University of Wollongong

Research Online

1-1-2007

'On your knees, white man': African (un)belongings in Rian Malan's 'My traitor's heart'

Antonio J. Simoes da Silva
University of Wollongong, Catherinedasilva51@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

"On Your Knees, White Man":
African (Un)Belongings in Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*

Tony Simoes da Silva
University of Wollongong, Australia

It would be unfair to see the figure of John Paul II on his knees on African soil during one of his many visits to the continent as the epitome of the White person's desire to atone for the many sins against Africa and its people.[1] Unfair, but not entirely unreasonable; true, Pope John Paul II had a thing about going down on his knees. Nevertheless, the image remains an uncannily powerful one, not least because Christianity has long had an uncomfortable relationship with the African continent. Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has remarked that "Imperialism and colonialism became sanctified by Christian grace" (Baugh 49).[2] Besides,

---

[1] For consistency of approach, I have opted to capitalize the words "White," "Black," and "Apartheid" throughout, unless quoting directly from other work.

[2] In *Masks of Conquest* (1989), Gauri Viswanathan also offers an illuminating discussion of the *nexus* between the Christian religion and colonialism. Few, however, would put it more candidly than Aimé Césaire, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*: "La candeur de Léon Blay s'indignait jadis que des escrocs, des parjures, des faussaires, des voleurs, des proxenettes fussent chargés de 'porter aux Indes l'exemple des vertues chrétiennes'" (24; "The worthy Léon Blay was incensed that crooks, perjurers, thieves and prostitutes had been charged with 'bringing to the Indies the essence of Christian virtues'"). In this view, not uncommon among many African and Caribbean intellectuals, the colonized's encounter with Christianity was essentially an encounter with corruption, lies, and theft. That in *The Savage Crows*, a novel by the Australian author Robert Drewe, the role of Christianity should be explored in terms similar to those used by Césaire illustrates the extent to which the process was endemic to all colonial territories and colonial powers. When, in *Things Fall Apart* (1948), Achebe has the villagers of Umofia give the Christian church a plot of land which they themselves do not want, he provides yet another angle to the issue. That in the end the villagers will be dispossessed by the forces ushered in by the Church does not invalidate the significance of Achebe's reversal of agency: rather than taking what they want, the Christians are allowed to pick up the spoils Umofians do not need. To be sure, the Christian church's collusion with the colonial enterprise is not unique. Partha Chatterjee (1993) points out that, within the Indian context, the belief in a kind and loving non-Christian god advocated by the likes of Sri Ramakrishna, for instance, also fed into the apathy of those who may otherwise have been tempted to rebel. But it is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work that, as a whole, provides possibly the most complete analysis of the place of Christianity in the colonial enterprise, especially when considered in terms of the author's own shifting engagement with the Christian faith (see David Maugham Brown 1991).

not since Baroness Blixen genuflected before the gubernatorial figure of Lord Delamere, colonial Kenya's last foreign ruler, in the film version of her famous book, have such important White knees graced African soil. Speaking figuratively rather than literally, many more have keenly expressed a desire to do the same: from the angry pronouncements of rock-and-roll stars Bob Geldof and Bono, to the melodramatic promises of current British Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown respectively, in recent times there has been no shortage of White men willing to dirty their trousers to rescue Africa from itself. One might note, somewhat unkindly, that Africa itself has now been down on its knees for so long that the only way to meet eye to eye with it and its people is to make the journey downwards.

I am conscious of the sleight of hand the above paragraph performs, for one might quite legitimately interject that Africa can appear in such a hopeless light only when one focuses on the image of the continent that Europe prefers to consume. Some years ago, when that august publication that insists on thinking for us all,[3] *The Economist,* declared Africa the "hopeless continent" (2000),[4] Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo offered a furiously articulate rebuttal by noting that Africa was alive and well, and much better-off alone than in the company of well-intentioned souls such as *The Economist*'s editor or publishers. Indeed, *The Economist*'s fascination with Africa is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because its obsession is typical of a Eurocentric perspective from which Africa looks still tantalisingly "in need of help," that is to say up for grabs. The original phase of the "Scramble for Africa" may be over, but the continent remains one of the most coveted places for the expansion of American and European corporations. Paradoxically, the critical piece of analysis that august source offered was not entirely devoid of a little sip of tea, oodles of sympathy and even a great deal of common sense. The problem, as Aidoo succinctly pointed out, is that now as always the busi-

[3] In what seems to me an uncannily odd instance of contempt for its readers, *The Economist* once ran a subscription campaign with the words: "I used to think. Now, I just read *The Economist*." Perhaps we are what we read after all; even allowing for postmodernist irony, this is hardly the sharpest encouragement to subscribe to a news publication. Postcards with that slogan remain widely available on Australian university campuses.

[4] Like many other Anglo-publications, American and European, *The Economist* regularly devotes substantial cover to Africa as a developing, possibly "developable" continent and to the role outsider financial and economic forces will play in this process. In this instance the magazine sought to examine Africa's seemingly endemic inability to deal with its own political and social problems in terms that more or less justified neo-colonial relations with the continent.

ness of beneficence is often essentially a money–making operation.[5] In that sense *The Economist*'s concern seemed to Aidoo less than selfless.[6] She concluded her piece in *The New Internationalist* in the feisty tone that characterises all her writing: "Dear *Economist*: Africa a 'hopeless continent'? Hardly." Judging by the regularity with which that publication continues to focus on Africa as mired in endless poverty, Aidoo must keep fairly busy firing off responses to its features.

I should note however that I do not intend in this paper to pursue an analysis of either position; rather, I use them here as short-hand for the Manichean ways in which Africa continues to be so densely associated with race and racial identities, as evidenced by the fact that all the present knights rushing to rescue it (from itself, as they see it) are White. As such, one of the threads that frame my discussion is a concern with the representation, indeed the production, of a textual Whiteness, as it were. More to the point, in my discussion I relate to the concept of an *insider Whiteness*, at once African and inevitably always already *out of Africa*. Drawing on the matrix identified above, I want to explore especially life writing narratives by White Africans as a rich setting for an analysis of how White people both relate to the continent as a physical and imaginary space and negotiate their ability to call Africa home. As the present debates about identity in South Africa show, it takes a great deal of work for the White person to be able to call Africa home.[7] Indeed, theirs is hardly a novel quandary, as J. M. Coetzee noted in *White Writing* (1988), then tracing it back to the work of Thomas Pringle (45–49); in later work such as *Doubling the Point* Coetzee has taken this further, referring to

[5] For an appraisal of the work of non-government organisations and the way their work frequently becomes part of the problem rather than of any solutions, see, among others, Hulme and Edwards 1997 and DeMars 2005.

[6] Ama Ata Aidoo, "What 'Hopeless Continent'?" *New Internationalist* 327, September 2000. http://www.newint.org/issue327/view.htm.

[7] Recently, an article by Malegapuru Makogba, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kwazulu Natal, caused a huge furore by daring to question White South Africans' commitment to change, noting the resilience of "White power" in the New South Africa. Makogba's piece, published April 2005, accused White South African men in particular of resisting change by simply attempting to ignore it. In language and reasoning so reductive that they might have easily gone unnoticed, Makogba compared some (and the qualification is important) White South African men to "bonobos," in their unwillingness to adjust to changed conditions. This in itself is noteworthy, given the tendency within South African racial discourse, and colonial discourses more generally to refer to non-Whites as "baboons." The reaction to Makogba's article might thus be seen as at least in part influenced by the vocabulary used as much as by the assertions made.

"the burden of consciousness" that White South Africans experience in their relationship to the African continent. Indeed, writing in 1957, before a journey out that has since seen her claimed as a British writer, former Rhodesian Doris Lessing stated: "Africa belongs to the Africans; the sooner they take it the better. But a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it" (10). With the insight that characterizes her writing, Lessing captures in these words the ambivalence of White Africans about the land of their birth; they are torn between the desire to belong and the fear of being cast away by an Africa they personify as a mother figure. That in some sense we might read such conflicting emotions as reflecting the phantasmagoria of White Africans only turns them into more meaningful signs of a genuine anxiety and insecurity which, I want to suggest, inflects their identity, their writing, and their interaction with the African continent as physical space and as a recipient of their emotions. Perhaps that is the point J. M. Coetzee makes in the texts noted above; for the White settler, claiming Africa is a protracted and contradictory process, and the way to the African sublime a source of much anxiety.[8]

Dated as they may be, especially in view of the fact that both Coetzee's South Africa and Lessing's Rhodesia now are vastly changed political entities from those about which they wrote, their views offer an apt summary of the thematic and ideological concerns reflected in the life writing of more recent writers such as fellow Southern African writers Rian Malan, Christopher Hope, Gillian Slovo, J. M. Coetzee, Alexandra Fuller, and Breyten Breytenbach. True to character, Lessing voices in the peculiar manner of her work an aporia that conflates Blackness with Africanness, and then, implicitly, Whiteness as always *out of Africa*. All Africans are presumed in her discourse to be Black; yet central to much of the work of White South African writers is a deeply felt connection with Africa as place and identity. To put it differently, Lessing posits an Africanness that both encompasses and transcends Whiteness, implying that however much White people might *feel* at home in Africa, *they are not Africans*. Their colour acts as a prophylactic sheath that allows for a relationship with Africa and things African that can only ever remain at least at one remove. In this context, I will propose that we read this kind of text as more or less conscious rehearsals of "African Whiteness," im-

---

[8] I mean by "phantasmagoria" the raft of emotions White people express about Africa and Whiteness, pertaining to the threat posed to Whites' safety, health, and character, for instance, feelings that result in degenerative perceptions of Africa as a place always only just on the verge of "un-civilisation."

pelled simultaneously by the demands and the potential of life writing to tell stories of self that are always inextricable from the Other's story.

As White South Africans, and as exiles, the work of writers such as Hope, Breytenbach, Slovo, Coetzee, Fuller, Malan and even a film such as Richard Grant's *Wah Wah* (2006), a memoir of his childhood in Swaziland, act as an apt comment on what Leigh Gilmore terms "the limits of autobiography." For the stories of White people in South Africa are always, in a perverse kind of way which neither narrator nor narratee can control, also the stories of Black South Africans. Although life writing critics have long noted that the "I" in the "auto" is already always the "I" of the Other, in (South) Africa this is an issue brought into relief by the residue of colonial and racial ideologies. As life-writing scholar Paul John Eakin succinctly puts it, "The ethics of privacy as traditionally conceived requires the drawing of boundaries, but how do we delimit the person? Relational identity confounds our familiar literary and ethical categories; both need to be stretched to accommodate the fluidity of selves and lives" (181). The focus on "divided loyalties" is in this context especially poignant. One of the difficulties writers face relates to the vocabulary available to them, since to write as a White person about Africa is always to conjure up a complex raft of problematic ideologies, however carefully the text might seek to negotiate them.

White private selves in colonised and settler settings, Homi Bhabha long ago noted (1994), are created by and through interaction with those whom their public subjects oppress in the very act of being hailed White (see also Miller 1991; Morrison 1992; Lipsitz 1998; Segrest 1994). As Christopher Hope writes in *White Boy Running* (1988), in South Africa "you cannot have White children without Black nannies" (58). For Hope, drawing, perhaps unconsciously, on a theoretical insight that has become closely linked to Whiteness studies, this implies that in the very act of separating the races Apartheid already put in place the conditions for its transgression; in the words of Melissa Steyn, "The purer white the identity, the more dependent it is on its black other" (16). Entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the young Christopher Hope, Nanny George and countless others like him are forced to contravene the strict rules that define space as White or Black. In *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (1979) Jacklyn Cock writes: "In Port Elizabeth, for instance, 'domestic servants looking after white children are allowed on white beaches, but are not allowed to swim'" (69–70, quoting a statement by a public servant on the intricacy of Apartheid policy matters). One might argue, in fact, that color-mad systems such as South

African Apartheid not only anticipated and regulated such moments of transgression but actually conjured them up in order to prove the rule. That, after all, is discipline's very *raison d'être*. As Foucault writes in "The Means of Correct Training,"

> the art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely at repression. [Rather] it differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected, or as an optimum toward which one must move. (1984: 195)

Thus, in the kind of vignette to which Bhabha has devoted so much attention, the relationship between the young White child and his Black Nanny develops within a space bound at once by the innocence of childhood and the (probably equally naïve) subversion intrinsic to subject formation in Apartheid South Africa. Together in the park for long periods of time, Hope and his male nanny frequently swap places, with the child taking turns at pushing George on the swings. The writer comments: "It was much later that it occurred to me that my games with my nanny George had been quite illegal because the playground, indeed the park itself, was out of bounds to Black people" (55).

In this instance the limits of Whiteness are defined as much by Apartheid as they are by the Other whom it produces; the exclusionary and exclusive nature of White racism becomes synonymous with the very notion of a White subjectivity that is indelibly *not* free. In words that provide the perfect synopsis of the kind of life-writing narratives by White South Africans, Carolyn Steedman has remarked that "the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit . . . are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official devices of a culture" (cited in Eakin 1999: 54). Significantly, then, and as noted above, South Africa's unique historical and political conditions cannot but underscore how the life stories that White Africans tell about themselves are never theirs alone. Focussing here on one of the earlier works of life writing by White South African writers, I shall examine the interaction between identity, Whiteness and life writing narratives in an African setting. Specifically I argue that Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1990) remains one of the most interesting portraits of White South African liberals' concern with their complicity in a system they purported to abhor but from which they benefited so lavishly, even when exiled from it. Malan's text highlights the complex raft of personal feelings and political allegiances that inflect the White person's interac-

tion with Africa. That Malan does so as a descendant of one of the central architects of Apartheid not only sets him apart from his White tribe but underlines the narrative's political and ethical symbolism.[9]

Published at such a crucial junction of South Africa's transition from Apartheid ogre to Rainbow Nation, from "world pariah" to "world darling," and inflected by the intimate suffering that obtains in Malan's betrayal of his clan, *My Traitor's Heart* stresses the White African's difficulty in making sense of the meaning of South Africa, *both* old and new. In that sense, it became metonymic of the ever-present gap between Anglo-American perceptions of Africa and how Africans view themselves. Indeed, Laura Chrisman (2003) sees it as the kind of work that allows a Euro-American readership to *know* Africa in ways that echo older representations of the continent, and accord with Edward Said's notion of "orientalism" (1978), or V. Y. Mudimbe's later study of Africa within such a critical model, *The Invention of Africa* (1988).[10] Chrisman asserts that texts such as Malan's allow "Englishness" to stand as a concept distinct from "Whiteness" in settings such as South Africa (and by implication also in all settler colonies). She draws on this proposition to illustrate her view that "metropolitan [British] publishers used South Africa's contemporary anti-Apartheid movement, and its Apartheid past, to consecrate a post-imperial English subject" (118). In other words, English people, and in South Africa English-speaking people more pointedly, can distance themselves from the behaviour associated with (other) White people, notably Afrikaners, through an emphasis on a discrete *English* identity. Although she does not actually pursue the point in that way, this process of "distillation" allows Englishness to signify a version of European civilisation that runs counter to whatever meanings the actions of White people in Africa might produce. While I partly agree with her, Chrisman's critique of Malan relies on a reductive and tendentious use of the text.[11] In fact, in this it is typical of a kind of response to writing by

---

[9] *The White Tribe of Africa* is the title of a 1981 study of Afrikaners by David Harrison; see also *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, by Vincent Crapanzano.

[10] Reprinted in her 2003 text, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism*, Chrisman's essay came out much earlier, and was part of the initial reactions to Malan's text. In fact, in its strongly negative reading, it parallels her response to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1992), a text noticeable also for its unorthodox style and thematics. See also Miller 1985.

[11] Chrisman is especially irritated by the fact that the book is endorsed by figures such as Salman Rushdie and John Le Carré, whose approval she reads as classic illustrations of a commodification of culture that is typical in many ways of the prevalence of Eurocentric cultural norms.

White South Africans that retains a great deal of currency within certain forms of cultural criticism.

I do not mean to be unkind, but Chrisman's reading seems to articulate by proxy the critic's own anti-Apartheid position. I know little of Chrisman's political allegiances, much less of her political intentions and they would be irrelevant, in any case. Yet, the stance she adopts in relation to Malan's text highlights merely another version of the processing of guilt and complicity she identifies in her reading of Englishness and Whiteness in South Africa. My interest in the text reflects similar concerns. But, as outsiders, our roles as anti-Apartheid activists were more valuable to us than to the people of South Africa. That, alas, is in the nature of much intellectual theorizing of complex political and material situations. Commenting on the complicated nexus between writing, Apartheid, and resistance, Rosemary Jolly (1995) writes, in words that aptly address the "politics of production and consumption" that frames South African art and culture: "Resistance, then, is not a quality inherent in a cultural product but rather an effect of the process of that product's creation and reception" (19). Europe's and America's dealings with Africa retain much of this insistence that the continent be essentially a repository for the White person's sympathy, but if we are honest so do the words and deeds of critics and theorists of rather more radical pedigree.[12]

It is this aporia that *My Traitor's Heart* conveys so successfully. The journey home that the book describes is thus doubly symbolic: it represents a return to the residual memories of a White African childhood, and of an earlier life more generally, and aims to re-situate the author as a White (South) African in relation to the emerging post-Apartheid nation. As such it illustrates the point made by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee 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). *My Traitor's Heart* struggles to put forth a White South African identity that might permit the White subject to exist within the much more stringent (perhaps largely self-imposed) ethical demands he associates with the post-Apartheid nation. In this instance, such a stance is framed by a peculiar notion of complicity with the old regime, which Malan accepts and actually revels in, and the acknowledgement of guilt associated with it that ensures that a place at the heart of the future nation will no lon-

---

[12] For a forceful comment on some of these issues, see Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa," http://www.granta.com/extracts/2615, 2005 (July 19, 2006).

ger be a natural right. Rather, as the narrative so clearly shows, for the White person, the right to remain in Africa is one fought for through one's lived experience. Ironically, of course, and as critical assessments such as Chrisman's show, for the White African, confessing the guilt and shame of complicity is not necessarily the clearest or the safest path back home. Malan may identify himself as African, but this is a claim he may not be allowed to exercise; more recent work by J. M Coetzee (1998; 1999), Alexandra Fuller (2002), Breyten Breytenbach (1998), and Antjie Krog (1998; 2003) illustrate the point.[13]

Witness to a Changing Whiteness

A South African journalist who left his homeland in the 1980s, in the "dying days" of Apartheid (a death announced much too often and prematurely, but certain clichés have a life all of their own), Malan writes in *My Traitor's Heart* a bawdy and wittily subversive travelogue-cum-memoir. Rather than focussing exclusively on an author's intentions presupposed by Chrisman's attack, I propose that we consider narratives such as *My Traitor's Heart* differently. With its sassy mixture of intimate stories of the private self in pain and publicly displayed subjectivities, *My Traitor's Heart* situates itself with reference to a broader process of atonement that is intrinsic to the European, or more generally "Western," interaction with Africa. Malan's public act of contrition, marked by spectacular instances of abject behaviour, represents a particularly dramatic attempt to re-signify the presence of the White person in Africa, and in effect the very meaning of Whiteness as an African identity. Put simply, as the "last bastion of White civilisation in Africa" prepares to surrender its power, Malan's performance recognizes that the involvement of White people with and in Africa must observe a different set of rules, especially if Whiteness is to retain its power. However well-intentioned, the efforts by the present British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to shift the debate on poverty and corruption in Africa to a more level playing field, with European and American governments taking responsibility for the acts of the past, are in this setting the latest manifestation of a similar process.

"Authorised" by Malan's impeccable political credentials — political exile of sorts, army *refusenik*, Los Angeles *flâneur* — *My Traitor's Heart* aims to convey an intricate portrait of the South Africa to which

---

[13] See also Breytenbach's *Mouroir* (1984a) and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984b).

the narrator returns, and of his place in it. In its dizzying structure the narrative replicates at once South Africa's entropic political conditions and its value as a sign of postmodern Western civilisation in Africa. As a White man, the Malan who returns from LA to "Joburg" has to make a conscious effort *not* to live the life of privilege that White South Africans share with their American counterparts. In his eyes, to do so would be to fail to take up the challenge of Africanness, especially given the extent to which South Africa has always been perceived as African and *other than* African. For Malan coming home requires a cultivated search for the *essence* of Africa.

When he returns home in 1987, Christopher Hope too recalls in *White Boy Running* his encounter with what he sees as South Africa's uncanny *unAfricanness*; as he notes, South Africa "prides itself on *not* being a part of Africa" (7). Staying at a hotel where the supply of running water and electricity are noticeably unreliable, he expresses himself surprised that this should be so (7); this is not what (White) South Africa is about. From a life-writing perspective, this is interesting also because, for all his self-awareness, Hope seems oblivious to the fact that coming home after a considerable absence always implies a translation between a reality one excavates from childhood memories, a more recent exilic one, and "the newness of the old." For Malan this involves at least a mindful rejection of the inclination to reminisce nostalgically about the past that usually characterises life writing. Thus, his story remains firmly anchored in the present, in the (post)modernity that White South Africa always asserted as its mark of difference from the rest of Africa.

For his part, and unlike authors such as Fuller and Peter Godwin writing about Zimbabwe, or even J. M. Coetzee or Breytenbach in their various life writing works, Malan does not return to "the farm my family once owned."[14] It is symptomatic of Malan's unique insight into contemporary South Africa that for him the farm has little significance: it cannot be otherwise. The farm owned, with and without inverted commas, or the farm rented by White people represents, in former colonial settings such as South Africa and Zimbabwe, the epitome of colonial oppression. As a sign of the expropriation of land by White colonial administrators, the farm remains in Africa a particularly potent sign of injustice and cruelty. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the process, the attempts by Robert

---

[14] My use of the phrase refers to a trope of self-writing that could only really be set in former Anglophone settler colonies. For an excellent reading of the trope of "an African farm" in the White imaginary, see Caroline Rooney's "Narratives of Southern African Farms" (2005).

Mugabe's government to redress this situation and the increasing pressure on the South African governments to do the same explain perhaps the urban setting of Malan's narrative. Even — and in the urban geographies of Apartheid South Africa, *especially* — the marginalised and troubled settings of the African townships that surround all major South African cities and towns, signify as antonyms for the idyllic farm symbolism that characterises conventional narratives by White people. For "the farm my family once owned" was almost invariably one they, or someone on their behalf, acquired by pushing the original owners off the land. The ironies of such claims to land and place as inherent in the trope of "an African farm" reach their finest and most perverse levels in the work of Karen Blixen, Elspeth Huxley, and Kiki Gallman, and in more complex ways also in Alexandra Fuller's and Doris Lessing's writing. Christina Lamb's *The Africa House* (1999), the story of an Englishman's folly in what is today Zambia, offers another variation on the White person's fascination with Africa as place and space. In the "heart of Africa" Stewart Gore-Browne builds an absurdly grand manor house, based architecturally and ideologically on an English estate, and devotes the rest of his days to living an African White farmer's life as only the English know how to do. Lamb's book beautifully recreates the world the British Empire transported elsewhere with such ease. Not surprisingly, despite the desire to retain a degree of critical distance from the material, Lamb produces a biography that conforms neatly to a certain way of *being White in Africa*, its romance underscoring the force of the colonial trope in the Anglo-European imaginary.

Indeed, Gillian Whitlock notes that, even when at her most self-conscious in her autobiographies, Doris Lessing too can speak of Africa as an "almost empty land" (2000: 199–200). Whitlock shows that despite her unimpeachable political *cachet* Lessing subscribes to a racially loaded view of Africa and Africans: "they simply cannot be trusted with their lives, these Africans." It is a view found elsewhere in her work. Central to Lessing's *African Laughter* is her distress at "the mess the natives created" in the post-independence period. That famous line "après moi, le deluge," freshly if silently recycled, and in the oddest of places. She writes, in the opening section of *African Laughter*, "Then: 1982": "Zimbabwe, like other new black countries, has a corrupt ruling elite. This is far from an apologetic class of robbers. On the contrary: they are proud of themselves, boast and display their wealth." (1993: 9). As we read these lines over twenty years later, they reveal Lessing's uncanny prescience into Robert Mugabe's character and Zimbabwe's present state. When we

consider that the new nation was then barely two years old, however, her indictment seems almost churlish and can remind us of the kind of thing Ian Douglas Smith, the White minority leader, might have said to justify his own illegitimate regime. To argue that, as a former Marxist, she might be in good company, given Karl Marx's own contradictory position on the colonial issue, will, I hope, soften what may seem an unkind assertion. Indeed, as Wole Soyinka asserted in his Nobel Lecture in 1986, "This Past Must Address Its Present," "how many students of European thought today, even among us Africans, recall that several of the most revered names in European philosophy — Hegel, Locke, Hume, Voltaire — an endless list, were unabashed theorists of racial superiority and denigrators of the African history and being" (1987: 766, question mark missing in original).

Travelling back from the USA, Malan's narrator adopts, therefore, a smart and self-conscious speaking position. In a postmodern, postcolonial way, the narrative becomes the kind of *mea culpa* performed in the manner of the Christian stations-of-the-cross. During his pilgrimage to some of Afrikanerdom's most sacred sites, but also the sites of some of most horrific memories of the brutality of Apartheid, Malan flagellates himself vigorously, if only metaphorically, in what must be read as attempts at expiating his sins. Regularly he gets drunk with fellow South Africans — *Black* South Africans that is — in search of that elusive moment of their shared South Africanness, the experience that will persuade them that he too is human. Although his patrimony is synonymous with the dehumanisation of Black South Africans that Apartheid nurtured, he is about to re-signify *the meaning of Malan. My Traitor's Heart* aims to re-inscribe *the meaning of Malan* in the Rainbow Nation; no longer as a murderous hater of Black people but as a self-conscious "kaffir boetie."[15] In so far as he is a direct descendant of one of the men responsible for articulating and implementing Apartheid in its most vicious form, Daniel François Malan, Malan's journey to the heart of the nation is through the betrayal of his own people, the Afrikaners, and of his own family.

In a reversal of conventional norms in Apartheid South Africa, it is now up to the White man to prove his humanity — the status denied Black South Africans by official Apartheid discourses until 1990. In Toni Morrison's words, though spoken with reference to the American situa-

---

[15] Literally, "brother to Blacks"; in the racist language of old South Africa, the phrase had a derogative meaning, applied to a White person perceived to have got so close to Black people as to risk semiotic, if not genetic defilement.

tion, the White South African's "habit of command and power is replaced
by the thrill of genuflection" (1992: 35). Perhaps that is as it should be:
Apartheid, and the looser model that regulated race relations in the old
Rhodesia could hardly be said to show the humanity of White people.
But in the kind of moment in the narrative that best speaks the personal,
the autobiographical, every time Malan indulges to excess with his new
found Black friends he is violently, physically ill. The abject White self
ostensibly determined to purge himself of the marks of Apartheid in or-
der to be made anew as a White (South) African is betrayed by a body
that appears intent on retaining its place in the old South Africa. As Ma-
lan recognises repeatedly, confession, even when indisputably contrite,
cannot erase trauma; its mark lies well beyond the pigmentation of skin,
in the psyche of White people.

Here, in what I suspect to be an unintentional allusion, Malan offers
a thoughtful reflection on Althusserian theories of subjectivity and espe-
cially the notion of "interpellation." Malan the White South African, an
Afrikaner to boot (and he does much to explain the importance of such
categories), is born an Afrikaner, re-made an Afrikaner, and as such in
South Africa he will not be allowed to eschew his superiority. Rimbaud's
"*Je est un autre*," acquires here a profoundly ironic resonance. Malan
seems to recognise it and finds himself taking sides with his *volk*, the
Afrikaners. In this he is not alone, for in a number of his many autobio-
graphical works — *Season in Paradise* (1980) and *The True Confessions
of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) especially, but also in *Dogheart* (1998) and
Mouroir (1984) — fellow anti-Apartheid activist Breyten Breytenbach
also wavers between overtly attacking his ancestors and celebrating their
achievements. Breytenbach's anxiety betrays a strong awareness of how,
as a White South African, his suffering, and trauma are always *not* the
same as those of non-Whites; as he asks in *Season in Paradise*: "What's
it like, I wonder, to be a brown man in this country?" (1980: 72).[16]

There is no doubt, furthermore, that works such as Malan's are inevi-
tably versions of the earlier template for an "autobiography of Africa"
to which, albeit unwittingly, it pays tribute; that, after all, is Chrisman's

---

[16] A particularly powerful illustration of the way even opposition to Apartheid led to dif-
ferent consequences is found in Ruth First's account of her time in prison. She writes at one
stage: "I, a prisoner held under top security conditions, was forbidden books, visitors, contact
with any other prisoner; but like any white South African Madam I sat in bed each morning,
and Africans did the cleaning for the 'missus.' Should a spot appear on the floor during the day
the wardress would shout to the nearest African warder 'Gaan hall my 'n kaffer' [Go and get
me a kaffir], and once again all would be well in South Africa's forced labour heaven" (35–36).

point. While in *Out of Africa* Blixen knelt as a White woman before an English colonial administrator on behalf of Black Africans, Malan goes down on "all four" to beg forgiveness for being an Afrikaner. True, he is often drunk or out of his mind on dope when he does it, but it is a start; is Tony Blair too simply inebriated by the hold on power when he goes calling on Africa? Given the dialogism of life writing, addressed always at once to the self and to another self whom it seeks to engage in conversation — autobiography is at heart the telling of a self's story and as such always *knows* its interlocutor. In the context of *My Traitor's Heart* as Malan's opening plea to the *New* South Africa, the abjection of the White self becomes instrumental to this process. As Michael André Bernstein puts it, abjection "is a social and dialogic category, and its expression is always governed by mappings of prior . . . cultural models. . . . Abject[ion] is *only* felt in conversation with another, with a voice, whether internal or external, whose oppressive confidence arises through its articulation of the normative values of society as a whole" (1992: 29; emphasis added).

Malan's melodramatic performance of his guilty White self may not always fulfil the requirements of a real dialogue, but within the conventions of life writing it goes some way to responding to the demands of Lejeune's autobiographical pact. As life writing, the text brings together the complex process of self-making at the ethnic, social, political, and psychological levels. Malan's is one of the most complex narratives to have emerged out of this political and aesthetic dialectic in postcolonial Africa. When the narrator writes at one stage, "No, I'm lying. I mustn't lie anymore" (50), he knows, of course, that he will, for it is in the nature of the genre to construct a mythic self. The narrator differentiates here between the truths that will slip into the narrative, and the half-truths that constitute the "thick description" of self-writing. In such instances, as the narrative flow suddenly snaps and the personal story — inevitably self-interested — disrupts history, the internal logic of the autobiographical narrative reflects itself as *process*. Intrinsic as they are to life writing, such slippages make visible what Justin Cartwright calls the "white dilemma in Africa" (2002) in ways not unlike those identified by critics of Whiteness writing specifically in the American context.[17] The norms, invisible because designed to appear natural, are brought into relief by the contradictions inherent in the language of self writing. In other words, to the reader, who approaches the autobiographical text with something akin to a voyeur's stance, the pleasure in the story of (an)Other(s) is complicated when political, social, and environmental conditions provide more than

a theatre of action: they, too, are the subject of analysis. As Whitlock re-
marks, "postcolonial autobiography always bears the traces of its origins
in specific relations of power, rule and domination" (2000: 189). For
the White African in postcolonial Africa this means constantly striving
for a balance between traditional ways of telling the African experience,
and the pressures of new power structures in modern-day Africa. Malan
writes:

> Ah, my friend, do I seem poisoned with cynicism? I try not to be. It's just
> that I'm trying to fight my way out from under an ages-old accretion of
> myth about the world I grew up in. An African boyhood? An Afrikaner
> boyhood? I don't think so. Looking back, the strangest thing about my
> African childhood is that it wasn't African at all. (62)

Doris Lessing could have told him that the challenge of Whiteness in
Africa is to redefine itself "on the go," provisionally, strategically. Chris-
man has suggested one way in which this takes place; Apartheid provid-
ed another by allowing English Whiteness to purge itself of some of its
most burdensome markings by displacing them on Afrikaner Whiteness;
for Afrikaners, Malan's narrative shows, their best option is through the
theatricalized experience of a shamed Whiteness.

   As we have seen, coming home allows Malan to claim his (South)
Africanness, but this can only be achieved by restaging it anew, repeat-
edly and exhaustively, both for himself *and* for others. The narrative of
homecoming that *My Traitor's Heart* articulates offers a clear acknowl-
edgement of the fact that belonging and identity are not natural but rather
the result of complex social processes. In this setting it is not sufficient,
perhaps not even possible, for the White person to *pretend* to be an anti-
Apartheid activist, for such a position carries with it real risks. That these
risks are limited to race alone — for the White person the threat comes
both from the racist authorities *and* from Black radicals — is something
that Malan comments on. In his words: "If you were white in the wrong
place at the wrong time, you were a target" (175). One of the luxuries of
exile, he notes, is the vicarious pleasure of imagining oneself an enemy
of the state (99–100); it carries no real consequences and it actually ac-
crues considerable cachet. While living in Los Angeles (where, with a
mind-boggling sense of candor he adopts as his *nom de plume* Nelson
Mandela) the South African Malan finds himself the centre of attention
for a small group of American anti-racism activists for whom "Mandela"
as a sign of the brutality of Apartheid is simply too evasive.

   In reality, Malan's autobiographical act thus functions equally as a
biography (of his family and of Afrikaners as a whole) and very much as

a historical document — capturing a particularly significant moment in the tumultuous changeover in South Africa from Apartheid to so-called Rainbow Nation. That it does so through a focus on the intimate sphere of the private self underlines the argument that through the act of bearing witness to the experiences of the private self, life writing simultaneously adumbrates the political, public sphere (Olney 1972). The critic must trace within the autobiographical the crossover into a national narrative, rather than treat them as synonymous. Linda Anderson has argued that "[w]riting the self involves moments when the self is lost, when cracks appear and unconscious memory floods in" (2001: 101). It is here that the theme of divided loyalties becomes especially pertinent, for the split frequently manifests itself in spite of an author's conscious attempt to weave an elaborate narrative of belonging. Coming home represents for Malan such a crucial moment, for ultimately he is *also* a *White* (South) African, *and* an Afrikaner, much as he imagines himself a South African who is prepared to fight against the regime that affords him a privileged location; hence my contention that the book aptly reflects Cartwright's "white dilemma" in contemporary (South) Africa.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

Aidoo, Ama Ata. 2000. "What 'Hopeless Continent'?" *New Internationalist* 327. *http://www.newint.org/issue327/view.htm* (September 2000).

Anderson, Linda. 2001. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge.

Baldwin, James. 1963. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press.

Baugh, Edward, ed. 1978. "Introduction." In *Critics of Caribbean Literature: Reading Is Literary Criticism*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Bernstein, Michael André. 1992. *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Blixen, Karen. 1980 [1937]. *Out of Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Breytenbach, Breyten. 1980. *A Season in Paradise*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

———. 1984a. *Mouroir*. London & Boston: Faber and Faber.

———. 1984b. *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. Emmarentia, South Africa: Taurus.

———. 1998. *Dogheart: A Memoir*. Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria: Human and Rousseau.

Cartwright, Justin. Back cover of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, 2002.

Césaire, Aimé. 1972. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chrisman, Laura. 2003. *Postcolonial Interventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Cock, Jacklyn. 1979. *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Coetzee, J. M. 1988. *White Writing*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

———. 1998. *Boyhood*. London: Vintage.

———. 1999. *Youth*. London: Vintage.

———. 2000. *Disgrace*. London: Secker and Warburg.

Crapanzano, Vincent. 1986. *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*. London: Vintage.

DeMars, Willian E. 2005. *NGOs and Transnational Networks: Wild Cards in World Politics*. London: Pluto Press.

Drewe, Robert. 1976. *The Savage Crows*. Sydney: William Collins.

Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. London: Routledge.

Eakin, Paul John. 1999. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

First, Ruth. 1965. *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law*. New York: The Monthly Review Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. "The Means of Correct Training." In *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. London: Penguin, pp. 188–205.

Fuller, Alexandra. 2002. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*. London: Random House.

Gallman, Kiki. 1991. *When I Dreamed of Africa*. New York: Viking.

Gilmore, Leigh. 1994. *Autobiographics: Feminist Theory of Women's Self-representation*. Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press.

Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press.

Grant, Richard E. 2006. *Wah Wah*.

Harrison, David. 1981. *The White Tribe of Africa*. London: BBC Books.

Hope, Christopher. 1988. *White Boy Running*. London: Abacus.

Hulme, David, and Michael Edwards, eds. 1997. *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?* London: Palgrave.

Huxley, Elspeth. 1962. *The Flame Tress of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood*. London: Penguin.

Jolly, Rosemary. 1995. *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press / Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Krog, Antjie. 1998. *Country of My Skull*. Johannesburg: Random House.

———. 2003. *A Change of Tongue*. Johannesburg: Random House.

Lamb, Christina. 1999. *The Africa House*. London: Penguin.

Lessing, Doris. 1974 [1957]. *Going Home*. St. Albans, UK: Panther Books.

———. 1993. *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe*. London: Harper Collins.

Lipsitz, George. 1998. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Makogba, Malegapuru. 2005. "Wrath of Dethroned White Males." *The Mail and Guardian*, 25 March. *http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articlei d=200303&area=/insight/insight_comment_and_analysis/* (February 17, 2007).

Malan, Rian. 1990. *My Traitor's Heart*. London: Vintage.

Maugham Brown, David. 1991. "*Matigari* and the Rehabilitation of Religion." *Research in African Literatures* 22/4: 173–80.

Miller, Christopher. 1985. *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miller, Nancy K. 1991. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. London: Routlegde.

Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nuttall, Sarah, and Carli Coetzee, eds. 2002. "Introduction." In *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–15.

Olney, James. 1972. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rimbaud, Arthur. 1991. *Œuvre*. Ed. Suzanne Bernard, Paris: Classiques Garnier.

Rooney, Caroline. 2005. "Narratives of Southern African Farms." *Third World Quarterly* 26/3: 431–40.

Segrest, M. 1994. *Memoir of a Race Traitor*. Boston: South End Press.

Slovo, Gillian. 2001 [1997]. *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country*. London: Abacus.

Soyinka, Wole. 1987. "This Past Must Address Its Present." Nobel Lecture, 1986. *PMLA* 102: 762–71.

Steedman, Carolyn. 1986. *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. London: Virago.

Steyn, Melissa. 2001. *"Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used to Be": White Identity in a Changing South Africa*. Albany: State University of New York.

Viswanathan, Gauri. 1989. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wainaina, Binyavanga. 2005. "How to Write about Africa." *Granta Magazine, 92: The View from Africa. http://www.granta.com/extracts/2615* (July 19, 2006).

Whitlock, Gillian. 2000. *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*. New York: Cassell.