as a category could not be further apart are explored, but are rejected in favour of a perspective that addresses the issue of readers, social/institutional conventions and of the way Literature (or what sets out to be received as Literature) is received and the uses to which it is put. Here another hard-line absolutism is neatly avoided—that of Tor Bennett's rigid contextualism (which we can paraphrase as 'the meaning of a literary text = the use/uses to which it is put'). The clear inference to be drawn is that no perspective is ever complete—that all we can hope for is an interesting and stimulating partiality that will always lead elsewhere. For Culler the incompleteness of theory is not only the reason for its pervasiveness, but is its entire *raison d'être*. It is also the reason why theory and Literature can have a harmonious marriage—because they are both so 'free'. The incompleteness of theory suits what he sees as Literature's 'Entropic', 'resistant' and 'paradoxical' qualities (see p. 41). Paradox (not in the limited sense of the term that is cursed by its association with American New Criticism) proves in Culler's adept hands to be a way of cutting through some of the thornier conundrums in literary theory—his convincing, rather 'lateral' analysis of literary universals being a prime example.

Following the chapters in which he analyses the relationship between Literature and cultural studies, Culler moves on to deal with issues of language meaning and interpretation. After this we have the two chapters dealing with genre both of which assert the primacy of literary modes or devices in all discursive practices, including the decidedly non-literary (metaphor being the focus of the first of these two chapters, and narrative the second). This is the most conveniently overlooked of all the major claims made by post-structuralist theory: Derrida's big point about the pervasiveness of the metaphorical and rhetorical strategies of writing in all textual/discursive practices (formalising much of what Nietzsche had presented with characteristic energy in his aphoristic critiques of the rationalist style and content of philosophy). The logical conclusion here is one that seems to inform Culler's book at a fundamental level: Literature is not peripheral, its strategies are inescapable, ingrained in the very nature of language.

Culler's deep identification with this line of thought gives the book a nice self-reflexive quality: having made an important contribution to the field of literary theory in the ways that I have suggested, and all within less than 150 pages, the book would as a narrative achievement, seem to embody its own observations regarding the ubiquitousness and significance of narrative strategies.

In the closing chapters Culler covers the familiar Althusserian/Lacanian/Foucauldian ground of subjectivity and identity. Whilst the chapter dealing with the latter (entitled 'Identity, Identification and the Subject') is nothing like as pivotal to Culler's book as the equivalent chapters in Bennett and Royle's are to their

construction of the central issues of the field, Culler moves in a similar direction towards the notion that psychological identification/ projection is the key not only to understanding the process whereby texts are read and textual meanings produced, but also provides an important perspective on the moral debates that surround Literature, primarily in relation to the concern with the way in which it affects its readers (a concern that goes right back to Plato's Republic). However 'balanced' an account he wishes to present, Culler subscribes to the view that rather than being a conservative or reactionary force or institution, Literature is something whose natural tendencies are towards challenging, provoking and subverting the established and accepted—and as such is more likely to align itself with liberal and radical forms of thinking. After his discussion of the diametrically opposed positions on the politics of Literature on their merits we are left feeling that it is right to be more inclined towards seeing literary texts as sites of resistance rather than forces for compliance, that because of the presence of the potentially subversive extensions and applications of the text's tendency to constitute an expression of the uncanny/ indefinable/ excessive/ undecidable, the default position should be one in which we expect and look for qualities that confound, if not actively resist, the stereotypical values and perceptions of the social and political elite, even if this elite should control the means of literary production.

On the negative side, Culler's book does not situate itself adequately enough in relation to the issues that surround Literature and its theory, not so much in relation to each other (he is, as I hope to have suggested, very good on this score) but in relation to the wider socio-cultural world, particularly a world that is developing in particular economic and cultural directions that are associated with the terms 'postmodern' and 'late-capitalist'. Here a contrast with the Rivkin and Ryan anthology to which I have previously referred, is both useful and salutary. Whereas Rivkin and Ryan's attempt to be as inclusive as possible, and to focus on the question of the interface/ dialogue/ dialectic between theory and socio-cultural reality, Culler's view of literary theory does seem removed from the practicalities of life and politics, for all its commendable openness, and despite its commitment to post-Saussurean problematisations of notions of finality and completeness. The inclusiveness that Rivkin and Ryan have made every effort to achieve gives the reader a strong sense of, and with this an appreciation of, the postmodern social context that theory cannot help addressing and is inevitably a part of<sup>5</sup>. In the light of this shortcoming, it is a

<sup>5</sup> Of particular importance here is the debate over the continued significance of theory in a postmodern world where everything is changing with ever increasing rapidity (and thus there is no time to step back and pause to make critical judgements and assessments) and where with the total saturation of the social environment by the image, particularly the electronic image, the whole Western notion of a distinction

pity that Culler did not at least give a nod towards the dissident figures in literary studies who challenge the contribution that theory has made to what they themselves characterise as our postmodern/ late-capitalist socio-cultural malaise. My intuition is that there is much common ground between these critiques and the thinking that informs Culler's 'packaging' of the field. Perhaps the reason for this silence is Culler's optimism, grounded in an implicit faith that his own openness and generosity towards Literature is shared by academic colleagues working in the same field (some of whom I fear would like nothing better than to see Literature deconstructed out of existence, no longer a recalcitrant and reactionary obstacle to the logic of utopian solutions). Culler's readers should at least have been left with an inkling that the situation in literary theory and in the literary academic world is not always as rosy as his book suggests. Not all literary theorists and critics approach their subject with such openness and generosity.

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between appearance and reality, between the copy and the original begins to founder. Baudrillard and the theorists most influenced by his thinking such as Hebdige and Jameson have focussed upon the implications of this development for our rapidly disappearing theory-confident modernist/industrial world.

## What about the Audience? Silences in *Voicing the Text*

Priya Narismulu

### Review Article

*Voicing the Text*

by Duncan Brown

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### Introduction: 'assumptions ... which run counter to our own'

In *Voicing the Text*, Duncan Brown examines expressions of oral literature from the /Xam Bushmen, the praises of Shaka, the hymns of Shembe, Ingoapele Madingoane's Black Consciousness-inspired 'proemdra', and the performance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. Brown's aim is to

re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen, through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianized oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s (1).

This is laudable even though I have reservations about the stereotype 'Soweto poetry' (which will be addressed later). Brown contends that 'there is currently almost no recognition of the place of oral literature in poetic or literary histories of South Africa' (31). He draws on the critics Terry Eagleton, Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias to argue that

the crucial questions for criticism become: what does the text seek to accomplish in the spheres of social and political action, and how does it accomplish this (by what rhetorical features/formal strategies)? (18).

This is an interesting position in South African literary studies and there is more

clarity in the author's statement of the 'moral purpose' of the study:

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. This study therefore has a particular moral purpose ... it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history (2f).

Despite these intentions Brown fails to deal with the fundamental question of the language of the text/ performance and the issue of the reader's/ critic's facility, and the impact these have on interpretation and analysis. Yet in the first chapter of *Voicing the Text* Brown cites some interesting points raised by Ntongela Masilela in 1987:

[T]he arrival and construction of South African literature in English on the cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literatures in African languages, which had been in existence for millennia in South Africa. At the moment this literature exists in a state of temporary defeat. It is a literature whose natural evolution has been disrupted and momentarily sidetracked. As the hidden consequences of the present political and social crisis are beginning to indicate, especially on the cultural plane, the relationship between our literature in English and our indigenous literature in the African languages will have to be re-examined and redefined in post-revolutionary or post-apartheid South Africa (37)

However, Brown seems to be unaware, even in the post-apartheid state, of the issue of language that is the focus of Masilela's argument. Brown does not deal with the problem of language difference that is central to the study of South African literature and inescapable in the study of oral literature. Nowhere in this scholarly work does the writer address the challenges and limitations of working with translations (with a glaring exception early in the third chapter). Instead, the position and operation of an English-speaking critic on African language literature is treated as being natural and unproblematic. The author's failure to register the significance of such an issue is of concern to any reader and particularly to scholars. As a person who uses English as a first language although it is not my mother tongue, it is perhaps easier for me to be alert to the assumptions involved in such a practice.

The silence around language difference is quite interesting considering that Brown is in agreement with Barber and Moraes de Farias' position regarding the interdisciplinary nature of oral literature:

my concern is to combine a sociology with a poetics of oral literature, as Barber and Moraes de Farias suggest, and I read the textuality of *izibongo* as integral to its social function (80).

It is curious how a scholar may be alert to the need for dialogue between discipline but be unaware of the need for dialogue between languages (which are structured as disciplines at universities), even as various texts are being used in translation. Given the history of colonial and settler language policies and practices in South Africa this is even more surprising. And, to take the author at his claim, how can one argue that he reads 'the textuality of *izibongo* as integral to its social function', while avoiding the medium of language altogether?

The silence around the issue of language is intimately linked to the question of audience. And this is the crux of the problem. The question that has been haunting South African literature for decades is that of the identity of its audience. A few poets and critics of the 1970s and 1980s attempted to deal with the issue, but their work was largely marginalised. Even today the question of audience tends to be part of the unconscious contradiction of critical texts that try to remedy some shortcoming or travesty in academic practice. *Voicing the Text* demonstrates this through a deep-rooted failure to engage with this question at all, as the century tries to close on the effects of our divisions as a society.

In the Introduction Brown informs the reader that the second chapter examines 'how Zulu praise poetry of this kind speaks to us now' (28). This is an important issue. However, the author does not query his own position as a reader. He seems to assume that 'we' are homogeneous. Who 'we' might be is problematic, particularly in a text that steadfastly fails to acknowledge the writer's specific subject position but instead universalises it by default. Further, the word 'we' does not only privilege the author's position but also echoes the hegemonic 'we' of academic discourse. Given the structure of South African universities<sup>1</sup> this has the effect of

<sup>1</sup> It is the structure of South African universities that authorises Brown's comfortable use of the term 'we' and prevents him from seeing the flaw in his argument. I have written elsewhere about the widespread assumption among intellectuals [who think] of themselves as the 'natural' audience of literature, as exemplified by Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community' (1980). Such a position is produced through the tactical delimitation of the noun 'community' as the conservative liberals tried, in Bourdieu's terms, to impose the norms of their own perception, i.e. to be perceived as they perceive themselves (Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:19). In this way, questions regarding the source of interpretive authority are circumvented, and authority devolves as if by default upon a tiny intellectual coterie which constitutes itself as 'universal', transparent and ahistorical, but which tended to be white, male, middle-

marginalising the African audiences that receive the praises in performance and privileging white professional readers. Whether intended or not the argument has the effect of hijacking the oral texts. The absence of reflexivity and the neutralisation of the role of the professional reader have become so entrenched in South African academia that such practices have to be challenged even in the post-apartheid context.

The issue of the audience of literature is one that is contentious in itself. Yet, although the question of audience comes up several times in the text, the writer does not seem to notice the deficiencies in his construction. In the second chapter Brown refers to the poem "'Shaka", in the form that it has reached us' (83). That there is no homogenous 'us' in this case makes the claim more disconcerting than the issue of difference. A related problem is apparent later in the same paragraph when Brown makes the following argument:

Unless we are prepared to acknowledge that in spite of the 'instabilities' of transmission, translation, and reception, we can still recreate something of a speaking voice, we are in danger of arriving at an impasse: a blocking of communication which is not inevitable but ideological, and is a legacy of the Romantic myth of essential truth that is supposed to flow directly from the artist's own individual mouth or pen (84).

The problems are more basic. Academics who work with texts in translation need to expose the operations of their disciplinary power and not mystify it through hegemonising elisions. To have credibility as intellectuals in a complex society a modicum of frankness regarding our subject positions and our limitations and challenges as readers of South African culture is necessary.

The contradictions and ironies in the following passage from the second chapter seem to escape the writer. While some of the writer's intentions are laudable, they tend to be stymied by contradictions and a failure to follow through:

The title of this chapter ('Poetry, History, Nation') is intended to reverberate against present circumstances, as the question of how we read 'Shaka' at this juncture in South African history extends beyond the problem of its

class and Anglocentric. The presumption of a fairly homogeneous audience represents a tactical disregard of the deep divisions in South African society (Narismulu 1998b:193).

While Brown tries to go beyond the ideological horizons of the conservative liberals, his treatment of the questions of language and audience suggest that he still has to deal with the cognitive challenges.

referential specificities. Placing a poem such as 'Shaka' at the centre of literary study in South Africa makes available articulations of history by those who participated in and shaped that history (113).

Given the deafening silence on the issues of language and audience the use of 'we' is curious. The challenge for progressive intellectuals at this juncture is to ensure that they do not undermine their projects through old habits of thinking. In the same paragraph Brown makes the following point:

Zulu history and social formations—particularly the kingship and aristocracy ('*amakhosi*')—have recently been mobilized by conservative organizations such as Inkatha in the cause of political power based on ethnic-separatist tactics (113).

A casual reader of the press will realise that while this may have been the case up to a decade ago, the issue is more complex in the 1990s, and Brown does a disservice to literary studies by not updating his reference base. The reader is left with the question of how Brown can claim to offer 'a more inclusive and coherent understanding of southern African literary and historical life' (36) when he has little to say about many critical issues.

Earlier in the second chapter Brown draws on an interesting point made by Jeff Opland about the office of the *imbongi*:

The *imbongi* is not paid by the chief or king, does not come from a separate caste or class, and is not designated as a poet through heredity; he (the office is reserved for men) has to earn the acclaim of the people (89).

Later, when Brown refers to the 'recitation of praise poets was featured at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President, and praises were delivered at the opening of South African's first democratic parliament' (115) the reader is intrigued, especially as there is the picture of Zolani Mkiva on the front and back covers of the book. However, Brown has little to say on the subject beyond:

There appears to be a real and continuing role for *izibongo* to advise, to criticize, and to deliver praise in modern circumstances, particularly as we seek socio-cultural institutions which are appropriate in South Africa to our changing imperatives, responsibilities, and identities (115).

And the reader wonders why the young man who has become Mandela's *imbongi* is not referred to in the text. Brown could tell us how Mkiva's role developed, the

extent to which it diverges from tradition, who engaged, legitimated and sponsored Mkiva's appearance at the inauguration, and so on. All of this is interesting but Brown misses the chance to draw the reader into the question of how the office of *imbongi* travels in modernity. It seems as though Mkiva's presence on both covers of the book is just a marketing ploy by a publisher who had a better understanding of readers' interest than the author. Brown doesn't do much justice to the *izibongo*, that 'unique form of social and aesthetic expression' (115), for the level of engagement is gestural. This is similar to the fascinating paragraph on the differences between the *imbongi* on the east and south east coasts (90), which offers no examples to consolidate the case. These are regrettable omissions.

Such gaps raise the larger problem of the second chapter, which is a good summary of other people's ideas, but there is little that is fresh, independent or insightful. There are more contentious issues in this chapter. Brown makes the point that

many Zulu speakers in KwaZulu-Natal can recite the *izibongo* of Shaka from memory because they were taught them at school as a bulwark against the 'subversive' aspirations of modernizing ideals (113f).

But Brown is conflating intention with affect while the history of the region in the last two decades suggests that a significant number of people have not subscribed to the conservative ideology propagated by the apartheid state and its allies.

Oral literature is a dynamic expression intimately connected to its audience. Its value in the field of South African literary studies is immense because it raises the question of who is the audience, an issue that has not been adequately addressed in colonialist and settler constructions of literature. Making sense of the literary production of our society requires a sensitivity to the audiences of literature and their significance. The mainstreaming of oral literature makes it difficult for literary/cultural scholars to abstract/extract literature from its material bases in the manner that other natural resources have been exploited. Academics are challenged to reorientate themselves and develop a critique of the narrow, ideological self-serving way in which literature has been constructed by some minority scholars with minority agendas. By engaging with such literary expression scholars are challenged to 'unlearn their privilege as their loss' (Spivak 1990:9) so that they can reconfigure the terrain. Brown is doing part of it, to the extent of valorising his own position but not risking it. As we participate in the broader processes of social change we learn that our literature is not to be divided along linguistic, racial or other lines. And scholars who want to make a contribution have to make the effort to learn other languages, particularly if they wish to make a serious contribution and to be taken seriously.

The deficiencies in Brown's conception of the audience of oral literature suggest a disregard not only of the significance of the audiences at the performances but a disregard for the emerging audiences of readers and critics that publicly funded academics and intellectuals are meant to be developing. Brown tends to restrict his readers to the solipsistic world of academic critics, most of whom are removed from the subject of oral literature through ideology, language, class and race. Brown fails to grasp the impact that the absence of black voices has upon his analysis. Even if colonialism clarifies the rest, has nothing happened since 1990? In Brown's writing on the *izibongo* of Shaka there is no attempt to bring English and isiZulu and black and white scholars into dialogue. The voices of black people tend to be present principally as some pre-text mediated through colonial/settler records. In Brown's representation of it, Zulu culture seems to have existed long enough to have its *izibongo* recorded by colonial figures and then became extinct. So the praises of Shaka end up telling the reader more about colonial and settler orthography than about the subject. But even that is an issue waiting to be addressed by a South African critic who has a substantive understanding of isiZulu and Zulu culture and political history up to the present.

As a scholar at the turn of the century does Brown not feel it is time to redress the historical silence in academic discourse of the people closest to the performances of the poetry? Where are the voices of such audiences and why has Brown not accessed them? Again, the flaw is in the research method that homogenises, diminishes and marginalises the African audiences of the oral performances to privilege the white/minority academic audience. And the chasm between the social and intellectual contexts of reception remains unnoticed and unvoiced. By confining himself principally to the work of intellectuals in the field Brown is restricting himself and his readers to people who are mainly white.

Some of the limitations in Brown's position regarding audience seem to be entirely analytical. In an early endnote Brown defends Ruth Finnegan against Leroy Vail and Landeg White's criticism that only her first book 'relate[s] in any detail the literature to the society that values it' (31) in the following terms: 'However, I would argue that a careful reading of her work reveals her constant concern to historicise the oral forms she discusses' (31). Without going into the merits of Vail and White's argument it is evident that Brown misses the sociological issue that is being raised. Given the intentions expressed regarding the purpose of the book in the introductory chapter (cited earlier) this is disappointing.

### Shembe

The third chapter focuses on the hymns of Isaiah Shembe which

occupy an unofficial space beyond the mission churches and the institutions of colonial governance, where they speak in new ways about the experiences of colonization, economic dispossession, and social decay (129).

Brown draws on Karin Barber's work on popular art forms to characterise Isaiah Shembe's hymns as being popular. It is true that Nazarite churches have long resisted the mission and established churches and constitute powerful and syncretic religious forces. Millions of people have been attracted to these churches (a fact not missed by the political parties who show great devotion to the Zionists at election time). However, although these churches represent the largest organised groupings in the country, this does not necessarily mean that they can be characterised as popular. Questions regarding the mode of organisation and power relations within the organisations need to be addressed. Shembe is a messianic figure to his followers and his movement tends to be dynastic and patriarchal, but Brown does not seem to notice how that stands in contradiction to the popular. Further, he offers no understanding of how Shembe's hymns may be characterised as popular expression, given that, as with most religious movements, participation and performance is prescribed, and there is little room for spontaneity, innovation and experimentation. Whether the performance of the hymns may be considered popular, or how they relate to the lives of members remains unaddressed.

The reader waits in vain for the socio-literary analysis that Brown makes a gesture of addressing in his introductory chapter (25). Why, for instance, are millions of people attracted to the movement? What community of interests are served/articulated/negotiated by and through the hymns? Do performances of the hymns deviate from the hymn book, and how and why does this occur or not occur? Brown does not tell us. Despite Brown's claim to want to 'open up a new area for literary study' (166), he does little service to the development of oral literature in an account that tends to be unconvincing and lacking in rigour. It is evident again that the analytical shortcomings are located in the writer's construction of the audience of this study. It is also evident that the writer hasn't thought it necessary to do any field research.

It is not possible for a scholar of oral performance just to rely on a hymn book (and other critics) for his information, particularly when the majority of followers of Shembe have not had the benefit of literacy. Given Brown's reliance on the hymn book of 1940, the question arises: how is his construction of the hymns to be construed as oral literature anyway? In Brown's conception oral literature is a loose, flaccid category. A potentially interesting area of exploration is weakened with scholarship that leaves the reader wondering whether the powerful movement has been isolated and abstracted from political reality and can only offer the poor and downtrodden a brief escape from reality. Clearly there is much more to it but that is not available here.

Although Brown uses the category 'popular' and draws on the work of theorists of popular literature like Karin Barber, he displays no understanding of the complexities of the term and its application to South African society. Instead, he sets up the popular as a straw category and then dismisses it for trumped-up reasons. Brown's manipulation of the construct is apparent in the following passage:

The idea of cultural forms 'talking back' to the colonizing power in fugitive and often irreverent ways is an attractive one, particularly in view of the current concerns of colonial and postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, what these forms actually say may be intensely conservative. A full engagement with the popular in literary studies requires neither a valorization of 'the people' nor a dismissal of them for expressing 'false consciousness', but a frank consideration of the structures of belief which these forms articulate, an analysis of their implication, an understanding of the conditions which produce them and a recognition of the undeniable appeal which these forms hold for large numbers of people (129)

Despite drawing on Barber's work, the first sentence sounds like the voice of an accidental tourist, unfamiliar with the history of struggle and suffering in South Africa not just under colonialism but during the long and harsh period of settler colonialism. This impression is reinforced by the conclusion of the first sentence, which is responsive not to history or the social conditions but makes concessions to the current intellectual fashion. The middle sentence is also quite curious: of all the examples in South African literature Brown chooses to characterise the hymns of the Shembe movement as being 'popular'. Then he contrives to point out that 'what these forms actually say may be intensely conservative', without clarifying that he has set up this questionable construction of the popular. The long last sentence cannot be challenged, and Barber (1987:7), Cabral (1983:207) and Mattelart (Mattelart & Siegelaub 1983:18,25) make the argument well. However, the inclusion of such a point in Brown's argument is questionable for Brown and his intended audience are in no danger of such an error, as evidenced by his choice of example. Whether consciously or unconsciously, through such assertions and scholarship Brown undermines a construct that has had a powerful resonance in the history of South Africa. That South Africa is free of an oppressive system, that degraded not only the majority but also the beneficiaries of that system, is due in no small measure to the popular will and actions of millions of ordinary people over decades of struggle. There is no recognition of that immensely powerful articulation of the popular and the democratic in Brown's analysis. Such a silence is interesting given the criticism he feels moved to offer.

While the hymns of Shembe may represent an expression of the popular in

South African literary culture they represent a type, a populist variety, and cannot be confused with the popular-democratic forms, which cover many of the resistance poems. If Brown wished to examine the impact of populist leaders, the most sophisticated and ironic of them is Nelson Mandela. But there is no analysis even of Mandela's *imbongi* Zolani Mkiva, as remarked earlier.

To return to the construct of the popular, the question arises: what might the popular be, besides the conceptual ghost in Brown's narrative, paralleling the ghost of an audience written off by his argument. Brown's ambivalence towards the construct of the popular is suggested in his statement 'Karin Barber's theorisation of 'popular' art forms in African societies is useful here, and may provide a conceptual framework for the literary forms discussed in the next three chapters' (127). The cautious 'may' proves to be the operative word: while the construct is misapplied to the Shembe hymns, in the remaining chapters it is used mainly in passing, while in the chapter on Black Consciousness the term is used quite negatively.

Any construction of the popular is accompanied by a range of complexities and ambiguities. The construct has a variety of partly overlapping, partly incompatible meanings, which is the consequence of being a heavily ideological term (Barber 1987:6). As Mattelart recognises, popular space 'is not a space given *a priori* ... a constitutive definition of the popular is itself at stake in the struggle' (Mattelart & Siegelaub 1983:18). V.N. Volosinov's argument that a word 'is determined by *whose* word it is and for *whom* it is meant' (1973:86) offers an important means of checking on the validity of any construction of the popular. Volosinov's statement resonates in the work of postcolonial writers like Wole Soyinka (1975), Karin Barber (1987), Trinh Minh-ha (1989), Gayatri Spivak (1990) and Edward Said (1993), all of whom use it in ways that are productive for the construction of the popular-democratic, such as Barber's (1987:5) generative formulation:

We need to ask by whom and by what means, in what circumstances, under what constraints, in whose interests, and in accordance with what conventions, these arts are produced.

That which is popular, in a democratic sense, is always in the making and always up for contestation. The popular-democratic is constituted through the process of struggle. Popular-democratic literature has been important in the political struggle, the more so as other spaces were either marked off or closed off. Such literature offers a record of the political and cultural development of people who reject having to be the object of politics and who insist on their right to become empowered subjects. The links with the political project of liberation are most evident where literary works construct new speaking places to enable people to speak to, for and of each other. Popular-democratic literature constructs spaces where voices that have

been marginalised, fragmented, dislocated, excluded and otherwise silenced can be seen in relation to each other. This does have overtones of redress, for in South Africa such voices tend to represent an overwhelming majority.

Given the context in which popular-democratic literature arises it necessarily has to participate, as Mattelart argues in an 'unequal, but dialectical, exchange with the dominant cultural grid with its norms, values, models and signs connected to ruling power' (Mattelart and Siegelaub 1983:17). This is most evident in the Black Consciousness poetry and indeed in most of the resistance poetry.

Owing to the precarious political situation, expressions of popular-democratic culture tend to be makeshift and contingent, work in progress, necessarily provisional, experimental and hybrid. But Mattelart asserts that this does not imply that the popular-democratic is a flaccid, catch-all category (that Brown seems to think it is):

Admitting that the space of popular concepts and practices is a space under construction and thus open to debate does not mean that it is an empty bottle into which everyone pours their own meaning (Mattelart & Siegelaub 1983:24).

Writers and composers of popular-democratic literature have been alert to the fact that literature represents the most complex embodiment of persuasive language, even as they recognised that the relationship of literature to politics is highly mediated. They used their hard-won public voices to challenge the dominant political and cultural discourses, opening up new possibilities in literary form and language, as they reconceptualised the relationships between power, communication and art.

Many of the resistance writers had a clear grasp of the creative, critical and communicative functions of language and literature under apartheid, which makes the confusion of later scholars of South African literature all more puzzling. For instance, Brown draws on Charles Olson's work, published in 1950, to make the case that

one of the most important allies which the poet has in attempting to return to poetry its oral and aural dimensions—the 'breathing' and 'listening' of its creator—is typography (189).

Olson's enthusiasm for typography as a means of recording oral performance is understandable at a time when the tape recorder was just entering public use (Hiller 1974:674). Five decades later, a critic should register the technological innovations of audio- and video- tape and their effectiveness as recorders of oral performance, and indeed Brown's final chapter examines the work of Mzwakhe Mbuli, which was

disseminated partly by tape recordings. But perhaps this is the dilemma of literary critics who would study oral performance: there is a weddedness to the print medium, as in Brown's attempts, in the third chapter, to restructure the transcript of Ingoapele Madingoane's oral poem 'black trial/ *seventeen*' (190f).

Diverted by such technical issues Brown completely misses the link between the resistance literature and popular communication. Although he refers to Brecht who 'emphasized ... economic imperatives and historical dialectics—the human subject who acts within and upon society to bring about change' (200), Brown fails to recognise that the literature acted as a mode of popular communication under the oppressive state. But he is confused about the meaning of popular, as evidenced in his inadequate gestures at Barber's work instead of grasping the richness of her argument. Brown's grasp of the popular is reactive. For instance, he does not understand what is creative about these forms of expression. Again, the problem is to be located in the neglect of the significance of the audience. Contrast this with the practice of a poet like Wally Serote more than two decades ago. In a range of poems for performance Serote offers several reflexive examples of human subjects who act within and upon society to effect change (1972; 1978; 1982).

In the third chapter, on Black Consciousness poetry, Brown draws on Fanon to point out the danger of 'culture put into capsules' (172). However, Brown himself is in danger of presenting the Shembe movement as 'historically "encapsulated" and "static"' (173), gesturing to a 'return to the sources' (196f), apparently unaware of Cabral's (1983:207) critique of this postcolonial manoeuvre decades ago:

'return to the sources' is historically important *only* if it involves both a genuine commitment to the fight for independence and a total, definitive identification with the aspirations of the masses.

Later, Brown's discussion of Ingoapele Madingoane's treatment of history carries the formulation, 'As part of his return to the source, Madingoane evokes the leaders of a heroic past' (196f). However, Brown seems unaware of Cabral's correction of Senghor's position. Cabral's (1979:207) cautions against the gesture of a 'return to the sources' by elites who use commodified and partial versions of the past to preserve and celebrate their power, and to gloss over their failure to make any effective contribution to the popular struggles for national liberation.

### 'A pedestrian exercise'?: the poetry of Black Consciousness

The fourth chapter addresses the ways in which the black consciousness movement used oral forms and focuses on 'the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression' (166). The state was not the only source of repression

experienced by the resistance writers. Some forms of repression, such as stereotyping and marginalisation, were cultural. Brown's use of the constructs 'Soweto poets' and 'Soweto poetry', as though they were not contested years earlier by the poets so described, is evidence of this. The term comes from Michael Chapman's collection of essays *Soweto Poetry* (1982a) and the anthology *Voices From Within* edited by Michael Chapman and Achmat Dangor (1982b). The inaccurate but internationally recognisable term was applied to the poets Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala and Sipho Sepamla, when only one of them, Sepamla, actually lived in Soweto for a time. Despite various objections by the poets, e.g., by Gwala, who lives in Mpumalanga township, Kwazulu-Natal, (Gwala 1989:70), the term continues to be used in some academic circles (Narismulu 1998b:195-197). The resistance poetry had as much connection with that particular township as any other. Perhaps its cachet among an 'international' audience explains its persistence.

Brown focuses on Ingoapele Madingoane's *africa my beginning* (1979), which was banned shortly after publication. However, since Madingoane had performed the material

extensively in the townships before the poems appeared in print, he just continued to recite the poems after the banning of the book (165f).

Addressing scholars' treatment of the resistance poetry in the same chapter, Brown makes a point that is unwittingly reflexive:

perceptions of Soweto poetry have remained largely page-bound, and discussion of this period has tended to focus on the influence of orality on print forms rather than on poetry which was performed at large gatherings (181).

Given that he knows better, as is clear from the last two quotations, Brown still errs a few pages later. Discussing Madingoane and other members of the Medupe cultural group, Brown comments that 'the poets transformed poetry from a printed phenomenon into a performance event' (184). Indeed, Brown's earlier chapter on the Shembe hymns offer few insights into the performative context and could have benefited from such an insight, although the last chapter, on Mzwakhe and Qabula, is better.

Despite the reservations noted above I concur fully with Brown's (178f) critique of Stephen Watson's diatribe on BC poetry (Narismulu 1998b). However, as Watson tends to receive more attention than his work warrants, I will leave it at that for now.

It is Brown's analysis of gender that has more immediate interest. Brown

makes the points that BC 'maintained and promoted the institution of patriarchy' (172) and that 'Madingoane's 'black trial' is unable to grant women status as social agents' (203). It is true that in a time when patriarchy was not openly contested, except in a few feminist circles, the discourse of BC expresses affirmation of the supposedly generic black man subjected to apartheid. But this cannot be conflated with the promotion of patriarchy as a whole. For instance, BC was quite rigorous in its challenge to the paternalist masks of apartheid and the liberal intellectuals. Brown offers a reasoned analysis of Madingoane's situation and an allowance that 'one may risk historical anachronism' (205). He also points out that 'none of the contributors to Michael Chapman's casebook *Soweto Poetry* (1982a) raised any significant questions about the presentation of women' (205). Perhaps not, but Brown should not rest his case so lightly. There is Fatima Dike's play *The First South African* (written and performed in 1977 but published in 1979), and various articles in *Staffrider*: Boitumelo's article (1979) which includes the contributions of Winnie Morolo and Ntombiyakhe kaBiyela kaXhoka and Manoko Nchwe; Lindiwe Mvemve (1980), Amelia House (1980) and Miriam Tlali (Seroke 1981). There is also Wally Serote's poetry from the late-1960s.

It is interesting that Brown raises the issue of attention to the interests of women in BC but not in the chapter on the Shembe hymns. He challenges a movement that existed two decades ago but does not raise the issue in relation to a movement that has a vibrant existence today when questions of gender and power are an integral part of public discourse. And women form the majority in the Shembe movement. The inconsistency in the analysis suggests less of a commitment to the interests of women and more of a need to challenge the BC movement's focus on racial oppression.

Earlier in the book Brown makes the interesting point that 'we should beware of turning criticism into a pedestrian exercise of tracking down references' (111). Such defensiveness in an 'impeccably researched' 'scholarly work' (blurb) is a little anomalous. The chapter on Black Consciousness (or 'black consciousness', as Brown prefers) proves quite enlightening. Brown draws on an article by Tony Emmett to make the following point:

The younger poets in fact often regarded established poets such as Sepamla and Serote with hostility and mistrust, accusing them of having 'pulled their punches' for the sake of their white publishers (183)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> In the endnote Brown makes the unreferenced assertion that 'The poets of the Medupe group regarded Sepamla's position as a capitulation to 'white standards'' (210).

The extract is taken from Emmett's article 'Oral, Political and Communal Aspects of Township Poetry in the Mid-seventies' (first published in the journal *English in Africa* in 1979 and then reproduced in Chapman's *Soweto Poetry*):

What did the younger generation poets, to whom Sepamla refers, think at the time? A discussion with a group of them suggested that the main purpose of their poetry was to put across a message, the substance of which was 'black awareness .... They suspected the published poets like Sepamla, Mongane Wally Serote and Mafika Pascal Gwala, who they maintained 'pulled their punches' (1982a:181)

It is not clear who Emmett is referring to in the words 'a group of them'. Emmett offers no source or reference for the supposed remark<sup>3</sup>. It is not, as the reader may infer, from Sipho Sepamla's article 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas', which is also in Chapman's *Soweto Poetry* (1982a). Emmett offers no inkling of the identity or number of the 'younger generation poets' whom he cites at great length (in two paragraphs of about 400 words). Where these statements were made, when, and in what context is not explained. That the omission undermines the argument seems to have escaped the attention of the writer, Tony Emmett; the editor/s of the journal *English in Africa*; the editor of *Soweto Poetry*, Michael Chapman; the thesis writer, Duncan Brown; 'the supervisor of the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based', Michael Chapman (ix); the author of this book, Duncan Brown and the editor/s at Oxford University Press.

How have such oversights occurred, and what do they suggest about the nature and standard of South African literary scholarship? Perhaps the ideological value of the statement accounts for the oversight on the part of a chain of scholarly authorities. Given the loaded nature of the statement, did none of them want to know the source or think that their readers would be interested in such information? Did they assume that their readers would be as satisfied as they presumably were with the assertion that some young Black poets, never mind whom, were critical of the leading resistance poets?

The question of audience that has haunted South African literary studies is no less trenchant here: in the late 1970s and 1980s those who might have raised an objection were too busy challenging more palpable sources of contention, such as the state. But *Voicing the Text* has been written in the post-apartheid period and scholars no longer have the luxury of taking their audiences for granted. But little caution is drawn from this. It is evident that the author's neglect of the audiences of oral

<sup>3</sup> Brown himself expresses some reservations about his source: 'Emmett's conception of African poetry and performance seem somewhat limited and static' (184).

literature has a parallel in his presumption regarding the audience of this text. This is regrettable, especially when the scholar is publicly funded and the society is at a critical stage of its development.

Although apartheid may have refined the imperialist tactic of 'divide and rule', when were the author or his literary ancestors and editors compelled to offer themselves as heirs to such a strategy? This curious mode of argumentation, of making vague and unreferenced gestures at objections by unnamed black people to the work of the resistance poets is also used by Stephen Watson, who claims the responses of some of his black students to support his argument (1990:87). Such a tactic is rash given the longstanding challenges to the authenticity of the 'Native Informant': Chinua Achebe pillories a District Commissioner's inept attempts to gather strategic information about 'the natives' in the framing passages of *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Wally Serote mocks the assigned role of the 'Native Informant' in 'The Actual Dialogue' (1972:9), as Peter Horn does in 'A Vehement Expostulation' (1991:75). Trinh Minh-ha (1989:67) and Gayatri Spivak (1990:66)(4) also tackle the issue in their critical writings. How different is Watson's argument from the apartheid government's attempts to co-opt Black people to justify its policies? For instance, the homelands were made viable by the instalment of tokens to act as authorities. And even they had names and were not ciphers like the nameless 'Native Informants' in Watson and Brown's arguments. When Watson or Brown want to argue that there are Black people who have been critical of the work of the resistance poets they should not offer racial stereotyping in lieu of the necessary research. This is unacceptable on the part of publicly-funded South African intellectuals. Such scholarship also undermines the development of literary and cultural studies.

All of this is interesting given that the fourth chapter is meant to focus on BC's mobilization of oral forms, particularly on the possibilities of performance poetry under apartheid (166). What is even more interesting is Brown's recognition that the influence of 'jazz and blues music ... is common in Soweto poetry' (186), and that Serote's 'oral [and jazz]-influenced narrative poems', such as *No Baby must Weep* (1975) and *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978), have 'not been the subject of significant study' (166f). However, Brown does not deal in any depth with Serote's work, which offer the most powerful examples of how BC (and post-BC) poems mobilized oral forms, drew on blues music, and what is most significant, focused on the issue of audience. It is as if Brown lost sight of his stated project:

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. This study therefore has a particular moral purpose ... it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to

retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history (2f).

Brown's quotations from Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial' (200, 201, 202) also suggest that it would have been more fruitful to have dealt with Madingoane's poems in the context of the Serote's work, particularly as Serote addresses the issues that Madingoane raises earlier and perhaps more successfully.

Through the struggle resistance writers like Serote and Madingoane realised that they had to offer more than a language of critique, and explored the constructive and liberatory capacities of their medium as they committed skills and other resources to the political resistance. At the same time the struggle served to rescue culture from its colonial dependencies, from being fragmented and marginalised; giving content and materiality to that which had been inchoate. In turn the popular-democratic literature of the 1970s and 1980s helped inaugurate a determinedly post-colonial culture, which struggled to free itself from the accretions of history, willed its psychological independence and went beyond the existing configurations to address and try to serve the interests of its emerging audience:

South African writers have begun to forge a genuine literature of the people: a literature in which the spectator and the reader have acquired an importance that is perhaps unprecedented in the history of literature: a literature which reflects back to its readers their struggle for emancipation, and at the same time reinvigorates them for that very struggle: a literature which has abandoned the universities and the comfortable living rooms of the intellectuals in favour of the streets (Watts 1989:37).

Given the challenges and obstacles that they faced, the volume, range and depth of the work produced by resistance writers in the 1970s and 1980s is surprising and largely unacknowledged as a corpus except in such inaccurate and reductive appellations as 'Soweto poetry'. Instead the construct of the popular-democratic helps make sense of the volume, range, depth and character of this material, and to begin a systematic account of it. Some of the most powerful expressions of the popular-democratic are in the medium of poetry, oral and written. As Jeremy Cronin pointed out:

In the last decade ... poetry has been marching in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land (*Weekly Mail*, 13.3.87:19).

Characterised by a sense of urgency that the oppressed in South African society speak among themselves as well as for themselves, Serote's poetry articulates a

powerful affirmation of the emerging audience of South African poetry in English. Serote's experiments with the construction of the speaker chart his intensifying political involvement, from the 'I' (uppercase) of *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and most of *Tsetlo* (1974), to the 'i' (lowercase) of *No Baby Must Weep* (1975), 'Behold Mama, Flowers' (1978:11-61) and 'Poem: on Distances' (1978:66). As the resistance grew Serote ceased to use the literary device of the singular persona, for it suggested an artistic transcendence of reality while the majority of South Africans lived under the threat of the state. Serote gave up the class-based privilege of distance/abstraction in literature, the better to represent and develop his identification with ordinary people. In this way he affirms the cultural and ideological significance of ordinary people.

Forced into exile like thousands of activists, Serote dealt with his severance by creating the conditions for speaking community in his work. Serote gave up the lyric form and his experiments with long autobiographical poems, and began to use didactic and rallying forms that eliminated the distance between speaker and poet.

Far from indulging his audience Serote places great responsibility upon ordinary people as active participants in the production of meaning in a society that had to liberate itself. Serote showed an inclusive sense of the role of the artist as a co-developer of his/her society. He used an innovative set of structural devices to engage his intended audience in the *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978) collection. He fused the techniques of jazz music and the oral traditions, as is evident in his use of a declamatory style and formulaic statements. Derived from the local oral tradition, the formulaic statements comprise particular refrains, choruses and chants that serve as repetitive structures to give coherence to the performance poems.

The experimentalism that characterises the work of the resistance writers of the 1970s and 1980s is linked to their conviction that literature could change their audience's 'perception not only of reality, but also of art—of what it is and what its potential role could be' (Brett 1986:10). Serote offers a very simple and effective demonstration of the scale of responsibility that rests upon the audience in the conclusion to 'When Lights Go Out' (1978:69f), which was written years before the mass marches of the mid- and late-1980s. The challenge in the poet's concluding statement suggests that what the reader derives from such a (necessarily) cryptic statement has to do with what the reader is prepared to put into it:

only if we know how, can we harness time—  
can you hear the footsteps.

Poems such as these depend upon the response of the audience for closure. The poet eschewed the writer-reader hierarchy, and affirmed his faith in his audience as comrades in the struggle to produce a more equitable society. This is a public and mobilizing form of art, that closely involved and represented its audience. Far from

homogenising the oppressed, as the construct of the mass popular tends to do, the popular-democratic takes risks to invoke and render the complex community of interests. The literature serves as much more than the fetish of a class or subculture. By relating cultural practices to other forms of social and political activity, and by challenging the cultural apparatuses themselves, such works tend to challenge and transform the ruling concepts of literature<sup>4</sup>.

Popular-democratic literature does not seek to be objective, neutral, trans-historical or trans-geographic, for it takes its bearings from its temporal and spatial location as well as from the history of repression and marginalisation of the majority. Based on the recognition of power as the basis of all social practice, the popular-democratic represents a counterhegemonic project. Collective forms of organisation are invoked to change established structures. Just as literature has been used by the dominant to maintain hegemony, many resistance writers/composers have conscripted it into the service of the oppressed. Activist writers and composers have used their texts strategically to intervene in various discourses of power and to exert pressure that was otherwise impossible given the conditions of repression.

Poems like *Behold Mama, Flowers* constructed spaces for voices that had been fragmented, dislocated, marginalised and silenced, in this way anticipating the developments in the labour and the mass democratic movements in the 1980s. Through the poem Serote shows how literature can be invigorated and directed by the struggle for political and cultural freedom: 'a communication which is not just content to bring communication to the masses, but seeks to liberate their speech' (Getino in Mattelart & Siegelau 1983:22). It is apparent that Brown's conception of the popular, which is limited to the notion of the mass popular, has little of the complexity of the democratic notion of the popular.

Dealing with the issue of BC and gender sensitivity Brown, conceding that 'one may risk historical anachronism' (205), feels moved to argue that 'popular forms often reveal intense conservatism' (203). While part of this issue has been addressed earlier, what is interesting at this point is Brown's failure to notice the significance of the popular-democratic in the resistance literature and his inability to see anything of value in popular cultural expressions. This is quite interesting position given his choice of subject and period. It is even more interesting given that Brown set out to offer a socio-literary analysis: 'I shall aim to relate literary form to societal function' (25). Yet he is patently unable to locate the literature within the major social movement of the time.

<sup>4</sup> The construct of the audience is key to the power of some of the most innovative literature of the 1970s and 1980s that drew on the oral tradition and the English and isiZulu languages. For instance, refer to Mbongeni Ngema's early play *Asinamali* (1985) (Narismulu 1998a).

### There is an early assertion that clarifies the writer's assumptions

In particular [this chapter] is concerned with the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression especially when the challenges of modernity are met by invocations to, and evocations of, a mythologised African past (166).

Brown uses Madingoane to address such issues when this was scarcely typical of most resistance poetry. However, such a choice strengthens the impression gained from the Emmett quotation that Brown uses BC only to dismiss it. This makes the reader resist the equivocation in the following statements: 'Soweto poetry (like the hymns of Isaiah Shembe) was a popular, fugitive form speaking in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces' (175). The counter argument is that these cannot to be equated because the resistance poets had to deal with the notoriously repressive actions of the apartheid state.

Such arguments confirm the reader's wariness at the early equation of the role and content of Serote's poems with that of Livingstone's:

I shall be reacting against the established line based upon the printed word, which begins with Thomas Pringle and ends with Douglas Livingstone or Mongane Wally Serote (1).

While the comment does not clarify Brown's position and makes, at best, a gesture of being radical, it is disingenuous to suggest that the South African literary canon ever equated the poetry of Wally Serote to that of Douglas Livingstone. Any student of one or both poets would realise that this is not how their work was received by the literary establishment.

In the final chapter Brown deals with the poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. He refers to Michael Chapman's important 1988 essay 'The liberated zone: the possibilities of imaginative expression in a state of emergency', but seems unaware of Liz Gunner's 1986 article 'A dying tradition? African oral literature in a contemporary context'. That he was unfamiliar with Gunner's article disadvantages his analysis. For instance, Gunner (1986:33) clarifies the socio-political significance of the *izibongo*, which

represent valuable 'property' in any ideological struggle. The usage of *izibongo* by opposing groups points up the struggle for control that is being waged.

Gunner (1986:37) also pointed out that the trade union poets used powerful cultural symbols to

show how a working class culture can show inheritance of, rather than

dispossession from, those nationalist and popular symbols so vital to a people's contemporary self-image.

This depth of analysis is lacking in Brown's argument. One of the most trenchant points for the analysis of the relationship of praise and worker poetry (Brown's second and fifth chapters) is the argument that worker *izibongo* show

workers defining their own culture. Perhaps most important of all, it shows the seductive symbols of the Zulu past being lured away from an aggressive ethnic nationalism and put to the service of a wider, more egalitarian cause (Gunner 1986:37).

What is apparent throughout this book is that although the author begins with a set of interesting ideas, he fails to follow through on them. The argument lacks clarity about why oral literature is important, and what impact does this have on the way in which South African literature is constructed. While his basic thesis shows an openness to the centrality of oral literature, his position turns out to be an abstraction. The analytical limitations in Brown's work are evident in the valid argument that 'during the 1980s, critics were for the most part unable to engage constructively with the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula as oral texts, and I argue for relocating this poetry in the discursive field of orality' (29). However, what he does not attend to is the question of the audiences who did respond to the work of resistance poets such as Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Temba Qabula. His analysis would have been the richer for paying attention to the contexts of performance and to the responses of people who did understand and/or value the work. And from the evidence of the last chapter, the poetry of Mbuli and Qabula do not seem to speak to the author at all, which may clarify the lukewarm nature of the project.

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## Book Reviews

### *Mother to Mother's Moral Ambivalence*

*Mother to Mother*

by Sindiwe Magona:

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In August, 1993, an American exchange student, Amy Biehl, was murdered in a vicious, racially motivated attack in Gugulethu, a sprawling, impoverished African township in Cape Town. It was an incident that precipitated both national and international outrage and evoked widespread demands for swift and severe retribution. In presenting an exploration of the possible circumstances surrounding the killing of Amy Biehl and in attempting to give Mxolisi, the fictional killer, a 'human' face Sindiwe Magona has undertaken a particularly difficult task. Apart from dealing with an unsympathetic literary construct in the form of Mxolisi, the subject of the killing within the South African context is fraught with political, emotional and moral ambiguities, and cannot be justified or understood in neat, absolute binary categories of right or wrong, good or evil, or guilty or innocent. It is perhaps more comfortable for the observer to maintain the commonly-held public perception of the perpetrators as inhuman, ruthless, cold-blooded killers, and stand in unequivocal moral judgement of them, rather than aspire to explore or understand the material circumstances around the brutal assault. In this regard, Magona astutely attempts to adopt a non-judgemental stance, allowing Mandisa, the narrator and mother of Mxolisi, to relate her story, though the level of authorial intervention is clearly apparent in the sophistication of the narrative voice. This eloquent, poignant prose is charged with emotion and an overwhelming sense of remorse for the numerous lives rent apart and irrevocably altered by this terrible tragedy.

Mandisa's narrative is a far cry from the standard media outrage and public recriminations that followed the killing: it is a brave and ambitious attempt to present a story of strife, suffering, impoverishment and human degradation, outside of the party political sloganeering and rhetoric that raged at the time of the killing. The association of the killers with the racially-bound ideologies of the Pan-African Congress (PAC), whose members openly and unapologetically chanted 'One Settler, One Bullet', roused much racial tension and brought to the surface many of the undercurrents that course through contemporary South African society. Magona, however, does not seriously engage the role of party political culpability in the incident. Though the narrative broaches the subject of racial polarisation, Mandisa herself displays no overt political allegiance: her commitment and energies are clearly directed towards ensuring the survival of herself and her family. It is her personal history and daily struggle that are foregrounded against the wider canvas of racial oppression in South Africa. Mxolisi is an integral part of this struggle, from his inauspicious beginnings, to his fractured, unstable childhood and eventual involvement in the senseless killing of a defenceless young woman - the mother is inexorably bound to the ill-fated son. There is also the sense, however, that the political developments of the day resulted in estranged and dislocated relationships between parents and children, where the latter were more likely to fall under the jurisdiction and control of the liberation movements rather than heed the counsel of their parents or custodians.

The presentation of Mandisa and Mxolisi as victims of institutional oppression and dispossession, tests the moral sensibilities of the reader. While the mother's plight clearly evokes a sympathetic response, to what extent is the reader expected to sympathise or identify with the perpetrator of this heinous act? Though, as a young boy, he had been witness to a horrifying act of brutality, had he not been nurtured and sustained by a caring and dedicated mother? To what extent does the narrative's focus on the mother's story eclipse the son's culpability in the murder? Though her tone is largely plaintive, the mother does not intercede on her son's behalf: she does not plead his innocence nor does she excuse his actions. She is presented as a voiceless subject who asks merely for the opportunity to be heard, to attempt to explain the circumstances that surrounded this apparently senseless termination of a bright and promising young life. Still, though there is no overt endeavour to justify or excuse his actions, through the process of 'humanising' the killer, the narrative attempts to shift the reader's moral perspective - to view all the parties involved in this terrible incident as victims at some level.

Magona avoids direct confrontation with the abhorrence of the action, and focuses instead on the mother's acute and overwhelming sense of grief. But what then of the murdered Amy Biehl? In view of her parents' decision to condone the granting of amnesty to their daughter's killers, it would appear that there is space for dialogue

and healing beyond the malicious act. This therapeutic element is very much present in Magona's writing. It is a painful exposure of the most intimate of details to which a scandalised public have had no access. Yet, in spite of a context that frames much of the boy's actions, for the reader, particularly one with prior information of the murder, his participation in the killing remains a reprehensible deed, for which, regardless of any extenuating circumstances, he must assume responsibility. Magona makes clear in her preface that there is only one killer, and that is the abhorrent system of racial discrimination. Yet, while Mxolisi is undoubtedly presented as a product of apartheid's inhuman policies, the narrative ultimately fails to detract from the boy's culpability in the killing. The narrative battles with this moral question and ultimately refrains from offering any judgement, leaving the reader more enlightened as to the possible events preceding the killing, but less assured of moral certitudes. In spite of this moral ambivalence or perhaps because of it, the novel makes a very useful intervention at this time in South African history as it contributes to the processes of open discourse and debate that are currently taking place in the country. The work pointedly illustrates the complexities and incongruities that will continue to dominate the South African political landscape for some time to come.

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## Speaking about Writing about Living a Life: Interview with Stephen Gray on his Autobiography, *Accident of Birth*

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Stephen Gray's impact on southern African literature and its reception both in South Africa and abroad has been immense. In addition to being a widely published critic, he has compiled anthologies of southern African poetry, prose and drama, and has thus exposed a wealth of material which may otherwise have remained in obscurity. He is himself a poet of international repute, having published many collections of his poems. A successful playwright, he has also written eight novels. A traumatic experience led him to turn his considerable talents to another use—the writing of his autobiography.

The interview was conducted at Stephen's home in Mayfair, Johannesburg on a beautiful sunny day in February 1996. The time lapse notwithstanding, Stephen's insights contribute significantly to the debate on the act of autobiographical composition. Furthermore, *Accident of Birth* has not attracted the critical attention it deserves; it is hoped, therefore, that this interview will do something to stimulate interest in an autobiography which tackles the politics of intimacy and the intricacies of politics with rare candour.

Judith (J): Most South African autobiographers steer clear of anything that's remotely impinging on their sexuality or their intimate personal relationships. It must have taken a lot of courage to deviate from that tradition of reticence and I wondered if there was any point at which you thought 'Hold on, this is getting too close to the bone; it shouldn't go into print'?

Stephen (S): I have to give a bit of a roundabout answer, because I am not sure of the final truth on this issue myself, even if it is the main issue of what became *Accident of Birth*. What are the politics of intimacy, or let's put the question a little

bit further back: is there a dividing line between public and private? Well, in all my writing I've expressed the notion that—in South Africa at large—there is a kind of prohibition, a sort of conspiracy of secrecy, about the very nature of privacy. Bit by bit I've been digging away at what for thirty years I've seen as my main theme: that the private *is* political, that what happens intimately in the household is directly connected to the outer political world. I think as citizens of apartheid we fooled ourselves that we were detached from it, but the very fact that we could have thought that was part of the ignorance that apartheid spread. But now, in this autobiography I don't think I was particularly revealing as there are still things about my life that I am not going to share with anybody, and that maybe I don't even share with myself. My particular aim was not to come my guts, as it were. But once the narrative is framed, I've used the technique of question and answer to the psychiatrist to convince myself of the rightness, or wrongness, of my point of view. The whole first part of the book is meant to be that confession to an analyst. So I made a point of jumbling the public and the private all in there together.

It's also a book about nervous breakdown; it's about collapse, about learning to come to terms with the post-traumatic stress syndrome that I was suffering. I was terribly damaged by that awful experience of having been at the knife-point of death, unexpectedly and, I thought, undeservedly. That was the accident of the title and it's a book about the kind of truths that just seep out, no matter how you try to put the cap on things and be all right. You can't, because your unconscious, your sense of the meaningless universe, with all the guilts and privileges of the person you are in the South African situation as it goes into our stressful changes, won't let you. Of course, it's called a middle-age crisis, isn't it?

J : Yet you are more prepared to take the reader into your confidence than any other South African autobiographer has been.

S : Maybe, but it's a tactic. I'm really the cold-blooded author who revised that text, let me tell you, about six times. I don't think I've revealed more than I wanted to. But I felt I should use the idea of giving away intimacies as a dramatic tactic in that text. I must say that some of the autobiographies you are referring to I find are formally boring, perhaps because formal innovations are not releasing content in any fresh way. South Africans are great at hearing only our own echoes. But I had to use other methods to deliver a different message. I am talking about writerly problems, like how to break through and talk in real terms about historical problems.

J : But your very controlled narrator doesn't give a sense of collapse.

S : Well, if that's the case, I'm sorry because I planned for those small moments which I hoped would be atomically explosive—at the end of the second chapter, after the first episode of confession about childhood, for example. The grabbing for the cigarettes... little domestic details like that. And that moment comes back, at the end of the book during the trial, when I'm in the witness stand. Fumbling in the pocket for cigarettes ....

J : And not remembering how to address the magistrate ....

S : And not remembering ... that's how stress manifests itself. I did not want to belabour the whole thing. I think a little crack in the exterior can suggest something very frightening.

J : Do you think that in order to tell a pleasing story the emphasis has to shift from telling the *truth* to *telling* the truth? Foucault has argued that 'The least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics'. Could you talk about the politics of truth?

S : I agree with Foucault in this instance. I'm fascinated with seeing how I have changed since the days of my own upbringing, which did rather teach me that politics was out there in the world, was something done by Nationalists in government, and had nothing to do with this little colonial child playing on the beach around Table Bay. My whole life has been a discovery of how false and misleading that is. The very apoliticality that was taught us was just a way of keeping us under control. It's all to do with our heritage. Now, thank goodness, we are stepping out of thought control, of censorship. Look what a diminished literature we were left with and how crimped our natural desires to flourish and be challenging and mature as people became. The apartheid society almost crippled us. My book could be written only as a strategy against that monstrous situation, to try and build a more open, free mind-space, if you want to use a corny phrase like that. I think the key word of our recent times really is 'struggle': there was an inner struggle that had to be fought in our heads, perforce, as well. And I am quite angry about the fact that our leaders misled us; that was criminal.

J : Yes, but for many non-South Africans, white South Africans bemoaning their oppression may come across as self-indulgent whinging. I don't perceive it that way, though, because I understand your anger.

S : But I'm reminded of Angus Wilson, who had his childhood in Natal and was a wonderful satirist. When he paid a return visit in 1963 he said

English South Africans are unique in the world because their only attempt at being political is complaining!

J : In dealing with a politics of truth, Foucault talks in much broader terms about the kind of insidious political correctness of what counts as truth in any culture. To be able to write a narrative autobiography, you would have to conform to certain conventions to have it accorded the status of a truthful document. How do you see your project of truth-telling in *Accident of Birth*?

S : Foucault is fine, but I don't want to be forced into replying within his terms of discourse. I can only say that as I kept writing, at the top of every page I wrote the word 'stocktaking'. Stocktaking Chapter 2—Childhood; Stocktaking Chapter 4—Pre-teens, and so on. Even deciding the periods was a huge leap forward in terms of patterning and working out the interrelations. And I realised as I first wrote each chapter I was also, in my stocktaking, writing that thing off. I can't tell you the amount of searching that went on in this house, of old suitcases for photographs and for letters. The book is also hugely quoted from other sources—from things I'd written previously, from things other people have said, and especially from books I've read. In fact, one of my themes there is that I am what I read. At the end it all comes to trial, and the big question which nobody ever has the guts to ask about themselves is forced upon me when I am in the dock, about to condemn others: should I not perhaps condemn myself? That was me facing my deepest truth.

J : The act of endeavouring to tell the truth in narrative must of necessity be structured around the economy of confession, that is, through a complex relationship of disclosure and concealment. How do you see this at work in *Accident of Birth*?

S : I agree that that's what it is. But I had this awful continuum of questions, like am I holding the reader, is the reader going to be interested by this? How can I twist it so that I can keep them all?—or not them, usually a reader is one person.

J : But that sort of calculated thinking—you know, I'll keep them amused for five pages and then I'll hit them on page 6—that wouldn't have happened as you were writing under such pressure ...?

S : It did. It has to, it controls it all and it was that control that saved me. Otherwise I couldn't have faced the roiling, muddled, hysterical chaos that I then felt was my collapsing and shapeless life.

J : So that was there, at the most fundamental level?

S : Yes, I felt that if I was a writer, I should write my way out of all that, otherwise I was dead. But remember also that in the opening scene I kept thinking of my buddy Richard Rive, who had been stabbed to death in similar circumstances—28 times! He must have put up a brave fight for his life with those two damned intruders. And I grieved over that—I wrote not one, but two obituaries for Richard. It seemed like an apartheid thing—good people being killed, in Richard's case in his own kitchen. I was tied up in my own livingroom with this monstrous event that had happened to Richard happening to me. I sat there bound in a yellow rope, freezing to death, with blood coming out of my throat, asking myself, 'Richard, what did you do wrong?' I'm not saying Richard replied, but I realised instinctively, at that fighting survival level, that Richard was a very aggressive type who fuelled his life with a kind of aggro. So I thought, don't do that, try another way; don't antagonise them, if they want something, just say yes, because I was outnumbered three to one, and they were even better armed than the intruders who visited Richard. And so Richard gave me a little gift of a lesson, which was: 'Win by the word, it's worth your life'. And as I was still tied-up, not knowing the outcome of my own story, I thought: my God, I've got a book, if I live to write it!

J : The title, *Accident of Birth*, is drawn from the epigraph which reads: '*We shall not let our creed be determined by the mere accident of birth in a particular age or a particular part of the earth's surface*'; but out of that context, the title implies the opposite. Did you intend this sort of ambivalence?

S : Not really. I had fallen on the phrase 'accident of birth' before I actually found the quote (via Olive Schreiner) from Herbert Spencer. Later I discovered two wonderful points that Spencer made relatedly, that the only two things a human person cannot control are who they are—in other words, who your parents are—and where you are born. The rest of your life you can control. I thought that was the most basic statement of the problem of identity in an autobiographical framework.

J : But the sentiments expressed in the quotation—that identity and beliefs should not be determined by mere accident of birth—are, in terms of contemporary theoretical orthodoxy, idealistic and impossible. To what extent do you feel that your own life, and the story that you told of it, testify to the validity of Spencer's assertion about individual freedoms?

S : I think he is countering that mid-to-late Victorian determinism

which came from two sources, both still potent in our self-formation. One is the Darwinian scientific natural selection school that puts such stress on character, as in Hardy's notion that character is destiny. The other school is the Marxist revolutionary school of thought that is also deterministic, even mechanistic, in presuming that the individual ego is a social function. I wanted to counter Darwinism and Marxism, the two schools which inform our thinking in the twentieth century, by saying that I feel some things do happen by accident, and that rebirths, transformations, are possible. So I am agreeing with him—not that I am a covert student of Spencer or anything like that. But I must stress that at the time of writing I was not influenced by thoughts like that at all. It's only later that I found them in my own text. I just worked by instinct. I didn't have a title at all until three-quarters of the way through.

J : To what extent are you and your story the products of a specific historical moment?

S : Well, hugely. This is what I am interested in, in my writing: catching the texture of each historical moment, not just one, and remembering that you and I and everybody else in our country have been going through such shifting historical moments. I thought I should catch the excitement of their transformation.

J : For Virginia Woolf, what's worth recording are those very brief—but rare—moments when we are *truly* alive in between the usual sludge of mere existence. In your autobiography, have you set out to extract those kinds of moments, or are you trying to record an entire chronological pattern?

S : I think in the end it's you, the critic, who must decide that.

J : The large print emphasis of 'Birth' and 'Gray' on the cover is most striking particularly because the blood red lettering and the scarlet foetus invoke the physicality of birth. How does the cover design render commentary on the text?

S : I can't give an authoritative answer because traditionally the cover is not in the realm that an author can control. But this is a COSAW publication, with the Congress of South African Writers agreeing that writers must have an active role in the book-making. So, unusually for me, I was there while Andrew Lord assembled it. But in the end it's his work, that's his view of the text (which he also typeset by the way), so he was absolutely integral in its packaging.

J : The representation of you on the cover anchors you to the act of

autobiographical testimony and the authorial signature in a way that is quite conventional.

S : There's another photograph on the back cover as well.

J : The one on the back announces even more explicitly, 'Here I am'.

S : The one on the back is the breezy, genial guy in his workplace, which is right in this room, right at that desk.

J : How long did it take you to write *Accident of Birth*?

S : It's all gone into a kind of merciful fog of forgetting. The action actually is dated because in the framing or the hold-up narrative I give the date of the invasion of my house as in October 1990, and it ends with the trial following that New Year, which coincides with the first sensational Winnie Mandela trial. And it's more or less so that I first drafted it between the hold-up and the trial. But that's cheating a bit, as anybody in book-making knows you don't get a big work done in 3 or 4 months. In fact, another 3 years of drafts passed before it was actually finalised.

J : Did you learn anything about yourself and/or your life as you were writing it?

S : Hugely, all the things I had been avoiding facing. Autobiographies are very demanding because you have to get the most personal layers and use them which one does when one's doing other things like poetry or novels but not in the way that's so awkwardly revealing and potentially embarrassing.

J : On page 10 you say, 'This round I will attempt to tell the truth'. Do you want this to be read as an unproblematic record of your life or do you want the reader to engage with the fictiveness which necessarily results from the narrativisation process and from endeavours to tell about events which are blurred due to the vagaries of memory?

S : The answer must be the latter because there isn't ever a direct record which accurately records something that is or is not the truth and delivers it unproblematically over to a reader who says that is true and that is false, finish and *klaar* (Afrikaans for over, finished.) That is why I decided to make the last scene the trial, because in a trial that is what is being judged—whether you are lying or telling the truth, whether you are moral or immoral. What the magistrate does is sit there

deciding. But I am perforce an ironist, a humorist, and I think the truth is very difficult to touch directly at all.

J : How do you see this text intersecting with other genres?

S : You mean of my own?

J : Of your own.

S : Well, when I write poetry, I think in a certain way. When I write fiction, I think in another way. If it's theatre or criticism, different ways, because that old thing about the medium is the message is half-way true. Certain genres are designed to deliver certain goods. For me it was altogether fresh, stepping into autobiography as a genre.

J : Do you see this as perhaps one volume of a multi-volume autobiography, the other volumes of which are your poetry, your critical work, your novels?

S : Emphatically no. This is, I'm pretty sure, the only labelled autobiography I will do. I'm not going to produce further volumes—I mean who is interested, and who the hell am I to think that people would be? Many South Africans just can't stop at one, but I believe in doing extremely economical work; I try to make my texts diamond hard and as complete as possible. I've done that one now; I won't do it again. I'm not really writing from an inner need, I'm trying to make good books.

J : What my question was pointing to was how autobiographical is your other work?

S : Unavoidably there are traces of autobiography there, because no writer—I keep referring to this generalised writer, but it's common sense—no writer would do something that doesn't fascinate them at the moment. So there is a kind of deep desire in everything that a writer writes, stretching from a book review through to the most elaborate poem. But to say that it's all autobiographical is a very big supposition.

J : Do you see *Accident of Birth* primarily as testimony, confession or self-portraiture?

S : Elements of all three. While I was within the text working it out, bit by bit, I did read quite a lot of theory about autobiography and noticed those three categories. I started to read other autobiographies; inevitably one has to. I mean, I went back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. I came to realise that there is a link between autobiography and the Western concept of the highly developed individual ego. That's one of ten points I began to pick up, but I was burrowing ahead like that mole not quite knowing where I was going—a mighty lot of digging with no real direction, and thinking I can use that, or I can't use that. I thought, okay, it's a bit of a Rousseau-like confession, but I'm not confessing for the same reasons, if you like. That's one little example.

It all really started by chance when I got pushed into a corner by the History Workshop here at Wits University a few years before, for whom I did a paper on Peter Abrahams. I came across various autobiographical texts of Peter Abrahams about his life in Vrededorp and Mayfair, my area of Jo'burg, and I found that, because they were written at different times, if you put them together you got three different people. That stuck in my memory, and I learnt that autobiographies are predicated on lies, not on truths, which was interesting.

J : How much influence did your publisher have on the final version of the text?

S : None, because I did not have a publisher at the time. In fact, I had a few problems getting this book published at all, I must tell you, as my regular publishers turned it down—for various perfectly good reasons of their own.

J : Did you have any readers read over it in draft stages?

S : Yes, many. Normally only an in-house editor would work on a book for stylistic corrections; the content is normally held pretty well sacred, as it's considered the writer's right to write what he or she wants. But in this case I felt it needed refereeing, because I had decided that I was not going to offend anyone. Although I think it's a hugely offensive book, it's even obscene and rawly aggressive and confrontational, that was not going to happen in the area of personalities. So I mailed sections to everybody who gets some attention in the book, asking them to confirm that they would not be miffed by anything. For example, Athol Fugard, Cecil and Thelma Skotnes, Phil du Plessis and others who play roles in the text. They all came back with, 'Oh for God's sake, you are free to say what you like!'

J : So, there were no revisions as a result of that sort of refereeing?

S : There were. Even then, if I sensed a bit of fussiness I took it out.

J : Whom did you think of as your potential audience? It seems to me that the absence of explanations of certain South African terms indicates an implied audience of local readers.

S : Yes, it's for my generation here, and I hope the future generation—a community of South African English-speakers who would not have trouble understanding it. Not for export overseas, like much South African literature which is so generalised that people in London, New York can read it without a problem. This is business conducted between me and my extended family, and you know that the readership for a thing like this is actually quite small.

J : What are your thoughts on the political implications of who reads and who writes in contemporary South Africa?

S : I do think that reading and writing is still a scandalously elitist activity, and of course I support educationists like yourself who are encouraging wider literacy. However, as one rises in the hierarchy of letters, I know one loses the community of oral culture. But then, beyond all that, I can only agree with Doris Lessing who says in the end the book is the greatest liberator man's ever thought of.

J : Looking at the kind of output that is coming out of this country now, one sees that the autobiographers who are producing in numbers are black South Africans.

S : That's an utterly appropriate phenomenon of the moment, presumably the biggest selling autobiography of all time produced by a South African being Mandela's. But Doris Lessing's last one is doing well in the bookshops at the same time.

J : Names in autobiography serve to secure the text's referential status; I wondered, though, whether at any time you might have felt the need or desire to fictionalise names, as Breytenbach did in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*?

S : There are just one or two who have false names, simply to avoid libel, but they are not fictionalised as such. But the portrayal of the famous in an autobiography I spotted early on was a fatal trap, ending in a string of gossip cameos. I am afraid I've got people like Nadine Gordimer walking in and out of the book, but

I scrupulously avoided—please let's stress this—portraying a situation where 'Nadine said to me' and 'I said to Nadine'. I could have gone on name-dropping forever otherwise.

J : I just wondered if there might have been times where you felt that it was necessary to talk about somebody without letting a reader know who it was.

S : There were. But I have a friend called Francis King, the British novelist, who has been everywhere, knows everyone. He once said to me, 'I'll never get talked into writing my autobiography because it will just have to be a string of anecdotes about those who have been more successful than me'. That stuck with me.

J : Freud and his followers have placed a premium on the fundamental truth value of disclosures about sexuality. In this respect *Accident of Birth* flies its truth-telling flag quite high. Did you perceive this as a measure of your ability to be honest and truthful?

S : I have to reply Yes and No. The No in a nutshell is that I think sexuality is not the final measuring stick of truth about a psyche. There is not necessarily an organic relationship within the person between sexuality and performance out there, or the intellect, or the creative potential. I think all sexualities can have all of those results in different combinations.

The Yes side is that when you are doing an autobiography, you know that readers are very turned on by revelations of sexuality, and that the bland, evasive South African habit of not talking about it is part of the general cover-up. In doing that stocktaking I've mentioned, I could not leave out my different stages of sexuality—I've talked a lot there about my sexual experiences, particularly bisexual problems. But not a wham, in-your-face thing. It is a big theme generally in my work, though.

J : But was there also a sense that to reveal those private aspects of your life was for you a way of confronting publicly who you are?

S : That's the way you see it. The way I saw it was that I could not evade the sexuality issue, just as I could not evade all the other ones—the educational issue, the political issue.

J : So you will not compartmentalise yourself and say, well, only this is okay?

S : Quite. But I had a very good analyst, and it was a real course that I was going through. That person Ruth, whom I didn't say very much about, is actually a real analyst called Ruth who has a very holistic view, to use a post-Freudian, wishy-washy term. But yes, I am looking for a more holistic understanding of identity.

J : I looked forward to interviewing you enormously because I liked the autobiographical narrator. Did you find that naïve conflation of yourself with the narrator in other critical responses to the text?

S : When people have responded, I've automatically gone deaf; I just watch their lips, pretending I'm interested, but I don't actually listen....

J : But what about reviews?

S : There have been precious few, and reading reviews is a habit one gets out of early on in a writing career ... otherwise you'd slash your wrists every second week, and I've only got two wrists. The work is in the public world and must lead its own life.

J : Nadine Gordimer said in an interview in 1995 that she would never write an autobiography because 'she is much too secretive'.

S : Well, Gordimer has the perfect right to do anything she likes which many people won't let her have, or won't let me have, for that matter. There are a lot of pressures on the writer in South Africa to perform certain things which are expected of them, and not to do others because they are considered in poor taste or inappropriate, or whatever. And so I'm very interested in how another writer is situated.

But having said that, one has to rely on one's ability to do whatever comes up, to challenge oneself—and the contingent is always a factor. I didn't know that those three invaders would force me to take a new direction. I realise now that for quite a long time I'd been taking the preliminary steps. For example, open a letter, something completely unexpected—University of Iowa Writers' Workshop—they want a memoir of my days there. And I produced it with great pleasure and ease over a weekend, sent it off; three years later it comes back in an anthology, and I took strength from that. Then there was a message from my agent to do a 'growing up under apartheid' piece for this magazine, quick, quick, for bucks (which, in the end, I didn't get). But subsequently it was reproduced in France, which I had never dreamed of, and reprinted in my *Human Interest* collection. I really cracked the lockjaw that I was suffering when I wrote a number of journalistic reports in which I included

myself as a character—well, as the uncharacterised narrator who characterises everything around him. Remember, I used to be a weekend writer when I was a professional academic, so I did ‘diary pieces’ to fill the jigsaw in a bit more. I found that I’d built up the courage to do the big one without even realising it.

J : Were you conscious of a need to withhold details as the composition process went on, or did you feel that the abandonment of the therapy structure in Chapter 10 allowed you to be less detailed?

S : Yes, but there are 18 all in all. So, chapter 10 is the transition. And the first 9, apart from the frame, use a more or less linear chronology, looking at the character in development. But once I got to 1969—and this is true of my real experience—and settled in Johannesburg, my life became very static. So I took the second life as a whole and looked at sections of it and the chapters become more essayistic, much more theoretical.

But do you mean you want to know whether I am being forthright about coming out or not?

J : No, I just wondered whether the therapy structure had in any way made you more forthcoming ...

S : Yes.

J : ... and whether the abandonment of that had freed you? You know, because the whole question of sexuality is fundamental in analysis whereas it doesn’t have to be fundamental in other kinds of self-exploration.

S : Agreed, but firstly there was a narrative situation. If I’d kept up with those sessions of psychoanalysis it would have become so tedious and so self-indulgent that the reader would have stopped reading. I had to vary that. But there is a bigger answer and that is I wanted to portray the process of healing and healing involves using something, grabbing it while you need it and rejecting it when it has served its purpose. So there is a larger story, which is of a mental development as I get my life in order. I wanted to dramatise a crisis and look deeply into the healing process. In the second half, bits are coming together, things are getting organised.

J : One reader remarked that he thought you’d cheated by being quite forthcoming about your sexual exploits in the ‘60s, and then becoming much more reserved later. He said it was almost clichéd for people to be honest about what they did in the ‘60s.

S : Quite true, it’s a fair point. But there are other things I left out, for obvious reasons. As things became closer to me, inevitably I became more discreet. There are people around who don’t want to be told that they were slept with. I left out almost all my professional life, too; I think I mentioned the place where I worked for all of 23 years only once, and 23 years at that time was half my life.

J : I wanted to ask you about that. When did you retire from the English Department at the Rand Afrikaans University?

S : During the process of writing the first draft of the book.

J : Is there any connection between the book and leaving your job as Professor?

S : Yes, but I omitted all that as I hadn’t taken stock of it. I just thought I would open my private study door, but not my office door. The last thing I wanted to do was an English department exposé.

J : Foucault argues in his *History of Sexuality* that a confessional relationship is a power relationship: while the confessor might feel he’s unburdening himself to heal himself, the power actually resides with the one to whom the confession is being given.

S : Maybe, but I see myself as containing many people and I know that I have a certain kind of power in choosing, on my terms, to manipulate other people’s attitudes to sexuality. I could see that it’s a power game to play, that hurts people, and moves people. And I know that using the sexual element can be devastating. I have huge respect for my friend, Pieter-Dirk Uys, because I think he can catch South Africans on such an awkward nerve that, while trying to evade it by laughing it off, they actually can break through to new ways of seeing. I have a lot of time for gay theory, and I have a lot of time for theatrically subversive strategies. And heavens, when you are in this business you have got to use them all. I can’t accept that the reader terrorises me; I have to try and out-manoeuvre the reader.

J : What is your life like after autobiography?

S : It’s more different than I could ever have imagined. Because I feel freer and easier. That stocktaking was very important for me in order for the healing to occur at all. In fact, I just wanted to tell people, look, if you’re in a mess you’ve

got to go through it, and you've got to come out changed. And I meant that as a model for everybody's behaviour.

We are talking about life experiences, and I thought what I could do for my readers was show them that, kicking and screaming, against all the odds, I went through it all and could come out and change. You are free if you make freedom for yourself. It's more an existential view, if you like.

J : You said that your life post-autobiography had changed...?

S : Firstly, the whole thing had been shucked off. It's gone. It's now between the covers of this COSAW book. That's it. Then I look at the photos, because there is a great interplay between photo and text in the book, and it really does seem like a family album of the past for me.

J : Coming back to the question of gender and genre now. At times your frank discussion of sexuality raises the issue of gender politics in that the bisexuality transgresses the sex - gender equation. Do you see any connection, formal or otherwise, between fluid gender roles and fluid generic practices?

S : Well, I always have kept myself pretty well informed about the feminist debate, and then more recently about gay studies. I've always tried to break the old rigid, hierarchical, heterosexual, racially-exclusive casts in which ideology and its literary product has been moulded. So in the second half of *Accident* all sorts of new forms are being invented, which are expressive of the impact of these alternative ways of formulating life.

J : If we agree that gender is produced through the discourses of self-representation, then how is this particular attempt at variance with other more conventional autobiographies?

S : Let me refer to the ur-text for me, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which for each rebellion in the different chapters there is a kind of compensatory gain in artistry. I'm not sure others end up presenting themselves as rebel artists.

J : Feminists like Leigh Gilmore have argued that the political ideology of individualism which defines our understanding of autobiography has been complicit with the oppression of women.

S : Yes, I agree.

J : Would you agree that this applies also to gays and bisexuals?

S : Absolutely.

J : Then would you describe the textual strategies that you had to adopt?

S : Well, anything but the linear realist, macho story-telling model, and conducting an experiment with the traps and loop-holes of English expression that must be filled in to express something that's always been left missing. It's about stylistics as well as politics.

J : And to that extent, writing an autobiography as honestly as you could was itself a political act of saying, 'I am the subject of my sentence, I am the subject of my utterance and I am the subject of my actions'.

S : Quite.

J : And that in itself had political resonance. To narrate is to select; did you feel that the necessary selections were reductive?

S : They were, but I tried to fight against that. While being apparently self-effacing, some autobiographies are actually quite self-aggrandising; I found that a bit phoney and silly.

J : You remark on page 49 that memories of journeys you had undertaken have now been obscured by your fictional descriptions of them. Is it not equally likely that the self of those times is obscured by the fictions?

S : It is equally likely, yes. The end result is when you come back to survey what you've done you can't remember what was the work and what was the reality because for you it has become the words of a text.

J : Ja, just as a photograph that you talk about also in your text replaces a visual memory and becomes the memory.

S : It's pure Roland Barthes.

J : If an autobiographical narrative can be described as mapping a terrain, what areas are left unnamed, unmapped?

S : I tried not to leave anything unmapped within the part of the field that is included. But then I suppose one must look for the erasures and absences in the area that is under scrutiny which perhaps should have been presented.

But at various ages one feels differently about things, that's all I can say. One's perspective is always changing; it's a biological thing, rather than an intellectual thing. For example, I'm not nearly as self-absorbed as I used to be. It's a change in me and that has to be reflected in the portrayal in the book.

J : How simple is the inhabiting of the 'I' in daily life? Is it easier or more difficult in autobiography?

S : Autobiography is easier, an easier way to get back into a difficult life. But when you're suffering from post-traumatic stress and trying to cure yourself, remembering is terribly difficult because every time you go back in memory, you remember the knife at your throat. But you have to unblock, and in order to unblock you have to come to terms with the trauma. Then you can begin to remember in a more orderly fashion.

J : *Accident of Birth* explores the two facets of confession/testimony: in the first few chapters there is the therapy structure; later, there is the legalistic aspect. Here, the narrator is a witness testifying both to the crime which was perpetrated against him as well as to the truthfulness of his life story. But these two features can be said to be operating at cross purposes to one another because in the therapy scenario, the narrator offers up guilty secrets—both sexual and political—and is on trial, so to speak, while in the testimony given as legally binding he's an innocent victim. How do these two tendencies seem to you to inform the narrative and is there a tension, productive or otherwise, between them?

S : Yes, there is a productive tension between them. I agree those are the two dramatisations of confession: section A—therapy, B—on trial. But there is a third factor, the writing of the book as therapy. At one point the writing of the book overtook the therapy. The book was doing the job better and quicker. It was just my way of fixing things.

J : Can the autobiography be read in part as an attempt to refuse the status of victim?

S : Oh, absolutely. Here I am and this is me. That's not a victim.

J : Okay, and the very last question. I referred earlier to the cover design: what does the Stephen figured there look towards? Which is just another way of asking, what next?

S : If you open the book out, you've got three Stephens there. One sucking his thumb in a bath of blood—prenatal; the other before he had his teeth done—relaxing in his study; and the third one ... well, Nostradamus looking off the page. And I hope you enjoy all three!

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## *Alternation*

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Contributors must submit *one computer-generated and three double-spaced printed copy* of the manuscript. The computer-generated copy may be on double density floppy stoffie in Word Perfect 5-6, Word for Windows 6 or ASCII. If accepted for publication 10 original off-print copies of the article will be returned to the author.

Manuscripts should range between 5000-8000 and bookreviews between 500-1000 words. However, longer articles may be considered for publication.

Attach a cover page to one manuscript containing the following information: Author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, telephone/fax numbers, a list of previous publications and a written statement that this manuscript has not been submitted to another journal for publication.

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- Head, Bessie 1974. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.
- Mhlophe, Gcina 1990. Nokulunga's Wedding. In Van Niekerk, Annemarié (ed): *Raising the Blinds. A Century of South African Women's Stories*. Parklands: Ad Donker.
- Mngadi, Sikhumbuzo 1994. 'Popular Memory' and Social Change in South African Historical Drama of the Seventies in English: The Case of Credo Mutwa's *Unosime Alternation* 1,1:37-41.
- Fanon, Frantz 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann, Charles Lam (trans). London: Pluto Press.