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**Title:** Depictions of Childhood in South African Autobiography with  
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Depictions of Childhood in South African Autobiography, with  
Particular reference to the 1920s<sup>1</sup>

If we wish to gain a better understanding of a particular period in South Africa's history, it is not sufficient merely to study that period, and the people who lived through it, in isolation; we also need to know what that period has made of these people. In other words, we should not neglect to ascertain what these people have become. If we accept this, then autobiography presents itself as a fruitful area of study.

The delineation of a 'period' is itself not without complications, and can at times be seen as a reflection of the degree of a researcher's specialisation. The result can be a somewhat artificial closure of the narrative. Further, as Frederic Jameson warns us:

... any rewarding use of the notion of a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, "expresses" some unified inner truth - a world-view or a period style or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breadth of the "period" in question.<sup>2</sup>

And yet in an adept and suggestive exercise in periodising historical change in revolutionary politics, cultural production, philosophical trends, and global economics in the 1960s, Jameson himself argues:

... to those who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may quickly be replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional - what Raymond Williams calls the "residual" or "emergent" - can be assessed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Isabel Hofmeyr and Paul la Hausse for their helpful suggestions in preparing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', in Sohnya Sayers, Anders

Autobiography would seem to stress the exceptional or, less emphatically, the possible, while registering a keen awareness of social and historical constraints, frequently articulated as desire or regret or bitterness. At the same time, autobiographical narrative proffers and is shaped around its own categories and periods - corresponding to the stages of life itself (birth, childhood, schooling, youth, marriage and so on) or to personal calamities - which cut across those broadly identified in historiography. As far as South African autobiography is concerned, however, peculiar difficulties are posed to those who would study autobiography as a literary genre. The critic is constantly aware that s/he is investigating the life of a real person as opposed to a fictional character. This does not mean that autobiography as a form precludes the fictionalisation of its protagonist. If, as Guy Butler suggests, "Memory plays the strangest tricks,"<sup>4</sup> the "strangest tricks" are as readily played with memory. But autobiography in the South African context has tended to be a serious pursuit. The reasons for this require little elaboration. Alongside the categories and periods (listed above) which typically structure less historically conscious autobiographies, are to be found such markers as (to take some of the most obvious) Bulhoek, Sharpeville and Soweto. From the point of view of literary studies, this very seriousness and proximity to history of autobiography (as opposed to these same propensities in works advertised as fiction) has meant that a number of works have been passed over as unsuitable for serious critical contemplation. On the other hand, historians have found in these autobiographies a considerable amount of material relevant to their own narratives.<sup>5</sup> This paper seeks a compromise by examining childhood, a conventional element of autobiography

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Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, Frederic Jameson, eds., *The 60s without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.178.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Butler, *Karoo Morning: An Autobiography 1918-35* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1977), p.35.

<sup>5</sup> See the helpful discussion of "weak" and "strong" histories in Claude Levi-Strauss, *La Pensee sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p.346.

viewed as a genre, as depicted by writers who lived their childhoods in a particular historical period, the 1920s. Something further, therefore, needs to be said concerning the working definition to be used in this paper of the formal dynamics of autobiography. This involves an understanding of autobiographical narrative time, and of the connection between narrative time and historical time.

In the field of literary criticism a good deal has been written about autobiography, particularly in the last two decades.<sup>6</sup> However, there exists little agreement on the subject of what exactly constitutes autobiography, nor is there much certainty concerning its function. One recent study, for example, could open with the assertion: "No one can tell what autobiography is, yet that has not dispelled a surge of recent efforts to define it." Another refers to autobiography as "that elusive genre."<sup>7</sup> What conditions have to be satisfied for a work to qualify as an autobiography, and what are the consequences for critical approaches of labelling a work thus? Is autobiography merely a source for other disciplines to draw on? Is it a literary genre in its own right? If so, in what ways is it related to other genres? These are only a few of the numerous questions that critics have posed.

It is not the purpose of the present paper to contribute to this debate.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's suggestion that the novel is pre-eminently "the

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<sup>6</sup> See the useful chapter entitled 'The Study of Autobiography: A Bibliographic Essay', in William C. Spengemann's *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp.170-245.

<sup>7</sup> Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p.1 ; Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.vii.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive definition and (historical and thematic) treatment

genre of becoming",<sup>9</sup> it is accepted that autobiography is a genre of the *having become*. This formula seems to me to capture the *historical* dimension of the genre, on the one hand, and, on the other, its *presentness*; in other words, autobiography represents a subjective consideration of the past as shaped by the autobiographer's perception of him/herself at the moment of writing, a perception itself shaped by that past. It is in this sense that this paper will consider time itself, and more particularly the ways in which various South African autobiographers have interpreted aspects of the past (comprising both a personal and a broader history) which have had an immense bearing on the subsequent course of their lives, and yet have frequently placed an equally immense distance (temporal, spatial, or psychological) between these aspects of the past and the autobiographers at the moment of writing. In focusing on autobiographical depictions of childhood, the retrospective perceptions of the continuities and discontinuities between the world of childhood and that of the moment of writing will therefore be emphasised. It remains, then, to consider briefly the implications of narrating the unfolding of a life in a decade, the 1920s, in which changing and unpredictable circumstances rendered it unlikely that a life tending in a particular direction in 1920 would be continuing along the same path by 1930.<sup>10</sup>

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of the 'Childhood' as a genre in its own right, see Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.22.

<sup>10</sup> A more detailed, if ultimately unsatisfactory, account of this process, focusing on the meanings and narrative manipulations of time and language in certain South African autobiographies, and more specifically on chronology and the political implications of language in the context of the 1920s, is offered in my 'Aspects of South African Autobiography with Particular Reference to Depictions of the 1920s', BA(Hons) dissertation (University of the Witwatersrand, 1987), chapter 1.

In his essay, 'Autobiography and Historical Consciousness', Karl J. Weintraub draws a useful distinction between "nature" and "history" in autobiography, the former having connotations of a life "unfolding" as if predestined to attain what the autobiographer considers to have been the dominant achievement of his/her life; the latter having connotations of "development", where historical contingency renders the course of a life unpredictable. The extent to which each is represented is "a matter of degree, of stress, of emphasis and balance."<sup>11</sup> The relevant issue here is that of *circumstances*. That is, are they merely catalysts in the attainment of some higher end? Or might they be presented, as in Rousseau's "Man is born good, but society makes him evil", as obstructing the natural unfolding of a life?

The word 'natural' is evidently one that can be ascribed to any number of given situations, at times resulting in significant tensions. This is particularly true of South Africa under settler domination, where both colonisers and colonised have drawn on a range of shades of meaning falling between the natural/unnatural opposition in order to legitimate their various claims. For the colonised facing an administration imposed by force and altogether inimical to their aspirations, memories (real or invented) of a 'natural', ordered pre-colonial or pre-capitalist existence can become powerful critical and organisational ammunition.<sup>12</sup> For the autobiographer growing up in an environment that to a greater or lesser degree retains elements of such an anterior existence, these elements provide a touchstone against which the subsequent changes s/he has experienced can be evaluated. The 1920s can

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<sup>11</sup> Karl J. Weintraub, 'Autobiography and Historical Consciousness', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.1 No.4 (June 1975), esp. pp.829-834.

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration of the conditions under which the 'natural' might be "a profoundly subversive and contestatory weapon", see Frederic Jameson, 'The Ideology of the Text', in *Salmagundi*, No.31-32 (Fall 1975 - Winter 1976), pp.239-240.

be argued to have constituted precisely this type of environment. In this decade, the pre-colonial past (and the way of life associated with, or attributed to, it), came to exercise a noticeable role in people's perceptions of themselves and of others. This was not only because it was for many a relatively recent past which continued to shape their lives and ways of thinking about the world. Nor was this merely because pressing social and economic changes were simultaneously distancing them from this past, thereby making them all the more aware of it. Of equal significance was the ambiguous role of the ruling classes in trying to shore up this past by experimenting with a rather queasy form of indirect rule, which, while enabling headmen and chiefs to exercise a measure of power, made them little more than servants of the Native Affairs Department. This endeavour was articulated in a legislative agenda (of which the central measure was the Native Administration Act of 1927) formulated to give shape to a concerted programme of 'retribalisation'. In tandem with the legislators evolved a school of anthropological thought associated with a group of segregationist philanthropists committed to assisting Africans to develop 'naturally' along their 'own' lines under the banner of 'cultural adaptation'.<sup>13</sup>

In this historical context of change juxtaposed with developing images of a past alternatively utopian (or "absolute" and hence "valorized")<sup>14</sup> and distorted, it is hardly surprising that individual lives were unlikely to unfold 'naturally' according to some predetermined plan. In a society where the 'natural' was very much contested territory and yet relations of power were for the most part rigid,<sup>15</sup> a dual personal history could easily arise, the first

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<sup>13</sup> See Saul Dubow, 'Race, Civilisation and Culture: The Elaboration of Segregationist Discourse in the Inter-War Years', in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), pp.71-94.

<sup>14</sup> See Bakhtin, *op.cit.*, p.15.

<sup>15</sup> William Plomer, for example, writes of his experiences in the Stormberg:

acting out the role(s) assigned by the dominant social order, while the second pursued other objectives. Autobiography generally uncovers this 'second' history, since it represents the consciousness and humanity behind the mask. However, the autobiographer remains all too aware of the limitations imposed by the 'first' history. Indeed, this 'first' history frequently imparts to the autobiography its temporal and narrative shape or form (as opposed to its content, which is the domain of the 'second' history). In bearing witness to the exigencies of life in South Africa, the autobiographer may well be compelled to compromise the subjective consideration of 'what I *did*' with an account of 'what happened to me'. Chronology as an organising principle balances these diverging narrative demands, generating particular versions of a broader history as the 'natural' unfolding of a life is obstructed and redirected by contingency narrated in the form of a succession of selected historical 'events'. In depicting childhood, autobiographers are particularly conscious of the constraints placed on individual initiative and, conversely, of the formative power of external agents.

A brief survey of a number of autobiographies that depict childhood in the early part of the twentieth century reveals two general tendencies: a concern with the notion of the 'typical' child, and an exploration of the implications within a South African context of the limited experiential boundaries of childhood. Both tendencies need to be described more fully before we examine these autobiographies in detail.

The idea of the typical child comprehends two dominant proclivities in its own right. On the one hand, this idea considers childhood in the universal sense of a child's gradual acquisition of consciousness of his or her surroundings,

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"Everything came back to that in South Africa, and at Marsh Moor the colour bar was stronger than the iron (the journeyman blacksmith) had hammered on the anvil." - William Plomer, *The South African Autobiography* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), p.144.



and of the specific formative influences exercised by the child's parents or other close relatives. It is partly for this reason that much space may be devoted to sketching the lives and characters of the autobiographer's parents. The latter are perceived to have been responsible not only for the protagonist's appearance at a particular time and place (this is self-evident, but worth stressing given the considerable significance attributed to factors of time and place in South African autobiography), but also for some of his or her dominant characteristics and modes of perceiving the world. On the other hand, the notion of the typical child embraces a recognition of the expectations of childhood conduct specific to the period and in contradistinction to subsequent periods, usually that of the moment of writing. This very often takes the form of an enumeration of those values and habits of the protagonist's parents that have been rejected or that circumstances have compelled the protagonist to abandon. In the one instance, then, the autobiographer is concerned to demonstrate the continuity between his or her childhood and the self at the moment of writing; in the other, the discontinuity.

In the South African context, the autobiographer's awareness of the discontinuities between his/her juvenile world and that of later life is frequently intense. As such, it can sustain a powerful organising effect on the narration of the author's life. Somewhat differently expressed, the autobiographer's purpose in recording his/her life may well be a function of the extent to which the autobiographer perceives continuities between his/her childhood and the present. Some of these continuities and discontinuities, and the narrative strategies that they generate, will be discussed at greater length later in this paper.

At this point it is sufficient to note one of the major factors accounting for the autobiographer's perceptions of such continuities or discontinuities. This,

the second of our two general tendencies, is the recognition on the part of the autobiographer of the very limited extent of his/her exposure in childhood to the world beyond the farm, the rural village, the small *platteland* town, even, possibly, the urban slums, although it is principally the three former situations that this paper will consider. Coupled with this tendency is the further recognition that some of the wider arcs of social change and industrialisation were intersecting with these semi-isolated pockets of life, drawing them into the circumference of a circle the centre of which was Johannesburg, or Pretoria, or Cape Town, or Port Elizabeth, and so on. Nevertheless, such processes of change were gradual. Although the railway system was expanding throughout the inter-war years, distances remained vast, cars were rarities, and, as W.M. Macmillan discovered while conducting his research, "the deplorable roads were in summer at their very worst: even miles of loose sand are more easily dealt with than thick wet mud."<sup>16</sup> A more sympathetic commentator could write at the beginning of 1928:

In all civilised countries the provision of efficient and economical transport is of prime importance; but in this sub-continent, with its vast empty spaces, a general absence of navigable rivers, and the difficulties attending the location and maintenance of adequate water supplies, the accomplishment of this has been no easy task.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while doubtless making an impression on the developing consciousness, as indeed we shall see, the changes of this period were sufficiently uneven to ensure that the frequently very localised social and cultural matrices of

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<sup>16</sup> W.M. Macmillan, *My South African Years: An Autobiography* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), p.168.

<sup>17</sup> 'Passenger Train Services on the South African Railways', *South African Railways & Harbours Magazine*, January 1928, p.105. A particularly bleak view of the country's communications is detailed by Margery Perham, *African Apprenticeship: An Autobiographical Journey in Southern Africa 1929* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p.83. On the other hand, the rapid spread of the influenza epidemic to the remotest areas of the interior had demonstrated the penetration of the capitalist economy. See H. Phillips, 'Black October: The Impact of the Spanish Influenza Epidemic of 1919 in South Africa', Ph.D., University of Cape Town, 1984, p.426.

rural South Africa maintained their considerable formative influences, and that where such changes were felt, they were mediated by these matrices.

It is at this point that our two general tendencies meet. In fact, it might be objected that there were no real grounds for distinguishing them in the first place, since a child "cannot know that any particular human component, trait, or experience is lacking in his closed world, in his family situation, precisely because he is inside it and because it is all he does know."<sup>18</sup> This would be true if the limited horizons of childhood were our only concern. However, we are also interested in the *differences* that existed between the semi-isolated pockets of South Africa's social landscape, and in the ways in which these differences could nonetheless articulate similar imperatives. Further, we need to take cognizance of the fact that even where parochial concerns continued to shape the thinking of the autobiographer, the retrospective depiction, in the light of a lifetime's experiences, of a childhood society dominated by such concerns cannot really hope to recapture the child's vision of that society as though the subsequent experiences had not occurred. And where there has been a radical, permanent break with the childhood environment this is all the more apparent. Thus, although the perception of having been a 'typical' child is often the issue of a parochial environment, the relationship between the two is complex and they are very far from being coterminous. A distinction should therefore be drawn between them.

One way of coming to terms with some of these problems concerning the perception of childhood is to ask ourselves why it is that some authors devote many pages to the narration of the earliest years of their conscious existence

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<sup>18</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.217. Jameson is developing an argument of Sartre's.

(usually between the ages of four or five and fourteen), while others might gloss over this period in a single short chapter. Guy Butler, for example, fills the better part of a volume with the evocations of his boyhood. Es'kia Mphahlele (born, a year later than Butler, in 1919), on the other hand, covers the same period in a slender ten pages of *Down Second Avenue*, and concludes:

Looking back to those first thirteen years of my life - as much of it as I can remember - I cannot help thinking that it was time wasted.<sup>19</sup>

The reason for the dismissal of the experiences of these early years is not difficult to ascertain. In the author's memory they occupy a position anterior to the experiences of the period in the Marabastad slums, when, he supposes, his life *really* began.<sup>20</sup> In other words, they appear to bear so little relation to his later life that, in effect, they constitute something of a false start; "time wasted" is time lost. Contrary to the prescriptive logic of autobiography, which is pre-eminently a genre of assessment, the impressions of these years do not assist the author in his attempt to define himself at the moment of writing, they do not add up to "a definite pattern"; these impressions (the author's "grandmother; the mountain; the tropical darkness;... world of torrential rains; the solid shimmering heat...; the romantic picture of a woman with a child on her back...") convey, rather, in their very lack of specification, a sense of timelessness. In short, the author does not really recognise himself in these images of boyhood. This does not mean that he has no desire to assign a meaning to his boyhood; the contrary is the case, as the dismissal, quoted above, demonstrates. But, as Mphahlele points out, these timeless images "keep imposing themselves on

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<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p.18.

<sup>20</sup> For a comparative analysis of the degree to which the respective periods in Maupaneng and Marabastad left their impressions on Mphahlele, see N. Chabani Manganyi, *Exiles and Homecomings: A Biography of Es'kia Mphahlele* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), pp.42-43.

(his) whole judgement." In this context, the idea of the typical child is a proxy for identity. If the 'I' of Maupaneng and the 'I' of Marabastad and beyond are only imperfectly reconciled, this is attributed to the existential bluntness of rural life:

But all in all perhaps I led a life shared by all other country boys. Boys who are aware of only one purpose of living; to be.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, if there is a continuity between the two worlds it is mainly expressed negatively. More recently, Mphahlele has suggested that the temporal dynamic that the city assumed for him was a reaction to the exigencies of his rural boyhood:

I think if the upbringing was as tough as the one I had in Mphahlele, where I was looking after cattle and goats, it was a pretty tough life. I think you're bound to look for something better once you've come back into the urban areas. You look for better things. And then from there on you have to keep pushing, you've got to keep pushing.<sup>22</sup>

There is a considerable difference between this point of view and that expressed by Z.K. Matthews. Matthews, born in 1901, was brought up to consider his early life in Kimberley as something of an aberration, as "unnatural and unfitting".<sup>23</sup>

What a difference, too, between Mphahlele's depiction of rural childhood and the glowingly narrated particulars of Jason Jingoes' boyhood. For Jingoes, born a full generation before Mphahlele, childhood not only represents a world

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<sup>21</sup> Mphahlele, *op.cit.*, p.18. All the preceding quotations are from this page.

<sup>22</sup> Interview by Tim Couzens, Norman Hodge and Kate Turkington with Es'kia Mphahlele, in *English Academy Review*, Vol.4 (January 1987), p.119. It should also perhaps be noted that a perception of proletarianisation, of the irrevocability of the movement to the city, and consequently of being transported from rural remoteness, brings the years at Maupaneng into being as a distinct phase of life. A more general connection between mobility (and more particularly modern transport) and the conception of childhood as somehow autonomous is developed by Coe, *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>23</sup> Z.K. Matthews, *Freedom For My People: The Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews: Southern Africa 1901 to 1968* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p.14.

that is physically lost, but also encapsulates the force of the values pertaining to that world, values that he continues to cherish. This suggests in fact that the perception of a world lost provides as good a reason for dwelling on that world as it does for neglecting it. Unlike Mphahlele, Jingoos is aware of no radical break isolating his earliest years from his adult life. On the contrary, he is conscious of having carried his childhood memories and perceptions of the world into his future. It follows that when he generalises about childhood, Jingoos does not divide typical experience into such different spheres of existence as the countryside and the city. His account imparts the impression, rather, of an upbringing sufficiently complex and satisfying to permit him to universalise his experiences:

Everybody remembers his childhood as a golden time. I am particularly fortunate in that I have memories peopled with great warriors, strong relatives, and good friends, and that I grew up at a time when herdboys were not regarded as simple peasant folk, and when people still had a love for cattle, and when fathers of households could stay home most of their lives. I drew on these memories of an ordered existence, governed by tradition, when in later years I met the dust of the mines in South Africa and travelled across the ocean to work as a labourer on the battlefields of France.<sup>24</sup>

The forces of change emanating from the outside world are mediated by this "tradition", becoming part of it and transforming it even as they repeatedly engineer its demise. As Jingoos passed from youth to adulthood, the disorganising effects of migrancy on homestead life in Basutoland intensified dramatically. It is estimated that between 1911, when Jingoos was sixteen, and 1936, the number of men and women from the Protectorate looking for work in the Union each year rose from 25 000 to 101 000.<sup>25</sup> "Every boy in Lesotho," comments Jingoos, "grows up with stories about working on the mines, because just about every man in the country, at some stage of his life,

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<sup>24</sup> Stimela Jason Jingoos, *A Chief is a Chief by the People: The Autobiography of Stimela Jason Jingoos* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.54.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Edgar, *Prophets with Honour: A Documentary History of Lekhotla la Bafo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), p.6.

goes to earn money on the South African labour market."<sup>26</sup> He then proceeds to relate a story that his father used to tell, in which the latter got the better of a white overseer underground who used to kick black workers. There is, characteristically, a moral to this story:

He taught me at home that some white people are troublesome to Bantu, but whenever he told me this story, he would also remind me that people are not alike; he himself had met many fine, gentle white men who never tried to make a black man's life unpleasant.<sup>27</sup>

The pressures of colonialism have necessitated the development of strategies and attitudes designed to cope with new stresses in a world beyond the homestead, but there nonetheless remains considerable scope for the dominated to feel that they are significant actors in this process.

Indeed, the heroics of the adult world loom large in the childhood reminiscences of South African autobiography. To Mphahlele, the return of migrants to Maupaneng with fabulous objects procured in Pretoria and stories of "the glamour of city life" communicates the message that "Pretoria was the Mecca."<sup>28</sup> The victories of relatives and forebears over nature, over hardships, over others, all become part of the child's means of perceiving him/herself as belonging to a particular context. An incident in which Ellen Kuzwayo's grandmother administered a crushing response to a perceived insult from an Afrikaner woman "left a lasting impression on (Kuzwayo's) mind." She later observes: "For as long as I remember, I have hated being a burden to anybody, or letting myself be treated as worthless by anybody." Important too to self-perception is the idea of play. In fact, the young Ellen and her cousins repeatedly imitated their grandmother's manner in their

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<sup>26</sup> Jingoos, *op.cit.*, p.59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>28</sup> Mphahlele, *op.cit.*, p.22.

games.<sup>29</sup> The games children play are often an indication of the social roles to which they have been exposed. In Freud's words:

The play of children is determined by their wishes - really by the child's *one* wish, which is to be grown-up, the wish that helps to "bring him up." He plays at being grown-up; in play he imitates what is known to him of the lives of adults.<sup>30</sup>

Jason Jingoes offers a more detailed account:

Had I been able to go further with my education, I would almost certainly have trained as a lawyer, for that was my greatest dream. When children play games, they always pretend to be the people they would like to be when they grow up. Some of us had clay oxen with which we ploughed imaginary lands; others pretended they were working on the mines; others had their own courts of law. I always played court games when I was small, especially games in which I had to defend myself or other people against charges.<sup>31</sup>

The concerns of a rather different "adult world" were reflected in the childhood play of Guy Butler at the time of the 1929 election:

The adult world, as a result of a mysterious activity called politics, was working itself up to a crisis called an election, in which we felt totally involved. In our experience, political humanity at this time was entirely white, and was divided into two species or races: Nats and Saps. Nats were all Afrikaners; Saps were mostly English, plus Jews, and some very brave Afrikaners. If you were Nat it was your sacred duty to fight for your language and the Vierkleur; if a Sap, you knew you were fighting for Britain, the Union Jack, and progress. The Anglo-Boer war was refought on the playing-fields of the B.H.S.<sup>32</sup>

These quotations illustrate their respective authors' perceptions of the available identities that they could subscribe to in their childhoods. Fashioning an identity from the example of parents and relatives is, of course, more easily achieved in a stable childhood environment with a certain degree of material comfort. In this respect, Jingoes, Kuzwayo, and Butler share similar backgrounds. Unlike Mphahlele, none gives the impression of

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<sup>29</sup> Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp.62, 134, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming', translated by I.F. Grant Duff, in *Delusion and Dream and Other Essays*, edited and introduced by Philip Rieff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), p.125.

<sup>31</sup> Jingoes, *op.cit.*, p.221.

<sup>32</sup> Butler, *op.cit.*, pp.98-99.



having engaged in a false start, and none dismisses his/her upbringing, although all are aware in retrospect that the cocoons enveloping their childhood worlds obscured a good deal of the processes of struggle and change carrying on without. We shall have occasion further on to examine in more detail Butler and Kuzwayo's experiences of childhood and their autobiographical implications. At this point, it is worth looking at the way in which the piercing of the cocoon might have been experienced from the inside.

We have already seen that the Basutoland cocoon of Jingo's childhood was being rapidly unwound in the 1920s, by which time he was working variously as a teacher and clerk in the Union. Naboth Mokgatle's Phokeng, too, was hardly the place it had been during the boyhood of his uncle Mogale. Christianity had attracted a majority of the village's population (including Mogale but not Mokgatle's father), and the youth were being prepared for contact with a wider world. At the same time, though, Mokgatle questions the force of the people's attachment to Christianity:

I grew up to find that there were still in our tribe many Christians whose parents never became Christians. Because of that I imagine that the Christian tradition never found a strong hold on many of my people.<sup>33</sup>

There clearly exists no uncomplicated process of basking in a bucolic ecstasy of juvenile innocence only to be rudely awakened to the fact of proletarianisation and the belief that the experience of years of childhood bears no relation to reality. "In my tribe today," writes Mokgatle at an earlier stage, "one can still find the past and the present living side by side."<sup>34</sup> Again, this is partly a question of uneven processes of change enabling the

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<sup>33</sup> Naboth Mokgatle, *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1971), p.65.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

assumption of a range of identities, from the international to the ethnic. As late as 1935, Mokgatle could vow "that (he) was no longer going to worry about politics (he had come into contact with Communists in Pretoria) but would become a true tribesman and care for (his) mother and the animals (his father left (them))."<sup>35</sup>

The clause "I grew up to find" and its variants are invoked fairly frequently by Mokgatle. There exists no uneasy relationship between the 'I' of his formative years and the 'I' of the grown-up, in the sense that he cannot doubt that they refer to the same person. In retrospect, the anomalies between his childhood perceptions and the perceptions of later years do not appear surprising. This is not only because he can consider his early life to be typical (he speaks of himself as having been "an innocent tribal boy..."),<sup>36</sup> but also because he is able to contemplate the passage from early life to being an adult in universal terms too. Thus, although his initial encounters with racism and the segregationist state impress him profoundly, they do not (at least from the perspective of the moment of writing) dislocate his world insofar as the typical child's vision is proverbially limited:

Before these experiences I had never known that South Africa was occupied by people who thought of men not as equals, but as superiors and inferiors. To me the African saying that to grow is to see and to learn became a reality.<sup>37</sup>

The perspective of the moment of writing is of essential importance here. One of Mokgatle's purposes in the autobiography is to demonstrate that there is growth beyond growing up. He feels that his experiences of racism "poisoned" his mind; all whites, at first, were alike:

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.204. Jason Jingoos similarly recounts that when working on the mines he was always conscious of home associations. Yet when the First World War began, he "as a member of the British Commonwealth, felt deeply involved." - Jingoos, *op.cit.*, pp.68,72.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138. See also p.161.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

Though I knew another African saying, 'Don't judge all by the weaknesses and faults of some', the feeling that Europeans were unfriendly dominated my feelings all along. Before my entry into politics I suspected everything they said or did.<sup>38</sup>

A comparison with the experience of Peter Abrahams is possibly instructive. For Abrahams, on the threshold of exile, "had reached a point where the gestures of even (his) friends among the whites were suspect, so (he) had to go or for ever be lost."<sup>39</sup> It has become commonplace to observe that autobiography is of necessity always incomplete since its author is still alive and battling to assign a coherent meaning to a succession of antecedent perceptions.<sup>40</sup> Where, however, there has been a sufficiently powerful feeling of discontinuity between one part of an autobiographer's life and another, it may be necessary to reconsider this formula. Indeed, in the case of Abrahams, exile provides a perspective from which his South African years can be viewed almost in biographical terms, since it enables him from his own point of view to be the person he could not be in South Africa. For Mokgatle, on the other hand, there is evidently, even in retrospect, a meaningful life before exile. There is a sense in which each stage of life, not merely childhood, is prior *and* parallel, each successive stage subsuming the last into a world that was possibly always there but had to be discovered. This may, as in the instance when Mokgatle had to choose between politics and being a tribesman, pose a dilemma concerning identity. However, this is a question not of two distinct persons, but rather of deciding to which of two distinct areas of experience a single person owes his allegiance. Ultimately this process is perceived not to be spiritually irreversible, even if exile has rendered it physically so. Exile for Mokgatle is a type of cure, and indeed he uses the image of the convalescent to describe his condition:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p.311.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.40.

... I have seen myself carry the whole system of a police state system with me in my mind in European countries and in London. I was like a person who had been sick for a very long time, whose blood had been heavily poisoned by sickness, and who could not get cured in his own country, so had gone to another country where doctors began to work on him. My sickness was a very old one and my cure was long.<sup>41</sup>

Mokgatlé, then, wishes not to be a *different* person, but seeks rather to be restored to the person he was at some point in his past. Again, this involves no denial of the 'reality' of the hardships he has sustained. But it assumes that underneath - or, more accurately perhaps, running through - these layers of experience is an unsullied 'I'. His autobiography traces the continuity of this 'I' from childhood to the moment of writing.

In fact, in Mokgatlé's case a sense of continuous identity is projected back beyond childhood to his ancestors. It is possible that the distance of the exile from the land of his birth prompts this perception. Certainly the autobiography's dedication would lend support to such a contention. The book is dedicated to the memory of Mokgatlé's paternal grandmother, with whom he identifies. In a predicament not unlike Mokgatlé's, his grandmother, as the slave of a Dutch settler, "grew up alone, far way from her people and birthplace." His fate is wrapped up in hers and *vice versa*:

It was because of the two episodes, her enslavement and her marriage, that preparation for my coming in the world started. I am a part of her and she is a part of me. I believe firmly that as long as I live, she lives.<sup>42</sup>

A governing belief rooted in the scene of childhood seems then to offer an organising principle, a philosophy, for the elaboration of a life, textually in the case of life before exile; in action for life in exile:

Some people may wonder why I went so far back in tracing my background. My answer is that the birth of my ancestors and grandparents after them ushered my coming, and therefore I am a continuation of them. As my mind develops, I increasingly believe

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<sup>41</sup> Mokgatlé, *op.cit.*, pp.349-350.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.vii.

that whatever I am, whatever I do, my ancestors play a leading part in my actions. I believe that they guide and protect me.<sup>43</sup>

Mokgatle, we note, has long ceased to be a practising Christian; he received communion only once after his confirmation at the end of 1929, refusing to return three months later for the customary second. Throughout the period of his confirmation classes he had been filled with doubts.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Es'kia Mphahlele followed a similar intellectual path - increasing doubts concerning the relevance of organised religion in a South African context, succeeded, with the assistance of an exile's perspective, by a growing conviction of the significance of the ancestors and their connection with a sense of *place*.<sup>45</sup> There is no space here for an examination of the veracity or otherwise of this conviction. On this score we shall have to be content with Mokgatle's assertion: "Some people say that, since I cannot prove it scientifically, it is false. My defence is that no one has been able to prove a belief."<sup>46</sup> However, this assertion also opens up space for the literary critic to proffer a speculative account (in response to a question posed earlier) of the child's subjective experience of the piercing of his/her closed world by exterior forces, and of the relation of this experience to the rejection of Christianity.

Two of Mokgatle's most vivid recollections of the period he spent herding his father's stock in the early 1920s (when he was ten or eleven years old) are indicative both of the changes that were taking place in the economic position of people living in the reserves and of the penetration of the outside world. They also have an important bearing on the constitution of identity. The first

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.162-165.

<sup>45</sup> Mphahlele, *op.cit.*, pp.221-222 ; Couzens *et al.*, Interview, *op.cit.*, pp.115-116,119.

<sup>46</sup> Mokgatle, *op.cit.*, p.51.

experience involves the appearance at the cattle-post of the dip inspector, Mr Behrens, who oversees the construction of a pond of dip and the subsequent dipping of stock. Mokgatle's immediate impression is of the extensive chaos caused by the episode: owners cannot identify their own animals under the yellow dye, and sheep and goats go missing. The repercussions in the longer term are more severe:

We were told that our sheep and goats were not healthy and dipping would make them so. But what I experienced was the beginning of the impoverishment of my father and other tribesmen. Sheep and goats began to develop a strange cough which led them to their eventual deaths. People watched their sheep and goats dying but were helpless, since there was nothing they could do about it.<sup>47</sup>

The second incident that impressed itself on Mokgatle's mind was the sight of a motor-car, spotted from a position half-way up a mountain:

Looking down, we saw a wagon moving but not being pulled by oxen. Looking closely, we noticed inside it two white men. That was the first time I saw a motor-car. We ran away as if we had never seen a white man before.<sup>48</sup>

Both these experiences are striking to the extent that they make the children conscious of racial differences for the first time, and that this consciousness is linked to perceptions of material and technological changes. Ernest Penzhorn (the Lutheran minister) and his family, on the other hand, had never excited such a response because they spoke Sesotho and their presence seemed natural, unattached to unsettling occurrences:

Whenever a strange white person came along we noticed that he or she was white, like the dip inspector, Mr. Behrens, at the cattle-post. I and others at once noticed the distinction and we small ones began to ask each other, 'Why is he not like us? His hair is longer than ours, straight like ox-tail hair, and he speaks a language we do not understand.' ... In those days, to me and others who shared my young days and thoughts, there was no other world outside the one we knew, no other countries outside our own, and we had no idea that many people did not speak Sesotho, which we took for granted was the language of all peoples. As youngsters, we had not gone to Mr. Penzhorn's house

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

to hear them speak German, therefore it never occurred to us that they had learned to speak Sesotho.<sup>49</sup>

Penzhorn's reasons for encouraging Sesotho were that instruction in English would alienate children from the traditions and customs of their forebears.<sup>50</sup> However, Penzhorn's work was no less implicated in processes of change than that of the dip inspector. As the example of Mokgatle himself was later to demonstrate, confirmation in the Lutheran Church had become a form of initiation. Confirmation implied leaving school; one was considered an adult, and left the village to work either in Pretoria or Johannesburg to acquire the means to marry. Admittedly, then, this move to town was seldom envisaged as a permanent step. But it could frequently become one. Thus, while actively discouraging the acquisition of skills that would be useful to the new arrivals in the city, Penzhorn's ecclesiastical agenda nonetheless assisted the forces of proletarianisation. Penzhorn's mission could be so successful in this regard precisely because his figure had become a 'natural' part of Phokeng's social, cultural and linguistic landscape, as the following description of his conduct during confirmation classes makes clear:

On the whole we liked our priest, he was a nice old man who sometimes joked with us. He was so good at our language that he knew a hundred proverbs in it and their fundamental meanings. He used to laugh at us when we did not know the names of things in Sesotho, and after telling us what they were called he would say, 'You call yourselves Basotho, I am the only Mosotho here.'<sup>51</sup>

In retrospect, Mokgatle is resentful of this insinuation of the outside world into the self-contained environment of his childhood. Although Mokgatle does not say so, it seems reasonable to suppose that the realisation that the priest was like the dip inspector and the people in the car evoked in him a sense of being cheated; his world was being shattered from within as well as from the outside. Certainly the questions of doubt he puts to Penzhorn during

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.95-96.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163.

his confirmation classes all have reference to schisms within the Christian world or to the duplicity of the priest's behaviour. He asks, for example, why Penzhorn should teach people to love their neighbours when he (Penzhorn) hates Mr Spooner of the rival Pentecostal Holiness Church. But by this time of course Mokgatle had already experienced racial segregation while working in Rustenburg and on white farms (he had also witnessed segregated worship).

If Mokgatle was rejecting Christianity, then this was because it was doing more to exacerbate the contradictions he was experiencing than it was doing to resolve them. If there is a sense in which his childhood has been something of a false start (and this is not, it should be noted, a feeling that his childhood bears no relation to his subsequent life, but rather that it premises this life all too ineluctably), then this is perceived to be the consequence of having been flung prematurely into the adult world via Penzhorn's confirmation service. Flung, moreover, with his own acquiescence (although he credits his sisters with a good measure of the blame<sup>52</sup>) and against the explicit recommendations of his father and the teachers at Mr Spooner's school, all of whom warned Mokgatle that confirmation implied the end of his schooling, which he had begun late in any case.

It is easier to enumerate the contradictory pressures that were brought to bear on the young Mokgatle than it is to draw definite conclusions from them. From the autobiographer's perspective, the world of his childhood may have been smaller, but it was hardly less complicated than that of his subsequent years. A life could take more than one path in the 1920s, and Mokgatle is aware of this. The 'I' that links together the different stages of his life culminates in his autobiography, but the memories of earlier divergent

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.152-153.



possibilities (foreclosed narratives) leave their imprint on the vicissitudes implicated in the path actually chosen. As Mokgatle comments when reviewing his rejection of his father's advice to continue his education:

Those fatherly words of my father never left my memories. Everything he said I have silently repeated when I met great odds, I have never blamed him, as he foresaw, but myself for not having listened to his advice. From that day my love for my father grew and grew.<sup>53</sup>

Like Jason Jingoos, then, Mokgatle carries the memories of boyhood into his adult life. However, if for Jingoos these memories provided a set of principles derived from an ordered existence, Mokgatle's memories are merely elements in the elaboration of such a set of principles. The tautology of the fatherly father is significant in this context, for it implies that his father has been a *good* father, whereas Mokgatle has not been a model son, a fact he is reminded of each time he encounters adversity. But as we have suggested, the 1920s were hardly conducive to the development of a blueprint for the unfolding of a life. Jingoos' principles meant little when he was obliged to assume a number of roles and identities in his work for the ICU. Mokgatle's childhood, informed by any number of contradictions, premised a life of improvisation shaped by contingency.

The idea of contingency must play a significant role in any autobiography, if only because in this context it does not merely signify chance but also causation. A life owes both its particularity and its continuity to a unique combination of circumstances. In reality this is an autobiographical convention. South African autobiography is no exception in this regard. Circumstances of birth, however, are seen to determine to a greater extent than elsewhere the horizons of the experiential terrain on which identity is subsequently constructed. In Guy Butler's words:

We knew that we were lucky and privileged to be born white. We took the superiority of the European races for granted. Not only

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

was this spelt out in the patterns of our society, but history and geography demonstrated it beyond question.<sup>54</sup>

But then, as he admits in the preface to his autobiography, he "grew up inside the settler myth."<sup>55</sup> In a different context, he observes: "We carry our childhood with us wherever we go."<sup>56</sup> This is revealing for it is a reference to *place*. In other words, it expresses a sense of rootedness. The interesting point about all this is that despite their being part of a "myth", Butler's childhood experiences are nonetheless deemed to be 'valid'. It could hardly be otherwise, given the amount of text devoted to their narration. However, this 'validity' is really only achieved by promoting a particular sphere of experience to a position at the head of all others and depoliticising it; this is the family, "the most important of human institutions":

In most families the feeling of kinship is strengthened by a body of anecdotes, stories, pictures, letters - half history, half folklore - a warm if vague awareness of many kindred moving in company through time. Children are born into its ambience, and the old do not necessarily leave it when they die.<sup>57</sup>

If, though, the family is the institution in which continuity is expressed, it is also responsible for the continuation (not merely the origin) of the settler myth. Indeed, it is precisely through the family's possession of land (which is taken for granted) that Butler comes to know the countryside and to feel his rootedness in it:

It seemed that at a certain distance along any road from Katkop you would find another hospitable uncle and aunt, with a different sort of house, and a different sort of orchard, and a different sort of water supply, and a different sort of afternoon tea. What more can a young child ask of life?<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Butler, *op.cit.*, p.158.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.225.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix. See p.x for the elevation of this feeling of kin to a universal category, shared by blacks and whites alike.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

These amenities represent the successful grafting of 'British' notions of cultivated domesticity onto the Karoo landscape. The fashioning of place and identity are clearly intertwined. In a sense, this construction of identity is validated by the rhetorical appeal to the universal child. There is no irony in this appeal. The youthful Butler's conception of Africa, on the other hand, though similarly derived from an imperialist vista, is placed at some distance from Butler the author:

Nothing contributed so much to my growing awareness of Africa and the world as stamp collecting... My stamp album supported (a) view of the world as Europe's extended estate. Apart from the anomaly of Abyssinia, the entire vast continent of Africa seemed under her direct or indirect control.... I specialised in stamps of the Commonwealth and Empire.... I found it hard to understand that some members of this glorious family had objected to being adopted into it: our own Afrikaners, for instance, and right on Britain's doorstep, some of the Irish, the Catholics, had been objecting to the British embrace for centuries, which was proof of their feckless, backward but curiously lovable nature: the difficult child of the intimate family circle.<sup>59</sup>

Whether or not he conceived of this 'family' in terms of the uncles and aunts and cousins scattered on farms throughout the Cradock basin is a matter for speculation. More certain is the likelihood that he acquired these views within his own immediate family. It is worth comparing Butler's philatelic apprehension of Africa with the more tangible awareness of the continent imparted to Mokgatle by his teacher Mr Motaung, who was making the class conscious of the fact that the Egypt of the Bible was in Africa:

He looked at us with amazement and asked, 'Don't you know where Africa is?' Angrily he said, 'You stupid children, stand up.' He lined each one of us up against the wall, ordered us to stretch out our hands, and each of us got a beating with a stick. Afterwards he stamped hard with his foot on the floor and said, 'This is Africa you are standing on.' He made us stamp hard three times on the floor shouting, 'This is Africa'.<sup>60</sup>

Mokgatle is being encouraged to identify himself concretely with a wider Africa, and to apply his schooling in a meaningful manner to his life. This lesson, he comments, "always lives in (his) mind." Butler's initial exploration

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.

<sup>60</sup> Mokgatle, *op.cit.*, p.158.

of Africa, on the other hand, is the very reverse. His knowledge of the continent is mediated by a cultural and economic tradition of conquest and appropriation. His sense of rootedness ultimately derives from this tradition, which involves the marginalisation of people like Mokgatle, the very title of whose autobiography advertises his anonymity. This is not a question of assigning or accepting blame. Butler's upbringing was fairly typical of the period. As W.M. Macmillan discovered when he attempted to attract people's attention to the findings of his research, "the ignorance of practically the whole white population about the conditions in the so-called native areas was quite unbelievable."<sup>61</sup> In his autobiography, Butler, perhaps in response to contemporary imperatives,<sup>62</sup> has been compelled at times to question the past about this issue which seemed to occupy such a peripheral position in his childhood consciousness (although his Aunt Mary, who worked in the Cradock location, later drew his attention to a wider political and social world, as did his father's newspaper). "I must attempt", he urges himself, "to recapture the feeling between the races in my childhood."<sup>63</sup>

If Guy Butler possessed no definite (consistently articulated) attitudes towards blacks in his childhood, then this was no reflection on the activities of various organisations and institutions which were refining such opinions and propagating them widely. The 1920s, as we know, was a period when the state, prompted by the segregationist thinking of the Hertzog government, was attempting to elaborate a more consistent 'native policy'. That this policy should have been presented to the white electorate as part of a package which included an emphasis on "control", particularly in response to the perceived

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<sup>61</sup> Macmillan, *op.cit.*, p.184-185.

<sup>62</sup> *Karoo Morning* was published in the period immediately following Soweto. As a literary critic, too, Butler can hardly have been insensitive to the militancy of some of the Black Consciousness poetry of the early 1970s.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, *op.cit.*, p.53.

threat of a combination of the black organisations (metonymically an image of the entire black population) in the late 1920s, is not surprising. The oppressive atmosphere of the period was succinctly symbolised in the amendment to the Riotous Assemblies Act in 1930 which enabled the Minister of Justice to deport or ban people, as well as ban meetings or literature, if he considered them to be the cause of feelings of racial hostility; his decision could not be overruled by any court of law.<sup>64</sup> The formation in the second half of 1929 of the League of African Rights, drawing the allegiance of sections of the ANC, ICU and CPSA (the driving force behind the organisation), certainly gave the impression that a united black opposition was emerging.<sup>65</sup> J.T. Gumede, the president of the short-lived League (sacrificed to the new Third Period orthodoxy emanating from Moscow), "believe(d) there (was) sincerity in it more than the other organisations."<sup>66</sup> Yet as Hill and Pirio observe, even before the formation of the League strands of Garveyite thinking had permeated many organisations to an extent that it was easy to confuse the CPSA's 'Black Republic' slogan with that of 'Africa for the Africans'.<sup>67</sup> Least concerned of all to make nice distinctions were the police, who in early 1929 were seeing a flood of communist literature entering the country; Walton making overtures to Champion; ICU leaders propagating

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<sup>64</sup> On "control" as the "bane of native policy", see W.M. Macmillan, 'The Educated Classes', in *The Star*, 22 December 1933. On the amendment to the riotous Assemblies Act, see Edward Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp.228-229. Jason Jingoos was served with a banning order in 1932. See Jingoos, *op.cit.*, p.118.

<sup>65</sup> Jack and Ray Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1983), pp.417-419.

<sup>66</sup> Central Archives Depot (CAD), NTS 7215, File 69/326, Typed copy of J.T. Gumede to E.J. Mposi, 9 November 1929.

<sup>67</sup> Robert A. Hill and Gregory A. Pirio, 'Africa for the Africans': the Garvey Movement in South Africa, 1920-1940', in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism*, *op.cit.*, pp.209-253.

the Black Republic; Wellington Buthelezi holding secret meetings; and the possible amalgamation of the UNIA and the CPSA.<sup>68</sup>

But all this was towards the end of the period with which we are principally concerned. *Throughout* the 1920s, but particularly after 1924, there had been intense debate among the ruling classes over the role of blacks in society and in the economy. Elements in this debate, which revolved around the emerging manufacturing sector, included 'civilised labour' and the 'poor white problem', wage scales and tariff protection, and the expansion of local markets.<sup>69</sup>

That these various factors (political and economic) had little bearing on the young Butler's perception of the trajectory of local politics in Cradock is hardly surprising.<sup>70</sup> For him, as we have seen, the 'swart gevaar' election was a replay of the South African War, prompted by the energies unleashed by the flag question. Elsewhere during the latter half of the 1920s, however, a more systematic form of segregationist thinking directed at white children was being propagated by government publications. For example, the *South African Railways & Harbours Magazine* (which claimed in 1930 to be "probably the largest monthly publication, in point of size and circulation, that is

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<sup>68</sup> CAD, NTS 7215, File 60/326, Report, 'Progress of Native Agitation in the Union', Deputy Commissioner Tvl. Div. to Commissioner of Police, 6 February 1929. The report concluded: "... it would appear a determined effort is being made (by agents connected with the Communist Party) to merge different factions of the native population in S.A. into a whole, and that the ambitions of that whole are a danger to the state." An earnest recommendation for the "extension of (the) native Secret Police" was advanced.

<sup>69</sup> Bill Freund, 'The Social Character of Secondary Industry in South Africa, 1915-1945. (With Special Reference to the Witwatersrand)', unpublished seminar paper presented to the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, April 1985, pp.18ff.

<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, Butler notes: "... the name Tonjeni springs from my childhood, as a 'cheeky' black man who disturbed complacent whites with 'impossible' political demands. I don't think he got as far as Cradock, but his voice did." - Butler, *op.cit.*, p.53. See also p.162.

produced and sold in South Africa."<sup>71</sup> ) ran a competition in its 'Children's Corner' section in 1926 soliciting essays on the subjects of 'natives':

My dear children, you are taking notice, and you are not leaving them alone. Some of you collect butterflies, or stamps, or picture postcards. Now turn your attention to your native neighbours, and tell me, in your best style, what characteristics you observe.<sup>72</sup>

Stamp-collecting, it seems, belongs to a repertoire of cultural imperialism. The winning essay, entitled 'Natives of South-West Africa', made, among others, the following racist observations: "The Hereros, who are called the "merry people," have very peculiar habits". "The Ovamos (sic)... are a very lazy race. Hundreds would rather starve than go and work"; "The Bushmen are cannibals and live on what they shoot".<sup>73</sup> There is possibly some consolation in the fact that there had been so little response to the first appeal for essays that the columnist had been compelled, in even more repellent terms, to solicit essays a second time before s/he could publish a winner:

So few have taken notice of the native, scarcely any have entered for the Children's Corner competition. Yet the natives, like the poor, are with us always... Now, boys and girls, you have at your hand, under your noses, a wealth of material in the studies of the natives with whom our lots are cast. I advise you to try and see through the dusky eyes, into the dusky brain, and find out how they think, or why they do things. To be rude to them, or play with them, is an error; but to grow up to understand them is a noble thing, which will make you better men and women, and of great use to this dear South Africa.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> 'Twenty-Five Years Old: "The South African Railways & Harbours Magazine": An Account of the Journal's History and Development', in *South African Railways & Harbours Magazine*, October 1930, p.1478.

<sup>72</sup> 'New Competition: Our Native', *Ibid.*, February 1926, p.267.

<sup>73</sup> 'A Prize-Winner', *Ibid.*, May 1926, p.749.

<sup>74</sup> 'Seeing and Thinking', *Ibid.*, April 1926, p.577. It should be noted that articles on the subject of blacks appeared with increasing frequency in the (adult section of the) magazine in the latter part of the 1920s, usually portraying them in a 'tribal' context and were profusely illustrated. See, for instance, Natalie Frisby's 'Native Characteristics', in *Ibid.*, May 1927, p.744.

As J.M. Coetzee has remarked of "the discourse of racism before 1945, what strikes us first about it is its nakedness, its shamelessness."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the number of irrational fears that this short passage evokes is astonishing. Of particular interest to a study of South African autobiographical depictions of childhood, is the injunction not to play with black children. For the image of non-racial play in childhood appears in a number of autobiographies, and is one expression of the sense of discontinuity between the autobiographer's juvenile and adult worlds. At the same time, it premises a narrative continuity (with a prescience available to the autobiographer but not to his/her youthful counterpart) insofar as the occurrence of such play is brought to the reader's attention precisely because it fails to correspond to the relations between blacks and whites subsequently experienced by the author. The image of such play is also a powerful moral stimulant to those who have committed themselves to opposing the *status quo*, and perceived as such in retrospect.

Memories of non-racial play tend to coincide with memories of a world without fundamental divisions. R.V. Selope Thema discusses his contact with white children in these terms:

The four of us (he, his cousin, and the landlord's two children) did not only look after the cattle together, but also played together and even fought each other. There was no apartheid between us.<sup>76</sup>

Naboth Mokgatle employs the notion of hell to describe the moral as well as the existential implications of segregation: "Hell is where people are denied meeting because they differ in colour."<sup>77</sup> Childhood play, as the obverse of this state, is projected as the blueprint for a future non-racial society. It

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<sup>75</sup> J.M. Coetzee, 'Blood, Flaw, Taint, Degeneration: The Case of Sarah Gertrude Millin', in *English Studies in Africa*, Vol.23 No.1 (March 1980), p.41.

<sup>76</sup> R.V. Selope Thema, 'Out of Darkness: From Cattle-Herding to the Editor's Chair', photocopy of undated (c.1935) manuscript, University of the Witwatersrand, Chapter 2, p.27.

<sup>77</sup> Mokgatle, *op.cit.*, p.116.



is also presented as a natural state, unsullied by shame. Significantly, it is brought about in opposition to the wishes of parents, who have come to accept the taboos of segregationist thinking:

The white children of Kroondal of my age were very fond of the people who worked for their parents. In school holidays or on Saturdays, when they were free from school, the boys wanted to go out with us into the grazing fields with their fathers' cattle and to be there the whole day playing games with us. Their parents were dead against their going out with the cattle, but some boys used to run away from home to join us. On many occasions we were found with them swimming naked in the dams.<sup>78</sup>

In Gilbert Coka's case, school initiates the division:

My childhood companions were white children. We played and frolicked together unconscious of the difference in our colour until we parted to our different schools.<sup>79</sup>

Schooling in the 1920s was not only separate, but increasingly unequal - for those Africans, that is, who had the opportunity to attend school. In 1921 approximately 9.7% only of Africans in the Union were literate. Mission schools in the decades following Union, far from nurturing a black middle class after the (albeit ambiguous) fashion of the colonial period, were typically preparing their students for subordinate roles in the new South Africa. That this aroused feelings of hostility was demonstrated in the escalation of boycotting of classes and rioting in the inter-war years.<sup>80</sup> And if educated blacks were being pushed in the direction of the proletariat, white children were being taught that all blacks were to be considered in the subject position - "at (their) hand, under (their) noses," in the racist idiom of the Children's Corner columnist. Inevitably, there was little common

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115. See also pp.131-132.

<sup>79</sup> Gilbert Coka, 'The Story of Gilbert Coka of the Zulu Tribe of Natal, South Africa', in Margery Perham, ed., *Ten Africans* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), pp.274-275.

<sup>80</sup> On literacy in 1921, see Les Switzer and Donna Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho: A Descriptive Bibliographic Guide to African, Coloured and Indian Newspapers, Newsletters and Magazines 1836-1976* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979), p.7. On the changing role of mission education, see Helen Bradford, 'The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa in the South African Countryside, 1924-1930', Ph.D., University of the Witwatersrand, 1985, pp.101-102.

ground made available for the consolidation of a 'typical' South African childhood. The non-racialism of childhood play was all too vulnerable to the interventions of segregationist propagandists. If, as we saw in the case of Mokgatle, the dynamics of social and economic changes would not allow for the development of the model child, the model of childhood was all the less likely to find its reflection in the evolving South Africa. Indeed, Winifred Holtby, who had toured South Africa the previous year, could write in 1927: "There is a real danger lest the South African native policy, born of prejudice, race interest and opportunism, may become the model for the rest of the world to follow."<sup>81</sup>

The history of South Africa in the twentieth century has removed many people from the scenes of their childhood. It is more than a truism to say that as they have grown into adulthood they have grown away from childhood. A number of autobiographies have recognised this fact, and some of its narrative implications have been the subject of this paper. Ultimately it is the moment of writing that has shaped this narrative. This is not only because the autobiographer is writing from a particular point in his/her personal history, but also because s/he is writing within a broader history which opens up and closes off certain possibilities beyond the moment of writing. Much of the writing we have examined was produced in a context of personal pessimism concerning South Africa's future. This is particularly true of the autobiographies of exile. Many of these (including those not discussed here), written in the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, express a pessimism which can only be heightened by setting South Africa's repressive contours in stark relief against an international perception of, amongst

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<sup>81</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'General Hertzog's Native Policy', *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, News Sheet*, November 1927, reproduced in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago Press, 1985), pp.180-181.

others, decolonisation, third world insurrectionism, and feminist and minorities movements.<sup>82</sup> It is therefore a useful exercise to consider an autobiography that has been written in the context of the social upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s, for these have encouraged a literature of scenarios, a literature sufficiently aware of the formative possibilities of contemporary change to contemplate elements of an altogether different future. To this end, I have elected to focus briefly on Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*, since it also brings together a number of the issues we have dealt with.

Kuzwayo's is one of those autobiographies that devote only a single chapter to their author's childhood. Significantly, the chapter is entitled 'My Lost Birthright', referring both to a place and a way of life. Yet this way of life, far from being regarded as a false start, is perceived to provide a coherent project for the unfolding of a life. Her family may have been dispossessed of its farm, and she may have been expelled from it by her Aunt Blanche, but the narrative is determined to establish a sense of continuity between past, present and future. This is to be achieved by seeking a reconciliation between the generations. At the simplest level this is to be observed in the dedication which links the author's work to the memory of her mother, to her own sons, and to "the Youth of (her) Community". There is thus a complex interaction between the general and the specific in this book, which represents an attempt to regenerate (or perhaps rejuvenate) that community the disintegration of whose moral coherence since the 1930s and 1940s she is at pains to demonstrate.<sup>83</sup> She attributes this in part to the breakdown of communication between parents and youth. She is all too aware that there can be no such community if it does not include the youth. Clearly the events of 1976 and subsequently have imprinted this conviction on the author's

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<sup>82</sup> For details, see Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', *op.cit.*.

<sup>83</sup> Kuzwayo, *op.cit.*, pp.88,255.

consciousness; they have also given the autobiography its structure - it opens with an account of the aftermath of the revolt, which highlighted the work that had to be carried out if that community was to be forged, before proceeding to a discussion of her birth and childhood. It is precisely for this sense of community and moral coherence that her childhood in the 1920s is a model. Possibly it is for this reason that of all the autobiographers we have looked at, Kuzwayo places most emphasis on the universal aspects of her childhood: the phrases "like all children of that era", "As in any other family", and "like children everywhere in the world" occur in quick succession, and all have reference to a life of order, sharing, and childhood play.<sup>84</sup> The idea of a closed, harmonious existence is also expressed; her "world went just as far as (her) eyes could see." Indeed, it is the pastoral vision of her childhood which makes it in her eyes a suitable model:

My childhood had been a happy time, full of the warmth and security of a traditional country life.<sup>85</sup>

Kuzwayo documents her growth away from the scene of childhood as a search and struggle for the type of community that will embody the values of her childhood environment. She feels that she has had opportunities that the children of today cannot enjoy:

The story of my life, my education, you see, cannot be buried quietly and safely in the past. How can I remain quiet when I see the choices open to the younger generation constantly restricted, their hopes fading into dreams, and the dreams becoming nightmares?

This challenge has haunted me through my entire life.<sup>86</sup>

Convincing the different generations that they all share similar hopes and should therefore work together is the form this challenge has taken.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.63-65.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, P.91.

Kuzwayo's autobiography, then should be seen as a means of intercession and communication between the generations. It is both a personal experience and a tool for others. Indeed, this is how she perceives it herself. We note, for example, that the writing of the book "opened the first meaningful communication between (Kuzwayo) and Aunt Blanche since that painful rejection", her expulsion from Tshiamelo in 1938, an event that caused her "whole childhood (to tumble) away".<sup>87</sup> The positioning of this passage announcing the reconciliation is also significant; placed at the point where her account of the rejection expresses greatest anguish, it is communicating the message that however far away from home she has gravitated, reconciliation with her childhood identity is always there in the end. In fact, Kuzwayo's birth on the farm, which is followed by an account of how she came to acquire her various names, is also an act of autobiographical creation; her identity at the moment of writing is rooted in these processes of birth and naming, for she immediately comments, "I am the author of this book."<sup>88</sup> The autobiographical act holds the various parts of her life together, ensuring their continuity. That the book is also perceived as a means whereby others can communicate across generations is demonstrated in Kuzwayo's discussion of Thenjiwe Mthintso, with whom she spent a period in detention:

It is my ardent wish that she will get access to this book somewhere, some time and accept these humble words of appreciation. If that is not possible, then I hope that her son, Lumumba, whom she spoke of with deep longing when in detention, will come to know of his mother's contribution from this book.<sup>89</sup>

Kuzwayo's autobiography as a whole is characterised by this combination of testimony, thanks and tribute, celebrating the courage of those she rightly perceives to be "unsung heroines"; communicating the deeds of "The Lives

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.107,109.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

of the Obscure", which is an important motivation for engaging in the autobiographical project.<sup>90</sup>

A particular conception of childhood, then, need not merely be an image of a lost world in which life was always less complicated. Neither need it only be a model for some society of the distant future. It can also be perceived as a tool for contributing to the building of that society in the present. Autobiography, too, has recently assumed this sort of importance in the eyes of historians and social scientists, who, in recognising that it can uncover something of the lives of the forgotten, are simultaneously articulating the force with which these previously marginalised voices are bringing forward their claims for a stake in a reconstructed society.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> For "unsung heroines", *ibid.*, pp.178,250. 'The Lives of the Obscure' is the title of a contribution by Virginia Woolf to *The Dial*, Vol.LXXVIII (May 1925), pp.381-390, cited in William C. Spengemann, *op.cit.*, p.205.

<sup>91</sup> It is of course not the intention to deny that scholarship maintains a considerable degree of autonomy with regard to its internal progress. A useful reminder in this respect is Eugene Genovese, 'The Influence of the Black Power Movement on Historical Scholarship: Reflections of a White Historian', in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp.230-255.