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The Power of Recall: Writing Against Racial Identity

For submission to:

Racialisation: Studies in Theory and Practice

Edited and Introduced by

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I wrote it because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person; I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me. I was in dialogue with myself as I wrote, as well as with my home town and my childhood and history and the future, and the past. Writing is both horizontal and vertical exploration. It has to true itself with facts but also with feelings and symbols, and memories that are never quite facts but sometimes closer to the "truth" than is any fact.
(Smith 1963, 3)

In a powerful essay that was to provoke new directions in feminist discourse, the poet Adrienne Rich spoke of her place of birth as a site that already marked her existence as a product of a particular social order. (Rich 1986, 215) Born in 1929 under the apartheid rules of Jim Crow America, she identified her own primary location within a cruelly unjust system. "White, female; or female, white. The first obvious, lifelong facts. But," she continued, "I was born in the white section of a hospital which separated Black and white women in labor and Black and white babies in the nursery, just as it separated Black and white bodies in the morgue." Even as she took her first breath, her body was claimed as white before it was identified as female. First published in 1984, this essay called on anti-racist feminists first to recognise and then to take responsibility for their own processes of racialisation if they were to help create an inclusive, "de-Westernizing", global movement for change.

Rich's intervention was made at a time when many feminists, black and white, were treating those "obvious, lifelong facts" as a fixed, even rigid, basis for political action. Those who were more hostile to identity politics interpreted her plea as a demand for a more complex, intuitive effort that was both a highly individual matter and, at the same time, necessarily part of a collective conversation about the fluidity of all socially constructed identities. Twenty years later, asking a different question about the relationship between where and what we are born, and what we choose to become, I am curious about the way that children who are brought into the world as racial subjects learn to refuse, or certainly be confused by, the precepts of racial hierarchy. I am specifically interested in stories told by adults where they recall the first time they became uncomfortably aware of being positioned within a racial, social order that required compliance and defied explanation. I suggest that attention to this autobiographical voice can provide valuable insights into the way that racial identities are learned, and more importantly than this, how they are also transformed, or even rejected altogether.

Introducing their essay on the role of self-narrative in post-apartheid identity politics, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael write:

The autobiographical act in South Africa, more than a literary convention, has become a cultural activity. Memoir, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism, all different kinds of autobiographical acts or cultural occasions in which narrators take up

models of identity that have become widely available, have pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century (Nuttall and Michael 2000, 298).

Their discussion of a range of texts suggests ways of interpreting this "cultural activity" as a profoundly useful insight into formations of racial community, and what they call "shifting registers" of discourse during a period of revolutionary transformation. As the above extract shows, they offer strategies for evaluating autobiographical writing in the context of particular time and space, searching for resonant themes that help to extend dialogue with self into broader conversations about local and national identities.

Stanley Cohen offers an example of the moment when he was first aware of his own participation in a system founded on privilege, injustice and racism (Cohen 2001). Aged about twelve or thirteen, and living at that time in Johannesburg, he suddenly noticed the old Zulu nightwatchman huddling over a charcoal stove while he was preparing to slip into his warm bed inside the house. The questions that flooded through his mind filled him with a profound sense of guilt. Years later, in the preface to his extraordinary book States of Denial, Cohen reflected on his "bedroom epiphany", convinced that this was his earliest memory of becoming politically aware, the beginning of what was to become an obsession with the study of denial as a social process: "But later, even when I began to think sociologically..., I would still return to some version of that early psychological unease. I saw this unease - correctly, I believe - as arising from a

sense of knowing that something was deeply wrong, but also knowing that I could not live in a state of permanent awareness of this knowledge." (ix) This fleeting autobiographical disclosure is offered at the start of his book on knowing about atrocities and suffering not because it is out-of-the ordinary, nor from an impulse to legitimate the author, but because it alerts the reader to the ultimate ramifications of not cherishing those personal, individual, childish sensibilities. The discussion that follows provides a window on to the mechanics, as well as the ethics, of recovering that sense of unease from the overwhelming social and political forces that seek to obliterate it.

This essay explores the significance of childhood and place in autobiographical accounts of "becoming racialized", that is, of learning to think and act both within, and especially in defiance of, racial terms. It entails reading different kinds of "autobiographical acts" where the authors reflect on the significance of spatial barriers that marked the lines of segregation in their home environment, and contemplate, with hindsight, the possibilities of their transgression. I will limit my argument to mainly American writers in the second half of the twentieth century, focusing on the narratives of women and men who were raised to think of themselves as white but who came to see themselves as race traitors. I am particularly interested in the ways that these writers evoke a structure of feeling for place, not as a passive witness to emerging social consciousness, but as an active component in producing certain foundational truths (or falsehoods) about racial identity. In short, I am asking for a reading of

the autobiographical text that explores the ethics of "assembling" the anti-racist self (Rose 1997, 225): looking for qualities such as ruthless honesty with oneself, a sense of morality, a readiness to admit heresy, and a poetic sensibility to location, and, in particular, to being estranged from one's surroundings.

Zygmunt Bauman expresses it better in his observations on the creative possibilities of exile, which he defines as: "the refusal to be integrated - the determination to stand out from the physical space, to conjure up a place of one's own, different from the place in which those around are settled, a place unlike the places left behind and unlike the place of arrival" (Bauman 2000, 208).

Stressing that the state of exile does not necessarily entail physical dislocation, he continues:

The resolute determination to stay "nonsocialized": the consent to integrate solely with the condition of non-integration; the resistance - often painful and agonizing, yet ultimately victorious - to the overwhelming pressure of the place, old or new; the rugged defence of the right to pass judgement and choose; the embracing of ambivalence or calling ambivalence into being - these are, we may say, the constitutive features of "exile".

Autobiography has been exhaustively studied as a literary form, and there is certainly a rich literature on place, memory and first-person writing which needs to be acknowledged before I go much further. Dolores Hayden writes, "place is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid" (Hayden 1995, 15). My focus on early

childhood means that I am dealing with an understanding of place always reconstructed in the past tense, that is, places of growing up as they are remembered in adult life. As Yi-Fu Tuan describes in his cross-cultural reflection Space and Place, it is rare for young children to be haunted by memory, and most do not yet have the faculties to comprehend their interactions with their environments. "The child not only has a short past, but his eyes more than the adult's are on the present and the immediate future. His vitality for doing things and exploring space is not suited to the reflective pause and backward glance that make places saturated with significance" (Tuan 1977, 33). The techniques of writing about the self at an early age demand both a selective recovery of one's own history, as well as an interpretation of the past that draws on the present. Recollection of place, meaning situation as well as location, is then an integral part of the processing of memory.

The sense-making of children

C. Wright Mills once defined the sociological imagination as the intersection of biography and history. He surely meant that biography included, even took for granted, the effects that place has on perception, identity, and behavior. Experience of home, for example, and then the reasons for leaving or staying; lives spent in corners of particular cities, regions, or the nation as a whole: all these scales of dwelling constitute place in some shape or form, and are arguably

relevant to social interaction of all kinds. Unlike most of the work that passes for sociology today, however, autobiographical writing, in common with creative fiction, is freer to speculate on the contingent and haphazard routes to self-awareness. Where ethnographic interviews and oral histories are legitimate within the disciplinary rules of ethnography, the practice of self-narrative is often considered an indulgence and of questionable value, beyond adding a personal, even poetic voice. For instance, as a practising sociologist, Dalton Conley warns his readers of the inherent unreliability of memoir as opposed to social science. In the epilogue to his own memoir of an unconventional childhood in New York, he comes close to apologising for not meeting the requisite standards of evidence. There are compensations, however:

The greatest of these is the depth of understanding attained when one is more participant than observer - that is, when one spends many consequential - even formative - years of one's life in a social setting, rather than swooping in from afar to gather data for a time before going home to dinner and one's real life (Conley 2000, 229)

Echoing Tuan's point that children are not sensorily equipped to analyse the significance of their daily lives in relation to their social environments, he points out that his book "is as much about what is not understood as it is about what is grasped. It is about the sense-making of children more than professionals. In short, it is about literary truths, not scientific ones."

These "literary truths", however, have a habit of capturing the imagination in ways that science is rarely able. In a recent edition of the journal Souls, a panel of writers, including Conley himself, assembled for an improvised discussion on "white identity" and "white privilege," first in the context of New York, and second in relation to the country as a whole. The attention to the city already suggested a focus on the local, and indeed, the personal. The edited transcript begins with a series of questions posed by the chair, Manning Marable:

When were you born and when you were growing up, what did it mean to be white? Dalton and Ann (Douglas), when did you first realize you were white, or what whiteness was? Robin (D.G. Kelley), as an African American, when did you first realize that there was something called whiteness? (Conley 2002, 74)

Faced with this challenge to identify earliest memories of racial self-consciousness, each member of the group described the place characteristics of their childhood homes. Ann Douglas offered her recollection of growing up in "an upper-class rural community outside Manhattan." The location, both geographical and social, suggested complex hierarchies of ethnicity, gender, and class that held the place together and gave it a unique, though typical, character: "This was fox-hunting territory, high-finance territory, and so needless to say, it was not a mixed population of equals. All the men in my family worked in Manhattan". Douglas continued to give an unflinching critique of the social relations of her household which included an anecdote about acting too familiar

with a black female servant. When she was about three years old she held her arm next to the arm of her grandmother's companion, of whom she was very fond, and asked her, "Why are you darker?". The sharp reprimand, rather than explanation, that she received from her mother drew her attention to the powerful attraction of something taboo, sowing the seeds for the future rebellion. Looking back, she recalled that the incident prompted her eventually to ask questions about the values underpinning her parents' home: "I wasn't happy in the world in which I was raised. I didn't seem to fit in."

Her awakening sense of what it meant to be racialised as white grew partly from close observation of and sensitivity to the ways that ethnicity dictated who was excluded from this community, who was accepted, and what jobs they performed. Although she does not elaborate further on the physical characteristics of this place where she learned these lessons, her reply demonstrates the ecological nature of human development: children can only become aware of becoming marked by social, economic and cultural difference in the context of particular environments. When recalling the feelings and memories evoked by talking about one's childhood, it is hard to separate the dynamics of family life inside the home from the people and the spaces that surround it. Once again, this turn to the past is unhelpful unless it is anchored in historical time. Interestingly it is only later in the conversation however that Douglas reveals she was born in 1942, a fact that immediately anchors her "upper-class, rural community" in a particular time as well as space.

Moved by Douglas's recollection of the sharp reaction to her spontaneous and relatively innocent act, and the lessons it taught her about the unspoken racial codes that held her childhood universe in place, Conley relates a story of his own. It is an anecdote that he tells in the opening chapter of his autobiography, Honky, and a formative episode in his emerging sense of self, also as a three-year old. Desperate for a baby sister and frustrated by his parents' seeming indifference to his pleas, he found a suitable candidate in the playground one day, and pushed the baby carriage over to his mother, jamming the stroller against her leg in an act of defiance. Her embarrassment that he had kidnapped someone else's child was less mortifying than the reprimand that she could not be his sister because she was black, a factor that had been of no significance to the young boy up to that point. This story can only make sense once it is placed in the wider context of where this family lived, as well as the year in which it took place (Conley 2002, 75).

The abiding value of Conley's autobiography is that he experienced the first part of his life as a minority, growing up in the early 1970s in a mostly Puerto Rican and African American neighbourhood on the Lower East Side. As a young teenager he crossed Manhattan to attend a "white school" in Greenwich Village, moving, as he puts it, between "two racial worlds". In this same conversation in Souls he recounts further stories of how he figured out what whiteness might mean as he learnt about power and authority in relation to the spatial organisation of the city. The unconventional lived experience that he

recounts through the interpretive gaze of the sociologist contains all kinds of potentially useful insights into racialisation as a process that is at once individually specific and inescapably social. To downplay this "cultural occasion" as a form of literary rather than scientific truth does an injustice both to literature and to science in my opinion. The memories are selective, to be sure, and the author is allowed to present his own analysis first. But once they are in the public domain they can acquire the characteristics of authentic ethnography, if that is what is needed to take them seriously.

A fly buzzes round the window interrupting my chain of thought. It is a distinctively English sound, startling me into a different frame of mind. Of course there are flies in Connecticut where I now live, but there are also screens on every window to prevent them from entering the building. The intermittent noise returns me to another time, another place, where flies seem to hide behind the curtains all winter, bumping lazily into life when spring comes round again. I feel a pang of homesickness, and this disjunction makes me wonder: how do we recall those first moments when we felt at odds with our surroundings; or identify that sudden sense of not belonging, not feeling part of the crowd, or wondering if our parents could be right about everything? How rare, but how valuable, are the stories that can connect those qualms of doubt to the incipient awareness of being an exile in one's own country.

Situating whiteness

Ruth Frankenberg's foray into what she terms the "racial social geography of race" offers a theoretical model, if one is needed, for writing ethnographies of growing up "white" (Frankenberg 1993, 44). In a broader investigation of the social construction of whiteness, she asked her interviewees, all female, to remember how they conceptualised and related to the people surrounding them as they grew up. "To what extent, for example, did they have relationships of closeness or distance, equality or inequality, with people of color? What were they encouraged or taught by example to make of the variously 'raced' people in their environments?"(44) The material gathered from individual respondents is not treated as representative so much as colors in a larger picture. Frankenberg uses it to "begin the process of 'defamiliarizing' that which is taken for granted in white experience and to elaborate a method for making visible and analyzing the racial structuring of white experience". As the women reminisce about the lessons on social differentiation absorbed in the spaces of childhood, the sociologist ear listens for clues indicating how their environments were shaped by social, political and economic forces.

The skilful ethnographer elicits the autobiographical voice from her or his informants. If their words are allowed to breathe on the page, they too can speak for themselves. Although anthropologist of whiteness John Hartigan did not invent the concept of the "racial situation", he used it with good effect to argue for an ecological approach to analysing social conflict (Hartigan 1999). His project provides another way of reading autobiography as a dialogue between

self and place, history and politics, past and future, compliance and resistance. Taking his theoretical cue from Michael Omi and Howard Winant's influential Racial Formations in the U.S., he set out to complicate the historical and political processes involved in defining, contesting and interpreting racial categories and their meanings in the context of a very particular place, and among people of differing class identities. Detroit, in his view, provided the perfect setting to investigate the social ecology of what he calls "racialness" since 76% of its inhabitants are black and the 22% white inhabitants, who range from rich to very poor, are therefore in a minority. His substantial fieldwork in different neighbourhoods allowed him to explore the "interpretive repertoires" of race that emerge from highly complex but well-documented dramas of urban life, sensitively conveying the intricacies and contradictions of individual and collective response.

Throughout his interviews and conversations with mainly white Detroiters living within the distinct spatial order of the city, Hartigan was guided by two simple questions: what does "race" mean to these people, and how do they decide if a situation is "racial"? Linking his project to a broader literature on racialisation, Hartigan suggests: "There are copious distinctions between the ways, in general, whites and blacks are racialized - the social and political ramifications are hugely different. But by examining how whites are racialized - always unevenly, always following the contours of class distinctions - we can think more clearly about the way racial identity varies by social and geographic

location"(13). Within the context of global, national, and regional histories of white supremacy, Hartigan's ethnographic detective work among ordinary people in the streets where they live is a useful reminder that race can also be "a local matter:"

Instead of drawing generalized assertions and summary judgements about race, I suggest that the economy of racial explanations and analysis needs to be oriented towards a greater dependence on and retention of the particular situations and settings where race is at work. That is, by considering the specific circumstances of racial situations, we can counter the allegorical tendencies that render people's lives as abstractions, such as "white" and "black"(282).

The focus of both these writers on the sites and settings of white racialness represents a new body of work influenced by feminism's insistence on the "politics of location". Before going any further, however, I want to emphasise that my interest in autobiographical accounts of "becoming estranged from whiteness" does not presume that this is automatically the best, or even the only, point of view that reveals how whiteness operates. In the same way that feminism has exhaustively debated different theories of "situated knowledges", this recent attention to the social construction of white identity reiterates the question: from what angles, or standpoints, do we learn most about the intricacies of racial power and the myriad forms of resistance that emerge in response? Writing about Primo Levi's discussion of "ordinary virtues" in the

practice of bearing witness to the dehumanizing effects of racism, Robert S.C.

Gordon observes:

Practical intelligence in Levi entails looking at and understanding the world responsively, flexibly, critically: it is a form of "good" or "right" looking, looking at the world anew. And such quality of vision depends, among other things, on where one is looking from and on knowing where one is looking from: in other words on perspective (Gordon 2001, 149)

Levi returns again and again to the role of the eye-witness as the agent of testimony, confirming his belief in the importance of seeing, the language of the visual. As Gordon elaborates: "The eye-witness has seen an event or an action from a position of proximity but also, most often, of personal detachment (or at least a presumed lack of complicity)...At the same time, however, the specificity of any single perspective is as much as a guarantor of subjectivity as of objectivity". Reading Levi's philosophical reflections on eye-witness accounts of the Holocaust is profoundly affecting, and I borrow his terms in order to link the unspeakable histories of white supremacy to the more mundane racial situations that I have described so far. Moving away from the abstractions and generalisations so often invoked as racial explanation, Levi's work is a reminder that, first, paying attention to personal testimonies entails listening to multiple points of view, and, second, that their significance and value depend on whether we can identify a "right" way of looking at the world, however partial.

The white environing world

In the same way that autobiographical acts articulate new modes of identity within post-apartheid South Africa, so the testimonies of African Americans from Frederick Douglass onwards have helped to define what it has meant to become American in different historical periods as well as offering powerful communication across the vortex of racial terror, ignorance and complete indifference. Although in this essay I am giving preferential treatment to the significance of place in memoirs of those racialised as white, this work means less without reference to those who are made to learn about whiteness from a distance that is more forcefully imposed. Douglass' account of his first conscious exposure to the inhumane cruelty of white power stands out. The episode comes at the beginning of his Narrative, and is described twice on the same page. He first recalls his master's propensity to whip his slaves to a bloody pulp; one such victim was Douglass' own aunt, whose heart-rending screams would wake the young boy at dawn. One day he witnessed this event, and he searches for words to describe the effect that this had on him:

I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it (Baker 1982, 51)

Douglass follows this passage with a detailed report of what he actually saw. As he writes, he relives the episode in his mind, sharing with his readers the perspective of both witness and participant as he leads them into the same kitchen where the flogging took place, and then to the dark closet where he fled in terror.

Almost a hundred years after Douglass's autobiography was first published, W.E.B. Du Bois explained how he derived his sociological analysis of American racism from his personal experience of growing up in a society founded and organized on the principle of white supremacy:

Much as I knew of this class structure of the world, I should never have realized it so vividly and fully if I had not been born into its modern counterpart, racial segregation, first into a world composed of people with colored skins who remembered slavery and endured discrimination; and who had to a degree their own habits, customs, and ideals; but in addition to this I lived in an environment which I came to call the white world (Du Bois 1986, 653).

The theory of double consciousness that Du Bois developed through living in, and being exiled from, these two worlds simultaneously is well known, but it is worth repeating his account of how he was conditioned and constrained by “the white world” from early childhood: “I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful daily account the reaction of the white environing world. How I traveled and where, what work I did, what income I

received, where I ate, where I slept, with whom I talked, where I sought recreation, where I studied, what I wrote and what I could get published - all this depended primarily upon an overwhelming mass of my fellow citizens in the United States, from whose society I was largely excluded."

Du Bois' observation of his transition from birth to adulthood is rooted in a sense of place mattering at every move. Attempting to transgress the physical and symbolic boundaries of racial segregation was not only almost inconceivable, but often fatal. This brief extract reveals once again how racism relies on a spatial logic that is not always visible to the naked eye. The ecology of white supremacy in early 20th century America meant that most people positioned across the color line had entirely different notions of what life "on the other side" might be like. "Of course", continued Du Bois, "... there was no real wall between us." He knew since childhood that "in all things in general, white people were just the same as I." However, one big difference was that whites did not have to take "into careful daily account" the reactions of the people who lived across the colour line. Whites did not automatically, out of necessity, develop an intimate sense of their black "prisoners" that was passed down from one generation to another. The way in which the two groups perceived each other was as asymmetrical as their relationship to power and privilege.

This passage was written shortly before Ann Douglas was born into the pre-civil rights household of servile servants that provided her first useful lessons of estrangement. Quite probably Du Bois' outrage that white Americans

simply failed to see beyond the walls they had constructed around their privileged and fearful environs must have spurred many would-be race traitors to interrogate their own imprisonment. In a literary review of what he calls "the white southern racial conversion narrative" Fred Hobson notes that "The outburst of white southern autobiography driven by racial guilt, beginning shortly before mid-century, would continue for three decades, indeed still continues to a great degree" (Hobson 1999, 15). Attributing this phenomenon to the emerging "southern party of guilt", Hobson identifies the "religious impulse" as the factor that spurred a new generation of whites to take social action against southern racial divisions. That same decade, Lillian Smith became the first American writer to embark on her autobiography as a psychological analysis of white racism. An investigation into the mental and social structures of segregation, Killers of the Dream was published in 1949, and later reissued with a new prologue in 1963. As Smith explained in the extract that begins this essay, "I wrote it because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person". Her motives were not, of course, as narrow as this comment suggests; the very first paragraph of her book evokes the terror of growing up in a community vibrating with the ominous rhythms of self destruction. "Even its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud. To them, it was a vague thing weaving in and out of their play like a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the whole household sleeps -

fleeting mystery, vague menace to which each responds in his own way" (Smith 1963, 15).

Tangled dreams and anxieties

As an internationalist, Smith consciously wrote her book against a background of murderous fascism in Europe and militant struggles for decolonisation throughout the world. Anxious to reveal connections between all forms of racial terror, she chose to explore the systematic structures of racial segregation from childhood to the grave, returning repeatedly to her own life to describe the lessons she imbibed with the very air of her home town.

In this South I lived as a child and now live. And it is of it that my story is made. I shall not tell, here, of experiences that were different and special and belonged only to me, but those most white southerners born at the turn of the century share with each other. Out of the intricate weaving of unnumbered threads, I shall pick out a few strands, a few designs that have to do with what we call color and race ... and politics ... and money and how it is made ... and religion ... and sex and the body image ... and love ... and dreams of the Good and the killers of dreams (16).

This is the autobiographical act of a race traitor, one who throughout her life urged disloyalty not just to the Southern traditions within which she was raised, but to civilization itself. The book requires a longer discussion of its contents and conclusions, and Smith herself a more thorough evaluation than she

has hitherto enjoyed.¹ Here, however, I want to draw attention to the powerful structure of feeling that emerges from her descriptions of the geographic contours of racism. She draws repeatedly on the affective lineaments of southern ecology, her vocabulary rich with allusions to a teeming natural world polluted by years of enslavement, forbidden desire, and hatred:

The physical setting for these tangled dreams and anxieties, the place we lived, was a backdrop to our Deep South childhood that seemed no more than a giant reflection of our own hearts. Back of our little town was the swamp, tangled green, oozing snakes and alligators and water lilies and sweet-blooming bays, weaving light and shadow into awful and tender designs, splotching our lives with brightness and terror (95).

It was not simply the natural, living landscape that mirrored the fatal contradictions between Christian love and inhuman cruelty: "Every little southern town is a fine stage-set for Southern Tradition to use it as it teaches its children the twisting, turning, dance of segregation. Few words are needed for there are signs everywhere. White ... Colored...White ... Colored..."(80). And where there are no words, she continues, there are still signs: "big white church on Main Street, little unpainted colored church on the rim of town; big white school, little ramshackly colored school; big white house, little unpainted house..." Repeating the theme of the seductive dance, muscles moving in step with no interference from head or heart, Smith weaves a visceral sense of her own entanglement in a way of life that was at once profoundly unsettling but

also self-perpetuating. Yet why was her integration not complete, and what allowed her to resist the sheer pressure of the place ?

A few pages into the book Smith asks herself this same question. She learned the Southern way of life as a child, absorbing its lessons "by closing door after door until one's own mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality" (19). But one day, she continues, "they began to open again." As a writer interested in the deep psychological recesses of the human mind, Smith remains unwilling to identify a "cause" that explains everything; nevertheless she turns to one experience in particular that she believed "pushed these doors open a little", showing "glimpses of the world beyond, of that bright thing we call 'reality'". Just as both Douglas and Conley interpreted one particular situation from their childhoods as a significant shift in consciousness, Smith recalls an episode that was less a moment of trauma than "a symbol of buried experiences that I did not have access to."

The incident took place when the young Lillian was about six years old. A small scandal erupted when a fair-skinned girl of roughly the same age was seen playing in the yard of a household in the colored part of town. When she was removed, or kidnapped as her own family saw it, Smith's mother agreed to adopt her. The two girls became friends for the three weeks in which the newcomer lived in her house. Then as suddenly as she was introduced she was returned to her black family when it was discovered that, contrary to her appearance, she was a Negro. Although she was allowed to give one of her dolls, Smith's

questions and protestations were silenced and all further reference to the episode were banned. There are other details that Smith later recalled with tremendous guilt and pain. Shortly after the event, however, she forced herself to forget and for more than thirty years, she later wrote, "the experience was wiped out of my memory" (27). But then, as she eventually returned to lance the internalised wounds of childhood, she found her way back to the unanswerable questions that were stifled with the removal of the girl. Turning in her mind to dress the sores that still remained after years of deference to a system that virtually crippled the psychic development of all its adherents, Smith reflected: "As I sit here writing, I can almost touch that little town, so close is the memory of it. There it lies, its main street lined with great oaks, heavy with matted moss that swings softly even now as I remember" (28).

Compiled a decade before Bachelard explored the notion of "topoanalysis" in The Poetics of Space, Smith's analysis of the repressed guilt experienced by Southern whites entails a walk back through "the streets of one's own childhood ... the town where one was born." Fascinated by the development of the child's mental universe within the dimensions of the interior of the house in which it comes to consciousness, Bachelard wrote later, "memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (Bachelard 1964, 9). By making the landscapes of her childhood articulate the choking nightmares of racial segregation, Smith helped to reveal the psychological costs of maintaining that "white enviroing world" from within.

Our grasp on the world

Although Lillian Smith was not comfortable with being called a feminist, her work has had enormous influence of subsequent generations of southern women writers. In the mid to late 1980s, Mab Segrest, who was born in Alabama, worked as an organiser against the Far Right in North Carolina where she lived. Her autobiographical project Memoir of a Race Traitor began as a documentary account of what she thought of as "objective" facts recording both random and routine racist crimes. "I did so", she wrote, "out of the certainty that, in the face of evil, good people do not respond because they can pretend they do not know" (Segrest 1994, 1). Like Smith, whose words form a powerful epigraph on the opening pages of her book, she locates herself at the very start as southerner born and raised in the same soil that had produced the neo-Nazis and Klansmen. But her attempts to be detached, to shape "the procession of crisp black letters across the empty page" gradually induced a kind of madness. After she manifested both physical and mental symptoms of distress, she was forced to quit work "to find again 'subjective' language, what poet Muriel Rukeyser called 'unverifiable fact'" (2). Searching for a different register, Segrest walked back down the streets where she was born, determined to locate and face up to the sources of her terror and fury. Her memoir is not so much a dialogue with her home town as a confrontation with her family history, knowing that in the white household where she was raised, "themes of race permeated our family interactions". Her

extraordinary book manages to investigate the pathologies of deep-seated racism within southern culture by showing a link between this personal life and the barbaric, systemic violence of white supremacy.

Segrest's perspective as an anti-racist witness is inseparable from her politics of gender and sexuality, and her memories of growing up at odds with a dysfunctional white family are enriched by her adolescent remonstrations at all kinds of discrimination and injustice. The southern tradition within which she continues to write was transformed by feminism barely two decades after Smith completed Killers of the Dream in 1949. That same year, Simone de Beauvoir, also attentive to black struggles for self-determination throughout the world, had offered a view of gender politics that was to radicalize a new generation. "The body is not a thing," she observed in The Second Sex, "it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects" (Beauvoir 1989, 34).ⁱⁱ While reminding us that the sociological process called racialisation is about so much more than race, this wise and enduring claim also directs us to adapt Adrienne Rich's fruitful question for feminists, posed nearly 40 years later: "Where, when, and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on, as women?" (Rich 1986, 214). The sinewy, slippery tentacles of racialisation appear in sharper relief if we give more space to the autobiographical act; if we allow the poetic narratives of self-critique to offer their uncomfortable honesty; and if we demand accountability from the self-imposed exiles who can expose the absolute hollowness of racial power.

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ⁱ See Hobson, pp. 18-50, for a fuller discussion of Killers of the Dream as a conversion narrative; I have discussed Smith's other writings in chapter 4 of Vron Ware and Les Back Outside the Whale: Color, Politics, Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

ⁱⁱ For a contextualised discussion of de Beauvoir's statement, see Toril Moi What is a Woman and Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 59.