

**Self, Life and Writing in Selected South African  
Autobiographical Texts**

Judith Evadne Lütge Coullie

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## Abstract

Autobiographical writing acquired increasing importance during the apartheid period, with greater numbers of autobiographical texts being published by a more representative range of South Africans across race, class and gender categories. This thesis analyzes the implications of shifts in autobiographical production, in English, during the years 1948-1994 through the examination of selected texts. The readings are informed by poststructuralism, modified by information about indigenous black South African cultural practices, as well as by input supplied by some of the autobiographical texts themselves. This theoretical approach may be referred to as a "pratique de métissage" (Glissant).

The texts selected for close reading are from a field of over 120 autobiographical texts. They were chosen for their ability to illustrate important trends in South African autobiographical writing, specifically with regard to the three constituent parts of autobiography: *autos*, *bios*, and *graphe*. The chapter dealing with the depiction of self interrogates the hierarchized discourses of male-biased humanism in Roy Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse (1951). In Ellen Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman (1985) I analyze the melding of the conceptual frameworks of indigenous black cultures and Western individualism by which the autobiographical subject is defined. Breyten Breytenbach's The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (1984) is read

as an exploration of the postmodernist decentred self. In the chapter focusing on the portrayal of life experiences, I examine the ways in which the narrator of Albert Luthuli's Let My People Go (1962) seeks to secure the reader's approval of his version of recent South African history; while the analysis of the sub-genre referred to here as worker autobiography is principally concerned with the politics of life-writing. In Chapter 5, I look at how Godfrey Moloi's My Life: Volume One (1987) uses the discourses of popular American movies of the 40s and 50s in order to validate a self victimized by racism, and also at the ways in which Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives (1992) probes the limits and possibilities of biography through autobiographical speculation. In general, apartheid autobiography moves away from individualism to contribute, through various means, to social and political change.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have always believed in me, and to my children, Charis and Benjamin, and my husband, Ian, who make all possible.

## **Declaration**

This thesis, except where specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is the original work of Judith Evadne Lütge Coullie.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

*[F]reedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant culture's characterizations of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures.*

Jana Sawicki

*The time has come, then, to record the end of a way of life and, more elusive, the truncated lives of women who were shaped by a warped society yet who were, all the same, portents of the future.*

Lyndall Gordon

*Unveiling is not reduction but passion.*

Philippe Sollers

The past 46 years have been momentous ones in South Africa's history: in 1948 the Afrikaner Nationalist Government came into power and embarked on a process of institutionalised racism<sup>1</sup>, the relentless denial of human rights for the majority of South Africans. 1994 saw this process grind to its inevitable halt when South Africa's first democratically elected government swept into power. The narrative of apartheid's rise and fall must be told, not only in the broad strokes of a national history, but also in the finer details of individual life-stories. As Lyndall Gordon notes, anthropological and sociological studies, important as they are, may simply demonstrate "the hopelessness of factual knowledge" and, for all their rigorousness, often strike one as "empty of human truth" (Gordon, 1992:129).

Autobiographical writing serves as an important corrective. It represents the refusal of individuals to be



mere objects of enquiry. The autobiographical 'I' "proclaims voice, subject, and the right to history and place" (Willis, 1985:213). While the relationship between lived experience and textual versions thereof is highly codified, and not to be collapsed into a simple referential model, autobiography has much to offer the student of history and culture. Such writing presents itself as a species of history, a history which confronts the partiality of interpretations of reality and explores the private dimensions of public policy.

It is a need to testify to the experience of apartheid which motivates a great many South African autobiographers.<sup>2</sup> Increasing numbers of South Africans, across more representative class, gender and race lines, are recording their life stories. In this, autobiographical production reproduces the struggle for democratization. Greater numbers of South African and non-South African readers are reading these avowedly factual personal accounts. In the apartheid period autobiography achieves unique significance for the genre, as it is currently defined, contests apartheid's obsession with group identity and concomitant erasure of individuals. Perhaps in part due to recognition of this, autobiographical writing has attracted increasing attention in the last decade or so. Autobiographies and quasi-autobiographies by South Africans seem to be far less frequently regarded -- or to regard themselves -- as the poor relations of fictional, poetic, and historical texts (and I speak here of their general reception, not only of their status in academic circles).

Indeed, in many cases purportedly factual accounts of life in apartheid South Africa have come to be regarded as more valuable than fictional accounts. For instance, the publishers of Jay Naidoo's Coolie Location (1990) claim in their advertising leaflet that the tradition of autobiography is "even more central than the novel in South

Africa's literary culture".) The fact that the autobiographical writings of Ellen Kuzwayo, Breyten Breytenbach and Christopher Hope have been honoured with literary awards is another indication of the recently improved status of the genre. At the less rarefied end of the audience scale another mark of the genre's widening importance is the emergence of the worker autobiography (which I discuss in Chapter 4) in which scholars and researchers act as facilitators for illiterate persons to narrate aspects of their lives. Such texts are frequently proposed for use as teaching texts for adult literacy programmes, reducing the reliance on the more usual Eurocentric texts. Thus it is not only those who regard South Africa's racism as an inexplicable horror of the twentieth century who see the importance of these records of life under apartheid; those who have lived through these horrors wish to testify and to hear the testimony of other victims. As Genette has observed, a culture "manifests itself as much in what it reads as in what it writes" (cited by Scholes, 1974:11).

South African autobiographical writing in this period encompasses

ritualised sets of discourses... which give rise to a certain number of new speech-acts which take them up, transform them or speak of them, in short, those discourses which, over and above their formulation, are said indefinitely, remain said, and are to be said again. (Foucault, 1981:56)

Many testimonies to experiences of apartheid, particularly of its victims, have this status; viz., they have become seminal discursive constructs, mutating yet iterative, resonating across a range of fields of activity and disciplines. It is changes like these in the role played by South African autobiographical writing that make a study of the genre particularly interesting at this time; as poststructuralists and postmodernists contend, "significance is a quality not of the thing itself but of the human activity taking place around it" (Klinkowitz,

1988:3).

Autobiographical texts not only participate in the struggle for equality by representing the demographics of the South African population more accurately (they reflect the growing momentum of the struggle as well as contributing importantly to that struggle), they are also of particular interest now because there have been noteworthy shifts in approaches to the genre.] Implicit in my analyses is the desire "to determine why particular semantic codes gain precedence or relinquish ground in the social formation" (Nussbaum, 1989:13). [In other words, autobiographical writing in all its diversity is read as a body of texts which encode important information about the culture and its peoples.] The relationship is oblique and opaque, but it is there nevertheless. Social change impinges on textual production; texts effect some shifts in the social formation. I have referred above to the worker autobiography of the 1980s, a sub-species which has all but disappeared in the 1990s. Remarkable, too, is the South African prison autobiography which has achieved recognition from many quarters as a sub-genre. (Breytenbach's The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist which is discussed in Chapter 3 is an example). Generic mutations such as these and those found in Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman (discussed in Chapter 3) and Gordon's Shared Lives (Chapter 5) invite analysis because of what they can tell us about shifting discursive formations in South Africa, about how these constitute 'self' differently, and what sort of writing about South Africanness is required and/or valued. Felicity Nussbaum's remarks are apt: as was true of early attempts at autobiography in England, contemporary South African autobiographies are indeed important instances of "self-writing, [which] for men and women, is part of the conquest over meaning and the contest over the power to name the real" (1989:xxi).

In autobiography the writer declares her or his authority over the right to declare the meaning of experience; frequently the South African autobiographical subject, in writing personal history, is righting falsified national(ist) history.

The meaning of experience is perhaps the most crucial site of political struggle over meaning since it involves personal, psychic and emotional investment on the part of the individual. It plays an important role in determining the individual's role as social agent. It affects both where and how the individual acts and whether her action is based on a consensual acceptance of the meaning and effects of an action, on conscious resistance to them or on the demands of other external necessities. The power of experience in the constitution of the individual as social agent comes from the dominant assumption in our society that experience gives access to truth. (Weedon, 1987:79-80)

Autobiography's rise in status in the hierarchy of genres of contemporary South Africa is clearly due to popular and academic concern for information about lived realities, particularly those of marginalized people who can become autobiographers or autobiographical subjects (of mediated autobiographical texts) when they couldn't aspire to be 'writers'. There has recently been a massive groundswell of sensitivity to the silences of the impoverished, the oppressed, and to academia's collusion in this silencing by speaking for these unempowered masses. Moreover, in academic circles autobiography comes in from the cold because of the theoretically validated (as well as politically defensible) attention to micro-politics, rather than grand narratives.

Contemporary literary theories have also contributed to autobiography's growing centrality in that the current interrogation of notions of identity, experience and textuality has facilitated a dissolution of traditional disciplinary boundaries<sup>3</sup> which has, in turn, led to a re-assessment of what it is that constitutes the proper object

of study in a given field. Thus while the autobiography was largely excluded from literary studies on the grounds that it was a species of history rather than Literature (I use the capital letter advisedly)<sup>4</sup> -- or was neither, being situated somewhere in between -- it has now acquired a somewhat privileged place (in academic enterprise, if not in undergraduate syllabi) as a prime site for analysis of culturally sanctioned responses to material relations. I am not arguing that autobiography is now worthy of consideration as 'Literature' (I do not justify my attention to certain texts on the grounds of their being 'great' or 'universally true'); nor am I claiming that South African autobiographical writing is sufficiently 'objective' to command the serious attention of historians and social scientists. The poststructuralist deconstruction of the exclusive couple creative/factual writing invalidates these claims, and contributes fruitfully to the interrogation of particular texts, in part because of a loosening of disciplinary boundaries. Ancillary to this is the weakening of the fiction/fact hierarchy across disciplines; indeed, contemporary theory interrogates the very foundations of this division, rendering its truth-value extremely problematic. And autobiography, as it is currently read in academic circles, colludes with the subversion.

The title of this dissertation reflects the three definitive parts of the genre: AUTOS -- the self; BIOS -- the life; GRAPHE -- the writing; and points to my concern with subjectivity, material practice and experience, and language and textuality, in texts which are commonly identified as records of life stories. The three areas of concern are pivotal in current theorising which informs a variety of disciplines including literary studies, Black studies, history, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, and, of course, gender studies. Ideas which were, in previous decades, transparent and unproblematic

have come to be used "under erasure"<sup>5</sup>, or in scare quotes (to indicate the inadequacy of accepting such notions at face value) or, at least, self-consciously. More will be said about this in the chapter on theory and in subsequent chapters. It is the newly acquired centrality of these questions in current debate that accounts in large part for the recent massive upsurge in critical and theoretical interest in the genre of autobiography. Under the influence of theorists like Althusser, Lacan, Foucault and feminists like Kristeva, scholars' notions of discrete individuals acting independently in a clearly separable social context have eroded, to be replaced by theorisations of subjects being subjected to, but capable of acting upon, their complex and unstable discursive circumstances. Autobiography, then, as the textual encoding of the subject and the social, comes to be seen as bearing much greater significance than the humanist, expressive-realist view of it as a body of texts about individuals' lives would have admitted. And what I hope to achieve in this study is a profoundly political analysis of textual practices employed in South Africans' life-writing.

The autobiographical genre, as presently understood, is a particularly provocative type of textual product at this juncture. Its provocativeness lies in the necessity -- dictated by current conceptualisations of the genre -- of such texts to work with and through charged notions such as individuality, reality, truth, history, representation and so on, in what is arguably a more compelling and forthright way than other genres such as fiction and drama. One simply cannot write about oneself without some conception of what it is about personal experience that is important, and about what it is in the plethora of detail in the experience of being that will best define for others the essentials of that experiencing subject. Nor can one write about one's life in a purportedly truthful way without conceptualising distinctions between truthfulness and make-

believe. And the act of writing for a readership necessarily implies a sense of what is appropriate in written form, what can and/or should be said, and what it means to say such things. It must be noted, too, that apartheid effected a prolonged crisis of uncertainty on almost all of its peoples, forcing South African autobiographers to attempt to forge selves that were worthy of telling about, to subvert official versions of reality and thereby redefine the real, to generate ways of telling that might fit the tale.

In Derrida's discussion of autobiography entitled Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name he remarks, "As you know, all these matters are currently undergoing a reevaluation -- all these matters, that is to say, the biographical and the *autos* of the autobiographical" (1985:5). Critics and theorists who work in the field invariably find as Olney did that, "it is all too typical -- indeed it seems inevitable -- that the subject of autobiography produces more questions than it answers, more doubts by far (even of its existence) than certainties" (Olney, 1980:5).<sup>6</sup> Autobiography studies are embroiled in uncertainties, but these do not detract from our recognition that autobiographies have been and are produced, and that they serve specific needs in accordance with their generic classification. And perhaps it is in part because questions are often more useful than answers, that the study of autobiography is so challenging.

The recent popularity of autobiography studies has been well documented by scholars like James Olney.<sup>7</sup> He remarks that while some critics date the production of the first autobiographies to as far back as the fourth century B.C., theoretical and critical literature about autobiography, "began, in effect, in 1956, which is not even yesterday but only about an hour ago as such matters must be judged"



(ibid.:6-7).<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy, too, that a journal dealing exclusively with "auto/biography studies" came into being less than ten years ago.<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, interest in autobiography has begun to catch up with American and European trends; an unprecedented number of papers on the genre were offered at a recent (1990) AUETSA annual general conference.<sup>10</sup>

This dissertation comprises an introduction, a chapter outlining the theoretical field and its implications for this study, and one chapter each on 'self', 'life' and 'writing' which focuses on selected texts, and finally, some conclusions. Such divisions bear the mark of arbitrariness in that, in practice, theory is everywhere, and the three aspects of autobiography are mutually constitutive, and hence indivisible, as will be apparent in the analyses of individual texts. Sign systems are productive of subjectivity and the discursive relations which structure the social formation, including the textual practices of that social formation. Experiences of self and life likewise shape textual practices; and the multiplicity of texts which inform a social formation inevitably shape experiences of self and the patterns of our lives. The divisions I use as rubrics for chapters should not be construed as a failure to recognise the complexity of the whole but rather as an attempt to achieve a workable organisation of material and foci for analyses. The reading of autobiographical texts involves

an awareness that criticism -- understood as analysis of the historical conditions which bear on the creation of links to truth, to rules, and to the self -- does not mark out impassable boundaries or describe closed systems; it brings to light transformable singularities. (Foucault, 1984:335)

Thus I have eschewed the construction of monologic arguments about this diverse body of texts which collapses difference into all-embracing generalisations. Nor has my approach to each text been consistent: rather I have allowed the interpretive strategies to emerge from the



texts themselves in a kind of theoretical and methodological pluralism (the range of theoretical positions adopted are broadly compatible; more detailed explanations follow in Chapter 2). My readings aim to explore the discursive constitution of autobiographical subjects and texts, to consider the significances of these discourses for an understanding of the South African social formation at specific junctures. While the selection of texts has been deliberately informed by a wide-ranging survey of South African autobiographical production in English in the last 46 years, each section focuses on specific texts chosen for the differences I see in them.

Perhaps some prefatory explanations regarding my working definitions are necessary. The term 'South African' is used rather loosely here to include autobiographies by people who were born in South Africa as well as those who were born elsewhere but who define themselves as South African or describe their experiences in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> In such cases, 'South African' refers to the second aspect of the genre's defining nomenclature, viz. bios (life), where texts deal with the lived experiences of the author/narrator/protagonist while in South Africa (never overlooking the arbitrariness of this geographical legacy from colonialism). My reading of these texts as a body of 'South African' writing seeks to reaffirm the indissoluble links between all who were subject to this national nightmare, whether categorised as members of the oppressor or oppressed classes and also to contribute -- in spite of cogent arguments against the use of such arbitrary historical national demarcations -- to the reclamation of a (diverse) national identity which is important in the healing process of nation-building. It is as well to bear in mind that very many of the autobiographers were denied South African citizenship when they wrote their texts; they are now part of the process of building a unified South African nation.

Furthermore, as indicated, this study is confined to an examination of South African autobiographical writing published in the apartheid period. This momentous epoch in South Africa's history and in the history of global racism begs scrutiny. 1948 is the earlier limit also because the only comprehensive survey of South African autobiographies -- an annotated bibliography by Ushpol -- concludes with texts published in 1951; it seems appropriate to begin close to where he left off. And concluding this study with the present has been a fortuitous necessity: 1994 has at last seen South Africa's first democratically elected government installed. An era has ended. Published life-stories reveal important details -- however obliquely -- of the progress and effects of the Nationalists' apartheid policy.

It must be noted, however, that while political developments in this period are obviously crucial in the constitution of *identity, material relations*, and the control of *textual production* (race classification determining geographical living space and mobility, educational opportunity, employment opportunities and -- more often than not -- class), the politics of apartheid have not been isolated as the only important factor influencing self, life, and writing. That it is a prime factor, is nonetheless, beyond dispute.<sup>12</sup>

To return to the defining criteria, the survey is confined to texts in English published in the period 1948 - 1994; many of the texts were written some time before but originally failed to find publishers (Rose-Innes's Autobiography and Kadalie's, My Life and the ICU: Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist in South Africa, for example), while others (like Leipoldt's Bushveld Doctor) have been reprinted in this period. The exclusion of unpublished autobiographies (whose number is impossible to estimate) seems to me not to be too problematic as I am

primarily interested in an analysis of texts that have functioned, or still are functioning, within the broad contexts of societies of readers at large.

The term 'autobiographical' as adjective is used deliberately for I have wanted to survey the field in its diversity, including texts which hover on the margins of conservative definitions of the genre; I have sought to consider challenges to mainstream autobiography. Thus included are texts which are not actually penned by the person whose life is the subject of the text, as is the case in joint-authored autobiographies like Albert Luthuli's Let My People Go (Chapter 4). Incorporated, too, are texts which are autobiographical in form (they use the first-person pronoun in the voice of the subject of the life-story and are purportedly true accounts) but which were not written by the subject of the tale, or even, in some cases, motivated by the subject. Examples are Part of My Soul (Winnie Mandela), Poppie by Elsa Joubert (neither of which have been selected for detailed analysis) and We Came to Town, one of the worker autobiographical anthologies analyzed in Chapter 4. Also of uncertain status as autobiography is Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives (Chapter 5), a text which at times declares itself to be a biography.

All texts which are purportedly true accounts<sup>13</sup> of some life experiences of the autobiographical subject were part of the initial survey, not only those texts dealing with a whole life, from cradle to the brink of the grave (such as Alan Paton's two volume autobiography, Towards the Mountain and Journey Continued). Few South African autobiographies deal with the entire life, and few cover every aspect of their lives even in the limited period which the narrative may encompass. For instance, 'political' and 'career' autobiographies usually include only the most cursory references to significant personal attachments. Luthuli's

autobiography and Boberg's The Boberg Story are exemplary.

Thus generic criteria have been used very flexibly, including texts which do not always conform simultaneously to the three terms auto/bio/graphy of the genre. The debate concerning the definition of the genre continues. It is a debate which is entered into in the chapter on textuality (Chapter 5). For the moment, suffice it to say that since generic categories are used to define texts by readers, writers and publishers alike, an analysis which aims to explore the functions of texts in their social/historical contexts cannot justifiably denounce genre as theorists like Paul de Man (1979) and Robert Elbaz (1988) have done, nor can it use generic definitions with a strictness which a general readership does not acknowledge. As long as a text has seemed to adhere to certain crucial generic practices (and these differ across the range of texts) and to present itself and/or be accepted as autobiographical, it has been admitted in the overall survey. At all times this study has aimed to keep to the fore the awareness that genres are not constant, discrete and isolatable textual entities but are part of the fabric of cultures and as such are influenced by other cultural practices and are involved in a significant degree of give and take with other genres. Generic practices are not only subject to varying degrees of transformation but may appear and disappear within the totality of material practices of a social formation. Autobiography, as Spengemann reminds us, must be viewed historically,

not as one thing that writers have done again and again, but as the pattern described by the various things they have done in response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the ways in which the self may be apprehended, and the proper methods of reporting those apprehensions. (1980:xiii)

Furthermore, recognition of generic categories by researchers will depend upon the sorts of information sought in texts, and the theoretical models being used.

The initial research has been as comprehensive as possible: in order to gauge the degree of centrality or marginality of particular types of texts, and to consider shifts in autobiographical textual production over time, it was necessary to have some overview of autobiographical production in general. I have attempted to read as widely as possible within the field (as it has been loosely defined) in English<sup>14</sup> published in the period 1948 to 1994. The confinement of my study to English texts has meant that, "[b]ecause the path of creativity is particularly tortuous for those who must straddle the interval between different and hierarchised cultural universes" (Lionnet, 1989:21), the writers have divergent relationships to the language, style and mode of discourse: a source of great interest. However, in spite of efforts at inclusiveness, there are certain to be some autobiographical texts which I have not encountered, partly because libraries rarely classify texts as autobiographies, and some which were excluded because of the exigencies of time. I believe that these are, however, relatively few in number. Individual texts are assessed in the light of broad trends in autobiographical writing.

Some seventeen texts have been selected for close attention out of a field of over 120 texts. Against this overview, the choice of specific texts for detailed analysis was motivated in part by a desire to demonstrate the diversity of the field: where Breytenbach and Gordon write self-reflexive -- at times, almost deconstructive -- autobiographies, Campbell and Moloi write what they insist is 'the truth', transparently encoded in text. Where Breytenbach, Gordon and Campbell write texts which would sit quite happily on university English department syllabi, Moloi's and many of the workers' autobiographical texts are written in simple or profoundly unconventional English. (In Moloi's case, English is mixed with Zulu, Xhosa, *tsotsi-taal*, Afrikaans, and Sotho). And where Luthuli's

autobiography challenges racism on the grounds of moral and logical indefensibility (while it tends to sideline gender and treat genre as self-evidently transparent), Kuzwayo's interrogates race, gender and genre far more profoundly -- if unconsciously -- as cultural constructs.

This study crosses gender, race and class lines for such groupings are neither stable nor are they necessarily and invariably more meaningful than others. Race, gender, class, nationality, ethnic allegiance -- all of these are consequential, for as localized systems of social organisation they are, as Rubin (1975) argues, ways of distributing power; however, Bozzoli points out the pitfalls of a reliance on structuralist notions of society comprising neatly encapsulated systems of race, class, and gender (1991:239) (also Diamond and Quinby, 1988:198). Gender is not always -- or indeed generally -- construed as the primary signifier for social organisation by South African autobiographers, and in order to explore the fluctuations of definitions of gender identities, gender has had to be examined as a system which interpellates women and men. Furthermore, consideration of texts authored by women and men was necessary so that the debate about gender and genre could be entered into in an informed way (see Chapter 5). Individual texts traverse class groupings: texts by members of the educated black elite, like Luthuli, rub shoulders with those by illiterate black subsistence farmers; autobiographies by those who are clearly part of the hegemonic class and who wish to be perceived thus (Campbell is an obvious example) as well as texts by (or about) people who have been oppressed into virtual oblivion (e.g. industrial and domestic workers) have been incorporated.

Race has also been treated as an unstable signifier: although race has been a prime signifier in South Africa, not all individuals belonging to a specific race group

define themselves primarily in terms of their official race classification. Many defy racist discourse precisely by refusing their given racial classification. All labels are used provisionally, and with great care to prevent reifying them; this tentativeness is vindicated when one is reminded of the historical contingency of concepts such as race: to James Rose-Innes and others of the early decades of this century 'racism' meant the antagonism between Afrikaans and English (white) South Africans, not colour prejudice. (Boris Wilson uses the term this way too). Lionnet reminds us that,

Twentieth-century science has shown that it is impossible to define with any kind of accuracy the genetic frontiers that might permit the classification of humans into a set of well-defined "races".... I would go so far as to argue that in the absence of scientific or experiential grounding, it is language that conditions our concept of race and that the boundaries of that concept change according to cultural, social, and linguistic realities. (1989:12)

And of course we know how changeable cultural, social and linguistic interpretations are. This study thus includes autobiographical writings in English by black and white South Africans.<sup>15</sup> Because I wanted my sample at least to come close to a resemblance of the general population of South Africa, more texts by (or about) black South Africans than by whites (even though there are more autobiographies published in English by whites than by blacks) are singled out for close reading.

But this decision to include works by blacks brings us to the question of white academics seeing fit to comment on the lives or works of blacks, a question which has reached rather emotive heights of late at conferences and in academic journals such as Agenda and Journal of Literary Studies. It is therefore incumbent upon me as a white South African whose experience has, without my consent, functioned as part of black South Africans' oppression, to justify my inclusion of black-authored texts. My aim is not to "cover up national oppression by artificially

integrating the oppressor and the oppressed into a democratic alliance" (Nkululeko, cited by Welz, Fester and Mkhize, 1993:10). I am trying to do the opposite: race and racism are interrogated as cultural constructs, by probing the multiple and shifting sites of oppression. My "strategy of resistance to the totalizing languages of racism [is, as it must be,] based in the attempt to create a counter-ideology by exposing rhetorical conventions" (Lionnet, 1989:16). The analyses will demonstrate that the aim is to probe -- not dissolve -- difference, bearing in mind that difference is unstable, and does not operate on one plane only.

Nor are the readings offered in a spirit of confident assertion but rather as explorations borne out of a desire (which I know my own limited experiences will always frustrate in greater or lesser measure) to understand.

Nkululeko asks:

Can an oppressed nation or segment of it, engaged in a struggle for liberation from its oppressors, rely on knowledge produced, researched and theorized by others, no matter how progressive, who are members of the oppressor nation? The same question put in another way is: can the right of a people to self-determination in the production of knowledge be overlooked and liberation attained for them through knowledge produced by others? (cited by Welz, Fester and Mkhize, 1993:10)

This is an important question. My own response is no, no-one, least of all oppressed and silenced peoples, should *rely* on 'knowledge' produced by academics like myself. But they do have the right to ignore or challenge what is said, just as I have the right to contest others' readings or, perhaps more importantly, non-responses. Many black writers have said that they wish to assert their right to tell their own stories; my whole-hearted endorsement of this position is what motivates me to take heed of, indeed, show respect to (in the best way I know), their stories. The point is to magnify their audibility, not snatch away the microphone.



I will never fully understand what it means to be impoverished, black, illiterate: but I do believe that by paying attention to the life stories of the oppressed I am, in a small way, helping to erode the gap between academic activity and activism. Academic analysis is never a substitute for the testimonies of the oppressed (Funani, 1992:65-6). The time has indeed come for Africans to speak for themselves (66); by giving the testimonies of the oppressed the serious attention they deserve, academics are validating this project. Funani's attack on a white woman academic has general (and thus personal) relevance:

The time has come for us to speak for ourselves. If Fouché wants to help, we would dearly appreciate it if she could go home and liberate her own people with her research and efforts. The country is in desperate need of that right now. (1993:57)

White academics cannot "help" by discussing only works by white South Africans for an exclusively white readership; such distortions cannot be construed as liberatory, as a contribution to non-racialism in the 'new South Africa', to mutual understanding, to confronting our shared humanity and our differences. The totalistic use of racial categorizations is both politically and theoretically (though these are not discrete entities) indefensible; as Sawicki says of pluralism in theory, "the obvious path for resistance to take is to provide alternative mappings of specific regions of the social field" (1988:188). Paying attention to the testimonies of those who are "more often simply objects of theory" (188) means a dissection of Manichean accounts which fallaciously reduce the complex multi-faceted struggles across innumerable battle-fields to one duel.

The argument against white academics writing about the experiences of blacks has broader implications, for it is based, in part, on the assumption that people whose experience is divergent cannot communicate their experiences to each other (see Fouché, 1993:40). This

reifies apartheid's crude and cruel system of categorization which is in opposition to what many of the autobiographers themselves were attempting to achieve, i.e. to share their life experiences with those who do not, but should, know about such things. That whites like myself are included in the implied readership of a great many autobiographical texts is made quite clear. Moreover, to follow the argument to its logical conclusion would perhaps entail the exclusion of autobiographical writing by white South African men, as well much of that by white South African women. For instance, Lyndall Gordon's experiences are, in important ways, very different from my own: I was born a generation later, have never lived in Cape Town, or studied at Columbia or worked at Oxford, and I am not Jewish. But I have learnt a great deal from her text and those of other women and men, black and white; moreover, I trust that my analyses of these texts are not without some value, if only to fuel debate.

Texts were chosen, too, if they seemed to exemplify a particular trend in autobiographical production. I also sought to bring to light some hitherto ignored texts which I believe make an important contribution to the genre.<sup>16</sup> Representatives of popular autobiographies (the worker autobiographies) as well as texts which are marginal to main trends (such as Lyndall Gordon's) are examined. This study interrogates some of the discursive networks that structure particular texts so that traditional hierarchies of value, the established canons, are challenged. A further consideration has been the text's ability to provide illustrative material for important theoretical questions. Theory has been "deployed to question the reciprocal relations of representation and reality, the production of subjectivity and human agency, and the contradictions of ideology" (Nussbaum, 1989:13). Just how theoretical concerns have informed my practice, and what these concerns are, will be the matter of the following

chapter.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical approach

*The world of 'theorization' is a grim one, haunted by mad scientists breeding monsters through hybridization, the hunted ghosts of a hundred isms, and the massive shadow of the subject surging up at every turn.*

Meaghan Morris

*There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.*

Paul Valéry

It has become commonplace amongst proponents of literary theory to declare that there is no practice without theory (Belsey, 1980:4). This is largely in response to the previous generation of literary critics who, schooled in the Leavisian and/or the New Critical tradition, argued that the practice of criticism and larger, philosophical questions were indeed separable. Leavis insisted that the two should remain discrete activities, that the sensitivity of response required of the critic is incompatible with the philosopher's (or theorist's) systematic explanation and defence of the abstract "ethical, philosophical and ... aesthetic choices" which motivate critical assumptions (1958:211). The counter-argument points out that every critical judgement, every reading, is conducted in accordance with a set of assumptions about the text and the manner in which it should be interpreted, assumptions regarding what should be read and how, what social role texts have, and so on; in short, in accordance with "ethical, philosophical and ... aesthetic choices" (Leavis, 1958;211). Attitudes to such broad issues need not be clearly formulated. Most readers would -- as Leavis seems to do -- consider the reading activity to be 'natural'. Nevertheless, analysis of the differing reading strategies of different communities, or of one group over time, will reveal varied responses to texts which are based upon shifts in attitude to fundamental questions. The demand that literature (the very term is now highly problematic)

"be in serious relation to actuality, ... be in relation to life" (Leavis, 1958:215) is not only not a universal requirement but is wide open to interpretation.

Since no reading is innocent of theory, then, analysts commonly foreground their theoretical orientations in order to attempt to confront what might otherwise remain unconscious biases in readings, and also to alert others to the implications of the interpretive strategies employed. It is with this in mind that I review some of the ideas of key theorists whose work has had the greatest impact upon my own, thereby clarifying my own broadly feminist and poststructuralist<sup>1</sup> theoretical approach, an approach which is a "pratique de métissage" (Edouard Glissant cited by Lionnet, 1989:4) employing as it does a version of poststructuralist epistemology and ontology, as well as a feminist politics, while nevertheless remaining open to cultural creolisation.

Discussion of theoretical orientation is necessary also because contemporary theory has only recently begun to infiltrate English departments in South Africa, and has had seemingly little impact upon readings of autobiographical texts. While many university English departments include one or two South African autobiographies (usually black-authored) in their syllabi, these texts are usually read mimetically, as transparent encodings of an unproblematic 'real'. While such efforts are undoubtedly important for they respond to the explicit political aims of many autobiographical texts, my own manifestly theoretical reading strategy offers a revision of these conventional liberal readings. Contemporary theories fruitfully challenge common-sense notions concerning identity and social relations, and also cultural production. Aesthetic activity is seen to be implicated in questions of power relations; it is not some untainted realm of idealistic creation. But then neither is commentary on art; like all

Why discuss  
of theoretical  
orientation  
essential

kinds of knowledge-making intellectual endeavour is intricately involved in issues of political, economic, and ideological import. This is particularly significant in relation to the role of the intellectual in South Africa. The charge has been made by Cecily Lockett (1990:3-4; 8) that contemporary theory is in some respects inappropriate to the reading of South African cultural production since its difficulty makes it inaccessible to the vast majority of the population, and also because it invariably reads the cultural text in ways which are contrary to popular readings. While these charges may be valid, it nevertheless seems to be inappropriate for an academic to apologise for the difficulty (and hence exclusiveness) of the ideas that she works with: as de Reuck argues, "one cannot step out of the world of ideas but must subject the conceptual web in which we find ourselves situated to the contemporary debate" (1990:30). Poststructuralism has also been accused of paralysing political action because of its insistence on the complexity of social relations (its refusal of simple notions of 'the struggle' or 'the oppressed'). But I hope to demonstrate that these complaints may be countered with evidence of the profundity of the poststructuralist analysis, a profundity which cannot be attained through acceptance of common-sense or popular ideology and which is indeed germane to academic study (what else are academics for if not to think deeply about this world and our place in it?). Instead of disabling political action, poststructuralism can interrogate social relations rigorously, offering the theoretical means for much more precise and exact understanding of subjects and their social circumstances so that change at fundamental, crucial levels is made possible.

Counter-arguments  
on critiques  
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Counter-arguments  
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Poststructuralist theory, however, is not unified<sup>2</sup>: significant differences are apparent along with thematic and conceptual convergences. Discourses (including

theoretical ones) have woven into them gaps (what is not attended to, the unspoken), inconsistencies, and contradictions.

[T]he premises of poststructuralism disallow any denominative, unified, or 'proper' definition of itself. Broadly, however, it involves a critique of metaphysics (of the concepts of causality, of identity, of the subject, and of truth), of the theory of the sign, and the acknowledgement and incorporation of psychoanalytic modes of thought. In brief, it may be said that post-structuralism fractures the serene unity of the stable sign and the unified subject. (Young, 1981:8)

*Principal contributors to post-structuralist theory - identify problematic aspects of their theories*

This chapter considers aspects of the works of principal contributors to the poststructuralist movement (Saussure, Barthes, Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and of the key feminists de Beauvoir, Kristeva and others) which are especially germane to my project, but then identifies those features of their theories which seem problematic. This adoption of poststructuralist theory is no more disinterested than any other interpretation: my concern throughout is the usefulness and defensibility of aspects of the theoretical paradigm specifically for the reading of South African autobiographical texts.

#### (i) The Saussurean legacy

*Considers the objects of higher criticism*

Antony Easthope remarks upon poststructuralism's relationship with structuralism: "The prefix 'post-' is serious not casual for post-structuralism gets its intellectual force by being both *after* structuralism and *because* of it, because of the limitations discovered in structuralism's project" (1988:23). Since poststructuralism relies upon structuralist precepts, I shall begin with a brief adumbration of aspects of Saussurean linguistics crucial to structuralist theory and practice.

Instead of focussing upon specific utterances (*parole*), Saussure argued that the proper object of linguistics should be the examination of the language system (*langue*)

which governs utterance and which can be inferred from specific instances of usage. It is this identification of the system as the proper object of study which informs the structuralist enterprise. But equally important for subsequent theoretical development is Saussure's identification of the sign as the basic element of linguistic structures. Saussure argued that a sign comprises two aspects, the signifier (the "sound-image") and the signified (the concept); the relationship between the two being arbitrary or unmotivated, but conventionally determined (Barthes, 1967:50-51). Easthope explains the import of Saussure's argument that the signifier and signified are brought together only through convention:

If the signified was derived either immediately or ultimately from the referent, then presumably... all words would 'have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next' [Saussure, 1959:166]. They don't. Meanings emerge from the community of meaning and reach out to referents in the extra-discursive (or they may not, since quite a lot of meanings make perfectly good sense to us -- 'witch', 'centaur', 'God' etc. -- even if they can't be attached to anything at all outside language). It is not the case... that likenesses strike consciousness from the external world; it is the case rather that meaning issues from the linguistic system. (1988:25)

Saussure, furthermore, remarked upon the purely differential, relational nature of language, arguing that in language there are only differences without any positive terms. This insistence on the instability of meaning and on the lack of positivity in language, undermines for structuralists and poststructuralists notions of definitive readings and denies that meaning can be innocently prescribed by common-sense or disciplinary convention. Moreover, the rejection of the common-sense notion of the 'naturalness' of words and meanings, of the transparency of language and other sign systems, has enabled students of literature and culture to consider much more critically the relation between the signifier and signified, and the implications of this unstable relationship.



Since the sign is meaningful only in relation to other signs in the system, the user must co-operate with the language system and function according to its rules and conventions. Barthes describes a language as:

a social institution, it is by no means an act, and it is not subject to any premeditation... the individual cannot by himself create or modify it; it is essentially a collective contract which one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to communicate. Moreover, this social product is autonomous, like a game with its own rules, for it can be handled only after a period of learning. (1967:14)

Language is "that which divides reality" (Barthes, 1967:64). All perceptions of the 'real' are mediated by language and culture. This rejection of the humanist conception of language as capable of expressing fundamental truths about an objectively discernible reality leads to an anti-humanist theorization of the individual as a cultural product which is a site of meaning, not the origin: the self is subject to changes in convention just as language and other sign systems are.

Such an insight into the nature of being is obviously profoundly important to cultural studies. This model subverts mimetic interpretations of autobiography as the creative expression of a unique, autonomous individual which manifestly reflects real experiences. Since the autobiographer's perceptions and identity are shaped by the social systems in which she operates and with which she must co-operate in order to make meaningful utterances, it is this relationship which becomes the proper object of study. Autobiographical texts are thus read as textual reworkings of apprehensions of reality which are themselves fundamentally conventional.

How this theory relates to your study

Seeing that meaning is a cultural product, it is no longer possible to deny relevance to social and cultural issues in the process of textual criticism, as the previous generation of critics informed by the principles of New

Criticism and Leavisian 'practical criticism' would have alleged. The autobiographical text encodes the social, and acts upon the social. The author in this view neither creates nor controls meaning. Furthermore, for an author to compose an autobiographical text, she has to have learned what it is that the culture understands by that appellation. Acknowledgement of the complex and fluctuating tissue of socially mediated conventions which are enabling of autobiographical writing frees the study of the texts from narrow 'literary' concerns (which usually overlooked it, anyway, as inferior literary product) and enables the interrogation of autobiography as cultural product.

**(ii) Barthes: structuralism and beyond**

Roland Barthes' work led increasingly to an acknowledgement of the limitations of the structuralist project<sup>3</sup>. In Elements of Semiology Barthes endorses a structuralist theoretical paradigm, but he also intimates a critique of the structuralist programme when he recognizes that structuralist discourse itself could become the object of explanation (Selden, 1985:74).

Nothing in principle prevents a metalanguage from becoming in its turn the language-object of a new metalanguage.... We might say that society, which holds the plane of connotation, speaks the signifiers of the system considered, while the semiologist speaks its signifieds; he therefore seems to have the objective function of decipherer (his language is an operation) in relation to the world which naturalizes or conceals the signs of the first system under the signifiers of the second; but his objectivity is made provisional by the very history which renews metalanguages. (Barthes, 1967:93-4)

This decisive insight<sup>4</sup> recognizes that the scientificity of structuralism -- "the objective function" of decipherment -- is merely a provisional status contingent upon the discourses which buoy it up. Therefore science, or truth, are not absolutes but products of discursive practices. The usual interpretation of South African autobiographies as truthful documents is thus seen not only to be based on

a falsely simplistic notion of 'truth' but also to obscure the network of cultural assumptions which make such interpretation possible, their social and political implications. And critical writing is provisional, not absolute.

Barthes argues in the essay "The Death of the Author" (first published in 1968) that "the whole of the enunciation is an empty process.... Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*" (1989:116). The very title of Barthes' autobiography, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, indicates the complicity of textuality in the constitution of identity and reality.<sup>5</sup> Barthes' application of Saussurean linguistics to a reconceptualisation of the author radically undermines common-sense acceptances of autobiographies as simple records of the unproblematic 'real' experiences of individuals. The autobiographical subject is the subject of, and subjected to, the autobiographical text; s/he is not equivalent to the material being whose name is appended to the title page. Barthes explains why it is that the author's creative control of the text is a myth:

the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.... (1989:117)

The autobiographer can thus only construct an autobiographical subject which conforms in important respects to what is culturally current. Convention is not merely peripheral, as is contended in much expressive realist criticism which stresses the revelatory nature of stylistic features with regard to an unproblematic author (see Catherine Belsey, 1980:7-14); current cultural codes set the parameters for all textual encodings of selfhood.

S/Z departs from 'classical' structuralism too in that the text is no longer perceived as an objectively definitive object which an independent reader can -- according to 'scientific' principles -- dismantle (1974:10). Barthes maintains rather that the "'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely lost (whose origin is lost)" (1974:10). The reader is a "deceptive plenitude [which] is merely the wake of all the codes," whose individuality or particularity "has ultimately the generality of stereotypes" (1974:10). This problematization of the reader is decisive to poststructuralism. The reader is no more an autonomous individual than the writer. Readers can only read in terms of the discourses which constitute them.

The self-sustaining objective structure of the text requires and must correspond to an equally self-sustaining subject. Structuralism becomes transformed into post-structuralism when the structures of the text are seen to be always structures in and for a subject (reader and critic). The text of structuralism is intransitive, that of post-structuralism transitive. (Easthope, 1988:33)

The interrogation of the reader is crucial, too, to the reading of South African autobiography. The reader, be she an 'ordinary' member of the public or an academic, can only interpret a text in ways which are culturally possible. And texts are not written in a creative vacuum but for certain types of readers (the "generality of stereotypes"). Thus analysis of a text is also analysis of a reading community. Features of the implied reader will be indicative of the specific configurations of discourses current at a given time.

For Barthes, as for all poststructuralists, reading is conceived of as active process, not passive consumption. Reading does not merely uncover a fixed stable meaning:

... the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic

exemption of meaning. In precisely this way... writing, by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates... an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases -- reason, science, law. (Barthes, 1989:117)

Barthes argues in S/Z that the task of the reader is to explore each and every "site of the signifier" so as "to ascertain the code or codes of which this site is perhaps the starting point (or the goal)" (1974:12). The task is to avoid the construction of "an ultimate structure" (1974:12) and to renew "the entrances to the text" (1974:13), to seek a plurality of meaning and avoid the illusory goal of a final signified. One argues not that this autobiography means this, but that this autobiography is constituted by these discourses (among others) and functions in these ways (among others). The "dilatory movement of the signifier cannot be stopped" (Barthes, 1974:123): i.e. autobiography and other 'factual' genres (like literary criticism) cannot achieve their aimed-for transparency. The profoundly metaphorical nature of language, the importance of its material properties (sound and writing), are not overlooked.

Realism in fictional and factual texts "consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real" (Barthes, 1974:55); the literary system pervades all instances of its usage. This new attention to the signifier leads to a re-examination of the fact/fiction classificatory divide for if the signifier and its conventions structure all uses of language then there can be no transparent use of language referring to or expressing independent reality. Autobiographies can only depict a recognizable 'real' if they conform in significant ways to the conventions of factual, specifically, autobiographical, writing. The conventions of autobiography and the supporting cultural networks are fundamental in the analysis of such texts. No text is a

discrete entity:

'What founds the text is not an internal, closed accountable structure,'... but rather the study of 'the outlet of the text onto other texts, other codes, other signs, what makes the text is the intertextual,' the interwoven strands of which the critic must sort out. (Klinkowitz, 1988:49)

Intertextuality embraces all of the codes and conventions by which culture operates; it is not merely a reference to the mutual influence of written texts upon each other. Analysis of autobiographical writing cannot confine itself to the examination of other autobiographical texts, but must consider a host of systems of signification (such as fictional writing, journalism, history, political narratives, music, movies, fashion and so on) which enable autobiography to exist as a genre, and which shape its forms and delimit its meanings.

Barthes' project grows from an initial interest in the dynamics of writing to the textual character of existence as a whole (Klinkowitz, 1988:44,48). He exposes the 'natural' as social construct, involving fictionalisation in which

stereotypes are produced as fictive artifices but are then 'consumed as innate meanings.' The critic's semiology uncovers this fictive impulse and restores it as a matter for appreciation, at the same time protecting society from the delusion which would be worked upon it. (Klinkowitz, 1988:48)

That this occurs has been painfully obvious to South Africans; and in uncovering the "fictive impulse" in racism, the semiotician attempts to remain sensitive to the supporting discursive networks upon which racist delusion relies, and to a new regime of truth, a new set of stereotypes, which will step into the breach.

### **(iii) Althusser: the ideological interpellation of the subject**

Althusser's theorization of the role of ideology in the structuration of subjectivity, "an account of the subject

as effect rather than cause" (Easthope, 1988:17), is an important elaboration of earlier critiques of the humanist conception society/individual as discrete entities. Althusser's work, while not without flaws stemming largely from its adherence to structuralist Marxist precept, contributes importantly to the poststructuralist demonstration that individual consciousness implies some idea of a collective consciousness and that, by the same token, the notion of the social formation makes sense only if conceptualized as an abstract entity derived from observable instances of its operation in individual and collective behaviour. His work also raises the question (which Foucault takes up more powerfully): who stands to gain from the institutional and ideological systems functioning in a given social formation at a particular time?

In the seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971) Althusser argues that the social formation interpellates subjects (rather than influences individuals) by means of ideologies which emanate from and support ideological state apparatuses. Ideological state apparatuses -- religious, political, educational, legal and cultural institutions as well as the mass media and the family<sup>6</sup> -- "function massively and predominantly by ideology" (1971:145), each in their own peculiar way (1971:154) to promote the reproduction of the relations of production i.e. the ideology of the ruling class. Ideologies, Althusser argues, are not simply idea systems or sets of doctrines but have real material existence in a variety of social apparatuses in which subjects live; they are "the very condition of our experience of the world" (Belsey, 1980:5).<sup>7</sup> ISA's "interpellate" subjects so that the subject (mis)recognizes her/himself as such according to the subject positions offered by institutions and its representatives. Consciousness is therefore a function of ideological subjection; it is "not the origin of social

relations but their effect" (Weedon, 1987:27). By encouraging individuals to accept ideology as natural and obvious (Althusser, 1971:172), indeed, by ensuring that individuals define themselves in terms of the criteria established by ideology, ISAs ensure that "the subjects 'work', they 'work by themselves'.... They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs" (1971:181).

Althusser's sustained ambiguity in the use of the term subject allows for the theorization of individual subjection (and the failure to perceive this subjection) to the social process being coincident with a degree of individual freedom. ISAs serve to process the individual so that he "*is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his submission*" (1971:182). One of the crucial effects of ideology is that,

the individual assumes that she is the author of the ideology or discourse which she is speaking. She speaks or thinks as if she were in control of meaning. She 'imagines' that she is indeed the type of subject which humanism proposes -- rational, unified, the source rather than the effect of language. It is the imaginary quality of the individual's identification with a subject position which gives it so much psychological and emotional force. (Weedon, 1987:31)

Althusser's "linking of ideology with material interests and its integral role in the reproduction of specific forms of power relations in society" (Weedon, 1987:27) facilitates a re-vision of politics and the individual's role in the political/economic structures in which s/he lives. His shift away from the economic determinism of orthodox Marxism to a more complex theorization of the social formation enables a clearer understanding of the symbiosis of ideology and material relations and the part of the subject therein (Dowling, 1984:64-66;68-71;82-83).

This decentering of the social and the subject is a key



poststructuralist concept which has particularly momentous implications for the reading of autobiography: individual choice, in life and in text, is circumscribed within the parameters set by the specific social and linguistic codes operating at a particular historical juncture. There is no inherent essence or core personality which -- independently of social circumstance -- determines what one is or how one lives. Expressive realist readings which look to the autobiographical text to provide a window on another's life are shown to be collaborating with the dominant ideology of humanist individualism. The autobiographical text is about more than its protagonist/subject; it is about a host of ideological (or discursive) systems which inform the text, the subject and the context in which these operate, and the reading community which the text addresses. Analysis may consider the autobiographical text as material and ideological product which functions in specifically productive ways within a social formation. Autobiographies serve to promote specific ideologies; and this is as true of texts which are politically "correct" as it is of texts that co-operate with ideologies of racism, sexism and so on.

#### **(iv) Lacan: on subjects and signifiers**

Jacques Lacan's work has contributed to the simultaneous elaboration and undermining of structuralism as theory and methodology (Lemaire, 1977:1-2; and Leitch, 1983:11). Lacan's re-readings of Freud, although deliberately lacking in linearity of argument<sup>8</sup>, have acquired something of the cohesiveness of a theory in the course of their appropriation by theorists in a variety of disciplines (Davis, 1983:861).

Lacan's most important contribution to poststructuralist theory has been his revision of the Freudian decentering of the subject in terms of a re-appraisal of Saussurean analyses of the relationship between signifier and

signified. There is, Lacan argues, an "incessant sliding of the signifying chain over the waves of the signified" which manifests itself in "the autonomy of the signifying chain from the signified" (cited by Lemaire, 1977:45). According to Lacan, people are subjected to the order of the signifier because "there is no thought without language (*langage*), [and so] knowledge of the world, of others and of self is determined by *language (langue)*" (Lemaire, 1977:52-53). Socio-cultural and linguistic symbolisms impose themselves with their structures as orders which have already been constituted before the *infans* makes her entry into them. Entry into the symbolic order, into the social, means that lived experience is mediated by the symbolic order, which is dominated by the signifier. There is therefore no hope for any individual of gaining total mastery of symbolism: " *the human being is an effect of the signifier rather than its cause*" (Lacan, cited by Lemaire, 1977:68).<sup>9</sup>

The symbolic order is constitutive of subjectivity in the sense that the distinction between self and other is possible only with the entry into the symbolic order. Edmond Ortigues (cited by Lemaire, 1977:52) explains that the symbolic individualizes by differentiating between self and other; and inside the self it differentiates between interiority and the expression of that interiority (through discourse -- the social "I" of speech and behaviour). Lacan reasons that since reference to self, desire, life, can only be made through the symbolic register, it will always be susceptible to all the distortions inscribed in the very principles of the 'symbolic', conventional dimension of group life. This means that the subject's relationship to her/his own body is a mediated one.

All that remains of desire, of natural reproduction, of the physiology of bodies is symbols, laws, concepts or even ideologies. Marriage, family, stereotypes of heterosexual relations, fidelity, etc., are, at the symbolic level, the inevitably reductive and partially arbitrary preferential crystallization of lived

biological and physiological experiences which are infinitely numerous and which are henceforth inaccessible as such.... (Lemaire, 1977:57-58)

Moreover, for Lacan, the unconscious is not the site of some uncontaminated, essential 'self'. Lacan argues (1977:234) that the unconscious, which is masked by the conscious, is structured like a language and follows the laws of the signifier:

the signifier acts separately from its signification and without the subject being aware of it. As a constituent element of the unconscious, the figure, the literal character of the signifier, makes its effects felt in consciousness without the mind having anything at all to do with it.... (Lemaire, 1977:38)

It is impossible, Lacan argues, to return across the initial divide separating the real from thought or symbol in consciousness, or to locate with precision the connexion which mythically unites the original text of the unconscious with the subject's imaginary. "A *fortiori*, it would be unthinkable that one could 'in truth' make the logical connexion between the signifier and the subject's bodily and physiological lived experience" (Lemaire, 1977:45).

Lacan's theorization of the formation of the unconscious and the Oedipal complex accounts for inexplicable behaviours in individuals -- dreams, slips of the tongue, and so on -- which a *cogito ergo sum* philosophy is unable to explain.

I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think... [or more properly] I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think. (Lacan, 1977:166)

One of the characteristics of language is that it evokes a thing, a reality, by means of a substitute which it is not; evoking, in other words, its presence against a ground of absence.<sup>10</sup> This allows the subject to refer to herself as distinct from her surroundings, and explains how the entry into the symbolic entails a split in the subject. Lacan provides an account of subjectivity as the unstable product

of contradiction and conflict, and while we may have a sense of our own identity and feel that we are the source from which our thoughts emanate, these experiences are inconsistent; we -- in life and in text -- continually struggle to find a continuity to our being (Henriques et al, 1984:275). Thus instead of attributing inconsistencies in the text to inadequate authorial control of the medium, a poststructuralist reading would regard such to be quite compatible with extra-textual subjectivity as well as with textual renditions thereof. Such a reading would not seek to explain away contradiction and incongruity but might instead foreground disjunctions as being especially significant indicators of the configuration of subjectivity and the intertextuality of cultural production.

Although an attempt to gain some measure of objectivity is one of the primary requirements for the genre of autobiography, Lacanian theory undercuts notions of empirically provable observations of an independent real for it denies that affect and cognition are separable, or that apprehensions of the real can be divided from the symbolic orders in which we act and react (often unconsciously). Lacanian theory, furthermore, provides an account of the gender system and goes some way (but not far enough, as we shall see) to distancing gender-based power relations from biological determinism. Following Levi-Strauss, Lacan argues that the prohibition of incest functions as the structure underlying the apparent organisation of societies (1977:65-66). Due to the promotion of exogamy which occurs through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the family structure manifests a transcendence of all natural order by the establishment of Culture (Lemaire, 1977:61-63).

Gender-differentiated meanings (and thus the positions differentially available in discourse) account for the content of gender difference.... Power difference (imaginary as well as real, intimately linked in the psyche with the early desire for the Other) is both the cause and effect of the system of gender

difference and provides the motor for its continuous re-production. (Hollway, in Henriques et al, 1984:228)

Lacanian theory situates gender at the heart of all subjectivity, and provides the conceptual means for the probing of gender constructions, the positing of self and Other, in autobiographical writing. However, one cannot simply accept *tout court* that the Lacanian account can explain non-European subjectivities. Students of South African culture (and other non-Europeanized cultures) have yet to explore the implications of the Lacanian model for those subjects whose cultural rites of passage may be markedly different.

#### **(v) Derridean *differance***

So decisive is Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist critique of central structuralist principles that some commentators on contemporary literary theory erroneously equate poststructuralism with Derridean deconstruction.<sup>11</sup> Derrida's account of *differance* refines the linguistic assertion that languages function as sign systems in which differences between elements (signifiers and signifieds) function constitutionally and definitionally, and no element has a fixed, or even stable, essential value. Derrida's qualification of this structuralist precept lies in his insistence that,

meaning is nowhere punctually present in language, that it is always subject to a kind of semantic slippage (or deferral) which prevents the sign from ever (so to speak) coinciding with itself in a moment of perfect, remainderless grasp. (Norris, 1987:15)

Meaning is thus simultaneously 'differential' (unlike or dissimilar in nature, quality, or form) and 'deferred' (delayed, postponed). Derrida explains that while "*Differance* is neither a word nor a concept" (1973:130), it "could be said to designate the productive and primordial constituting causality, the process of scission and division whose differings and differences would be the constituted products or effects" (137).<sup>12</sup>

This Derridean insistence on the *play of differance* stakes out a new freedom of possibility for poststructuralism:<sup>13</sup>

*The Insistence of the Figure.* Signs displace and substitute; we inhabit a world of tropes and devices. Literal language does not exist, except for the illusion of it.

No language can have a literal ground. Consequence. No exit from the aberrations of reference. The ground always collapses.

A "literal interpretation" is an effect derived by single-minded reduction of grammatical, figural, and semantic oscillations in a writing.

Neither author nor critic can ultimately control the free play of signifiers in disseminating reference. No one escapes the chains of figurality, the flights of signifiers, and the network of differences in a writing. We confide always in images. (Leitch, 1983:57-8)

We find evidence of this in autobiographical writing, in the simplest texts such as Sibambene, which attempt a transparency, an innocence of referentiality, as well as in more fraught accounts of selfhood, such as Breytenbach's True Confessions. Attempts to locate in the autobiographical text a reality or a stable meaning which is free of the differential play of language, are bound to failure. The readings of selected texts which follow seek to foreground the materiality of the text: its discursive components, its pictorial accompaniments. The 'real' is interrogated, not as something independent of text, but as textual construct. Critical readings of autobiography, by the same token, can never claim to be free of the play of the signifier; the best that analysis can hope to achieve is some degree of consistency and validity in terms of those theoretical paradigms which make most sense at the time.

[The text] is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts. Its system of language, its grammar, its lexicon, drag along numerous bits and pieces -- traces -- of history so that the text resembles a Cultural Salvation Army Outlet with unaccountable collections of incompatible ideas, beliefs and sources. The 'genealogy' of the text is necessarily an incomplete network of conscious and unconscious borrowed fragments. Manifested,

tradition is a mess. Every text is intertext.  
(Leitch, 1983:57-8)

Derrida's deconstruction of the boundaries between literary and philosophic discourse strengthens the poststructuralist dissolution of disciplinary and generic boundaries. His close analyses of the

network of articulated themes and assumptions whose meaning everywhere links up with other texts, other genres or tropics of discourse .... It is enough (he argues) to disqualify any reading that would confine its attentions to "philosophy" or "literature" and seek to close off all contaminating influences from outside its own subject-domain. Writing, in short, is *intertextual* through and through. But this should not be taken as a licence for that other kind of wholesale "intertextuality" that rejoices in simply riding roughshod over all such generic distinctions. For it is precisely this "stratified" character of language - - the fact that it has been endlessly worked over by *specific* genealogies and logics of sense -- which now demands such a corresponding effort of "prudent, slow, differentiated" reading. (Norris, 1987:25-26)

My readings of South African autobiographical texts deconstruct the intersecting discursive networks, the "logics of sense", which make the genre possible and important. I investigate the interrelationship of autobiography and other (factual and fictional) ways of encoding experience (Moloi's use of movie discourse provides an interesting example), but I do not ignore the fact that these texts define themselves as autobiographical. Instead I ask, what are the implications of these texts defining themselves thus?

Derrida insists that no text can control or even be conscious of the *tropes* which are always invested with a potential for disruption.

Deconstruction neither denies nor really affects the commonsense view that language exists to communicate meaning. It *suspends* that view for its own specific purpose of seeing what happens when the writs of convention no longer run. (Norris, 1982:128)

A deconstructive reading explores the strategies and

defensive tropes by which a text either confronts or evades the texts that precede it. It interrogates the metaphors, mythemes, chains of implication which are demonstrably *there* to be read but which are usually overlooked on account of their irrelevance to the central issues. It often focuses upon footnotes or parenthetical details or even marginalia (Derrida, 1979:131-132) thus resisting the "homogenizing pressure of received ideas" (Norris, 1982:184). (In line with this I look at, amongst other things, layout and illustration in Sibambene, at cover design in True Confessions, and at the role of photographs in Thula Baba and Shared Lives). "[Deconstruction] points to those blindspots of argument where a text generates aberrant meanings or chains of disruptive implication that work to undermine its manifest 'logical' sense" (Norris, 1987:163). A deconstructive reading is closely tied to the texts it interrogates; indeed, Derrida argues that deconstruction is always already at work in every text, even in the deconstructive reading itself.

Like Barthes and Foucault, Derrida also interrogates the function of the authorial signature. In the essay entitled "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" Derrida explores the way that the proper name of the author acquires meanings determined by readers' reception of the writings themselves, a reception which can never be controlled by authorial command. Thus one finds, for instance, that the names of well-known writers or famous people can impel readings of the autobiographical text which exceed the textual inscription of identity. Moreover, the proper name "is not to be confused with the bearer" for its structure ensures that it "exists and is meant to exist without the bearer of the name. Thus every name is the name of someone dead, or of a living someone whom it can do without" (1985:53). This is relevant to a reading of autobiographical texts which almost always attempt to conceal the ontological divisions



between textuality and life, thereby endeavouring to create the illusion of textual transparency through which the subject's identity may be glimpsed as a solid object. But often, in spite of efforts to the contrary, the textual name eludes simple identification with the narrator and protagonist, and acquires a host of additional significations. Furthermore, the author's name is part of the meaning system of the text; it is not peripheral, irrelevant.

Names usually elicit stereotypical associations with regard to race, ethnicity and gender, and thus function in very special ways in the production of meaning in the autobiographical text. Derrida discusses, too, the often ignored impact of the qualities of the proper name as signifier, as sound-image. For one thing, the proper name is "inscribed -- structurally and a priori -- in a network where it is contaminated by common names" (1985:107). The name then, can (and usually does) have significance beyond its local/individual instantiation and its legal and social implications; apart from the synecdochic values of the name of an author of a body of works, the name must always participate in the play of meaning which associated signifiers may lend it.

Important as his work has been to poststructuralism, the "radical free play" (Leitch, 1983:237) of Derrida's more recent writings is a cause of much discontent amongst theorists (myself included)<sup>14</sup> and has important (negative) political implications. It is an issue over which the paths of Derrida and Foucault diverge.

#### **(vi) Foucault: the subject of power**

Foucault's analysis of power and its effects in even the smallest units of the social formation cause him to deliver an implicit attack on Derrida and others who accept "the sovereignty of the signifier" and "the reduction of

discursive practices to textual traces; the elision of events produced therein and the retention only of marks for a reading" (Young, 1981:50).<sup>15</sup> Foucault calls for the restoration to discourse of its character as an event,<sup>16</sup> as implicated in the specificities of historically grounded power relations. His concern with language and discourse provides a model for the examination of the inter-relationship of the discursive and the non-discursive in South African autobiographical texts, and of the implications of this relationship for the construction of 'truth' and 'knowledge' which function importantly in the distribution of power in the social formation.

For Foucault, a discourse is a regulated system of statements whose unity is "above and beyond books, texts, authors, through time" (Henriques et al, 1984:105). It is independent of the "proximity of epistemological validity, scientificity, or truth" (Smart, 1985:40). The rules which govern what is sayable or considered valid within any discourse,

are not confined to those internal to the discourse, but include rules of combination with other discourses, rules that establish differences from other categories of discourse (for example scientific as opposed to literary, etc.), the rules of production of the possible statements .... The systematic character of a discourse includes its systematic articulation with other discourses. In practice, discourses delimit what can be said, whilst providing the spaces -- the concepts, metaphors, models, analogies -- for making new statements within any specific discourse. (Henriques et al, 1984:105-6)

Foucault notes, too, that "discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices, which cross each other, but can just as well exclude each other and be unaware of each other" (quoted by Young, 1981:50). Discourses concern specific areas of activity or practice. Discourses (like autobiography) are grounded in historically specific material relations such as "forms of production, social relationships, political institutions" (Foucault, quoted by Smart, 1985:42), the non-discursive domain providing "the

external conditions of possibility" which give rise to the appearance of a discourse and which fix its limits (Young, 1981:50). It is "in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault, 1980:100). Discourses are not *either* dominant and accepted or excluded and dominated. Rather the world of discourse comprises,

a mutiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.... Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1980:100-101)

Foucault rejects the notion of ideology because "it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth" (1984:60). While my readings are deeply influenced by Foucault, I have not avoided the term ideology: I use the term to mean a belief system which has its own politics of truth (but which is not in opposition to the Truth). Instead of seeking truth vs ideology, analysis concerns itself with "seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false" (1984:60).

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1984:72-73)

A poststructuralist reading of autobiography seeks to uncover the mechanisms whereby each text establishes its truthfulness, and may explore some of the political and economic implications of these tactics. Analysis asks, what kinds of texts are being published in South Africa at a particular juncture? What kinds of personal testimonies

are valuable at any one time, what kinds of truths about individual lives is the reading public willing to accept?

For Foucault "there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms" (1972:183). Knowledge, therefore, cannot be verified or disputed in absolute terms of truth or falsehood, science vs ideology.<sup>17</sup> Rather,

the problem of a search for guarantees concerning knowledge has always been inscribed in the struggle around the legitimacy and authority of the kinds of principles, interpretations, analyses and descriptions of the social and material world that provide the discursive bases for action. (Henriques et al, 1984:110)

Foucault does not reject all "knowledge" as false constructions predicated upon power-struggles; thus one does not ridicule the claims of South African autobiographies to be read as sources of knowledge on personal experience. Autobiographers are not simply deluded: the analyst rather examines the implications that such claims have for the analysis of South African cultural production: what kinds of interpretations are autobiographical texts offering as "discursive bases for action"; what is the nature of the historical specificity of the material and discursive conditions which make possible the specific constructions of reality? (See Smart, 1985:141). Nor are my readings offered cynically as interpretations which are merely academic exercises of indifferent validity; they are indeed implicated in the power-knowledge nexus, but they are founded carefully on theoretically validated precepts, and carry the guarantees which contemporary theory may provisionally lend.

Foucault examines the various historical relations between forms of knowledge and forms of the exercise of power for there can be no general theory which applies universally to knowledge/power relationships. In line with

this, I interrogate the specificities of individual texts; I do not attempt to make generalizations.

We must not look for who has the power... and who is deprived of it...; nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to remain ignorant. We must seek rather the pattern of the modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process.... Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are "matrices of transformations." (Foucault, 1980:99)

Power is not the property of a centralized group (state, dominant class etc), but is rather a strategy:

Power's condition of possibility... must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point...; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. (Foucault, 1980:92-3)

One should not conceive of power relations as a "binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled" (94), although "the manifold relations of force" (94) do occasionally create the conditions for major dominations and rebellions (such as in apartheid South Africa). Even when the South African State seemed to be most crushingly in control, it had constantly to reinforce its position of power, and had to remain vigilant at all times, for resistance was ever-changing, and ever-present. Power had to be exercised; it was not, and is not, something one can possess and hold. Foucault provides theoretical justification for resisting the strong temptation for analysts of apartheid to prioritize race or class as prime signifiers in the distribution of power. Texts do not necessarily conform to stereotypical models of racial identity and the distribution of power (black does not necessarily equal victim, or white, oppressor), and they may function in unexpected ways in the production of knowledge. Just how fruitful a Foucauldian genealogical analysis can be -- and what unforeseen findings it can yield -- is evidenced in my discussion of Moloi's My Life, a text which reinforces and resists hegemonic power relations in surprisingly complex ways.

"Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1980:95): resistance is everywhere in the power network, not simply as reaction but inscribed in relations of power as "an irreducible opposite" (96). Power relations are immanent in all types of relationship (sexual, economic, knowledge-generating etc) and "have a directly productive role" (96) in the practices of individuals and institutions.

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault, 1984:61)

Over and above the "massive binary divisions" (1980:96) the critic can explore this complex of widely dispersed power relations as I do in texts as different as Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse and Moloi's My Life. The discussion of worker testimonies in Chapter 4 examines the repressive/productive nexus in the researcher-subject relationship. An examination of South African autobiographical writing, furthermore, can look beyond the obvious cultural and political repression of the majority and consider some of the enabling effects of the interaction between Europe and Africa. Transitory, unstable power relations have, in the last few decades, resulted in a proliferation of South African autobiographical texts, most conspicuously by black South Africans; and analysis of these shifts in trends of textual production reveals much about power and resistance in contemporary South Africa. We find, for example, that the primarily narrative structuration of contemporary autobiographical writing -- even by black South Africans -- is not simply the negative effect of a dominant culture imposing its own practices on the marginalised. Rather,

partial submergence of traditional non-narrative auto/biographical forms can be considered in terms of the possibilities afforded narrativized autobiographical texts in a world which deals in commodities; such texts are often accorded great polemical force and hence political effectiveness due in large part to their adoption and adaptation of the generic norms of the dominating culture. This is because these texts are more likely to be published than those which employ a traditional approach, and they therefore reach a much larger South African and international readership.

Since "relations of power are not in a position of exteriority to other types of relationships" (96) but are everywhere, power and attendant resistance are mobile and transitory, fostering groupings and divisions, "furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds" (96). Foucault conceives of the body itself -- as well as discourses inscribing sexuality and the body -- as being implicated in the power/knowledge network.

The relationship between the body and discourse or power is not a negative one; power renders the body active and productive. Sexuality and identity can only be understood, then, in terms of the complicated and often paradoxical ways in which pleasures, knowledges, and power are produced and disciplined in language, and institutionalized across multiple social fields.... The body does not give knowledge that is then merely transmitted by an essentially neutral language and allowed or disallowed by a centralized form of prohibition. Discourse makes the body an object of knowledge and invests it with power. (Martin, 1988:9)

Foucault examines strategies which invest the body with meaning and argues for the cultural and historical specificity of bodily experience, what Foucault refers to as a "political economy" of the body (1984:172-3). Sexuality and race, therefore, are not fundamental features of identity borne of biology, they are products of culture

and history and are thus to be located in power relations. "Neither wholly a source of domination nor of resistance, sexuality is also neither outside power nor wholly circumscribed by it. Instead, it is itself an arena of struggle" (Sawicki, 1988:185). The relevance of this to a study of autobiography, a type of writing that deals with experiences of the body in culture, is clear: the specificities of the discursive constitution of sexuality and race *in each text* are minutely examined as arenas of struggle, as sometimes separate, sometimes intersecting discourses.

All categories of the natural or the normal, as well as the unnatural or abnormal, are exposed as social constructs.... [Foucault's] methodological deconstructions explode the self-evidence of constituted meanings, defy the acceptance of received categories as exhaustive, and the cost at which such coherence and solidity are effected. The point from which Foucault deconstructs is off-center, out of line, apparently unaligned. It is not the point of an imagined absolute otherness, but an 'alterity' that understands itself as an internal exclusion. From that perspective, it is possible to grasp and restructure the organization of our bodies, psyches, and lives through discourse. (Martin, 1988:10)

Martin's concluding point about the positive changes which might ensue from Foucauldian analysis is noteworthy, hingeing as these changes do on Foucault's consistent scepticism. Foucault emphasises the conditional and tentative status of knowledge, "knowledge as perspective" (1984:90), and its strategic importance in the network of power relations (1984:76 ff). Thus all analyses should make explicit "their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy -- the unavoidable obstacles of their passion" (90). Foucault identifies a "political economy" of truth (Diamond and Quinby, 1988:x-xi) and argues against polemics and grand alignments. He contends that

the forms of totalization offered by politics are always, in fact, very limited. I am attempting, to the contrary... to open up problems that are as concrete and general as possible, problems that



approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal, problems that are at once constituents of our history and constituted by that history. (1984:375-6)

For Foucault, "everything is dangerous" (quoted by Sawicki, 1988:189), no theoretical or political model is free from possible abuse. Sawicki observes:

Foucault's theories do not tell us what to do, but rather how some of our ways of thinking and doing are historically linked to particular forms of power and social control; his theories serve less to explain than to criticize and raise questions. His histories of theories are designed to reveal their contingency and thereby free us from them. (1988:189)

In line with Foucault, my analyses seek to give "expression to subjugated forms of knowledge and a voice to histories which have been submerged, concealed, silenced" (Smart, 1985:61). This means an opposition to the self-evident, the 'natural'; and part of the strategy for achieving such disruptions of the 'normal' is the recovery of the marginalized.

#### **(vii) The feminist project(ory)**

The feminist movement has been an important part of European intellectual culture at least since Simone de Beauvoir's enormously influential The Second Sex was published in 1949. Decades before Foucault, Lacan and others demonstrated the political expediency of dominant conceptions of the 'natural', de Beauvoir exposed the cultural constructedness of subjectivity, and explored the notion of identity as process. de Beauvoir remarks upon how women are relegated to power-less roles, and how this powerlessness is itself used to justify their inferior status.<sup>18</sup> But, she adds, "the significance of the verb to be must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'" (1968:23). She argues that the failure of leading contemporary European intellectuals to grasp the implications of the gender

system is due to the fact that they were themselves beneficiaries of this system:

It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature. (de Beauvoir, 1968:25)

Anticipating Lacan, de Beauvoir theorizes the alterity of woman. Woman lives in a world,

where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) -- who always regards the self as the essential -- and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in a woman's situation attain fulfilment? (1968:27)

Among the most important contributors<sup>19</sup> to the European feminist intellectual project has been Julia Kristeva whose collection of essays entitled Recherches pour une semanalyse appeared in 1969, the same year in which she first published in the influential journal Tel Quel, joining the editorial board in 1970. That year Barthes declared: "Julia Kristeva always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we were comforted by, the one of which we could be proud" (cited by Roudiez, 1980:1).

While de Beauvoir describes woman as Other, as the lesser half of a couple, for Kristeva feminine difference is not lack but a positive "Otherness". "Femininity is 'the repressed term by which discourse is made possible', what Julia Kristeva refers to as the semiotic" (Mary Eagleton, 1986:204). Difference in this sense is not restricted to the opposition of male and female; it is that which is set outside of the established system. In Kristeva's theory, the semiotic is closely connected (but not equivalent) to femininity. As Terry Eagleton explains (1983:188) it stems

from the pre-Oedipal phase and is thus bound up with the mother's body. The semiotic is like a flow of 'pulsions' or drives; it is a rhythmic pattern which can be seen as a form of language, though it is not yet meaningful. When the child enters language,

this heterogeneous flow must be as it were chopped up, articulated into stable terms, so that in entering the symbolic order this 'semiotic' process is repressed. This repression, however, is not total: for the semiotic can still be discerned as a kind of pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence. The semiotic is the 'other' of language which is nonetheless intimately entwined with it.... The semiotic is fluid and plural, a kind of pleasurable creative excess over precise meaning, and it takes sadistic delight in destroying or negating such signs. It is opposed to all fixed, transcendental significations; and since the ideologies of modern male-dominated class-society rely on such fixed signs for their power (God, father, state, order, property and so on), such literature becomes a kind of equivalent in the realm of language to revolution in the sphere of politics. (Eagleton, 1983:188-189)

The semiotic can be construed as a

borderline of the symbolic order; and in this sense the 'feminine' could equally be seen as existing on such a border. For the feminine is at once constructed within the symbolic order, like any gender, and yet is relegated to its margins.... On this view, the feminine -- which is a mode of being and discourse not necessarily identical with women -- signifies a force within society which opposes it. (Eagleton, 1983:190)

And although the symbolic is entered and engaged by males and females, it is referred to as the "paternal function, grammatical and social constraints" (Kristeva, 1980a:7). Ann Rosalind Jones notes that

Kristeva sees maternity as a conceptual challenge to phallogocentrism: gestation and nurturance break down the oppositions between self and other, subject and object, inside and outside.... (Jones, 1985b:86)

Thus although neither the semiotic nor the symbolic can simply be equated with female and male respectively, Kristeva's theory suggests that there are correspondences.

The work of de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Cixous and other feminists fostered the growing awareness in the West that gender was socially constructed (not natural), and therefore could be reconstructed or deconstructed. It is this fundamentally feminist conception which informs (in varying degrees) the ideas and works of key poststructuralists. Historians of literary theory<sup>20</sup> generally overlook the profound influence of the feminist movement which can be detected in much contemporary theory. This (incompletely developed) feminist tendency is implicit in the analyses of male hegemony in the works of some structuralists (like Levi-Strauss) and is evident in the work of poststructuralism's founding fathers: in Lacan's rereading of Freud, in Derrida's deconstruction of phallogocentric discourse (Jones, 1985b:80-112), and in Foucault's analysis of the social construction of sexuality (Diamond and Quinby, 1988:x). But while early poststructuralist writing generally interrogates subjectivity, sexuality, power relations, and material and discursive practice, it tends to disregard the obvious pervasiveness of male dominance and female subservience and neglects to consider strategies for liberation from gender systems.<sup>21</sup> The feminist impulse in later poststructuralist practice<sup>22</sup> is thus a necessary corrective:

feminism is of vital importance, and not only because it is a social movement which demands equity for a majority of the world's population, as if that were not enough.... [It is] a radically new conception of human and social relations. Thus feminism is not merely an aspect of cultural studies, but one of its structuring principles.... Secondly, feminism is important as it is a model of a new kind of politics... [it] has done what Foucault said political theory has not done: it has cut off the head of the king; it no longer regards power as something that can be gained by the capture of sovereignty. Feminism seeks a more massive change in human relations than marxist theory has usually proposed.... (Shumway, 1989:109-110)

Feminism -- embracing a multiplicity of tactical approaches -- fortifies the poststructuralist interrogation of the

humanist individual "man", puncturing the supposed neutrality to reveal the bias towards white, upper class males. It confronts (with varying degrees of success) the interconnectedness of class, race, gender and anti-imperialist struggles,<sup>23</sup> but most importantly: "Feminism is a politics. It is politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society" (Weedon, 1987:1).

As is evident in my discussion of Kristeva's work on the symbolic and the semiotic, feminism has refined the poststructuralist interrogation of the role of language in the constitution of subjectivity; it is discourse which entrenches male hegemony which must be resisted, subverted, mocked. (See Cixous, in Jones, 1985b:85). For Cixous and Irigaray, this is to be achieved by a celebration of women's difference;<sup>24</sup> they call for the joyous inscription of female plenitude, and for the disruption of the symbolic order, "by dislocating syntax, playing with the signifier, punning outrageously and constantly" (Marks and de Courtivron, 1980:33). Irigaray notes that, "Women's desire most likely does not speak the same language as man's desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks" (1980:107). Thus some feminists refuse to take the language of patriarchy seriously.

You, Dora, you the indomitable, the poetic body, you are the true 'mistress' of the Signifier.... Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law: an explosion henceforth possible and ineluctable; let it be done, right now, in language. (Cixous, 1980b:257)

And in their own textual *jouissance* Cixous and Irigaray, along with other feminist writers (like Woolf) have dissolved the boundaries separating the genres by intermingling essay, autobiography, fiction, narrative, polemic; by writing prose which plays with language and is close to poetry; by refusing to pretend that "objectivity" can transcend the autobiographical. Similarly, Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives employs a feminist politics to

deconstruct conventional auto/biographical authoritarianism.

My own readings are informed by materialist feminist politics. The fluid configurations of gender have to be probed with great sensitivity. This is especially true of South Africa, a country with enormous cultural diversity (Malay Muslims, Xhosas, Jews, Zulus, Afrikaners, Portuguese, Tsongas, English, 'Coloureds,' Hindus of Indian descent, and many more), but with one common denominator, viz., the oppression of women. The forms that this takes range from the extremes of desperate poverty, abuse and rape (many have claimed that South Africa's rape statistics are amongst the highest in the world) to job discrimination and sexual harassment.

Renewed attention to the signifier in culture (a feature of poststructuralism) is espoused by many feminists. Kristeva's deconstruction of the biological links between the laws of logic (usually, but not necessarily, male) and the free play of language (usually, but not necessarily, female), can be complemented with Gayle Rubin's exploration of the contradictions of woman as sign (the dominant cultural inscription) and woman as person<sup>25</sup> in her feminist critique of Levi-Strauss, Freud, Lacan and Marx. Rubin finds that across a range of diverse cultures, women function predominantly as gifts in order to secure male-bonding in kinship systems. Marriages are

a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts.... The result of a gift of women is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship. (Rubin, 1975:173)

Kinship organizes social relationships; it is a way of distributing power among men. "As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges -- social organization" (Rubin, 1975:174). This materialist emphasis

of the non-discursive relations which are implied by and encoded within the discursive informs my own feminist interpretations.

In his assessment of women functioning primarily as signs, Levi-Strauss argues that women are like words but are also, less importantly, speakers (Rubin, 1975:201). In their attempts to return to women the voices silenced by cultures, feminists have confirmed and given political impetus to the poststructuralist impulse to attend to the marginalized. Feminism investigates, and thus goes some way to valorizing, genres and texts which have been sidelined; it resurrects ignored female-authored texts. Feminism deconstructs hegemonic hierarchies, knowledges, and "objective" analytical practices; it is also "alert to the omissions, gaps, partial truths and contradictions which ideology masks -- it attends to the silences" (Greene and Kahn, 1980:22). My reading of Roy Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse is perhaps the most obvious example of such a strategy; I consider the implications for gender politics of what Campbell does not say about his wife (and other women) in his life story. Feminism and gender studies have added impetus to autobiography's growth in popularity amongst academics for, like poststructuralism, it deconstructs centres, highlights the obscure, accords experience and micro relations the attention they deserve. Feminism does this not only because such practices have generally accepted theoretical validity at this time, but more importantly, because such practices contribute to the empowerment of women.

The respect accorded experience can be seen to arise from feminism's emphasis on the "politics of the personal" (Weedon, 1987:5). Feminism insists that personal experience is the site of struggle and the key to social transformations.

In the twentieth century, after suffering through fascism and revisionism, we should have learned that

there can be no socio-political transformation without a transformation of subjects: in other words, in our relationship to social constraints, to pleasure, and more deeply, to language. (Kristeva, 1980b:141)

This "politics of the personal" provokes us to question the effect of all that we do, believe, and say on prevailing power relations for subjectivity is not fixed, but is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon, 1987:33). Feminist theory (again, coinciding with poststructuralism) holds that power relations are in constant negotiation and contestation, even while it acknowledges the potency of the male-dominated structuration of social formations. Thus for feminists, there is no essential truth about the gender system, but this does not mean that consistent awareness of difference prevents unified resistance by women. Arguing for the adoption of strategic essentialism, Martin notes,

We cannot afford to refuse to take a political stance 'which pins us to our sex' for the sake of an abstract theoretical correctness, but we can refuse to be content with fixed identities or to universalize ourselves as revolutionary subjects. (1988:16)

Political activism is regarded as necessary, but this does not negate a healthy scepticism regarding the grand political gesture;<sup>26</sup> it is how one lives that is important if social relations are to be transformed. In her introduction to Desire in Language, Kristeva states:

Dissenting from all political power groups, be they in the government or in the opposition, the intellectual's position should be one of continuously challenging all orthodoxies.... I am quite dedicated to the feminist movement but I think feminism, or any other movement, need not expect unconditional backing on the part of an intellectual woman. (Kristeva, 1980a:9-10)

Like poststructuralism, feminism constantly interrogates its multiple theoretical facets; unlike poststructuralism, it always does this with practical, political efficacy in mind. In their goal to deconstruct oppressive power relations (be these of gender, race, class, creed or



whatever), feminism (particularly) and poststructuralism are concerned not to mirror the race for power.

Poststructuralism with feminism's directedness (using these terms to refer to loose aggregates) offers what I hold to be the most sound explanatory theory for identity, discursive and material relations; and it also is especially useful as a theoretical instrument by which to probe and perhaps dissolve disciplinary boundaries and the boundaries of text and context. For students of autobiography this is especially pertinent. As not quite literature, not quite history, political science or law or sport, or whatever field is focused upon (even though libraries rather inexplicably see fit to catalogue the texts in accordance with the primary sphere of activity of the author), autobiography -- as currently conceptualized and practised -- challenges generic and disciplinary divisions; my theoretical position allows me to interrogate the intersections, rather than forcibly excluding what fails to fit in with the discipline of literary studies as it has sometimes been narrowly defined. In South Africa (and elsewhere) autobiographical writing has often functioned to empower, to proclaim the presence and voice of those who have been denied recognition as proper human beings because of their race, class and/or gender. Its role in the fluid distribution of power in the discursive and non-discursive relations which comprise contemporary South Africa is analyzed in terms of shifting gender, class, and race configurations. And my choice of texts for close scrutiny has in part been motivated by a decision to further validate texts which make visible those who have been obscured or cast as Other in discursive and material relations. In other words, this study makes no claim to objectivity or political neutrality. Moreover, in my desire to empower through the interrogation of power relations I have deliberately avoided an overarching grand thesis, which uses individual texts merely as illustrative

material. Rather I have endeavoured to explore each text in the spirit of essay, not assertion.

**(iii) Problematizing the poststructuralist problematic**

Poststructuralism, as has been noted, is a movement comprising diverse and sometimes dissentient writings which generally have in common the decentring of the subject, the interrogation of language and ideology/power, the dissolution of the notion of transcendent truth. I say "generally" for there are disagreements even amongst founders of the movement: as has been noted, Derrida and Foucault have criticised each other's approaches, and both have criticized Lacan and Althusser. Althusser's insistence on a scientific marxist knowledge which is "by definition a subjectless discourse" (Althusser, 1971:171) which transcends ideology<sup>27</sup> and Lacan's structuralist psychoanalytic approach are denounced by Derrida and Foucault on the grounds of there being no metatheory such as is claimed in marxist and psychoanalytic discourse. I support this criticism.

Despite important philosophical differences between Marxism and liberalism regarding human sociality, both ideologies partake of the Enlightenment's uncritical acceptance of science and reason as the sole means for discovering truth and knowledge. It is thus ironic that Marxism, which purports to challenge the value system of the dominant class, has nonetheless readily adopted that class's notion of scientific control. (Diamond and Quinby, 1988:194-5)<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Lacan's structuralist theorizing of the universality of the Oedipal complex and related developmental phases (see Lemaire, 1977:1-3,7; and Lacan, 1977:65-66), does not include adequate recognition of shifting cultural and historical influences. Lacan argues that the unconscious exists universally in all humans, its content being closely linked to existing social interdictions (Lemaire, 1977:58-59); his acknowledgement that both the Oedipus complex and the family will be subject to local formal variations is somewhat

parenthetical. Lacan's theorisation of all subjectivity as comprising layers of structures: the conscious, preconscious and unconscious (Lemaire, 1977:3) is indeed generally given as a universal and transhistorical truth (see Lemaire, 1977:58, 81, 189-190), denials by Lacanians like Juliet Flower MacCannell notwithstanding (in Davis, 1983:913). That Cathy Urwin (Henriques et al, 1984:286 ff.) finds it necessary to modify Lacan's account apparently confirms my criticism. This universalising tendency is particularly problematic if one pursues the implications of Lacanian psychoanalysis as fundamental to poststructuralist theory.

There are other difficulties with Lacanian psychoanalysis: for one thing the contention that the phallus functions metaphorically seems to me to be unsubstantiated in the writings (see Sheridan's "The translator's note", 1977:xi). The following passage illustrates the confusion between physical and metaphorical phallus:

The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire.

It can be said that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula. It might also be said that, by virtue of its turgidity, it is the image of the vital flow as it is transmitted in generation. (Lacan, 1977:287-288)

Lacan's consistent insistence on the law being associated with the father and desire with the mother come close to biological essentialism (see Leitch, 1983:29-32; 236-237) and the patent sexism (manifest too in the masculine universal) is especially troubling because it is largely disavowed by Lacan and Lacanians (Lemaire, 1977:86,88). What is overlooked in Lacan's own discourse is precisely the power of the signifier: the use of the phallus in a way that blurs the bodily and the symbolic,<sup>29</sup> the sexism in

continual focus on male development,<sup>30</sup> the uses of "father" and "mother" -- all acquire a force which cannot be dissipated by simple (infrequent) denials of their literalness. This phallogocentrism is intensified by Lacan's deterministic treatment of gender development.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps most troubling of all is the sense that in order to accept Lacanian psychoanalysis as a workable theory, one has to commit an act of faith. As Lacan himself states: "One is either taken by what they [my writings] formulate or one leaves it" (in Lemaire, 1977:14). I am afraid that I fall outside the either/or: since Lacan theorizes much which was hitherto unexplained in theory, I am "taken" by Lacan's theories, but provisionally, and sceptically. By lessening the reliance on psychoanalysis some poststructuralists like Henriques et al (1984:318) claim to have resolved the problem; I am not convinced that this is nearly as easy as is implied.<sup>32</sup> As I have indicated, my main concern has to do with the application of Eurocentric theory to African discourses and the subjects which these interpellate. As far as I can ascertain, there has been very little work in this field. Thandabantu Nhlapo's essay in Putting Women on the Agenda and, to a lesser extent, Mary Maboreke's (in the same volume) deal with the constitution of gender in black Southern African cultures and open the issue of cultural specificity in familial and gender relations, as do (using different discursive paradigms) Noni Jabavu, Ellen Kuzwayo, Godfrey Moloi and other autobiographers; however, much more work needs to be done before there are sufficient grounds for a radical revision of key poststructuralist explanation. My analyses of autobiographical texts try to achieve a sensitivity to the specificities of the textual constitution of subjectivity. My own cultural limitations mean that I cannot speak authoritatively about non-Westernized indigenous South African cultural practices; nevertheless, I can apply a finely discriminating theoretical paradigm to

my reading of these texts. I submit that much of the poststructuralist theorization of the role of language in the constitution of subjectivity is probably valid, too, for indigenous South African cultures, but precisely to what extent I am unqualified to say.

Another charge against poststructuralism concerns its claims to be subversive and revolutionary; these, it is argued, are merely based on self-congratulatory illusion (there is in some overtly theoretical texts a holier-than-thou attitude<sup>33</sup>) since poststructuralism, as a complex and difficult body of writing, is of interest only to academics. Paul Smith, for instance, quarrels with poststructuralist conceptions of the subject which "have tended to produce a purely *theoretical* 'subject,' removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live" (1988:xxiv). This criticism is not without foundation; for even the most sophisticated theorist will probably act as if she were indeed an autonomous individual. Most people -- particularly those operating within Western narrative traditions -- tend to construct histories of themselves (whether formally or informally) as if they were continuous, unified entities with stable characters, personalities or natures (all the taboo notions of humanism). Furthermore, we are held accountable, and hold others accountable, in a legal system which operates in terms of a humanist conceptual framework. Try as we might to be theoretically correct, academics nevertheless still want personal recognition for articles produced and enjoy the acclaim that accompanies the notion of authorial originality rather than the anonymity implicit in Barthes' insistence that all writers merely rewrite the already written! Academics and theoreticians cannot, therefore, simply claim to have "at last come out on the far side of a humanist (or anthropocentric) ideology" (Norris, 1987:219). One cannot ignore,

the simple fact that no case can be argued, no proposition stated -- however radical its intent -- without falling back on the conceptual resources vested in natural language. And that language is in turn shot through with all the anthropocentric, 'metaphysical' meanings which determine its very logic and intelligibility. Any claim to have broken once and for all with the humanist 'sciences of man' is a claim which can only be self-deluding and devoid of critical power. (Derrida, cited by Norris, 1987:219-220)

Allied to this is the charge that poststructuralism is so circumspect in its avoidance of seeming to pose as metalanguage or to have grasped the 'truth', that many of its seminal texts are deliberately obscure and thus obfuscate any argument.<sup>34</sup> The difficulties of Lacan and Derrida are legendary, and, may be encountered, too, in the works of some of the other key poststructuralist figures.<sup>35</sup> These involutions have no doubt contributed to 'ivory tower' elitism. Furthermore, because of the ascendancy of theory across a wide range of disciplines, there is a growing imbalance of power between theorists and non-theorists in the academy. Many feminists argue most cogently that much contemporary theory is a potent instrument for the fortification of existing (sexist and racist) power-knowledge relations, potent especially since it parades as the contrary. (See Cecily Lockett, 1990:8, 15). That there is some validity in these accusations leads me to reject certain predominantly deconstructive strains of poststructuralism.<sup>36</sup> It is my contention, however, that feminist and Foucauldian approaches obviate some of these difficulties by demonstrating the importance of strategic essentialism (i.e. the adoption of a position *as though* this were an essential feature of one's being) and of analytic argument which accepts its provisionality; which insists on sceptical self-scrutiny and consistently seeks new strategies by which its usefulness as a tool for change may be strengthened.

**(ix) The argument for poststructuralist enquiry into South African autobiographical texts**

While I adopt a broadly poststructuralist approach, I choose not to identify myself as 'a poststructuralist' principally because that may imply a willingness (which I do not have) to "let thought coagulate into systematic doctrine and become the vehicle of some moralistic truth" (Kritzman, 1988:xvii-xviii). Like Foucault, I want to leave open the possibility of writing differently in future years, to question present positions; I do not want to have to apologise for not saying the same thing over and over again. Nevertheless, poststructuralism offers profound insights which have yet to be superseded (as they must be) by other theoretical paradigms. The marriage of poststructuralist theory with the practice of strategic essentialism can be effective in the fight against injustices like racism, sexism, imperialism and class-based exploitation. As Diamond and Quinby observe, "It seems clear that the intersection of poststructuralist, anti-humanist strategies with feminist analyses provides the possibility for a materialist critical practice and political struggle" (1988:17).

The pluralist approach adopted in this study selects aspects of theoretical models which seem valid and realigns these in relation to a feminist politics; it also attempts to take into account specific (for these must not be homogenized) African conceptions of self, context and text. As mentioned earlier, a more fitting term for my theoretical position -- given my attempts to be receptive to African cultural constructions -- is "*pratique de métissage*" (Edouard Glissant, cited by Lionnet, 1989:4) which refers to hybridization, transculturation, transmutation, reciprocal influence and explores indeterminacy, fragmentation and diversity. Involving as it does the collapse of Manichean categories (1989:15-18), "*métissage* is the fertile ground of heterogeneous and

heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects" (8).

Within the conceptual apparatuses that have governed our labelling of ourselves and others, a space is thus opened where multiplicity and diversity are affirmed. This space is not a territory staked out by exclusionary practices. Rather, it functions as a sheltering site, one that can nurture our differences without encouraging us to withdraw into new dead ends, without enclosing us within facile oppositional practices or sterile denunciations and disavowals. For it is only by imagining nonhierarchical modes of relation among cultures that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity.... (Lionnet, 1989: 5-6)

*Métissage* marks a deviation from European poststructuralism but it is consistent with poststructuralism's spirit of scepticism and openness to non-hegemonic constructions. It is a form of *bricolage* -- a reading practice which refuses to attempt uniformity or complete coherence -- which is of fundamental importance for the understanding of postcolonial cultures.

Poststructuralism's traversal of traditional disciplinary boundaries is also particularly generative for the study of autobiography (as Driver's work demonstrates), a genre which seems not to have fitted comfortably into any particular discipline: autobiography may be read through any or all of philosophy, history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender studies, literary studies, socio-linguistics. Such a pluralism can help to avert a tendency to essentialize or stereotype. This is particularly important since political efficacy promotes the simplification of the lines of political struggle. In South Africa, apartheid and patriarchy have endorsed "a system in which stereotypes are produced as fictive artifices but are then 'consumed as innate meanings' [Barthes]" (Klinkowitz, 1988:48). In the complex, hybridized cultural mix that constitutes contemporary South Africa the fracturing of the sign, of these "fictive artifices", is especially pertinent since the dominant interpretations tend to be self-perpetuating; and a



Manichean approach obstructs rigorous analysis. Looking for slippages between signifier and sign, a poststructuralist reading examines specific instantiations of subject positioning (of implied authors, narrators, protagonists and readers -- real and implied) and the implications for the deployment of power relations: Thus Moloi's 'self' is not simply to be read through the discourses of Sotho culture (the linguistic group from which his name derives) and black urban slums which provide the locale for much of the narrative: the plurality of discourses which constitute the autobiographical subject include these but also those of Zulu culture, Christianity and popular American gangsterism (amongst others). The theorization of the split subject opens the way for a study of the uneasy conjunction of subject positions which autobiographies -- by virtue of their co-operation with current generic norms -- usually attempt to meld seamlessly. The attempts to conflate real author (i.e. writer; see Rimmon-Kenan, 1983), narrator and protagonist(s) are seen to be the result of wilful refusals to acknowledge the instances when these strain to separate. Cultural and textual conventions implicit in compositional trends are exposed in a way that they are not in readings informed by an expressive-realist model which elides the differences of subject positions (Coullie, 1991:5). (More of this in Chapter 3). The refusal of the obvious means that revolutionary or contestatory groups (such as anti-sexist and anti-racist organisations) are not necessarily, or in all respects, liberatory, for neither power nor oppression are properties or inherent characteristics of groups or individuals. South African autobiographies often reveal surprising examples of just how misleading stereotypes can be,<sup>37</sup> particularly since they cannot take into account the rapidly changing power configurations in contemporary South Africa.

South Africa has had 46 years of an apartheid regime;

Foucault's argument that "the intellectual is no longer commissioned to play the role of advisor to the masses and critic of ideological content, but rather to become one capable of providing instruments of analysis" (Kritzman, 1988:xii) is apposite. "The role of the intellectual," Foucault argues,

is not to tell others what they have to do. By what right would he [sic] do so?... The work of an intellectual is..., through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblematicization (in which he carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (in which he has his role as a citizen to play). (Foucault, in Kritzman, 1988:265)

The intellectual, then, does not bring objective knowledge to the unknowing masses but rather combats, from unexpected quarters, the forms of power in which intellectual activity is embedded. The intellectual is neither a-political nor the arch political savant but is "an expert... politicized by virtue of immediate involvement through intellectual activity in everyday struggles and conflicts, the most fundamental and profound of which in modern society concerns that of truth" (Smart, 1985:67). Poststructuralism's consistently oppositional, sceptical attitude is valuable to intellectuals and the broader community which they serve. Universities are not, and never can be, ivory towers. They are implicated in knowledge-making which is vital to the functioning of the social organisation. And if the knowledges produced by universities are informed by poststructuralist oppositionality and scepticism, they have a good chance of being positive.

[The] role of theory is therefore not to formulate a global analysis of the ideologically coded, but rather to analyse the specificity of the mechanisms of power and to build, little by little, "strategic knowledge." "What we have to present are instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups

specifically to make these analyses, to wage those struggles, by using these instruments or others: this is how, in the end, possibilities open up."... If power is dispersed in a multiplicity of networks, resistance can only be realized through a series of localized strategies. (Kritzman quoting Foucault, 1988:xiv-xv)

The poststructuralist insistence on the primacy of the signifier and thus on the importance of rigorous language analysis is valuable, too, if one is concerned, as I am, with the wider political implications of textual practices. Given the brutal force of South African State politics on the lives of individuals, the way that texts can affect broader political events is clearly of great importance. Current cultural practices from a multiplicity of identifiable (yet not 'pure') cultural groupings, the languages (which have been a site of struggle in South Africa for most of her troubled past, and continue to be contested), and generic norms, the dispensations of reader-power and publisher-power, determine the range of options facing writers, as well as the range of responses likely to be evoked in readers. No text is held to be transparent.

Criticism is freed from its sometime largely evaluative function.

A materialist cultural interpretive practice insists that we read not only individual texts but literary histories and critical discourse as well, not as reflections of a truth or lie with respect to a pre-given real, but as instruments for the exercise of power, as paradigmatic enactments of those struggles over meaning. (Martin, 1988:18)

Certainly, my concern is not to demonstrate which texts are worthy of attention or preservation but rather to investigate how they function in the social formation, what they tell us about social relations and about individual (socially sanctioned) perceptions of the self. The critic is not "the complete reader... the ideal reader" (Leavis, 1958:212); a reading is "'A statement of mistrust' [which is, as Derrida argues]... 'neither true nor false: it is rather in the nature of a permanent hypothesis'" (Norris,

1982:106). But of course there are limits to this suspension of pretension to validity; eventually even a poststructuralist will have a point to defend. Insistence on specificity does not lead to a paralysing plethora of detail in analyses:

Of course, on the basis of specific theoretical analyses one can make generalizations, identify links between forms of oppression, and locate patterns of domination. Thus, one can evaluate the relative practical values and dangers of particular tactics of resistance. (Sawicki, 1988:188-9)

So while I do not offer my readings of South African autobiographies as the *only* ways to interpret the texts; neither do I offer them as interpretations of indifferent validity. My loosely poststructuralist approach interrogates conceptions of self, life, and writing in ways which, I trust, "illuminate, clarify, and decipher" (Diamond and Quinby, 1988:xiii), even while interpretations are, of necessity, partial (in both senses of the word). This dissertation seeks to "render problematic the demands of one [discourse] in relation to others" and to the "cracks and fissures [of discursive formations] that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs" (Wicomb, 1990:36). The materialist approach explodes the text: "it is not the dictionary's (closed) definitional power that the text possesses, but its infinite structure" (Barthes, 1974:120); it interrogates the text's "politics of truth", and probes the "'political economy' of the body" (Foucault, 1984:172). Foucauldian genealogy examines the role of the body for,

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (Foucault, 1984:82-83)

In short, this theoretical pluralism enables fundamental analysis of what we are, how we are, how we come to

understand ourselves and our places in the world, and how these experiences may be encoded in text.

Poststructuralism's inbuilt self-reflexivity is a partial safeguard against its easy co-optation to existing power structures.

The 'best' theories do not constitute a very effective protection against disastrous political choices; certain great themes such as 'humanism' can be used to any end whatever.... I do not conclude from this that one may say just anything within the order of theory, but, on the contrary, that a demanding, prudent, 'experimental' attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is. (Foucault, 1984:374)<sup>38</sup>

Poststructuralism's resistance to dogmatism is an important strength for it makes researchers and academics question their own lives and motives, their 'truths' as they are inscribed in analyses. And while it may not always cause us to change for the better, it offers encouragement for greater self-consciousness and thus a more keen sense of personal accountability. Furthermore, Foucault's analyses of the complexity of power/knowledge relations have had the effect of politicizing theory. Sawicki observes that Foucault, rather than offer a grand theory himself,

subjected modern theories... to historical reflection in an effort to render them problematic in the present by focusing on the ways in which they have been linked to domination and oppression. Given his skepticism about grand theory, and his emphasis on the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the social field, he is led to a theoretical pluralism of sorts. For if difference is distorted and obscured in totalistic theories, the obvious path for resistance to take is to provide alternative mappings of specific regions of the social field. In other words, *theoretical pluralism makes possible the expansion of social ontology, a redefinition and redescription of experience from the perspectives of those who are more often simply objects of theory.* (My emphasis, 1988:188)

This theoretical creolization is consistently and radically challenging.

In the first place, the call for theoretical and practical pluralism is based on the implicit assumption that a power-free society is an abstraction and struggle a ubiquitous feature of history. Those engaged in struggle can expect the changes they bring about to take on a different face over time. Discourses and institutions are ambiguous and may be used for different ends. Second, and correlatively, a Foucauldian sexual [or race or class or other] politics does not aspire to control history or to bring about global transformation all at once. There is no single vision of life "after the revolution." Yet, one need not have an idea of utopia to recognize and struggle against injustices in the present. And if there is a vision implicit in this approach, it is one of a democratic and heterogeneous society. (Sawicki, 1988:189)

An open-ended, amoebic poststructuralist/feminist problematic challenges existing material and conceptual structures and enables the researcher to explore marginalized discourses and subjects. It theorizes the role of discourse in material relations and in the constitution of the subject, while insisting upon the reality of experience, on the materiality of the body, on the relations between power and knowledge -- relations in which the poststructuralist researcher is just as implicated as the subjects of her investigations are.

### Chapter 3: Subjectivity

*As you know, all these matters are currently undergoing a reevaluation -- all these matters, that is to say, the biographical and the autos of the autobiographical.*

Jacques Derrida

*To most people at some point it comes home that inside our skins we are not made of a uniform and evenly distributed substance, like a cake-mix or mashed potato, or even sadza, but rather accommodate several mutually unfriendly entities. It took me much longer to ask the real question: what effect on our behaviour, our decisions, may these subterranean enemies have? That lake of tears, did it slop about, or seep, or leak, secretly making moist what I thought I kept dry?*

Doris Lessing

*Our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of time, our selves the difference of masks.*

Michel Foucault

As I have said, although we may have a relatively stable sense of our own identity and feel that we are the entirely rational source from which our thoughts emanate, these experiences are far from constant and cannot necessarily be captured at will. Self is a process, a site -- constituted "within power relations within particular historical moments" (Nussbaum, 1989:10) -- for interpretations of experience. The de-centred subject controls neither consciousness nor the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Culture, history and language speak in and through the subject, shaping the subject's reasoning powers. "Language... ensures that all of the members of a group inhabit the same psychic territory, and regulates the exchanges which take place between them" (Silverman, 1983:180). The subject is thus subjected to the social, but is also the agent of action and may thus initiate change.

Although they can be theorised in like ways, textual and material subjects are not interchangeable or equivalent.

The subject who writes and the autobiographical subject are not simply equivalent. "There is in fact no common measure between what is spoken and what is lived..." (Lemaire, 1977:6). The refractions of the 'real' are multiplied in the autobiographical text: perception is conventionally determined; and narration is governed by yet more sets of prescriptions and expectations. Emile Benveniste distinguishes between the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is spoken; there is a split between the speaking subject and the adumbrated subject of the enunciation (Nussbaum, 1989:31-2). Flesh and blood authors, and their life experiences cannot simply be translated into print; the realms are ontologically distinct. Narrators and protagonists -- linguistic constructs -- are usually separated by time lapses (narration comes after the events that are being narrated); protagonists may change over time, may -- in fact -- comprise a variety of sometimes contradictory subject positions (Renza, 1980:268-295). The autobiographical subject is a function of the text, and as such is subject to a whole host of pressures pertaining to texts, such as what is publishable (who is reading what when), what various functions a genre might be held to perform at a given time, what styles or approaches are in favour amongst particular kinds of readers, and so on. Although some insistence on verifiable 'truth' about the writer/autobiographical subject as s/he is encoded as narrator and protagonist is a feature of all of the autobiographical texts examined in this study<sup>2</sup>, analysis separates material person, the writer, from textual constructions of the autobiographical subject (which is a composite of narrator and protagonist(s)). Barthes' autobiographical narrator reminds us of the *constructedness* of the character which structures the first-person narrative:

I try, little by little, to *render* his voice. I make an adjectival approach: agile, fragile, youthful, somewhat broken? No, not quite;... For all these voices, the right metaphor would have to be invented, the one which, once encountered, would possess you



forever; but I fail to find any such thing, so great is the gap between the words which come to me from the culture and this strange being.... (1977a:67-8)

And later he expounds on the infeasibility of the autobiographical project; language, he says, is "a final alienation" for he could not express emotions: "he felt more than excluded: *detached*: forever assigned the place of the witness" (86). And Derrida in the "Roundtable on Autobiography" refers to autobiography as "a terrible thing" (1985:72) in which the writer confronts the impossibility of telling about the self.

Few South African autobiographers explore the self in this way. Most employ a humanist paradigm and portray themselves as authors/authorities in control of unified identity. While my own theoretical position opposes this conception, it is not my intention to deconstruct these texts in order to demonstrate the falsity of their position but rather to show how discourses interact to comprise the subject, and to explore some of the broader implications of the specific configuration of discourses within particular texts. Significantly, it seems to me that in the majority of autobiographical texts examined generic norms are a more fundamentally powerful influence on the textual (re)presentation of the self than are individual differences. By and large the texts of very different people exhibit the enormous importance of conformity to some or other species of generic convention (there is not only one kind of South African autobiography); this is true even in those texts which seem to want to foreground the subject's uniqueness, like Roy Campbell's or Zola Budd's. Analysis may thus foreground the social implications of the precise constitution of the autobiographical subject -- I do this in my analyses of Campbell's and Kuzwayo's autobiographies -- so that stylistic features are considered as indices not simply of individual character but of discursive and non-discursive practice in the wider social formation.

[T]he analysis of the subject in the autobiographical text aims not to tease out the influences of the society on an independent individual, but rather to foreground the complexity of the textual codification of those discourses which constitute the social formation and the subjects who are produced and are productive therein. (Coullie, 1991:9)

Since no discourse can be private and "Subjectivity... is merely the wake of all the codes which constitute me" (Barthes, 1974:10), analysis of the textual constitution of the subject entails concomitant interrogation of the social; "the traditional division of individual/society dissolves in favour of a recognition that these are mutually constitutive" (Coullie, 1991:9).

Textual responses to generic convention betoken shifts in the social formation. Thus textual analysis is not mere academic exercise: it involves interrogation of fundamentally important "cultural codes" (Nussbaum, 1989:15). Consider the implications of the current employment of narrative in autobiographies by black South Africans in the light of the fact that this is a departure from traditional black auto/biographical poetry.<sup>3</sup> While one may distinguish between biographical praise poems (i.e. those which are composed and performed by the poet about someone else) and those which are largely autobiographical (i.e. composed, for the most part, and performed by the subject of the poem) I use the typographical ambiguity of auto/biographical to refer to the latter because, as we shall see, the performing subject is not solely responsible for the content. It is these auto/biographical poems that are germane to this study. The crucial shift in the textual practice of black South African autobiographers to a Westernized narrative mode denotes profound change in the ways that subjects are interpellated -- in the ways that subjects are shaped by the cultures in which they live, and in the ways that subjects perceive of themselves and their places in the world. Importantly -- and never forgetting that there are divergences and differences within each

broad category -- the constitution of the autobiographical subject in traditional auto/biographical praise poetry is fundamentally different from the autobiographical subject of narrative autobiography. The subject of a narrative autobiography is pivotal and unified in as much as the linguistic indicators of the 'I' cohere around this central narrator and 'character'. The narrative autobiographical subject often involves objectification of the self for the telling involves the construction of an adjectival framework for the autobiographical subject (this person has these attributes), and usually rests upon the ideology of individualism. On the other hand, the subject of the much looser non-narrative autobiographical praise poem is interpellated in a much more fractured way, so that there is no central controlling presence which acts as textual authority in quite the same way as in a narrative. The self of the praise poem is dispersed across the community's reading of that subject: lines of other people's praise poems may be incorporated, and passages composed by others about the autobiographical subject may also be included. So the narrating 'I' is not the author/authority for the self as it is in a first-person narrative. Moreover, the absence of a narrative structure means that interpretations of the autobiographical subject will be freer and multi-faceted (narrative usually provides an interpretive structure which contains meaning).

Consider the implications of this mutation in textual practice in the light of demographic and cultural transformations in South Africa: in the wake of the massive urbanisation resulting from apartheid's bantustan and migrant labour policies, tribal culture and the extended family have, for millions of black South Africans, eroded. This, coupled with the growth of capitalism, Westernised education and Christianity -- all of which foster individualism -- has resulted in shifts in the constitution of the subject, of self. Self as inseparable part of

community (the living community as well as the unending lineage of ancestors) -- the traditional relational self -- has largely given way to the individual seeking personal autonomy and gratification. Social upheaval in South Africa over the last four and a half decades has resulted in radical (but uneven, multifaceted) changes in the constitution of the self, transformations which are manifested in shifts in autobiographical practice. As Foucault has said,

[i]t is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices -- historically analyzable practices. There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them. (1984:369)

Discursive and non-discursive configurations impinge on textual production so that the autobiographer will construct a textual self which, firstly, she is able to conceive of (i.e. the language and culture can accommodate such a conception of selfhood), and secondly, will find a readership. And of course, only those whose lives are of interest -- in terms of prevailing political, economic and discursive conditions -- will achieve visibility in print. Massive social transformation since 1948 has, of course, impacted on autobiographical production: its increasing politicization and democratization will receive more detailed attention in Chapter 4.

And what of fluctuations in the ways in which these selves are textually encoded? The narrativized, unified self -- although certainly the predominating conceptual model -- is not treated uniformly, nor is it without competing constructions of the autobiographical subject. The autonomous self, with a consistent core character, gives way in some texts to the stereotype whose experiences are selected in terms not of significance for the person's life, but rather as instances illustrating political or sociological concerns; in other texts the decentred

postmodernist self is (dis)located across the text's linear logic, and in yet others the self which straddles seemingly incompatible discourses and cultures is situated between recognizable codes, negotiating transformation. The autobiography as record of personal achievement is joined by autobiographical accounts of nullity, brutal deprivation, mere survival.

Selves are, of course, defined negatively (I am not like these others) as well as positively (I am...), and there are significant textual modifications in this respect also. A hierarchizing tendency is evident in all autobiographies studied; it serves to define self and Other in ways that will be familiar or acceptable to targeted readers. The specific configurations in particular texts indicate how meaning and worth are apportioned to individuals in a culture. For Campbell, in keeping with the ethos of his time, women and people of colour are *personae non grata*, as are effeminate men, socialists, republicans, and a whole host of others. His disdain for them denotes his superiority. It seems to me that the white South African autobiographer's implied construction of blacks as Other (blacks are almost non-existent in the autobiographies of Goudvis, Attwell, Evenden, and others) gives way in some recent texts to a stronger sense of certain white South Africans as Other (Breytenbach, Kitson, Joseph and Hope exemplify this). And black autobiographers do not necessarily define themselves in opposition to whites either: Moloi defines himself principally by showing that he is not a rural traditionalist (and, of course, he implies that he is superior); Indres Naidoo distinguishes between prisoners and Boers, and ANC and PAC supporters, the first of each pair being defined as better. In many autobiographies -- Rian Malan's springs to mind -- there is an increasing uncertainty in the identification of the Other. This is perhaps not surprising in the autobiographies by white South Africans who could not

identify with the 'White Tribe' or its policies, but who were yet kept isolated from people of other race groups because of *de facto* apartheid.

The interpellation of the reading subject in autobiographical writing may also encode much important information about a culture. Readers approach texts from within the discursive and material circumstances which interpellate them as subjects: the "'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts..." (Barthes, 1974:10). Texts might co-operate with or subvert (or both) these constructs. We need to consider what sort of reader is implied in a particular text, and what might be inferred about the ideological and material (economic and political) circumstances which are implicated in such practices. Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman, for example, marks a very important change in this regard. Previous autobiographies and quasi-autobiographies by or about black South African women tended to address a white readership so as to explain how a localized black culture might be experienced. Noni Jabavu's The Ochre People and Drawn in Colour, Carol Hermer's The Diary of Maria Tholo, and Elsa Joubert's Poppie all serve to translate, in a manner of speaking, the subject's experiences to white readers. Kuzwayo's text, however, addresses black South Africans, and in this way records the positive shift in self-perception of black South Africans that has been evidenced most obviously in political activism. The fact that Call Me Woman speaks to a black readership denotes, too, the shift in broad configurations of power in South Africa from white to black. (I say this even though the 1980s saw a brutal increase in State repression, for it was in this decade, as Ronnie Kasrils and others have said, that grassroots political activism became most insistent.) The hailing of a black readership in effect recognizes that it is black South Africans' opinions which matter; they are the ones for whom the story is told.

The three autobiographies analyzed in this chapter represent different textual explorations of being. Broadly speaking, Roy Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse exemplifies extreme humanist individualism; Ellen Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman departs significantly from this tradition; Breyten Breytenbach's The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist explores the decentred subject of a postmodern aesthetic while insisting, nevertheless, that this is a true story about the author whose name and photograph appear on the covers. These three texts are of interest because each explores the question of the relative autonomy of the autobiographical subject. While Campbell's self is presented as the highly individualistic, autonomous author of his own 'real-life' adventure, the subject of Kuzwayo's autobiography is depicted as an un-exceptional victim of racist and sexist oppression. Campbell's subject is portrayed as free; Kuzwayo's as struggling to attain a small measure of freedom. Breytenbach's subject is fractured; freedom and subjectedness are variously explored. And whereas Breytenbach's text explicitly sets out to probe the contradictions inherent in experience and in the textual encoding thereof, Campbell's and Kuzwayo's attempt to excise contradiction to a large extent. However, as Derrida has shown, each text contains within it the seeds of its own deconstruction. Whether these texts are attempting to portray -- or to privilege -- a unique, autonomous self (Campbell), or an unexceptional self subjected to social oppression (Kuzwayo), or a disjunctive, dispersed self (Breytenbach), my analysis of the intersecting discourses in them reveals contrary tensions and in so doing tells us something about how the social traverses and dissects the subject of the text.

One key site for the intersection of the social and the subject in South Africa is race, and these texts have been chosen because they confront, explicitly (as in Kuzwayo and Breytenbach) or implicitly (as is more often the case in

Campbell) the implications of race for the subject of the autobiography. While I am, as I have said, conscious that to classify texts according to the race of the author is a dangerous practice, for one thing because it could act to reinforce the importance of race as a signifier, I find that an analysis of South African autobiographical writing can hardly avoid some discussion of race since in even the most recent autobiographies, race still functions as an important determinant of the identity of the writing (and reading) subject. Significantly, white (usually men) autobiographers in the earlier decades of the period covered in this study tended to treat race as irrelevant, seemingly in attempts (conscious or unconscious) to make believe that racism had no part in their experience of South African reality (Malherbe, Boberg, Evenden and Duffield spring to mind). As we know, most cosmopolitan communities were by and large complicit in this duplicity, whereas in last two decades international pressure on South Africa has increasingly refused to allow the issue to be hidden. Nowadays most South African autobiographers confront and challenge their racial identities: Breytenbach, Hope (White Boy Running), Mathabane and Goonam are amongst those who foreground race as prime signifier in the very titles of their autobiographies<sup>4</sup> while others interrogate race and racism throughout the text (Malan, Mphahlele, Kitson, de Villiers, Bernstein, and Heard exemplify this).

The ideologies of racism, sexism, nationalism, and so on invite us to conceive of these hierarchical divisions as obvious and immutable, but history and autobiographical writing prove otherwise. Race is the discursive inscription of meaning on material bodies: "The... body itself is social" (Barthes, 1977a:124).<sup>5</sup> What we are is obviously determined in large part by the meaning and worth accorded our material bodies. And if one bears in mind the special significance accorded the author's name in



autobiography, indications of the author's race and gender will probably affect readers' interpretive strategies, as well as the more fundamental decision of whether to read the text or not (Coullie, 1991:12).

Campbell's autobiographical subject displays the unswerving certainty of the white male conqueror who is portrayed as representing the best of the coloniser's culture. Kuzwayo's text explores the uncertain subjectivity of a black female South African. Breytenbach's subject is resonant with contradiction; he is white, but identifies with black South Africans (hence the albino in the title). Fighting against racism, he finds nevertheless that he cannot justify a freedom struggle which pretends that race has not shaped identity. Finding that his mother-tongue does not make possible the distinction, he writes in English so as to position himself as an African rather than an Afrikaner. (In Afrikaans the word Afrikaner means Afrikaans-speaking; its etymological root refers to African origins, however, and Breytenbach is alluding to this).

In his attempts to efface race, Breytenbach's text can be seen to represent "the way forward"; one hopes that South Africans will someday be able to regard racial categorisation as an historical curiosity. It is important to point out, however, that even though race is a seemingly obvious signifier functioning in the distribution of power and privilege in contemporary South Africa, its range of meanings is not predictable. Race, like all social systems of organization, is a means of apportioning power, but this does not necessarily happen in the obvious ways of white oppressor/ black victim, nor does race function in isolation from other systematic features of the social organisation. Like Bozzoli's Women of Phokeng, my study has attempted to question two extremes of approach: the 'victimology' that caricatures black South Africans as the somewhat pathetic objects of

colonialism, racism, oppression, poverty, patriarchy, and capitalism; and the converse of this -- the 'rah rah' approach, which makes romantic, celebratory, and teleological assumptions about black South African consciousness and struggle. (1991:239)

We might consider, for instance, the fact that while Campbell's autobiographical subject displays all the certainties of the white man and Kuzwayo's illustrates the difficulties and hesitancies of a black woman, Breytenbach's explores the *uncertainties* of a white man who rejects apartheid and racism. For Breytenbach and other anti-apartheid whites like Benson, Hope, Malan, and Joseph, their white skin is a source of discomfort and dilemma, as well as privilege. (By the same token it is apparent in autobiographies like Mathebane's Kaffir Boy, Modisane's Blame Me On History and many others that simply being black may imbue the autobiographical subject with a measure of moral superiority.) This use of race by the victims of racism to appropriate a position of power illustrates Foucault's point that power should be conceived of as a relationship, rather than a property.

Race and gender systems are functions of language and culture which are crucial in the shaping of identity for South Africans in their specific linguistic, cultural and geographical positions. I have thus sought to interrogate the precise configurations of gender in the textual shaping of the subject in Campbell's and Kuzwayo's autobiographies in particular. These texts exemplify most strikingly the feminist insistence that the personal is political, for self-presentation in each is intimately bound up with the specific constructions of masculinity and femininity which prevailed for these autobiographical subjects.

The arrangement of texts here -- Campbell, Kuzwayo, Breytenbach -- does not represent either an ascending scale of excellence, or past, present and future trends. The humanist subject -- such as we find in Campbell's

autobiography -- has dominated South African autobiographical writing in English in the last four and a half decades, and continues to do so. Kuzwayo's autobiography might be said to represent a small number of texts which indicate a new kind of autobiographical subject, one which adapts Western practice to (black) South African experience, but I do not believe that it is a direction which will supersede the more usual expressive-realist narrative autobiography. And Breytenbach's postmodernist practice, his celebration of multiple selfhood constructed in the act of writing, is not likely to be often repeated. These texts have been selected and arranged in this way because they exemplify three approaches to the problem of exploring the self in autobiography, approaches which can, justifiably, be identified as treating the project with an increasing sense of its equivocality.

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Roy Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse, first published in 1951, subscribes emphatically to the ideology of the individual. The vigorous narrative style serves to underline the claim of the hero's exceptionalism.<sup>6</sup> The publisher's comments are apposite: "This rip-roaring autobiography catches the full flair and flavour of a man much larger than the life of his times" (back cover, 1971). The narrator would, I think, have approved of such a description of himself. Setting himself apart from ordinary people, he was, he says, "the first man to torry a buffalo on horseback on African soil" (1971:35). As a boy, he staged spectacular octopus fights, hunted wild pigs (which are reputedly extremely dangerous) and other animals, and from adolescence was a crack shot. He was an exceptionally accomplished naturalist at a very young age (115-6). Later, he worked as a stuntman "doing all sorts of acts such as falling from high places, eating fire, and chewing up glass" (243). He jousting in Provence and was a

bull-fighter in Spain. He broke horses in and, "[e]xcept for climbing my horse up the flagpole... did every reasonable trick within a circus rider's or a bullfighter's repertoire" (326). He risked life and limb to shelter monks during the Spanish Civil War, and was "the unique case in history" of a foreigner being permitted to exercise "the right of a master-fisherman in the most exclusive trade-freemasonry in the world" (292) (i.e. the French fishing industry). Always better than ordinary men, as a soldier his charge-sheet was "kept stainless throughout the war, till [his] discharge with 'Military Conduct: Excellent'" (237).

Not just a man of action, the hero is also a successful poet and writer. His exceptional abilities thus allow him to see through the sham of Bloomsbury when others cannot, and appreciate the true worth of Toledo (he is *one of two* of *all* foreign visitors to Toledo who are gifted enough to perceive this!) (329). When he falls in love, it is with a "most beautiful young woman" (244) who, along with her friend, was an unparalleled source of inspiration to many:

No other contemporary women ever had so much poetry, good, bad, and indifferent, written about them or so many musical compositions dedicated to them, or had so many portraits and busts made of them -- as those two girls between them. (247-8)

That this is a superlative hero is conveyed, too, in the construction of the narrator's vantage point on reality as stable, secure, and exceptionally perspicacious. His opinions, expressed with supreme confidence, are given freely and with scant regard for moderation on a whole range of subjects.<sup>7</sup> The narrator makes pronouncements about animals, whole nations and race groups, and about women and men.

For this narrator, there is no question but that his inherently superior intellect and sensibility are the source of his knowledge of reality and of himself.

Personality is construed as a function both of inherited characteristics and autonomous personal response. In the first chapter, entitled "Forebears", the narrator recounts many anecdotes about his relatives, all of whom are exceptional and rather eccentric individuals. In keeping with the 'common sense' notions of inherited personality traits, this chapter establishes (both implicitly and explicitly) a core set of characteristics which readers can associate with the narrator/ protagonist. This first chapter functions in part, then, to establish the reader's expectations for the rest of the autobiography.<sup>8</sup>

Reality and self are held to be independent, discrete, stable and knowable. In one example of his certainty that an objectively discernable reality can be grasped, Campbell's narrator says, "From the very beginning my wife and I understood the real issues in Spain" (322). The "real issues" are phenomena which may be apparent to anyone who is willing and able to look with (it is implied) a measure of detachment. Such conviction regarding the division between self and other allows the narrator to perceive of his opinions as being due to independent thought: there is no sense of their being shaped by current discursive practice. If we recognize that "the 'knowledge' that the human subject possesses about itself figures within discursive systems of power that are available at a given historical moment" (Nussbaum, 1989:15), then the very fact that Campbell is able to construct such an autobiographical subject becomes indicative of features of the distribution of power in the social formation of the time. These are features such as patriarchy and colonialism and racism, all of which may be seen structurally to heap confidence and might upon a white male such as Campbell.

Campbell's text makes manifest the intersection of a host of discourses which serve to bolster the discourse of the

humanist individual. This means that Campbell's narrator is no less the subject of prevailing discourses than is anyone else, even though he presents himself as a super individual who often swims against the tide of popular opinion. As Bozzoli observes in Women of Phokeng,

[e]ach fragment of identity... has a history, and a link with a prevailing discourse. Each fragment is an inherent tradition which was once derived from a particular past situation, socially created, and yet brought into idiosyncratic and individual expression by its incarnation in... the 'self' of each particular [person]. (1991:241)

Some of Campbell's narrator's more obviously controversial opinions belong to discourses or ideologies which are presently under attack: the ideology of 'character' (i.e. of the humanist individual) is the basis for the ideologies of masculinity (coupled with sexism and homophobia), and of national and class and race-based prejudices.

Extreme individualism dominates the narrative, but it is dependent upon the subordinate discourses listed above and their associated ideological implications. The text's celebration of masculinity is crucial; in terms of the hierarchization of discourses in the text this is without doubt most important. Right from the outset<sup>9</sup>, the narrator defines himself as a soldier and adventurer and the subsequent account of his actions further style him as the masculine ideal: skilled sailor, bullfighter, expert horseman, swimmer, marksman, and so on. As a mark of his excellence the hero "lost interest in hunting with guns as being too dull, having experienced the hand to hand stuff. [He had] often before and since then gone into a wounded bushbuck and fought it out with a knobkerrie" (78). He quells horses, fish and women:

None of my very best horses were ever too easy to break in: and on the human plane I like there to be some tension in the harmony so that it never grows stale,

Only that beauty shall be mine  
That never slacks the strain,  
A fighting salmon on the line,

A snorter at the rein (249).

He inspires undying loyalty in his underlings, implying that they too recognize his superiority. Pillay, a servant of Indian extraction, bids him farewell:

Dear Master you are the man talking true and honest in this World, every Indian and native saying you are the god in this world I am very sorry that I lost you I am thinking you all the time in my mine. (180)

The hero masters his world from a very young age. Untamed Africa affords him a wealth of opportunities for ultra-masculine adventures in which physical and mental strength are pitted against great odds. He learns to understand (and hence subjugate) the bush and its inhabitants. "After I was eleven I could bring down a charging buck and knew most of the answers of the Bush.... In those days all I needed, to take a wild beehive, was a hoe or an axe..." (65). It is mastery, in its senses of sovereignty and specifically masculine dominance, that Campbell's autobiography celebrates.<sup>10</sup>

It is fine to see nature in its rugged grandeur, just as it is fine to see a nice-looking but unbroken horse. But the supreme treat is to see the ruggedness of nature dominated by skill: the precipitous slopes terraced into orchards; and the horse completed with a fine rider. (325)

The conquest must, however, be benevolent and 'civilized' (in the European tradition). The ideal man must, in fact, be a benevolent dictator.

The hero has to master himself too. Constantly exposing himself to fear and danger, he asserts self-control by overcoming these. A particularly amazing example comes near the end of the text. When arrested by soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (men who have, he believes, killed in cold blood two civilians -- an adolescent boy and an old woman) Campbell refuses to put up his hands saying, "Would they please excuse me, but my British ancestry made that impossible, and that to dismount at their orders was the

very utmost damage I could do to my self-respect" (347). Campbell is then severely beaten; one of the men crashes his rifle

several times across my nose and lips, so that the blood splashed on to the wool of the sheepskin on my saddle.... I stood at attention each time I could recover my balance, staring into the man's inflamed eyeballs. I knew I was saving my life, and that my way of taking this sort of punishment contemptuously was interesting both men. (347)

This is supremacy of rationality over physicality at its most extreme.

Further evidence of his (masculine) power over the material world is his mastery of language:

... I am able to address the barrack-square as a Sergeant-Major, and explain the parts of a machine-gun, speaking as one ranker to another, in English, Swahili, or Chinyanja; I can address the English Society at Oxford or Cambridge from the same platform as T.S.Eliot, or Sir Osbert Sitwell: confer ceremoniously in flowery Zulu or Sintabele with delegations of headmen: I can join a knot of stokers in a pub in Glasgow or Liverpool as one of them: I can lecture in French or Castilian to the Universities of France or to the Ateneos of Madrid and Barcelona: I can give a talk to the Portuguese people, from the B.B.C., in Portuguese, on street-warfare, Civil Defence, and fire-fighting, as I did in 1941... and feel equally at home in the Sergeant's Mess or at the high table at Magdalen College. (62)

Mastery of discourse means mastery of self and social situation (which is defined as interaction of men with men). Language is held to refer to an objectively discernible external reality, and thus control of the latter means a concomitant increase in the subject's ability to refer to, and thus manipulate, the real. Of the interview with four critics, Campbell notes:

though they pulled a great many feathers out of me, they all agreed that the remarkable thing in my verse was a familiarity with the physics, chemistry, and biology of the natural and mechanical universe: and a knowledge of animals, fish, ships, engines, guns, machines, which no other modern poet possesses. It helps one manipulate words deftly.... This knowledge, which is of infinitely less importance than spiritual



knowledge, nevertheless enables you to give form and obvious meaning to what would otherwise remain obscure and difficult. (285-6)

Campbell's hero transcends his circumstances using all the means at his disposal (including language). His certainty in the rightness of his superiority never falters. Consider the incident early in his marriage which is part of the process of breaking his wife in.

Though we were happy, my wife and I had some quarrels since my ideas of marriage are old-fashioned about wifely obedience and in many ways she regarded me as a mere child because of being hardly out of my teens.<sup>11</sup> But any marriage in which a woman wears the pants is an unseemly farce. To shake up her illusions I hung her out of the fourth-floor window of our room so that she should get some respect for me. This worked wonders.... My wife was very proud of me after I had hung her out of the window and boasted of it to her girl friends.

This infuriated them, as their young men always gave in to them: and they got no excitement or 'polarity'. But it was five or six years before we broke each other in to our complete satisfaction and I wore the pants for good. (253-4)

It is noteworthy that *she* labours under illusions while *his* grasp of reality is axiomatic. The hero's circus-master act with the unruly performer is performed so that she may have an opportunity (unbidden as it was) to share in what he sees as his incontestable apprehension of 'the truth'. In order to ensure that his wife may see things from his (unassailable) viewpoint (and thus accept her subordinate position), he has -- literally and figuratively -- to shake up her illusions. So sure is his sense of the greater rights which he must enjoy because of masculine superiority, that he happily boasts of his use of physical might to subjugate his wife. His confidence, one realizes, is quite independent of her eventual compliance. He simply *is* right. His masculine might is a symptom of that.

This conviction that male dominance is the result of inherent superiority, physical and intellectual (and no doubt spiritual), informs the narrator's critique of "the

smug little Sunday School world of Bloomsbury 'queerness' " (263). The problem, as the narrator sees it, is that these men do not conform to the masculine ideal. That these "males [are] under the domination of females" (263) cannot be blamed upon the females for, one can infer, females are underlings and cannot be expected to know better unless they are taught by *real* men.

This state of affairs... is absolutely the fault of the husbands. No woman will ever forgive a husband who does not give her a thoroughly good hiding when she knows she has deserved one. On the contrary, she will hate and despise him, and make a fool of him at every turn and corner, if he does not behave like a man. (263-4)<sup>12</sup>

The dogmatism of the language is obvious in words like "absolutely", "ever forgive", "a thoroughly good hiding", "hate and despise", and "at every turn and corner". The discourse of sexism relies on unchanging absolutes. A *man* is an ideal which transcends individuals, but it is an ideal to which all males should aspire and which some, like Campbell, can attain.

Moreover, the text's foregrounding of the public achievements of its hero can be seen too to be a function of the discursive construction of the masculine subject. The gender system has perpetuated itself in many social formations by affording men (active) positions in the social domain, while restricting women to private (passive) roles. This distinction might be detected in the *textual* constitution of gendered subjects too: it is not uncommon to find in South African autobiographies that women-authored autobiographies depict subjects who are introspective, more acted upon than acting (e.g. Kuzwayo), while those authored by men portray extroverted subjects whose deeds structure the narrative (e.g. Campbell). But Breytenbach's autobiographical subject disproves the rule for he is engaged in a deep exploration of self and experience. What he thinks is more important than what he does, or than what is done to him.

Although Campbell's autobiography clearly construes the attempt to be 'a man' to be a matter of choice for males, it serves to exemplify my earlier point about discourses pre-existing subjects' participation in them: the hero/narrator is spoken by the discourse of masculine idealism and rationality, and sexism. The insistence on tradition (his views on marriage, for example) evidences the way in which discourses, which involve both linguistic and material attempts to define reality, speak (through) the subject. These discourses intersect with the social organisation of material beings so that masculinity and an attendant mastery are defined, determined and confirmed. Campbell's text as artefact is a product of these intersecting discourses. It is, furthermore, (re)productive in that it reproduces these ideologies.

That material circumstance and linguistic form are mutually reinforcing is especially striking in Campbell's autobiography. As is suggested by the passage describing how beneficial the man's use of physical force can be to his relationship with a woman (Campbell, 1971:263-4) the language used in all sorts of situations expresses forceful mastery. Another example may be found when the hero feels himself forced to criticize "the smug little Sunday School world of Bloomsbury 'queerness'" (263). "Many of the male retinue of these great Matriarchies felt a surreptitious gratitude that I had struck such a *resounding blow* against the 'degrading' tyranny under which they live" (my italics; 263). While "the Bloomsburies shrink with horror" (263), Campbell rallies to battle. His choice of words reinforces the image of himself as the fearless warrior, fighting to right wrongs. He always acted, he tells us, "with the greatest chivalry", taking for his role model "that mirror of Chivalry, the Red Cross Knight, in the *Faery Queen*" (264), thereby implying that he is the "'masculinist' Messiah" (263) who assails the citadel from without. Apart from Campbell, Mr Mortimer "was the only one with the

courage and honesty to describe the state of things in those days" (263). That this was a war for real men (who are rare) who can apprehend "the state of things" is implied when the narrator tells us that Mr Mortimer, "deserves a Bloomsbury D.C.M.!" (263).

Ideology is apparent also in what is not said. Confining the discussion to the examination of the fashioning of the discourses of masculine superiority, we might note the narrator's frequent failure to name the women in his life. More significant than the metonymic reductiveness of his descriptions of young women as "pigtails" (67, 115) is the narrator's marginalisation of his wife. The chapter entitled "Marriage" is astonishingly consistent in its shadowy treatment of Mary Campbell. Virtually nothing is said about what she says, thinks or does; she is quoted directly only once, and this is to indicate her acquiescence to Campbell's mastery of her. She says only "Yes" (254). Mary's textual insubstantiality is due, too, to the fact that she is hardly ever actually named, and on those rare occasions when she is named she is *never* the subject of the sentence. The narrator himself (in his own voice, not quoting others)<sup>13</sup> uses her name only twice, in both instances making *his* relation to her clear: she is his fiancée or wife. His only use (in the entire text) of Mary's full maiden name occurs when he is describing his victory over rival suitors:

Van Dieren, and a sculptor, whom we nicknamed Sennacheribs, had been hanging around for weeks, vainly, on the doorstep. They were furious that I was accepted as a fiancé the day after our meeting. Van Dieren had already dedicated some of his music to Mary Jarman, and Sennacheribs was running after her friend, although at that time she gave him no encouragement. But I turned up on the second day, with a special marriage licence, upon which I had spent my last two or three pounds: and I installed myself at once. (245)

It is not entirely clear that the Mary Jarman referred to is Campbell's fiancée (since her friend's identity is unspecified the vagueness is increased), for in the

preceding passage the only reference to her by name is Wyndham Lewis's description of her as "'the very beautiful Mary Campbell'" (244). In both this instance and that of the passage quoted above, Mary is not the subject of a sentence and her identity is given incidentally. Furthermore, she is not the subject of either paragraph; she is merely the object of men's attentions. The only other time the narrator himself uses his wife's name, the name is again not given prominence ("I went to find Augustus John and Mary", 257). Both before and after they are married Mary Campbell is usually referred to as "my wife".<sup>14</sup> She is also referred to as "this one" (244); as one of "the girls" (245) or one of the "young ladies" (244, 245); as "the girl I married" (247) or "this girl" (249, 252), the "young woman" (244) or "this woman" (249). From the time that their first child is born (259) she becomes even less substantial in the narrative as she is usually subsumed into the effacing "we". Mary Campbell is reduced to the margins of the narrative; she is much more ghostlike than most of the male characters in this chapter whose subject, and title, are "Marriage"!<sup>15</sup>

This stable, humanist individual, the narrator/protagonist, is the centre of rationality; the power which he enjoys as a male is thus justified. Also symptomatic of this discursively and materially hierarchized world are ideological constructions of national and racial stereotypes. Of the former one might refer to the narrator's pronouncements on the French and Spanish (271), the English and Germans (310) and a whole host of others. Concerning racial stereotyping, the narrator is just as confident. "There is no doubt", he avers, "that the average native is socially inferior to the white man" (163).<sup>16</sup> The use of (the masculine universal) in this statement is not merely symptomatic of the linguistic practice of a bygone era. It is the white man who is the ideal to which black men should aspire. (Black women do

not, it seems, figure at all). One of the narrator's horribly crude objections to black-white liaisons illustrates the point:

I think it is silly to interbreed, though I have no colour prejudice. Hybrids are rarely any good, except in the case of a donkey stallion and the mare of a horse. When super-annuated English society-tarts take up negro lovers, it is generally a sort of perversion like the exaggerated feeling for dogs and cats. I knew one who went negro in order, as she said, to 'study conditions amongst the negroes'. Having selected the negro with the largest 'condition' she could find, she brought him to Europe. I knew this couple and they happened to call on me in a Levantine port.... I was working in this town in partnership with three very deeply-coloured Saracen-like gentlemen and they were highly indignant when they saw me sitting at the same table with a negro. I explained it away by saying it was an aunt from South Africa with a dear old faithful servant. It did not help matters when she started wiping his nose for him in front of everybody, and then putting his tie straight. (162-3)

Part of the narrator's disapproval stems from the negro's total lack of manly self-assertiveness. To begin with, she selected him, which is of course an inversion of the male choosing a mate. The subversion of gender roles exacerbates what is, for the narrator, an unacceptable blurring of racial divisions. While the narrator presents these as quite different issues, Campbell's racism is clearly partly due to the perceived failure by some members of other race groups to observe the proprieties of the 'real man' (white, European), proprieties which are not even acknowledged to be relative. Of course racism, without an attendant sexism, also informs much of the narrative (see e.g. 220, 243, 184, 311, 340). But the discourses of sexism and racism are, as a rule, mutually reinforcing, and both are informed by an ethos of paternalism.

Paternalism means a simultaneous impulse to exclude (people of colour and women are deemed inferior) as well as an impulse to include (people of colour and women should

aspire to the standards of white males). It is thus both a spurning and (usually less markedly) an embracing of subordinates. I have discussed the dismissive tendencies in Campbell's narrative regarding women and people of colour, but might add that this is further evidenced in the text in the reductiveness of the terms for women ("girls") and black men ("boys"), in the marked marginalisation of women throughout the narrative, and in the dismissive accounts of Zulu culture (47). "Native" beliefs are generally treated as rather curious superstitions; consider the deprecation of polygamy (27), indigenous medicine (47 and 54), and Mali's "vision" which the narrator tells us confidently was, in reality, merely a dream (132-3; 149; 152; 159).

But there is also evidence of the contrary impulse, the desire to include. This is only really evident in relation to race, perhaps for the obvious reason that although a woman might try to be *like* a man, she can never actually *become* a man, whereas a black male can at least be 'a man'. Campbell's hero shows his respect for other men of colour (and thus diverges from the expected forms of racist discourse) in his fluency in Zulu language and lore and in his rejection of municipal laws that protect European sensibilities from being offended by traditional Zulu dress (38). Although contemporary readers might gasp disbelievingly, the narrator asserts that he has "no colour prejudice" (162); he is, he says, quite prepared to "defy public opinion, even at its most frantic, as in the case of... the Colour Bar in South Africa" (83, also 261). But his defiance is couched in terms that illustrate the contrary tendencies of dismissive exclusion and benevolent inclusion: "there is no doubt that the average native is socially inferior to the white man, but he should not and cannot be prevented artificially from becoming his equal, for the good of all concerned" (163). ↓

As has been explained, the subject may determine the form that his utterance will take by adopting subject positions from amongst those offered by sometimes contestatory impulses within one discourse or from contradictory discourses, for the subject of discourse is also the subject of action. (Foucault and Paul Smith have argued this most cogently). In keeping with a poststructuralist paradigm, we can analyze the inconsistencies within and between discourses to uncover the interstices for individual choice from within the range of options delimited by culture and history: Campbell's narrator shifts from judgemental to benevolent paternalism, presumably due to some conscious decision-making on his part.

Now while the discourses such as those of sexism, racism, national and class prejudice (in that hierarchical order) can be seen to intersect in this text, it should be noted that the effect of mutual reinforcement is not consistent between discourses, nor is a particular discourse necessarily internally consistent. More to the point, the interpellation of the subject by the variety of ideology-laden discourses will not be monologic.

This is why, when we speak today of a divided subject, it is never to acknowledge his simple contradictions, his double postulations, etc.; it is a *diffraction* which is intended, a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning.... (Barthes, 1977a:143)

Henriques and co-authors argue that the material individual is conceived of as a subject which

is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations.... [Analysis]... must refer to the specificities of the different practices in order to describe the different subject positions and the different power relations played out in them. It cannot simply speak of a specific subject's behaviour and attitudes or ascribe in advance the subject's position according to class or gender. (1984:117)



The textual constitution of the implied reader deserves attention because it is this addressee who functions to secure or anchor the narrating subject. When the implied reader's attitudes appear unremarkable to the real reader of the text then one can be sure that this is because the real reader's ideological positions coincide with those implied by the text. Campbell's implied reader is a white male who applauds masculine adventurism. We know this, in part, because of the narrator's confidence in all of his opinions, including sexist and racist ones. He addresses the narratee in an almost conversational way as when he begins a sentence with "Naturally" (52), and with the rather chatty "As I've said before,..." (217). That the addressee is a young (white) male is evident, for example, in this rare direct address to the reader:

If you, my reader, at any future date find yourself sitting there with your arm round some young beautiful living torso, ... -- whoever you are, say a Grace for me and my beloved and my friends, for we also knew what you know,

Yet, though knowing naught,

Transcended knowledge with our thought. (215-6)

And he adds on the next page: "But if you want the thrill of cowboy life, with real wild horses and cattle, you don't have to go to the Far West for it" (217).

The implied reader, then, is appreciative of the ethos of the archetypal male adventurer. The reader is also interpellated as a stable, rational individual who will derive sufficient vicarious pleasure from the narrated adventures perhaps to wish to emulate these, but at any rate, not to seek a greater degree of introspection on the part of the narrator. Narratorial stability is echoed in the narratee's stable individuality. And it is perhaps this which accounts for some of the narrative's appeal: the reader is securely held in the grip of the narrative. There is no suggestion of uncertainty or equivocality or disagreement. Although I do not know of the term being applied to autobiography, it seems to me that Campbell and

many others<sup>17</sup> write what might be referred to as classic realist autobiographies, for they deny, as other classic realist texts do, that there is any reality outside of the textual construction of it, and they tend to seek to obscure the materiality of the text, the process of its production.

classic realist definition

Where Campbell's autobiographical subject speaks with the voice of confident authority, proclaiming in every utterance the speaker's absolute right to exercise the freedom he has to determine who he is and how he lives, Kuzwayo's subject speaks with a voice which seeks tentatively to define a self and a life, but who makes no grandiose demands for either. Nevertheless, it is, I think, fair to say that while Campbell's narrator in many respects simply rehearses the discourses which prevailed at the time, and which constitute him as an arrogant 'man', Kuzwayo's more hesitant subject exercises greater freedom in that she breaks new ground in terms of the discursive constitution of the autobiographical subject. This may seem to be an odd thing to say about someone who is clearly the victim of multiple forms of oppression, but I say this because, in terms of a Foucauldian theorization of identity,

freedom lies in our capacity to discover the historical links between certain modes of self-understanding and modes of domination, and to resist the ways in which we have already been classified and identified by dominant discourses. This means discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant culture's characterizations of our practices and desires, and redefining them from within resistant cultures. (Sawicki, 1988:186)

Perhaps because Campbell lived when an era was dying, whereas Kuzwayo lives in one which is in transformation, Kuzwayo seems, in fundamental respects, to exercise greater freedom of choice with regard to defining herself than Campbell. She has purposively to resist and create new interstices for being, while Campbell may simply take

advantage of what the social formation offered the white men of his time on a plate.

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While the subject is afforded choices and responsibilities in the incompatibilities and incompletenesses of discourses, the parameters for these personal freedoms are delimited by history and culture. Thus the autobiographical subject is less a function of idiosyncrasies than a function of history and culture. Clearly Light on a Dark Horse is dated. It is not just that Campbell held some offensive views; it would be more valid to argue that the text encodes positions which, for many, are no longer tenable and literally unspeakable.

Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject, on the other hand, culls a new discursive position for herself as a black South African woman. The very title, Call Me Woman, indicates this redefinition of the female subject. Refusing the passivity and dependence of female subjectivity in traditional black ideologies, Kuzwayo portrays a self who can speak in the imperative, even if she does so rarely. Although this ability to command is not one which consistently characterises the autobiographical subject, its presence, especially in the prime position of title, indicates Kuzwayo's attempt to assert her right to self-definition. Dorothy Driver notes that feminist critics have argued that,

one achieves voice -- or attains subjectivity as an individual -- at the point where one recognises the ways in which one has been subordinated by a political system, and thus made to fit a political category at odds with one's own experience of and aspirations in the world.... Subjectivity (or voice) depends on placing oneself as cognitive subject in language. This means recognising the ways in which one has been constituted in terms of specific discourses and thus dissociating oneself from them while at the same time claiming a particular and different place within language. (1991a:91-93)

Kuzwayo's dissociation from dominant ideologies is only

partial, and her autobiographical subject is unexpectedly unassuming. Ironically, while exposing the horrors experienced by victims of apartheid, the text also contains within it echoes of apartheid's attempts to silence and erase black South Africans, especially black women (because they are considered to be less useful to the economy), by exploring an autobiographical subject who is remarkably self-effacing. This is true even though its explicit project is to celebrate black South African women.

Kuzwayo is not defining herself as the individualist of Western liberal feminism, but nor is she subject to and of the traditional role of the black woman. She is indeed "claiming a particular and different place within language", one which insists on her status as "blackwoman"<sup>18</sup>, where race and womanhood are not contradictory. Kuzwayo's title speaks to those racists who have positioned her as a voiceless, disenfranchised black "girl" (49, 250); it also speaks to traditionalist blacks who seek to ensure that black women remain subordinate to their menfolk.

*textual epicentre*

Kuzwayo's autobiography depicts a self which co-operates with the Western norm of the narrating and narrated self as textual epicentre, but it is also at odds with this autobiographical practice insofar as Kuzwayo's autobiographical self is almost a palimpsest of the innumerable selves of South African black women. Although structurally central, Kuzwayo's story is not consistently the pivotal point of the text for it is usually presented as the story of one life, one self, among many, not as the only true centre of interest. In its challenging conjunction of aspects of traditional black discursive practice with Western narrative norms, Kuzwayo's text marks a cultural clash, not only of textual conventions, but also of conceptions of the subject.

Call Me Woman combines autobiography and biography. Kuzwayo narrates the key events of her life as is conventional in Western autobiography (the form which has dominated South African autobiographical writing in the last 46 years), but she also devotes a large portion of the text to the naming and praising of many other black South African women. A biographical impulse is an important feature of traditional autobiographical praise poems -- izibongo or lithoko (Gunner, 1984:63). Kuzwayo's text, however, differs from traditional black practice in that where traditionally the individual reciting her own praise poem will include lines and phrases which have been composed by others about her (thus she includes *others'* biographical material about herself), Kuzwayo records biographical details about herself and others. The publisher's cover notes testify to this:

This remarkable autobiography refuses to focus only on the author.... In telling her own personal and political story over 70 years, Ellen Kuzwayo speaks for, and with, the women among whom she lives and works. Their courage and dignity remain a source of wonder.

The organisation of Call Me Woman reinforces this biographical impulse and represents an important departure from both traditional black and Westernised autobiographical forms: parts one and three of the text -- which do not focus principally on the autobiographical subject -- frame the narration of Kuzwayo's life story. The result is a fracturing of the focus.

The first and third parts are more documentary than autobiographical. Part one, entitled "Soweto", describes living conditions for black South Africans presumably for the uninformed non-South African reader (see, for example, 5). Documenting the appalling poverty and social disintegration accompanying the relentless progress of apartheid, Kuzwayo deplors the fact that black South Africans have been left "without direction or a pattern to follow: a tragic state of affairs" (13). Concluding the

first section with the 1976 riots and the brutal murder of Steve Biko and others, the narrator returns again and again to what these catastrophes have meant to black women. Her principle interest is in "how other black women have managed to survive the horrible conditions thrust on them" (21). Kuzwayo applauds these women -- the humble domestic workers and the defiant illicit liquor-brewers alike: to her they are all "great mothers of South Africa" (23).

The third and last part is principally concerned to record women's contributions to "the Struggle". Again, this is more documentary than autobiography. And although the central part of the text in many other respects conforms to mainstream Western autobiographical practice (it is a prose narrative with an authorial narrator, as opposed to non-narrative poetry of the traditional black praise poem), the framing device which situates Kuzwayo's life story (parts one and three) has the effect of depersonalising the autobiography.

This effect is reinforced by the juxtaposition, before the text proper begins, of a chronological list of significant events in Kuzwayo's life and a like chronicle of major political events in South Africa from just before Ellen's birth to 1984 (the time of writing). She is thus presented as merely one victim of this national nightmare. Further detracting from the achievements of the autobiographical subject, are the lists of names of all black women medical doctors and lawyers (up to 1982) which conclude the text. The photographs which are printed in the text contribute, too, to this fracturing effect: 14 relate to Kuzwayo and her family; the other 10 are of a generally documentary nature (7 are of important black women). The text, then, in narrative technique, content and structure, serves as a blending of narrative and non-narrative (here in documentary form) (auto)biographical forms, the effect being to create an autobiographical

subject who provides an interesting measure of social change.

Even the central part of the book which deals with Kuzwayo's own life refuses to privilege the autobiographical subject. Kuzwayo reminds us that her story is not special and that her achievements are important because she is a black woman, not because they represent personal victories. Of her role in the movie "Cry The Beloved Country" she comments : "We made a mark for ourselves, for the youth clubs and, above all, for black womanhood" (143). Often she shifts the focus away from herself:

Let it be known that the trauma I went through in the three years my son was banned to Mafikeng is nothing unique. It is the torture and suffering of hundreds of black parents. Mothers in particular have endured such torments.... (193)

Of her failed marriage she observes:

Day by day I realised I was being humiliated and degraded, an experience I have in recent years come to realise is suffered by many wives the world over, within different races, cultures and religions. At that time I believed I was singled out as an individual.... (124)

Kuzwayo's text, then, is 'selling' not only her life story but a testimony to the lives of black South African women. Kuzwayo's studied vagueness in the narration of the crucial breakdown of her first marriage (see 123-127) -- crucial in that it alters her life utterly and completely -- is symptomatic of this refusal to sell a narrated self, a life-story package (if I may put it this way). If we consider the autobiographical narrative's fundamentally developmental frame (part two of the text), it is noteworthy that the momentous breakdown of her marriage, which means social stigma for Kuzwayo as well as the loss of her two sons, is discussed in obscure terms:

I had to face the reality that marriage did not mean the pinnacle of life, but was its stark beginning. It

was a harsh, shocking discovery for me.... My first pregnancy engaged my thoughts and in a way sheltered me from some of the things which would otherwise have unsettled me: things which were happening under my nose in my own house. I either pretended I did not see them or I refused to believe what I saw.... [My two sons] protected me, as it were, from the daily harsh and hurting experiences I was exposed to.

My image of married life was far removed from the torture I was exposed to. I went through both physical and mental sufferings.... Even now, I find I cannot write in detail about it. (123-4)

To readers who expect autobiographies to conform to the conventions of the realist novel the evasiveness is very disturbing. (See, for example, Daymond, 1987:21-22.) Although those familiar with narrative autobiography usually expect some information to be withheld (Campbell and Paton, for instance, merely hint at extra-marital affairs), we do not expect the missing information to be crucial to the narrative, as is the case in Call Me Woman. The narrator simply requires that readers offer her their trust as an act of faith. This is an important difference from Campbell's which, exemplifying the mainstream Western autobiographical subject, commodifies the self as a clearly delineated and defined product: The Macho Adventurer, The Master.

Another feature of Kuzwayo's text which distinguishes it from other narrative autobiographies, and which relates to my earlier point about self-effacement of the autobiographical subject, is the use of focalisation. Usually, South African autobiographical writing follows in the Western tradition and uses the narrator -- in the present of writing (narrating self) or in the past of the story (character self) -- as focalizer.<sup>19</sup> Instead of using the autobiographical subject, past and present, enunciating and enunciated, as the text's centre of gravity, Kuzwayo not only decentres the text by shifting the focus onto other black women, but also often speaks not specifically as Ellen Kuzwayo but as a black woman.<sup>20</sup> Kuzwayo, in other



words, departs from Western tradition when she positions the autobiographical subject as a non-individualised black woman. Consider, for example, the narration of Steve Biko's death:

According to the *Daily Despatch*, Steve Bantu Biko, in the company of his friend Peter Jones, left his mother at 7.00 pm on 17 August 1977, his jacket hung casually over his shoulders. His last words to her were, 'Mom, I'm coming back.' Two days later both young men were detained in Grahamstown. His mother first knew of his detention on 20 August. When Alice Biko learnt that her son was detained at Port Elizabeth, as any natural mother would, she sent him a change of clothes. All attempts by his family and lawyers to see him were refused by the security police. Imagine the mental torture of being denied permission to see your son, when you know he needs you most. This is the experience and suffering of many black mothers. (47)

This is focalized by Kuzwayo as a black mother ("as any natural mother would"; "imagine the mental torture"), as well as by Alice Biko (Biko's mother) with whom the narrator empathizes. The narrator then generalises the experience to all black mothers whose children have been victims of apartheid violence: "This is the experience and suffering of many black mothers" (47). (It is noteworthy that she refers to "mothers", not "parents".)

While other autobiographical narrators might, occasionally, use characters other than themselves as focalizers, this is not common, and it happens inconsistently. Kuzwayo, on the other hand, uses this technique rather frequently. Moreover, while autobiographies usually *focus upon* the autobiographer (as character and narrator) and her experiences, Kuzwayo's frequently uses other black women or their experiences as the object of focalization.<sup>21</sup> For instance, although Kuzwayo and her experiences are the focalized in the central autobiographical part of the text, in the first and final parts other black women and their circumstances are generally the objects of focalization. The significance of this for the discussion of subjectivity lies in the

narrator's blurring of the defining outlines of an individualistic self in a text in which she is focalizer and focalized inconsistently.

Kuzwayo presents herself not so much as the representative, or archetypical black woman<sup>22</sup> -- for this means to claim to be extra-ordinarily typical -- but rather as one of many. The consistent humility of Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject seems incompatible with a claim to be able to stand for the group. Even in those instances when the narrator does indicate that her experiences are shared by other black women, the claim serves to detract attention from the autobiographical subject, not to aggrandize it. It is to say "I am one of the group, not unique," rather than "I can represent the group for I am typical". This is an important distinction; perhaps one related to the specific instantiations of the gender system experienced by Kuzwayo. For where someone like Mathabane seeks to define personal circumstances as typical and representative (hence the title, Kaffir Boy), Kuzwayo presents her experiences as her own, but as not uncommon (hence Call Me Woman).

The subject is thus textually constituted, in part, by what can be identified as the discourse of Western individualism -- out of which traditional Western autobiographical practice emerges -- but also, more importantly, by traditional black discourses which constitute the subject as one of the community. Traditional praise poems define identity in terms of ancestry and relationship (Gunner, 1984:59). The subject of a praise poem is identified by the relation of the names of the ancestors (usually from the patriarchal line), the clan names of the individual, and the individual's praise names. Now although Call Me Woman does not appear consciously to evoke key features of *izibongo* or *lithoko*, traditional Zulu and Sotho auto/biographical forms, it does depict the self

as part of a community and insists that the meaning of identity is not individually defined. The naming of other black South African women functions, in part, to define the autobiographical subject: she is one of that community. Knowing them, and her relation to them, helps us to know her (for example, 99, 148, 149). Moreover, the notion that one's praise poem invested one with an aura of immortality -- because it would be recited after death, almost as a prayer, to communicate with the ancestors or shades -- imbues, in altered form, Kuzwayo's autobiography too. But instead of bestowing immortality on herself through the text, Kuzwayo commemorates other black South Africans, particularly women.

In common with what Elizabeth Gunner refers to as the essential character of Zulu *izibongo* of "eulogy and identification" (1984:83), Kuzwayo lauds individual black women and, in so doing, praises them all for those referred to by name function as representatives. The following passage exemplifies this nicely:

Women somehow seem to cope with the pressures [of social disintegration] more successfully than men. Take, for example, the case of one woman who drives a taxi for a living.... [Mrs Esther Seokelo's story] is an unusual but significant example of the invaluable contribution made by black women towards the development of their community and country. (51-2)

Kuzwayo is autobiographer, as well as *imbongi* (praise singer), using the examples of other black women to inspire others, just as the traditional praise poet does (Gunner, 1984:70):

The physical activities of a people can be temporarily contained, but the spirit behind that movement lives on forever. That alone, if nothing else, should be an inspiration for the black women.... When I look back over the history of women in South Africa... I find myself amazed all over again, first by the extraordinary disabilities under which the women of my country have had to struggle, and then by the spirit with which so many of the challenges have been overcome. (Kuzwayo, 1985:259)

Campbell is an individual who stands out clearly in the crowd and in the text. Discursive contradictions are banished from the text (as far as possible) so that the hero may be delineated with unwavering certitude. Kuzwayo's text participates in the humanist conception of the individual when she presents the autobiographical subject as a more or less stable, rational being whose principle characteristic is an unwavering concern for the community (114), but it departs from this tradition when it defines self relationally and when it allows contradiction and uncertainty to surface: "Perhaps I should also not rule out the possibility that my observations were more in my mind than real. Did I observe what I wished and hoped to see?" (171). This is a self who is problematized, having to work at finding stability:

At that point the gravity of the problem of the Zoutspansberg residents hit me between the eyes. I was speechless. I could not account for my own feelings of guilt about this situation, much as I told myself I was not to be blamed for it. (170)

When Campbell's hero is confronted by people who do not share his opinions he dismisses them. Kuzwayo's sense of self is much less a function of essential self-knowledge than of relationship. Her uncertainty when she leaves prison is a moving example of how subjectivity is in process, and must continually be re-adjusted. She uses the telling phrase "to collect myself" (217) for she finds that her perceptions are "confused" (216). Detention has destabilized her sense of self and resulted in an incapacitating dread:

I longed to get [home], but somehow I was frightened - - very much frightened -- though I could not say what I was really afraid of.... Trying hard to collect myself, I finally managed to step out of the car and stood for a few seconds... half-happy to be home, half-paralysed with unaccountable fear. (217)

The reason for the panic becomes apparent once it is clear to her that the worst will not be realised: Kuzwayo had been terrified that the community might suspect and reject her. Once her own sense of self has been vindicated by the

community, she can accept that the negative conceptions of her held by police and prison officials have proven false. But the intensity of the effort to try to maintain an identity which she could believe in causes complete breakdown:

That group [of neighbours] finally ended the fears I had had about the reaction and attitudes of my people. I had received outstanding support and acceptance on my return from detention and I survived and thrived on that.... The strangest thing was that I could not as much as stand up from that couch to go to bed that night. Suddenly the resistance I had put up in detention, both emotional and physical, deserted my system without warning. I collapsed without passing out, and spent the night on the couch. When I came to, the next day, I was not the same Ellen I had been twelve hours earlier. (218, my emphases)<sup>23</sup>

Kuzwayo's sense of self is unstable and vulnerable, due in large measure to the devastating effects of apartheid: on the micro scale, its demeaning of the worth of every black South African; on the macro scale, its destruction of traditional communities and value systems, evidenced also in the breakdown of the family. (Kuzwayo's sense of self is destabilised, too, when her aunt rejects her (107-8)). Fanon argues that colonialism and attendant racism lead to a radical uncertainty of self:

Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?' (1973:200)

Violently irreconcilable interpretations of her identity result in vulnerability and uncertainty:

As I observe people's perceptions of me in the communities where I move, and then place my findings against the cold attitudes and harsh responses I get from government departments, I am completely thrown off balance. While I really believe that my community and country accept me as an asset, my government sees me not only as a liability but as a threat.

During the last ten to fifteen years, I have been able to serve my community in many different ways.... I am amazed when I observe the power, strength and self-confidence that are born of involvement in work on behalf of one's own hard-pressed people. (221)

Kuzwayo does not present her self as a sort of self-contained commodity because this is a subject which confronts its dependence upon social networks. Mary Maboreke describes gender based differences in the interpellation of black South African subjects:

Africans in general and African women in particular identify themselves through a maze of relationships; namely, mother to so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, wife of so-and-so, etc, in which 'so-and-so' is always a man. African women are never viewed as separate individuals but rather as appendages of a man. Almost all Africans see themselves as an integral part of a big and complex machine called 'the family'. The individual alone is seen as almost useless and certainly powerless. African women feel this powerlessness when removed from the family wheel, and so attach themselves to the family organism even more tightly. The obligation this family membership generates is the price women pay for membership of their family.

Societies such as ours are tightly structured, stratified, hedged in by prescriptions, by the primacy of the communal good over individual rights and interests. (1991:228-9)

Thandabantu Nhlapo makes a similar point: he comments on the "non-individual nature" of African marriage, adding that "group interests are framed in favour of men" (1991:113).

[The] African value system does not perceive women as separate entities but always as adjuncts to the family. A woman's personhood is lost in the group much more than a man's is subsumed under the so-called community principle. (1991:120)

Although Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject is defined relationally, the primary relationship is less pivotally that of the family than that of the community. This text thus marks a shift not only from traditional Western individualism, but also from traditional black constructions of the female subject. So that while Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject is informed by some Western norms, it is not defined in individualistic terms; conforming to traditional black social norms insofar as

this is a self defined by a community, the text, unexpectedly, deviates from the norm in that the community is not dominated by men, but by black women, be they lawyers or humble pavement hawkers.

Kuzwayo claims the right to define herself by redefining the community to which she belongs, not by rejecting community to insist on individual autonomy. Identifying herself as a mother, she redefines this too: this is a woman who must struggle against oppression and poverty, a fighter who must fight precisely because of her role as nurturer. She shows that there is no contradiction here. Driver makes a similar point (1991a:93), and argues also that critical analysis of the specific configuration of one's social circumstances is a necessary step for women to achieve greater self-control: "women's voices cannot emerge as 'their own' without interrogating the various structures by which they have been defined, which includes interrogating the family itself" (1991a:93).

The breakdown of her first marriage is crucial because Kuzwayo is forced thereby to construct an independent identity, without the stays of a close and stable set of traditional familial relationships. In fleeing her husband's home and in thus detaching herself from that network of self-defining relationships, Kuzwayo (who has already broken with her own family, 97ff) has to turn to her estranged natural father and his family. Unfortunately, she finds that she is unable to recapture a sense of belonging: "when I came back from Saulspoort and needed someone to help me out, I did not feel free, in this new home, to seek the help I needed" (134). She stays there only two months. It is through her teaching and community work, and the friends that she makes, that Kuzwayo comes to acquire a sense of self that she can live with.

Gordimer says of Kuzwayo:

[She] is history in the person of one woman.... She represents... wholeness attained by the transitional woman.... [She] is not Westernized; she is one of those who have Africanised the Western concept of woman and in herself achieved a synthesis with meaning for all who experience cultural conflict. (1985:xi)

It seems to me that there is much validity in this assessment of a textually constituted subject which breaks with the conventions of both Western and indigenous culture in important respects. Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject is indeed "transitional" as Gordimer argues, from a traditional black economically stable community to fragmented, "proletarian dormitories" (xi). However, I want to argue that Kuzwayo is not in transit, so to speak, *from* traditional black notions of the subject to Western modes of construing being; rather she represents a specific instantiation of the transformation of both into something which is new and different. Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject represents one possible response in terms of subjectivity to the shifts in the South African social formation and her text does not represent an incomplete and unsuccessful assimilation of the standards and conventions of Western autobiography. The autobiographical subject is the transitional product of a complex fabric of social discourses, constituted in the space between the frames.

Perhaps it is necessary to stress that autobiographical writing by black South Africans should not be conceived of as originating in praise poems and then striving to achieve the standards and practices of Westernised forms. All forms of textuality and the construction of subjectivity are under unrelenting, but inconsistent, pressure from divergent discursive and material circumstances. As conditions in the social formation shift, so will textual codifications change. We can see this sort of pressure on popular (Western) music which has resulted in attempts by *whites* to adapt to *black* practice, e.g. Johnny Clegg and Savuka, Mango Groove, and Paul Simon on "Gracelands".



South African autobiographical writing has some instructive instances of textual responses to cultural turmoil. Consider, for instance, the anthologies of autobiographical sketches which have been so popular over the past ten years or so (a more detailed discussion follows in Chapter 4): these usually treat the narrating and narrated subject in ways which diverge from conventional Western and traditional black norms. For one thing, the narrator and her narrative are usually produced jointly by the researcher and the interviewee, and these life stories often have more than merely narrative interest. Many, for instance, are intended to function as texts for literacy classes. If we are to learn something from these texts, we must be keenly attentive to the specificities of their responses to social and discursive pressures.

→ It is important, too, that analysts acknowledge the impermanence of generic 'essentials', interrogating how and why changes occur, and what these may signify. Many texts, for example, fail to conform to the definitive criteria that Daymond cites (1987).<sup>24</sup> Christopher Hope's White Boy Running, for instance, conforms more closely to what Daymond identifies as a black cultural impulse to "personal testimony" which is "not really autobiography" (1987:18). Ruth Gordon, E.G.Malherbe, Alan Paton, Guy Butler, Ernie Duffield, and Roy Campbell (to name but a few) do not perceive or present the self as representative, nor does suffering seem to be their motive for writing. And worker autobiographies rarely include "specificity of detail". Conventions change even for those who are producing what might be called mainstream autobiographies. Autobiographical subjects inevitably change because material and discursive interpellations of the subject undergo constant transformations in reaction to uneven pressures from different aspects of the social formation. Conventions cannot statically conform to "the impetus immortalised in the title of one of the greatest of all

autobiographies, The Confessions of St. Augustine" (12). Moreover, Daymond's suggestion that there is a Western standard is false; she says that Kuzwayo "is not sufficiently Western to write autobiography quite as we expect it to be" (22). This "we" is a fiction; there are many different expectations abroad even for those who are familiar with Western norms (compare, for example, Barthes' autobiography with Maxine Hong Kingston's). South African autobiographical writing shows that the pressures upon texts, from the social formation and from other texts, are not linear but multi-faceted, uneven, and inconsistent. These tensions and tendencies are perhaps most importantly encoded in the textual inscription of subjectivity.

Call Me Woman is one answer to Bozzoli's question about South Africa's oppressive system: "What happens to consciousness when the forces of structure and agency are so unevenly balanced?" (1991:2). Bozzoli reminds us that the balance between, on the one hand, social structures which determine people's lives and, on the other, free choice of action on the part of subjects, will be dependent on where we stand in relation to social power. While for the South African ruling classes, "self-consciously designed and promulgated ideologies are common" (2), for the powerless, consciousness

has rarely attained a similarly deliberate character... the facts of alienation and oppression have meant that the ordinary person has infrequently been drawn into a vision of herself as capable of exerting power beyond a limited sphere. Consciousness here has been formed within and against structures, rather than above and around them. (2).

The autobiographies of Campbell and Kuzwayo are illustrative. Kuzwayo's opposition to the discourses of racism and sexism (e.g. 32) is contained, and contains within it, conservative leanings: she must have a family of her own (144); she perceives herself as someone who must serve (e.g. 46, 48, 73, 114). She applauds the gains which have been made by black women against patriarchal

limitations, but seems to harbour some ambivalent feelings in this regard as she discusses the resultant social tensions (261-263).

Kuzwayo's text manifests the fractures and dissonance to which the individual is subject; thus,

[t]he complexities involved in understanding the terms 'resistance' or 'opposition' are considerable when one perceives people as being so intricately enmeshed in different types of domination that opposition to one type may involve collaboration with another. (Bozzoli, 1991:14)

Kuzwayo's autobiographical subject tries to change the systems of apartheid and traditional patriarchy from within the confines of the role of server. The text's conclusion shows this:

The black women in South Africa have shown outstanding tenacity against great odds. We shall never give in to defeat.... The commitment of the women of my community is my commitment -- to stand side by side with our menfolk and our children in this long struggle to liberate ourselves and to bring about peace and justice for all in a country we love so deeply.

The old Setswana proverb has come alive with a fresh meaning for me at this point:

*Mmangoana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*

It means:

'The child's mother grabs the sharp end of the knife'.

*Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*  
God Bless Africa. (263)

Autobiographies which conform to the general trend of Western narrative autobiography, like Campbell's and most other South African autobiographies produced in the last four decades, present the autobiographer/narrator as the authority of self and text, the latter as a transparent reflection of the former. Kuzwayo's is different in that a unifying narrative, controlled by a stable narrator, is subordinated structurally to the non-narrative mosaic of other black women's lives. The textual constitution of the subject is different, too, in that Kuzwayo's self is

unstable, tentative, and is presented as an adumbration of other "selves", those of other black South African women.

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Most South African autobiographies written in English in the last 46 years concentrate attention upon the *bios*, the record of lived events. Most are personal *history* rather than *personal* history. Breyten Breytenbach's The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist is exceptional in its exploration of the subject as textual construct, the writing process as part of the experience of, and construction of, (a) being. The autobiographical self is presented more in the spirit of a question than a statement. Although the narrator repeatedly declares "I am the writer"<sup>25</sup>, his insistence conforming to normative expectations of Western-style autobiography that the "I" of the text represents the (extra-textual) author and (narrative) hero, the text also insists that such assertions are based on fictions, fictions of narrative shaping and generic convention, as well as more fundamental fictions concerning the nature of being, the constitution of subjectivity. The text explores subjectivity and its textual encoding; it announces itself as an autobiography, but shows that postmodernist scepticism is enabling of deeper insights into the complexities and secrets of being. It fractures the "I". "'I' continually makes itself over and over again, reposit itself as a displaced, symbolic witness of the shattering where every entity was dissolved" (Kristeva, 1980:163-4).

The title, The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, resonates with ambiguity. Claiming to conform to the conventions of the confessional autobiography while simultaneously mocking such claims, the text also exploits the *novelistic* use of the conventions of the confessional autobiography. Thus "true" implies sincere, unembellished, factual; but it recalls other "true" narratives like

Gulliver's Travels, Moll Flanders and Tom Jones, an impression reinforced by the obviously imitative summaries which introduce each of the two parts of the book. For instance, the Preface to Part One reads: "being the veritable account in words and in breaks of how a foolish fellow got caught in the antechamber of No Man's Land" (11).

But the play on the word "true" does not negate its conventional significance for autobiography. Throughout the text there runs a strand in the narrative which serves primarily to inform the reader.<sup>26</sup> And at the end of the narrative, the first of six "Notes" is largely concerned with the status of the text as a truthful document.<sup>27</sup> The confession

had to become the reflection of a search for what really happened, and for the identity of the narrator.... My account of what happened is neither objective nor complete. I have consciously left out much that I knew about, or now know about.... I don't think there is any total objectivity ever. There must be, however, I believe and I try, a constant attempt at remaining fully aware under all circumstances, which again means that there are choices to be made and responsibility to be taken for the awareness and for the choices. I have attempted as closely as possible to describe only that which I experienced or saw... I tried always to remain clear and to penetrate to a feeling for truth in what I heard and learnt from others... behind every name there's a real person.... And I have not 'invented' or transposed any event. (338-9)

The text is thus "true" since it informs in conventional ways; it is subjectively true and aims for "a feeling for truth"; but it is also "true" in new interrogative ways: the narrator uses the term in inverted commas (156, 158). Moreover, it is "true" in that it is a textual construct conforming to many important discursive conventions regarding fictive "truth": "The fools -- don't they know that truth is a convention?" (36). Finally, it satirises "truth" as constructed by the apartheid regime, especially the "truth" that Breytenbach is the "terrorist" menace to

society, while his captors are upholders of justice. The narrative is thus true in many senses -- objectively, subjectively, factually, fictionally, and in the Derridean sense of truth under erasure.

This can be said, too, of the second word in the title, the "Confessions". The text is far more frequently indictment than confession; moreover, when the narrator does confess there is no orgy of self-abasement in the tradition of Rousseau; nor does he confess to the charges of the apartheid state (his plans to facilitate the overthrow of the white Nationalist government are discussed freely, rather than admitted to or confessed).<sup>28</sup> Instead, when he confesses in a spirit of self-reproach he confesses to the "guilt of the survivor" (27), to his humanity, and to his need to comply even when he hates what he complies with (66; 169-71), to "participate in his own undoing.... Worse, far worse, that he ended up looking upon his tormentor as a confessor, as a friend even. This development is so profoundly unnatural that it makes him sick of himself" (343).

I do not know whether what I aim for will be any better but I do know that this [apartheid state] is unacceptable and that it will have to be destroyed to make it possible for the *other* -- maybe better -- to take its place. And I know that I am lazy... my knees are weak... I genuflect so easily.... (239-40)

This is confession, in the usual sense and, like most confessions, Breytenbach's text offers narrative excuses and is thus self-justifying -- which, as de Man remarked about Rousseau's Confessions, serves to "exculpate the confessor, thus making the confession (and the confessional text) redundant" (quoted in Norris, 1982:107). But the word "Confession" is also used ironically and the irony undercuts (but does not negate) this deconstruction of the 'sincere' confession. This is, then, a confession, but the fact that it is also the parodic echo of other "true confessions" adds another dimension of meaning to a laden term.

The reference to himself as an albino serves to draw attention to the author/narrator's white skin, while disclaiming identity with whites of European descent. It is in part an ironic commentary on the etymological roots of the word Afrikaner (viz African). Breytenbach distances himself from Afrikaners by referring to them by the derogatory term used by prisoners and black South Africans; he warns the reader, "Don't ever trust a boer. His two faces are the result of a tragically flawed culture" (161). Thus in his refusal to be identified with Afrikaners ("I do not consider myself to be an Afrikaner. To be an Afrikaner in the way they define it is to be a living insult" (280)), he claims identity with black South Africans by implying that his whiteness is an accident of biology, not a matter of racial or cultural alignment. "I know what it is like to be black in a white country", he says (27), and half expects black security policemen to identify with his chosen role as freedom fighter, perhaps to perceive his 'race' as albino. He hails his other self, "Mr Investigator", as his

dark mirror-brother. We need to talk, brother I. I must tell you what it was like to be an albino in a white land. We are forever united by an intimate knowledge of the depravity man will stoop to. Son of Africa. Azanians.... I hear you chuckling, you who are Black.... (260)

But the narrator also insists that race cannot be ignored:

The gulf between Black and White, or between Whites and all the others, is so enormous that in fact we are strangers to one another. The only common ground we share is Apartheid. But we interpret the ground differently. We are conditioned, each in his own way, by the privileges and the iniquities of the system. To pretend differently would be taking and mistaking one's desires for reality. (73-4)<sup>29</sup>

So on another level the claim to be an albino, an honorary black, is ironic.

Lastly, his adoption of the regime's term to describe all who challenge the legitimacy of the Nationalist government as "terrorists" further underscores the ironies which

resonate in the rest of the title.

You feel like laughing. Mr Investigator? You splatter. What? Am I not a terrorist then? No, no, no, don't get me wrong. I'm not denying that. I've accepted it. *Mea culpa*. (I am guilty in any event. All that's still lacking is the crime to fit the guilt. I'm sure you can help me there, Mr Eye.) I was accused of being a terrorist, I was brought before the courts in terms of the Terrorism Act, I was convicted of being one, I was sentenced as a terrorist, on my jail ticket where it asked 'sentence or crime' it was written, carefully, 'terrorism'; therefore, because this is the way we do things in No Man's Land, therefore I am indeed a terrorist. But at the time when these interrogations were going on it was still a secret to the minds of my young [activist] friends. (38)

True Confessions exposes some of the horrors perpetrated by state employed terrorists. Breytenbach is a convicted terrorist, but he isn't a terrorist for he does not terrorise.

This insistence on the plurality of meaning evidenced in the title informs the text's exploration of selfhood. This inquiry is predicated both upon the narrating subject's interpellation as an Afrikaner who seeks to undermine the Afrikaner apartheid State (racism had become increasingly virulent during the author's lifetime), as well as upon the specific conditions prevailing in the prison. The refusal to define himself simply as one kind of man is, to some extent, brought about by ironies of his sentence as a terrorist, while the very people (*his* Afrikaner people) who subject him to terrorist tactics are cast (in the prison system and in the social formation) as beyond reproach. The confessing self is the site for the convergence of many (sometimes intersecting, sometimes contestatory) dimensions of significance. The expressive realist author, the humanist source of truth of experience, is present but not as god-like master of the discourse or of self. As Kristeva says, "[Y]ou do not take place as such, but as a *stance* essential to a practice" (1980:165). This authorial voice is one among many. Thus the text is presented as a



source of information about a material being whose photograph is printed on the back cover<sup>30</sup>, the photograph serving to set the seal of authority on the text as autobiography by indicating that the image depicts the writer, the "real author" in narratological terms, and the narrator and protagonist of the narrative.

This writer is the "terrorist" who entered South Africa on a false passport. The writer's experiences provide the narrative structure for the text: the narrative begins with his arrival in South Africa and subsequent entrapment, and ends with his departure from South Africa to freedom. As might be expected, especially by novel readers, the hero also develops, undergoes transformation, as a result of his experiences so that there is greater convergence between narrator and protagonist at the end of the narrative.<sup>31</sup> This is hinted at early in the text when the narrator indicates a subsequent loss of innocence: "You see, I was a travelling salesman in dreams and illusions" (24). The narrative is the medium by which the past selves of the protagonist and the narrating self are woven together; and since this is a narrative in print form, the author's name is part of the fabric. But the conjunction is by no means total for the text explores not a composite or finite self as 'character', but an experiencing self, a self in process (and, of course, an important part of that process is the process of recording/writing). Barthes' autobiographical narrator says of himself:

All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel -- or rather by several characters. For the image-repertoire, fatal substance of the novel, and the labyrinth of levels in which anyone who speaks about himself gets lost -- the image-repertoire is taken over by several masks (*personae*), yet distributed according to the depth of the stage (and yet *no one* -- *personne*, as we say in French -- is behind them). (1977a:119-120)

The experiencing self experiences not only immediate sensation but also memory of past sensation; these cannot be neatly separated. So strong is the link between

remembered self and narrating self in True Confessions that it is the need to purge the narrating self from the ugliness of recollected experience that provides the principal motive for writing. "Now I must get rid of the unreality. I must vomit. I must eject this darkness" (27) the narrator says; and,

[t]he only comfort I allow myself is the thought (or the hope?) that recollecting all the events will also allow me to put them out of mind forever. I am hoping for a purge. (That is why it is so important to dredge up *everything*: what one leaves behind will, like the bloodsucking head of the louse you remove from your skin, start festering.)... Is the need to vomit the surfacing past a rash on the brain? (151-2)

The narrating self is a collage of past and present selves. Experience in the present is an uneven assemblage of past experiences and present subject positions (though these are, of course, densely interwoven and not necessarily separable). In the "insert" which shifts from the time of the narrative (story time) to the time of the act of narrating, the narrator finds himself seeing and feeling Africa, in Paris:

Down in the kernel of the city there's the old City Hall.... I look up and like a memory another vision superimposes itself. Already now I know that there will be this blotting nostalgia, other scenes darkening under what the eye sees at the moment. The slight blue, the sniff of wind in the air, and the green figures having the shapes of movement make me remember that wild and desolate coast along the Atlantic Ocean with the primeval wind sailing over the dunes bending the grass to prayer, and that same light blue allied to white. I can taste it on my tongue. When later I walk up the hill again there is a folding into evening and outlines fading fast. Winter. But the light grows daily.... Everywhere, all over town, there has been a renewal.... There's life behind the facades.... People are living there....<sup>32</sup> Contrast it with that other place in No Man's Land having the attributes and gestures of life but in fact being a labyrinth of death. In the thin alleys leading off these streets the lampposts start revealing the first yellow globes of darkness.... Suddenly I imagine a rattling noise and again falls open in that inner man which never forgets a memory of an image of dusk-coloured grey with a verdigris glow over the mountains and he listens to the whirring sound of the gallinaceous birds with slate-blued white-spotted

plumage that lived around the prison. (174-5)

The "I" is a concatenation of selves, and of memories (constructions) of past selves. And these selves are always implicated in the discursive representations of self that culture and history make available. As Norris observes, "there is no privileged ground of reflection from which thought could ever organize or control the flux of temporal experience.... Perception is always already representation" (1982:47-8). Telling of the present of writing involves telling of the past (which is part of the present). Telling of the past, however, is no less problematic, for the discourse will always be coloured by the present of the narration. The narrator prefaces the narrative with a meditation on this:

And then, this same process is an open-ended one; I can hear the echoes. As it continues -- this jumbletalk, this trial -- I can go on searching, and I can hear the reverberation of my own voice. I'm sitting here -- I have this little instrument in my hand; I have the earphones on my head and I speak to you and I listen to the voice coming back. And I learn from these words the reality as it is being presented at the moment of emitting the sounds. That is perhaps as close as I can come to what the identity is considered to be. That is as close as I can come to the truth. Here I am. Here the truth is also. I hope, Mr Investigator, that that is what you expect of me. Because, you know, you could force me to deny whatever I say immediately after having said it; and you could probably force me to start all over again. I can tell you in advance that if I were to do that it would come out differently; it would be different; I'd no longer be there; I'd be somebody else -- as sincere, as keen to help, as obsessed by the necessity to confess. (13-4)<sup>33</sup>

And this brings us to the text's insistence that while the "I" is Breytenbach, free in Paris, and also Galaska, undercover agent, and Breytenbach, prisoner, it is also most importantly a construction of the text. The above passage concludes:

But let us push him back into the darkness of non-existence and let us go forward with what we have in hand at the moment. May I be your humble servant, Mr Investigator? Listen to me. I shall confess. (14)

The "him" to be pushed back is a self not yet created, not yet discursively or textually constituted. It is the self, the other "I" who would, at a different time and in a different text, tell a different story about a self the same but different.

The "I", then, is a platform for subject positions for the autobiographical subject; the reader is expected to attribute these subject positions to Breytenbach, the material being (the link being secured by the author's name and photograph). But due cognisance must be paid to the impossibility of the fixing of the textual and extra-textual subject for the text makes it clear that images and names provide the necessary security for identity only within certain contexts. Breytenbach's name and photographic image reinforce the autobiography's claim to be about a real person, specifically *this* person, but they do so in parenthesis, so to speak. True Confessions explores the inherent instability of the sign, be it linguistic, pictorial, or even the material body. Thus the text opens:

The Name you will see under this document is Breyten Breytenbach. That is my name. It's not the only one; after all, what is a name? I used to be called Dick; sometimes I was called Antoine; some knew me as Hervé; others as Jan Blom; at one point I was called Christian Jean-Marc Galaska: then I was the Professor; later I was Mr Bird: all these being the labels attached to different people. Because, Mr Investigator, if there is one thing that has become amply clear to me over the years, it is exactly that there is no one person that can be named and in the process of naming be fixed for all eternity. (13)

Thus although the "I" is the textual anchor linking the author's name and image and the narrating and narrated subjects, it is an unstable link, even within the text. (And between text and extra-textual self the links are even less dependable). This point is illustrated graphically by the fact that the small photograph of the author on the back cover is subordinated visually to the larger drawing,

executed by Breytenbach himself, on the front cover.<sup>34</sup> This drawing is, essentially, an illustration of and for this text, depicting as it does two likenesses of the author, examining an open book. While the photograph is part of the 'documentary' claim of autobiography, the drawing is an extension of its fictiveness, its nature as textual composition. The two men in the drawing are clearly intended to resemble Breytenbach (we recognise the clipped beard, the large nose, the silvered short hair from the photograph): yet, unexpectedly, these two men are in warder's clothes. Illustrating the text's play on the narratee, Mr Investigator, as the author's second self (see, for example, 72, 96 where this is abbreviated to "Mr I"), the cover drawing underscores the narrator's insistence on the intimacy between the prisoner and captor. Thus Mr Investigator is both the reader and also the author as auditor, interrogator of self, a facet of the self who is in some senses akin to those who imprisoned him (he is also called "Mr Interrogator" (101) and "Mr Investinterrogator" (165)). There is a common bond -- wrought by their cultural and linguistic identity as Afrikaners but also by their close and mutually dependent relationship in prison -- between narrator and jailors: they are "people like you and me. That is what makes them so horrible and so pitiful.... I believe the torturer is as depraved by his acts as the one who is tortured" (339). The torturer must destroy the detainee,

because the dismantlement has revealed vis-a-vis, a brother-I, a mirror-image or only a miserable human-conditioned pile of flesh and faeces which is unbearable and needs to be done away with; there is thus already the tendency to identify with the other (and the roles can be inverted) and the blind desire to force a solution to and resolution of the irreducible contradictions -- precisely because you cannot accept the (self)-image revealed to you, nor the knowledge that never the twain shall meet. (341)

And, "The two of you, violator and victim (collaborator! violin!), are linked forever perhaps, by the sad knowledge of what people are capable of. We are all guilty" (343).

There are thus ambiguities in the front illustration's ambiguous treatment of a self and a mirror image (indicating that the self is not unified), of self and enemy, prisoner and warder. These ambiguities are reinforced by the wing apparent on the back of one of the men in the drawing, evoking the clichés of jailbird and bird on the wire. These clichés also inform the text: the protagonist is called "Mr Bird"<sup>35</sup>, "Professor Bird" (165) and "Bangai Bird" (308). But the text refuses to allow these clichés simple or stable meanings:

What is *my* name? You choose it. Take your word. A name is exactly the absence of definition. I've told you that I'm called Bird, *Mister* Bird if you don't mind, which means the jail bait. I've also explained to you how I involuntarily took a vow of not using words, because the words cluttering up the spaces on the other side of the walls of my cell were like birds without wings. Can you imagine anything more obscene than a bird with no wings? And yet it is exactly what I'm giving you here. I'm stuffing this confession of mine with all the other wingless birds. Perhaps it is the stuffing coming undone which brings with it unasked for visions of wings and sand and sea, and others of tame guinea-fowl mocking us from beyond the walls, moving through the evening becoming more opaque in their ever-repeated mating dance. Sounds, images, birds, insects, wirts and borms and names -- the multiplication and manifestation of nothing. (178)

Again the cliché is subverted, turned inside out: prisoners who are hanged experience "the indecency from man to man of handcuff and hood and rope and trapdoor -- the earth falling for ever away: we are the wind and we are the birds, and the singing, singing of weighted ropes..." (216).

The wing in the drawing is a token wing; it is clearly non-functional. When the protagonist wishes to flee the prison, he fails: "Needless to point out that none of these flights ever got off the ground" (295). But this is not only a jailbird's wing, it is also stylised in the manner common in depictions of cherubic angels. And these angels are warders. The chapter dealing with the warders is

ironically entitled "Some Angels" (part two, Chapter 4); and the narrator tells us that, "Prison is just another heaven" (151) manned by "guardian angels" (287). (See also 171, 235, 287.) But this heaven is a hellish place in which representatives of the apartheid state are God's earthly incarnations, God being the "Interstigator" (215). Jailbird and "angel" converge, or at least face parodic versions of themselves in each other. The narrator explores the psyche of the interrogator by parodying his voice:

Do you mind that I ask, I ask, I ask? Don't you know that its necessary? That it can never be any different?... you and I entwined and related, parasite and prey? Image and mirror-image?... I know already. I always know. But I must prove. You are the confirmation. You prove. You are of my making. I am the controller. I slit open, and then I sculpt. You make sense of my anxieties. You flesh out my dreams.... I love you so. I need you so. Don't you see? You permit me relevance, you give me my outline. You give me status. You make me accept myself. You make me feel that I know I *am*! Come, I'm your father confessor. Together we are the embodiment of the reality of my thoughts, my wishes, my anguishes, my existence. In me you are as safe as death. I have the two faces.... Through you I touch eternity. Through you I see that the looking-glass is true. (56-8)

Things are not as they seem; meanings obscure meanings which, in turn, cover other meanings. Thus while the prisoners are held captive by their jailors their captivity is usually temporary -- they migrate when their season in "Paradise" is over; the jailors, however, are themselves imprisoned within the compound (223). Warder/jailbird face each other in a pictorial exploration of the precept which the narrator assures the reader is a crucial one by which to live as a prisoner:

... you have to impose a moral discipline upon yourself, sensing and avoiding the crude simplifications and dichotomies the authorities try to have you conform to. Always remember the simple truth that denying the humanity of the person facing you is a sure-fire way of diminishing yourself. Keep away from the slothful slotting of 'them' and 'us'. I'm

not talking about moral rectitude -- it is an exigence of awareness, a consciousness tool for survival. (282-3)

The angels' cherubic hands point, in the drawing, to the blank pages, pages which the "controller" (57) will fill with the co-operation of the detainee:

I am the controller.... You must open up, go open. You must just say. Say that which I must hear. Tell that which I know.... I nose around in your psyche. You are my excursions to wanton cellars. You are my book. I create your past. Your future is in my hands. I leaf through all the painfully constituted files on your comings and your goings, the records of your thinking and the organigramme of your associations. We are never free of one another again.... Come, I'll show you who you are. Look in this mirror, look. I bring you the image. Look how naive you are...

Accept what I give you. Be rich! Occupy the references I create for you! (57-8)

Interrogators, the narrator tells us wryly, "are very keen connoisseurs of literature. In their impatience they will intercept a manuscript between author and publisher. They may even read a book before it is written!" (157). Breytenbach's jailbird's life is a *tabula rasa*.

Identity is not, then, an essential set of characteristics that transcends experience. These interrogators are godlike in the way they use the process of destruction to create a new identity for the detainee. The narrator reminds us that,

the purpose of detaining and grilling and convicting and then holding people, is to disorientate them, to destroy their sense of themselves and the whole field of unquestioned awareness of the surrounding world, the whole cloth of relationships with other people, all the tentacles of grasping and undertaking ideas, and finally to burgle and to burn down the storehouse of dreams and fantasies and hopes. (28)

Identity is a function of context. On capture, the narrative of identity has been brutally interrupted:

I couldn't control my body. I was shivering, my legs were shaking; I couldn't even quieten my lips.... I



lay there in the unreal tumbling condition between sleep and wakefulness, with the broken film slapping in my head. (31)

This is more than an evocative description, for the text explores just how fundamental narrative is to the constitution of the self. Change the story and the hero changes too. Change the protagonist's name, and you change his identity. And once sentenced, "You are issued now with your prison identity" (126). This involves fundamental re-definition: "I was born. As prisoner 436/75.... No longer are you Mr Breytenbach, if you ever were; you are now the fucking dog, the *bandiet*, the *mugu*, the mother's cunt" (128). Instead of being someone who has a right to a proper name and the uniqueness of identity which this implies, Breytenbach finds that he becomes the archetypical prisoner, a caricature of a person. This destruction of the familiar self is reinforced by the grinding away of individuality effected by the repetitive, colourless samenesses of prison life and the lack of responsibility and choice (123-32 and 143).

The self as type rather than as individual is manifested textually in the loss of the "I" into the blurred referents of the "you" (28-31). The autobiographical becomes biographical; the *autos* is referred to in the second person. Narrator and protagonist are split asunder. Reader and protagonist begin to converge. As a result of isolation, for instance,

parts of you are destroyed and these parts will never again be revived. You are altered in your most intimate ways exactly because all objectivity is taken away from you. You watch yourself changing, giving in to certain things, becoming paranoid, staring at the wall, living with an ear to the door and yet cringing at the slightest noise, talking to the ants, starting to have hallucinations -- without ever being able to ascertain the extent of these deviations or this damage precisely because you have nothing against which to measure it. And this damage is permanent even though you learn to live with it.... (130)

Paradoxically, the "most intimate" aspects of identity are

distorted "exactly because all objectivity is taken away from you"; exploring the postmodernist theorisation of the self, the text shows that even at its most basic and private, the self is a function of the social context. Loss of a recognisable frame of reference results in loss of recognisable selfhood. But this loss involves a paradoxical gain: "You learn how things, appearances, fit together. About illusion. About stopping and space and you yourself just one vibrating pretence among many" (131). There is no humanist core 'character', no intimate inner self, which is independent of discursive and material circumstance.

True Confessions explores the ways in which the prison experience is both intensely personal, yet utterly impersonal, typical, and depersonalising, because dehumanising conditions are part of the system to which all prisoners are subjected in varying degrees. (Of course, this is true, too, of the apartheid society which is both intensely individual and comprehensively collective). Thus when freed, Breytenbach returns in his dreams to the prison, to find "a throng of I's, of convicts all lining up for food" (218). And when confined to the visual limits of the cell, the prisoner finds that,

[t]he ears become the most important sense organs. You use your ears the way a bat employs its radar -- to situate yourself, to detect danger, to find some security in this environment you cannot escape from.... But at other times you wake, you listen, and the rumours you hear are indecipherable. Your ears lead you up blind alleys -- they do not interpret. The noises confuse you. They are the exteriorization of your confusion. You want to shout to identify yourself, to pin yourself down. What is this? Where am I? Am I awake? Your silence is sucked through the bars. You fight for sense.... Your mind lives outside you. The whole world has burned down. (220)

The eyes are no windows to the soul, they "can be open like the looking of mirrors" (217) as are the eyes of the men in the drawing; these are eyes rendered "useless from the despair of having seen too much... of never having truly

seen anything at all..." (239); these are the eyes of birds (176), of ill-omen (153). To look into the eyes of another is to see the self and the world without reflected. (In the author's drawing one of the men's mirror eyes is clearly outside the fence). We constitute each other and the world. No-one is an autonomous entity.

Identity is unstable and multifaceted. The outlines of the self are blurred, and are as much defined by others as by oneself. *"You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens"* (Barthes, 1977a:36, original italics). Identity is the mask worn for oneself and others at a particular point in time; identity is the sum of masks worn, held together by the "I". So while, *"They were looking for bombs... I was hanging on to the fragmentary scenario of my identities"* (331). These masks are labelled (13, 20) and, as the term mask implies, hide other selves. Thus Breytenbach, as Galaska, is arrested and describes his first confrontation with South African security personnel as "mask to mask" (24), not face to face.

Beneath the masks there is no essential naked self, stripped of illusion:

How does one survive? I did not survive. This is important to point out. True, there is a sum of attributes which can be called by name. 'Come out, Breyten Breytenbach!' you may want to call; and from the gloom, wrapped in words as if in cheesecloth, Bangai Bird will emerge. (He has the smell of writing on him; he is utterly deconstructed to stuttering utterances.)

It is important that you consciously (I'd be apt to say 'personally') assist at the putting down of the I. That is if you wish to parry destruction, to unsurvive. (As if 'survival' were going to inquire after your wishes!) The I not only as a concept of (para)physicality, as a screen of illusions, as a hole-ness -- but in its most mundane manifestations. You are the way: the walking and the walk, not the walker. The I which blocks the view must disappear by 'deconception' for a sense of movement to be

actualized -- a feeling of metamorphosis. (308)

This exploration of selfhood entwined in the textual recall of past experience involves journey rather than destination; it involves the creation of a past self, present (writing) self, and also impacts on future identity for the text is material construct with implications for the writer in the world of legal responsibilities and material consequence. The consecration of significance in discourse, the construction of an autobiographical self, is especially important. When leaving his cell for the last time, the narrator's most intensely felt emotion is not for his imminent freedom, but for his written work. "All that mattered was the manuscripts under my arm. If I could not take them with me I was going to refuse to leave the premises" (324). In the texts is the "I" that he has created/preserved as a bulwark against the utter destruction of self which incarceration promotes. It is this textual self as well as the texts as products to which he clings. Text is both nothing and something:

You write your mind. That is perhaps, Mr Investigator, why or how I have become so sensitive to living structure. Also to the objective existence of that which has been exteriorized. (I'm not saying exorcised!) That you are not only writing your past but also your future: you are cutting open new lanes to the heart of nothingness but you are also papering over cracks and blocking off routes. (160)

What is found in the process of writing is a part of the instance of seeking. Talking into the microphone, earphones feeding sounds into his ears, the writer/narrator records:

I speak to you and I listen to the voice coming back. And I learn from these words the reality as it is being presented at the moment of emitting the sounds. That is perhaps as close as I can come to what the identity is considered to be. That is as close as I come to the truth. Here I am. Here the truth is also. (13)

Truth of self, of experience, of text, is evanescent.

Mr Investigator, I hope you realize that it's not easy

for me to talk to you like this, with an open heart. I'm trying to stick to a simple principle: to tell everything, hodge-podge, be it a clapper-clawing or a whining, whichever way it comes. Naturally I have forgotten a lot -- I wouldn't be human otherwise. That is why I try to structure my mind -- the one incident carries the echoes of others -- like death. There is no composition like decomposition.... The further you go the more you realize that there are no finites; just movements of the mind, only processes. (151)

Self is verbal, not a noun or set of adjectives. "You know that we're always inventing our lives. You know that what I'm confessing now is also the instantaneous invention of what might have happened" (17). The "true identity" (19) can only be spoken of ironically. It is to be White in a Black country (73-4; 94); it is to be "black in a white country" (27, 260), to identify with the oppressed; it is to justify the lives of the oppressors and interrogators (56-9); it is to be an invisible agent, an actor (in both senses of the word) (81ff; 91); it is to be lover, son, brother; it is to be the writer and the scribe (163); it is to be written; it is to be Galaska and Breytenbach and Klong and Dick and Professor and Mr Bird. It is to be Johan, awaiting death (170). To be "I" is also to be "you" (e.g. 128).

Dominating the text is "Mr Investigator", another self, born at the very moment when Breytenbach's entrapment by the security police seems inevitable (118). The narrator confronts Mr Investigator in an effort to scrutinize and exorcise this self and the associated experiences. Mr Investigator is his "dark mirror-brother" (260); but he is also the enemy<sup>36</sup>, and more often, the reader, a reader drawn into the text's probing of the fractures of self (17). Unable to turn to friends, Breytenbach must turn to an invisible reader, mirroring his sense of absence (the empty, mirror eyes of the cover illustration)<sup>37</sup>, so that the "I" of the enunciation becomes "you", the addressee. Extending the poststructuralist insistence that the "I" can

only be defined in its difference from the "you"<sup>38</sup>, the narrator defines both "I" and "you" in terms of similarity as well as difference.

You who come out are free, and yet there is the you which disappears into the twists of mindless mind-seeking forever. Who comes forth then? Is there really a you? Isn't there, in the final instance, only an amorphous but all-encompassing investigator? You hover over the red ruins (which look like a child's watered-down sandcastle from up here) and you search for the you, in the same way that it has always been waiting for you. The one is the liberator of the self. I imagine an I....

I write to no one, inventing an I who may mouth the words that I can neither swallow nor spew out -- they are the stones of the labyrinth, with the mortar of silences. (238-9)

Writer and reader are, like detainee and interrogator, locked in a mutual embrace, reflecting each other in mirror eyes, each constituting the other. The auditor, Mr Investigator, becomes "Mr Eye" (201); he is the author's self; he is the reader's self. He is the man in the cover drawing whose eye is not imprisoned within the fences. The prisoner, the writer, the narrator, the addressee, the reader -- as points (sometimes converging) on a continuum of being -- are defined and given identity in the process of writing.

In spite of the difficulties of confession, the narrator acknowledges that in the process the "I" will change, as will the "you" of Mr Investigator: "But we must go on, mustn't we, Mr Investigator? See, now that I've told you about all of this, I can forget it. One must burn! Maybe, once I'm finished, there will finally be neither you nor I left..." (153). Of course, this is true in the sense that these are textual constructs and when the text ends these characters remain encased within the pages. However, the narrator's concluding words imply that not only is the text completed but the exorcism has been successful too, the characters are no longer needed: "It is done..." (334).



But writing is as much a form of imprisonment as a means to freedom:

Writing becomes for me a means, a way of survival.... But at the same time I soon realize that it becomes the exteriorization of my imprisonment. My writing bounces off the walls. The maze of words which become alleys, like sentences, the loops which are closed circuits and present no exit, these themselves constitute the walls of my confinement. I write my own castle and it becomes a frightening discovery: it is unbalancing something very deeply embedded in yourself when you in reality construct, through your scribblings, your own mirror.... Because in this mirror you write hair by hair and pore by pore your own face, and you don't like what you see. You don't even recognize it. It won't let you out again.... [Author's ellipsis] Who am I? Where and who was I before this time? (155-6)

Writing is the mirror (161) and like a mirror, its images are without substance (178); this is the Lacanian split self mirrored over and over again. The autobiographical subject is a function of the autobiographical text; notions of a simple reflection of reality in autobiography explode in a multiplicity of signs and signifying systems.

Ruptured, dislocated subject positions are sometimes intersecting, sometimes isolatable, disconnected, contradictory. Exploring past selves, present selves, and even opening the spaces for possible future selves (160), True Confessions admits to its own silences, the unsayable being defined in the process of telling:

It is all coming back in bits and pieces, Mr Investigator. I am vomiting words, I have the sour taste, I'm trying to hold on to the tread. These things surface from somewhere intimate, and yet I do not know them. If I were to know my own nature well I should be knowing universal nature....<sup>39</sup> See here, I hold it in my hands. I have the black gloves. And silences. Salient incidents remain like shards in the mind. I dare not remove them from fear of provoking a bleeding that can never again be stopped. (This is a confession, not a saga). I don't know if I have a mind. I dare not look into it -- it is so sore. I'm tired of talking to you. (296-7)

Motives may be too obscure to define (86-7), or may simply be unknowable:

(How much of my trip was to impress people like him? How much of it was an attempt to force a break in the contradictions in which I was caught up: the dreamer ensnared by political work -- neglecting his art -- and suffering from it; the exile who had never accepted the finality of his exile, whose roots were still in South Africa; the man, becoming a European, writing in an African language, with the world evoked by it, which no one around him understood? How much of it was suicidal? Or repentant homecoming?) (95)

And, in a final note on the text, the author/narrator avers that it was not his intention "to take revenge on a system or certain people", but adds, "at least, I don't think it was" (339). Moreover, gaps are inevitable because of the vagaries of memory (151) and the materiality of text. Textuality makes its own demands ("It was my intention to produce a political text -- if it turned out to be more 'literary' than expected it can only be because I couldn't help it. It is the lability of the job, it is the seductiveness and the *life* of the word" (339)); it has its own limits (e.g. the Prisons Act, 135); it must take cognisance of the fact that it, unlike fiction, may implicate living people (162); there are limits of space in a publishable book (200, 271, 273); and textuality creates its own realities (156; 165).

But just as writing creates selves -- the autobiographical subject(s), the reading subject -- it destroys the self too: "The I is out. It is outside the walls.... If it can be written about, it doesn't exist" (241); "to write is to celebrate death" (37). Exploring the poststructuralist notion of writing as absence<sup>40</sup>, the text encodes an "I" which no longer exists and which never existed anyway, the textual "I" being an imperfect, ontologically distinct approximation of an ungraspable reality. The narrating "I" comments on the paradox of discourse and text: the narrating self of the present (the self of the enunciating) is vague, unclear, whereas the narrated self (the self of the enunciation) is clearly defined. Life when converted/translated into text acquires



clarity as it ceases to be.

I'm home now, maimed, diminished, splayed, with my vision impaired, my horizon narrowed, my reference points vague, obscure; and yet there is this total clarity even if it's only at the level of language, which is the surface, which is the superficial, which, by the definition of language, must disappear to be allowed to exist (26).

Writing is lifeline and snare. It is necessary for survival (159); but, as Dampies (a fellow prisoner) had tattooed around his neck: "'my last words is a rope around my neck'" (165).

Language obscures and it reveals (171); but it is not detached from material existence. Discourse imbues the body with meaning, and determines the material circumstances of a life. This is evidenced in a variety of ways in True Confessions. A whole dialect develops in prison, needed to construct and reflect -- to produce and re-produce -- material conditions (226-9). One tragic tale is told of a 'Coloured' accountant, sentenced to six years imprisonment for fraud. His failure to engage in prison discourse -- thereby acknowledging the strict hierarchy encoded therein -- results in his physical and psychological destruction. His crime against the prison system is committed soon after he is interred: "he made the error of addressing a White warder as *meneer* (sir) and not as *baas* (master)" (269). The authorities feel that he has to learn that he is not "a *mister*". First, his glasses are broken; then his false teeth are stolen; his clothes follow. He is beaten up. And finally, he is robbed of his identity as a man: he is raped and turned into a *wyfietjie* (a little wife) (272).

Discourse is used to create fictions that may be the seedbeds for reality. Of his friend and mentor in the underground movement, Curiel, the narrator recounts the manner in which Curiel's assassination was prepared for. Smear articles appeared in a magazine, and as a result

Curiel was placed under house arrest by the French authorities. Although he was released when the accusations proved groundless, the propaganda had succeeded in creating "a climate which would permit his extermination" (51). Life, and as we have seen, death too, are inextricably bound up with identity as discursive construct. The narrator himself experiences this in his second trial when his life must bear the marks of fictiveness (236).

Race in South Africa is encoded in discourse, which itself reproduces hierarchical relations. True Confessions tells of how a prisoner of indeterminate race had to be classified so that he could be confined in the appropriate section of the prison. The person obviously wished to be classified white so that he might receive better food and treatment. But when the frustrated sergeant asked, "'Now tell us what the hell you are -- Black or White? And the man answered, 'But of course I'm white, my baas'" (127), his language gives him away. His use of the discourse of servitude marks him as black, when his skin does not.

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Learning about the subject of autobiographies is important for we may thus become more aware of how it is that we are ourselves positioned as subjects:

To know oneself is to study the intersubjective processes of articulation and interpretation by which we emerge as part of the world... as Barthes says, "the fundamental ethical problem is to recognize signs wherever they are; that is to say, not to mistake signs for natural phenomena and to proclaim them rather than conceal them". (Culler, 1975:264-5)

As the social organisation undergoes radical transformation we see shifts not only in the kinds of texts that are being produced but also in the kinds of subjects that are being constructed. This is extremely important, for we are perhaps in the unique position of witnessing fundamental social change and concomitant (sometimes contributory, sometimes consequent) textual revolution. While earlier

autobiographical texts employ the discourse of rationality in their titles (e.g. Mist of Memory, Bernard Sachs, or Memories & Sketches, Rosenthal, or The South African Autobiography, Plomer, to name but a few), some recent texts refuse the seemingly simple transparency; they mimic instead the voice of the Other, or they parody the discourse of idiocy. Donald Woods' Asking for Trouble, Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart, Mathebane's Kaffir Boy, Goonam's Coolie Doctor, Jay Naidoo's Coolie Location, Hope's White Boy Running, and, of course, Breytenbach's The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist all do this in one way or another.

New conceptualisations of subjectivity are manifest for new ways of being are now possible. "If 'women' and 'men' are categories produced by social, historical, political, and economic factors, then individuals are less the source of their own meaning than the place where clashes to control meanings of words occur" (Nussbaum, 1989:134). We see this in Kuzwayo's and Breytenbach's texts; consider, too, the autobiographical subjects of Makhoere's No Child's Play and of the host of autobiographical anthologies which emerged, principally in the 'eighties, to celebrate in text the hitherto invisible members of the black working class. In these texts illiterate people have been enabled by researchers to write themselves (and their selves) into history. Fanon writes of this in characteristically extravagant terms:

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity. (1973:28)

#### Chapter 4: Life

*History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.*

James Joyce

*[N]othing is more 'real', we think, than a date.*

Roland Barthes

*What, have you not lived?*

Lyndall Gordon

The period 1948-1994 covered in this study is a particularly significant period for autobiographical writing since it is a time when crude State control aimed to regulate the lives of all South Africans, with brutal effects for black South Africans. As in eighteenth-century Britain, "Economic developments and social dislocations related to the Industrial Revolution and the resulting population shifts from rural areas to urban centers began to disturb the equilibrium maintained by the force of centuries of tradition" (Pomerleau, 1980:29). The social impact of South Africa's "Industrial Revolution", which is usually identified as occurring after the discovery of diamonds, was overshadowed by the egregious forced removal of indigenous peoples from tribal lands<sup>1</sup> and the creation of dehumanising black ghettos, rural and urban. Since the subject and the social are mutually constitutive, social engineering on the scale experienced by South Africans in the last fifty years in particular, is, as we have seen, accompanied by radical shifts in conceptions of the self. Lives, too, change as the social context undergoes radical transformation, and individuals who write their life-stories seek, over time, to address different issues. The South African life-story in this period lends itself increasingly to (often implicit) reflections on the import of this life for a national history. My interest in this chapter is in the intersection of autobiographical writing and history. What can autobiographical writing tell us about history, if we know that the texts cannot be regarded

as mimetic, and if we treat their claims to factuality with scepticism? How can autobiographical texts secure the reader's conviction that this is a kind of historical document, that it is not fictional? How does the autobiographical text aim to secure the reader's sense that its interpretations are 'true'? This chapter explores the autobiographical texts of Albert Luthuli and of a number of black South African workers as species of history-writing.

Significantly, most of the English-language autobiographical texts published by South Africans since 1948 place the emphasis not on the exploration of self (autos), nor on experimentations with the medium or genre (graphe), (although important innovations do occur), but on the documenting of experience, the life (bios). South African autobiographical production shows that life-writing need not be intimate or introspective. Moreover, in those texts where the autobiographical subject's life is treated as representative, as stereotypical, the autobiography is not even a markedly personal mode of writing.<sup>2</sup> Thandi Moses observes that "the times we are living in -- the suffering, oppression, violence, deaths and detentions -- have resulted in people putting their personal problems on hold, and concentrating on the national problems they experience as people" (Daymond and Lenta, 1990:75). And Fanon argues that "the mobilization of the masses through the war of liberation introduces for each man ideas of common cause, national destiny and collective history" (1973:73-4). This emphasis on the historical value of the autobiographical text and on the prototypical status of the autobiographical subject is obviously due to the horrors through which millions of black South Africans have had to live; there is a need to testify, to bear witness, a need which meets with a corresponding need in readers to explore the minutiae of individuals' lived experience of apartheid. And this need to testify is not confined to black South Africans: in the latter part of the apartheid period the trend of the

assertive mode of autobiographical narration (this is who I am; this is what I have done) increasingly fails to dominate white life-writing, as more and more autobiographers employ an exploratory, less certain, mode of narration.

If the autobiographical text, in whatever form, is to succeed in impressing upon its readers its sincerity, its validity as testimony, then it has to be seen to conform to norms concerning how the culture defines historical accuracy. Autobiography, as a species of history, brings with it all the problems of history-writing. It has not only to conform to prevailing conceptions of what counts as worth knowing (and thus recording) but also dominant notions of the formal constraints of inscription/documentation. As Paul Jay has observed, "formal innovations in autobiographical literature" can be compared "with parallel developments in historiography" (1984:108). In this chapter some of the worker autobiographies emerge from that same disciplinary impulse: Facing the Storm (Keegan) results from a project to record "a people's history" (ix); and Women of Phokeng is part of that same project. Others share important features in common with a like group of historical texts which aim to record history from the grass roots. Moreover, many autobiographies by black South Africans are explicitly attempts to rewrite South African history. These attempts are necessary since South Africans who have any education at all would almost certainly have been educated, if one can use the term in this context, through a system which deliberately set out to misinform about the past. ) I examine in this chapter one autobiographical text which aims to set the history records straight, Albert Luthuli's Let My People Go. Patrick Lekota's is, however, probably the most extreme example.

Moreover, "the methodological decisions that an autobiographer makes are historiographic as well as

literary, novelistic, and poetic ones" (Jay, 1984:108-109). In autobiography, as in history, names and dates serve to anchor the narrative in detail which can be validated from within a network of authenticating institutions and practices. The name of the author has a very important function in autobiographical writing; it unifies the text and anchors it in the material realities of South African experience, usually specifying race, language group of the author (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, English or Afrikaans and so on), and gender. In autobiography, the proper name "represents an attempt to inscribe the unique in the system of language" and requires that it be read as untranslatable, as if it "were nothing but pure reference". It must also, however, be assimilable to "any word that is caught up in a linguistic and genealogical network where meaning already contaminates non-meaning" (Levesque, 1985:93). Foucault's argument in "What is an Author?" is too complex to be adequately treated here, but his assertion that the proper name is not pure and simple reference, being "more than an indication... a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description" (1984:105), is pertinent. In autobiography, the proper name functions in concert with personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation to refer to "the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the real speaker's discourse... [t]he author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (1984:112, 118); the "author-principle limits [the chance-element in discourse] by the play of an identity which has the form of individuality and the self" (1970:59).

The autobiographer has to attempt to persuade the reader that the writer (represented by the proper name), or, at the very least, the interviewee, is the same person as the one who is characterized in the text. And she has to convey some sense that the material of the narrative has its grounding in verifiable fact. In the autobiographies

studied in the previous chapter, it was seen that in texts as diverse as Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse, Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman, and Breytenbach's The True Confessions of An Albino Terrorist, the autobiographical subject is decentred, discontinuous, each text disrupting -- even against the explicit textual project -- the self's "pretended continuity" (Foucault, 1984:88). But what of the texts' treatment of the social and historical context for the self? Most autobiographical writing inscribes history as a continuous and graspable linear development. In South Africa, the primacy of *biography* in autobiographical texts depends on pragmatic notions of history and reality, of the coherence of self and the innocence of narrative and text. Few South African autobiographical texts "abandon the illusion that experience is discrete and isolate or that time is linear, with neatly separated points of reference" (Kolodny, 1980:244). It seems to me that this is because many autobiographies present themselves as one person's experience of History, rather than one person's own unique history. Relying on the authenticating discourses of serial, entire journalistic time, they reduce experience to order. Nevertheless, if single autobiographical texts do not always contribute significantly to the disruption of fictional continuities, taken together they disperse meanings and fragment monologues.

Furthermore, in their attempts to achieve the status of testimony, many South Africans tell the life story in unembellished prose, which may underscore its truthfulness, its lack of artifice. Some (those which are not penned by the autobiographical subject) have to rely on this, on conveying a sense that the researcher has faithfully recorded the straightforward answers of the autobiographical subject, when they cannot rely on the reader's knowledge that this narrative is straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. In this chapter, of the 13



texts considered only 2 (Qabula's and Tom's) conform to the norm of autobiographer as writer, narrator, protagonist, and this points to at least two important issues: first, black autobiographers often cannot actually pen their own autobiographies -- because they are barely literate or illiterate, or because a life of poverty ill affords individuals the motivation or leisure time to compose their memoirs, or because they are too involved in the struggle for liberation to devote time to writing. Second, the fact that someone else may assist in the documenting of a life or portion thereof indicates again the point that it is the record of experience (bios) that takes precedence over personal explorations of subjectivity (autos) and over experiments with the medium (graphe). And this brings us back to the style of writing: in such cases a plain narrative, brief and to the point, may serve to stress the series of significant events (usually in terms of a theme) in the interviewee's life.

Autobiographical texts have adopted a variety of forms, indicating a diverse range of responses to State and other power relations. Varied as they may be, however, what unites these texts is an insistence on the part of readers that autobiographers undertake to communicate accurate information about the autobiographical subjects. "The relation of autobiographical discourse to the real is opaque, highly codified, and politically charged; it is entangled in the material reality of lived experience" (Nussbaum, 1989:xiii). As Gusdorf (cited by Olney, 1980:21) and others (e.g. Finney, 1985:57) have argued, autobiography records the truth of subjective experience (which in terms of historical fact may well be false); now although this is a notion deriving from humanism (the individual has a core or essence that is her fundamental truth), it nevertheless has some validity in terms of my own theoretical position. For truth is subjective, in that it is the construction of conscious and unconscious forces

operating within and without the subject; truth positions the subject within discursive and material orders which speak through the subject, they subject the subject. Reality is not consistent and coherent, neither for diverse or even unified communities, nor for individuals. As I have argued elsewhere (1991:14), reality is not independent of ideology as some concrete, objective 'Truth' which all 'normal' adults would be able to agree on. I am not denying that there is a Real; like Derrida, I do not endorse that,

rather facile strain in current post-structuralist thinking... that passes directly from the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign (the lack of any natural or determinate link between signifier and signified) to the notion that texts cannot possibly 'refer' to any world outside their own rhetorical domain. On the contrary, Derrida argues: language is marked through and through by referential (or mimetic) assumptions, and there is no way of simply breaking their hold by a kind of deconstructionist fiat. What he does seek to show... is that classical ideas of this referential function have greatly simplified its nature, ignoring whatever gets in the way of a direct return to *mimesis*, origins and truth. There is, in short, an ideology of representation.... (Norris, 1987:53-4)

"To distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language" (Derrida, quoted in Norris, 1987:144). For Lacan, the Real (the third part of the Symbolic, Imaginary, Real triad) is "that which is radically extrinsic to the procession of signifiers... the infinitely receding goal towards which the signifying chain tends" (MacCannell, 1983:917). Moreover, for Lacan, "it is necessary for the unification of one signifier with one signified to remain stable, to become necessary for the mind if there is to be any ordering of the real and of thought" (Lemaire, 1977:17). Relating this to the autobiographer's task, one does not expect autobiographies to deny the validity of narrative or the possibility of communication -- we take it on faith that in most cases the words do point to real individuals' real experiences. But

what we identify as 'real' is that which conforms to normative cultural definitions, as Ellen Kuzwayo, Emma Mashinini and many other autobiographers find when deprived of a social network confirming their own perceptions of reality. "The audience and their representations are the terms of the 'realism' of any film or work of art -- not some pre-existent reality which it merely conveys" (MacCabe, 1985:74).

Barthes argues further that cultural codes define the natural, which is not natural at all but ideological, repetitive, stereotypical (1974:97-8): "The natural is never an attribute of physical Nature; it is the alibi paraded by a social majority: the natural is a legality" (1977:130). Autobiographical writing inscribes cultural prescriptions for recognition of the 'natural' and shows, too, that the body, as Foucault theorized,

far from being some fundamentally stable, acultural constant to which we must contrast all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly "in the grip," as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices.... Cultural practices, far from exerting their power against spontaneous needs, "basic" pleasures or instincts, or fundamental structures of body experience, are already and always inscribed, as Foucault has emphasized, "on our bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures".... [S]ocial practice [changes] people's experience of their bodies and their possibilities.... [However], the physical body can also be an instrument and medium of power. (Bordo, 1988:90-1)

Bordo adds that "women's bodies in general have historically been more vulnerable to extremes... of cultural manipulation of the body" (Bordo, 1988:91). She is referring to culturally specific ways in which women are taught to experience their bodies (e.g. the experience of hunger for the anorexic; or the experience of breastfeeding for say a traditional Zulu woman as compared to a contemporary professional American woman), as well as to actual physical impositions on the body in the form of etiquette codes for women's bodies such as the common

Western taboo on bodily hair for women, or restrictions on movement (women frequently record the opposition of their men partners to their involvement in politics or trade unions (see Lydia Kompe, 1985:105-9)), or in the extreme form of torture (Kompe speaks of female circumcision rituals, 1985:99). Importantly, Bordo goes on to point out that although power relations involve the domination of particular groups (white South Africans or men in general), this does not necessarily mean that "the dominators are in control of the situation, or that the dominated do not sometimes advance and extend the situation themselves" (1988:91). Numerous autobiographical accounts testify to this, some implicitly, some explicitly. When Emma Mashinini speaks of her trade union she notes that while membership is equally distributed amongst men and women, the executive has a majority of men: "But who's responsible for that? It's the women themselves. I don't know why. It's the women who will always elect a man" (1985:131).

While subjects are interpellated in terms which are culture and history specific, subjects experience a degree of freedom to contest or contribute to their own subject positions, to shape facets of their lives. The degree of freedom will, of course, differ between groups and within groups. In South Africa, in particular, where race determines one's life so utterly, in concert with gender, class and language group, individual lives might quite reasonably be described as scripted according to type. Autobiographical writing demonstrates the differential nature of the functioning of patriarchy across class lines, and the rural/ urban divide. The texts which are devoted only to women respondents, like Working Women, Vukani Makhosikazi, and Women of Phokeng, attempt to address the gender discrimination which black women are subjected to, in addition to racism. Sharon Welch makes an observation which is relevant to much contemporary South African politics, and this is evidenced in much autobiographical

writing, by both women and men:

I became aware that emphasis on universal human rights and the dignity of all persons obscured some people's sensitivity to the abrogation of those rights and that dignity on the basis of sex. I was faced with the paradox of seeing men who were fully committed to such universals as freedom and equality and yet were thoroughly sexist. (1985:213)

Many autobiographies record a fierce attempt by the autobiographer to refuse the roles which race, gender and class classifications offer: this is true of black freedom fighters like Caesarina Makhoere and Frank Chikane, of women like Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona, Helen Joseph, Lyndall Gordon, and white men like Breyten Breytenbach and Rian Malan, to name but a few. But many texts are testimonies to the powerfulness of this sort of straightjacketing classification, for they construct the autobiographical subject as symbol, as representative. Many of the worker autobiographies discussed later in this chapter construct prototypical subjects. But perhaps Dugmore Boetie's so-called autobiography which records the horrors of black existence is the most trenchant example, for while his story rings true according to type -- and it was clearly what the author believed his publisher wanted -- it is (we are told) a fabrication. Here the individual has been eclipsed by a generalised truth about urban black experience.

But we need to consider the truths of autobiography very carefully: the double mediation of autobiographical writing means that reading the autobiography as historical document requires constant vigilance that the complexities of this practice are not collapsed into a mimetic reading which wilfully overlooks the text's process of production -- the role of the imagination in the production of knowledge (de Bolla, 1986:52), and the structures of mediation which are its discursive raw materials. As Elbaz so nicely puts it:

History, science, or for that matter any meaningful statement, in no way duplicate reality; they construct

it. For language is functional to the ideological position of the speaking subject, and 'reality' is the creation of this same subject. One does not report, duplicate or verify the truth: one makes it. (1988:8-9)

We know that objectivity is an unattainable ideal; the denunciation of the historian's 'objectivity' is now commonplace, and because autobiography admits some erosion of even this mythical kind of historical objectivity by the narrating subject, it is doubly suspect (or doubly honest, depending on one's viewpoint). In disciplines as diverse as physics, anthropology, literary theory and criticism, and history, the fundamental imbrication of the observer in the examination of the object of scrutiny is acknowledged, as is the radically rhetorical nature of the historical text (White, 1980). Rather than collude with a sense that history is a series of "progressive approximations to the reality of things in themselves" (Smart, 1985:54), Foucault stresses the partiality of present knowledge so that even when one tries to read autobiography with its importance for history in mind, one avoids carefully the temptations to make pronouncements on history. Because totalizing narratives obscure lived complexities, I have avoided collapsing the diversity of textual responses into one grand narrative of apartheid;<sup>3</sup> in any case, the texts themselves refuse this sort of neatness, weaving within them a host of conservative and oppositional discourses in relation to racism, sexism, tribalism, religious practices and so on. Important as racism has been in this period, South Africans have not experienced only racism. They write about class divisions, about gendered lives, about familial relationships, about aspirations and disappointments. My readings are based on the Foucauldian argument that,

Nothing is fundamental.... That is why nothing irritates me as much as these inquiries -- which are by definition metaphysical -- on the foundations of power in a society, etc.... There are only reciprocal relations, and the perpetual gaps between intentions in relation to one another. (Foucault, 1984:247)

Having said this, however, autobiographical writing of the period 1948-1994 nevertheless speaks very powerfully (even through avoidance of commentary in some texts) of the effectiveness of apartheid in creating a chasm between black and white South Africans; as Lyndall Gordon observes in her autobiography, the physical separation of the races due to legislation like the Group Areas Act (whose effects are still enormously powerful, even though it was repealed in 1990) caused each group to turn upon itself, "cut off from other groups, each locked in its narrow cares" (1992:84). Seemingly, Louwtjie Barnard's, Zola Budd's and Ruth Gordon's only cross-racial contact is with black South African servants; Moloi, Qabula and Makhoba meet whites as employers or policemen. Even those who want to ignore racial divisions and its caste system find themselves caught within networks of distrust, practical difficulties, ignorance (Kuzwayo, Magona, Breytenbach, de Villiers and many others record experiences of this). But the texts also show, as has been discussed in Chapter 2, how power is relational, it is not a property (much as the politicians would like to believe that it is), and it is immanent in sexual, familial, economic, knowledge and other relationships. Analysis of South African autobiography in the last 46 years yields, in effect, "analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced" (Foucault, 1980:102); this, in spite of the fact that in South Africa in this period the force relationships are more obviously centralized and defined in terms of warfare, of State violence, than in the Western societies to which Foucault refers. An autobiographical text like Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart exemplifies the complexities of historical knowledge, counterpointing as it does Anglo-American logic with what is for him the unknowable of Africa.

Autobiographical writing reminds us that Foucault's point

that, "history does not operate as a force, but remains dispersed, split, random" (Bartowski, 1988:47) is valid, even for a country like South Africa whose history seems so crudely obvious. Autobiographical writing, as a form of what Foucault refers to as "effective history", affirms "knowledge as perspective", not seeking to erase, as traditional historians usually do, "the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy -- the unavoidable obstacles of their passion" (1984:90).

Autobiography, as a species of history, rarely pretends to find "its support outside of time" or "to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity" (Foucault, 1984:87); instead, all information, verifiable or otherwise, is contextualized within the genre's conventional insistence on the relativity of the text to the idiosyncratic of the writing subject. A survey of autobiographical production exposes the multiplicities and varieties of responses to historical change which refuse the simplistic summation of the master narrative of traditional history. It is in this sense that South African autobiographical writing in the last two decades presages the political shift in power away from white hegemony and towards a consolidating black centre; stealthily, black autobiographies (and their readers) have asserted their importance; and gradually whites' voices have come to explore uncertainty, a significant political dislocation. But the forms these tendencies take, the ways in which individual texts may reinforce or subvert these broad trends, are uneven, diverse, varying. Foucault again reminds us that,

[t]he world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events.... We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among



countless lost events, without a landmark or point of reference. (1984:89)

When we turn to autobiography as history, we confront the fragmentations of reality, the blindnesses and gaps which are not only structurally encoded in all narrative but in all perceptions of the real. We read each text with the knowledge that autobiographers probably construct narratives which conform to traditional, teleological models of history, and this awareness enables us to contextualize certainty, to probe the silences, to prize open the cracks.<sup>4</sup>

A poststructuralist reading of autobiography, therefore, analyses the historical implications of the silences and gaps in the text: for instance, when white autobiographers fail to address their political circumstances as whites in an apartheid state (and many still do), exploration of the significances of this must be undertaken -- perhaps it testifies to the effectiveness of the State in creating almost incredible ignorance on the part of the white electorate regarding political reality; perhaps it is wishful thinking -- a need to transcend the horrors of racism, transformed in text into an avoidance of the inescapability of racism in South Africa. In some cases, the emphasis on the public life, the career, can be seen to be a refuge from private feeling;<sup>5</sup> public commitment may be used to help solve or avoid personal problems (Ruth Gordon's autobiography seems to exemplify this) -- and it is not inconceivable that failure to address one's position as a white South African in an apartheid state could be part of one's personal problems.

Autobiography, although a kind of historical record, is, as we have seen, not simply history on a small scale; there are qualitative differences. As Finney observes,

[l]ike a work of history [autobiography] tries to be factually true; yet it differs from history in not offering generalized truths based on documentary

evidence.<sup>6</sup> Autobiographical truth is concerned with both fact and the meaning the autobiographer attaches to the facts. (21)

This brings us to another kind of truth, other than what is understood as factual truth. Autobiographical texts, if they are to succeed in persuading readers that they have earned a place in the genre, have to ring true. Verifiable fact is not, I contend, in the long run as important as the sense that this is a sincere attempt to bear witness to personal circumstance. It is this tone of authenticity from the speaking subject that is lacking, as I shall show later in this chapter, in some researcher-scripted texts. This truth of experience is more profoundly relevant to the identity and sense of self than are truths which can be verified. Unfortunately, the self cannot even be sure that what it recognises as true is so, even in its own terms; as St Augustine wrote: "Within me are those lamentable dark areas wherein my own capacities lie hidden from me. Hence when my mind questions itself... it is not easy for it to decide what should be believed" (cited by Jay, 1984:31). And Arthur Koestler observed: "In the realm of psychology no concrete, objective truth exists, only an almost infinite number of levels of truth" (cited by Finney, 238). Poststructuralist theory has, *pace* Nietzsche, claimed that, "Truth is simply the honorific title assumed by an argument which has got the upper hand -- and kept it -- in this war of competing persuasions" (Norris, 1982:61) and Foucault's elaboration of this position has resulted in widespread acceptance of the inter-connectedness of truth/knowledge/power. My own argument is that it is not possible to recognise Truth,<sup>7</sup> but it is possible to recognise what the discourses of truth are -- and how they function -- at a given moment and it is thus possible to identify what will pass for truth within a given discursive construct. Thus analysis interrogates the paradigms of truth employed in particular texts, seeking to explore conscious and unconscious strategies by which such truths are secured, for this is how one can begin to understand

the articulation between the social and the subjective. The idiosyncratic should not be subsumed by cultural analysis, but then neither should its culturally constituted aspects be overlooked in favour of an emphasis on the uniquely individual.

One aspect of the relationship between autobiographical writing and history concerns the broader historical significance which can be attached to changes in autobiography. Publication trends in autobiographical writing can contribute to our conceptualisations of historical change: Who has access to print? Who does not publish? What sorts of lives are attracting the support of publishers in response to perceived interest among readers? How does autobiographical writing encode historical circumstance? And how does such writing respond to change (what Jay refers to as "a functional relationship between changing epistemologies and changing narrative strategies" (111-2))? What kinds of experiences qualify as personal historical record? How do structural constraints shape lives? Where is the 'real' in the text? How are the fragments of these autobiographical texts (more than one hundred and twenty) to be read?

South African autobiographical writing spans a wide range of interpretations of life, from those which recount the entire life, as Alan Paton does, to those which record very short periods, as do authors of prison memoirs, in accordance with diversifying needs which life-writing comes to fulfil. Of the texts discussed in this chapter, Luthuli's represents the former; worker autobiographies record only aspects of the life' (and very briefly).<sup>8</sup> A field dominated in the 1940s and 50s by white men's autobiographies recording life stories that tended to be career or achievement oriented, and markedly individualistic (those by Evenden, Rose-Innes, Malherbe, and Duffield are good examples), has gradually been

populated also by texts by women and people of colour which are often collections of life-narratives, brief adumbrations not of a whole life or even an entire career, but of what has happened to the enunciating subject, rather than what she or he has achieved. Again, the worker autobiographies which I examine later in this chapter are a good example of the latter. Furthermore, over the last four and half decades, South African autobiographical writing, comes increasingly to include texts which document the experience of being a South African of a particular racial category (Benson, Kitson, Malan, de Villiers, Mphahlele, Mathabane amongst others); these come to predominate over those which recount an individual's life, with racial classification being treated as some sort of rather irrelevant inessential.

Moreover, in this period social change has afforded opportunities for different sectors of the population to write autobiographies, and there have been marked shifts in the kinds of South Africans who are recording their lives in autobiographies, often in response to perceptions of publishers regarding market demands. Autobiography chronicles the emergence of the black middle class (The Diary of Maria Tholo and Richard Rive's Writing Black are examples) as well as the growing sense of the importance of the lives of impoverished rural and urban workers; it thus declares the worth of individual testimony, perhaps in contestation with authoritarian academic studies which erased the individuals by using their evidence to construct other, statistically based narratives, addressed to the academic community. (As has been noted, autobiographical writing in the last twenty or so years manifests the struggle for democratization. Furthermore, across the board, there has been a shift to overtly politicized autobiographies: Luthuli, Makhoere, Joseph, First, Benson, Wilson, Woods, Kitson, Bernstein and many others define the self principally in terms of political allegiance.) Perhaps

this is to be expected considering the increasingly brutal repression of blacks and anti-government individuals in the 60s and 70s. These changes are in response to political repression and also in response to shifts in the interests of readers who have sought in the last two decades to read about the experiences of a more diverse range of South Africans. Autobiographical writing traces, in addition, the growing conscientization of South African women and their refusal of the role of the good, silent woman. And while early autobiographers (from all racial groupings) writing in English in the apartheid period addressed themselves more or less consistently to a white readership, this becomes less usual in the last two or so decades, thus indicating growing democratization (in collective consciousness, if not in political reality), and also the spread of literacy amongst black South Africans.

As Fanon and many others have observed, initially the pretext for colonization is that the coloniser brings enlightenment, education, technology, religion, law, human rights; colonization is, "A fight against barbarism, poverty, backwardness" (Fanon, 1967b:161). But colonization is increasingly seen to manifest itself as brutal exploitation, as the withholding of education, economic rights, technological skills and so on. Many black autobiographies -- and even some white-authored ones -- are an attempt to come to terms with, or an exposé of, this shocking realisation. Luthuli writes of his experiences in the 20s and 30s at Adams College:

We pray very hard about our children, most of all because of the South Africa in which they are growing up. In the days when Professor Matthews and I were young teachers at Adams the world seemed to be opening out for Africans. It seemed mainly a matter of proving our ability and worth as citizens, and that did not seem impossible. We were, of course, aware of the existence of colour prejudice, but we did not dream that it would endure and intensify as it has. There seemed point, in my youth, in striving after the values of the Western World. It seemed to be a striving after wholeness and fulfilment. Since then

we have watched the steady degeneration of South African affairs, and we have seen this degeneration quickened in the last ten years. (42)

From autobiographies like Plaatje's one can infer that in the early decades of this century "striving after the values of the Western World" was seen as a reasonable response to colonialism, but not from Abrahams (1954) and Mphahlele (1959) onwards. In the later texts the brutality of white racism is explored as a virulent and contaminating illness.

Autobiographical writing of the last two decades in particular also displays more diverse responses to the problems of life-writing. Sub-categories of the genre emerge in response to changing social circumstances. Records of prison experiences, for instance, often document only the period of incarceration (Ruth First's 117 Days is one such text); no longer insisting on the author/subject as the same person, quasi-autobiographies -- sometimes co-authored as in Luthuli's and Makeba's cases (amongst others), sometimes motivated and compiled by independent researchers -- burgeoned, especially in the 80s. A Talent for Tomorrow (Suzanne Gordon), Working Women (Lawson and Perold), We Came to Town (Kerfoot), and The Sun Shall Also Rise for the Workers (Makhoba), as well as the other worker autobiographies analyzed in this chapter, are examples of such researcher-motivated texts.

These diversified approaches to the problems of life-writing serve as historical records in the sense that discourses function constitutively in the social formation and new discursive practices in texts thus manifest shifts in the social formation and in the social relations which are enmeshed in material and discursive circumstance. Autobiography, moreover, serves as historical record since it marks *what* a segment of a culture deems important for inclusion at a particular cultural and historical moment, *how* material should be treated, and *who* should be sharing

experiences with readers.<sup>9</sup> As Hayden White has noted, narrative selects for inclusion; indeed, it is the "need or impulse to rank events with respect to their significance for the culture or group that is writing its own history that makes a narrative representation of real events possible" (1980:14). And this is a point central to my argument in this chapter: life-writing tells us about (culture and language-mediated) experience and enacts social and discursive changes by encoding features of the social formation's value systems as they impinge upon the writing subject. In an important sense what is written about reveals the problematic nature of the texts' concerns for the broader social formation. Foucault argues that a large body of literature on a specific topic is indicative of the problematic nature of that issue, problems which are teased over in writings (1984:344-5). The following seem to me to be paramount among the unresolved problems emerging in South African autobiographical writing: How to be an individual when group identity is overwhelmingly prescriptive (note the root of script in prescriptive); how to survive when survival is a luxury? How to respect oneself -- and command respect from your readers -- when as a black South African the entire social machinery denies your worth, or, as a white South African, your position as part of the dehumanising racist edifice causes you to mistrust everything you do, for nothing is innocent? Or, to put this another way: how to construct an identity which escapes the racism of the social formation? How to tell one's life so that the experience becomes a meaningful contribution to the understanding of the brutally simple narrative that is the received South African history?<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, South African autobiographical writing in English in the last 46 years generally (but of course unevenly) becomes markedly less Eurocentric in form, subject-matter, and audience. For many, the rejection of Europeanized autobiographical forms was simply a response

to the realization that the kinds of lives to be documented would not be accommodated by the rational narrative forms which characterize mainstream autobiographical writing in the major English-speaking countries. Autobiographies written in English by black South Africans initially tended to conform to the Western norm of telling the life-story of the particular individual (and it was usually a rather special kind of individual -- Mphahlele, Abrahams, Jabavu, Matshikiza), while more recent autobiographies by black South Africans often came to be attempts to rewrite history, to set the record straight. And while much of the autobiographical writing in the early decades of Nationalist rule displays ordered and coherent narrative attempts to explore and explain (like Luthuli's and Rose-Innes's), in the later decades autobiographical writing increasingly (but with important exceptions) evidences attempts to grapple with what Spengemann calls the "anarchic effects of individual existence and the totalitarian effects of social organisation" (1980:113). This is true not only of black-authored autobiographies, like Mattera's, Modisane's and others, but also of white-authored autobiographies like Malan's and de Villiers'. This again demonstrates in large scale what Luthuli found personally: in large numbers, South Africans (black and even white) turned away from the metropole, away from white standards, rejecting the brutalities which accompanied the cultural package.

If autobiography may be described as an assertion of the importance and meaningfulness of the individual's life -- and I think that this is an apt description, those texts dealing more broadly with the historical horrors of apartheid or with aggregated 'individuals' notwithstanding (Thula Baba and Bozzoli's Women of Phokeng) -- then the changing demographics of South African autobiographical production to a more (but incompletely) democratic textual production shows how for many dispossessed and disempowered



South Africans, women and men, claiming the right to tell their own stories is a negation of apartheid's negation of life.

New distributions of power are being textually enacted as perceptions of reality change. Metaphorically, white South Africans were presented by the apartheid state with a mirrored world in which their own reflections glittered back at them, with black South Africans receding into the unfocused and undifferentiated background. (This was literally, spatially, accomplished by means of the establishment of 'homelands' and 'locations' for blacks -- which white South Africans could not freely enter -- and backyard *khayas* where black workers in white suburbs, because of prohibitions regarding prolonged stays by family members or friends, were seen only in terms of their positions as servants to whites). The autobiographies by white South Africans, especially those written in the earlier decades of the period under discussion, as a rule reinscribed this mirrored myth, as they wrote about their careers and lives with scarcely a mention of the barely seen horrors of institutionalized racism.<sup>11</sup> But as social realities presented themselves as unavoidable -- black South Africans and the world came increasingly to disallow the fantastic explanations of apartheid -- autobiographers began to address (again, unevenly, for white-authored autobiographies are still appearing whose authors seem not to have lived in the most virulently racist country) their racially assigned positions. Beginning in the mid-sixties with texts authored by politically active whites like Ruth First and Albie Sachs, the acknowledgement of racially assigned privilege becomes central in autobiographies by non-politically active people like an Afrikaner recording his travels in Africa (Ted Botha), a teacher (de Villiers), and journalists like Natie Ferreira, Rian Malan and Tony Heard.

While many South African autobiographies bear only some of the marks of testimony, one striking feature of these texts which they share with other testimony is the fact that they are clearly frequently to be read as responses to the crises of truth that South Africa has been experiencing -- with growing urgency -- in the last 46 years. As Felman observes,

testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question. The legal model of the trial dramatizes, in this way, a contained, and culturally channelled, institutionalized, crisis of truth. (1992:6)

Autobiographical texts might be attempts to deal with a personal "crisis of truth", when the author wishes to prove that she or he is a particular kind of person (and not otherwise). An example of such a text is Godfrey Moloi's My Life: Volume One which I discuss in the following chapter. Yet although I say this is a response to a personal need for self-definition, it is also, and perhaps more obviously, a way of dealing with institutionalized racism, for this text can be read as a rebuttal of apartheid's dream of confining all black South Africans to rural 'homelands' and keeping them uneducated, conservative, simple. My Life sets out to establish that Moloi is not "just a farm boy" (1987:5). Refusing apartheid's positioning of blacks as ineducable, tribal, Moloi positions his autobiographical subject as smart, streetwise, sophisticated, individualistic. Racist doctrine, presented as truths, is neatly encapsulated in what was a commonly mouthed dictum: *you can take the black out of the bush, but you can't take the bush out of the black*; this is repudiated in Moloi's text which shows that he and 'the bush' are quite incompatible! Thus autobiographical writing can (and more frequently does) aim at challenging socially accepted notions of truth by presenting contestatory versions of reality. A very large

proportion of South African autobiographical texts belong in this category, from the worker autobiographies discussed later in this chapter, which explore the deprivations of the lives of ill-educated workers thus contradicting assertions that black South Africans are satisfied with their lot, to texts like Breytenbach's True Confessions and all other prison writing, which expose the conditions in South African prisons, to Malan's My Traitor's Heart, which painfully picks over the unreality of South African 'reality'.

Citing Camus, Felman asserts that contemporary writing -- and she is including fictional writing -- "is testimonial to the extent that it exists in a state of *referential debt*, of 'constant obligation' to the 'woes of history,' and to its dead" (1992:115). The acknowledgement by South Africans and the international community of the need for unofficial South African testimony, of documentation of ordinary people's lives, has resulted in a growing sense of autobiography's importance, relative to fictional forms. Luthuli's Let my People Go and the worker autobiographies which I examine in this chapter may be read as attempts to grasp the significance of history -- and to rewrite that history -- for all South Africans, including ordinary, ill-educated, impoverished blacks. Again citing Camus, Felman observes that,

"History rushes onward while thought reflects. But this inevitable backwardness becomes more pronounced the faster History speeds up. The world has changed more in the past fifty years than it did in the previous two hundred years." The "literature of testimony" is thus not an art of leisure but an art of urgency: it exists *in time* not just as a memorial but as an artistic promissory note, as an attempt to bring the "backwardness" of consciousness to the level of precipitant events.... The literature of testimony, therefore, is not simply a statement (any statement can but lag behind the events), but a performative *engagement* between consciousness and history, a struggling act of readjustment between the integrative scope of words and the unintegrated impact of events. The ceaseless engagement between consciousness and history *obliges* artists, in Camus' conception, to

transform words into events and to make an act of every publication.... (1992:114)

Each of these texts indeed functions as a "promissory note" in that it serves not merely to record past experience but to affirm the relentless progress of South African history toward justice and democracy, to contribute to that inevitable movement. And subsequent events have borne out the promise: just a few months ago South Africa held her first democratic election. In this the authors/researchers, no less than the artists to whom Camus refers, "transform words into events and... make an act of every publication". The growing importance of South African autobiography in the period 1948-1994 is indicative of the desire of South Africans and people abroad to re-view South African reality, to revise the official story of the white Afrikaner Nationalist government in accordance with the testimony of the oppressed peoples. And indeed, most of the world found the State guilty of perfidy and isolated it accordingly.

Life-writing then functions not only as historical document; it is also an historically significant act. Autobiographical writing acts upon social and discursive practices in that texts may influence other texts, readers, and thus the social formation. Autobiographical testimony contributes importantly to general knowledges about South Africa. Although the influences of texts are impossible to measure with any precision, analysts need to take account of "the necessary and ineluctable dialectic between text as structure and text as act" (Easthope, 1988:70). The fact that many of these autobiographical texts were banned in South Africa (those by Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Winnie Mandela, Indres Naidoo and Caesarina Makoere spring immediately to mind) indicates the State's fear of the power of these texts to persuade. Thandi Moses and Boitumelo Mofokeng cite Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography as having been greatly inspiring to black women writers, one

of whom was Emma Mashinini who then went on to write her own autobiography (Daymond and Lenta, 1990:74-5). It is for this reason that autobiographers have a significant responsibility when they undertake to publish a text.

Autobiography, as I read it, can be described as a confrontation between psychoanalysis, ethnology and semiotics, and the analysis of autobiography may (as Foucault argues about psychoanalysis and ethnology) open up "the double articulation of the history of individuals upon the unconscious of culture, and the historicity of those cultures upon the unconscious of individuals" (1970:379). We know that "neither culture nor the unconscious can be approached apart from a theory of signification, since it is by means of historically circumscribed signifying operations that both are organized" (Silverman, 1983:129). In this study, the focus is on this relationship between the signifying systems employed in autobiographical writing and their import for our understanding of the intersection of cultural transformation and individual change, both conscious and unconscious.

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The first text to be examined in this chapter, by Nobel Peace Prize winner, Albert Luthuli (with amanuenses), dates back to 1962 and is a fine example of the tendency to write history (from a specific individual's perspective) when writing autobiography. Fanon remarks on the importance of this task for black intellectuals:

Colonialism -- empties the native's brain of all form and content and also distorts, disfigures and destroys the people's past in order to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. Thus the native intellectual must give the past of the whole continent of Africa its value for the colonist has degraded the whole continent. (1973:169-70)

All autobiographers (and researchers who use autobiographical accounts to construct quasi-autobiographical narratives) are probably motivated by a

need to give their own personal versions of what their (or other people's) lives were like. As we have noted, "Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened" (White, 1980:23). For some, this is a personal quest: Zola Budd and Louwtjie Barnard, for instance, both portray themselves as victims of selfish men in order to counter possible allegations that they were responsible for their own misfortunes; and I have already referred to Godfrey Moloi. For others, like Luthuli, the motive is less personal: he sets out to prove that State punitiveness against his organization and himself was unwarranted, but more importantly Luthuli, like many black autobiographers (Lekota, Mashabela, Magona, Kgosana, Mokgatle amongst others), uses autobiography as a forum to rewrite and revise South African history.

The focus is on the events that have occurred, broadly historical events as well as those that have been personally experienced by the autobiographer, and sometimes this means that the authorial persona is obscured or non-individualised. The subject of Let My People Go is remarkably self-effacing. This is in part because the protagonist's narrative traces his growing political activism, rather than a more general, and perhaps more private and personal, maturation process. The focus on the political is due perhaps to a commitment on the part of the writing subject to political struggle, as well as to the fact that those committed to political struggle may actually have to live out their lives by subordinating personal concerns to the political struggle. As Spacks remarks, "Of course commitment to a cause necessarily implies subordination of self" (1980:116). For South African activists especially, knowing that political activism may result in very long term incarceration or even death (with or without the rubber-stamp of the Courts)

obviously meant an enormous degree of personal sacrifice. Luthuli, for instance, says of his wife's unfailing support and unselfishness:

I cannot express how grateful I am, especially as I quite literally neglect my family and feel extremely guilty about it. Ungrudgingly she has taken on, since I entered public life, the whole burden of the home and of working our smallholding. (41)<sup>12</sup>

Such commitment to a cause, and corresponding effacement of the self, informs the very title of Luthuli's autobiography: Let My People Go. The emphasis is on the group ("My People") of which the autobiographer is a member; moreover, the impersonal Biblical injunction addressed to an aggressor is fitting in the light of the narrator's unswerving Christian piety, which is, in effect, a philosophy of selflessness.

Political activism is clearly not only the substance of the narrative, but also its aim (about which more shall be said). But what is interesting in Luthuli's case is that the narrating self and protagonist seem paradoxically caught up in activism without there being active pursuit of such a life. Luthuli's Let My People Go is not only a remarkably *impersonal* autobiography, it is remarkable too for its use of passive constructions at significant moments in Luthuli's life and political career. Luthuli accepts his election as chief of Groutville (it was not an hereditary title) only after two years' pressure from the tribal elders (50). He becomes an active member of the A.N.C. when "precipitated into Congress casually, almost by accident" (89). At an annual Congress meeting which disintegrated into chaos, Luthuli

leapt on the platform and called for silence. To my surprise, I got it.... *I found myself* in the chair.... Champion became Natal President, and *I found myself* serving on his executive. It was a day of surprises.

To accept this position seemed to me the natural outcome of *an attitude which I had imbibed* at Adams: it was another way of trying to serve people. (My emphases, 90).

When Dr Dube dies, Luthuli becomes a member of the Native Representative Council seemingly without desire or effort to campaign on his part (92). Later, after initially refusing the Youth League's requests that he stand for the Natal Presidency of the A.N.C., Luthuli's acceptance is conditional upon his opponent's agreement to this (100). At the following National Conference of the A.N.C., Luthuli is asked by the President-General to take the chair (101). During the Defiance Campaign he was, he says, "having to be very lively" (108). And in the account of his election to the Presidency of the A.N.C. in 1952, again Luthuli's passivity dominates; the subject of the autobiography is indeed often construed as the *object* to whom things happen. It is worth quoting another illustrative passage at some length:

The Natal delegates... told me that they intended to nominate me to stand against Dr. Moroka. I agreed without much excitement, making one stipulation: "I do not intend to become involved in fights over position."

"You just leave it to us," they replied.

I did leave it to them....

In the voting, Dr. Moroka had some support from Free State delegates, but the upshot was that I now found myself at the head of the resistance movement, President-General of the A.N.C. I suppose that the deposition [from his position as chief] which Doctors Eiselen and Verwoerd conferred on me had something to do with the matter. If the people wanted me there, I was there. But I was grateful that I did not have behind me any struggle for power, nor any contention with other resisters. (117)

Not only can this passivity be accounted for because of the subject's subordination to a cause, one can also account for much of the lack of self-assertion in black-authored autobiographies by looking to profound disempowerment of Africans by the apartheid regime; Luthuli describes it thus: "[Natives] stand by and watch ourselves being used as the white man's football.... Our lot is to feel the impact of the boot" (79); we are "objects rather than subjects" (80). But this is not all there is to it. For Luthuli's passivity is conveyed in a tone of humility,



born of inner strength and certitude; as his amanuensis says, it is "the humility of a man who cannot be humiliated" (12). It is not the aggrieved passivity of the helpless victim. This is seen in the fact that Luthuli's passivity occurs most notably when he faces political exaltation. When it comes to the struggle against the State (and it must be remembered that this began before the Nationalist Party became the Government in 1948), Luthuli's commitment is steadfast. Personal hardship such as repeated bannings, imprisonment and consequent severe ill-health are met with stalwart indifference. But there is no evidence of passive indifference to injustice, regardless of the consequences to himself.

What Spacks finds amongst certain women autobiographers, applies, too, to Luthuli: "Instead of using the cause ultimately to enlarge the sense of self, these women seem to *diminish* self in their reports of their causes" (1980:116).<sup>13</sup> Spacks refers to a symptomatic lack of affect, a denial of all emotional response to the autobiographer's own public importance and accomplishment; this, too, is evident in Let My People Go.<sup>14</sup> It is worth looking at this lack of recorded response on the part of the autobiographical subject in some detail: Luthuli does not tell us how he feels about being made chief, about becoming an office-bearer in the A.N.C., or even of his response to his election as President-General of the A.N.C. This is what he says of the adulation he receives in Durban:

I found myself travelling towards the railway station over the heads of the crowd. In the enthusiasm of the moment, the traffic regulations and the prohibitions against outdoor meetings were forgotten. I managed to persuade people to put me down so that I could leave for Ladysmith. (188)

When he is chosen to visit India to attend the International Missionary Conference, he records no response. His banning orders elicit no comment (e.g. 191); bouts of serious illness provoke only the expression of

gratitude for correspondence and visits (141). This is indeed an autobiographical subject who is subordinated to a cause.

Subordination of self is evidenced also in the overall structure of the text which tends to narrate the history of the resistance movement, involving the narrator only marginally. For instance, his teaching career is submerged in the narrative of the progress of Bantu Education (a notorious system designed to educate disenfranchised South Africans for a lifetime of servitude); his political career is only a small part of the more central narrative of the history of increasingly brutal racism and the resistance movement. Luthuli's autobiography is remarkably reticent about important personal relationships:

Over the inner reality of our marriage and the depth of the attachment between my wife and me, I draw a veil. But I may say here that I count myself fortunate among men to have married so good a wife, and so devout a Christian. (41)

Of his children we learn virtually nothing. This is his cryptic description of his children: " We were married in 1927. Between 1929 and 1945 Nokukhanya bore me seven children, of whom the first and last two were boys" (42). Luthuli's insistence that he is no more and no less than a representative of those who fight in the struggle for liberation informs not only the structure of the autobiography (the subordination of the personal to the historical), but is indeed his reason for agreeing to the project:

The burden of my evidence [at the Treason Trial] was the burden of this book. It was a description of what the Congress movement has stood for, of the reasons for our actions, the method we have embraced, the goals which we mean to achieve, and the South Africa we envisage. (198)

Luthuli's aim is not simply to inform; his autobiography is itself part of his activism. He aims to enlighten ignorant "white would-be sympathisers" (47) and to persuade

the international community that the "official" South African version of political reality is a vicious lie, best combatted by applying sanctions against South Africa which might shock white South Africa out of its smug inability to listen to reason or moral argument. For instance, of his participation in the toothless Native Representative Council, Luthuli acknowledges that the Council had for years, and in vain, importuned the governing white authorities to reverse the process of increasing oppression:

I was disillusioned myself and could only reply, 'There are people beyond South Africa who sometimes hear what we say. All we can do is try to shout to the world. All I can do is help us shout louder....' White South Africa was impenetrably dead, and their newspapers did nothing to educate them. (92-3)

This autobiography is part of that attempt to address the world; Luthuli, as autobiographical subject, is not the principle object of narrative interest; South African politics and history are central. The autobiographical subject functions as the authenticating narrating subject.

That the self is not of primary concern to Luthuli can be seen also in the fact that the decision to write the autobiography is taken after much persuasion. The Preface begins:

This book is the outcome, after long hesitation on my part, of *the urging of a number of my friends*. It is true that in the last thirty years *I have been increasingly identified* with the movement of resistance against oppression by white supremacy in South Africa, until now *I find myself* at its head. Nevertheless, I regard my life as one among many, and my role in the resistance as one among many. If I have anything to say, it is not because of any particular distinction, but because *I am identified* with those who love South Africa....

Among the many *friends who have encouraged me* to write this book -- and *had they not implanted the idea* it would not have been written -- it fell to Charles and Sheila Hooper to *deliver the final blow* to my reluctance. (My emphases; 1982:15)

And a kind of quietism informs the act of composition, too.

Luthuli's amanuenses, the Hoopers, each made records of Luthuli's dictation, out of which "they compiled a first draft of the book.... To this draft I added my afterthoughts, occasional corrections, and this preface" (1982:15). But even more remarkable is the author's insistence that his importance lies merely in an extraneous status granted him by others; it is "not because of any particular distinction, but because I am identified with those who love South Africa". He goes even further, concluding the Preface thus:

If I have done injustice to any [men and women who fight valiantly in the cause of freedom and justice], I ask pardon, and I point out that this book is in part dedicated to them. But the last impression that I wish to create is that their role is minor, while mine is major. Indeed, the reverse is true. As I look back I accuse myself of having contributed too little.

May God's Will, holy and perfect, be done in South Africa, the dearly loved land whose children we all are. (16)

I doubt that there are many autobiographies by famous people, let alone Nobel Prize winners, which are this self-effacing.

Commitment to formal autobiography, a story of the self written with the intent of dissemination, implies a claim of significance -- a fact that troubled early [women] practitioners, who felt obliged to defend themselves against the charge of vanity by asserting the exemplary shape of their experience or the didactic intent of their prose. Women, for obvious social reasons, have traditionally had more difficulty than men about making public claims of their own importance. (Spacks, 1980:112)

Whether Luthuli "felt obliged" to defend himself "against the charge of vanity" is, on the evidence of the text, doubtful; however, the narrating subject certainly takes great pains to ensure that his readers know that he is not laying claim to extraordinary importance, and he does this in part by "asserting the exemplary shape" of his experience, as well as "the didactic intent" of his prose.

"Goodness is selflessness, these [women's]

autobiographies suggest; and vice versa -- a notion by its nature unlikely to make for effective autobiography, since autobiographies are about selves" (Spacks, 1980:114). Perhaps Luthuli's autobiography is instructive since it exemplifies, I believe, just the opposite. It is effective<sup>15</sup> precisely because it is not only about a self; it aims to effect change, and it aims to do this not for personal reasons but because this is the morally defensible way of responding to the process of dehumanization to which the vast majority of South Africans were subjected. It is effective, surely, because there can be few readers who are not convinced of this, and we are convinced of this in part because we are persuaded that the protagonist is selfless -- in keeping with his professed Christian faith -- and steadfast.

Hayden White has persuasively demonstrated that in historical narrative, "The events that are recorded in the narrative appear 'real' precisely insofar as they belong to an order of moral existence, just as they derive their meaning from their placement in this order" (1980:26). Let My People Go secures its own foregrounded moral order, or, more precisely, its counter order, in three principle ways: most notably, it counterpoints its own narrative of the material effects of racist legislation and increasingly naked displays of State power with the fictive (both in the senses of made-up and false) versions used in white justification; secondly (and less markedly) it employs most skilfully an understated irony which firmly places the narrator in a position of moral superiority; and, thirdly (the text foregrounds this least), the narrator's generosity<sup>16</sup> and earnest desire to serve his fellows, manifested in a great many minor incidents as well as in his life-long commitment to the liberation struggle, ensure that the reader's sympathies are with him (and thus against those he opposes).

Taking the first, let us examine precisely how this juxtaposition of Luthuli's account with the accounts of white supremacists functions. The narrator's account of events and consequences is contrasted with justifications for racist oppression which are shown to be based neither on reason nor confrontation with material reality. This is a consistent feature of Luthuli's narrative; it is the most explicit of the three strategies to secure a contrary moral order to that of the State. Luthuli shows repeatedly how the false validations of racists emanate from a discursive domain which is highly selective in the aspects of reality to which it chooses to attend: he frequently indicts the white press for its consistent failure to inform its readers about the realities of black existence or even of black objections to egregious State brutality. It is a discourse which cannot survive without profound deceit. Of the advice to black South Africans to accept whatever benefits the State might provide, Luthuli is adamant that these can be conceived of as benefits only by those who wish to be deceived: "I am open to progressive compromise, but I reject Dr. Aggrey's advice to accept anything given. I must be sure it is bread I am offered, and in apartheid I see not bread but a stone" (38). The argument that Africans cannot "catch up" with white civilisation in a few decades but need "a two-thousand-year apprenticeship" (43) is, Luthuli declares, "pure nonsense" which

does not arise from a survey of history, it arises from the urge to justify a course already chosen. The conclusion ("No rights for two thousand years") is there before the argument begins. An uncritical assumption ("Whites are civilised") is there too. No account is taken of the fact that there have been both bad and exemplary Christians throughout the whole of the two thousand years in question, and that various societies have produced civilised beings for much longer than that. The argument assumes that, whereas white[s] can take up where the last generation left off, Africans cannot.... Must we really invent the spinning-wheel before we can wear or make clothes? Must we really invent the internal combustion engine before we can drive cars? (43)

Luthuli patiently explains the most important "Apartheid-

Baaskap [sic] Acts" (48), what he calls -- pointing to the inherent contradiction in South African "justice" -- "criminal laws" (110), and their impact on black lives.

Of stock limitation, Luthuli shows how deeply flawed official white 'reasoning' is. Black farmers are, he points out, unlikely to be persuaded of the desirability of stock limitation,

when we are familiar with the spectacle of white farmers with thousands of head of cattle on spacious ranches. Cattle-culling is an unreal solution to the problem in South Africa. The problem is: 13 per cent of the land for 70 per cent of the people. The white version of the problem is: how can we continue to confine them to 13 per cent of the land, as we are determined to do? Cattle-culling is not the result of facing the real problem, it is the outcome of this white determination to make no concession whatever. (55-6)

Luthuli encounters a similar response to the problems of racism being 'solved' with yet more racist legislation: land theft by whites which results in the migrant labour system is dealt with by white authorities by enforcing Influx Control laws which prohibit the free movement of black South Africans to urban areas "to protect the urban natives" (109)!

Challenging patiently throughout the narrative aspects of the lies which together constitute the *raison d'être* of racism, Luthuli's narrator contrasts white delusion with reality. While whites see steady social disintegration of black communities "as just another sign of African incapacity" (56), the narrator explains that the destruction of black families is the result of white avarice. Promiscuity and neglect amongst blacks are thus directly attributable not to inherent black savagery but to the immoral actions of white overlords. Whites, comfortably horrified, seek to avoid recognition of their common nationhood with black South Africans; they define themselves as a superior group apart. They fail to

recognise that they are really neighbours, "not white masters" (103).

That the official white version is part of a whole false discourse of racism is implicitly contrasted with the narrator's own true discourse in which words are used to refer to experienced reality, not to a sham: Luthuli refers to "white parlance", one feature of which is the fact that in this discourse "all people who do not wholeheartedly accept indefinite white supremacy are 'agitators'" (83). The gross distortions which are encoded in "white parlance" prevent communication from taking place. During the Defiance Campaign "there was a fruitless interchange of letters between the Congresses and the authorities... [though our] letters were sometimes completely ignored" (104). However futile the attempt to communicate with the white rulers,

[o]ne thing which this correspondence did underline was that there is not really even a common language in which to discuss our agonising problems. The Nationalist rulers cannot speak to Africans except in the restricted vocabulary of white *Baasskap*. They cannot discuss. They know, and they then proceed to arrange and give orders. For our part, we cannot employ the phrases of supplication and subservience, we cannot take up the unreal posture of "good native boys" towards good, all-knowing and all-beneficent [sic] white rulers. Our whole protest and resistance is based on our claim to human dignity. (105)

The official motto of white South Africa is EUROPEANS ONLY (105), a motto upheld by the white press which blatantly works to keep white readers ignorant and misinformed. Examples abound. I cite only one. At the time of the bus boycott -- an enormously successful total boycott -- Luthuli notes that, "[t]here was the usual talk in the Press of intimidation -- as though a few picketers could intimidate a township of a hundred thousand people at bus queues where the police were active to break the boycott." He adds in a footnote: "There were, in fact, no queues. The police assembled at bus stops to protect non-existent 'loyal' natives. Loyal to what? Poverty?" (155). The



creation of 'Bantustans' is described in farcical terms: tightly controlled Government appointees manage the system paradoxically known as "Bantu Self-Government" (179) in "Homelands". When language is used deliberately to misrepresent, and when these efforts at fraudulent fabrication are so patently at odds with the experiences of millions of people subjected to the evils of its hypocrisy, satire and irony are often the only modes with which the narrator can address the distortions.

Repeatedly, Luthuli shows the irony of white oppression lying not in secure knowledge of superiority (as is claimed by supremacists) but in (unwarranted) fear. Of black violence, for instance, Luthuli notes that

[m]any whites, having persuaded themselves *against the evidence* that they share South Africa with a barbaric and hostile black horde, cannot leave us alone, they feel they must goad and prod us. It is as though they are perversely most afraid of us when we are friendly and disciplined and patient. The large, amiable dog in the yard is on a chain. You have been told that he is a snarling, dangerous cur. His amiability must therefore be a deception. You keep out of reach and jab repeatedly at him to rouse him to anger. If you succeed, that proves he is a wild and savage creature. Now and then you do succeed -- the best-tempered animal gets sick of ill-willed pestering. Sometimes you do enrage him. Sometimes the chain made for him snaps. Then there is a riot.

Whites see only the riot. Their reaction? -- Make a stronger chain.... What follows when the chain breaks is not riot and the restoration of order. It is riot and counter-riot.... There are occasions when the counter-riot takes place before the "riot". (My emphasis.) (114)

Luthuli adds in a footnote: "Since I wrote this, Sharpeville has provided macabre illustration of its truth" (114). Luthuli thus secures his status as the bearer of truth, as being in a position of unassailable moral superiority, thus endowing the narrative with prestige of historical document. For history-writing must seem to be 'true', above the petty politics of the events it recounts.

While Luthuli's narrative serves to enlighten, the whites

it describes desire only to be kept ignorant and in power: in response to an A.N.C. call for a Judicial Inquiry into the role of *agents provocateurs* in riots, the Minister of Justice replied that this "would achieve nothing except to provide a platform for agitators" and Luthuli comments, "This last observation now accompanies all refusals to make facts public" (115). This fantastic deception about agitators -- a fabrication which the Government was to rely on more and more right until 1990 -- is an incredible refusal to acknowledge the evidence of their lives and eyes and minds:

I sometimes wonder if life is not one long series of surprises for the Nationalists. Most of them perhaps really *do* think that Africans are so thick-skinned and limited in understanding that they would not notice things like malnutrition, low wages, leaks in the roof, police brutality, or flagrant discrimination, unless an agitator came to point it all out. It takes them gravely aback when we arrive at our conclusions and resolve to do something about them. Deep down, I wonder if they believe us -- left to ourselves -- capable of more than "*Ja, Baas!*" After the event, they seem sometimes to have the air of people who really had not thought it could happen. They *still* seem to believe, even now, that as soon as their unreal plans are established and applied, the whole African people is going to subside into centuries of subservience. (143)

But perhaps, the narrator muses, this delusion of agitators and intimidation is because the whites "have become so accustomed to the political coercion of Africans that they expect us to imitate their methods" (156). The trouble with whites is that

they credit us with their own ambitions. They mislead themselves by believing that we too have master-race aspirations. And since they see things in those terms, they terrify themselves into an attitude which knows only two alternatives -- dominate or perish. For us, we do not desire to dominate but to share as between brethren, basing our hierarchy on ability, not colour. That is our offer. And we shall not consent to perish. Let them never cherish that foolhardy illusion, for all their guns and Saracens. (187)

Again stressing his refusal to sit back and passively allow the State and other white politicians to play their games

with millions of Africans lives, in accordance with their flimsy deceptions, Luthuli argues:

I see no clever strategy in leaving them to attribute fictitious attitudes to us when in fact we have real attitudes of our own. Further, it has always been my aim to ensure that if the whites are ignorant of the realities, the fault does not lie with us. (162)

And ignorant they are: "the white fifth [of the population] has almost no idea how the other four-fifths live... it is more and more a Government-enforced ignorance" (189).

The second way in which the narrative secures its own moral order is through pervasive use of understated irony at instances when the absurdity of South African politics is gently, and with great restraint, satirised. Many of the passages quoted above are evidence of this method (I shall not labour the point with direct reference to them), but there are many more. In a so-called Christian State, for instance, the State and its supporters are themselves those who ensure that Christianity does not spread amongst black South Africans: "White paternalist Christianity -- as though the whites have invented the Christian faith -- estranges my people from Christ" (119).

But the worst impediment to the spread of Christianity and the maintenance of early standards nowadays is not even the fact that many white Christians are unwilling to practise what they profess. It is the recent glorification of the past, and the cry by the present Government (with legislation to match) that Africans should "develop along their own lines"... The effort currently being made to pour us back into the mould of nineteenth-century African tribalism is detrimental to our advancement and to Christianity. (20)<sup>17</sup>

The narrator tells us, too, that the Natives' Representative Council (an attempt to appease black political aspirations since black disenfranchisement had become state policy) was apparently born out of the belief "that if we could be induced to talk enough to no purpose, our political hopes and economic troubles would fall away" (85). When Dr. Eiselen claims that Luthuli's membership of the A.N.C. is incompatible with his position as chief, the

narrator comments: "I still saw no conflict between the Defiance Campaign and my place as chief, but that is perhaps because I failed to see my position in Groutville as a favour bestowed by the Native Affairs Department" (111).<sup>18</sup>

The narrator's ironic humour underscores his moral superiority. The narrator records the termination of his first banning order thus: "In the winter of 1954, when the new battery of ruthless laws was freshly in place on the Statute Book, my ban expired. It was not immediately reimposed. I suppose I was being given a chance to go straight. I immediately misbehaved" (135). When served with his second ban the hero's pretence to be the simpleton that his captors think all Africans are serves to underscore *their* stupidity (136), a stupidity which emerges over and over again. Luthuli observes, for instance, that, "A small number of Afrikaners *who have begun to think* are beginning to ask whether Dr. Verwoerd and Mr. de Wet Nel really do speak with the authentic voice of the African" (my emphasis; 190). He relates an incident demonstrating the almost incredible incompetence of Government representatives, again showing the enormous discrepancy between official claims that black South Africans were receiving Government assistance and the ridiculous nature of so-called assistance. The particular incident occurred when Luthuli, as chief, determined to co-operate with the Government agricultural advisor's suggestion that the entire community change to producing a cotton crop by offering a piece of his land to serve as initial model.

I ploughed. He [the demonstrator] planted. My wife tended the crop. The Government demonstrator visited the experiment casually. At the time of reaping he was nowhere to be found. We reaped it in ignorance of the correct methods to employ. He reported the operation to his superiors. That was that.... [The system of agricultural field advisors] fails, on the whole, and its failure is pointed to by whites as yet another piece of evidence that Africans are unteachable. (54-5)

But certainly the greatest irony of all (one to which white supremacists are blissfully oblivious, and one that is emphasised throughout the text) is the paradoxical strength which the liberation movement gains from increasing State repression. Some of the credit for the co-operation between liberation movements the narrator accedes to General Smuts "for it was one of his more iniquitous Acts which made us and the Indians of Natal realise that we have a good deal in common" (91). "It seems hard to recognise at the moment that the Nationalists more than anybody have given force and insistence to African demands" (97). When Luthuli is arrested along with many others on charges of High Treason, again the resistance movement is strengthened: "What distance, other occupations, lack of funds, the police interference had made difficult -- frequent meetings -- the Government now insisted on" (148); and the Treason Trial itself,

provided a new rallying point for the resistance. I must give credit where credit is due. I doubt whether we could have devised so effective a method of ensuring cohesion in resistance and of enlarging its embrace as did the Government when it set the trial in motion.... The colour-bar dropped away like the fictitious and beastly thing it is, within the borders of the unexpected world which the Trial had created. (152-3)

Given the horrors of oppression which whites inflicted upon millions of South Africans, the narrator's insistent acknowledgement of the positive effects of repression, combined with his very mildly satiric tone, strikes one as an exceedingly generous response, one which serves to highlight the narrator's superiority. And this brings us to the third method in which Luthuli's narrator reinforces his own moral superiority: viz., the text's characterisation of narrator/protagonist as humble yet profoundly principled, as acutely critical of hypocrisy and cant yet irrepressibly generous and earnest in his desire to serve his people for the greater good. It is perhaps this which compels respect in the reader for the moral code

which the text upholds, and thus ensures that we acquiesce to its version of reality as the correct one. His refusal to co-operate with white lies inevitably leads to a positive interpretation of State oppression. The principle by which he tries to live, that of giving "a charitable interpretation to every man's actions" (36) until proven wrong, informs the narrative. He tells us that is knowledge of Afrikaner history "gave me some insight into the dilemma of whites, particularly Afrikaners, which has possibly served in later years as a real protection against hatred and bitterness" (37). This is illustrated when he comments on the plans of Dr. Loram (Chief Inspector of Native Education in Natal) to impose a "practical" education on black South Africans:

His driving intention seems to have been, *in all good faith*, to equip African children for the lives white South Africa decreed they would have to live. Since they had been cast for the role of hewers of wood and drawers of water, their education must equip them to hew wood and draw water. (My emphasis, 33)

He goes on to say that he doubts whether this was a conscious strategy; Luthuli attributes Dr. Loram's support for a programme set to make Africans "contented in [their] mental shackles" to a lack of critical acumen. Luthuli concludes, with amazing benevolence that Loram "had, no doubt, the best of intentions" (33). The narrator even acknowledges, quite ungrudgingly, that the Nationalist Government have effected some positive changes: the amendment regarding the payment of fines to the Tribal Treasury (rather than the chief) is one such instance (52).

Of his imprisonment under the State of Emergency which followed Sharpeville, Luthuli writes:

Vigilant steps were taken to seal me off from other prisoners.... Even African warders were under instructions not to speak to me. Especially as my illness kept me confined to bed for most of the day, I led a solitary life. Nevertheless, I do not remember my cell as a place of boredom. It became, in fact, a place of sanctuary, a place where I could make up for the neglect of religious meditation occasioned

by the hurly-burly of public life. There was time, there was quietness, there was comparative solitude. I used it. Frail man that I am, I pray humbly that I may never forget the opportunity God gave me to rededicate myself, to consider the problems of our resistance to bondage, and above all to be quiet in His Presence. My whitewashed cell became my chapel, my place of retreat. (201)

This kind of quiet magnanimity is very rare, in the people one meets or in those who are depicted in autobiographical texts. The consistent humility, too, which is never strident or self-seeking, ensures that we are more than sympathetic to the speaker. Earlier he tells us, "My ambitions are, I think, modest -- they scarcely go beyond the desire to serve God and my neighbour, both at full stretch" (36). The autobiography testifies to this, its very self-effacement serving paradoxically as self-revelation. This gentle humility inspires as the most outstanding characteristic of the subject of Let My People Go. It is, in large measure, this modest unpretentiousness which secures the reader's trust in the autobiographer's account of history, thus enabling him to realize his aim to make the text serve as an intervention in that history.

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Autobiography is a protean genre, taking a variety of shapes in order to serve authors and targeted readers in specific ways, but always as an attempt to record experience. I have mentioned before my belief that the genre in South Africa has increased in importance -- relative to fictional works -- in the last twenty or thirty years, in response to political and social engineering which sought to deny individuals the right to determine their lives. In the struggle to survive, oppressed South Africans have written about themselves not in order to explore new ways of writing, so much as to declare the rawness of their experience, the inescapable reality of their lives. The Afrikaner Nationalist government sought to write black South Africans out of South African history,



to silence black voices entirely, to remove their bodies physically from the land that they designated South Africa by compacting millions of people onto impossibly small 'homelands' which could, presumably, write their own 'independent' histories. Much of South African autobiographical writing insists on the right of these dispossessed peoples to rewrite, to right wrongs, to personally wrest the Master's fictional narratives away, to expose the official version as the babble of madmen.

The rewriting of history is an important feature of much (but not all) South African autobiographical writing, with growing urgency in the latter part of the period under discussion. Elizabeth Nelani says of black South African youths:

They might already be spoiled because of the lack of education. But what little they have they'll use to fight -- fight back for the whole of history -- for the days after the war when the British couldn't pay the Afrikaners who fought in the war, and so they paid with Africa -- the children are not scared of death. (Quoted by Barrett et al, 1985:232)

The revision of history significantly encodes realities and also feeds back into perceptions of readers, South African and international, thus materially (but immeasurably) affecting interpretations, narratives, of South African reality. Autobiographical texts appropriate the right to interpret; interpretation is "the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules... in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will" (Foucault, 1984:86). Even those texts which ostensibly deal with the minutiae of experience of particular black South Africans (and thus do not seem to challenge apartheid history), in effect do contest History's collusion in the silencing of the South African masses by documenting the lived history of specific oppressed individuals, however humble; by exploring the "uniqueness of experience in the face of its theorization" (Felman and Laub, 1992:xx).



One of the glaring ironies of the whole apartheid project, noted by Luthuli, has been the strengthening of the resolve to resist in proportion to the increase in State repression; this is evident in a survey of autobiographical writing, which, in the last 15 or so years, documents increasing white resistance as well as black. White resistance often takes the form of researcher-scripted autobiographies like those of Frances Baard and Winnie Mandela, and of Elsa Joubert's Poppie.<sup>19</sup> These texts provide a platform for the victims of apartheid. Fanon's observation (quoted at the end of Chapter 3) that decolonization transforms the victims of colonial oppression into key players in history is particularly apposite; and South African autobiographical writing in the latter part of the period under discussion demonstrates the importance of those whose inessentiality was strategized in political, geographical and human terms. While early black autobiographies tend to be written by educated individuals whose texts had to compete with far more numerous white-authored texts, the writing of the last fifteen years marginalizes whites, especially those who either supported apartheid or were politically neutral, and asserts the centrality of even the most humble of the poor and illiterate. The impulse to affirm the importance of the life experiences of the underdog has resulted in the emergence, around the 1980s, of a sub-species of autobiography<sup>20</sup> which I believe is uniquely South African, comprising the brief life stories of victims of apartheid who are semi-literate or illiterate blue collar workers and subsistence farmers. Many of these texts are hardly recognizable as autobiographies -- some are more readily classifiable as biography than autobiography, and some seem closer to fiction; I have nevertheless studied them as a species of autobiography because each relies on the reader having some sense of the narrative being based on the personal testimony of living individuals. These texts are all researcher-motivated, that is, it is as a result of the

suggestions of a researcher (I use this term loosely to embrace a range of individuals in different disciplines) that the autobiographical subject tells about her or his life experiences, often recorded in a series of interviews. Moreover, these worker autobiographies are usually written and compiled not by the autobiographical subjects, but by researchers cum editors. (The only exception, an apparently unaided composition, would seem to be Qabula's A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief).

These texts raise a host of questions: What needs with regard to readers' knowledge of the life experiences of South Africans do these texts fulfil? The appearance of this kind of writing in the 1980s and its virtual disappearance at the end of this decade invites reflection on its role in the South African social formation. How do these texts establish themselves as 'true'? Since these texts are usually markedly different in form from conventional autobiographies, I am concerned to explore the textual strategies by which they establish themselves as authentic life stories, and seek to probe what is at stake in their doing so. But perhaps what interests me most is the politics of this form of life-writing: who tells about life experiences, the autobiographical subject (through the researcher), or the researcher (through the autobiographical subject)? Who is it that has the power to name the real in these quasi-autobiographical texts? Does the obvious power of the researcher detract from the project of empowerment of the voiceless and illiterate? To what extent do these texts serve to fragment the grand narratives of history, or, at the other end of the spectrum -- in their frequent aggregation and radical abbreviation of the lives of individuals -- do they rather conserve master interpretations by reinforcing stereotypes? In this analysis I have found that although these texts differ, and each has to be considered on its own merits, in general they challenge the obscurity in which the lives of poor,

uneducated people are lived, and thus claim importance for the individuals who speak and whose voices are representative of millions of others whose lives are lived in similar obscurity.

The aspects of reality which seem to emerge as problems in these texts stem, it would appear, from the chasm between black illiterate workers and white South Africans, as well as from the perceived absence of recognition by black workers of the importance of members of their own ranks. Perhaps it is also the contradiction between institutionalized deprivation and the growing strength of liberation movements which insist on the power of the people which necessitates attempts to reconsider aspects of life. Some of these texts, moreover, address the needs of adult black literacy students, for whom Eurocentric or childish textbooks are unsuited. "This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problematization and the specific work of thought" (Foucault, 1984:389).

The texts that I have studied are not uniform; they represent a variety of responses to questions regarding lived experiences of the oppressed. Worker autobiographies range from those texts which deal each with an individual life story to those which blur the boundaries of individuals' experiences. The Story of Mboma by Mboma Dladla, as told to Kathy Bond (1979), The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers by Mandlenkosi Makhoba (helped by an anonymous friend; 1984:1), My Life Struggle by Petrus Tom (1985), A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief by Alfred Temba Qabula (1989) each deal with single autobiographical subjects.<sup>21</sup> Some worker autobiographies take the form of anthologies of autobiographical "sketches" of many subjects, as in Working Women: A Portrait of South Africa's

Black Women Workers by Lesley Lawson (1985), We Came to Town, edited by Caroline Kerfoot (1985), A Talent for Tomorrow: Life Stories of South African Servants by Suzanne Gordon (1985), Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women Speak edited by Ingrid Obery (1985), Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza by Hanlie Griesel (1987), and Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa by Tim Keegan (1988).<sup>22</sup> Also included in this group are texts which are autobiographical only in the very loosest sense: they are based on the testimonies of individuals but the researcher/editor creates out of a number of life-stories one aggregated narrative. Thula Baba (no author named; 1987) and The Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983 by Belinda Bozzoli (1991), although very different in tone, form and intention, both create of the life stories of a number of women a single narrative.

The emergence of these worker autobiographies in a period of profound social turmoil in South Africa is important. It will be remembered that 1976 saw political tumult on an unprecedented scale; no longer relying on leaders (who were mostly in exile or imprisoned), ordinary people risked their lives to defy their white overlords. Riots did not end there, but what did -- it seems to me -- begin there was a paradoxical reaction by the State of crushing displays of increased State power (there were successive States of Emergency in which curfews were instituted and thousands of South Africans imprisoned without trial), and a contrary admission in the 1980s that apartheid had failed, and that white supremacy could not be maintained. With this public confession by the then Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, came a relaxation of so-called petty apartheid, and the legalisation of black trade unions. This latter event is especially pertinent to the study of South African autobiographical writing since fledgling black trade unions (FOSATU and NUMSA) were instrumental in publishing life-

stories of workers. Allied organisations which aimed to empower blacks, like the Domestic Workers and Employers Project (DWEPE), USWE and Sached, were also involved in the production of some of these texts. With the exception of only three of twelve texts -- viz. Qabula's (NUMSA), Obery's (Catholic Institute for International Relations) and Keegan's (David Philip) -- all of these worker autobiographies were published or co-published by Ravan Press, a Johannesburg publishing company which obviously set out to democratize its targeted audience base, and to contribute to the conscientization of its readership. The texts without exception aim to validate the lives of the autobiographical subjects. It seems to me that this objective points to an increasingly urgent desire, on the part of many white academics, to register -- in their own way -- their determination to subvert State power.

Let us consider the types of subjects whose lives are narrated: there are subsistence farmers (Sibambene, Facing the Storm, Vukani Makhosikazi) and a child in an impoverished rural "reserve" (The Story of Mboma), migrant workers (We Came to Town, Vukani, Women of Phokeng), domestic workers (two texts concern themselves exclusively with domestic workers, viz. Thula Baba and A Talent for Tomorrow, two with women domestic workers as well as with black women employed in other sectors of the economy, viz. Working Women and Vukani), factory workers, nurses, teachers (Working Women, Vukani), a forklift driver (Cruel Beyond Belief), a foundry worker (The Sun Shall Rise) and a trade unionist (My Life Struggle). The focus is on the ill-educated, the exploited. The publication of the life stories of such humble people asserts their right to readers' attention, along with the famous and infamous who, prior to the appearance of these texts, had cornered the market of autobiographical writing. The subjects are not achievers in the usual senses, yet these texts claim for them a remarkableness, and affirm their achievements to be

worthy of public attention in their difference. In so doing these worker autobiographies attest to the importance of all the millions of like South Africans of whom these autobiographical subjects are representative.

Importantly, these texts are often addressed to workers (The Sun Shall Rise and My life Struggle are published -- the publishers, Ravan Press, declare -- in order "to make available stories by workers, for workers, to give the workers' point of view", n.p.); they are addressed to those who are themselves semi-literate and perhaps in literacy classes, thus subverting for these targeted readers, too, the policy of subjugation and debasement by presenting them with models of people who are important enough to read and write about, people like the readers themselves. We Came to Town, for example, opens with a note to the literacy teacher: "The aim of this book is to provide adult beginner readers of English with simple, authentic material which deals with everyday adult concerns and experience" (n.p.). The Story of Mboma has the following comment on its back cover:

The *Msinga Series* is drawn from the autobiographies of children at the Emdukatshani School, and illustrated by the children themselves. The books are 'supplementary readers' with a difference: literacy is seen as part of the struggle against one's environment, for a better life.

These texts resist apartheid in many ways: they aim to spread literacy (and thus enable black South Africans to rise above their usual status of unskilled labourers), they endorse the lives of even the most humble and poor, and they often target a previously neglected readership.

A black working class readership is reminded of both their oppression and their dignity in many of these texts.

The paradox that an oppressed class must be taught to recognize its own interests is usually explained in Marxism through such notions as ideological hegemony, but for Jameson it is equally due to the fact that denial or repression is, even for the oppressed, a

means of survival. (Dowling, 1984:118)

Black South Africans might internalize negative attitudes to other blacks, perhaps forgetting the whites' role in the disintegration of black communities, and thus of moral standards. One of the women interviewed by Bozzoli remarked: "Jesus, do you think blacks can stay in one place without quarrels?" (1991:150). Collusion in their own oppression is especially true of many black women, undeniably the most victimized group in South Africa. Lydia Kompe describes her difficulties as a woman amongst men in her trade union: "It was a real problem at the beginning but I learned to live with it. I felt inferior all the time, maybe because we African women are taught to think that we're inferior to men" (1985:104). Louise Yekwa, a teacher, is apparently unaware of her silent acquiescence to her husband's exploitation of her:

When I get home from school I do some ironing, sweep and dust the house. And then I start cooking.

At home I don't have anyone to help me. I have to do everything because my kids are still young. When I'm not at home my husband helps. When I'm at home -- nothing.... But he'll never cook when I'm around. The thing is, he's studying and he wants time to read.

I'm studying for matric because I want to get promoted.... I study after supper.... Sometimes I sleep early. I go to sleep at eight o'clock and wake up at about twelve and study until morning. It's easier to work when everybody's sleeping. (1985:121)

Working Women, the text in which the above extract appears is explicitly feminist in intent, and thus it contextualizes experiences such as Louise Yekwa's within an overall survey -- and contestation -- of black South African women's oppression. While the autobiographical subjects might not position themselves as feminist, the text frames each autobiographical extract so that the oppressed class is taught to recognize its own oppression in each of the life stories.

But what is perhaps more radical in texts which address a black working class readership is that those whites who

read these texts are positioned -- in what I'm sure is a novel experience for most -- as Other. Instead of being the normative implied reader they are more or less obliged to adopt the position of the impoverished and ill-educated black worker. Texts like Vukani Makhosikazi, Thula Baba, We Came to Town, Working Women, The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers, My Life Struggle, are, I believe, very successful in positioning the white reader such as myself, "in the shoes of blacks", thereby effectively fulfilling what J.C.Kotze explains is of vital importance for the reconciliation of South Africa's segregated race groups:

People can only interact meaningfully with one another if they understand one another, if they share meaning. And people will be able to share meaning if they share experience. Though whites cannot share the experiences of blacks in a real way, they can gain insight into the everyday experiences of blacks. (1993:v)

He goes on to say:

A profound knowledge of one another's conditions of living (blacks are far more knowledgeable about conditions amongst whites than vice versa) and of differing perceptions, may start to bridge the social gap between black and white in South Africa. (1993:xii)

Because of their positions as members of the hegemonic culture, whites are indeed generally ignorant about the lives of black South Africans; and the books they read almost invariably serve to reinforce their sense of their own infallible grasp of reality since they address whites in and on their own terms. Worker autobiographies which refuse to co-operate with this norm thus represent a very important break with hegemonic practice.

Of course, not all worker autobiographies imply a black worker readership: A Talent for Tomorrow, Facing the Storm and Women of Phokeng are aimed at educated English speakers. The latter two texts are part of an academic project, and thus address other academics. But even these texts function to assert the significance of those who have



been "caught under the wheels of history" (Lionnet, 1989:24). And these texts, more obviously than those aimed at a worker readership, contribute significantly to the reshaping of attitudes in their identification of new subjects worthy of study, to the extension of boundaries of what is worth knowing, producing new truths for academics and the broader social formation. This is a project of empowerment. As Foucault argued, knowledge and power are always indivisible, thus the reinterpretation of these autobiographical subjects as subjects worthy of study -- not simply as nameless parts of grand abstractions in sweeping statistical studies of the effects of apartheid on black South Africans -- imbues them with an importance, and hence a power, which they hitherto did not have or were not accorded.

These worker autobiographies seem to me to meet several needs for South African readers, writers and publishers: they address the needs of white people of influence (academics and publishers) to turn the spotlight of learning onto those who have been profoundly marginalised; thus these texts represent attempts to undermine the apartheid state's own monolithic narrative distortions of history. These texts furthermore address the need of apartheid's victims to explain themselves and to assert the validity of those like themselves: "I tell this story," Makhoba tells his readers, "to remind you of your life. I tell you this story so you will remember your struggle and the story of the struggle we fight. AMANDLA!" (1) In this these texts meet a growing desire to democratize South Africa so that the voices of all may be heard.

As Shoshana Felman argues with regard to the role of interviewers of survivors of the Holocaust, these investigators enable victims "to believe that it is possible, indeed, against all odds and against their past experience, to tell the story and *be heard*, to in fact

address the significance of their biography" (1992:41). In a similar way, Suzanne Gordon found that,

The interviewee reviewed his or her life: looked back upon the striving, the decisions taken; puzzled over the complexities, dwelt on regrets or the occasional triumphs; sometimes chuckled over escapades. Memories could be resistant, drawn reluctantly and painfully into consciousness; occasionally a woman would be overwhelmed with sorrow. Bitterness was surprisingly infrequent and there seemed to be an almost heroic acceptance of the forces behind the march of events. Then, as the protagonist listened to his or her voice being played back, or the story being read aloud, it seemed that there dawned a recognition of the almost epic quality of the struggle, of the hardships confronted if not always overcome. (1985:xvi)

This would seem to be an instance of what Felman argues was a fundamental feature of testimony for those who had experience of the Holocaust:

The narrator herself does not know any longer who she was, except *through her testimony*. This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge *does not exist*, it can only *happen* through the testimony.... (1992:51)

In spite of the fact that the shaping influence of the compiler must not be discounted -- and I shall discuss this in more detail shortly -- it seems to me that an attempt to formulate some sort of explanation of experience must often have meant a process of insight-gathering on the part of the interviewee. And while I would not argue that all of these texts can be described "as a sort of signature" because of the intervention of the interviewer/editor/writer, I do feel, with Felman, that an opportunity to testify might have meant for many of the autobiographical subjects an opportunity to "repossess [themselves], to take, in other words, the *chance to sign*, the *chance to count*" (1992:51). Johanna Masilela expresses her gratitude to the compilers of Vukani Makhosikazi: "I'm happy that I've got someone who will introduce me. Let me make history please" (1985:44).

The democratization of access to print is also manifest

in the fact that a significant proportion of these texts (Sibambene, Thula Baba, Working Women, and Women of Phokeng) are concerned to contribute to the empowerment of women, the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged. Lockett (1990:18-9) refers to the importance for women of this sort of social documentation. These texts manifest the truths of subjective experience, for they insist on a recognition that reality is gendered. Many worker autobiographies testify to experiences of scripted lives: lives determined by the structural constraints of race, gender and class, even though these are never simple categories. One has to try to resist simplistic definitions and hierarchization for these constructs are never divisible from complex lived relationships; they are never identifiable on their own terms.<sup>23</sup>

Autobiographical writing helps us to understand the paradoxes of the structural compulsions of race, gender and class, as well as the inconsistencies and disparities between individual experiences. We need to hear the testimony of particular subjects. Dori Laub's point about the importance of testimony to our grasp of the Holocaust seems apposite to our understanding of South African history:

While historical evidence of the event which constitutes the trauma<sup>24</sup> may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma -- as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock -- has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to -- and heard -- is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (Felman and Laub, 1992:57)

Those who encouraged black South Africans to tell about their life experiences were all in some measure instrumental in giving birth to "the cognizance, the

'knowing'" of apartheid. The researchers either encouraged black workers to write themselves (Petrus Tom, for instance, prefaces his text with a note of thanks to Judy Maller "who interviewed me about my life and past experiences in trade unionism. Before I met Judy I didn't think I could write a book, but she encouraged me and introduced me to Ravan Press" (n.p.)), or interviewed subjects and wrote up their responses (as did Obery et al, Griesel, Bozzoli, Gordon, Bond, the editors of We Came to Town and Thula Baba, Keegan, and Lawson).

That these researchers are "facilitators" (Davies, 1989:88) is indisputable. But this is not necessarily all they are. For one thing, the texts are written in English, apparently not the mother-tongue of any of the interviewees. Translation is problematic, for languages are not simply equivalent; moreover, in most instances, the editor/researcher employs a third party to translate the interviewee's responses to her before she begins her own editing process. Griesel is one example.

In writing the English version, I attempted to mirror the style and reasoning of an oral tradition and a different language. My guide here was the manner in which the discussions were *translated to me* and also (I would like to believe) my sensitivity to the tonalities of the women's deliberations about their lives. Stylistically the English version is therefore unconventional in terms of what is usually regarded as 'standard' English. The only evidence to support the achievement of a close approximation of the women's style and tone in the English text is that the translation back into Zulu was effortless for the interpreter and also seemed right to the people at Mboza, and that the Zulu version is almost exactly the same length as the English one.... (my emphases; 1991:52)

Was Griesel able to judge the efficiency of the translator's task? (She does not tell us how fluent her Zulu is, and this is clearly an extremely important factor). And is (presumably) standard Zulu faithfully translated into non-standard English? Is length a valid criterion?<sup>25</sup> Griesel herself voices a reservation: "The

tension between the writer *being literate* (in English) and the women *becoming literate* (in Zulu) added a further dimension to the construction of meaning in text" (1991:52).

Apart from the complexities of the language problem, there is also the fact that the texts are composed according to the researcher/editors' own interpretative schema and agendas. Lawson and Perold, of Working Women, for instance, clearly have a feminist project in mind -- a project which it seems is not necessarily endorsed by all of the interviewees (a gendered conservatism is evident, for instance, in the narrative of Louise Yekwa).<sup>26</sup> The compiler's framework will determine the questions which are asked (and hence the answers that are given); one can, for instance, infer a range of repeated questions in the answers of Gordon's interviewees. One can only speculate as to whether a predetermined agenda interfered with the researchers' ability to listen, and to hear. They might, as Laub observes, "have felt driven to confirm [their] knowledge... by proceeding to hear everything [the interviewees] had to say in the light of what [they] knew already" (61). Whatever the truth of the matter with regard to each individual text, the compilers/editors clearly exercise a great deal of power in that they determine the context in which the subject's narrative will appear.

Perhaps Davies' objections to the interruptions of the researcher's narrative voice in A Talent for Tomorrow, in contrast with her approval of the apparent restraint of the editor of Working Women (1989:89-91), is principally a stylistic objection -- she complains of tediousness and disjointedness in the former (91) -- rather than a criticism of greater intervention, *per se*. I would argue that the intervention is always there. If I may quote Griesel yet again:

My insistence in the preface that I am not the author [but]... "the arranger" seems to have been an unnecessary preoccupation at the time, and an impossibility. The task of reconstructing spoken discourse in a written text is clearly more complex than merely recording or arranging (as a scribe would) the spoken words of individuals. (1991:52-3)

Nevertheless, there is a qualitative difference between the autobiographical text which is largely or even partially biographical (using the researcher as narrator, as in Facing the Storm, A Talent for Tomorrow, Women of Phokeng, and Thula Baba) and the text which inscribes the autobiographical subject as narrator. In the former, the researcher announces his/her interpretive narrative influence -- in some instances so as to undertake the role of mediator, of cultural translator, for a white readership. Keegan, for example, justifies his role as writer, not merely as scribe, thus:

Some might think that the subjects should be left to speak for themselves, in their own words, with editorial intervention only. In fact that is almost always impossible. Reminiscences simply do not come out as connected narratives. Questions have to be constantly asked; information has to be extracted. Seldom can the informant's own words be quoted verbatim without being explained or 'translated'. Creative reconstruction by an interlocutor is necessary before the broken conversational process can be made intelligible as a narrative. What is more, the significance and meaning of much of what an informant tells us cannot really be understood unless placed in the context which only the practising historian can provide. (1988:161)

In texts where the autobiographical subjects' voices are seemingly reproduced without interference, the narrative impresses the reader as "essentially a narrative of silence, the story of the [interviewer's] *listening*" (Felman, 1992:218). The effacement of the researcher thus becomes a means of authenticating the narrative as one of testimony, of autobiography. Felman reminds us that, "In the legal, philosophical and epistemological tradition of the Western world, witnessing is based on, and is formally defined by, first-hand seeing" (1992:207).

Authenticating the narrative with the authority of the witness is an important part of most of these worker autobiographies. I would like to look more closely at Sibambene to assess the success of this attempt. I have already mentioned Griesel's insistence that she is the "arranger, not the writer. My task was to arrange the translated and transcribed words of the women into a written text" (n.p.). The text, however, tends to erase the reader's sense of the individual women by the arrangement of the text into chapters dealing with three age groups, each of which is composed as the amalgamated voices of the women in the particular age group. The "arranger" refers to the women's opinions mostly in the third person, interspersed with very brief quotes from unnamed women. This diminution of the perceived presence of the autobiographical subjects results in a corresponding increase in one's sense of the arranger's hand. Sibambene, I believe, fails to retain in the narrative the "essence and mood of [the women of Mboza's] discussions about individual experiences" (n.p.). Rather, one's impression is that the women's differences are ironed out into generalized assertions about their age group's views. Griesel summarizes these in one of the prefatory notes:

The older women think life is not the same as it used to be, but accept the way things are because, they say, 'We don't know another life.'

The younger women reject the reality of hard work and difficult circumstances and say, 'Life will only be better if there is change.'

The young girls compare their lives with those of their peers who attend school and say, 'Our futures are dark without education.' (n.p.)

The reduction of lives to adumbrations relating to the thematic concerns of the compiler (as can be seen in varying degrees in Sibambene, Working Women, We Came to Town, Thula Baba), the abbreviation of identity to stereotype or case study, could be construed as a betrayal of the autobiographical subjects' complexity of experience

and humanity; yet this prototypical treatment of the life story might also be perceived as a way of emphasizing the fact that a witness speaks *for* others, as well as to others (Felman, 1992:3). The implicit claims of the representative status of the autobiographical subjects may also serve to lend factual validity to the life story; Felman (1992:111) asserts that it is from this sense of a community who could offer like testimonies that some of the authority of the witness, that is, the truth claim of the narrative, proceeds. Spengemann argues that,

Historical autobiography was invented to demonstrate the consonance of an individual life with an absolute, eternal law already in force and known through some immediate source outside the life that illustrates it. Fashioned to these purposes, the form could neither make the conclusions of an individual life seem universally applicable without misrepresenting the individual life, nor represent that life accurately without compromising the universality of its conclusions. (1980:60)

Often autobiographical writing resorts to a quasi-allegorical rendition of experience in which historical events are treated primarily as emblems of an absolute truth (political reality) beyond themselves rather than as links in a spiritually/personally consequential chain of events (in Spengemann's formulation, 1980:69). This can be seen to some extent in texts like Working Women, We Came to Town, and even more in Thula Baba. It is seen too in the 'kaffir boy' stereotypical autobiography (Mathabane's and Boetie's are probably the best examples). These texts demonstrate what Spengemann calls a "typological view of human behaviour" (1980:50), figuring forth a world in which things *happen* to people, rather than one in which people *do* things, or dealing in qualities rather than in agents. This textually enacts the passivity enforced on black South Africans by the state, and portrays their experiences of lack of agency. Also, the stereotyping of the victim may be politically effective: multiply the experiences of these poor people by 23 million and the horrors of apartheid hit home.



Many worker autobiographies present the personal histories of the autobiographical subjects almost as case histories, exploring lives for a specific investigative purpose.<sup>27</sup> In all of the worker autobiographies analyzed, the individual testimonies are presented as case histories in the sense that either researchers, editors or even publishers (as in The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers) are concerned to establish the testimonies of the autobiographical subjects as bearing witness to kinds of experience that categories of similar people may have shared. Perhaps the point is clearer if rephrased: the interest is not only in the individual, but in the contextualization of the subject's responses within an explanatory paradigm which resembles a kind of sociological case study. This is taken to extremes, it seems to me, by Mathabane, Boetie and the writers of Thula Baba. In these texts the impression is created that truthfulness rests less upon accuracies of depicted events than upon the feelings the narratives call forth and express; not so much the idiosyncratic truths of self but rather the generalised truths of political reality, situating the subject in terms of a Marxian notion of truth as the view of the totality of social relations. There is, of course, the danger of such a text doing exactly the opposite of what it intends -- viz. to bring the subject to life -- and instead to caricature and reduce, thereby to make the autobiographical subject seem simplistic -- as though treatment and subject coincide. Texts which abbreviate experience to broad strokes might appear to betray the texture of life, the complexity of being, creating caricatures that reinforce a certain "victimology" of which Bozzoli speaks. It is my contention that most worker autobiographies escape this: anthologies like Facing the Storm, Working Women, A Talent for Tomorrow, and Vukani Makhosikazi manage to allow for the transcendence of individual autobiographical subjects over the context of being one autobiographical voice amongst many other similar voices.

I have chosen to focus the foregoing discussion on texts which, to my mind, fail to achieve their desired aim of foregrounding the very human dimensions of the plight of the autobiographical subjects because this allows me, by implication, to highlight the features of texts which are successful. Thus I hope to explore some of the fine details in which the politics of textual production may be located. Sibambene is one text which, in addition to its failure to convey a sense of individual speakers, undermines its own project by using children's drawings to illustrate each page in a visually interesting but childish way. These drawings, and the layout in general, reinforce the childlike quality of the verbal text which has flattened, it would appear, all figurative, idiomatic and proverbial expression from the women's comments. If such a loss has indeed occurred, it is probable that this was an inadvertent loss in the translation process. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the effect of the children's drawings in conjunction with the very simple verbal text is a reduction of the narrative to childishness, which undermines the women's attempts to command recognition and respect from adult readers. It is my impression that the text, unwittingly, co-operates in that patronising view of the poor as being simple and childlike. (Griesel's own reservation regarding the layout is different from my own: she sees the "variety" of the text as a "contradiction to the often featureless experiences of living at Mboza and the fleeting nature of individual existence in an oral context" (1991:53)).

That the text reduces the women to ciphers is indeed most unfortunate, for Sibambene is unique in its address of very severely impoverished women rural dwellers.<sup>28</sup> It is, furthermore, clearly not the intention of its compiler to reimpose, in yet another forum, the silence which the women by force of circumstance suffer; Griesel states at the outset:

Sibambene is a book produced with a group of women who have had no formal schooling. They live in a rural community known as Mboza where they have recently started literacy classes.... The decision to write this book was taken in July 1986, jointly with the women participants in the research.

The book is intentionally spoken in the words of the women. As rural women without formal schooling they have minimal access to resources which are common to the privileged and the powerful. These include literacy itself; and related resources such as school and books, through which the privileged maintain control over literacy.

The fact that it is those who are literate who exercise control over texts serves to perpetuate the mystique of literacy....

The book is intended to contribute to the development project at Mboza where the focus is on people and on building structures for democratic participation in decisions which affect their lives.

To participate means to have a voice, and the voices of the women and young girls need to be heard. (n.p.)

The intention to empower, through giving the women the opportunity to speak about their own lives, and through encouraging the women to acquire literacy skills which will give them a measure of control over the world of printed words, is sadly not fulfilled to its maximum potential in this text as Griesel herself admits:

In my constant attempt not to impose an external perspective on the formation of the book, the end product may have merely served to make public the very realities which the women wanted to have changed. Phrased differently, although the material contained in the book may have succeeded in capturing the essence of the lives of women at Mboza, it did not (and could not) provide the resources with which to transcend this reality.... The stark reality is that women at Mboza have remained effectively illiterate: despite their having learned the basic skills of reading and writing, they still live in a predominantly oral context; text is not part of the fabric of their daily lives and this in itself excludes them from a re-interpretation of the text which reveals their lives. (1991:53)

Another worker autobiography which I find problematic,

principally because of the intrusive presence of non-autobiographical writers/compiler, is Thula Baba. This narrative is, the editor/s inform us, "a moving account of the everyday life of a group of domestic workers told by a literacy teacher. It is based on the firsthand experiences of some of her learners" (5). Neither the editor/s nor the literacy teacher are named, but their influence is fundamental, for this text, while presenting itself as the autobiographical narrative of "Ntombi", would seem to be rather a kind of aggregated life-story, attributed to a central character and her family and friends. It is the full significance of the words "based on the firsthand experiences of some of her learners" that is uncertain for they could encompass a range of meaning from the faithfully auto/biographic to autobiographical fiction (David Copperfield is a good example). Initially, what disturbs is the assertion that the autobiographical narrator ("Ntombi") is the writer (7-8), when the reader has already been informed by the editor that the text is composed by a literacy teacher. Furthermore, the "literacy teacher's" voice is heard briefly within the narrative itself when, after the first page which introduces Ntombi as narrator in first-person narration (with an accompanying photograph), the following page gives more information about Ntombi, but in third-person narration. This section is headed "People in the book" and begins thus:

Ntombi. She writes the book.  
She is a domestic worker.  
She is 33 years old.  
She has four children.  
Sipho, Thoko and Jabu. [sic]  
are in the homelands.  
Lindiwe, her baby, stays with her  
in the city. (8)

The uncertainty of the factual/fictional status of the text is further reinforced by the use of first names only for all characters, and by the arrangement of the narrative into a quasi-diary form in which incomplete dates are given

(day and month, with no year). Like the incomplete proper names, the sense of factual verifiability is undermined by a consistent vagueness. The reader will perhaps recall the quote from Barthes which I used as an epigraph at the beginning of the chapter: "nothing is more 'real', we think, than a date." The references to particular names of places and people, and the dating of events, lend to autobiographical writing the verifiability of history and journalism, and provide, too, an important interpretative context, in terms of which meaning is constructed in the reading process. The meaningless dates which head each entry in Thula Baba deny a sense of the factuality of the narrative.

Yet another conventional feature of autobiographical writing which, along with names and dates, is apparently used in Thula Baba to confirm the verifiability of the narrative, but which fails to do so because of unorthodox usage, is the use of photographs. Since photography is an important means by which much autobiographical discourse secures its status as 'true', I would like to devote some time to a discussion of how photographs are usually read in more conformist autobiographical discourse, and demonstrate why it is that the photographs in Thula Baba counteract the normative effects.

On photography  
Photographs function in conventional Western narrative autobiography as they do in journalistic discourse, to 'prove' the accuracy of the verbal text. Photographs seem to demonstrate that someone or something had real existence. For Barthes, the "photographic referent" is,

not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph... in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there.* There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. (1981b:76)

"The Photograph does not call up the past.... The effect

it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed" (1981b:82). Photographs attest to the ontology of beings. "Photography... began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's *formality*" (Barthes, 1981b:79). This is arguably why it is so often a feature of the autobiographical text, indicating a bodily materiality beyond the verbal text. Barthes argues that "the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger at certain *vis-a-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language" (Barthes, 1981b:5). It is this effect which the editors of documentary and auto/biographical texts, including Thula Baba, have presumably attempted to achieve.

But where the use of photographs in Thula Baba deviates from their use in other factual narratives like journalism, history, and auto/biography is that some of the photographs in Thula Baba are clearly staged. Two which are most strikingly so are the one which bears the caption, "Tembi got a telegram today" (21) which depicts the characters Tembi and Ntombi looking at a telegram. Another is of the character Matshepo in the dark of the station waving at a departing train (73). The contrivedness of these illustrations, for me at least, instead of securing the truthfulness of the narrative, serves rather to undermine the relationship of all of the photographs to the verbal text (one wonders if perhaps all are staged?) and, indeed, to create an impression of fictionality of the entire narrative, a sense (as I mentioned) reinforced by the unconventional narratorial position and use of dates and names. The photograph "can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature *tendentious*, never as to its existence" (Barthes, 1981b:87); presumably, the editors of Thula Baba wanted to create the impression that even if the

people depicted in the photographs are not who they are said to be, they are real, and *might have* lived lives such as are recounted in the narrative.<sup>29</sup>

Photographs are particularly effective in establishing the factuality of autobiography, history, journalism and related 'true' discourses because, as Kaja Silverman observes, the photograph is an icon (1983:19); it is message without code, since, "In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate" (Barthes, 1977b:17). The photograph is thus usually simple validation.

But photographs are not merely transparent manifestations of a past, for, "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory... it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory" (Barthes, 1981b:91). The photograph, in other words, can supplant the visual memory, and become itself what is 'remembered' of past experience. But this feature of photography can itself be useful to autobiography. It is in this sense that the photograph which is borrowed from journalism by an autobiographical text serves to import into the autobiographical text fragments of the journalistic narrative, and journalistic 'memory'; it situates the autobiographical text and imbues it with an interpretative frame, supplied by what is remembered of news media presentations. This can be seen in an autobiography like The Diary of Maria Tholo which uses only photographs of a general documentary nature and none which are specific to the autobiographical subject. The photographs here function to situate the narrative as part of contemporary history, rather than to allow the text to stand as an individual's story which is coincidentally a record of the times in which the person lived. Some of this effect is created, too, in Call Me Woman which has

about 40% of its photographs functioning to record the images of other women and events of broadly historical interest.

But even in those texts in which the photographs are intended to serve as records of the person of the autobiographer, such as in My Life Struggle and A Working Life, the record is not without its own complexities. As Barthes writes in his own autobiography (which uses photographs liberally):

"But I never looked like that!" -- How do you know? What is the "you" you might or might not look like? Where do you find it -- by which morphological or expressive calibration? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images. (1977a:36)

While few autobiographers confront in the text the complexities of the fixed photographic image being intended to represent a changing being -- and certainly none of the texts included here in the category of worker autobiography does this -- the reader might well have her sense of the contrast between the instability of living subjects and unchanging print reinforced, particularly in those texts which contain a number of photographs of the autobiographical subject over a period of time. And this brings us to the related problem of the verbal text attempting to fix the autobiographical subject, of the 'translation' of lived realities into verbal artifact. Worker autobiographies, in general,<sup>30</sup> are simple and brief, designating realities which are unquestioned and implying that reality is unproblematically transcribed into print. This serves a purpose, as has been suggested, in that their message of the intense hardships of the poor is delivered with a simplicity which can be very powerful, and which is necessary in order for these texts to accomplish a



democratization of readership. "Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude" (Laub, 1992:70-1). These texts are addressing important needs of their listeners, be they those struggling to acquire literacy, or academics needing to understand about the lives of the silenced masses, and these needs would doubtless not be met by postmodernist interrogations of the conventional nature of reality, and of the problematics of the 'translation' of experience into text.

However, the quasi-autobiographical texts like Thula Baba and to a lesser extent Women of Phokeng and perhaps even A Talent for Tomorrow might cause some unease in the reader who is seeking the autobiographical subject's voice and person (Davies, 1989:91); when the editors appropriate these voices to create a narrative which names the real on the editor's own terms (and often in the editors' own terms/words), the reader might feel that the autobiographical contract is severely compromised.

To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth: to speak, implicitly, from within the legal pledge and the juridical imperative of the witness's oath. To testify -- before a court of law or before the court of history and of the future; to testify, likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators -- is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community. To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness stand, or to take the position of the witness insofar as the narrative account of the witness is at once engaged in an appeal and bound by an oath. To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit to oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* -- in speech -- for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences. (Felman, 1992:204)

Perhaps it is this contractual obligation which occupies a privileged status in the discourse of Western liberal humanism that is placed in jeopardy in quasi-autobiographical texts which undermine or blur the

testimonial quality of the autobiographical text. A strong sense of editorial interference might weaken one's sense of vital communication between autobiographical subjects and reader. The passage quoted above continues:

But if the essence of the testimony is impersonal (to enable a decision by a judge or jury -- metaphorical or literal -- about the true nature of the facts of an occurrence...), why is it that the witness's speech is so uniquely, literally irreplaceable?... What does it mean that the testimony cannot be simply reported, or narrated by another in its role as testimony? (1992:204-5)

It is the voice-over of editors and researchers that may erode the power of the testimony, and of the witness's 'presence' as living, unique person. In these cases (aggregating autobiographical narratives like Thula Baba, Sibambene, Women of Phokeng), "The reader has trouble finding the *self* the autobiography purports to depict" (Spacks, 1980:117). This is due, in part, too, to the fact that most of the texts which are part of the worker autobiography tradition, and also texts like Luthuli's, focus principally on the working life, rather than the experiencing being. But, of course, reading and interpretation are functions of culture and social circumstance, and my own reading is not given here as a statement of immutable, unquestionable fact, but rather as a reading which might be representative of the impressions of many who have been interpellated in the discourses of white privilege, of liberal humanism. Whether a similar impression is created in the minds of readers whose cultural paradigms are different from my own is of course open to debate, and is an important question.

The worker autobiographies studied here, in spite of fundamental differences, contribute to the creation of new knowledges which serve to reinforce the struggle for democratic distribution of basic human rights by fragmenting the grand narratives of history, by individualizing and particularizing the statistical

abstractions which can numb one's sense of what human beings who are part of these statistics feel. The dehumanizing effect of statistics is especially dangerous in cases like that of South Africa where one is talking about mass deprivation, where the vast majority of people are brutally oppressed in their millions. The danger is that suffering might be robbed of any tragic impact simply because its occurrence is so widespread, so anonymous, so depersonalized. In the case of these texts they are actual interventions in the conflict between this tendency, a tendency which is greatly exacerbated by the State's efforts to remove black South Africans from that part of the country which they designated the 'Republic' to the 'independent homelands'; and the desire to hear the testimony of the silenced masses. It seems to me that this sub-species of autobiography is a very important textual development because it both insists on historical knowledge, from the grass roots up, while simultaneously undermining any possibility of an all-encompassing grand narrative which elides or erases the individual histories of those who live history. Felman observes that Camus, for instance,

*puts side by side* the blindness and the contradictions of historicism and the blindness and the contradictions of antihistoricism.... "To deny history is to deny, in fact, the real," but "neither more nor less, " insists Camus, than the denial of the real which historicism dramatizes in its ideological fetishization of history itself: "one takes a distance from the real by wanting to consider history as a totality sufficient unto itself" [Camus, "Lettre au directeur des Temps modernes"]. (Felman, 1992:174)

The fact that this sub-species of life-testimony seems to have all but disappeared in the 1990s appears to be partly a response to heightened politicization of black South Africans as the 1980s progressed, thus decreasing the need for texts whose aim is conscientization, and partly a response to the vastly different political dispensation in South Africa ever since the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela and other political leaders. But the major reason for

their virtual disappearance might be the far more prosaic one, the fact that Ravan Press found that there was little or no market for such texts. A representative from Ravan Press (who asked not to be named) told me in a conversation that, "the black working-class readership is a myth". If reports of 45% (or more) illiteracy are correct, then one can see why these texts might be indicative more of researchers' hopeful projections than of actual potential readers. Moreover, the picture of widespread poverty amongst black South Africans painted by worker autobiographies renders unsurprising the fact that few can afford to purchase books.

In spite of the fact that researchers seem to have channelled their efforts in other directions in the last few years, this analysis of the role of the researcher in these texts brings one to a recognition that the question of researcher involvement raises broader considerations of the responsibilities of the intellectual in social transformation. It seems to me that the intellectual should, as Foucault has argued, open new ways of knowing, ways which are sensitive to perceived injustices and power imbalances in the larger social formation.

The writer's function is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it. (Terrence Des Pres, cited by Felman and Laub, 1992:xi)

In these terms, the researcher/editors of worker autobiographies have succeeded, whatever the shortcomings of specific texts.

## Chapter 5: Writing

*I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me.*

Roland Barthes

*When true accounts of the past are given, it is not the things themselves, which have passed away, that are drawn forth from memory, but words conceived from their images.*

St. Augustine

*[C]onsidering the complexity of the signifying process, no belief in an all-powerful theory is tenable; there remains the necessity to pay attention to the ability to deal with the desire for language, and by this I mean paying attention to art and literature, and, in even more poignant fashion, to the art and literature of our time, which remain alone, in our world of technological rationality, to impel us not toward the absolute but toward a quest for a little more truth, an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking beings.*

Julia Kristeva

As Barthes indicates above, constructing a self, a continuous core of adjectival qualities with a 'character,' a 'nature,' is a process of symbolization, of story-making. When that narrativized personal history is subjected to the additional pressures of text, and of public reception, then the autobiographer's attempts to translate the realm of experience into verbal construct result in a duplication of mediation. With discursive mirrors reflecting into discursive mirrors, finding the 'real' or the 'truth' upon which the text's claims to autobiographical status depend becomes like an attempt to find the material object in the mirrored reflection: we are left in the end with the reflection, and our interpretations of its significance. Ultimately, as analysts of personal histories we have only the autobiographical text, the verbal (and sometimes part pictorial) construct. Its highly codified relationship with material circumstance might never be far from our conscious application of reading strategies, but it is the text, the words on the page, that we have to read.

Confronting the textuality of the autobiographical is not, I would argue, a denial of the connectedness of text and material context, but rather an acknowledgement that at best we seek in autobiographical writing not the Truth, but, in the words of Kristeva, "a little more truth." Discursive and non-discursive, text and context, are never separable; but the precise nature of the relationship is only to be dimly apprehended through the polished opacities of our own ideological and historical mirrored tunnels.

Acknowledging at all times the partiality of my own vision, this analysis attempts to engage with the materiality of textuality. Refusing the autobiographical texts' usual pretence at transparency -- their blithe implicit claim that the words and the pages are merely innocent bystanders or vehicles for an independent, discrete truth -- I have interrogated the actual verbal constructions. Analysis has involved examination of the discursive hierarchies by means of which the 'truths' of the text have been constructed (as in my analysis of Campbell); I have attempted to tease out the generic compulsions and tensions at work in texts in order to ponder their implications (Kuzwayo and Breytenbach); I have probed the text's rhetorical strategies (Luthuli) and the politics of textuality (the worker autobiographies). In this chapter, I examine the political implications of Moloi's hierarchization of discourses, and the generic problematics facing Lyndall Gordon, the biographer as autobiographer.

As has been noted, the concern with lived experience, *bios*, leads to a desire apparent in most South African autobiographical writing in the last 45 years, to make text transparent so that encoded realities will be apprehended by the reader without impediments of verbal constructs.<sup>1</sup> The need to privilege the referent rather than the vehicle of reference is, of course, understandable, given the stark

improbabilities of experience for South Africans, and has resulted in radical shifts in textual practice. There has also been a marked prioritization of auto/biography over fiction<sup>2</sup> and also, in almost all South African autobiographical writing in English in the last 46 years at least, in writing in which the denotative is dominant over the connotative. This emphasis on the denotative, manifest in conventional autobiographies authored by whites like Evenden and Ruth Gordon and blacks like Luthuli and Rive, and which is particularly obvious in worker autobiographies, is, I believe, borne out of a need to bear witness, to report, as Benson says (1991:124). This privileging of the referential is also seen in criticism of much South African fiction in the last two or so decades: many critics are unwilling to defend texts which seemingly de-historicize the South African context. The novelist J.M.Coetzee has come under attack for this.

This need to testify about material circumstance in South Africa is, of course, a serious purpose. And in its efforts to achieve transparency or unimpeded referentiality, much South African autobiographical writing in English of the last four and a half decades impresses the reader with its gravity by means of its solemn flatness of tone. Our classification of autobiography as factually true perhaps leads to an earnestness in reading which cooperates with a lack of humour and a paucity of imaginative inventiveness which seem to be characteristic of the genre in South Africa in this period. Moreover, the weighting of chronology and event, rather than the less ordered sequences of emotional or psychological experience, contributes, it seems to me, to an apparent lack of profundity or personal probity in these texts. (Gordon's Shared Lives is, as we shall see, a notable exception). Lockett (1990:19) remarks upon what Western readers might feel is a lack of aesthetic grace in autobiographical writing by black women (and presumably this applies to

writing by black men too). I would argue that in many cases a bleakness of style might in part be attributable to overriding polemical objectives. When trying to persuade readers that the horrors of oppression are real, the message takes precedence over other considerations.

Much South African autobiographical writing is fundamentally polemical in nature. Texts are intended to persuade: in such cases, experimentation with verbal constructs (graphe) might merely deflect attention away from the weighty issues under review. Thus one is not surprised to find little or no verbal or formal experimentation in such texts. Many of these texts might appear superficial and formally simplistic in their attempts to be purely denotative, informative, and to persuade by means of this information. Often those texts which aim at transparency deny the pleasures of text, the playful engagement between text and reader, because they try to fix or delimit meaning, to deny plenitude and contradiction. The authoritarianism of much South African autobiographical writing may sometimes be off-putting because the reading subject is positioned so securely within very narrow interpretational boundaries that it becomes uncomfortable. In other words, the reader's position is often, in such cases, overdetermined. Perhaps this accounts in part for the unpopularity, until very recently, of autobiography in university departments of literature.

There is no doubt that most of the hundred or so autobiographical texts which I have studied will sink without a trace, gathering dust on specialist library shelves. The lack of appeal in such narratives does not, of course, diminish their importance for the student of South African culture. Perhaps it is the failure of many straight-forward autobiographies to fulfil the reader's expectation of what Barthes identifies as hermeneutic



coding (the "agency whereby a mystery is first suggested and later resolved" and the various "mechanisms for delaying our access to the desired information" (Silverman, 1983:257) which frustrates many readers' narrative pleasure. Another factor which may contribute to what the 'Western reader', taught to value the aesthetic standards of predominantly white male authors, perceives as lack of textual grace may be the marginalization of blacks and women from public forms of discourse.<sup>3</sup> Irigiray argues that,

The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places woman in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology, this mirror entrusted by the (masculine) "subject" with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself. The role of "femininity" is prescribed moreover by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds only slightly to woman's desire, which is recuperated only secretly, in hiding, and in a disturbing and unpardonable manner. (1981:105)

Irigiray's assessment applies perhaps to women in general, to South Africans who have been marginalized on the basis of race, and particularly, to women of colour who have been doubly excluded. Madeleine Gagnon explores gendered exclusion:

Yet I snatch this language that is foreign to me and turn it about in my fashion. I thread together truths that will be reproduced. But on the slate I wrote with a sovereign chalk. It told which part of me was to prevail. I am a foreigner to myself in my own language and I translate myself by quoting all the others. (1981:180)

Although Irigiray's and Gagnon's views deserve careful consideration, we should not forget that clumsy or bald autobiographies -- according to these 'Western' standards -- are by no means the sole preserve of black South Africans or women.<sup>4</sup> And if we consider *mediated* autobiographies, specifically, I wonder to what extent a 'deadness' in some of these texts might be attributable to a sense, on the interviewee's part, of "[t]he absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable*

*other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness," a sense of absence which "annihilates the story" (Laub, 1992:68).

Thus I am arguing that even the precise configurations of texts which seem insipid can be important indicators of cultural realities. Furthermore, one needs to bear in mind the contrary: that a textuality which appeals to the reader's desires can provide a powerful context which reduces the reader's sense of the text's purported truth-value because it appeals more forcefully to the reader's pleasure in the telling. Moloi's autobiography is perhaps a good example: it beguiles because of its stylistic novelties and narrative enticements. It is not so much that we accept that the narrative is wholly true, but rather that we ask fewer questions as we read; we do not wish to disturb the pleasures of the text by interrupting its flow. Narrated events, just as words in a sentence, depend for their value, and hence significance, upon their position in a textual context. Pleasure, or lack thereof, in a text, it seems to me, needs to be taken seriously.

Lockett argues that the fact that autobiographical writing by black women "is seldom aesthetically pleasing to the Western reader" (1990:19) is largely because the language used is not a mother-tongue. The issue of language is important, for when most black autobiographers choose to write in English<sup>5</sup> -- as do dissident Afrikaners like Breytenbach, Ferreira and Small -- the politics of language come to the fore. English allows writers to reach the widest possible audience, both South African and overseas; it is the language of hegemony, being the favoured language with most South African publishers. The worker autobiographies which were discussed in the previous chapter were all written in English -- not the mother tongue of any of the subjects. Could it be that for these and other black South African writers (and perhaps too for

Breytenbach, Ferreira and Small), "the significance of the occurrence can only be articulated in a language foreign to the language(s) of the occurrence" (Felman, 1992:212)? Perhaps the distance of another sign system is -- for some -- necessary for the attainment of the requisite narrative perspective, that coherent and unifying centre which embraces (and in a sense pronounces on) all the constituents of narrative, while for others the use of English is simply an imposition made by compilers, researchers, or editors.

Lebohang Sikwe addresses the issue of the dominance of English in the writing by black South Africans:

The problem for us when it comes to writing in our own languages is that nowadays we don't talk one language at a time. The problem of mixing. And when you start writing a poem you have to have the logical current of that language.... For myself, I'm a Tswana-speaking person, but I can't talk pure Tswana. For me, writing in English is simpler than writing in Tswana.... (Daymond and Lenta, 1990:76)

The decision to use English in their writing comes not only from a great many second-language users of English, but also from editors and researchers. Casting the life stories of poor unskilled workers and subsistence farmers, as the worker autobiographies generally do, in terms and textual models familiar to whites (and using English) enables authors to communicate the significance of apartheid for its victims to whites and non-South Africans who have no experience of townships or rural squalor. And those texts which are devised to be part of literacy programmes also induct learners into Western models of the auto/biographical, the narrativized adumbration of experience.

Taking due cognisance of the role of researchers or co-authors or amanuenses, means asking, as Foucault has done, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (1984:120). When academics mediate and subject the autobiographical

subjects' responses to further translations (the translations of cultural paradigms as well as to linguistic translation), then in these cases, translation is (as Derrida argues) more properly conceived of as transformation (1985:95). Translation is governed by the ideal of a transfer of sense between languages that respects "the priority of the signified (of meaning itself) over the mere written signs that serve to communicate its presence" (Norris, 1987:38). This is probably true, too, of collaborative or mediated autobiographies which imply that the researcher/scribe is merely an impartial conduit for a meaning which is prior to its formulation, and which can be found intact in the final text. But when the text's language is not the mother-tongue of the autobiographical subject one should consider the position of the language chosen in the hierarchized and disjunctive social formation that is known as 'South Africa', not just in terms of what it signifies in the social formation (access to publishers, audience, legal systems and *de facto* power bases etc.) but also in terms of the untranslatability of paradigms, of perspectives, of proverbial and idiomatic knowledges. Vance's question is pertinent: "Isn't the colonization of the New World basically a form of translation?" (in Derrida, 1985:137).

But analysis should avoid the temptation to romanticize mother-tongue as originary and innocent before the corruptions of more powerful languages of translation: no language is innocent of the inscription of power-relations in its structures, not even the mother-tongue. Furthermore, neither the original language nor the language into which it is translated is a unified entity or pure (Derrida, 1985:100): English no more comprises only 'English' words than Zulu comprises purely 'Zulu' words. I have tried in this study to address something which South African autobiographies rarely acknowledge:

the inescapable, pervasive way in which ideological coercion is surreptitiously built into language, into

the very discourse one is inadvertently employing and the very writing of which one believes oneself to be the author. (Felman, 1992:139)

Moreover the position of dominance is not axiomatically on the side of the language of translation, in this case English. For, "When no known language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language -- as men used to steal a loaf of bread. (All those -- legion -- who are outside Power are obliged to steal language)" (Barthes, 1977a:167). The 'thief' might manipulate the stolen language (even while she herself has to succumb to its value-laden structures); she might subvert hegemonic constructions and conceptions. One might consider that

the Greek art of *métis* is an art of transformation and transmutation, an aesthetics of the ruse that allows the weak to survive by escaping through duplicitous means the very power intent on destroying them. (Lionnet, 1989:18)

It is this that Lyndall Gordon achieves: as a woman who is, by definition, "outside Power" she has to use the 'languages' of biography and autobiography in order to undermine their authoritarianism. For, in terms of these conventional forms, it is the lives of those who achieve in the public realm, who can compete with men, which are worthy of documentation. This prescription, in effect, silences women who do not fit the bill. Gordon's Shared Lives employs "an aesthetics of the ruse" to evade the male-biased discourses that are intent on effacing women.

In some cases, Malan (1990) springs to mind, acknowledgement of a lack of innocence in the narrative process leads to a degree of cultural relativism. However, it seems to me that a more profound relativism comes from the colonised peoples like Moloi, who practises linguistic *métissage*, and Kuzwayo, who creates a new discursive practice out of the fusion of disparate cultural paradigms. If, as Lionnet shows, "The Anglo-American consciousness seems unable to accommodate miscegenation positively

through language" (1989:14)<sup>6</sup> then it may be relevant that white South African autobiographers rarely attempt autobiographical hybridization. Nevertheless, the culture of the oppressor has to break out of its ossifying power structures and mutate and researcher-motivated autobiographical mosaics are evidence of this kind of adaptation. Lionnet argues that

reciprocal relations prevent the ossification of culture and encourage systematic change and exchange. By responding to such mutations, language reinforces a phenomenon of creative instability in which no 'pure' or unitary origin can ever be posited.... Variety and heterogeneity lead to richer and more fulfilling lives for all those who share a given environment; multiplicity flourishes when the shackles of homogeneity and rigidity are broken. (1989:17-8)

The politics of textuality, then, extend beyond the obvious polemical aim of much writing. As Cixous points out: "writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (1980b:249). For instance, the seizing of rules and forms -- e.g. Western autobiographical forms -- to subvert and reshape these and the power base on which they rest: this is an important part of the life-writing industry in South Africa in the last 46 years. Such texts may undermine textual conventions by appropriating these forms for novel causes, thus subverting the power of those who controlled the forms. We shall see something of this in Godfrey Moloi's My Life: Volume One.

One way in which texts may (intentionally or not) persuade or manipulate readers is by hierarchizing discourses. MacCabe defines discourse as a domain of language usage which takes account of the position of the speaking subject within the utterance. "With discourse we become interested in the dialectical relation between speaker and language in which language always already

offers a position to the speaker and yet, at the same time, the act of speaking may itself displace those positions" (MacCabe, 1985:63). A field of discursivity is "the site of the possibility of proof and disproof" for the split Lacanian subject (MacCabe, 1985:82). Foucault argues that it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together; but discourse does not comprise a number of discontinuous segments, some dominant and others excluded.

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.... There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (Foucault, 1980:100-2)

Speech or discourse always implies a dialogue, as we have learnt from Bakhtin; texts respond to repressed oppositional voices. This is true even of hegemonic discourses. As Dowling observes, a hegemonic discourse "suppresses or marginalizes all antagonistic class voices, and yet the hegemonic discourse remains locked into a dialogue with the discourse it has suppressed" (1984:131). Something of the converse occurs in Gordon's Shared Lives, a text which explicitly refuses to conform to conventional Western models of either biography or autobiography, but which has to engage with the codes of both: it has to remain "locked into a dialogue with the discourse[s] it has suppressed".

It is from this complex interweaving of discourses (over which the author has little control) that meaning originates. And it is in this sense that the materiality of the language, the discursive arrangement of the text,

provides important material for the analysis of the culture(s) out of which it emerges.

Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard: they are the codes: in their interweaving, these voices (whose origin is "lost" in the vast perspective of the *already-written*) de-originate the utterance: the convergence of the voices (of the codes) becomes *writing*.... (Barthes, 1974:21)

*off-stage voices of the land*

The writer, then, speaks not in his or her own voice, but in the voices which her or his interpellated positions make available; the multiple voices of the already written culture. Discourse thus issues from an unconscious as well as a conscious speaking subject (Silverman, 1983:50). It must be recalled, however, that the writer adopts a speaking position from within a specific discursive position, out of an array of sometimes mutually reinforcing, sometimes contradictory, discourses. And herein lies a measure of conscious or unconscious control by the enunciating subject. Thus Kuzwayo is able -- knowingly or unknowingly -- to forge a new discursive practice out of the mutually exclusive discourses of black non-narrative autobiographical praise poetry and Western individualizing narrative. Lyndall Gordon also, by reinterpreting or translating the act of autobiographical narration through the discourse of feminism, is able to draw on those off-stage voices, those cultural codes, which her experiences of many cultures (South African white Jewish culture, American and British academia) make available to her.

Texts are not only resonant with their multiple constitutive discourses, they resonate with one another, acquiring significance and lending significance by association. As Foucault says,

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands;... its unity is



variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse. (1972:23)

By (implicitly or explicitly) announcing itself to be part of one or other generic tradition -- and thus by classifying itself as like certain kinds of texts and unlike others -- a text sets limits on the play of signification.

Generic distinctions may seem unfashionable (Elbaz springs to mind as a detractor of this position<sup>7</sup>), however even Derrida insists that deconstruction should

keep its eye on the specific *differences* of logic and sense that mark off one text from another, and which also demand some answering awareness of generic distinctions on the reader's part. Texts are 'stratified' in the sense that they bear along with them a whole network of articulated themes and assumptions whose meaning everywhere links up with other texts, other genres or topics of discourse. This is what Derrida calls the 'disseminating' force always at work within language, written or spoken.... Writing, in short, is *intertextual* through and through. But this should not be taken as a licence for that other wholesale 'intertextuality' that rejoices in simply riding roughshod over all such generic distinctions. (Norris, 1987:25-6)

And Foucault distinguishes between texts with an "author function" such as poetry and fiction, and those in which the author function is lacking, so that in the latter -- of which autobiography is an example -- the personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugations "refer to the real speaker and to the spatio-temporal coordinates of his discourse (although certain modifications can occur, as in the operation of relating discourses in the first person)" (1984:112). The references to social circumstances in autobiographies function not only as narrative techniques, as novelistic scene painting in the tradition of realism; they also provide an interpretive framework. Contextual fullness in narrative explicitly invokes "the idea of a social system to serve as a fixed

reference point by which the flow of ephemeral events can be endowed with specifically moral meaning" (White, 1980:25). Thus although South African autobiographical writing is a heterogeneous field, and specific autobiographies may be more like other forms than they are like each other, the fact that a text asks to be read as autobiography is important for it calls into being a specific set of reading strategies with which the reader may or may not comply but whose invocation necessitates due consideration.

Autobiography as a genre defines its limits, as all concepts do, relationally: like history, it is about 'real' events; unlike history, it is personal, not impersonal and does not involve the effacement of the narrating voice<sup>8</sup>; like journalism, it documents 'factual' occurrences; unlike journalism, it usually covers a protracted period, and does not seek to present itself as a purely 'objective' discourse; like fiction, it constructs stories around themes and significances and in forms that will entice the reader; unlike fiction, it insists on the verifiability of much of its material; like fiction and popular movies, television narratives and so on, autobiography often constructs heroes and villains, relying on culturally acceptable clichés of narrative situation and interpretive models; unlike these media, it insists that these heroes and villains actually lived. Autobiography usually expressly invokes a contractual agreement with the reader: the reader reads the references as true, and the text undertakes to refer to people, places and events which have had material existence. Felman cites de Man:

Political and autobiographical texts... have in common that they share a referential reading-moment explicitly built in within the spectrum of their significations, no matter how deluded this moment may be in its mode as well as in its thematic content.... (Felman, 1992:143)

Lest it appear that I am arguing that autobiography is ontologically distinct from other genres, I should explain

that my position is that autobiography establishes its particularity through use of specific rhetorical strategies. So while the text cannot be conceived of as mere transcription of self and life -- the writer's stated or implied intentions to write a 'truthful' document are not a reliable indicator of generic distinction ("Decentred as subjects, lost in Derridean difference and caught in ideological cross-fire, we cannot always rely on the stability of such intentions" (Wicomb, 1990:42)) -- the text nevertheless should, I believe, be read so that the discursive strategies which it employs in order to establish itself as autobiography are given due recognition.<sup>9</sup> Derrida observes that it is "the ear of the other", the acknowledgement of the receiving subject, that ensures that an autobiographical signature has been inscribed, that marks the text as autobiography, which is why he uses the inaudible *differance* of otobiography, instead of autobiography (1985:50-1).

Because textuality makes its own demands, the text cannot simply be understood as transparent vehicle for truths about subject and life. Text assumes a life of its own, with generic conventions shaping the story, motivating the inclusion and omission of details; and each retelling assumes its own shape, as Breytenbach shows, and constructs a different self, a different life, a different story; "each new attempt at autobiography will tell a different story since the story has changed in the course of its telling and as a result of it" (Finney, 1985:13). Every act of composition is an act of commentary: "the juxtaposition of facts becomes in itself an act of interpretation" (Finney, 1985:23). In the composition process radical selection of remembered experience must occur (memory itself having effected a fundamental abbreviation). A publishable text must be of a manageable length, and this requires ruthless selection. Moreover, there are considerations of what segments of experience one

would not want to share with an anonymous reading public. A.E. Coppard's admission that, "There have been episodes in my life, important and privately fascinating occasions, which not even the prospect of an eternity of hellfire would induce me to reveal" is, Finney argues, "true of all autobiographical writers" (1985:46). Certainly, we have seen that Breytenbach and Kuzwayo admit to omission, while Campbell and others like Alan Paton, Ruth Gordon, Noni Jabavu do not really attempt to conceal their withholding of information. Finney argues that, "an autobiography is likely to throw more light on the normally aging autobiographer than on the earlier self about whom the book is ostensibly written" (1985:259). And long before this Freud demonstrated that,

the past represented in analysis is both a discursive and a symbolic one. The material recollected is less a 'pure' past than a narrative created in the present as the subject imaginatively reworks conscious and unconscious material. (Jay, 1984:25-6)

While the psychoanalytic situation and the textual circumstances of writing autobiography are not equivalent, the role of the unconscious should not be discounted, and many autobiographies clearly serve their writers as similarly therapeutic acts of analysis.<sup>10</sup>

The autobiography, furthermore, does not simply document life because, as we have had occasion to note already, textuality is ontologically distinct from life. The text can only point or gesture towards the real author:

The *bios* of an autobiography, we may say, is what the "I" makes of it; yet as recent critics have observed, so far as the finished work is concerned, neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing -- the third element of autobiography -- assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. But at this point, as... [Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan tell us], the text takes on a life of its own, and the

self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing to do with an authorizing author. (Olney, 1980:22)<sup>11</sup>

Textual characters are not equivalent to material beings, the former (as verbal constructs) not being subject to the vicissitudes of life. But these characters are subject to the narrative and its constituent discourses. The character must serve the narrative -- we find this even in a text like Breytenbach's True Confessions where the storyline requires that accounts of prison friendships be omitted or radically reduced so as to prevent the subversion of the story of his solitary confinement; more tellingly, in this text, no matter how much he might wish to destabilize any notions of continuity of being and of the innocence of text, finally the narrator has (in a concluding note to the reader) to return to an avowal of truthfulness which employs precisely these very conceptions so as to enlist the reader's acceptance that this is indeed a true account of the material conditions of a material being, the writer. Barthes states, and we see this evidenced in the example from Breytenbach, that "the character's freedom is dominated by the discourse's instinct for preservation" (1974:135). Later he adds:

*the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices:...* Such is discourse: if it creates characters, it is not to make them play among themselves before us but to play with them, to obtain from them a complicity which assures the uninterrupted exchange of the codes: the characters are types of discourse and, conversely, the discourse is a character like the others. (178-9)

Even to claim that autobiography is an account in the present of past experience is problematic: for as Derrida has demonstrated, the present is a composite of manifold memories and anticipations,

never existing in the isolated instant of awareness. Time is an endless deferring of presence.... In other words, there is no privileged ground of reflection from which thought could ever organize or control the flux of temporal experience. (Norris, 1982:47)

While textuality would seem to be the source and evidence for the fact/fiction divide, this division of texts into fact/fiction is metaphorical and rhetorical, not logical. Lacan remarked that "truth always manifests itself in a structure of fiction" (cited by Davis, 1983:861), and Elbaz argues that

everything having to do with language is fiction, the construction of a speaking subject: one always speaks from a linguistic-metaphoric reality. Every discourse is an interpretation. The hope of grasping events in their bareness and immediately as they happen is an illusion which takes strength from the dichotomy 'truth/falsehood' -- a metaphysical residue which is one of the bastions of the prevalent ideology. (1988:14)

The mediation of "a linguistic-metaphoric reality" is thus duplicated by the mediation of textual convention and generic requirements when the speaking subject becomes a writing subject. Barthes' position is that

[i]t is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself.... [L]anguage is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we convoke logic, or, lacking that, the sworn oath.... (1981b:85-7)

In addition we might use photographs, for, "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (87). The point is, I believe, to examine that "enormous apparatus of measurements," not to pretend that because there is no logical or theoretically valid reason for their existence that we should therefore ignore them and "do away with the concept of genre" (Elbaz, 1988:14). Barthes argues in "The Death of the Author" that

writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (1989:114)

But his view carefully excludes writing which has "a view to acting directly on reality" (114). So although the autobiographer, the person, eludes textualization and the

narrative is 'peopled' by 'characters' not unlike those in fiction, there is one important difference and that is that of legal accountability. Autobiographers can be held up for defamation or libel because of their texts' truth claims.

It is futile to attempt to be much more specific in defining the genre. To some extent, autobiography is a tautological genre: if a text presents itself as autobiography the strategies by which it secures this status are matter for analysis. The claim to be autobiographical represents a contract, "and it cannot be honored except by another" (Derrida, 1985:9). In spite of the fact that I defend the continued recognition of the importance of generic categories for the reasons I have already given, I must concede that

if the border between autobiography and fiction is erected on a privileged notion of referentiality, then the study of autobiographical works will always be partly founded upon an illusion.... De Man rejects the idea that the subject in an autobiographical work represents a privileged form of referentiality. He wants, instead, to view the subject as a textual production. What we always confront in any autobiographical work, he argues, is not a series of historical events but a series of efforts to write something. The action proper to autobiography, is not historical but rhetorical. (Jay, 1984:18)

Generic conventions function to delimit the sayable. Moreover, generic convention, when it becomes formulaic as in much South African autobiographical writing, seems to provide a structure whose truth value is endorsed through repetition, each retelling acquiring validity from those that have gone before. The repetitiveness of much South African autobiographical writing (especially the 'township' autobiography), serves perhaps to create the illusion of stability, a clearly delimited real. This repetitiveness of many of the tales of black South Africans' lives under apartheid might arise, in part, from a need in some readers to hear variations of the theme because of the incomprehensibility -- both for white and black South

Africans, the latter trying to understand their oppression -- of the horrors of apartheid. Autobiography contributes to the collective memory of what apartheid meant; "Our memory... repeats to us what we haven't understood. Repetition is addressed to incomprehension" (Valéry, quoted by Felman, 1992:276). Moreover, each autobiographical text enacts a *difference* in the repetition.

But autobiography, as is true of all genres, is a transitory cultural product; it is governed by shifting conventions which are culture and history-specific. In fact, as we have seen, even to use the same term, 'autobiography', for such widely divergent textual productions as Western-style narratives and traditional black South African autobiographical praise poems is probably somewhat misleading and certainly imprecise. Nevertheless, since generic classification serves as a determinant of the status of a text in the material world of publishers and readers, its unstable configurations warrant attention. As Christie McDonald suggests in a question to Derrida, "the principle of a traditional genre is fundamentally that of an order which, even though it does not remain fixed, makes possible the production of meaning and gives rise to hermeneutic discourse as meaningful discourse" (Derrida, 1985:47). In my study of generic developments over time my method is archaeological; I am concerned to establish "the regularity of the discursive practice concerned, 'the set of conditions in which the enunciative function operates and which guarantees and defines its existence'" (Smart citing Foucault, 1985:49).

South African autobiographical writing since 1948 has seen some significant innovations in its formal features. Raymond Williams observes that:

As a society changes, its literature changes, though often in unexpected ways, for it is part of social growth and not simply its reflection. At times, a



rising social group will create new institutions which, as it were, release its own writers. At other times, writers from new social groups will simply make their way into existing institutions, and work largely within their terms.... (1961:528)

I would argue that autobiography has released writers from the oppressed classes that other prose genres would not have been able to accommodate.<sup>12</sup> "In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least 'literary' kind of writing, practised by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were 'writers'" (Olney, 1980a:4). This ability to include even the barely literate is the source of its crucial importance in South African literary production in the last four and half decades. Moloi's My Life: Volume One, for instance, is often ungrammatical, as even his apology to the reader indicates:

I apologise in advance for my poor writing style, I couldn't make it, even at school. But, nevertheless, here I am trying to the best of my ability to put down on this paper for my generations to come, and for those who care, the truth about this me called Godfrey. (4)

Autobiography's inclusiveness is an important part of what makes it of greater cultural and political significance than fiction. As Nise Malange remarks: "each person has a story to tell... you do not need to be well educated or specially gifted to be able to tell the story or to write" (cited by Lockett, 1990:19).<sup>13</sup> The mediated autobiographical anthologies like Facing the Storm and Working Women and the aggregated auto/biography like Thula Baba and Women of Phokeng exemplify this non-elitist inclusiveness of the genre. They illustrate, too, the elasticity of the genre which enables it to accommodate and contribute to social change.

Other more radical changes in South African autobiographical writing are the changes from traditional black non-narrative praise poems to narrative prose autobiography. While so much of White's essay on "The

Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" will be useful to my analysis of the shift in black South African autobiographical writing from praise poem to narrative, Nussbaum's astute criticism of White for seeming to be bound to an idea of narrative as transhistorical, a metacode which he terms, "a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (White, 1980:6) is important. The fact that traditional black South African autobiographical texts are non-narrative suggests that we need to be rather more cautious when making assumptions regarding "human universal[s]." As Nussbaum observes,

[W]hile it is crucial to acknowledge the way history is always someone's story, it is equally important to historicize narrative, to recognize its embedment in its particular moment and sociocultural situation, and to note the ways in which its various readers over time assign its various meanings. (1989:17)

The seemingly abrupt shift in the autobiographical texts by black South Africans from traditional black *lithoko* (Sotho) and *imbongi* (Zulu) (praise poems) to narrative forms (one must, of course, guard against essentializing these autobiographical forms), is significant beyond its indication of a shift to a Western aesthetic standard, ascribed to the impact of a dominant culture on dominated cultures. I have argued elsewhere that this change is indicative of a shift in epistemology towards a Western linguistic practice which accords greater truth value to prose than to poetry. The truths of prose are themselves generally conceived of in this community as unembellished, rooted in daily experience, this notion depending "on the assumption that language can function mimetically in relation to reality, that transparency of meaning is an attainable ideal" (Coullie, 1991:16). Furthermore, the move to Western autobiographical forms betokens a shift from autobiography as act (the praise poem is a performative text which may alter in certain minor respects from one performance to the next) to autobiography as

relatively stable *product*<sup>14</sup> (which may or may not accrue for the author some monetary profit); and also from autobiography as both sacred and profane (an individual's praises being used after death as incantation to the ancestors), to autobiography as secular textual product. The move from performative poetry to printed prose narrative means fundamental epistemological shifts and Jay's point about British autobiography is pertinent: "traditional autobiographical forms began to dissolve as the conventional ideas that underlay their conceptions of subjectivity and its literary representation were dissolving" (1984:112). The communally defined self (which involves, it would seem, a more dispersed sense of what self is) is replaced by a self who is known and narrated by an authorizing author/narrator. Traditional black South African poetic forms define identity in terms of ancestry and relationship (Gunner, 1984:50, 59); the self is not autonomous, nor does the autobiographical subject function as author in quite the same way as in narrative autobiography. The self is defined by the community; in Zulu and Sotho non-narrative praise poems the defining criteria for biography and autobiography are less clear than they are for most Westerners:

An ordinary individual's praises are... both autobiographic and biographic. He composes praises for himself but is helpless to prevent others from doing the same for him and commenting upon features that catch their attention and excite their admiration, amusement or distaste. (Gunner, 1984:63)

In narrative autobiography the self is commodified as an entity over which the author has exclusive authority (and whose narrativization thereof may earn her disapprobation or profit). In this Western tradition originality of composition, not community effort, is the norm.

The author's authority is embedded in the centrality of the narrator in the narrative and in the unifying nature of narrative plot (which tends to disallow untidy elements which do not fit in with the overall interpretative

communally defined self

narrative line). The individualization of the central character in narrative autobiography (a kind of holy trinity of author, narrator, protagonist), can be contrasted with an explicit embedding and relational defining of the autobiographical subject in traditional praise poems. The act of composition is treated in markedly different ways in the two traditions: Westerners allow for one author only of autobiography, and although co-writers may be accepted, it is extremely rare for a communally composed text to be received as autobiographical.<sup>15</sup>

*Minh-ha mutations*

The point that I wish to make is that mutating textual practices are profoundly significant. Textual structures are not something imposed from outside the genesis of the text, but are "a projection of that person's way of handling realities" (Minh-ha, cited by Maqagi, 1990:23). It has been argued at least since Nietzsche that the Western conception of the unified self is a constructed tradition, "a historically constituted set of ideas and assumptions whose referents are complexly dispersed within the very language we must use to think the self into being" (Jay, 1984:28). Linguistic and textual transformations are concomitant with paradigm shifts. Foucault remarks that, "[t]he coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences" (1984:101). Narrative autobiography has as its pivot the individualized *author* as source of knowledge and meaning. But this individualizing philosophy embraces too the autobiographical *subject* in narrative autobiography. Narrative is an authoritarian mode, whereas the performative, more collectively composed traditional black autobiography is less obviously so. In the non-narrative praise poem of black South African tradition, the author (or more properly, the autobiographical subject) is not sole authority over the text, nor sole composer, and

thus cannot assume a position of unimpeachable dominance within the text.<sup>16</sup>

Hayden White remarks that

[u]nless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of giving the true account of what really happened. (1980:23-4)

The authority of narrative history and auto/biography lies not only in its positioning of the narrator as authority for the story, it lies perhaps more powerfully in a characteristic of narrative itself. That is, the narrative structure imbues narrated events with an order of meaning. Spacks notes that, "To understand one's life as a story demands that one perceive that life as making sense" (1980:131). This "sense" is achieved by means of the narrative's characteristic attempts "to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time" (White, 1980:15).<sup>17</sup> I would argue that many autobiographies succumb to the attractions and dangers of rationality, what Foucault calls "the merciless language of reason" (1965:ix). The authority for the narrative's schema of meaning is conveyed by relying on the techniques of what Barthes -- referring to fictional works<sup>18</sup> -- calls the readerly.

Almost all South African autobiographical writing in English since 1948 can be classified as readerly -- rather than writerly -- texts. In the latter meaning is constantly transformed, in flux; it is plural and contradictory. The readerly text, however,

steers clear of contradiction, which would challenge the imperative of inevitability.

The readerly text purports to be a transcript of a reality which pre-exists and exceeds it, and it tightly controls the play of signification by subordinating everything to this transcendental meaning. It encourages the reader or viewer to move

readerly  
texts  
defined

away from its signifiers, which are understood as secondary, toward a privileged and originating signified. (Silverman, 1983:243)

The readerly, of which the classic realist text is a prime example, hierarchizes its discourses "and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth" (McCabe, 1985:34).

Most South African autobiography in the last four and a half decades, like the classic realist text, "ensures the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularly" (McCabe, 1985:39). This is manifested in Campbell and Luthuli, and can be found too in Butler, Hermans, Juta and Joseph. The reader's relationship to the represented world is generally designed to be one of assent: the text evokes a world which soothes the reader's expectations of passive consumption of significances (however disturbing these may be) which exceed the verbal representation thereof. Barthes argues that "the author [of the readerly text] is a god (his place of origin is the signified); as for the critic, he is the priest whose task is to decipher the Writing of the god" (1974:174). The primacy of the author as the godhead of the holy trinity (author/narrator/protagonist) in most narrative autobiography is undisputed, and this entails the concomitant secondary supporting role of the reader as collaborator.

Autobiographers have to create an illusion of conclusiveness out of their inconclusive and uncompleted lives, but since, as Barthes intimated, each autobiographer is her or his own symbolic and ideological blind spot (1977a:152-3), they can rarely achieve consistent mastery of the discursive raw material with which they must work; gaps must inevitably be smoothed over by the reader. The reader is, in autobiographies as different as Winnie Mandela's and Alan Paton's, invited to co-operate with the

text's narrative strategy which is

[t]o end, to fill, to join, to unify -- one might say that this is the basic requirement of the *readerly*, as though it were prey to some obsessive fear: that of omitting a connection. Fear of forgetting engenders the appearance of a logic of actions; terms and the links between them are posited (invented) in such a way that they unite, duplicate each other, create an illusion of continuity. (Barthes, 1974:105)

My own position of reader refuses this role, seeking not some sort of divine truth regarding the text, but rather attempting to unravel some of the discursive threads which constitute the text so as to interrogate the gaps, the inconsistencies.

At the other extreme of this continuum, the *writerly* text, like Breytenbach's and, to a lesser extent, Gordon's, contemplates its own discursive raw materials. It may be fruitful to consider the traditional autobiographical praise poem, *izimbongi* and *lithoko*, as a species of the *writerly*, sharing some of its characteristics. It denies the rigidity of a syntagmatic order, and seeks no "final great ensemble, ... [no] ultimate structure" (Barthes, 1974:12). The *writerly* text replaces the concepts of "'product' and 'structure' with those of 'process' and 'segmentation'" (Silverman, 1983:247). The performances of a person's praise poem will be sensitive to audience responses, hence "process" rather than "product". The praise poem may, in performance, be constructed differently; it is a pre-eminently social and communal act. Its form is loose in that it does not seek some unifying narrative point.

Autobiography usually authenticates itself by inscribing in the narrative the probable, what the culture has "already written" (a favourite Barthesian phrase) as making up the tissue of everyday life. In "*readerly*" fashion it "attempts to conceal all traces of itself as a factory within which a particular social reality is produced

through standard representations and dominant signifying practices" (Silverman, 1983:244), aiming for transparency by concealing the apparatuses of enunciation (215). The binary oppositions which are part of the culture's meaning system (male/female, black/white, country dweller/city sophisticate, oppressor/victim etc.) are woven into the narrative by means of what Barthes refers to as the symbolic code. McCabe notes that for Barthes,

[o]n the one hand representation refuses to accept the unlimited nature of the real, a nature which entails that no description can be brought to an end, while, on the other, it refuses to acknowledge the operations of fantasy in the description by supposedly grounding the writing in external conditions. (1985:135)

Paradoxically, narrative achieves the illusion of fullness, completion, through establishing its frame of reference metonymically, using detail to suggest a larger, complete, reality. All of these techniques are especially significant, indeed crucial, for autobiography since its value rests almost entirely on its claim to represent the real. Just how specific texts employ these techniques so as to achieve maximum credibility and transparency is matter for much further study.

White argues that "narrative in general... has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, *authority*" (1980:17):

Where there is ambiguity or ambivalence regarding the status of the legal system, which is the form in which the subject encounters most immediately the social system in which he is enjoined to achieve a full humanity, the ground on which any closure of a story one might wish to tell about a past, whether it be a public or private past, is lacking. And this suggests that narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality we can imagine. (17-8)

White argues that narrative closure consists of the *passage* from one moral order to another for there is no other way



of 'concluding' an account of *real* events; "for we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that the events of the order of the real have ceased to happen" (26). A story, by contrast, concludes when the events it has treated are "endowed with specifically moral meaning" (25). Barthes makes a similar point in his autobiography: "History is a moral notion; it allows us to relativize the natural and to believe in a meaning of time" (1977a:126). The narrative autobiography thus establishes itself as an authoritarian undertaking also because it becomes its own moral authority for interpretation. We see this particularly in Campbell's, Luthuli's and Moloi's autobiographies. Perhaps it is no accident that these are male-authored texts.

But as White goes on to show, this certainty of moral code, of interpretative model, is born out of desire, not experience. The historical narrative

displays to us a formal coherency that we ourselves lack.... In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience. Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a *plot* all along, they give to reality the odor of the *ideal*. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as 'found' in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques. (White, 1980:24)

And again we return to the issue of stylistic flatness in much autobiographical writing: making explicit the contrivances of plot and verbal dexterity would be tantamount to an admission of fictionality (in the sense of creative shaping, but also with an implication of constructedness). Given the seriousness of their task as witnesses to the social catastrophes of the last 46 years, or even for those who see their texts in less momentous terms as records of their lives and careers, few autobiographers are willing to take the risk of confronting

the narrativized idealization of experience.

I have sought to suggest that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning? (White, 1980:27)

And, judging by the rarity of autobiographical texts which confront the issues of narrative expediency, it would seem that few readers of autobiography seek such exposure of the textual production process, of the ideological functions of narrative. Silverman says that

Barthes emphasizes that the classic text depends upon a linear reading or viewing; any deviation from that norm threatens its existence. This is because the classic text is finally nothing more than a large-scale predication, i.e. a statement which defines and situates a subject.... [Its discourse] requires readers and viewers who will accede to the terms of its (linear) unfolding. It enlists those readers and viewers by fostering in them a desire for closure, and a belief in the revelatory nature of endings. Narrative represents a particularly powerful syntagmatic lure, affirming the coherence of the text and binding the reader or viewer to it in a relationship of pleasurable dependence.... At the moment of closure toward which every readerly experience moves, the reader or viewer enjoys an illusory sense of liberation -- illusory because through that closure his or her subjectivity has been reconfirmed. Subjectivity must be constantly reactivated in this way; hence the readerly text is a disposable product, designed to be consumed during one encounter. More must always wait on the shelf.... (1983:245)

Certainly, most narrative autobiographies are "designed to be consumed during one encounter", attempting to convey certainty of meaning through transparent text. This again contrasts with autobiographical praise poems of traditional black cultures which are intended to be repeated many times -- not necessarily identically -- during the course of a

person's life; the performance is itself an experience, not a commodified product which can be purchased and then disposed of. The repetitiveness of formulaic autobiographies relates too to their function as disposable products: the reader's one encounter with the text is predictable, depicting a reality that is reassuring (even when it horrifies), holding no surprises in the positioning of the reading subject.

Writing of the hermeneutic code in the readerly text, Barthes argues that it serves to "structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution" (1974:75). Expectation

becomes the basic condition for truth: truth, these [hermeneutic] narratives tell us, is what is at the end of expectation. This design brings narrative very close to the rite of initiation (a long path marked with pitfalls, obscurities, stops, suddenly comes out into the light); it implies a return to order, for expectation is a disorder: disorder is supplementary, it is what is forever added on without solving anything, without finishing anything; order is complementary, it completes, fills up, saturates, and dismisses everything that risks adding on: truth is what completes, what closes. (Barthes, 1974:76)

Not all autobiographical writing covered in this study is obviously hermeneutic in emphasis (Moloi's "farm boy" theme being an unusually clear example of a narrative which is structured around the hermeneutic impulse), but nevertheless most relies on the reader's desire to apprehend a new moral order in narrative closure. Breytenbach, for example, has left the prison and racist South Africa to emerge a wiser, more self-aware man in the free world of Europe. Donald Woods in Asking for Trouble (1980) also concludes his narrative with his arrival in Europe (England, to be precise) and his vindication in a new moral order which condemns racism. And Mathabane (1986), too, ends with his departure from South Africa to America, where a new moral order (which his own courage has begun to engender in him already) will enable him "to become a man, to realise his dreams" (350). Most South

African autobiographical writing positions the reader securely in a relation of acquiescence to its moral vision.

White exposes the nature of the appeal of narrativity in historical discourse: it "makes the real into an object of desire" by imposing upon events that are represented as real "the formal coherency" of stories (1980:23-4). Implicit in his argument, however, is a proposition that the ideological functions of narrativity make it unsuitable for representations of the real.

If we view narration and narrativity as the instruments by which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it. (White, 1980:8-9)

While I am sympathetic to White's position, one must be wary of assuming that non-narrative representations of reality are necessarily less problematic. One other alternative (the one that Barthes chooses), to write the self as a disordered collection of fragments, is also illusory:

I have the illusion to suppose that by breaking up my discourse I cease to discourse in terms of the imaginary about myself, attenuating the risk of transcendence; but since the fragment (haiku, maxim, *pensée*, journal entry) is *finally* a rhetorical genre and since rhetoric is that layer of language which best presents itself to interpretation, by supposing I disperse myself I merely return, quite docilely, to the bed of the imaginary. (1977a:95)

Barthes' description of his own autobiographical compositional strategy -- the heaping of summary on top of summary -- seems applicable to non-narrative autobiographies, such as some of the autobiographical anthologies of the worker autobiography sub-genre which achieve little more than the broad adumbrations of the epitome, the stereotype. Thus narrative is not an arch villain and the alternative is not necessarily truer or more satisfactory. Narrative is developmental yet

coherent; summaries are only incidentally cumulative.

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I said earlier that significant innovations have occurred in this latter part of the twentieth century in South African autobiographical writing in English. In addition to the formal innovations of the move amongst black South African autobiographers from traditional poetic praise poems to Western narrative forms, there are very important changes regarding the demographics of writers and readers of autobiography: as has been mentioned, the field has become increasingly democratic with more and more people of colour and women publishing their life stories. | ?

Nevertheless, women still produce fewer autobiographical texts than men. The proportions are roughly just short of double the number of black men autobiographers to black women; black men have published about 6/10 of the autobiographies that white men have; and white women's autobiographical texts make up less than half those of white men. If one considers that in South Africa blacks outnumber whites to about 6 to 1, and that women generally slightly outnumber men, these figures are even more disturbingly skewed. The imbalance is particularly obvious in the case of black women, especially if we recall that the largest proportion of quasi-autobiographies, of researcher-scripted autobiographical texts, are to be found in the black woman category. Between 1960 and 1985 two black South African women published their autobiographies in English (i.e. Jabavu and Kuzwayo); none exist prior to this. In this period, however, two other autobiographical texts of black women were published in English, but these were both penned by white women. Even post 1985, a large proportion (more than half, it would seem) of black women's autobiographical texts are researcher-motivated and scripted. These include Winnie Mandela's Part of my Soul, Frances Baard's My Spirit is Not Yet Banned, and the

anthologies like Working Women, Vukani Makhosikazi, and Women of Phokeng. In these cases it is white women who act as facilitators for black women to recount stories of some of their experiences.

Who is it that silences women? It is male-dominated social structures which interpellate women as Other, which make women believe that they have sole responsibility for domestic chores (and thus less time for any other pursuits), which make women feel that they have nothing of importance to say or, if they do wish to be heard, regard their contributions with disdain. As is evident in Shared Lives, Lyndall Gordon's youthful (and obviously gendered) feelings of inadequacy are eroded principally not by Gordon herself, but by her husband who encourages her to write, who -- in effect -- authorizes her achievements.

And who is it that silences black women, specifically? It is both the white establishment (inferior black education, and also the publishing industry which tends to neglect indigenous black languages and women's writing) and also patriarchal black cultural formations, which inform not only traditional social structures but, as has been well documented, liberation movements and trade unions too. Racism and patriarchy silence black women by interpellating these women into subordinate subject positions by which they themselves think and act. Nise Malange writes of a "socialized lack of self-confidence"; young women from traditional homes are "considered unmodest or rude" if they attract attention for anything other than the products of their labour (cited by Lockett, 1990:18). And Boitumelo Mofokeng comments on the enormous courage required for a black woman to speak in her own person, using the first person (Daymond and Lenta, 1990:78-80). In the light of this, many South African women autobiographers can indeed be seen as crusaders, as women warriors, demanding recognition and an audience where none existed before.

Black South Africans produce proportionally fewer autobiographical texts than whites, nevertheless, for obvious reasons, their texts tend to be regarded as more important. (One needs only to look at South African university English department syllabi to see that if autobiographies are prescribed, they will almost always be black-authored texts). Hayden White's point about the contest over meaning which is implicit in any narrative account of history is apposite: increasingly marginalized persons are appropriating the right to speak, to be attended to. Writers, publishers and readers are responding to demands of history to recognize black South Africans and to marginalize whites.

There are shifts, too, in the readership of autobiographical texts. Increasingly, as I have said, black South Africans are targeted as readers. Barthes' argument that "*in the text, only the reader speaks*" (1974:151) refers to the role of readers in the meaning-making process, the text being inert matter until it is read. But readers make meanings in another sense too: as texts are written for implied readers, so the image of the targeted audience will shape the text. And in this diversifying of implied audiences there has been an accompanying hybridisation of autobiographical forms. The relationship between text and reader is dialectical, for as the implied reader shapes the text so the text shapes the implied reader, encouraging certain attitudes and beliefs in that reader. So the meaning-making process of actual or real readers is generally quite tightly circumscribed by the narrative's hierarchization of discourses, its claims to have in its possession the truth, and its positioning of the reader in relation to these textual strategies. Readers of autobiography are usually placed in a position of pseudo-dominance: sharing all meanings with the narrator, being the privileged auditors who are invited to listen to confidences and truths.



While the reader may refuse the subject positions offered by the text, the reader is not autonomous:

The subject who reads is constituted by a series of conventions, the grids of regularity and intersubjectivity. The empirical "I" is dispersed among these conventions which take over from him in the act of reading. (Culler, 1975:258)

Or, as Barthes would have it, the reader is already written. The experiential side of this theoretical argument is expressed by Dabi Nkululeko who insists that white women cannot fully comprehend the experience of the native woman under colonialism. I agree. However, I differ from her when she argues that comprehension can begin if "Euro-settler women... overcome most of the trappings of their own experience, such as their own class interests and status," and dissociate themselves from their experiences "as part of the colonist-settler nation" (cited by Lockett, 1990:14). If we are our own ideological blind spots, as Barthes and Foucault have demonstrated, no more than an attempt can be made to understand, let alone dissociate oneself from, the discourses that inform our consciousness. Disengagement *per se* is not possible. Nor should we essentialize ourselves or others in terms of race, gender, class and other categorizations.

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Felicity Nussbaum's remarks about 18th Century English autobiography apply to South African autobiographical writing in the last four decades:

Autobiographical writing allows the previously illiterate and disenfranchised to adopt a language sufficiently acceptable to be published, and, at the same time, it enables them to envisage new possibilities in the interstices between discourses or to weave them together in new hybrid forms.... Such texts may work simultaneously for and against the ideologies of identity which prevail. They may sometimes seem to resolve certain manifest contradictions in order to affirm the humanist self, but just as often the texts may be read as subverting hegemonic formulations of identity, thus arrogating the power to change dominant knowledges regarding the human subject. (1989:37)



Both Godfrey Moloi's My Life: Volume One and Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives seem to illustrate the phenomenon described above (in spite of the fact that Gordon is not illiterate: she is certainly marginalized) for, as new hybrid discursive compounds these texts can be seen (albeit in very different ways) to "work simultaneously for and against the ideologies of identity which prevail". My interest in this chapter (in keeping with the theme of *graphie*) is precisely in how Moloi and Gordon "envisage new possibilities in the interstices between discourses or... weave them together in new hybrid forms". While Gordon's innovativeness lies in her subversive manipulation of the discourses of biography and autobiography so as to expose new ways of being and of knowing, Moloi's lies in his pastiche of seemingly incompatible discourses, and in the hierarchization of these discourses, so that established interpretations are invalidated, and novel ones offered. I shall begin with Moloi.

Most autobiographical texts by black South Africans, predictably, challenge the apartheid State. Moloi's My Life: Volume One, published in 1987, although authored by a victim of apartheid does not explicitly defy the regime. Moloi's autobiography, tracing his experiences of destitution and crime from the 1930s to the 1960s, attests to the fact that, "for Africans our country has been made into a vast series of displaced persons' camps" (Luthuli, 1982:177); but it also exemplifies the irrepressible spirit of someone who flouts displacement by creating out of the emergent chaos a place in which the squalor of poverty is imbued with the glamour of celluloid. The autobiographical hero is just that: a hero. While simultaneously exploring a life of deprivation and oppression, the narrative, by hierarchizing seemingly contradictory and incompatible discourses, refuses the position of victim for the autobiographical subject, thus subverting material and discursive realities of South Africa both in the period of

the narrated events (the 1930s, 40s and 50s) and in the 1980s (the time of the narration). My Life<sup>19</sup> is a particularly interesting attempt to create out of racially motivated deprivation, a hero's life, not in the more expected mould of hero of the liberation struggle, but in the unorthodox positioning of the self in the discourses of popular American culture of the 40s and 50s.<sup>20</sup>

White South African governments have engineered the breakdown of traditional black social structures through racist legislation dating back to the early decades of this century. As masses of impoverished blacks flocked to the towns because of the devastations of land theft to seek employment at exploitative rates, traditional extended family units, and the norms and mores which cemented relationships, ceased to function.<sup>21</sup>

Understanding as we do that the subject is positioned in discursive networks which involve material and non-material relations, we can expect that the destruction of the social and discursive fabric means that new ways of being emerge. Apartheid has, quite literally, changed the subject.<sup>22</sup> But the changes show that power is not simply an oppressive force. Power, as Foucault argued, "transforms" (1980:92); "relations of power... have a directly productive role" (1980:94). This is true of those crystallised force relations embodied in the state apparatus, and of the less stable, non-institutionalised "moving substrate of force relations" (Foucault, 1980:93). Power is productive as well as repressive: "it produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It... [is] a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (Foucault, 1972:61).

Inviting Foucauldian analysis which avoids "a conception of power in terms of the terminal form it may assume" (Smart, 1985:136), Moloi's text explores some of the

diversity of structures in which power -- even in a racist police state like South Africa -- is exercised, and its positive, pleasure-inducing effects.

The productive effects of forms of power are evinced in the fact that My Life is a Western-style narrative autobiography which shows no evidence of influence from traditional poetic, non-narrative Zulu and Sotho auto/biographical texts.<sup>23</sup> My Life narrativizes the autobiographical subject's desire in terms of hegemonic culture. It hierarchizes its discourses so that traditional discourses, such as worship of the ancestors (*amadlozi*), deep and selfless respect for parents, functioning extended family networks, and other culturally inscribed norms, are marginalised. For instance, although Moloi's autobiographical subject at times invokes the ancestors' help, he more frequently prays to a Christian God (Moloi's father was an Anglican priest), and even more often seems sceptical of both of these belief systems, revealing a spirit of agnosticism that is in keeping with the characterization of himself as the sophisticated city slicker. The following exemplifies this well:

One pitch-black night we went to steal from *The African Moon*, an American ship and for that reason a favourite target. When I was half way up the anchor rope to the deck, some devil wind came from nowhere and slowly swayed the ship to my side, sagging the rope with my weight dangling from it slowly into the dark drink. Waist deep, I was praying in the name of all gods and devils and holding for dear life to the rope. I don't know, between God and Satan, who swung the wind back in my favour as I slid back to the quay where my friend 'Pikinini' was waiting. (24)

Moreover, while the protagonist is still part of an extended familial network, the links are clearly weak, and the narrator does not define himself in terms of these relationships. He lives at various times with his aunt, brother and cousin, but alcohol abuse and poverty place enormous strain on these relationships. (It is hard to imagine how anyone could be hospitable in a two-roomed

shack with no proper sanitation or even running water).

The narrator's isolated expressions of admiration for tribal traditions notwithstanding, Moloi recounts his experiences of traditional Zulu culture as if its practices are curiosities. For instance, his discussion of the prohibitions against women and men sitting on the same side of the hut, or drinking from the same vessel, concludes thus:

So the big clay pot, *ukhamba*, would be stirred, sifted and tasted by the youngest. He would give to the elder next to the door. The elder would drink and pass the *khamba* to his neighbour, and so on across the hut until it reached the youngest. Then the youngest would again bring it to the elder next to the door. The same procedure was followed by the women on the other side, as they never drank from the same *khamba* as the men. Before long, somebody would start a song, and the rest would join in the harmony. You know those beautiful tunes the Zulus sing. (46-7)

Again referring to "Zulu culture" (50) as an outsider would, the narrator describes the rules of courtship which serve to prevent male aggression and promiscuity. "How wonderful the world would be if we all behaved like that, especially in the townships" (50) he says, indulging in a fantasy that he does not really want to be part of. Moreover, Moloi's urban manners and American-style fashions, which are generally a source of intense pride, disqualify him from participation in traditional society. A woman with whom he attempts to flirt responds by dismissing him because his clothes make him look "like a woman" and his hands are "as soft as a child's" (56). He does not suffer much regret, however, for not having "their clothes and their beliefs" (57) because the anonymity of urban slums has its uses for Moloi: "town," he observes, "is the only place where one can hide one's disgraceful past" (51).

Abandoning traditional Zulu and Sotho constructions of the self as an indivisible part of a community<sup>24</sup> -- the

living community of extended family and tribal affiliations, as well as the community of those who have gone before, the ancestors<sup>25</sup> -- Moloi's egoistic hero is presented as "a self-made man" (3) (as S. 'Teacher' Masebe, the author of the Introduction says). He is an ambitious individual, battling against enormous difficulties such as poverty-induced crime and the lack of legitimate employment opportunities above the unskilled and semi-skilled levels. The autobiographical subject is presented as a picaresque hero whose rejection of traditional "country ways" serves as the principle narrative structuring device. That is to say, the country vs. city theme informs the hero's maturation process and also the plot, which traces his experiences from his familial country roots in rural Natal to his acquisition, at the conclusion of the narrative, of a permit to rent a house in Johannesburg.

The narrative begins with an implied question regarding the hero's identity. The first chapter is entitled: "I Thought You Were Just a Farm Boy". The speaker, Acme Hlatshwayo, is, as the past tense of his utterance implies, mistaken. The rest of the text proves the extent of the error, and concludes with a heavily ironic reconsideration of this proposition. My Life, then, in terms of its central problematic of self-definition, rejects traditional rural culture, and the narrator not infrequently refers to these country folk pejoratively as "country bums" (92), "moegoes" and "sqazas" (136), which may be roughly translated as hicks and barbarians. Interestingly, Fanon's observation that the antagonisms between country people and urban dwellers "is the antagonism which exists between the native who is excluded from the advantages of colonialism and his counterpart who manages to turn colonial exploitation to his account" (1973:89) is most apt. It is Moloi's ability to "turn colonial exploitation to his account" that shores up the implied disdain for traditionalists who, the narrator feels, are never able to

rise above their status as unsophisticated, uneducated pawns. It is widely agreed that conventional narrative solutions may be prescriptive as well as descriptive, and this is certainly the case in *My Life* for it is apparent that the narrator expects the reader to concur with him in his dismissal of what he perceives to be peasant culture.

prescriptive  
v/s  
descriptive

But how is rejection of tradition to be construed as positive and productive? *My Life* endorses a lifestyle which is a hybrid of various South African discourses as well as the dominant discourse of popular American culture, born out of the narrator's desire to be identified as a superior, urban sophisticate. For instance, illustrating Foucault's point that the hegemonic culture is not only repressive, but traverses lives and induces pleasures, the autobiographical subject models himself on an idle idol, "Mr Soweto":

He chose his dress and his cars well. He was no councillor, no shopkeeper, no manager. He was just nobody but Elijah Msibi.... Many people have forgotten about Msibi... but this might remind them to go back and scrutinize his past deeds and see just how worthwhile he was. He used to drive around in his beautiful red *Impala* convertible, immaculately dressed in his favourite *Stetson* shoes and hat (sometimes a straw hat took its place), with a pole of a cigar in his mouth. (116-7)

Apparently, all Mr Msibi did to earn this respect was to dress stylishly, be generous with his liquor, have smart cars and avoid getting his hands dirty in any lawful employment. Emulating Mr Msibi, the narrator carefully describes his own modish clothing, which generally conforms to contemporary American fashions.

The effect of the narrative's desire is seductive: Moloi's tale of the first 30 years of his life enthralls because it is entertaining, evoking as it does -- in indigenized form -- the glamour and thrills of early Hollywood adventure movies. This new world, emerging out of the destruction of traditional communities, is, however,

a crazed world in which fantasy and adventure collide with racist oppression; a world in which husbands and wives may not live together, a world of cardboard and tin shacks, of an illegal-liquor industry born out of poverty and racially differentiated liquor laws, of the "Pass" whose efficacy was ensured by the regular police raids which Moloi describes as, "the most terrible thing ever created by man against man" (66). It is a world in which racial classification is a prime determinant of criminality:

I have lived my life in the worst of times, when almost anything you did was a crime. You would get arrested just for being found drinking your own home brew -- and if it was white liquor you were really in trouble. Being found smelling of liquor, being without an I.D. document, being drunk no matter where, sometimes for having cutlery in your house ('dangerous weapons'), never mind not having a job -- you were always being found guilty.... So all in all life was but a vicious circle. Today I really wonder how people, including me, existed under such inhuman conditions. (117-8)

This is a world in which even the most innocent activity is characterised by extreme violence. The narrator confides his greatest fear in the final pages, without any apparent awareness of what for most people would seem to be a strange terror in response to an apparently trivial act:

All this time I had a continuous worry on my mind. I had been haunted by it since marriage. I always prayed my God to take me through that age and help me not to be forced by circumstances to travel in trains with my wife. This was because I had witnessed some barbaric acts by *tsotsis* [gangsters] travelling on these trains. They wouldn't hesitate to molest a girl while in the company of her boy-friend. They would mercilessly beat her up or even stab her if she tried to resist, while telling the boyfriend to shut up and mind his own if he treasured his life. They would take the poor girl away forcibly while the poor boyfriend watched helplessly.

This I prayed should never come my way.... I prayed if ever it did I would know that my God never intended me to see my thirties, as that would have to be the day that I died. (219-20)

Repeatedly expressing his desire to avoid gangsterism and violence, the hero nevertheless consistently engages in

acts of brutality because in this world heroes are those who survive. The narrative is punctuated with the narrator's constant reminders that acquaintances have died since the narrated events had occurred; for instance, of "McKay Davashe, Kippie Moeketsi, Mzala Lepere, Willie Malang, Grey Mbawe, and... General Duze" all except one are dead (78) and of his band of eleven "most... are no more in this world" (175). The "brave new world" which emerges out of the devastations of apartheid is one in which the bully rules, be he the white racist or the black thug. The autobiographical hero robs and loots; he stabs a pickpocket several times in his quest to rid the world of such criminals, without confronting the irony of his own pickpocketing career (209). He savagely attacks unarmed men (even a sleeping man), shoots the wrong man (and expresses no regret), and he beats up women. And yet he manages to pardon all of this because it is part of a racy movie-like adventure.

It is important to note that Moloi's hero is, and could only be, a man. Jelinek aptly observes that the construction of their lives

as heroic seems to be a male literary tradition. The proclivity of men toward embellishing their autobiographies results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered. (1980:15)

While there are texts by both women and men which do not conform to Jelinek's observations about gendered writing (Makhoere's and Breytenbach's, for instance) Moloi's text does. My Life obviously positions the subject in terms of this gendered aggrandizement. The narrative demonstrates what a psychologist has recently found in empirical studies in Natal townships, a link between violence and a "more general crisis in masculinity" (Campbell, 1992:617-8). Catherine Campbell has found that "the ability of men to control women... and the use of violence to ensure this control, is one area where the power of working-class men



has not been threatened by a racial capitalist society" (625-6). Moloi's autobiography demonstrates the collapse, in urban ghettos, of traditional patriarchy into a much more virulent sexism (Luthuli argues that this is yet another negative effect of white domination (171)), authorised by reference to American male 'action' movies. The protagonist's attempts (referred to earlier) to woo a non-Christian Zulu woman are met with scornful rejection: "You mean that this ridiculous guy can make a man, to me? Look at his clothes! He looks like a woman.... You get away from here. I told you, I'm not your class!" (56). Township women, on the other hand, and even rural women where social norms have been eroded by contact with Europeans ways, are easy prey for Moloi and other men. When he finds a girlfriend kissing a man he perceives as his enemy he beats the man up, and then gives his girlfriend "the beating of her life" (58). The hero of My Life achieves his status as hero in specifically stereotypical masculine pursuits: womanizing, hard drinking and acts of physical bravado, including extreme violence. The hero's status is secured through multiple discourses: traditional Zulu/Sotho patriarchy, Western style sexism, and, most importantly, through the discourses of macho American fantasy.

Just as it attempts to negotiate incompatible cultures and value systems, My Life is a wonderful example of linguistic *métissage* (pace Lionnet, 1989). Mixed in amongst the Zulu, Sotho, Afrikaans and tsotsi-taal (township slang) terms -- which, incidentally, are often unexplained, thus implying a black South African reader -- Moloi's autobiography liberally employs American slang of the period. Women, for example, are referred to as "dames" (99), "dolls" (28) and "molls" (73); men are "guys" (56) or -- if they're enemies -- "bums" (57); police are "cops" (31), liquor is "booze" (48) which is purchased from a "joint" (122); a pianist is "good at the ivories" (99).

One of many fights is described thus: "I... bashed [my opponent] twice with my dome, bending his grazers in.... Then I flattened his protruding proboscis with my ham digging right. He hit the deck with his bum..." (93).

Americanisms exist not only at the level of expression, for My Life has the structure of a comic movie: complete mini-narratives, often humorous, frequently described as "scenes" or "shows", are linked together by a narrator who very often positions himself as movie director. The autobiographical subject in these instances is more than hero; as director he appropriates a greater form of compensatory power by placing himself in a position of control. This is how the narrator describes the violence which erupted at the Communal Hall where his band was performing:

It was exactly fifteen minutes to midnight... when I saw some manoeuvres at the door.... My God, the Plantation Spoilers [a gang] had arrived.

They burst through that door and left it wide open. There were loud screams and yells as people ran towards the stage. I could see the flashes of their long blades reflecting from the hall lights.... The women were screaming, the sweat was smelling, people were running around like rats.... This was some scene, surely the Spoilers had arrived.... This was action at its best....

There were screams, yells and blood all over.... The Spoilers were all over the hall.... A shot exploded and echoed across the hall. I saw Sika do some kind of tango; he had stopped a slug with his bum.... Dululu was now alone in the centre of the hall, swinging his gun from one hand to the other.... I realized nobody wanted to hurt me as people were passing me on all angles. This meant I had a good chance to be both director and spectator of the whole show. (179-183)<sup>26</sup>

The narrator takes a similar view of his experiences in prison (for unlawful possession of a firearm):

I feel unable to put down in words on this paper what this scene looked like. But vividly I still remember. To start with, there were over a thousand men involved in this [dam-building project]. There were warders, specials, oxen, tractors, wheelbarrows, mules, shovels, picks, spades, *blou* and *wit baadjies* (long and short term prisoners). So just imagine rolling

sound, clapping slate and calling action on all this!  
What a scene. (147)

And the autobiography's conclusion tantalisingly evokes the movie or T.V. serial convention of hinting at the themes of "the next exciting episode":

A new episode was about to begin. But will those knives, guns and goals be things of the past or will the whole past follow me into my brand new home?

This was the inscription on the wall for Godfrey the farm boy. (221)

"[I]dentity is a strategy" (Teresa de Lauretis, cited by Lionnet, 1989:8), and Moloi's strategy of according Hollywood movies the position of dominant discourse, enables the narrator to derive pleasure from an existence fraught with hardship and danger: he is constituted as the hero or director who transcends all obstacles. His unprincipled acts of gangsterism are interpreted from within a discursive practice which applauds the hero's behaviour, just as long as he remains the hero. He is often portrayed as a kind of movie star who strikes poses, a township Humphrey Bogart. (The description comes from S. Teacher Masebe's Introduction, 1). So successful is the movie-illusion, that the reader has frequently to remind herself that the narrator is not simply recounting fantastic adventures but is presenting us with a document which purports to record "the truth about this me called Godfrey" (4).<sup>27</sup> The point is that these sword-hero movies and Westerns (and, less centrally, popular American music of the time) do not simply serve to enliven the narrative; they *inform* the narrative, inducing pleasure, forming knowledge, producing discourse (precisely as Foucault argued) -- the crazy hybridized discourse of the black township.

Movie illusion is not simply the ideal to which the narrative aspires; it is the transcendent reality against which experience is measured. The perils of bootlegging provide opportunities for movie-like adventures:

[The cops] knew our little black *Prefect* cars very well by sight and they used to chase us around like rats in that maze of a township whenever they spotted us. This called for fast thinking and real mad movie driving. (203-4)

One police chase concludes successfully for the hero when he "disappeared into the wild west" (205). The protagonist's departure from his aunt's home (to escape from the cruel beatings of his drunken cousin) is described as his "escape from Alcatraz" (8). Blood is compared to tomato sauce (instead of the other way round) (30). Gang violence, even when the hero is a victim, is accepted if it reminds him of the movies. Once, when his band is performing, a gang breaks in "to rob those few pennies from the takings":

All of a sudden hell broke loose.... I tried to reach the door but somebody punched me on the nose and I bled the same instant.... I found the wall and flattened myself as much as I could against it while those running in circles in the middle of the hut got the worst of it from the thugs and those trying to defend themselves.... Pharaoh didn't stand high in my estimation, but on the other hand I had enjoyed what happened. It reminded me of some of the Westerns I'd seen. (53-4)

Crucially, movie discourse is not simply idiosyncratic: Moloi's friends give themselves movie hero names like Scaramouche (75), "Zachariah 'Satch' Lepele" (112), and "Zorro" (151); township bands take names like the "Jazz Maniacs, the Harlem Swingsters" (110), the "Ink Spots..., the Manhattan Stars, the Manhattan Bros, and the Broadway Bros" (111). Providing a structure in which subjects can function, weaving through the gaps of crumbling traditional cultures, Hollywood comes to Soweto many decades before Whoopi Goldberg.<sup>28</sup>

The broader social implications of American movie fantasy lie in the fact that

[e]very text is an articulation of the relations between texts, a product of intertextuality, a weaving together of what has already been produced elsewhere in discontinuous form; every subject, every author,

every self is the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time. (Sprinker, 1980:325)

Like all texts, My Life is the result of "systematic change and exchange" (Lionnet, 1989:16), the product of the intersection of a number of discourses which are "locked in an intricate web of practices, bearing in mind that every practice is by definition both discursive and material" (Henriques et al, 1984:106). Demonstrating "the relational character of [the] mutual effects" of the social and the subject (Henriques et al, 1984:21), Moloi's autobiography shows that the radical social changes wrought by racist oppression have resulted in profound and often unexpected changes in the ways that subjects are positioned. My Life illustrates what Jameson argues is a feature of fundamental social change in a class-based social formation:

the real notion of a proletarian revolution involves not some minor adjustment of social relations but a conflagration of forms, of modes of being, of individuality and experience as *such* so total as to be literally unimaginable to the bourgeois mind.<sup>29</sup> The bourgeois fears mob violence, rape, the clubbing to death of his children, the rampage through the museum... and yet these are only dim figures of a revolution in which bourgeois consciousness itself will become extinct. (Dowling, 1984:117)

My Life appropriates the freedom to interpret the self and experience in terms that are quite foreign to the culture of the white Afrikaner overlords; it creates, out of "frames of reference [which] are cultural worlds apart" (Lionnet, 1989:21-2), a self which defies the vast machinery of the white supremacist state to crush all sense of self-worth in black South Africans. Even though Moloi does not explicitly position himself as an opponent of the apartheid state,<sup>30</sup> he survives and defies the State's positioning of him as victim. As an instance of the "conquest over meaning and the contest over the power to name the real" (Nussbaum, 1989:xxi), My Life demonstrates that although white Afrikaner culture has been the obvious oppressor in South Africa, the discourses of American

movies have proven -- in Moloi's case at least -- to be stronger, the truly hegemonic discourse.

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We might agree that Moloi's autobiography demonstrates a refusal to resist the State that could seem tantamount to collaboration, nevertheless I hope to have demonstrated that Moloi's text illustrates a significant, and politically subversive, shift in textual production and power. My Life is an event and

[a]n event... is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it... the entry of a masked 'other.' (Foucault, 1984:88)

In his deployment of discourses which specifically excluded oppressed peoples like the colonised black masses, Moloi appropriates the position of popular hero within those discourses.

Another transformative autobiography -- but transformative in terms of generic configurations and gender positioning -- is Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives. While Moloi shores up masculinist discourses by weaving together a diverse range of discourses and carefully hierarchizing these, Gordon prizes open the authoritarian structures of Western biography and autobiography in order to interrogate (specific) women's experience. Nussbaum reminds us that modifications and transformations in writing such as we find in My Life and Shared Lives "disrupt old narrative codes or locate new ones as the texts strain to make currently available narrative models... stretch to 'represent' new kinds of consciousness and experience " (1989:xiii).

Gordon's title is telling: her text explores the fluidity of boundaries of self and other, the seepage of one life into another, the possibilities of autobiography permeating

the biography. Shared Lives probes these realities, thus practising the politics of her feminism which strives for collaboration, co-operation, between women. Stretching biography to incorporate autobiography, stretching authorship beyond the confines of the authorizing name, Gordon constantly reshapes existing narrative models so that the myths of individual autonomy are made to make way for "new kinds of consciousness and awareness". Gordon sets out to write the biography of three friends of her youth in Cape Town who have since died. But she finds that to be true to the intent of biography and to the memories she has of Flora (Romy, as she comes later to be called), Ellie and Rose, she has to write autobiographically, positioning them in her life and positioning herself in the narrative of their lives, thereby refusing the illusions of narratorial objectivity. Since her own knowledge is limited, and -- by her own admission -- biased, she turns to a host of other friends, and absorbs their musings into her tale. In my analysis of Gordon's book, my interest is (as, according to Dowling, is Jameson's) "in the cultural artifact as the symbolic resolution of a real contradiction, an attempt to resolve on an imaginary level the intolerability of a lived dilemma" (Dowling, 1984:119).

The "real dilemma" concerns the gender positioning in a variety of specific social circumstances, ranging from Cape Town's Jewish community to the academic circles of New York and Oxford, of the living subject as well as of the textually constructed autobiographical subject. Gender imperatives are largely responsible for the intolerable tensions, but it is in gender, too, that their resolution is found. For it is in her creative exploration of the promise and potentiality of women's (diverse) experience, that Gordon is able to symbolically resolve at textual level the oppressive imperatives that she confronts as a woman.

Interestingly, both Moloi and Gordon achieve a measure of resolution for their very different circumstances by exploring gender-specific possibilities for the constitution of the textual self. In both instances, these gendered discourses structure the texts, providing narrative intertexts which, while not erasing contradictions (contradictions can never be eradicated), construct subject positions which make dissonances more tolerable. Perhaps I should say that I did not set out to choose for this chapter on textuality two texts which foreground issues of gender; rather, what happened was that in choosing two texts which treat the problems of life-writing in innovative and, I believe, important ways, I stumbled upon the fact that in both instances the textual solutions (and problems) were indivisible from the problems (and solutions) of gender. Moloi's hero resolves the dilemmas of racist oppression -- which has been shown by many (e.g. Catherine Campbell) to be an emasculating force -- by recasting experience in terms of popular American masculinist myths. Moloi's autobiographical hero could only be masculine. Gordon's Shared Lives establishes itself as a woman's text: it makes gender more than a concern at the level of content by locating gender as the key in-forming concern of the text. It is this intersection of gender and genre in Shared Lives which I shall now explore.

Since this brings us to the debate regarding gender and genre, I shall indicate, at the outset, my own position on this question. I do not support the generalized claims that gender inflects writing of men and women in ways that are predictable beyond national, linguistic, class, race and historical differences. While I am not sure that this is precisely what those adherents to notions of gendered characteristics in autobiographical writing are arguing, it would seem that the generalizations of many critics like Mary Mason about the implications of gender for



autobiography are not sufficiently qualified. Jelinek, for instance, contends that there is "a literary tradition in which women write autobiography that is different from that by men" (1980, xi-xii). She argues that women's autobiographies, unlike men's,

rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives -- domestic details, family difficulties.... (1980:7-8)

I have not found this to be generally valid in the texts that I have studied; in some instances, the differences between women's autobiographical texts (like Ruth Gordon's and Ruth First's) and between men's (for example, Breytenbach's and Lekota's), seem to me to be greater and more obvious than the differences between the autobiographical texts of representatives of the different genders. Although there are differences between some women's writing and some men's which conform to the general trends delineated by Jelinek, there are also many texts which do not conform. Consider, for instance, my discussion in the previous chapter of Luthuli's autobiography: much of the analysis is structured around Spacks's argument concerning the characteristics of women's autobiographical writing. Self-effacement, subordination of self to a cause, and denial of emotional response to the autobiographer's own public importance: all of these features which Spacks finds to be distinctive features of women's autobiography, are manifest in Luthuli's Let my People Go. Thus although women and men might compose contrasting autobiographies, different in respects which may reinforce our expectations of their gendered experiences, such gender differences are not predictable and, in South African writing of the last 46 years, are not even the norm. Anticipated gendered norms are not defining characteristics, linked without exception to the biological sex of the autobiographer. What is predictable is that in life women and men (in all race, class, and ethnic

categories) will be differentially interpellated, and will be expected to speak from different subject positions. Some women and men may refuse their positioning, or their gender positions may be subordinated to other, conflicting discourses. One could therefore perhaps argue that an apologetic, humble subject in a black man's autobiography is due to the discourse of racism, which undermines the discourse of patriarchy. (I think that this is only partly the case for Luthuli: I think that his position as a Christian has far greater impact). So while there are women's autobiographies which conform to gendered expectations (Kuzwayo's and Mary Benson's are examples), a woman like Ruth Gordon writes an autobiography which positions the autobiographical subject as authoritarian centre and the narrative is largely a record of her public life. Cornell, Campbell and Alan Paton write in terms of a masculine tradition of selfhood, whereas Breytenbach's autobiographies explore the inner life, and chart the inconclusiveness of self and experience (as women's autobiographical writing often does). So although the gender differences are particularly insistent in Moloi's and Lyndall Gordon's texts, this is not to argue that such gender differences are normative.

Gender discourses, like other discursive systems by which individuals are interpellated, are neither monologic nor consistent. And these gender discourses are always in concert with a host of other discursive systems, their relations being fluid, constantly in flux, coming to the fore and receding in the course of time. This applies both to lived experience as well as to text. Speech or discourse always implies a dialogue, as we have learnt from Bakhtin; this is true even of hegemonic discourses. Dowling's observation -- which has been referred to previously -- that although a hegemonic discourse suppresses or marginalizes all antagonistic class voices (and of course, one can broaden the application of this

beyond class), it nevertheless remains locked into a dialogue with the discourse it has suppressed (1984:131). Thus gender discourses are multifaceted, not only being in conversation, so to speak, with other discourses but also with other -- perhaps contrary -- gender discourses. Shared Lives responds to the repressed oppositional voices within patriarchal discourse. At times the dialogue breaks the narrative surface and narratorial opposition is made explicit. A particularly moving example of this comes when Gordon recounts her experiences as a young wife and expectant mother in New York: authoritarian male doctors dictate brutal conditions for childbirth, with "the woman's hands... tied down, a general anaesthetic administered, and the baby delivered with forceps" (1992:147). Pregnancy disqualifies a woman from study or indeed from others' consideration of her as a thinking individual: Gordon's husband's professor disapproves of her plans to study, and advises, "'You should stay at home with your baby.... And your husband, too, working long days and nights, giving his all as a man of science, will depend on you for *unselfish* support'" (148). But the narrative shows repeatedly that men are not the only purveyors of these patriarchal myths. Gordon finds that most women she encounters collude with the patriarchal myth of Mother Nature and pain-free, natural childbirth, and when she is unable to act the part she can only adjudge herself to be a failure, rather than questioning -- as the narrator later does -- the validity of the popular, hegemonic, version. It is the animal-like scream that tears unwittingly from her during labour that "seemed to break open the facades of social existence" to reveal the "truth" (150), a truth that is so unbearably cruel, so vastly at odds with all she had been led to expect from womanhood, that confronting it causes her to sink into deep depression.

The narrator/protagonist is able to escape the depression, not with the aid of male-dominated medicine's

brutal shock treatments, but with the help of her woman friends, principally Romy (also known as Fruma and Flora), the central subject of Gordon's biography. Gordon had been raised in a very closed Jewish community in Cape Town. Her friends from her school-days, Romy, Ellie, Rose, Phillippa, and Linn, are crucial to her developing sense of self. But of greatest importance is Romy. Years later, when Gordon's severe post-natal depression only worsens in response to conventional medicine, so that a spell in an asylum for the insane is prescribed, it is Romy who responds to her plight by flying from South Africa to New York to rescue her friend by restoring to her a self that she could believe in.

Then, late one night at the end of January, Romy came: a saviour in high tan boots, with streaming red hair framed in a white bonnet, alighting at Kennedy Airport, tired from her flight but bent on transformation. She had feared, she said, 'the worst', and her shock came out in a burst of tears. So she gave me back that person. She brought letters from Ellie and Phillippa which addressed that forgotten being;... and best of all, she challenged the fiction of illness, in words I could not have dared to say. (153)

Gordon transcends the limits of gender straightjackets; her struggle against the master narratives of male hegemony leads her to a threshold of truth, a truth that she can weave into her own rewriting of the already written. Gordon's battle leads her to exceed the frontiers of genre in her exploration of what it meant to be a young woman thirty or so years ago. The creative extension of the parameters of biography and autobiography are very much part of her project to probe the significances of lived, and rigidly gendered, experience.

Gordon explicitly sets out to write biography: "This book is [Flora's/Romy's] biography, as exact as if she had public importance on the stage of history" (1). She writes too of Ellie and Rose, part of the same group of friends.

What motivates her to write is the fact that all three have died as young women. Gordon insists that her story is "life, not fiction. It will be an authentic record of a group of women who met in 1954 at the age of twelve at a girls' school" (3). But she finds that conventional biography is insufficiently plastic to respond to the indefinable, the interstices of being:

Absorbed by the lives of the obscure, George Eliot was alert to 'that roar which lies on the other side of silence'. To hear that roar of the inward lives of each of these women requires a freedom to push biography beyond its standard form. It could be easy to piece together the usual narrative of dates, events, and facts, leading to affecting scenes of tragic finality. But the stories of these women [Flora, Ellie and Rose] cannot be told with the linear simplicity of the dessert-course romances of Myra and Linn. For the lives of Flora, Rosie, and Ellie were more buried, more disturbed by talent, and rooted in aspects of womanhood, that remain, as yet, undefined. They need more time, more delicate sifting of fact, more searching of what remains unknown in women's lives.... (38)

The narrator cannot write conventional biography because the truths about the subjects that she wishes to explore simply cannot be accommodated in conventional forms. The genre, the typical biography, simply cannot interrogate,

the fluid adjustments of character (often mistaken for female capriciousness); the almost bodily need for the language of response (often mistaken for female vanity); and, strangest of all, the close-guarded, comic fixity of the stale roles that girls of the 50s chose to play -- games of compliance that carried, already, some element of amused, spectatorial detachment.... (38)

The text, then, redefines the kinds of feminine experience that the narrator and her friends shared in the close-knit Capetown Jewish community. Insisting that patriarchal judgements are "mistaken", the narrator undertakes to explore fluid forms of experience in fluid narrative forms. Confronting the insistent questions which cannot be answered (and which perhaps cannot even be clearly articulated), the narrator weaves into her story

the silences and dark places which have to be acknowledged if an attempt is to be made to strain towards the truth, a little more truth. Of Rose she has to conclude:

To ask which was the real Rose was, of course, the wrong question. For her triumph was a form of contrivance that would leave the essential behind: that Rose I had known, long ago, without makeup, who had dared to think at Good Hope and written essays of ambitious brilliance. When we met, once in '67 in [a] dark, empty coffee-bar on a late afternoon in Johannesburg and once in '69 in her serene, baby-filled home, she was -- serious. That is all: her triumph is to defeat the presumptions of the biographer. (210)

Of Flora, or Romy, as she came later to be called, her task as biographer is easier; she is more able to delineate a character in keeping with the conventions of biography. But even with Flora, the mysteries of existence become part of what the biographer must concede is what makes the 'character' a person. Repeatedly, we are told that Romy "found herself" (230) in Paris; but even while the narrator appears to share this opinion she accepts that such certainty is a fiction:

She found herself, he said. But what, I wondered, did she find? Was it what she had always moved towards: being, not doing, not that absurd busy-ness that protects the rest of us from confronting our void? Was it Lewis Carroll who said that the achievement of living is the formation of character? If so, Romy and other unknowns had their achievements that are not measurable in public terms. (230)

Since biography is a public genre, a publishable record of lives, Gordon has to redefine the genre so that the "public terms" of biography are split apart to expose in part at least the shadows and illuminations of private and often wordless experience.

How do we divine the language of the sigh or the scream or that state of pure happiness that we called, delightedly, 'hysteria'? There will be, I thought, no path to follow. There will be no easy truth. It will be an imaginary meeting of divided halves: the biographer and the subject, the living and the dead. There is no essential truth and no end to truth. Biographic objectivity is an illusion: that voluminous

'Definitive Life' favoured by publishers is but a shell. For the only approach to a living truth is, on the basis of fact, to imagine the life -- which is to take it to the border of fiction. (251)

Ultimately, Romy, Rose and Ellie cannot be explained; they have to remain, in the words of Barthes, subjects wandering in search of their final predicates. In her confrontation with the limits of the genres of biography and autobiography, Gordon finds that neither the subjects of the story nor the narrating subject can be known. Like Barthes, Gordon seems to acknowledge im-possibilities of knowing and being:

Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*... I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to; and in this movement, the pronoun of the imaginary, "I," is *im-pertinent*; the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*.... (Barthes, 1977a:56)

As the discussion in the preceding chapter has indicated, photographs in autobiography and biography usually provide clear visual 'proof' for the text, functioning as adjectival paradigms; however, the illustrative photographs in Shared Lives deviate from this norm, serving instead to add to the enigmas of the narrative, reinforcing the sense that identity cannot be contained -- either verbally or in pictorial images. The photographs in Shared Lives do not function as solutions; rather their blurred outlines and averted gazes increase our realization that clarity of definition, that *knowing* the Other, is illusory. The exception to this rule, the photograph of the author on the back fly-leaf (presumably chosen by the publishers), proves the point. All the other photographs which illustrate each chapter, and also the cover photograph, are either blurred, or the subjects' eyes look away, withholding their meaning. One source of indeterminateness is the dissimilarity of the images where one person features in more than one photograph. For instance, the indistinct images of Lyndall, Flora and Rosie in the school photograph cannot be

likened to the images of these women which appear elsewhere. And where there is more than one person in a photograph, as in the one of the group of schoolgirls (Chapter 3) or in the image of Romy and Lyndall Gordon on the beach (Chapter 8), it is difficult to discern the identities of the people. One cannot immediately ascertain which is which.

In part the obscurity is because the captions are separated from the photographs (they precede the text proper), but also because the narrative text (with only one exception, viz. Chapter 2) does not comment on the images depicted in the photographs. And perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that very often the visual image contradicts the characterisation constructed in the verbal text. This is most striking in the case of Flora/Romy, the most important character in the biography, who is portrayed as spontaneous, confident and warm and yet she appears, in the photograph of her at her graduation (Gordon, 1992:108), as submissive, compliant, self-effacing, and in the photograph of her at the beach (136), as uncertain, quizzical, seemingly wondering why the photographer wants the photograph of her at all. There is no evidence of bold vivacity in any of the photographs of Romy. Furthermore, the photographs seem to disrupt narrative certainties because they do not represent only those who are central to the narrative: both Phillippa and Rosie Kunene are rather marginal figures in the story; their importance lies in their contributions to the composition of the story, yet their photographs have no less status than do those of Romy or Ellie or Lyndall. And one wonders why the only photograph of Rose which has some clarity (given the distortions of the dramatic shadows and lights caused by the footlights) depicts her in costume, on stage, in a play which apparently has little significance in terms of the story of Rose's life.



The photographs, then, are not clues to a kind of certainty, pieces in a puzzle, either verbal or visual. Even on repeated reading of this text the photographs evade comprehension, reinforcing -- indeed, illustrating too -- the text's insistence that we can only reach toward truth; there is no arriving. Just as Romy and Ellie in the cover photograph demonstrate, truths are secrets that can be shared only between the special few: Romy's face is almost entirely obscured by her hand and Ellie's mouth is hidden. It is the earnestness of the gaze (a gaze we can only imagine since we cannot see Romy's eyes) which conveys a profound sharing from which we are deliberately excluded.

Shared Lives is a testimony to the failure of fact to locate truth; it is a testimony to the power of imagination, not only in the creative process but in life. It is the "imagined challenge" (153) that she finds in Virgil which initiates the healing process, helping Gordon to begin to break out of her deep post-natal depression mentioned earlier (as ten sessions of shock treatment failed to do), "each sixty lines of translation for the following class were the first, hesitating steps of a return to the living" (153). It is a healing to which Romy contributes significantly by interpellating, "hailing" as Althusser has it, the Lyndall who had, in her youth, believed more completely in her own potential. And it is with gratitude that Gordon recalls the forcefulness of Romy's imaginative recreation of her friends, her inventive shaping of their being and lives.

Could any act of reciprocity give back to Romy what she did for me? She invented her friends, made us up, endowed us with qualities that were congenial to her. This was the source of her attraction. She gave to each what each most needed.... All of us she urged to play our parts in character. (1992:250-1)

The biographer acknowledges her debt to her subject, the Romy of the past, the Romy who, even though she had died suddenly in 1976, cannot die: Gordon finds that she is more fully a creation of her subject than her subject is of her:

In September 1988... I talked to 'Romy' rather than 'Flora', a person of my own age, who could look back from the same point at the life she had helped to shape:

But for you, Romy, I would not have been a candidate for the mated existence; I would have been, for a long time, a subject of family conclaves (which they would have enjoyed) about my appearance and manner.... I should have been, according to family prediction, a Miss Prim of a nursery teacher, waiting around, after friends had married, for some second-rate husband who would have me. (1992:263-4)

Finding that what she is not defines what she is, and also that absence defines presence, Gordon rediscovers in the writing process her friends, especially Romy, who have long since died. "This was no ordinary biographical research; it was the renewing of bonds which was, to Romy, the essential act of life" (276).

The book concludes with another 'meeting' between the author and the spirit or memory of Romy, this time in Paris in 1990, 14 years after she had died.

As I met this Romy, who had been distant in her last years, I let Winston [Romy's husband] press on, again, towards Notre-Dame. I stood on the bridge, and the music swelled and carried her forward buoyant in the mild sun, her reckless past -- the scream, the virginal frenzy, the broken wedding -- contained by the graces of Paris. The speaker dimmed, swelled again, and -- suddenly -- she came close, hiccupping with laughter, laughing wildly as she did at school, shaking back her red curls. It was for this that I came to Paris, without knowing it... to meet her on this bridge in the city of her dreams. (1992:284-5)

Death does not mean finality, at least not in the accepted sense, for Romy's absence does not always mean a diminution of her influence. When Gordon interviews friends and others who have shared their lives with Romy, she finds that Romy returns:

How strangely after 12 years, the memories stir. [Winston] brings Romy back when he tells a story and sinks back laughing. She used to laugh in that way, with a kind of helpless and tolerant mirth at her own follies. We'd tell each other stories, making the past, giving it shape and point. Romy is the collaborator in her biography. I simply relay her

oral performance. (261)

The biographer's role is shifted from its pivot; it is shared with the subject's own continued influence. Author/authority are reconfigured.

Not only is the biographical subject placed in a position of power uncharacteristic of the genre, the subject is approached from unlikely directions. The biographer's subject is found in unlikely places: Gordon finds her (years after Romy's death) in the literature that she teaches at Oxford:

In the course of many tutorials, it happened, again, that Romy emerged from certain texts.... Yes, I was getting to know Romy better than in the course of her life. She came closer as old lines swerved from their context. (250)

And again, the narrator freely admits that factual research cannot provide all the raw materials necessary. Finding a batch of old letters from Romy, Gordon records her musings on whether to undertake the biographical project. The letters were "part of Romy's unpublished life -- could I find and *imagine* the rest?" (247, my emphasis).

The subject is delineated not only through assertion or suggestion, but through the narrator's insistent awareness of Romy's absence through premature death. But absence defines presence in another sense for some of the young women of Gordon's generation. The narrator refers to the message Camille Claudel wrote to Rodin, her lover:

'Il y a toujours quelque chose d'absent qui me tourmente.' Could this, I wondered, speak for Romy and women like her, who cannot accommodate to the given lot: 'There is always something missing which torments me.' (284)

Refusing the position of knower, of authority over all of the narrative and over the narrative subjects, the narrator does not answer directly the question of how formative absence was for these young women, but the text's evocation of gendered prescriptions which truncate possibility for

young women -- particularly for her friends and herself as members of "an increasingly fantastic colonial tribe" (1) of white, middle-class Jews in Cape Town of the late 50s -- implies an affirmative answer.

Women's writing, Jelinek argues, is "anecdotal and disruptive" as opposed to men's which is "linear", public (1980:19). Shared Lives exemplifies this (when much South African's women's autobiographical writing in the last 46 years does not; Ruth Gordon's Alive, Alive-O!, for instance, is largely linear and details the public rather than the private events of her life). Shared Lives weaves its non-linear way around the false constraints of chronology. The basic structure which begins with the reflections in the present of the writing process of the narrator, and then goes back to the 1880s, recounting the histories of the families of the women, and moves forward, chapter by chapter, period by period, to the time of writing in 1990, is continually disrupted by comments or memories which cannot be contained by the time frame. Frequently, the narrative of the past anticipates what is to come in the succeeding decades. This happens throughout: for instance, in just over a page, the narrative veers from the 1950s back to 1795, forward to the riots of 1976 and then on to the 1980s, before resuming the narrative of the 50s (39-41).

Shared Lives weaves together the always unravelling threads of time and thus achieves a measure of closure in that for the narrator the ends of her three friends' lives come to be seen as an early warning, "marking the imminence of the moment when our generation will move into the past" (1992:7). The moment of telling, then, marks the end of a search, and the beginning of the process whereby a generation passes out of relevance. But the narrative's conclusion also demonstrates what has been implicit all along, and that is that the process of composition was not

simply a record of the past but an act in the experiencing present. It becomes the reason for resuming relationships long since dormant. Writing structures the narrator's life, providing a mild kind of rebellion against a husband whose influence had been so beneficial, so fundamentally formative (and to whom a quiet kind of homage is paid in the narrative). The rebellion lies in the fact that Siamon, the author's husband, had encouraged her to be a thinker and to write (specifically biography), long before she had contemplated such possibilities, but had discouraged her from writing a biography about a friend (Romy) of whom he had disapproved. So the act of composition becomes a kind of benchmark in her relationship with her husband (and with herself). Shared Lives demonstrates that

autobiography is not a reflection of the life but something added to it, not a picture but an action, which can neither stand still long enough to see the life whole nor pursue its own movement to a point of certain rest. (Spengemann, 1980:109)

Jay notes that Valéry argues that his mind retains from the past "only what 'can be assimilated so intimately that it is no longer the past but an element of potential action, a resource for the future'" (1984:165). Gordon's auto/biography concludes with a sense that due homage has finally been paid to these dead friends, but perhaps more forcefully with the knowledge that the lessons she has learned from re-searching the past will inform her teaching, her reaching out to future generations of women.

Unlike most autobiography critics, and perhaps many autobiographers too, Gordon in Shared Lives does not claim that the present of the writer is the most powerful force in a narrative of the past; rather, while acknowledging the influence of the present on the shape of the recalled past, the narrator shows that the divisions of time into past, present and future are neat and necessary, but ultimately oversimplified, a distortion. Memories, apparitions and

dreams undermine the seeming solidity of the present, redefining the real. In the month after Romy's death Gordon has a recurrent dream, a dream which "brought back the intense reality of the past in contrast with the unreality of the present" (1992:242). Gordon exposes, by implication, the falseness of the neat chronologies of past, present and future: she presents the past as a product of the present and the present as a product of the past. The text enacts the Derridean point that the present is a composite of manifold memories and anticipations,

never existing in the isolated instant of awareness. Time is an endless deferring of presence.... In other words, there is no privileged ground of reflection from which thought could ever organize or control the flux of temporal experience. (Norris, 1982:47)

The narrator concludes the first chapter thus:

I have thought of this book all through middle age, from 1976 to 1988, through my mid-thirties to mid-forties, but only at forty-six did I see in perspective that Flora's death at the end of youth, in 1976, foretold a first lapse of energy twelve years later, marking the immanence of the moment when our generation will move into the past. The time has come, then, to record the end of a way of life and, more elusive, the truncated lives of women who were shaped by a warped society yet who were, all the same, portents of the future. (Gordon, 1992:7)

Shared Lives counterpoints its narrative of past and present with a concern for the implications that the forces informing experience might have for the future. Unlike most autobiographies, which either ignore the future, or merely hint at its possible dimensions, Shared Lives embeds its story in an awareness that continuities cannot be artificially broken, that nothing ever ends. Even though lives may cease, and people may be buried, they continue to be in the minds and lives of others.

Not pretending that the past is available as a neatly defined package of memories, just waiting for the auto/biographer to return to, Gordon uses the diaries

(which she kept from the age of ten until her wedding day)<sup>31</sup> as well as the letters which were written and received by herself and her friends.<sup>32</sup> The past is a text, as well as a context; the auto/biographer is one who seeks, not one who delivers. Although Shared Lives diarises the narrator's quest for truths, her shared efforts to reconstruct lives, the text is not a diary, at least not in the usual sense. But its employment of diary and letters lends an authenticity to the narrative for these documents enable past selves to speak again; the narrative is not wholly under the control of a narrator who reconstructs the past selves in the light of later concerns.

Nevertheless the narrative is diary-like in some respects: increasingly, the narrator records her experiences of reconstituting a past in narrative. While most auto/biographers attempt to render the writing process transparent, Gordon tells the story of the story, recounting frequently the performance of collaboration. Recording the conversations and interviews (the dates and places being carefully noted) which she held with people who were significant in the lives of her friends, Gordon makes explicit her release of the authorial hold on the text. This decentering of auto/biographer, however, informs the text much more pervasively than the mere inclusion of letters and conversations indicates. The final chapter opens:

What began in dreams and acts of memory has become, in its final stage, collaborative. What was written after breaking the silence in South Africa at the beginning of 1990 has been an attempt to fuse the words of others with my own biased hoard. We exchanged our stories of Romy, Rose, and Ellie, a continuation, a recovery it seemed to me, of the vital part of the friendship: we had circled a passing phase of life, had recognized in what we called 'stories' the middle of our indeterminate existence....

Different speakers have challenged a version of the past that tugged Romy towards my own life. 'Partners' was shaped by Leonora; 'Futures' by Winston and Rosie Eunene; 'Moves' by David Gevint and Bonnie Keating. And 'Memories' could not have been written

without the advancing dead, their words nearer,  
louder, the resounding echo of the past. (277)

In its polyphonic narrative style and circling acknowledgement of the indivisibilities of time, Shared Lives traverses the intricate web of experience which blurs the boundaries of self and other. Biography slips at times into autobiography, both of these discourses being transformed in Gordon's use of them so that they refuse the comforts of the readerly, the known.

Resisting the illusory separation of teller and tale that defines so much biographical writing, Gordon weaves a narrative of self into the narratives of others, just as she insists that the friendship which united the characters about whom she writes was mutually defining. The narrator notes that in January 1977 she wrote:

Flora and Rosie were obscure growths of postcolonial South Africa. As such, I was part of them, they of me, and I want to claim that part. I am the divided relic of these friends, and feel the footsteps of their lives in mine. (248)

In January 1990, in the course of researching this book, the author meets with one of Romy's former boyfriends.

There was no need to make conversation or think up questions or put him at ease. We talked together as two who had been possessed by the same person who had disappeared and left us with her impact on our lives, conscious that whatever we were or had become, she had -- to some large extent -- made us. Over our meeting she presided, having brought us there, to that corner table, with the pink napkins and the marmalade. (275)

Kolodny, writing about other autobiographical texts by women, makes an observation which is especially pertinent to Gordon's autobiography:

What is being revealed here... is the lack of appropriate cultural definitions for women in our contemporary society. The implications of addressing that lack are at once literary and political: for, in altering the images and narrative structures through which we compose the stories of our lives, we may hope to alter the very experience of those lives as well....

In terms of literary history, it is a situation



not unlike that of the eighteenth century, the first great age of autobiographical outpourings, when, as James Cox put it, 'the modern self was being liberated as well as defined.' As more and more women today seek precisely those goals -- that is, liberation and self-definition -- we may expect even more startling autobiographical narratives to come. (1980:258-9)

The text's insistence on the collaborative nature of self, life and text marks a new departure in auto/biographical writing for this insistence is formal as well as thematic. I have referred earlier to the emphasis on the denotative in most South African autobiographical writing, on implicit claims to the transparency of the text and of the effacement in the narrative of the process of production: Gordon's text is innovative for it does none of these. Shared Lives does not hierarchize its discourses in terms of an identifiable and definable notion of truth; rather, it offers the reader points of entry, layers of interpretative options, dispersing the narrative line across multiple possibilities. Gordon explicitly refuses the illusion of unity and continuity, the expediency of fact; she gives us a writerly text which proclaims the importance of the imagination. Allowing the narrative to slide at times into almost dramatic forms, the text explores the polyvocality of the real -- a textual practice aligned with the author's feminism.

Shared Lives is the (partial) symbolic resolution of the experiences of the gendered straight-jackets which Gordon and her friends were expected to accept in the tightly circumscribed community of white Jews in Cape Town, and which accompanied them in different forms even when they moved out of this closed social group. Writing of American social norms, Jane Tompkins argues:

Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but *required* to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally conditioned to repress, an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women's epistemic authority. (1989:123)

Shared Lives asserts the validity of "women's epistemic authority". Rejecting women who ape men, "manikins" grasping at male power, Gordon celebrates women's sharing, a sharing which draws her to the women's college, St. Hilda's, at Oxford University. Gordon aims in her teaching (and in this text) to promote a community of women, "thinking together, which seems to me a preferable mode of education, especially for women, to that of showmen" (224). It is this sharing which she sees as Romy's especial talent, "a triumph of women's tradition and portent of women to be" (263).

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

*Nor knowest thou what argument  
Thy life to thy neighbour's creed hath lent.*  
Emerson

*The immense suffering black people experience in South  
Africa... created in me a reverence for ordinary  
people.*

Bessie Head

*This business is everybody's business.*  
Camus

The texts selected for detailed discussion in the preceding chapters will have shown something of the diversity of autobiographical practice in South Africa during the apartheid years. I have hoped to show in my analyses of particular texts that what might perhaps seem unified under genre is in fact fragmented, and fraught with difference. The texts are shaped as responses to an array of problems. Some of the problems addressed are: how to tell about a self which is demeaned by experience while simultaneously attempting to redress the inequities (the worker autobiographies, Kuzwayo's and Moloi's); how to appeal to adult learners in literacy classes in such a way that learning is promoted along with a validation of the learner's sense of self-worth (We Came to Town and Thula Baba, for example). Campbell's responds to the problem of depicting one's individuality, while Luthuli's stresses his unexceptionality; Lyndall Gordon appears to attempt both in her depiction of the narrating and narrated subjects as very particularized, yet subjected to pressures generalized to women. Gordon also probes the possibilities and limits of the genre, as do Breytenbach and Kuzwayo, with very different results. Kuzwayo's autobiography explores creative innovation in the space between the cultural frames of white hegemony and traditional black culture; Call Me Woman's autobiographical subject emerges out of seemingly irreconcilable discourses.

Similarly, motives for writing differ. Spengemann (1980:xvi, 167) identifies three motives in autobiography in the Augustinian tradition: philosophical autobiographers aim to search for the self; poetic autobiographers seek to express the self; and historical autobiographers seek to explain the self. But, he says, for those who have not maintained Augustine's belief in unconditioned selfhood, autobiography becomes self-invention (xvi). These divisions are not particularly useful as categories into which to attempt to slot South African autobiographical texts produced in the last four and a half decades principally because much South African autobiography does not follow the Augustinian tradition which focuses on the self. As has been noted, a large proportion of South African autobiographical writing is primarily concerned with the life rather than with the self. Instead of exploring an experiencing self, many texts seek to expose the experiences the subjects have to undergo. Moreover, even if one were to apply Spengemann's designations to the texts' treatment of those problems of self-construction which no autobiographical text can avoid, the process would have a rather large measure of arbitrariness in it because invariably texts would fit into more than one category. Nevertheless, we can see *elements* of each of the above motives (not necessarily based on a sense of an absolute self) in the texts which have been selected for detailed consideration in this study. Lyndall Gordon's autobiographical text might be described as tending towards the philosophical; Breytenbach's tends towards the poetic; Moloi's and the worker autobiographies towards the historical. And both Lyndall Gordon and Breytenbach write autobiography as poetic self-invention, Spengemann's fourth category. But where Spengemann's designations are useful for the purposes of this study is that they bring to one's attention the fact that he has omitted another motive for autobiography which is extremely important in contemporary South African autobiographical production: this is the

desire to persuade. Where Spengemann's motivations seem to be largely confined to what the author sets out to achieve, an intention to persuade includes the reader in its ambit. This is significant in that autobiography in South Africa during the apartheid period is far less an individualistic art form or means of expression than a tool for profound social change. Autobiographies which aim to promote social change by persuading readers that this is necessary might be referred to as polemical autobiography. Luthuli's autobiography and many worker autobiographies such as Working Women (Lawson) and Thula Baba might be classified thus, along with others not singled out for close reading, such as Winnie Mandela's Part of My Soul which is a public relations exercise for the ANC but also, more pointedly, for Winnie Mandela herself.

In similar vein, Erikson identifies three forms of time in autobiography, "the writer's present, the writer's past, and the historical context in which the writer has lived" (cited by Finney, 1985:227). Erikson (and Finney, in his endorsement of Erikson's observation) fail to take into account the role of the future in autobiographical writing; the purposeful nature of much South African life-writing makes this form of time very important since a large proportion of texts may be described as polemical in intent. Almost all texts by black South Africans -- understandably -- look to the future, and aim to act as interventions in that future. Luthuli speaks of "the new South Africa" (1982:136); his text addresses the three forms of time to which Erikson refers in order to contribute to the creation of a just and free South Africa at some time in the future. (Let My People Go is a command for future action). Kuzwayo concludes her autobiography with a reference to the commitment of the women of her community "to stand side by side with our menfolk and our children in this long struggle to liberate ourselves and to bring about peace and justice for all in a country we love

so deeply" (1985:263). Qabula's last words in the narrative refer to the desire that ordinary workers be remembered by future generations (1989:109). Likewise, Makhoba's concluding sentence reads: "And we know that when we make our unity, the sun shall rise for the workers" (1984:38). But it is not only in their conclusions that these autobiographers look to the future; for those cited - - and for a great many others -- it is for the future (this post-apartheid state that has now been achieved) that they write. They write so that past struggles for freedom will be remembered and will contribute to the shaping of a future free of racism.

The selected texts show that the genre is pulled in many directions, towards writing styles more usually considered to be characteristic of other genres -- and usually in more than one direction in one text. Sometimes the autobiographical/ testimonial impulse is modified by a leaning towards the novelistic (Light on a Dark Horse, Campbell) or the short story (Thula Baba); sometimes towards historical documentary (Let My People Go, Luthuli); sometimes towards philosophical exposition (Shared Lives, Lyndall Gordon and True Confessions, Breytenbach); sometimes towards political tract (The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers, Makhoba). Motivational and formal diversity affect length which ranges from a few lines per autobiographical subject (as in Sibambene) to hundreds of pages (as in True Confessions); they affect language, which ranges from the simplest of English (as in We Came to Town) to poetic and creative uses of prose (True Confessions); they affect layout and design so that texts range from uninterrupted verbal text (Campbell's has only small illustrative drawings at the beginnings of each chapter) to the highly decorated (Sibambene and The Story of Mboma). The leanings of the text towards other ancillary genres also modifies its reliance on photographic material: there are those texts which do not use photographs as support

except for one of the author on the cover, presumably requested by publishers (Breytenbach's and Campbell's), and those which use photographs as illustrative material in journalistic style (Makhoba and Tom, for instance), while at the other extreme some use photographs not specifically linked to the narrative or the autobiographical subjects (We Came to Town). Narratorial stance shifts, too, with the text's tendency towards one or other generic satellite: the authorial narrator (as employed by Campbell and Luthuli) is replaced in some texts by complex narratorial shifts, as in Women of Phokeng (Bozzoli), True Confessions (Breytenbach) and Call Me Woman (Kuzwayo).

The texts that I have discussed in detail in the foregoing chapters indicate, in the words of Foucault, the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself: texts, genres, races, classes, genders, and even individuals. A significant advantage of an analysis of South African autobiography which attends to its diversity is that,

it enables us to think of difference as a resource rather than a threat.... Neither does one regard difference as an obstacle to effective resistance. Difference can be a resource insofar as it enables us to multiply the sources of resistance to the myriad of relations of domination that circulate through the social field.... Moreover, if we redefine our differences, discover new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, then our differences are less likely to be used against us.... Of course, this means discovering what we have in common as well. (Sawicki, 1988:187)

One point that needs to be made here is that the texts illustrate that differences co-exist within single subjects so that often resistance and collaboration are conjoined in one subject, each being foregrounded when it is deemed necessary or expedient. Thus while for some Lyndall Gordon's Shared Lives might be disappointingly vague in its criticisms of apartheid, it nevertheless registers a very important and complex kind of resistance to oppressive systems of identity-formation and knowledge-making.

Another issue which requires mention is that while some might despair of South Africans ever bridging the gaps which separate them (Bessie Head said, "We are all really startled alive by the liberation of Africa, but we have been living in exclusive compartments for so long that we are all afraid of each other" (1990a:30)); I think we need to understand that mutual respect does not mean homogenization.

The diversity of South African autobiographical production enables us to explore some of the shadows behind the historical events that loom large in South African history. Bessie Head remarked upon her need for "a sense of historical continuity, a sense of roots, but I remember how tentative and sketchy were my first efforts, not finding roots as such but rather putting on layer after layer of patchy clothing" (1990a:86). Life-stories can provide much important information about peoples and their past. Through such texts we can learn about what sectors of the population have access to publishers, about what sorts of lives are being recorded, about what sorts of selves they portray, about formal and stylistic trends, and so on. But this information does not appear in a solid body, tracing clear lines of development. Rather, the information to be gleaned from this body of texts, when pieced together, often forms contradictory patterns which frequently refuse linear narrativization. Thus the life-stories of South Africans under apartheid can be likened to this "patchy clothing".

Autobiographies, written in the present, about the past, can shape the future precisely because they can help redefine our sense of ourselves and our fellow South Africans of whatever colour or political persuasion. Head says that like most black people born in South Africa, she "lived with a very broken sense of history" (1990a:97). This is just as true, too, of white South Africans.



Autobiographies can help to remedy this, as well as the opposite tendency of history to present itself as seamless narrative. Mainstream history tends to concentrate upon the important people who make important events happen:

There isn't anything in this village that an historian might care to write about.... Historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are -- just living. There is so much necessity living they do and in this village there is so much mud living. Women's hands build and smooth mud huts and porches. The fierce November, December thunderstorms sweep away all the beautiful patterns. After some time these same patient hands, hard and rough, will build up these mud necessities again. (Head, 1990a:30)

While the career-oriented memoirs of the famous might have their brief moment of fame, it is to these "patient hands" that the autobiographies draw attention and upon which South Africa's future prosperity and peace depend.

Autobiographical writing, as a discrepant body of writing, seems to me to be a kind of antidote to myth as "depoliticized speech, which... 'does away with all dialectics,... [and which] organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident...'" (Klinkowitz citing Barthes, 1988:73). The life stories, as heterogeneous as they are in so many respects, expose the dialectic in individual lives between the momentary and the pervasive. The patterns of transformation in specific texts could not have occurred

if through a series of sequences, [they] did not eventually enter into an overall strategy. And inversely, no strategy could achieve comprehensive effects if it did not gain support from precise and tenuous relations serving, not as its point of application or final outcome, but as its prop and anchor point. There is no discontinuity between them, as if one were dealing with two different levels (one microscopic and the other macroscopic); but neither is there homogeneity (as if the one were only the enlarged projection or the miniaturization of the other); rather, one must conceive of the double conditioning of a strategy by the specificity of possible tactics, and of tactics by the strategic envelope that makes them work. (Foucault, 1980:99-100)

It is this "double conditioning" which life-writing documents in diverse ways, and which I particularly wished to foreground in my discussion of Kuzwayo's Call Me Woman and Moloi's My Life.

The discourses of power and subordination are multifaceted, as my analyses have attempted to show. While one can see something of the bourgeoisie versus the masses at play in South African life-writing (Campbell as opposed to Qabula, for instance), there are too many other sites of meaning (and thus of interpretative contestation) to use this opposition with anything other than extreme caution. While it is partly true to say, as Barthes does, that the oppressor's language "is plenary, intransitive, gestural" and relies on "tautological statements which... exercise a certain tyranny of likelihood" (cited by Klinkowitz, 1988:63-4), this is itself too obvious and simple. There is more to the language of the oppressor than this; moreover, we know that 'the masses' too employ slogans and tautological statements in their struggle for liberation. The very term 'the Struggle' essentializes what is fragmented and disunited, as Resha, Kitson, Indres Naidoo and Kasrils testify. Many of the protest autobiographies utilize "a certain tyranny of likelihood". Qabula's very title (Cruel Beyond Belief) and also Mathabane's (Kaffir Boy), for instance, invoke the reader's generalized sense of the horrors of apartheid. In Qabula's case the narrative does not, it seems to me, consistently demonstrate these horrors. In short, the title seems inappropriate, if effective as political rhetoric. But perhaps the most trenchant example of 'the oppressed' relying on self-justifying slogan comes from recent events. The PAC chant "One settler, one bullet" was used to 'explain' the murder of the American Fulbright student Amy Biehl. Biehl was not a South African settler, and had no intention of ever being one.

A further problem concerns the identity of 'the oppressor'. In the context of South African apartheid, it is usually easier to identify the oppressed than it is to identify the oppressor for a white skin has not necessarily meant compliance with Afrikaner Nationalism, nor a black one resistance. Victims can themselves contribute to oppression (their own and others), while those who are positioned as oppressors may seek, in a variety of ways, to undermine the system which defines them thus.

In order to explore the micro and macro politics of apartheid, the texts selected for close analysis were chosen in part for their political differences. This study has sought to pay heed to those whose voices have been silenced -- the migrant labourers, subsistence farmers, domestic workers, those who live in abject poverty (such as We Came to Town, Vukani Makhosikazi, Thula Baba, Sibambene, A Talent for Tomorrow, Facing the Storm, The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers) -- as well as to those whose voices have been amplified by their social positioning as white males, like Roy Campbell and Breyten Breytenbach. For it seems to me that if one is to come to understand how dominant and subversive discourses intersect, are in dialogue with one another, then one has to look across the spectrum. The readings are influenced by the Foucauldian argument that power is a transaction, rather than a contract; "it is not the 'privilege,' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions -- an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated" (1984:174). I have sought in some readings to analyze the power relations informing the texts, even those which are apparently irrelevant to apartheid, such as American cultural hegemony in Moloji.

Chronologically, the emphasis in this study has been on more recent autobiographical production. I have selected

one each from the 50s and 60s; the rest are from the late 70s through to 1992. Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse (1951) -- the earliest publication discussed in this study -- represents, in rather exaggerated terms, what I have found to be the predominant trend in autobiographical writing in the early decades of this period, viz. the signalling of special individuals whose lives are of interest because they are not like those of ordinary folk. I have therefore not chosen others from this period which might have little further to offer in the way of fresh insights into narrativized self-construction and generic practices at the time. Roy Campbell had achieved worldwide acclaim as a poet; James Rose-Innes (1949) was a prominent politician; C.A Evenden (1952) founded the international M.O.T.H. movement; Sarah Gertrude Millin (1941 and 1955) was a novelist of international repute. Although Luthuli's autobiography (1962) is also the life-story of a famous man, it differs from this tradition in the important respect that the autobiographical subject, rather than attracting attention to himself, seeks to deflect it.

Autobiographies by famous people continued to be produced throughout the apartheid period, but in the last two decades they have come to be increasingly marginalized, especially if the autobiographical subject's fame lies outside the struggle for political equity. Thus autobiographies by Guy Butler (1977, 1983, 1991), Zola Budd (1989), and Sir de Villiers Graaf (1993) are not, as far as I can gather, popular amongst reviewers or academics or likely to be prescribed at universities, while autobiographies by South Africans (white or black) who tackle their political circumstances head on, as do Rian Malan and Ellen Kuzwayo, are more attractive to those in the business of making knowledge, and thus are likely to have far greater impact.

A greater emphasis on the latter part of the apartheid

period is warranted in terms of my desire to explore the ways in which autobiographical practices are tied to the material world since there has been greater diversity in approach to the task of telling about one's life in the last two decades or so. This is a time of accelerating social crisis, and "autobiographical writing... serves as a location where residual and emergent notions" of race, ethnicity, class, and gender "clash to replicate and challenge reigning notions of identity" (Nussbaum, 1989:xiv). In the case of those who were the victims of apartheid this is because social disintegration had gained momentum to such an extent that individuals and communities were losing their traditions, their value systems, their sense of identity. Many black South Africans could not compose traditional indigenous-language autobiographical texts because they were no longer familiar with the tradition of oral poetry, and indeed, perhaps felt less than confident in using their mother tongue for any sort of formal composition. Lebohang Sikwe (who was quoted earlier), for example, suggests that many black South Africans do not speak their own languages any more, they have lost "the logical current of that language" (Daymond and Lenta, 1990:76), and usually speak a mixture of languages. She says that because of this she prefers to compose in English. But having only broken indigenous traditions to call upon, many black South Africans could not then simply adopt the kind of Western autobiographical practice which interpellates an autonomous individual at the centre of a narrative. This is in part because the remnants of African culture run contrary to such a conceptual framework (as I have explained in Chapter 3) and in part because apartheid prevented them from conceiving of themselves thus. In almost every respect, life was out of their control. Kuzwayo's and Moloi's autobiographies serve as wonderful examples of how a text can resolve symbolically the actual lived problems confronting black South Africans under apartheid.

There are some important shifts in white writing too in the latter part of the apartheid period. Increasing political activism by black South Africans -- activism which impinged on whites' lives in ways that were, it seems to me, unprecedented -- forced whites to take stock of an untenable political dispensation. Whites could no longer ignore the fact that they were, whether wittingly or not, beneficiaries of this system and its systematic attempts to keep them ignorant of its evils. Thus we find the researcher-scripted autobiographical texts proliferating from the late seventies through the eighties: whites like Joubert, Bond, and Hermer were recognizing that black people had faces, lives, concerns, and they sought, through textual production, to make the rest of the white population recognize this too. These researchers, and those who followed (Keegan, Lawson and Bozzoli, for instance) made possible the autobiographical texts of representatives of the nameless masses. These (often illiterate) individuals who have no public profile are unexpectedly given a platform. Some worker autobiographies go even further in their recognition of oppressed black South Africans by not only recording the life-stories of black South Africans but also by addressing black readers, a previously neglected group in all fields of textual production in South Africa, so as to show their readers that their poverty and oppression were not indicative of their lack of worth (as the subject of Poppie suggested), but were the result of carefully orchestrated, and widespread, oppression.

We find, also, in this latter period, an increasing number of white-authored texts which register considerable discomfort with the experience of being in positions of privilege as whites. Along with texts by white activists, like the liberation theologian Cedric Mayson (1984) and Hugh Lewin (1980) who was imprisoned for subversive activities, there are those by Afrikaners like Natie

Ferreira (1980) and Breytenbach (1980 and 1984), and by English-speaking whites like Christopher Hope (1988), an expatriate, and Elizabeth de Villiers (1990), which explore the confusion and shame of whites who have not supported apartheid, but who are nevertheless implicated in its injustices. An autobiography like Campbell's, which explores the subject's adventures from a secure and invulnerable position of narrating self, is no longer possible for these later writers referred to here, and many others.

There is yet another reason for the greater attention to the last two decades of autobiographical writing, and that is that autobiographical texts were produced in much greater numbers in the eighties than they were in previous decades, thus indicating the growing importance of autobiographical testimony for writers and readers alike. In my bibliography, for instance, 9 autobiographical texts are recorded for the 60s, 16 for the 70s, while 71 are listed in the 80s (one might add 7 more which were reprinted in that decade). I believe that in the 90s this trend will continue, for I have already read 26 autobiographical texts published in the last four years, and I know of another six which I have yet to read. Now although one has to bear in mind that the recent texts are more accessible, and more likely to come to my notice, I do believe that these figures nevertheless indicate the growing importance of the genre in South Africa, a shift which this study has itself -- by implication -- traced.

Not surprisingly, a recurrent theme in autobiographical writing in works by black South Africans and others during apartheid is protest against systematized inequality. Peter Abrahams' Tell Freedom (1954) is the first protest autobiography in the 1948-1994 period. It was followed by Huddleston's Naught for your Comfort (1956), Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue (1959), Modisane's Blame Me on History

(1963) and many others into the nineties with Lekota's Prison Letters to a Daughter appearing in 1991. While Luthuli's Let My People Go (1962) undoubtedly strives to register protest, it differs from those which precede it in that the narrating subject blurs his own individuality so as to depersonalize the oppression, to foreground its inclusiveness. This feature of the narrative can be seen as an indirect precursor to a number of texts -- the worker autobiographies of the 1980s being rather extreme examples -- which implicitly lay claim to the importance of the autobiographical subjects precisely because they are not unique individuals.

Another precursor, in a different sense, to the worker autobiographies is a text not discussed in detail in this study, and that is Elsa Joubert's Poppie. This text, first published in Afrikaans in 1978, was, it seems to me, the first of the researcher-scripted autobiographical texts, being based on the testimony of an illiterate and very poor black woman who is given a pseudonym by the (white) author. This text marks a new direction in white protest writing. Although the traditions of protest established by Trevor Huddleston (1956) and in different vein, Ruth First (117 Days, 1965) and Albie Sachs (Jail Diary, 1966) were to be continued, Poppie is the first autobiographical text which takes white protest in another direction. It registers protest by implication, by publicising the plight of the oppressed. Bessie Head observed that

a meeting of strange cultures in Southern Africa did not inspire wonder and communication between black and white. It produced a desolate history of moans, lamentations and wars. For a long while the concerns of black people and their day to day survival were of little account. (1990a:85)

With Elsa Joubert's Poppie, a representative of the non-politically active white population attempted to address the ignorance of the white minority by which apartheid's evils were perpetuated. It documents in painful detail the phenomenal struggles for survival which an impoverished



black woman has to undergo from day to day throughout her life. Poppie, a widely acclaimed work by an esteemed Afrikaans novelist, portrayed the pathos and tragedy of Poppie's life, and, by implication, of the lives of millions of apartheid's victims.

Life-writing during the apartheid era shows how writers have employed the print media to subvert the attempts of government to delete the voices and stories of black South Africans from the media. Using the language of the former colonial power, and autobiographical narrative forms in print, autobiographers seized the technologies by which the rulers sought to keep themselves in power. Foucault argued that, "The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing [the rulers'] rules... so as to overcome rulers through their own rules" (1977:85-6). There is no doubt that autobiographies by and large served an important role in the struggle for liberation. The Nationalist Government recognized their potential by banning many of them. (Barthes reminds us that "all domination begins by prohibiting language", 1974:68.) Protest narratives were able to make an impact because they were available in print (legally or illegally in South Africa), in the language accessible to the largest number of South Africans and overseas readers, rather than as performance texts in the indigenous languages which would reach significantly smaller audiences. That the oppressed were able to speak out against their oppression was indeed an important development.

But Foucault's deconstructive methodology acts as a warning "against the commitment to any confessional mode as necessarily liberating.... It is imperative that we... question the structure of the communicative relation that is operating" (Martin, 1988:15-16). When considering South African autobiographical writing one needs to consider carefully -- as I have done with some of the worker

autobiographies -- the role of publishers, researchers, readers (the book buying public) for the autobiographer's seeming grasping of the opportunity at self-definition is, of course, constrained by all of these. Furthermore, while the use of English might in many respects be considered effective politically, it must also be borne in mind that in many other respects it may contribute to the silencing of the speaker, the disempowering of someone who is already the subject of oppression.

Important as protest is -- and as unpredictable as its forms might be, ranging from Makhoba's pro-union story to Breytenbach's postmodernist exploration -- the texts which do not explicitly resist the State or its policies should not be overlooked. In this regard, Moloi's and Campbell's autobiographies provide an interesting comparison: both express some dissatisfaction with racism, but both implicitly endorse it by expressing racist (and, I contend, not coincidentally, stridently sexist) sentiments. I have not included any texts for detailed discussion which either ignore the political dispensation (as far as I can tell, such texts are all white-authored, for obvious reasons) or which defend it. This is because such texts are few in number, and tend to follow a very conservative Western generic pattern: the authorial narrator/protagonist is positioned as centre and authority of a narrative which admits little or no uncertainty and which has a classic realist plot line (usually tracing a career, as do the autobiographies of Forbes, Hermans and Malherbe, or a particular period, as does Attwell's). While the coincidence of formal conservatism and political conservatism is of interest, and would be worth pursuing in further analyses, the conjunction is not necessarily consistent (Luthuli's is formally conservative too) and I did not find it sufficiently compelling to warrant inclusion of such a text here.

I have mentioned that there are texts which defend apartheid; this is perhaps misleading. In this study, of the more than 120 autobiographical texts which I have read, there are only a handful which attempt -- explicitly or implicitly -- to justify white supremacy. These are Sarah Gertrude Millin's (1941 and 1955), Mike Hoare's (1986) and Kaizer D. Mantanzima's (1976). Mantanzima's autobiography is tellingly published (and presumably motivated and sponsored) by the Nationalist Government's Foreign Affairs Association. Mantanzima was responsible for the success of the Nationalists' plan to make Transkei take its "independence" from South Africa. Why, you might be wondering, are there so few autobiographical texts which defend apartheid? Where were all its supporters? How did it last so long if they were not exploring every avenue to vindicate their political beliefs? While I cannot presume to know the answer to these questions, I can make some suggestions: perhaps there are a greater number of defensive autobiographical texts published in Afrikaans (it was an *Afrikaner* Nationalist Government, after all); perhaps, even from its inception, there was some kind of sense amongst the English-speaking supporters of white supremacy that while institutionalized racism could be practised, individual defences of it were unlikely to wash; perhaps the most ardent advocates of apartheid were too busy promulgating laws and ensuring that these were adhered to, to write their own life-stories. Perhaps the published defences of apartheid in English took other forms: biographies of white supremacists, for instance, or political and/or historical analyses. These issues, too, require further consideration.

But of greater importance for future study in the field of South African cultural production is the forging of a theoretical model which is more sensitive to indigenous influence than I have been able to be here. Theory is a story -- a complex, non-monologue -- by which we explain

our selves and our world. Academics need to know more about the stories, the theories, by which the indigenous peoples of South Africa explain themselves, the stories out of which they give meaning to their lives. The old disciplinary divisions which have kept such material within the preserves of anthropology and Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and other language departments need now to be transcended.

The end of race prejudice begins with a sudden incomprehension.

The occupant's spasmed and rigid culture, now liberated, opens at last to the culture of people who have really become brothers. The two cultures can affront each other, enrich each other.

In conclusion, universality resides in this decision to recognise and accept the reciprocal relativism of different cultures, once the colonial status is irreversibly excluded. (Fanon, 1967b:44)

I have heard eminent academics say that South Africa has not yet produced any black theorists of note. I believe that these people are looking for the wrong "theory": they are looking for black South Africans who speak the language of Eurocentric theory that they, as First World academics, have been trained to hear. Instead we now need to look for the theories that inform the cultures outside of academic institutions. This is where the indigenous theories of Africa lie; and it is responsiveness to new kinds of theory, new kinds of myth, that I hope to develop in subsequent study.

Nevertheless, the employment in this study of a modified poststructuralist theoretical model has its merits. For one thing, as I have said, these analyses refuse mimetic readings. They render visible the illusory transparencies of text and undermine the attempts by sectors of the literary critical establishment which persist in reading black people's writing as being of worth only insofar as it can be read as referential (Wicomb, 1990:42), as "non-literary arenas rather than with their internal structures as acts of language" (Henry Louis Gates, cited by Wicomb, 1990:42). I hope to have demonstrated that even what seem

to be the simplest of autobiographical texts are just as fully implicated in the politics of textuality as are those that appear to be highly sophisticated. I have tried to show why it is false to engage in a mock criticism in which "the structure of the black text has been repressed and treated as if it were transparent" (Henry Louis Gates, cited by Wicomb, 1990:42). And while the Eurocentricism of poststructuralism is disturbing, this Western theoretical model has relevance because the discourses and technologies of the West are imbricated in the making of apartheid South Africa and are therefore germane to its analysis.

While this study has sought to avoid generalizations which are presented as being beyond dispute, some conclusions can be drawn, one of which is that in this period an important shift in terms of the ranking of autobiographical texts has occurred. Initially, autobiographical accounts of non-achievers, of the representatives of the oppressed masses, were thought to be of little or no value: one can infer this from the fact that in the first few years of the apartheid period no such texts were published. The life-stories that seem to have been held in highest esteem (indeed, which have actually been printed) are those by individuals -- usually white -- who have public visibility: the politicians, sportsmen and so on. But as apartheid entrenched itself further with more and more draconian laws being passed, and as it impacted more forcefully on people's lives, those who could (who had the means to) escape South Africa, like Abrahams (1953 and 1954) and Mphahlele (1959), recorded the painful circumstances leading up to their decisions to go into exile, while Luthuli (1962) and Jabavu (1960 and 1963) documented the tragic implications of apartheid on black South Africans' lives. In the second half of the apartheid period the ranking which rather indiscriminately favoured the life-stories of the famous is inverted. The autobiographical texts of the oppressed are validated in

print in significant numbers, along with the life-stories (covering brief or longer periods) of individuals who document experiences of, and responses to, apartheid. At the same time the autobiographies of whites who have no particular political objections to apartheid are marginalised to the extent that people like Ruth Gordon (1984), David Alexander (1992), and Brian Godbold (1989) apparently could not find publishers. Each of their autobiographies is privately published.

Nussbaum points out that,

In a given social formation, then, at a particular historical moment, the power of certain discourses to determine knowledge may be uneven, and an ensuing struggle occurs in human subjects, in texts, and in the management of those texts. (1989:36)

In this regard one can see the beginnings of a canon of South African autobiography emerging. Interestingly, those by Mphahlele (1959), Modisane (1963), Kuzwayo (1985) and Magona (1990) have, it would seem, made it into the very select canon, often finding their way onto undergraduate and graduate prescribed book lists. "Language, like mankind, expands forever, and one becomes a hero simply by having the last word" (Klinkowitz, 1988:59). Given the fact that all of these are black-authored texts, it would seem that black South Africans will (appropriately) have the last word on apartheid.

But what is needed now, to make that "last word" more representative, is for South Africans across the spectrum to write their own stories. Petrus Tom prefaces his autobiography with the following:

I hope that this book will be a valuable contribution to the workers' struggle, and that other workers will be encouraged by it to come forward and write their own books which will tell their own stories. Intellectuals and academics have, for far too long, been writing books about us. But now the time has come for us, the working class, to take a stand and write our own stories about our experiences in life (1985:n.p.).

Those so-called Coloured South Africans: where are their stories? Where are the stories of Indian South Africans? Where, in both of these groups (and others), are the stories of women? Greater accessibility, in print form and translated, of traditional autobiographical performance texts is also needed. While there are problems inherent in this, this will nevertheless be an important way in which South Africans from diverse backgrounds (including urbanized and Westernized blacks) could learn about the past, and acquire resources for the future.

A study such as this cannot achieve significant political effect: but it can undermine simplistic interpretations. And it is upon simplistic interpretations that the worst brutalities, the worst violations of human rights and human life, have rested. Reading about how different people have chosen to characterize their lives, their daily struggles, may not cause a revolution in the usual sense, but it may, in the words of Kate Millet, help to effect "a deep emotional type of transformation that must also take place inside us. It's a better way to live" (in Kolodny, 1980:249). Textual analysis might seem to be a luxury which only the privileged can indulge in, but it is not without merits. Jameson, for instance, defends literary criticism, which "in bourgeois terms is very obviously a marginal activity..., but from a Marxist perspective it would appear to be even more so, the very type of apolitical or 'unrevolutionary' speculation..." (Dowling, 1984:99) with the answer that this argument derives from a failure to perceive the cultural sphere as an arena of class struggle and revolutionary conflict. His view of narrative completes his response:

since History comes to us encoded in narrative form, the literary critic confronting a text is, far from being a marginal figure, the very type of the mind confronting Reality, and interpretation is the form of its understanding. The task of Marxist thought is thus not to forswear interpretation, but to rescue it from the denial and repression of History. (Dowling, 1984:99-100)

Perhaps what I hope most to have demonstrated through particularized readings of specific texts is what Lionnet so succinctly expresses: "the symbolic is real, and in symbols lies our only hope for a better world. To reinterpret the world is to change it" (Lionnet, 1989:26).



## NOTES

### Notes for Chapter 1

1. Perhaps a caveat is necessary here: 1948 is commonly (and erroneously) emphasised as giving rise to racism in South Africa under the auspices of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party; as Clements Kadalie and Naboth Mokgatle and others indicate, racism was entrenched in South African lifestyles and legislation (e.g. 1913 Land Act) long before the Nationalists won the 1948 election.
2. Not all South African autobiographers are concerned with the political horrors of their lives: many write life stories which give little indication of a specifically South African social context. Some that come to mind are Ulf Boberg's The Boberg Story (1957), Ruth Gordon's Alive, Alive-O! (1984), Gordon Forbes' A Handful of Summers (1978), and Harry H. Hermans' The Law my Master (1970).
3. It must, of course, be noted, that the genesis of the interdisciplinary movement in intellectual endeavours is to be found in the influence of linguistics on a wide variety of human sciences and the arts. In literary studies, for example, the early decades of this century saw the Formalists, the New Critics, and Leavis emphatically defend the notion of the specialness, the distinctiveness, of literary studies. In the latter half of the century, however, the influence of Saussurean linguistics on literary studies was to cause a re-assessment of the field in the light of its place as one semiotic system amongst others. Literature was thus seen to be one instance of a general system by which meanings are generated; the methodology of literary studies differed very little from those adopted by others in the humanities. The result of the broad application of the Saussurean linguistic paradigm across this range of disciplines was, as we know, structuralism. A fuller discussion ensues in Chapter 2. (See Scholes, Structuralism in Literature and Culler, Structuralist Poetics and also the chapters on structuralism in the introductory texts to literary theory by Selden and Jefferson and Robey).
4. Terry Eagleton has some interesting things to say about the rise of Literature as a discipline in the introduction and first chapter of his Literary Theory: An Introduction. He notes, for instance, that since the turn of the eighteenth century 'literature' has been used to refer exclusively to creative or imaginative work (1983:17-18).
5. Derrida indicates a suspension of concepts by placing words "under erasure", signified by crossing them through in the text and thus warning the reader not to take them at face value. "The marks of erasure acknowledge both the inadequacy of the terms employed -- their highly provisional status -- and the fact that thought simply cannot manage without them in the work of deconstruction.

By this graphic means, much akin to the anomalous spelling of *differance*, concepts are perpetually shaken and dislodged" (Norris, 1982:69).

6. It is important to bear in mind, however, that while the genre, by definition, concerns itself with issues which are presently enjoying topicality across a range of theoretical approaches and disciplines, I do not wish claim, as Olney rather extravagantly does, that, "autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people..." (1980:13). The genre in all its multiplicity of forms and functions, subject to constant transformation, cannot justly be exalted over (or indeed, dismissed as inferior to) other textual practices as though such status is a quality inherent in the genre per se, a quality which transcends historical and cultural specificity.

7. James Olney remarks that it is a contemporary fascination with the *autos* that is primarily at root of the current popularity of autobiography as the focus for critical and theoretical studies (1980:19, 23). While not contesting this, I would argue that the centrality accorded to material practice, largely as a result of Marxist theories, and the importance which recent theories confer upon textuality, are also important contributors to the popularity of the genre.

Olney notes, too, that autobiography, "has become the focalizing literature for various 'studies' that otherwise have little by way of a defining, organizing center to them... such 'studies' as American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and African Studies. According to the argument of these critics ... autobiography offers a privileged access to an experience ... that no other way of writing can offer" (13).

8. Felicity Nussbaum says that the first stirrings of conceptualisations of the autobiographical as a distinct generic class (and, by implication, theorisations about that generic category) occurred in England "toward the end of the eighteenth century" and notes that "The first use of the word 'autobiography' in an English title may well be in W.P.Scargill's The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister (1834)" (1989:1-2).

9. The first edition of a\b:Auto\Biography Studies appeared early in 1985. Four issues per annum have been produced ever since.

10. In 1989 six papers were presented which dealt with South African fiction, and two which looked at South African literature and society. No papers dealing with South African autobiography were presented. In 1990, five

papers dealing with South African fiction were presented; two on South African poetry and nine on South African autobiography, making this the most heavily represented field at the conference. This weighting has not been repeated (perhaps because such an enthusiastic panel organiser has not again come forward), but the genre is still very topical, judging by the numbers of journal articles on autobiographical writing.

11. Thus Helen Joseph's autobiographical writings are included even though she was born in England. Her texts are about her experiences in South Africa, and she feels she belongs here. She says in her autobiography,

My brother in England asked me to consider returning... For me, to leave South Africa and return to England was unthinkable. South Africa is my land by adoption, even if not by birth. For me to leave would be the ultimate betrayal. I was not being a martyr about this. I wanted to stay in South Africa, to be side by side with my friends in the struggle, whether banished, banned or in goal. Perhaps it might cost me dear. I did not know, but the greater price would have been to leave. (1986:146)

I have included, too, autobiographies by exiled South Africans like Hugh Lewin and also by authors who are not South Africans, by birth or naturalisation, but who have written about their experiences in South Africa. Examples are Trevor Huddleston's Naught for Your Comfort and Quentin Jacobsen's Solitary in Johannesburg.

12. The fact that the apartheid era has ended has been significant for this study in another way: a great many previously banned texts have now been unbanned, no longer being perceived as a threat to the State, and whereas in the past many texts had to be read in the physical presence of a librarian (if they were accessible at all), these are now freely available.

13. Some attempt to present verifiable information about a person's experiences was an almost invariable criterion; Dugmore Boetie's self-proclaimed autobiography is exceptional in that it has, according to its editor Barney Simon, proven to be a work of fantasy. Also deviating from this norm is Thula Baba, the aggregated life-story discussed in Chapter 4.

14. The study has been confined to texts written in English. Certainly, a more comprehensive analysis of autobiographical writing across languages would no doubt reveal some interesting trends. I believe, however, that the restriction to English (enforced by my own linguistic limitations and my disciplinary affiliation) is not too seriously debilitating for English is the medium in which by far the largest number of autobiographical texts are published, even by those whose mother tongue is not

English. This may be explained, in part, by writers' and publishers' awareness of the greater potential readership - within South Africa and abroad-- for English texts rather than those written in Zulu, Sotho, Afrikaans or other indigenous languages. It may be due, too, to the perception of many that English is the language of liberation and progress. In this regard, one might recall the number of African countries which have, post-independence, adopted English as their official language. Namibia and Zimbabwe are two recent examples.

15. The selection favours works by black South Africans principally because these texts seem to carry greater weight amongst readers, in South Africa and overseas, and because they have, in certain instances, seemed to me to be more innovative. Black women: Kuzwayo and numerous others in the worker anthologies; black men: Moloi, Luthuli, and many others in worker autobiographies. White women: Gordon; white men: Breytenbach and Campbell.

16. The corollary has been the exclusion of texts which frequently find themselves on English undergraduate syllabi, such as Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue, Abraham's Tell Freedom, and Modisane's Blame Me on History.

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## Notes for Chapter 2

1. I usually use the term poststructuralism, although there has been a tendency in the last few years for theorists to prefer the term postmodernism. In spite of the fact that poststructuralism is not a unified theory, some of its detractors have effected a shift in emphasis (rather than a rejection of fundamental poststructuralist precepts). The new appellation for the later theoretical position would seem usually to be 'postmodern'. Lars Engle, for example, used this term at the 1990 AUETSA conference to denote what he referred to as "oppositional" approaches, clearly denoting a range of responses relying heavily on poststructuralist theories, and Felicity Nussbaum defines her theoretical position as a "postmodern mode of inquiry that takes account of gender issues" (1989:xvi). I, however, find the term 'postmodernism' to be more misleading than 'poststructuralism' since it already has long established a usefulness as a reference to a different and rather specific set of characteristics of 'literary' (and 'artistic') texts; and even when used in relation to theoretical texts it embraces a variety of approaches which are not always distinguishable from poststructuralist practice. Rice and Waugh, for instance, argue that,

There are some obvious links between postmodernist and poststructuralist theories: for instance, emphasis on the signifier, the questioning and relativizing of

truth, the fragmentation of the subject. But there are also important differences. Postmodernism extends the reign of the signifier into culture in general and poses a more radical "loss" of the signified; it casts doubt on the function and ability of language to organize and control meanings in the socio-cultural domain; it recasts the role of the social mass as held within the reason of ideology; and it emphasizes consumption, seeing it as a play which constantly eludes the rational explanation of theory...

[Postmodernist theory] marks the emergence of a radical critique of the theoretical moment witnessed over the past twenty or so years; a critique which poses critical theory as the dream of a now redundant form of understanding the world. (1989:260)

Many self-defined 'postmodernist' theorists are more materialist in emphasis than Rice and Waugh's definition implies, while many poststructuralists engage in what they refer to as postmodernist practice.

2. Rice and Waugh, on occasion, use the plural to indicate the heterogeneity of the field: "various post-structuralisms" (4); Young, in his introduction to Untying the Text, notes that poststructuralism is an "autocritique" of structuralism and that the word poststructuralism itself "shifts the emphasis from any single meaning or theory towards an unbound movement through time and space, suggesting that there... can never be any definitive 'theory of poststructuralism'" (1981:6). Chris Weedon acknowledges the plurality of meanings of poststructuralism (1987:19) but identifies some common principles (20). Nussbaum, too, makes this point (1991:24 -30).

3. Young, in his introduction to Untying the Text refers to a 1971 interview with Barthes in which Barthes suggests that the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism occurred between 1966 and S/Z (1970).

4. This insight characterizes the poststructuralist thinking of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, White and many feminists like Weedon and Nussbaum but not the thinking of Lacan or Althusser. This poststructuralist insistence on provisionality is criticized by Selden (1985:102) and others.

5. See, for instance, Barthes (1977:3-4; 74; 79; 85; 92-95; 105; 119).

6. Althusser contends that the relative distributions of influence of ISAs alter in response to the overall historical circumstances prevailing at a specific time (Henriques et al, 1984:96).

7. Ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971:162) and it requires the blindness of all

to its distortions; it requires the *subjection* of all to its exploitive system. I find Althusser's account to be useful as an explanatory model of the interpellation of the subject but, like Foucault, I reject Althusser's use of ideology as though it is in opposition to the truth of Marxist "science". So when I use the term ideology, I use it to mean the idea systems by which we make sense of the world, not to mean that these are false and that I have access to the 'truth'. Generally, I prefer the term discourse (it also has the advantage of being more obviously implicated in material practice) and my analyses of specific texts tend to focus on discourses rather than ideologies.

8. Lemaire (1977:113-114) notes that Lacan's intellectual approach may be defined as ironic (i.e. having an interrogative import). Lacan's writings do not lend themselves to closure; nor does he claim to have propounded theories.

9. It will be recalled that Weedon (1987:27) made a similar, yet importantly different, observation about Althusser's theory of the subject and the social when she said that consciousness is not the cause of social relations but rather their effect.

10. Derrida, like Barthes and Lacan, theorizes the role of language in the constitution of subjectivity as being, a place of exile, a medium where absence, death, and repetition rule without exception. A language can only constitute itself as such by virtue of an original catastrophe, a violent separation from nature.... As [is written in Derrida's] "Living On": "A tongue can never be appropriated; it is only ever as the other's tongue that it is mine, and reciprocally." (Levesque, 1985:143-144)

The speaking/writing subject is split from the experiencing subject; the 'real author' is a split subject traversed by discourse and by unconscious desire, and the writing process is simply a record of absence, of versions of selves which do not exist.

11. Anne Jefferson and David Robey are guilty of this in their Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction, as are Rory Ryan and Susan van Zyl in their like text, An Introduction to Contemporary Literary Theory. This erroneous simplification of poststructuralism ignores key poststructuralist insights generated by Lacan, Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva but does serve to draw attention to the prominence of the contribution of Derridean deconstruction to the poststructuralist enterprise. For instance, Young, in his Introduction to Untying the Text observes that, "It is Derrida who is often associated most closely with poststructuralism, precisely because it is he who has investigated and exposed the contradictions and paradoxes upon which structuralism is formed" (1981:15).



12. But to attempt to stabilize *differance* as signifier and signified is to ignore the Derridean injunction against such logocentrism for *differance* "has neither existence nor essence. It belongs to no category of being, present or absent" (1973:134). *Differance*, in its refusal to accept stability of signifieds and in its disturbance at the level of the signifier (its anomalous spelling), thus designates as well as enacts the theme of the instability of signification (Norris, 1987:15 and 1982:32; also Jefferson, Jefferson and Robey, 1986:119).

13. Interestingly, the point is made in "Roundtable on Translation" in The Ear of the Other (1985:93-161) that translation, in its attempts to divorce signified and signifier so that a pure signified is simply attached to a new system of signifiers, can never achieve its ultimate goal. It must always entail transformation. Nor can one translate one integrated and complete language into another, for every linguistic system comprises "several languages or tongues" (100).

14. Norris, in Deconstruction, remarks that the utopian longing for textual free play tends to "anarchic effect" in later Derridean texts (1982:49).

15. Derrida has also delivered (more direct) attacks on Foucault's early work: apropos Foucault's attempt in Madness and Civilization to write a history of madness before being captured by knowledge, Derrida shows that the project is self-deluded if it tries to achieve a standpoint outside or above the discourse of reason (Norris, 1987:214-215).

16. The Foucault vs Derrida quarrel which Norris takes up on the side of Derrida seems to me to fail to take account of the fact that what is at stake is a difference in strategy. Moreover, Norris's defence of Derrida (1987:216-217) on the grounds that Derrida's concerns with political realities are evidenced in his insistence on the "worldly" consequences of the writings of Nietzsche and Freud seems to me to be very slim justification in the face of much more evidence which indicates a complete absence of political engagement in even a broad sense.

Norris's criticism of Foucault's "extreme epistemological scepticism" which, Norris claims, "leads him to equate knowledge with power, and hence to regard all forms of 'enlightened' progress (in psychiatry, sexual attitudes or penal reform) as signs of increasing sophistication in the applied technology of social control" is a misreading of Foucault in the sense that it implies a hopelessness and lack of resistance which Foucault is at pains to deny is true of contemporary power relations (any more than power relations in the past). Furthermore, what Norris (217) says of Derrida (by way of contrast with Foucault), applies equally to Foucault; Foucault also insists that one has to work within contemporary intellectual traditions but

against some of its ruling ideas, and that thus one can effectively criticize existing institutions.

17. This is a serious difference between Foucault and Althusser and other Marxists and neo-Marxists; for them, Marxist doctrine (in some form) provides the 'truth' which must be referred to whenever understanding of ideology is sought.

18. By the way, The Hamlyn Pocket Thesaurus of English Words (1979:31) gives "effeminacy, femininity" as synonyms for weakness, and "effeminate, womanly" as synonyms for weak!

19. Other important French feminists are H el ene Cixous, who has been producing feminist texts rather prolifically since the mid sixties (Jones, 1985b:89); Monique Wittig, whose stridently feminist Les qu erilleres was published in 1969; and Luce Irigaray who published her important essay Speculum de l'autre femme in 1974.

20. Some who are guilty of this oversight are Jefferson and Robey, Selden (1985), Easthope (1988:xiv) and even avowed feminists like Chris Weedon (1987) and Cecily Lockett (1990); in all of these the emphasis is on the influence of poststructuralism on feminism, omitting a concomitant analysis of the influence of feminism on poststructuralism. Selden, for example, includes Kristeva in his discussion of poststructuralism, but excludes the feminist dimension of her work, dealing with it only in his (deeply flawed) chapter on feminism, even though of her "semanalysis" Kristeva declares: "It was perhaps also necessary to be a woman to attempt to take up that exorbitant wage of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men..." (1980:x).

21. While I think that Weedon fails to acknowledge the influence of feminism in much of the work of poststructuralism's founding fathers (and to pay due attention to Kristeva's key input), her remark about the "men's club" of the early poststructuralist theorists is nevertheless worth repeating:

It is no coincidence that these theorists are all men; this is a consequence of the gender relations which have structured women's absence from the active production of most theory within a whole range of discourses over the last 300 years. It is also a mark of the particular conditions under which prestigious and powerful bodies of knowledge were and are produced. (1987:13)

22. For a summary of Showalter's critique of Terry Eagleton's and Jonathan Culler's "feminist" approaches, see Joseph Allen Boone (1989:161).



23. See Kristeva 1980b:137-141, especially 140. Of course, many women of colour in America and Africa have issued a powerful critique on European and American feminisms which do not consider race and class with sufficient rigour of honesty.

24. I am not able to wholeheartedly endorse this position, tending dangerously as it does towards essentialism. Moreover, the celebration of women's sexuality seems to be a little flippant in the light of the profound deprivation to which millions of South African (and other) women are subjected.

25. Levi-Strauss's implicit sexism is manifest in his failure to react to this contradictory status of women. See Rubin, 1975:201.

26. Foucault, Derrida and many other poststructuralist theorists have a similar distrust for grand political gestures.

27. Jameson, too, endorses a view of marxism as "truth" while working within a poststructuralist or postmodernist paradigm (Dowling, 1984:13).

On problems with marxism, see Dowling, 1984:48-49.

28. See also Henriques et al, 1984:95-98.

29. See, for instance, Lemaire, 1977:181.

30. Consider the sexism implicit in the following from "The signification of the phallus" in :

...male homosexuality... is constituted on the side of desire, while female homosexuality, on the other hand, as observation shows, is orientated on a disappointment that reinforces the side of the demand for love. (1977:290)

Surely not many lesbians would agree.

31. See Cathy Urwin (Henriques et al, 1984:282, 318). Also dubious, though not strictly germane to my theoretical discussion, is whether psychoanalysis, and marxism, actually do what they set out to do. Has marxism achieved what it promises, anywhere? Can the psychoanalyst be utterly passive (Lemaire, 1977:198, 217-219, 221) so that "the movement of analysis unfolds 'according to the paths of a specific gravitation, which is truth' [Lacan, French Ed. of *Écrits*]: the truth of the patient's desire" (Lemaire, 1977:222)? And even if this is achieved, how is it known to be achieved? How does the analyst recognize this truth? Or the patient, since it is the truth of the unconscious? Moreover, how do the psychoanalyst and psychoanalytic theorist recognize the "true essence" of the subject (Lemaire, 1977:6-7, 67, 69)? Is this not an attempt to cling to the notion of the unified subject, while simultaneously positing a decentred, split

subjectivity?

32. Dowling, for instance, argues that "neither the human psyche as Freud studies it nor the theory he developed to explain its dynamics is permanent or timeless"; "it is the essence of ideological thinking, of which Freudian psychoanalysis is simply one prominent example, to shut out or deny its ultimate grounding in History and Necessity" (1984:31).

33. I am most uncomfortable, for example, with Barthes' claim that,  
the intellectual's (or the writer's) historical function, today, is to maintain and to emphasize the *decomposition* of bourgeois consciousness... this means that we deliberately pretend to remain within this consciousness and that we will proceed to dismantle it, to weaken it, to break it down on the spot, as we would a lump of sugar by steeping it in water. (1977:63)

34. Selden concludes his chapter on poststructuralism with the following: "[Poststructuralism's] desire to resist assertions is itself doomed to failure because only by saying nothing could they prevent us from thinking that they mean something. This summary of their views itself implies their failure" (1985:102). While I would argue that not all poststructuralists can be tarred with the same brush, examples of the kind of theoretical project to which he refers are amply provided by Derrida, Lacan and by Barthes (1977:172).

35. On the abstruseness of Derrida, Dowling remarks: "What Derrida was saying, I later realized, was that you can come right out and say what you mean only if you've got a false theory of meaning, but even so, he never *said* that directly, and... (These are the frustrations one felt)" (1984:10-11). And Norris refers to the "the centrifugal energies of destruction" (1982:124; also 126-129).

Lemaire notes that certain expressions typical of Lacan refer to different concepts in different contexts, this without explanation on Lacan's part (1977:157); and Robert Con Davis says that it often seems as though we're not meant to understand Lacan's work (1983:855-6).

36. Deconstruction theorized the discursive context as the relationship of difference between written texts, and while insisting that non-discursive forces are important, does not spell out the social power relations within which texts are located. (Weedon, 1987:25)

Of the charge of political timidity, Barthes says of himself (rather damningly, in my opinion), "And it is because he fails to separate political reality from its general, *repeated* discourse that politics is barred to him." For Barthes, "politics too belongs to the category

of languages, and turns to Prattle" (1977:52-53).

37. See, for example, Norma Kitson's (1987) critiques of the power games played by members of the Anti-apartheid movement in London or Elizabeth de Villiers' (1990) oppressive consciousness of her white skin or Godfrey Moloi's (1987, 1991) racism.

38. Foucault's notion of the "specific intellectual" is helpful here; see "Truth and Power" (1984:51 -75).

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### Notes for Chapter 3

1. "The unconscious comes into existence simultaneously with the subject's first assimilation of cultural prohibition" (Silverman, 1983:55). This poststructuralist insistence on the de-centred nature of subjectivity is the reason for this chapter's title; "identity" implies sameness and would thus be inappropriate.

2. Although claiming to be true (based on true accounts of experience) Thula Baba is the exception to this rule because it does not give verifiable information.

3. See Gunner, Opland, and Kunene. I have already referred to this phenomenon briefly in the section on Foucault in Chapter 2, as an instance of the productivity of power. More detailed discussion follows in Chapter 5.

4. Although the title of Rive's Writing Black insists upon a recognition of the writer's racial classification, the text tends to efface this.

5. See Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1984). He takes the argument regarding the body as socially significant a step further:

We believe... that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history, but this too is false. The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances.... Nothing in man -- not even his body -- is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. (1984:87-8)

6. Whether the hero's exploits, recorded in the narrative, were actually performed by the writer, Roy Campbell, or not is irrelevant to this analysis of the text. At stake here is the textual construction of the narrator and protagonist. Poststructuralist theory insists upon the non-transparency of the text. Of course, what is relevant

though, is the fact that the text claims that it is a faithful record of lived experience.

7. Consider his pronouncement that the French Revolution was a "volcano of blood and pus" which caused France to decline into "a third-rate masonic republic, divided against itself" (Campbell, 1971:158). Not afraid to pass to pass summary judgement about disparate global events, he goes on, "All political activity which has been attempted outside of tradition during the last one hundred and fifty years has worked out in the inverse sense from its original intention" (158).

8. For example, from his maternal grandmother, a Gascon, he inherits his "love of bulls, and of Provencal, French, and Spanish poetry" (23; also 84-5). From his paternal grandfather he inherited the "malady" of versifying (25). An exceptional ability with animals "runs in the family" (35). In later chapters we read that he inherited from his father "his unselfconsciousness in dealing with [his] fellowmen" and his "mastery of horses which has been [his] passport through every frontier" (62).

9. The narrator's introduction indicates the motive and time of writing: he is a demobilised soldier, the time is 1951 (20).

10. Annie Leclerc's thoughts on mastery are apposite: "Master, master: there is the master word of all our submissions to the greatness of man" (1980:81). She observes that men must conquer to obtain mastery:

I know that what a man likes about himself and what he's made the object of his respect are the virtues of the conqueror and the proprietor. He needs the strength to conquer and the bulk to possess with impunity.

The virtue of virtues, the *virtus*, is force. (1980:82)

11. Campbell was "still a only minor of nineteen" (251) when he married.

12. Chaucer's Franklin's advice on how to keep love alive in a marriage has clearly fallen on deaf ears here!

13. She is referred to by name by Wyndham Lewis ("Mary Campbell", 244), Stuart Gray ("Miss Mary", 247), by a servant ("Miss Mary", 251), by the gypsies (254), and by a woman whom the narrator dubs "Mrs Sennacheribs" (255).

14. In the narrative dealing with their courtship, this phrase ("my wife") occurs three times (248, 249, 251); after marriage it is used more frequently (252, 253, 254, 255, 256, 258, 264).

15. I must mention the fact that Campbell's chivalric

attitude to his wife in no way precludes his womanising pursuits. Although almost thrown away in narrative asides, Campbell tells us of a kind of urban hunt in which he and Liam o' Flaherty "carried out the four best-looking ladies" from a Mayfair club ("without any opposition from their menfolk"), forgetting that their wives were waiting in the taxi (317). And later, it is only when he and Mary convert to Catholicism and are remarried in the Catholic Church that he "went monogamous" (325). He does not record these earlier affairs.

16. That the autobiography is peppered with racist sentiment is undeniable, but one should also bear in mind that the author claims to have made himself very unpopular by defying the "Colour Bar" (83, 261).

17. Alan Paton, Zola Budd, E.G. Malherbe, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Guy Butler, Noni Jabavu, amongst others, write what I would classify as classic realist autobiographies.

18. This term is, according to Dorothy Driver, Loretta Ncgobo's (Driver, 1991a:93). Neither feminism nor nationalism take precedence in the woman's self-definition.

19. Rimmon-Kenan explains this term:

The story is presented in the text through the mediation of some 'prism', 'perspective', 'angle of vision', verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his.... Obviously, a person (and, by analogy, a narrative agent) is capable of both speaking and seeing, and even of doing both things at the same time.... But a person (and... narrative agent) is also capable of undertaking to tell what another person sees or has seen. Thus, speaking and seeing, narration and focalization, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent. (1983:71-2)

20. There are many examples; I cite the following two, 14 and 23-4, in which the focalizer and focalized become the black woman, uprooted, uneducated, poverty-stricken. When Kuzwayo is the focalizer, she consistently foregrounds her sympathy and empathy for all sorts of black women, even those who are markedly different from her, in all sorts of ways. For instance, her discussion of women who participate in a licentious dance called the *timiti* (31) is sympathetic (yet disapproving).

21. Focalization "has a subject and an object. The subject (the 'focalizer') is the agent whose perception orients the presentation, whereas the object (the 'focalized') is what the focalizer perceives" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983:74).

22. I would argue against the suggestion made by Gordimer (1985:xi), Head (1985:xiv) and Daymond (1987:13-4) that Kuzwayo is representative of South African black women.

This comment has often been made about the autobiographical subjects of American (e.g. by Rosenblatt, 1980:179-80) and South African black-authored autobiographies; viz. that the autobiographer stresses not her unique individuality but rather her representativeness or typicality.

23. See also Kuzwayo's response to two white women:  
I examined the way I had received my visitors and was forced to recognise the harm my detention had done to me. I saw the dents it had left on me, the unseen, emotional scars I had suffered, as well as the need to help myself out of that rut. (1985:232)

✓ 24. Daymond, for example, cites a number of features which are held in some quarters to be definitive of autobiography: a confessional impulse; a sense that the confessing self can be representative; the "ability to isolate the shaping events and conditions" of one's life, "to give them form and to search in them for a meaningful pattern of cause and effect" (1987:15); the individual must "speak up for herself against the community" thus indicating "a sense of self, a sense of her right to autonomous decision-making" (20); suffering as the usual motive for autobiography (15, 21); and, lastly, "specificity of detail... what could only be told by the narrator herself" (21).

25. See 154 (this is claimed twice), 159, 163, 166, 331.

26. See, for example, 61, 183, 242ff, 314, and the narrator's use of dates and place names to "anchor" the narrative in fact.

27. Obviously, I am disagreeing with Johan Jacobs' claim (1986) that the text is more fictional than autobiographical.

28. See Part I, Chapter 6 which discusses how and why he came to indulge in "terrorist" activities (especially 38).

29. The narrator outlines his opposition to the ANC and SACP on the grounds that their refusal to acknowledge the deep divisions caused by apartheid between black and white reduces the effectiveness of their strategies of subversion (73-4; 76).

30. My edition (Faber and Faber, 1984) has a drawing by the author on the front cover, and a small photograph of him on the back. I have since seen another copy of the text which has an enlarged copy of the photograph of the author on the front cover, replacing the drawing. This is a great pity. It underscores only one reading of the author's identity, the most conventional one.

31. This is a common feature of narrative autobiographies; at the narrative's conclusion the narrator and protagonist

are not only closer together temporally (the time gap between story time and time of narration usually closes progressively during the course of the narration), but values approach coincidence. Thus the conclusion of the narrative autobiography often represents an attempt to suture the split between *le sujet de l'enonce* and *le sujet de l'enonciation* but this coincidence can never be perfect because it is exactly in the divorce between the two that the autobiography's existence is possible at all.

32. This is the title of a play by Athol Fugard, thus again illustrating the complexity of the interweaving of present (in Paris) and past (in South Africa).

33. Barthes' autobiographical narrator states:  
Self-commentary? What a bore! I had no other solution than to rewrite myself -- at a distance, a great distance -- here and now: to add to the books, to the themes, to the memories, to the texts, another utterance, without my ever knowing whether it is about my past or my present that I am speaking. (1977:142)

34. I am indebted to a late colleague, Ashley Ward, for his comments on his reading of this drawing.

35. See 13, 140, 146 (prisoner as "birdie"), 154, 179 ("jailbird"), 194 ("birds").

36. He describes with bitterness how his keepers liked "to fuck around with my mind" (36). It is noteworthy, however, how rarely the narrator expresses or implies any hostility to Mr Investigator, reinforcing the sense that "we here see the mirror and its own mirror image" (86).

37. Silverman states that "the mirror stage is one of those crises of alienation around which the Lacanian subject is organized, since to know oneself through an external image is to be defined through self-alienation" (1983:158).

38. See Silverman (1983:43-53), Belsey, Weedon and others.

39. Cf. frontispiece quotation, "Song of the Origin of the Four Natures":

Others do not know my nature.  
As I know not the nature of others,  
The nature of things as that of men,  
Just like the universal nature.  
This universal nature is like my partial one.  
If I were to know my nature well,  
I should be knowing universal nature.

40. Lemaire:  
One of the specific characteristics of language is that it evokes a thing, a reality, by means of a substitute which this thing is not, evoking, in other

words its presence against a ground of absence.... This act of substituting a sign for a reality is also an operation of mediation whereby the subject places himself at a distance from the lived experience and is thus able to locate himself as a subject distinct from his surroundings. (1977:51)

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#### Notes for Chapter 4

1. The editors of Vukani Makhosikazi state that between 1960 and 1980, "more than two million people were moved as a result of government policy" (1985:181).
2. This tendency for the record of the life to obscure the writing self is found also in some white-authored texts like Boberg's, Ruth Gordon's, Malherbe's and many others in which the motive is patently not political; it would seem in these instances that the authors want rather to retain a large degree of privacy in their making public their life stories.
3. Derrida describes his opposition to grand explanations: "In any case I am very mistrustful whenever people identify historical breaks or when they say, 'This begins there'" (1985:84).
4. The temptation to conform to traditional teleological models is hard to avoid in South Africa in the period under consideration since the Master narrative (in its double sense) of apartheid and its eventual demise seem to be paramount.
5. This is a point made by Spacks (1980:121) in relation to women's autobiographical writing.
6. While it is true of most autobiographical writing that it does not offer "generalized truths based on documentary evidence", there are South African autobiographical texts which do something very similar. As we shall see, many worker autobiographies present aggregated autobiographical subjects (based on interviews, usually), and many autobiographies of black individuals present themselves as prototypical. The "generalized truths" of these texts are usually based on interviews. (Nevertheless, since much 'people's history' is too, the distinction must be used with care).
7. Of course my own interpellation as a white South African academic constructs for me my own notions of what is true.
8. My decision to exclude from analysis white-authored autobiographies in this chapter is a deliberate and, I contend, a defensible one. Autobiographies by whites like



Guy Butler, Alan Paton, Gordon Summer and Zola Budd, to name a few examples, are unlikely to be reprinted, while Luthuli's went into twelve editions with one publisher, and was published by at least two other publishers. In a recent visit to the United States (July, 1993) the South African autobiographies which I found on the shelves of a few university bookstores were, almost without exception, those by black South Africans (the exception was usually Rian Malan's). Moreover, in courses on South African literature taught at South African universities, the autobiographies which are included are almost always those by black South Africans.

9. English autobiographies, and probably autobiographical production in general, are still not proportionally representative in terms of race groups or gender.

10. At the risk of being repetitive, I would like to reiterate that developments are always uneven; there are autobiographies being produced even now which do not address these problems, but which are very conventional records of an individual's life and career.

11. Although one should bear in mind the fact that Afrikaans-speaking peoples are likely to publish autobiographies in their own language, it is noteworthy that there are virtually no English autobiographies published in the last 46 years which act as apologies for apartheid, while there are Afrikaners who write their autobiographies in English, as do Ferreira and Breytenbach, in order specifically to distance themselves from Afrikaner culture and politics.

12. This disunification of the family due to a family member's political activism is simply an intensification of the dissolution of the family as caused by apartheid, as Luthuli finds when he and his wife spend the first eight years of their marriage living apart (40-1).

13. There are many South African autobiographers (women amongst them) who record their commitment to political struggles with the effect of increasing their own personal importance: Thomas Boydell, Boris Wilson, Caesarina Makhoere, Janet Levine, Indres Naidoo all seem to me to have some elements of this in their autobiographies.

14. Luthuli proves to be the exception to the rule that Spacks identifies: Spacks finds that the value of such commitment to a cause is different for women. Such a clear gender difference is not a consistent feature of South African autobiographical writing. Intense selfless commitment is evident in a man like Luthuli's autobiography; it is evident to some extent in autobiographies by women like Kuzwayo, First, Joseph, Benson and Mashinini.

15. I argue for the effectiveness of the text in spite of the fact that we cannot measure the text's influence in terms of actual responses by the international community.

16. See 33, 36, 37.

17. What Luthuli does not add here but acknowledges later (46) is that the "nineteenth-century tribalism" defined by white supremacists was their own version, a sham designed to disempower and impoverish blacks, rather than engender tribal identities and pride. This is evidenced in the fact that chiefs were Government appointees, whose primary responsibilities were to the white leaders, not to their own people.

18. Luthuli takes great pains to ensure that readers understand that his appointment to the position of chief is the result of democratic process in the Groutville community.

19. It seems to me that Poppie -- first published in Afrikaans in 1978 -- was the forerunner of these white-authored quasi-autobiographical texts about black subjects. Even though it is not, strictly speaking, autobiographical, the author, Elsa Joubert, prefaces the text with this note to the reader:

This novel is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today. Only her name... is invented. The facts were related to me not only by Poppie herself, but by members of her immediate family and her extended family or clan, and they cover one family's experience over the past forty years. (1985:n.p.)

After Poppie came The Story of Mboma (1979) and The Diary of Maria Tholo (1980). Many others followed, especially in the form of anthologies of short autobiographical sketches in the mid-eighties, the worker autobiographies.

20. Carole Boyce Davies also argues for this group of texts to be considered as a specific literary genre, because of peculiarities in "form and intent" (1989:88).

21. Davies does not seem to include texts which deal with single autobiographical subjects (1989:88); she defines this category in terms of the class status of the autobiographical subject, and the intent of the editor/publisher to foreground the plight of the most oppressed black South Africans. I believe texts -- these are briefer than conventional autobiographies -- which are not "collections of personal stories" (Davies, 1989:88) belong in this sub-species.

22. Working in South Africa edited by Ken Dovey, Lorraine Laughton and Jo-Anne Durandt (1985), belongs on the margins of this group since it includes personal accounts by South Africans who cannot be counted amongst the oppressed. I

have not included this text in my discussion of worker autobiographies.

23. Bozzoli argues persuasively that "even such seemingly obvious concepts as 'race' are ambiguous, forged through a series of processes and shot through with both class and gender attributes" (1991:239). Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that these are not immutable concepts, and are "products of political decisions and not products of nature" (Kotze, 1993:xi), they affect in fundamental ways material existence. Kotze adds:

To be labelled 'black', 'white', 'coloured' or 'Indian' in South Africa constitutes a very real kind of experience for the people concerned. But this is not to say that each of these population categories constitutes a common, homogeneous culture. They merely provide contexts -- externally specified and internally constructed. (Kotze, 1993:xi)

24. Arguably, the experiences of black South Africans are traumatic, but not a trauma (which implies a discreteness, a finality, which is not applicable to a prolonged and systematic disempowerment and disablement of millions of people).

25. I spoke to a woman who had translated a Zulu novel into English; the English version was more than double the length of the original as this was, she said, the only way she could capture the essence of the Zulu. While I am not qualified to either endorse or deny such claims, I do think that length is probably a rather minor issue in the translation of prose.

26. The blurb of Working Women claims:

Working Women tells of the struggles of South Africa's black women workers. Through interviews and photographs women describe their lives at work and at home. Strong voices speak out against women's oppression. The book shows women challenging the government, the bosses, and their own husbands. (n.p.)

While this is true, it would also be true to say that the book shows many instances of women not challenging the government, the bosses, and their own husbands; examples of women submitting to gendered oppression are numerous.

27. Robert Con Davis remarks that,  
[t]he structural kinship of literary narrative and clinical case history is as least as old as Freud. In fact, one of the distinctive inventions of the nineteenth century was the development of the case history as a mode of enquiry in many fields.... (1983:846)

28. Although Women of Phokeng is meant to be a companion piece to Facing the Storm, and thus allow rural women to tell their life stories, it does not really do this since

many of the women spent large portions of their lives as migrant workers in the cities (4).

29. The editors of We Came to Town (1985) do not use the photographs to "prove" the existence of the speaking subjects. In the "Note to the teacher" (n.p.) the editor states, "The photographs are not intended as direct illustrations but have been chosen to stimulate interest and group discussion by contrast and comparison." Here too, the sense is created that these photographs document typical black experience in its many facets, in both rural and urban environments.

30. I have referred, previously, to Facing the Storm, Women of Phokeng and A Talent For Tomorrow as exceptions.

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### Notes for Chapter 5

1. Olney, writing of American or Western autobiographical practice, identifies a shift of attention from *bios* to *autos* which was "largely responsible for opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction" (1980:19). In South Africa, the focus has remained largely biographical; nevertheless, when the emphasis is on the self, as it is in Breytenbach and -- less obviously -- Kuzwayo, the philosophical tendency noted by Olney is apparent.

2. I have argued elsewhere that the claim by the publishers of Jay Naidoo's Coolie Location that the tradition of autobiography is "even more central than the novel in South African literary culture" is probably valid for literary production in the last decade at least (1991:20).

3. Some readers might be tempted to deny that autobiographical writing by the oppressed could be unappealing since such an attitude would be politically incorrect. I would argue, however, that judgements such as these are important indicators of the hierarchized constitutive discourses of both reader and text.

4. I can think of quite a few texts by white men which I have had to struggle through, motivated only by my sense of purpose regarding this study. (Malherbe's, Evenden's, Boydell's and, unexpectedly, even Paton's, were for me quite unenticing). Although, of course, disparagement of these texts is acceptable in terms of current political fashions.

5. I have researched only English-medium texts (and thus do not know what autobiographical texts are being produced in any of the other languages currently spoken in South Africa). However, while the fact that there are now 11 official languages in South Africa makes a comprehensive

survey of the field of autobiographical production extremely difficult, I would hazard a guess that English texts make up by far the largest proportion.

6. Lionnet is referring here to the terms for miscegenation in English which always imply a negativity. I am broadening the application of this observation to a seeming inability (in general terms) of Anglo-American discursive fields to incorporate creatively the cultural practices of other groups. This is probably largely due to the power-base of the coloniser, and the fact that one of the ways to maintain this was to keep the coloniser's culture 'pure' so that all of the bending had to be done by the colonized.

7. Interestingly, Frye excludes biography and history from the category of fiction because he argues that these are non creative; however, he admits autobiography (or confession) as one of the four terms of fiction because he says "most autobiographers are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern" (cited by Scholes, 1974:125).

8. There is, however, some evidence of the depersonalizing of the narrative voice in a few autobiographies: an attempt to achieve a sense of the historian's objective view of an epoch is manifest in the autobiographies of Lekota, Mokgatle and Luthuli.

9. Since this chapter was written, I have come across Eakin's book on referentiality in autobiography (Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) but although its subject is relevant to my work, I was not able to read it before completing the thesis.

10. Freud refers to the need for those seeking relief from traumatic neuroses to re-experience a distressing past, but in such a way as to increase the distance between it and the present. What this really means is that "the sensory and affective intensity of the memories in question is drastically reduced by submitting them to a linguistic organization" (Silverman, 1983:75); "the original memory traces... lose sensory and affective intensity, but they gain meaning" (102). This would seem to apply to Rian Malan, Breytenbach, First (and other writers of prison memoirs), Lyndall Gordon, Mashinini, Kuzwayo, Mathabane, and Modisane.

11. I find this formulation extreme, and untrue: the relation between the "authorizing author" and the text is highly complex.

12. Autobiographies by black South Africans like Mphahlele, Abrahams, Jabavu and Luthuli made their mark, I

believe in the 60s. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that in the 70s a far greater impact was made by black poets in journals like Staffrider.

13. "Lily Moya" of Not Either an Experimental Doll: The Separate Worlds of Three South African Women fails to tell her story. Shula Marks (the editor) has some interesting comments on this, as does Felicity Nussbaum (1990:26).

14. The printed text can undergo revision: texts may be revised, abridged, censored and so on, and thus are not necessarily unchanging. Moloi's autobiographical writings illustrate the point.

15. I think that Thula Baba, if indeed it is accepted as autobiographical, is perhaps the sole exception, having a "composite" autobiographical subject, the narrative being composed by numerous respondents in conjunction with their literacy teacher(s).

16. Of course, one should bear in mind that in the traditional praise poem the community serves as the interpretative "brake" or limit condition. It is usually a profoundly allusive text; and the reality it connotes will be shared (and defined) by the community amongst whom it is performed. So the impression that the traditional form is less authoritarian is only partly valid: there is not a centralized authority, but meaning is nevertheless constrained by the community. The seemingly looser structure of the traditional autobiography does not mean that there is no structure, but rather that the interpretative structure is less individualistic, more community-based.

17. In terms of a Lacanian conceptualization, narration is also seen as an effect of the unconscious, revealed in the gaps or lapses that appear in a narrative's manifest text. It must be borne in mind, however, that the unconscious of the text is not necessarily the unconscious of the author. Analysis of the narrative's unconscious can be a significant contribution to one's understanding of the collective unconscious.

18. Although Barthes' analysis is restricted to fictional works, some of the categories and techniques that he identifies can be fruitfully applied to non-fictional narratives.

19. Moloi has published a revised version of My Life: Volume One which is combined with Volume Two in 1991 (Jonathan Ball). Since the modifications are quite substantial -- and, in my opinion, distort and devalue the text -- I refer at all times to the Ravan Press edition of My Life: Volume One. As Nussbaum has remarked, "We tend to think of a *printed* text as a fixed entity rather than a textual space that is always undergoing revision, in part

because an author's name encourages a reader to regard a text as all of a piece, the 'expression' of a subjectivity coherently held" (1989:18); but Moloi's My Life: Volume One (Ravan Press) is a very different text from My Life: Volumes 1 and 2 (Jonathan Ball). Perhaps in Moloi's case revision can be construed as repression.

20. These dates are approximate; Moloi would have seen the sword-hero movies and Westerns sometime from the latter part of the 30s, through to the 50s.

21. Incidentally, women bear the brunt of all of this destruction for they are inevitably forced by circumstance to support children whose fathers have absconded; they are the lowest paid sector of South African society and the least likely to have access to education or the legal system.

22. I am borrowing this pun from the title used by Julian Henriques et al in their book Changing the Subject.

23. Moloi is a Sotho surname, but his family lived in Natal (now called Kwa-Zulu/Natal) which is the home of the Zulu.

24. Mary Maboreke describes the interpellation of the subject in traditional black social formations:

Africans in general and African women in particular identify themselves through a maze of relationships.... Almost all Africans see themselves as an integral part of a big and complex machine called 'the family'. The individual alone is seen as almost useless and certainly powerless.... Societies such as ours are tightly structured, stratified, hedged in by prescriptions, by the primacy of the communal good over individual rights and interests. (1991:228-9)

25. The phrase "gone on before" is telling, indicating as it does the continuity between living and dead. Gunner observes that the shades are the "living dead" (1984:50). Zulu belief does not cut off the living from the dead; survivors and shades are perceived as interdependent.

26. If one distances oneself from the narrative enough to consider that this might be a description of an experience of real terror and violence for people who had simply planned a night out at a dance, then the narrator's excitement becomes rather macabre.

27. Interestingly, Moloi's text attempts to repress suggestions that the text constructs its own truth, yet at times cannot help but admit to the vagaries of memory and of text. It resounds with its own ideological crises that are, as Nussbaum has remarked, "more easily discerned in the newly emergent genres because the familiarity of



entrenched conventions has not glossed over the fissures" (1989:xiii).

28. Thomas Mogotlane argues that mapantsulas (township gangsters) in general, "were influenced by the American gangster movies of the 1950s.... Dressing in labels was very important.... [A good example is] Godfrey Moloi [who uses the 'American' style of dressing]... he has a handkerchief hanging out of his suit pocket all the time. Getting out of his Mercedes-Benz, wearing his Florsheims, very clean and smart, he is still a mapantsula of the 1950s" (Schmitz and Mogotlane, 1991:38).

Furthermore, I was informed by a student that most gangs in Soweto still to this day take names of film heroes, and also that the rough life that people lead in townships can be described as coming straight from gangster movies or thrillers. He argued, therefore, that Moloi is representing general township values and not just trying to act the superstar.

29. Luthuli makes the following wry observation:  
I sometimes wonder if life is not one long series of surprises for the Nationalists. Most of them perhaps really do think that Africans are so thick-skinned and limited in understanding that they would not notice things like malnutrition, low wages, police brutality, or flagrant discrimination, unless an agitator came to point it all out.... Deep down, I wonder if they believe us -- left to ourselves -- capable of more than "Ja, Baas!" (1982:143)

30. The narrator is disdainful of those who entangle themselves in politics, as he puts it (68), and is himself at times racist. The hero participates, without narratorial comment, in the riots by Africans against Indians in 1949: "We looted, stabbed, and fought. Because some Indians fought back, defending their properties, it was a long ordeal" (36). The narrator, to cite another example, says of a mulatto girlfriend, "The only snag was she was a very bad dresser, but I blamed her not, she was coloured.... She was a smoker and I hate smoking women. I tried in vain to stop her smoking, but she was coloured..." (125-6).

31. Its ceasing is a significant event as the narrator herself explains: "In one sense, the story of growing up had come to the foregone conclusion. In another sense, I was vanishing along with my generation into the rituals of the tribe: the engagement party..., the walk up the aisle" (145).

32. Juhasz conforms to the line of argument that tends to essentialize women (and from which I have wished to distance myself). Nevertheless, much of what she says is relevant to Gordon's Shared Lives:



In their form, women's lives tend to be like the stories that they tell: they show less a pattern of linear development towards some goal than one of repetitive, cumulative, cyclical structure.... Even if a woman is a professional and conducts her life largely according to male patterns (since most professions are male dominated and/or controlled), it is generally not easy or usual, because she is a woman, for her to separate out neatly the powerful domestic and personal relationship-oriented strands in her life. Dailiness matters to most women; and dailiness is by definition never a conclusion, always a process....

The perspective of the diarist is immersion, not distance. The diary is finished when the pages run out, not when some denouement and conclusion are reached. Lives, too -- of men as well as women -- have this formal proclivity; it is one of the characteristics of living that people have often used art to try to remedy. (Juhasz, 1980:223-4)

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