

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

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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

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<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

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<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, Biddy 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

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<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.

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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

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<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>.

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<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

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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

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<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

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<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 Swerfjare 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

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<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

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<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-Moetlane 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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