

Narrating Redemption: Life Writing and Whiteness in the New South Africa: Gillian Slovo's *Every Secret Thing* Tony Simoes da Silva

In her influential reflection on the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull* (1997), Anjtie Krog cites psychologist Nomfundo Walaza's lament about the reaction of White South Africans to the commission. In a private conversation with Krog, Walaza asserted:

What makes me angry is that whites are privatising their feelings. If you as a black person cry, you cry alone at the hearings. If you are angry, there is no person to direct that against verbally—they hide in their suburbs, they hide behind their court interdicts and legal representatives. The pain of blacks is being dumped into the country more or less like a commodity article—easy to access and even easier to discard (161).

Walaza's despair was shared by many Black South Africans, some of whom eventually came to believe that that the TRC could never serve any useful purpose.¹ She was especially frustrated by the "privatising of feelings" by White people because it occurred at the very moment when Black people had started to tell their stories freely and frankly. In fact, as she saw it, in the setting of the TRC, White South Africa may have had the ideal forum for the dialogue it would need to have with Black South Africa. For her part, reacting as a White South African who believes herself willing to revisit the past often and honestly, Krog is especially troubled by the fact that Walaza implies that so little has changed in this "changed" nation. She is especially uneasy at the apparent hopelessness of the racial equation in the New South Africa. Interestingly, Krog's fear of Walaza's assessment actually echoes a view expressed decades earlier by one South Africa's iconic White liberals, Alan Paton. In Paton's *Cry*,

The Beloved Country (1949), Father Msimangu, he “who had no hate for any man”, states: “I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they [White people] turn to living they will find that we are turned to hating” (252).

With this resonance in mind, it is Krog’s reaction that I want to pursue in some detail, for its ability to convey cogently what fellow South African novelist Justin Cartwright calls “the white dilemma in Africa.” Using this phrase in his review of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Cartwright applies it to the conundrum of “African Whiteness,” at once of Africa and uncannily non-African. In other words, even in the act of staking a claim to a place in Africa, White Africans are marked by the historical spectre of their Whiteness. As a White liberal, and an Afrikaner to boot, Krog’s desire to be a good White is sabotaged by the behaviour of other White people; *they* may choose to hide behind their high walls in suburbs segregated in all but name, but she is willing to confess, to perform publicly the *mea culpa* Walaza believes is incumbent upon all Whites. That is, in part, what impels *Country of My Skull* and in turn some of the more negative responses it has elicited. Somewhat perversely, though, in her own response to Walaza’s views Krog herself reiterates the very inward-turn defined by the former as “a privatising of feelings” by White people in the post-Apartheid nation. She asks for Walaza’s views yet then is disturbed by what she hears: “am I really that bad [a] White person?”

This line of questioning is an example of the kind of moment that I want to explore in this paper with reference to Gillian Slovo’s childhood memoir, *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* (1997). It is a phenomenon evident in the increasing number of life writing works by White South Africans, most of which are essentially engaged to some degree in negotiating the meaning of Whiteness for the purpose of re-gaining a place in the “national portrait gallery.” Indeed, Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, in their introduction to *Negotiating the Past*, assert that “[t]he narrating self in [life-writing texts by White South African writers] typically aims to effect a distance from an earlier, politically less enlightened or in other ways unacceptable, version of the self” (6).

I therefore propose that we see the increasing adoption of life writing forms among White South Africans as performative acts concerned not only with writing a personal narrative of the self but with (re)situating the raced White South African subject within the new discourses of national belonging.² Further, in an argument that I have developed elsewhere with reference to a broader number of texts by White writers born in South Africa and Zimbabwe, I argue that life writing narratives have in fact created the perfect conditions for a spectacularization of feelings that is all the more dramatic because it is couched in the language of self-telling.³ Thus while purportedly speaking the White South African self publicly such writing neatly fulfils the task of ensuring they remain essentially private, self-authored. That, in a sense, becomes an even more insidious effect than Walaza might have anticipated. Through a reading of Gillian Slovo's childhood memoir, I want to tease out some of the ways in which story-telling by White people in South Africa at once demonstrates Walaza's views and complicates Krog's bouts of earnest introspection. Indeed, while it is arguable that Slovo's status as a South African is not exactly unproblematic, it is my contention that her work is all the more rewarding a site of analysis precisely for that ambiguity. Here is someone for whom South Africa is simultaneously a remote point of identification as a place of birth or temporary residence, and inextricable from the deeper levels of a consciousness created out of a dramatic and traumatic interaction with the symbolic template that is South Africa.

The decision to examine Gillian Slovo's memoir aims therefore to draw on the way her work underscores the difficulty of articulating a White subjectivity in an African context. Writing as the daughter of two of the most radical White South African activists, both of whom sacrificed much in the fight against apartheid, Slovo's work is informed at once by an acute awareness of the privileges of Whiteness and of the risks of special pleading by White South Africans. It is also, importantly, a narrative deeply inflected by the traumatic memories of abandonment that Slovo and her sisters experienced as small children. That *Every Secret Thing* is "a memoir of trauma" is clear to all who read it; that in the process of narrativizing that life experience the book is indelibly marked by

ways of being that that are uniquely linked to a White South African consciousness, is, however, perhaps not as obvious. Rather than minimizing the pain of Slovo as told in *Every Secret Thing*, I want to propose that in many ways her story is all the more powerful for the complex ideological webs it negotiates, often overtly and consciously, and on occasion to mixed effect.

At its heart is a haunting presence of the stories the self *needs* to tell and those it knows it *must not* tell; Slovo is not alone in facing this quandary. That too is the challenge Antjie Krog faces in her life writing, and even others such as fellow South African Christopher Hope (1987) and Zimbabwean Alexandra Fuller (2002). As the writers themselves make abundantly clear what distinguishes their work from such templates as Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (1937) is the ethical refusal to write the 'Self' narrative over the narrative of 'Other.' Yet, as a childhood memoir Slovo's text is also crucially marked by the self's need—desire—to take centre-stage. *This is my story and I'll tell it as I like it*. The focus in my reading on key incidents recounted in the memoir is thus not intended to undermine their traumatic imprint in the child's mind, rather to situate them in the context of the broader meanings inextricable from being White South Africa. Thus, in my reading of *Every Secret Thing*, I want to identify and trace the multiple and frequently conflicting moments where the signification of Whiteness as an ideology of privilege and power inevitably impact on the self's politically aware narrations and actions, for which one might suggest a neologism, narra(a)tions. For in writing this memoir Gillian Slovo herself is also re-thinking the parameters of her White South African identity. Coming back to the place of her childhood becomes a way of recreating a usable past out of flimsy memories, especially in the face of an increasingly tenuous link to it.

Narrating Redemption

Central to *Every Secret Thing* is the assertion that, for Joe Slovo and Ruth First, being White in South Africa did not preclude the right to belong in Africa as Africans; to the contrary, their work on the struggle against apartheid was born out of an intrinsic belief that this was their land. Rather than the exquisite but frequently tediously selfish bouts of

anguish about their ability to remain in the post-apartheid nation displayed by Breyten Breytenbach, Rian Malan and others, Slovo and First are never in any doubt that they will be staying on in the New South Africa. Theirs is a visionary struggle, a life lived less with a focus on enjoying the rewards in the future than on the purpose of changing the present. At what is perhaps its primary level of meaning, Gillian Slovo's memoir describes the angst of watching Ruth First constantly place her motherhood second to her political activism and to her political allies, and Joe Slovo grow distant from his children. In a narrative that rarely conceals the enormous admiration she feels for her parents (even if this is also tempered by the anger she felt as a child), Slovo is critical of First's *joie de vivre* most of all because of the lacklustre performance she puts in as a mother. She is hurt most of all by the way political activism creates and strengthens an intimacy between her parents that is denied her. Reflecting on the last time she met her mother, and on the angry words exchanged on that occasion, Slovo remarks:

I felt the unfairness of what Ruth's life had done to me. I protested, knowing that I was only making Ruth feel guilty ... And yet each of us, I think, knew that what we really fighting about was whether she had been a good enough mother, and whether I, her daughter, would release her from the anchor of her past mistakes (6).⁴

Gillian Slovo's relationship with her father, while perhaps not as traumatic, is no less tempestuous. She has commented that one of the reasons her memoir was so difficult to conceive and execute was precisely Joe Slovo's opposition to it.⁵ As he saw it, and in the memoir she deals at length with the matter, the life story she sought to write, and to write about, was his, not hers. Ironically, as she also notes in the her talk with Jolly, it was precisely the realization that Ruth First's role in bringing about the new South Africa risked being overwhelmed by Joe Slovo's political profile post-1994 that set her on course to (re)create First's life story. After her mother's death, and while researching the memoir, Gillian confronts him with the painful evidence she uncovers about his and First's relationship, and their complicated personal stories. Slovo

now realizes that while she knew about their flaws as parents, their own relationship to each other was no less uneven. Behind the passionate commitment to radical politics they shared, theirs was a distant love affair in which both partners were knowingly unfaithful to each other.

The work's subtitle, "my family, my country," speaks of the doubling the writer experiences, conveying the internal tension pulling apart a self at once intensely private and spectacularly public by virtue of her parents' simply *being* Joe Slovo and Ruth First. In fact, returning imaginatively in *Every Secret Thing* to a South Africa she left as a young woman, Gillian Slovo stakes out a political claim to her parents' hard-earned legacy as *different*, that is, anti-apartheid White South Africans. For if First died at the hands of the apartheid government without seeing the end of the South African racist regime, both her husband and her daughter would live to witness its collapse, and to shape (or seek to help in the shaping of) its aftermath.⁶ As Slovo puts it at one point, in words that betray the ambivalence of her relationship to South Africa: "Nobody told us what to do—we were passive in the face of a tradition that we, white children, born into Johannesburg's suburbia and transplanted to England's capital, didn't really understand. *Not that anything was required of us, merely that we be there*" (21, emphasis added). Spoken with reference to her mother's funeral in Maputo in 1982, this comment reflects Slovo's awareness that in many ways 'Ruth First the activist' is not her mother, but rather an icon claimed by the anti-Apartheid struggle. While all around them anonymous Black people openly mourn and celebrate Ruth First the South African revolutionary, the ANC cadre killed in the name of the cause, her daughters struggle to contain their personal pain, unsure that they want to be seen to cry in public. More than that, however, Gillian Slovo's reticence speaks in this instance also of her own resentment at having to share with others the very little she feels she ever possessed of her mother. If this is not quite the "privatising of feelings" Nomfundo Walaza critiques, it bears a close resemblance to that process.⁷

Slovo's anger betrays a desperate attempt to hold on to what she views as the last vestige of normality: if, as parents they failed her and her sisters, in her eyes they failed each other as well. Yet, more frustrating is

the fact that to her parents there was nothing wrong with the kind of lives they lived. Looking back on her father's rebuttal of her request for further information on Ruth First's life, Slovo asserts:

I knew I had a right, that it was my past as well as his but when I tried to say as much, I found that I was stuttering. There was a clamouring voice inside me which agreed with Joe, a voice conjured out of a past when necessity had made me protect my parents' secret world not only from hostile strangers but from myself as well. (185)

She wavers between recognizing that the world in which her parents circulated differs from hers, and resenting their unwillingness, although she knows it to be their inability, to include her and her sisters in it. Slovo's bitter love for her parents highlights the parallel White worlds they inhabit: one essentially law-abiding and occupied by the children; the other the transgressive space of her parents, where skin colour matters little. Such instances suggest, too, that what upsets Slovo most of all is the way her parents constantly reverse conventional family roles: here it is the parents who break all rules; who, rebelling, risk losing everything and everyone, regardless of the consequences. Very early in her memoir, she writes: "In most families it is the children who leave home. In mine it was the parents" (4). Slovo's anger reveals also a degree of Puritanism that is not uncommon in the childhood memoir, the child narrator here arrogating for herself a speaking position from which to judge her parents by standards that are not those of their age group.

In the context of a narrative inflected by the dual influences of Whiteness and life writing, the sense of entitlement she feels as a daughter of Ruth First and Joe Slovo is most visible in her dealings with the White family who now live in the house where she grew up. Through her frequent tussles with them, it is as if she seeks to secure the political capital accrued by her parents' work to change the meaning of Whiteness. Of her first visit, she writes:

Our family albums are full of those years of gracious living. There's the house that we lived in—the three-bed-roomed new-

built bungalow in one of Johannesburg's middle-class suburbs, without a swimming pool but with a big garden overlooking an open *veld* and a huge spreading broad-leafed plane tree that we sisters used to climb.

It was our house, our haven. Even after I was taken away from it, I thought of it as always belonging only to us. And yet when I went back thirty years after we left South Africa, and tried to go inside there was a couple living there who thought of it as theirs. There had been other pilgrims to that place before me: researchers intent on writing of my parents, or activists, trying to relive those days and all of them has [*sic*] been briskly sent away. When I arrived, it was conceded that I did have some claims on the place and I was grudgingly admitted into the living room. No further than that, however: I wasn't allowed to walk down the corridor and visit the bedroom which Robyn and I had once shared, or to open the cupboard where I had once locked and forgotten her. (40–41)

While Slovo concedes that the house she *thought* would be hers forever now belongs to someone else, the way she writes about it suggests otherwise. The frequent appeal to hyphenated words speaks of an unconscious desire to reclaim place with the cloyingly powerful memories of childhood. The connected syntax re-enacts an apparently seamless remembering of the past, creating what, visually, at once implies unbroken links to place and wholeness of self. It is this motivation that will lead her to return repeatedly to the house, even she eventually comes to accept that “it was no longer ours” (41). Her “second visit, this time with Robyn, was even more curtailed. We got a brief tour of the garden,” but she does not give up easily. She writes of what was to be her last visit to the house:

On my third visit, I was met with a rebuff: “Close the gate on your way out”, an angry man told me. “It upsets us when you come here.” I had no choice. I turned and closed the gate. At the same time as I wondered at his anger, I also thought that he was right: it was no longer ours. (41)

It is hard not to sympathize with Slovo in her desire revisit the memory space of her past life, to join the fragmented recollections of her childhood to a physical place capable of making them feel real. As I have noted above, the visits are crucial to the process of healing that the memoir as a whole rehearses, for that is in the nature of this kind of trauma narrative. Yet, I found it impossible to balance the natural self-centredness of the writing self and the condescension bordering on arrogance implicit in the repeated visits, in the insistence on entering what is now someone else's private space.

Reading it as I did within the context of a double focus on life writing and Whiteness, I was struck by the casually insulting tone of Slovo's account of the visits, and her contempt for the new owners. That the people occupying the house are White, and quite clearly no fans of the life achievements of Joe Slovo and Ruth First, is obvious from the tone their daughter adopts. The people in the house she finds cold and suspicious; most of all she resents their reluctance to let her wander freely throughout the place. As we consider Gillian Slovo's own belief that she is entitled to visit the house as frequently and as extensively as she wishes, a number of questions emerge: would she have presumed herself equally entitled to visit the house of her childhood had the family now living there not been White? Is the problem (theirs, but also hers) the fact that they are a White, middle-class family not in awe of revolutionary Whites such as Joe Slovo and Ruth First, and, by implication of Gillian Slovo and her sisters? Is their Whiteness here then already a kind of double curse, especially because they refuse to acknowledge the multilayered meanings that it accrues in a setting such as post-Apartheid South Africa—part privilege, responsibility, complicity, guilt, shame? For Slovo, the persistent claims on the time, space and emotions faced by the family who now live in her old family home are as nothing when compared to the fact that they occupy what is, from both her personal and political viewpoint, a hallowed space. The point is not that we should ignore her pain, especially the persistent suffering of trauma. However, as Walaza's comments on the reaction of White South Africans to the TRC demonstrate, all too often the trauma of the White self overwhelms all others. In a sense, the refusal to front up to

the TRC is in itself a luxury to which only the privileged subjectivity of the White South African self, *in all its manifestations, English-speaking and Afrikaans, poor and otherwise*, believes itself entitled. My contention, here and elsewhere, is that life writing by White South Africans constitutes a similarly fraught political act.

Every Secret Thing is a narrative marked by this constant tension between the emphasis on a good, or perhaps a *right* kind of Whiteness (anti-apartheid, selfless, politically aligned with the struggle of Black people), and Slovo's persistent, if unconscious, attention to the power of race to define self, and of the power of racist ideologies to determine self-identity. In what one could read as a consciousness caught up in the whirlpool that are racial relations in South Africa, this is evident also, and especially, in Slovo's almost obsessive attention to her parents' non-White friends, who are generally described in terms of their colour. Struggling to attract her parents back to her, most of all her mother, the little girl child experiences a raft of mishaps, psychological and physical. Yet, amidst some of the most harrowing moments of private pain Slovo's child self rarely fails to notice the 'blackness' of her parents' comrades. In contrast, she refers to White friends and acquaintances simply by their names, or the generic "man" or "woman", though often associated to markers of class and wealth. I contend that the candour of such instances undercuts the memoir's clearly articulated political position, especially when they are spoken through the point of view of the child.

One particularly poignant moment occurs when Ruth First and Joe Slovo are arrested in 1956. As the media come to feast on the misery of the family, whose fragments they find at the breakfast table. Slovo writes:

"Six-year old Shawn was our spokesman:

"Mummy's gone to prison", she said, "to look after the black people" (41).

Slovo continues: "Joe and Ruth were soon released on bail ..." (42) and her sister's words are left unglossed, at least until much later in the narrative. For Slovo knows that while six-year-olds are unlikely to have the awareness to judge the weight of their statements, it is in part precisely

for that reason that ideology so often is at its rawest in the child's discourse. It would be unfair—unethical, even—to read in Shawn Slovo's words evidence of the views of her parents, spoken when in the safety of their home. In the framework Whiteness produces in South Africa, both "new" and "old", however, it is also possible to argue that unguarded moments such as these convey the less obvious but most obtrusive ways in which Whiteness emerges as the unconscious that poisons the interaction between White and Black people, as Walaza has noted. In this instance, it appears in the guise of benevolence; after all, "looking after Black people" has been one of the central aims and purposes of the White people's presence in Africa. It is a sign of the strength of the ideology of Whiteness that even in the context of her family's blindness to race little Shawn Slovo should speak with a forked tongue, as it were. Rather than accusing Slovo or her parents of being unconsciously racist, I point out the strains imposed on a White subjectivity in settings such as South Africa, now perhaps as much as during Apartheid.

In the eyes of the White South African, even when trained to resist *consciously* the multiple ways in which race acts as a tool of oppression and discrimination, self is defined in White and Black terms; Self and Other, indeed. Such instances may not be on a par with Fanon's well-known words, "Maman, un Nègre" (93), but they remain nevertheless peculiar in Slovo's memoir. Of one particularly memorable and traumatic incident, she writes:

Before I had time to scream at the blood pouring from my eyebrow, I was in the arms of one of my parents' black comrades and rushed to the bathroom. I remember the whisky on his breath, his calloused hands wiping my skin, his curly hair framing my straight bob, and in the background my mother seeing I was alright, shifting from horror to abandoned gaiety. (43)

Unspoken here is the White girl's recognition that in the time-honoured tradition of race relations in South Africa, even at times like this, of intimate fear and pain, it is to the Black South African person that the task of consoling and nurturing the White child falls. Seen through her daughter's eyes, Ruth First appears in this vignette as a callous, cold

mother, yet her behaviour could not be more typical of a White South African woman. The vast majority of White South Africans, and particularly those of First and Slovo's social status, entrusted their children to the care of Black servants. Vincent Crapanzano remarks in *Waiting, The Whites of South Africa* (1985), that "Often the first, most emotional and bodily contact a child has, among the English and perhaps, to a lesser extent, among the Afrikaners, is with a person of colour" (42). In *Maids and Madams* (1979), Jacklyn Cock offers an even more provocative analysis of this issue, through her juxtaposition of the experiences of White children to those of the children of the Black maids. That the calloused hands that reach out to Gillian Slovo should belong to a Black man is perhaps hardly surprising in this sense; what is striking is that they should have remained so vivid a memory in the child's recollection of the moment.⁸ Although it is wise to note here that the memory recounted above is essentially one of trauma, and as such perhaps indelibly marked in the child's mind, even the sections told from the perspective of the adult woman retain frequent examples of such slippages. Thus, when Gillian Slovo writes of "Africans . . . and four well-coiffed women" (199), we know that the women are White by the simple fact that Black women would be unlikely to have either the time or the means for expensive coiffure. Slovo's constant references to the skin colour of her parents' friends is redolent of an understanding, typical of racist ideologies, of race as always *other* than White.

In common with much life writing of this nature, then, *Every Secret Thing* combines a faint sense of self-congratulation of the traumatized self ("I survived, look at me, in spite of it all I am a normal person") with the desire to speak (on) trauma in order to heal it, to exorcize it. The "warts and all" style conveyed in the title—every every secret thing stands revealed before daughter and reader—represents Slovo's attempt to render whole a mother whom she knew in fragmentary moments snatched during visits to London by First, to Maputo by Gillian Slovo, or the all too brief encounters between mother and daughter at home in Johannesburg, in short stays in Swaziland or Cape Town, while on the run from the White South African authorities. The language, frequently vivid and overblown, struggles to capture the pain of the child's

suffering: “In the forward rush of my childhood years that bled one into the other, there are occasional moments of pause” (45). As she sees it, this childhood, *her* childhood as a White South African child of anti-apartheid activists, was less a seamlessly magic journey of discovery and joy than a web of traumatic experiences that she associates with a loss of blood. Here the haemorrhaging self echoes and reverses that very well known moment in Fanon’s work that I referred to above, when the child is the cause of haemorrhage.

Clearly, it is in the nature of autobiographical accounts to privilege the perspective of the writing self, and in narratives of trauma often there is an overt healing dimension to the work. As we have seen in this article, this process is very much a characteristic of Slovo’s work, just as she was concerned with foregrounding her mother’s role in the anti-Apartheid struggle. Thus the work is impelled by a dual focus on the personal and the political in which the self-centredness comes as a natural consequence of the writer’s perspective and intentions. Yet, I have also argued above that such qualities alone should not preclude a reading that seeks to expose and explore the naturalness of those processes. However unfairly it might seem to read the work in such a manner, in settings such as post-Apartheid South Africa the life writing of White people is inevitably involved in identity politics that are rarely selfless. As Grant Farred argues in a discussion of J.M. Coetzee’s writing, to undertake publicly the replacement of old with new selves can also be a very lucrative exercise.

Thus I do not intend in this essay to deny the personal significance of a trauma memoir such as *Every Secret Thing* or to exaggerate the political frames by which it is inflected. I do, however, want to emphasize in my conclusion the need to situate even works such as Slovo’s within an active re-signification of Whiteness in South Africa as inherently good and wholesome which the official end of Apartheid has unleashed. However unwittingly, narratives such as *Every Secret Thing* make public the pain of White people in ways that perform a doubly ambivalent function. On one level, they reinvest the power of Whiteness to belong in the New South Africa: *not all Whites were the same, and some fought hard against a system articulated in their names*. But at another level, such

narratives go further than that, in the process exaggerating the role of White people in the struggle against apartheid. Thus even when Slovo frames her mother's actions within a broader context of the ANC's campaigns, the names of Black leaders function essentially as background detail in the portrait of "Ruth First's Campaign Against Apartheid."⁹ There is something odd about the way Slovo describes Ruth First's every small action or speech as a pivotal moment in the dismantling of apartheid. In incident after incident First is described in terms that position her as one of the leading fighters against apartheid, a woman who stands out not so much because of her passion for human rights and freedom, but because as a *White* woman she dares believe in these concepts in South Africa.

To be sure, it would be misleading to overlook the way Slovo herself is conscious of the extent to which the participation of White people in the political struggle for freedom and dignity cannot but reify some of the rules of colonial engagement with Africa and the Other. She describes her father's mysterious comings and goings in terms of a "Boy's Own" adventure (81–82), and wonders "what Elsie [the Black maid] thought of all the white bosses coming and going" (67). Of the White activists' propensity to claim centre stage she remarks at one stage: "It was second nature to us, this owning of black South Africa's pain. Even as children we carried internal scales of justice which we used to weigh "their" needs—the needs of the impoverished masses—against ours." She goes on: "How could we win? Compared to the poverty, degradation, discrimination they endured, our suffering was negligible. When it came down to it, the scale was weighed permanently against us" (98). It is at such moments that Slovo's frank depiction of the conflict between her and her sisters' need for her parents and their sense of obligation to the nation best epitomizes the acute nature of "the white dilemma in Africa" of which Cartwright speaks. Eventually, after further reflecting on the pressures imposed on First's and Slovo's family life, and quoting at length from a letter from Bram Fischer to her parents (98–99), Slovo concludes: "Between these two polarities I am endlessly caught, swaying between my needs and theirs, between the self and the community to which, *because* I was a white child, I never fully belonged"

(100, emphasis added). That fluid consciousness, bearing at once the imprint of personal trauma, of collective memory and of national history makes *Every Secret Thing* a text especially topical to an examination perhaps even an understanding of the place of the White African self in the Rainbow Nation.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, although Walaza's comment attains a particular significance in the context of the TRC's work, such views are not without precedent; they echo those of Jacques Derrida in his essay entitled on Nelson Mandela) and of Farred in a polemical piece on J.M. Coetzee's assertion that he did not feel himself the target of the Pan African Congress' motto, "One Settler, One Bullet." Perhaps more interestingly, of course, the ten years that separate the Derrida and Farred essays are in themselves a timely comment on the circularity of discourses of race, in South Africa as elsewhere. Although the end of apartheid was premised on the eradication of discrimination based on skin colour, the workings of the TRC illustrated this was always going to be easier to wish for than to achieve.
- 2 In the narrative by Malan this is literally the case, as the writer, drunk and on drugs repeatedly falls down to empty out his guts. Gone is Karen Blixen's fine deportment and good manners; in this post-colonial, post-modern moment, penance is all the more sincere if soaked in the fluids of bodily functions. Different instantiations of this practice may be found in Coetzee and Breytenbach.
- 3 See Simoes da Silva.
- 4 In a classic illustration of the self's solipsism, the view Slovo's memoir conveys of Frances Bernstein's life, and of her relationship with her own mother, Hilda Bernstein, could not be more different from reality. In 1967, Hilda Bernstein herself writes touchingly about the period Slovo describes in her memoir. Here, in a narrative that unsettles most precisely for its dispassionate tone, Bernstein describes repeated escapes from the South African Security Police, often without so much as a wave to her children. The pain she experiences at leaving her children home alone, for hours, days, eventually weeks, is one that clearly contradicts Gillian Slovo's perception of the family as having it all. When Hilda and Lionel Bernstein eventually flee the country, through Bechuanaland (now Lesotho), the children wait days before finding out that their parents are safely out of South Africa.
- 5 See interview with Jolly.
- 6 For a full discussion of issues of 'relationality' in life writing, see Eakin.
- 7 Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's work on 'cultural capital', Rooney explores in an essay on the poetry of two White Australian poets, Judith Wright and Les Murray,

a similar concatenation of concerns with reclaiming a degree of self-worth that is at once inextricably White and other.

- 9 Interestingly, the outsourcing of emotional nurture that characterizes the relationship between White people in Africa and their children speaks also of the imperial ancestry of White South Africa, for their behaviour may be traced to the practices of the English upper classes. In the same way that colonialism set out to civilize non-White people the world over, to transform them into utilisable units, the colonies allowed working class and lower middle-class Whites to re-signify themselves by crossing social and economic boundaries made impenetrable in the metropole.
- 9 Recently, Suzman, anti-apartheid activist and former opposition MP in the South African parliament prior to 1994 complained about what she perceives as attempts by the ANC to erase the contribution of White liberal South Africans to the struggle against apartheid. Israel explores a slightly different but connected issue, namely the actions of exiled South Africans in the campaigns against the old South African regime. Although Israel's work is not exclusively concerned with the actions of White South African exiles, much of its appeal resides in the function of Whiteness embodied in the stories. At the risk of appearing to diminish the import of the work of White activists, narratives such as Israel's unwittingly fetishize such contributions on the basis that these people were actually White. Gillian Slovo's treatment of her father's role in the anti-apartheid campaign offers a much more balanced view. Joe Slovo fuses with the struggle to such an extent that in time even the bitterly anti-White Pan-African Congress (PAC), with its motto 'One settler, one bullet', comes to see Slovo as *other* than White: "That's no white man ... That's Joe Slovo" (217). After he dies, his funeral becomes an occasion for a display of non-racial politics, and his daughters are forced to concede that yet again they have become marginal to the narrative of his life as a White man (216). In death as in life Slovo *is* and *is not* a White man. Later, returning to visit his grave in one of Soweto's cemeteries, Gillian Slovo is told by the driver that "He is only one of two white people buried in Avalon ... He was seen by our people as a black man" (270). Slovo herself earlier attempts to make sense of her father's complex self by stating: "He was, in true South African style, a walking colour chart: the white whom blacks revered; the red whom whites demonized; the hero—Joe Slovo sung like that in one lilting spurt in the town ships; or the devil Joe, reviled in white *braais* as a KGB colonel" (134). See also Sanders' response to Farred's review of *Complicities*.

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