

Draft-dodgers in 1980s South Africa: Styles of Liminality and Lostness

Paul Mason

Summary

The subject of analysis in this article is oral testimony delivered by five white men who resisted conscription to the apartheid army in the 1980s. The argument, underpinned throughout by its focus on a liminal mode of being expressed by these men both during apartheid and subsequent to its demise, is set in motion by outlining the socio-historical context that framed the interviewees' complex stances of resistance. The argument proceeds by paying close attention to transcripts of interviews that were conducted from 2010-2013, and thereafter applies concepts considered useful for the interpretation thereof. These additions to the interpretative framework include Stewart Motha's concept of liminality as applied to Antjie Krog's writings and experiences, as well as Minesh Dass's notions of white liberalism and lostness. Attention is also paid to the ways in which Donald McRae narrates his memories of resistance to conscription. McRae's narration of his resistance stands as a counterpoint to the modes of resistance articulated by the interviewees. The argument concludes by applying Breyten Breytenbach's ideas of the Middle World and the uncitizen to analysis of the testimony.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ontleed die mondelinge getuienis van vyf wit mans wat diensplig in die apartheidsweermag in die 1980's teengestaan het. Die vertrekpunt van die betoog is die sosiohistoriese konteks van die ondervraagdes se ingewikkelde stellinginname jeens weerstand. Die argument word deurgaans onderlê deur die fokus op die liminale bestaansuitdrukking wat gedurende en ná apartheid deur die mans getoon is. Daar word verder noukeurig aandag geskenk aan transkripsies van onderhoude wat tussen 2010 en 2013 en daarna gevoer is, en konsepte wat as nuttig beskou word, word dienooreenkomstig in die ontleding van die transkripsies toegepas. Die ontledings-raamwerk sluit in Stewart Motha se beginsel van liminaliteit, soos dit toegepas is op Antjie Krog se geskrewe werk en ervarings, asook Minesh Dass se nosie van wit liberalisme en verlorenheid (*lostness*). Ook word daar gefokus op die wyses waarop Donald McRae sy herinneringe aan die weerstand tot diensplig verhaal. McRae se vertelling oor sy weerstand dien as teenwig tot die maniere waarop weerstand deur die ondervraagdes uitgedruk is. Die argument sluit af met 'n ontleding van die getuienis aan die hand van Breyten Breytenbach se nosies van die Middewêreld (Middle World) en die onburger (*uncitizen*).

Introduction

Arrival at an understanding of the politics of whiteness does not require the analyst to prove, disprove or even modify the claim that white complicity played a significant role in sustaining apartheid rule, as well as perpetuating ideological strains thereof in the post-apartheid context. The fact of complicity, along with a range of inter-related and contrary expressions and practices of whiteness, both past and present, has received much academic attention. This article concerns a largely unexamined aspect of white masculinity in apartheid South Africa, revisited from the vantage point of post-apartheid South Africa in the form of interviews conducted between 2010 and 2013 with five draft dodgers.¹ After presenting and interpreting the testimony, the article expands upon its framework of analysis by drawing on specific concepts from two journal articles, a memoir and two essays: Stewart Motha's concept of liminality as used in his journal article "'*Begging to be Black*': Liminality and Critique in post-apartheid South Africa" (2010: 285-305), Donald McRae's reconstruction of his resistance to conscription in his memoir *Under Our Skin* (2012), and Minesh Dass's interpretations of white liberalism and lostness in "'*Wishy-washy liberalism*' and 'the art of getting lost' in Ivan Vladislavić's *Double Negative*" (2017: 9-30).² The argument concludes by linking interviewees' articulations of self to the concepts of the uncitizen and the Middle World referred to by Breyten Breytenbach in two essays from his compilation *Notes from the Middle World* (Breytenbach 2009: 135-185).

Context

Prior to investigating the testimony, it is necessary to provide an outline of the socio-historical co-ordinates that framed the interviewees' resistance to conscription in the 1980s. The testimony of five interviewees who dodged the draft in a variety of ways is best understood on the levels of the general and the specific. On the general level, this takes the form of a brief account of the external co-ordinates of the lives of conscripts as well as those of draft dodgers, and, on the level of specifics, offers biographical sketches of the five interviewees.³

-
1. For the sake of anonymity, the interviewees have been granted pseudonyms.
 2. My commentary on the interview testimony applies a variant of Dass's notion of lostness that I consider to be better suited to analysis of the testimony.
 3. A transcription of the interviews, conducted from 2010-2013, constitutes a portion of the Appendix to my PhD thesis, "Contesting Masculinities: A study

Regardless of political orientation, every white man in apartheid South Africa had to navigate his life within a racist oligarchy that was governed by white men. Because white men stood at the centre of all levels of political and social control, it is not difficult to define their collective or group identity. However, the identities of sub-groupings of men who resisted conscription are, to differing degrees, more challenging to define. In terms of degrees of difference, sub-groupings whose resistance is arguably easy to define include men who engaged in protest action against the apartheid army from a position of exile as members of the Congress of South African War Resistance (COSAWR), as well as a very small number of white men who joined uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC).

During the apartheid years, from 1967 until the early 90s, it was compulsory for white men to register for conscription at the age of sixteen. They were legally bound to heed the call-up immediately after completing their secondary schooling or tertiary studies and enter two years of so-called National Service.⁴ These two years were to be followed by a total of a further two years in the form of so-called Citizen Force camps that might stretch through to the end of the white man's working life. The call-up went largely unquestioned within white society, and open refusal to heed the call-up brought with it the consequence of imprisonment. For many men it was a simple matter of when to go in and "get it over with". For those who decided not to enter the military, a limited range of options were available. Avoidance strategies took the forms of exile; armed resistance; openly announced refusals to serve that carried with them, from the mid-1980s, a six-year prison sentence; and a number of other strategies taken by the interviewees whose testimony forms the focus of this article.

Following the termination of National Service in 1994, a small number of conscientious objectors presented testimony during a "Special Submission on Conscription" that constituted a fraction of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Special Hearings. This hearing took place in Cape Town on 23rd July 1997, and the testimony heard was that of conscientious objectors whose refusal to perform their National Service was motivated by their Christian faith. Their beliefs stood in direct opposition to the version of Christianity that had undergirded the political ideology of the apartheid regime, at the same time as they resonated with the distinctly Christian tenets of forgiveness and reconciliation that fuelled TRC proceedings. As analysis of the testimony will reveal, although the interviewees' refusal to undertake

of selected texts of resistance to conscription to the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the 1980s" (2016).

4. Two years of service was instituted in 1978. Prior to this, the period of service had been 9 months from 1967 and one year from 1972.

their National Service was undeniably driven by an exercise of conscience, this was not rooted in a Christian mindset.

Arising from the testimony is the awareness that interviewees' psychological instabilities emphasise yet undermine interrelated, seemingly clear-cut binary concepts such as resister versus conscript, refusal versus compliance or good versus evil. For the sake of convenience, I have chosen the concept of "liminality" as the umbrella term for analysis of the testimony because it echoes and contains interlinked concepts such as uncertainty, adriftness, ennui and lostness, all of which are liminal affects blurring the supposed oppositions referred to above.⁵ Analysis confirms that this configuration of concepts gains effective purchase on the transcribed testimony.

Prior to the presentation and interpretation of the testimony, it is useful to introduce the five interviewees.

Biographical Sketches

Interviewee John was the first resister sentenced to six years in prison in July 1988 for his refusal to serve. The choice of John as an interviewee could be read as contradictory, inviting the following question: how is an exploration of liminality and lostness justified by listening to the testimony of a man who took the unambiguous stance of refusing to heed the call-up, a stance that received a good deal of media attention and was thus highly visible to the public eye? The choice of John as interviewee will be made clear in the section of the article that follows.

The testimony of interviewee Matthew indicates a turn-around in his attitude and responses to conscription. He shifted from an unquestioning readiness to obey his call-up after completing his final year of schooling to openly announcing his refusal to attend camps subsequent to "klaaring out" and working as an End Conscription Campaign (ECC) activist. He also performed the alternative of unpaid community service and fasted in protest against conscripts being sent to participate in the Border War and enter the townships to quell what the National Party government called "unrest".

Interviewee James expresses the unusual response of one who actively resisted conscription from both within and outside the military establishment. His testimony expresses a logic of rebellion: a refusal to bow down to the patriarchal authoritarianism that governed the lives of young white men within the institutions of the family and the schooling system, and that served

5. Because the idea of liminality suggests an in-between condition of being, a conflict and subversion of opposites, such as uncertainty or self-doubt versus bold defiance, can often be at play. As interpretation of the testimony shall show, vacillation between contrary states of being features in the testimony of the interviewees, strikingly so in the testimony of the interviewee to whom I have attached the name John.

the purpose of naturalising the call to perform military duty. The selection of James as interviewee was also motivated by the contrast between the frequently invigorating creativity of his escape strategies and the fact that his experiences have lived on as psychologically disabling.

The experiences of interviewee Mark echo those of James for the fact that they have lived on as psychologically disabling. This has manifested in an ongoing struggle to reorient himself, to experience or create a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning as opposed to a frequently debilitating ennui. Through occasionally committing himself to psychotherapeutic intervention he has revisited his past with a view toward developing a sense of how he might take on a role within his current social context that he could experience as “comfortable enough”. His recollection of the period in which he felt his identity rooted in his refusal to be conscripted, can be described as nostalgic.

Interviewee Luke articulates a complicated range of responses to conscription that took place over a period of ten years. His experiences echoed those of Matthew, James and Mark, but his testimony also reveals subtle differences from theirs in terms of the after-effects of resistance to conscription. Although Luke expresses the dark weight of this legacy, his testimony also evidences a man not entirely lost to himself, existentially adrift. Analysis of his testimony interprets these differences.

The Testimony

The question was posed earlier as to why it is justifiable to include, in an account of draft dodgers’ ambiguous responses to conscription, the testimony of a man who chose to stand trial for his refusal to serve. The answer to this question is that John resisted conscription by taking other “options” prior to and following his incarceration. His testimony in this regard reflects the fact that for a number of men resistance to conscription was a faltering process of decision-making instead of a clear-cut stance. This complexity features in the testimony of each of the interviewees. The issue of resistance to conscription therefore asks to be read and interpreted as a problem in both senses of the word.

A frequently used draft dodging strategy was to go into hiding, or what might also be called internal exile. Another strategy was the extension of university studies for the purpose of avoiding National Service instead of academic advancement. The latter option was exercised by John, Luke and Mark. Matthew used the strategy of fasting in protest against the institution of enlistment, and in November of 1990 he refused to attend camps, which resulted in a one year prison sentence that was suspended on condition he did

unpaid community service.⁶ For James, on the other hand, the primary strategy for dodging the draft took the form of escaping from military barracks through the duration of his two years of National Service, as well as from subsequent camps.

John's testimony reveals that the binary of publicly announced refusal to serve versus the enactment of "softer" options was not clear-cut. By way of illustration, he expresses shifts in his orientation to the call-up during the period that preceded standing trial. Indeed, his decision-making process often resembles donning a mask instead of simply surrendering himself to imprisonment. There was a sub-plot to his narrative that was invisible to both the military establishment and the mass media, as well as being inconvenient at times for the ECC's political mission. The circumstances of his trial certainly provide clues to uncover this sub-plot. As noted earlier, he was the first conscientious objector whose publicly announced refusal to serve was not motivated by religion or pacifism. However, and contrary to this expression of certainty, his testimony also reveals uncertainty with regard to the circumstances that led to his incarceration, as well as the emotions that attended these circumstances. He articulates regular shifts between firmness of will and a hazy wilfulness. The firmness is reflected by the fact that the notion of the hero features strongly in his narrative, along with his construction of himself as a celebrity. "In a way", he said, "you could read the whole thing as my way of turning myself into a star. I knew that the six-year sentence would make a celebrity of me, and the truth was that I wanted that" (Interview with author, 14 September 2011). On the other hand, although the stance he took made his alignment clear, such that he stood as an exemplar or symbol of resistance to National Service, he did not sign up as a member of the ECC. When asked to explain this surprising disparity, he replied, "I am nobody's useful idiot" (Interview with author, 14 September 2011). However, immediately after making this assertion, his voice regained its hazy wilfulness as he recalled a telephone conversation with a friend who was in exile during the run-up to his trial: "My friend asked 'Why? What's it going to achieve?' I couldn't say to him 'It's going to work like this and this and this'. So I said 'it's a gamble'" (Interview with author, 14 September 2011). Despite the weight of certainty attached to the fact that his refusal brought with it a mandatory six-year prison sentence, his words "this and this and this" suggest indecisiveness, even arbitrariness. By using the analogy of gambling, he acknowledges that he is deciding upon the next stage of his journey on the basis of a roll of the dice, despite the fact that the situation was one in which the dice were already loaded. He recalls psychological symptoms that arose

6. Significantly, the sentence of community service became available in the early stage of the period of transition in which conscription was beginning to be phased out. Matthew received his suspended sentence of community service nine months after the release from prison of Nelson Mandela.

from the experience of his day-to-day life as a gamble or limbo-state during the period that preceded his incarceration:

Whether through addiction or not, I continually turned to dagga and beer to escape from my depression, which, of course, only aggravated it. Whenever I hear Bob Dylan's "Just like Tom Thumb's Blues" it reminds me of that period: "I cannot move/ My fingers are all in a knot/ I don't have the strength to get up and take another shot." (Interview with author, 14 September 2011)

Elsewhere in the interview he sums up his life at the time as follows: "There's another line of my own, perhaps plagiarised from somewhere, which also evokes it for me – 'I can't even get onto my knees to pray' – I was totally fucked through the later period of '87 and into '88, a walking zombie" (Interview with author, 14 September 2011).

Even in the cases of John and other interviewees who knew, prior to the threshold instant of reporting for National Service, that they would not serve, exhortations to do so that emanated from families, institutions of civil society, and the media held the power to unhinge them. John states:

By the end of July 1987, just before I was due to report, I had a sense of starting to feel quite low. In the months that followed things got quite desperate. My memory of what my motivations were when I went to university after finishing school are not very clear. (Interview with author, 14 September 2011)

His confusion was exacerbated by his experience of tensions within the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), also called the student left, that was active on English language campuses:

I was strongly aware that my emotional investment, the origins of my investment, was around racism. Within the student left the orthodoxy was that the struggle was about class more than race. This kind of thinking couldn't really accommodate the idea that it was really about both When I was bipolar I had articulated some thoughts along these lines from the floor at NUSAS conferences. (Interview with author, 14 September 2011)

Later in the interview, he expresses another motivation underlying his refusal to serve:

Making myself into a star also enabled me to turn the tables on the left in another way – because I had never been put forward as a leader by them. As I have said, I lacked confidence and any feeling for the interpersonal – so it made sense that I wouldn't have been seen as leadership material. (Interview with author, 14 September 2011)

This statement indicates an internal contradiction: John's enjoyment at turning the tables or taking revenge against the student left's neglect of his

leadership potential, at the same time as acknowledging the absence of such potential. A similar tension with regard to John's political orientation and that espoused by NUSAS is expressed by Matthew:

I turned my back on NUSAS to something more relevant and attended the ECC launch in 1984. It was something like tilting at windmills, Don Quixote stuff. No one then could imagine conscription being terminated or Mandela being released. Instead, there was the feeling of heading toward Armageddon; that sanity would never break out. A bunch of nutcases were running both sides. (Interview with author, 29 November 2010)

Elsewhere in the interview, Matthew shares the experience that precipitated rethinking his dodging the draft:

At the beginning of 1989 I had an epiphany generated by an LSD trip. I realised I was sick of doing camps, all the subterfuge. Furthermore, I was sick of the effects on my peers of ducking and diving When I had the epiphany I could see how my friends' lives had been fucked up by dodging. I thought – I'm in a much stronger position than them. Really fucked up guys couldn't survive the psychological damage. (Interview with author, 29 November 2010)

Although there was clearly a difference between John's and Matthew's links to the ECC, their testimony indicates an important common feature, also strikingly present, as will be seen, in James's testimony: a capacity to reinvent or reconstruct themselves in response to the constraints imposed by conscription. However, prior to paying closer attention to the interviewees' capacity to reinvent themselves, I wish to expand upon the expressions of uncertainty touched upon earlier.

Echoing John's doubt with regard to his motivations to attend university after finishing school, interviewee Mark observes:

Even though I was able to go to University I had no clear idea what I should be studying, but I was clear enough in my mind that I did not want to go into the army ... I simply had to do something to avoid the call-up [...] something in which I had no real interest. (Interview with author, 15 November 2010)

Similarly, Luke speaks of a deferred mode of living, an "adriftness". Recalling his time working as a post-graduate student and part-time lecturer, he says:

When I think of myself at the age of twenty-four at university I see that it wasn't a path. It was a place where I was hanging out, deferring National Service. It's not necessarily just a matter of a career path, but a sense that one has a purpose, a direction. I never had that. (Interview with author, 26 October 2012).

James recalls his own sense of being adrift and also comments on its afterlife:

It was a limbo time, and in many ways it was good for me in that it gave me time to introspect and to get the kind of education that was important to me in the first place. But in terms of getting on with my life, the fact is I still haven't gotten on with my life. (Interview with author, 18 October 2012)

Linked to these expressions of uncertainty, another relatively common feature in the testimony is the articulation of deep-lying psychological roots to the interviewees' intense, sometimes shaky and confused aversion to conscription. For example, when James was asked to speak of his experiences of National Service, he provided a lengthy account of his relationship with his "fascist" mother from the age of six months and onward. Clearly the mention of conscription unearthed in him primal emotions of disaffection, fear and trauma. His expression of fear and trauma is echoed in Luke's words: "All I lived with was a sense of fear. It was something you couldn't speak in such a society with its idea of manhood. So I grew up with insecurity, feelings of inferiority, displaced bravado – just trying to find a way to express oneself" (Interview with author, 26 October 2012). Mark expresses his own dividedness: "I went through extremes, and I suppose it says something about me that I went through such extremes, and in the negative sense someone might say that this shows a lack of character, unnatural weakness, or whatever" (Interview with author, 15 November 2010).

Despite such expressions of pained uncertainty and insecurity, what is also evident in the testimony is a factor, mentioned earlier, that complicates these emotions – the capacity to reinvent. This odd co-existence is present throughout James's testimony, which veers from memories of familial trauma that impelled him to use National Service as an escape route, to the psychologically disabling experiences and legacy of his time in the army and, importantly, the invigorating creativity of his escapes from military barracks both during the two years of National Service and subsequent camps. Having spent a large portion of the early 1980s staging escapes, he moved to Hillbrow and the military police appeared to have forgotten him. This proved to be a short reprieve. Fuelled by the desire to get married and secure a job, he handed himself over to the military authorities and was sentenced to a further two years of service, despite the fact that he had in effect already completed more than two years. However, his experiences of military service ended abruptly:

Eventually I thought fuck it and just walked out. I was half-way down the passage when these guys stopped me, one with a hand on my shoulder. I slapped it away and said "I'm not interested, go play toy soldiers with someone else". And I carried on walking, nobody stopped me at the gate. That was the end of that. They had obviously decided I was too much trouble. (Interview with author, 18 October 2012)

Two of the interviewees revealed another strategy to survive conscription and its effects. This took the form of attaching themselves to something beyond or larger than the here-and-now, what might be called a survivalist's quest for refuge. Luke's quest took the shape of regular intellectual realignments and idiosyncratic spiritualities:

Back then I escaped into esoteric spiritual things, a wayward mix of alternative Christianities and Eastern religions. Now my spirituality is far more Zen-oriented. It's about conscious living, being awake, nothing special really. I think my spirituality came home when I could face the now. Not now in a mystical sense; but just treading water, shoveling shit, that kind of thing. (Interview with author, 26 October 2012)

John testifies to a similar form of refuge:

I was released from jail and struggled to recover any centredness. I went through all kinds of stuff, suicidal episodes and other instabilities. The big turning point for me was through encountering meditation and Buddhism, especially following a nine-day retreat I did in 1999. (Interview with author, 14 September 2011)

Earlier, it was seen that James's strategies differed from those of other interviewees in that he conducted his resistance from inside the military machine. His testimony differs too in relation to his quest for refuge. For example, he recalls what followed the first of his many escapes:

It was such a blissful three days it didn't matter. I'd taken no food. When I'd got to the top [of the mountain] I came to a little lake with trees around it and a small cave. I sat there in the shade and just watched these ducks on the lake. I ended up vegging out and watching these ducks. It was great. (Interview with author, 18 October 2012)

Despite meditative attachments to Buddha, ducks or such like, the testimony of each interviewee does indicate that the capacity for the reinvention of self is often cancelled out by the burdens of conscription and resistance to it, along with the damaging psychological legacy attached to both. With reference to the latter, three of the five interviewees have attempted suicide. At present, two of them live in tiny rent-free cottages in the gardens of family members. The mother of one of these brings meals to him twice a day and leaves him alone with his books. Neither of these two men manage to earn money, living lives akin to those of characters to be found in plays or novels written by Samuel Beckett. Despite several attempts to reconnect, I have neither seen nor heard from them since conducting the interviews, which indicates that they have successfully cocooned themselves.

A White Woman's Liminality

In his article, “*Begging to be Black*”: Liminality and Critique in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, Stewart Motha argues that Antjie Krog has positioned herself authentically in the post-apartheid context, “in a liminal space from which to think postcolonial alternatives” (2010: 1). Krog explores these alternatives in two important works of literary non-fiction – *Country of My Skull* (1998) and *Begging to be Black* (2009). Both texts pay close attention to the problems of white belonging in post-apartheid South Africa, and in both she expresses the importance of creating an identity that is aware of the socio-economic injustices and human rights abuses of apartheid to the extent of creating an actualisable opportunity for white people to inhabit and affirm the so-called “new South Africa” or “rainbow nation”. She states: “I want to be part of the country I was born. I need to know whether it is possible for somebody like me to ... live as a full and at-ease component of the South African psyche” (Krog 2009: 93). Despite the passion of such assertions, the content and style of her books does not articulate a clear-cut sense of white belonging. Instead, her writing often indicates that white people’s historical embeddedness in colonialism and apartheid dilutes the persuasiveness of a will and commitment to belong, that belonging is possible but difficult to achieve, and that belief in it is arguably naïve. In this regard, Motha notes that Krog speaks of a “crisis of the present – the difficulties South Africans face in grappling with the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid, the fact that there is a process of un-homing and re-homing” at work in post-apartheid South Africa and that “this un-homing and re-homing is something that white South Africans in particular need to think more deeply about” (Motha 2010: 1).

By comparing the concept of liminality that Motha attaches to the life and work of Krog with the liminality and lostness expressed by the interviewees, it is clear that a sense of belonging in post-apartheid South Africa does not describe their subject positions. In contradistinction to their liminality or lostness, what Krog achieves in *Begging to be Black*, as Motha suggests, is “an epistemic move towards another ontology of being” (7). He argues that she is “seeking to de-centre herself and a coloniser’s way of seeing, knowing and being” (7).⁷ Such an impulse to decentre the self implies a capacity to envision liveable alternatives.

For the interviewees, such an impulse and capacity are absent. Their vision of past, present and future, more often than not, appears little more than partial or peripheral, and manifests as despair; a bleakness of spirit and emotions. The prevalence of such psychological symptoms suggests that a considerable

7. Motha speaks of particular “onto-epistemic” strategies whereby Krog effects this transformation of being. These include what he calls “a powerful ethic of putting the ‘world’ as conceived by ‘humans’ into question” (7). Motha’s elaboration of such strategies is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

amount of self-work and reinvention is necessary for this sub-grouping of crepuscular beings to transfer into the post-apartheid context something of the political cognisance and commitment that energised their resistance to conscription. Analysis of the testimony showed that some of the interviewees did enact creative strategies of reinventing themselves, and it could be argued that this indicates seeds for self-renewal and invention in the post-apartheid context. But it could be counter-argued that the sense of urgency that bound their personal lives to the politics of the 1980s carries little weight, and is largely untranslatable, within the contemporary social context.

By way of counterbalancing the judgments of the lives of this sub-grouping of men, such as those presented above, it is important to note that seven to ten years have passed since the time the interviews took place. This gap in time prompts questions: What has happened to these men since the interviews took place? What shifts in consciousness and emotions might have unfolded? What paths toward re-homing might any of them have embarked upon? Because any individual's orientation toward his or her future is unfixed, unfixable or organic, unexpected answers to these questions might be available. At present, the questions remain open.

Under Our Skin

Donald McRae stands in different counterpoint to the interviewees than Antjie Krog. In his memoir *Under Our Skin* (2012), McRae, a left-leaning student and journalist, presents the story, as David Robson observes, of “an idealistic young South African in the early 1980s [who] was faced with a stark choice: sign up for National Service, serve six years in prison or leave the country” (2012). Surprisingly, McRae's first narrative engagement with the predicament of conscription occurs 277 pages into his 418-page memoir via a cursory mention of his closest friend's decision to “get it over with”. This mention is prefaced by an account of the detention and torture in the infamous John Vorster Square of white political activists Neil Aggett, Liz Floyd, Aurret van Heerden and Barbara Hogan, culminating in the death of Aggett, the first and only white anti-apartheid activist to die in detention. This account constitutes a narrative of its own and is clearly the result of a devoted task of investigative journalism. It occupies close to a third of McRae's memoir and details the life, relationship with Liz Floyd and death of a man he had not met. The facts narrated predate McRae's decision to go into exile and bear no direct relation to his own life or that of his contemporaries. This raises the question: what is the purpose of this lengthy sub-narrative? In answer to this, the Aggett story may be considered a means of measuring one form of white resistance, in the form of refusing to be conscripted, against another. McRae downplays going into exile as a meaningful exercise of agency: “My story is nothing compared to his [Aggett's]” (409), also announcing it as “a little tale against [an] epic

saga”. Indeed, McRae attaches very little ethical weight to his own resistance to what the apartheid state expected from its white male citizens, which included his refusal to undergo National Service by going into exile. Feelings of guilt clearly outweigh the possibility of attaching even a shade of the heroic to his and other resisters’ refusals. Thus, McRae’s own story functions as a backdrop to the Aggett story. Although Aggett and Floyd are, on the level of the genre of memoir, no more than secondary or passing characters, on the level of the narrative-in-itself they are rendered as fully rounded characters. This rendering, that involves the plot devices of tension and resolution of tension, and what David Robson terms “fly-on-the-wall descriptions” (2012), make it resemble a novel or screenplay. The question can be posed as to whether narrative strategies such as these might have emerged from an imagined time and place of writing other than that of post-apartheid South Africa – a time not as heavily laden with emotions of white guilt and shame. McRae’s Aggett narrative blurs the customary lines between non-fiction and fiction. By doing so it provides a safer way of revisiting the guilt and shame felt and experienced by white people who possessed political awareness and conscience during and subsequent to the 1980s. This distancing effect also inspires a vehemently voiced opposition to apartheid from a distance – a distance which runs the risk of taming the vehemence into political correctness. McRae’s memoir does present a critique, but the scope and depth of it is problematic, partial and arguably superficial. What is clear is that the voice that narrates the memoir is, however unconsciously, far from authorial in the sense of being self-possessed or autochthonous. The emotional instability, which in the case of McRae certainly includes experiences of guilt, shame and a sense of existential irrelevance, are his own, but, as the interpretation above has suggested, he does not properly own these emotions. In comparison, the testimony of each interviewee presents similar or very different experiences of this state of shaky or unowned ownness. Despite these variances, it must be noted that two common factors or problems underpin McRae’s memoir and the testimony of the interviewees: how exactly to respond to the command to enter the apartheid regime’s military machine and, by extension, how to go about making sense of one’s past, present and future from the vantage point of post-apartheid South Africa.

The above analysis of the oral testimony and the discussion of concepts applicable to the interpretation thereof has sought to understand yet emphasise the troubled, ambiguous identities of the interviewees. Another explanatory category, and an important one for obtaining an understanding of these identities, is the concept of the white liberal. The applicability of this category will be tested through a discussion of Minesh Dass’s article “‘Wishy-washy liberalism’ and ‘the art of getting lost’ in Ivan Vladislavić’s *Double Negative*”, published in 2017 in *English in Africa*.

Liminality and Wishy-Washy Liberalism

Having noted the discomfort felt by white liberals about their position of privilege within apartheid South Africa, Dass emphasises the contradiction between the emotional response and the “material reality” of apartheid (2017: 13-14). He refers to Samantha Vice’s “advocacy of personal introspection” as an appropriate response to the discomfort that arises from this contradiction, and counter-argues that her suggestion, “while it is premised on grappling with privilege, does not properly account for how this process would contribute to the undoing of privilege, particularly its material forms” (Dass 2017: 14). His analysis of *Double Negative*’s protagonist Neville Lister serves to validate his claim that “Vice’s argument runs the risk of allowing white people to become-self-involved, and therefore politically neutered” (Dass 2017: 14).

Developing his argument, Dass speaks of “two versions of whiteness” which he describes as follows: “one is nostalgic of an oppressive past and therefore prone to view the [post-apartheid] present in hostile terms, while the other is self-conscious of its compromised and therefore shameful position” (2017: 15). He states that although these two versions are “poles apart in their political orientation”, they share the following assumptions: “whiteness cannot belong in South Africa, this is not its home, unhomeliness is its unavoidable state” (Dass 2017: 15).⁸ Through his analysis of *Double Negative* he seeks to show how the novel involves both forms of whiteness, “if only to complicate them” (Dass 2017: 15), and asserts that Vladislavić provides a different “vision” of whiteness – one that merges the two he has described and perhaps even gestures toward a future in which contributions can be made by white people in the achievement of social justice. Having stated in the concluding paragraph to his article that “discomfiture is not in itself an ethical way of being for white South Africans”, he asserts that what *Double Negative* “implies, instead, is that being lost, being unhomed, might be a condition of possibility for ethical behavior” (Dass 2017: 27). The logical implication set up here – that the ‘in itself’ of discomfiture contains the promise to transform into a “condition of possibility for ethical behaviour” – provides a valuable interpretative angle on Vladislavić’s representation of his protagonist’s lostness. By extension, it also welcomes application to the transcribed interviews. Its application to the testimony reveals that the condition of lostness expressed by the interviewees places a large question mark after the idea of a condition of lostness as constituting “a condition of possibility for ethical behaviour”. Instead, analysis of the testimony indicates that the

8. Dass’s use here of the term “unhomeliness” is a reminder of Antjie Krog’s use of the term “un-homing”, as cited by Motha in his article discussed earlier. Echoing Dass, Krog uses this term to describe a distinguishing feature of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

“might” Dass attaches to this condition of possibility is, more accurately, a “highly unlikely”. In other words, the testimony presented by the interviewees constitutes a version of white identity instead of the “vision” suggested by Dass. Analysis of the testimony does not indicate the possibility for the actualisation of ethical intention. Instead of indicating the opportunity for transcending a condition of lostness, the testimony tends to reflect a stagnancy of intention and will that looks both backward and forward through darkened lenses.

Earlier in his article, Dass addresses the difficulty of actualising ethical transformation in the form of his commentary on Vladislavić’s depiction of shifts in his protagonist’s perceptions of himself from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa: “In middle age, Neville Lister believes that he has unlearned the art of getting lost” (2017: 26). Dass proceeds to question the idea that lostness can be a learned art: “I do not think one can consciously set out to be lost Getting lost happens to one, which is to say, that it is an epiphenomenon, a loss of control” (Dass 2017: 26). An epiphenomenon obviously implies a generative phenomenon, and both categories prove to be applicable to the testimony of the interviewees. In the lives of the interviewees, the generative phenomenon was conscription, and the epiphenomenon took the shape of symptoms and styles of being. In any attempt to understand the specifics of such symptoms and styles it is important to bear in mind the cultural forces that shaped the lives of these men through the 1970s and 1980s. In *Double Negative* and in many of his other novels Vladislavić provides a subtly trenchant critique of the myopic cultural life of white people through these years, years in which the day-to-day had little or no cognisance of the political realities of the time, such as the Soweto uprising of 16th June 1976, the murder in detention of Steve Biko in 1977, the Border War battle of Cassinga in 1978 and the battle of Cuito Cuanavale that ended the Border War in 1988.

In summary, Dass expresses a concern with ways in which white liberals express and enact their political convictions in the post-apartheid period. By paying careful attention to the manner in which this grouping avoided or side-stepped full acknowledgment and active resistance to apartheid, arguably to the degree of complicity, he also suggests the possibility of an alternative form of subjectivity, one that might transcend the constraints of its past and present in the creation of a solid ethical ground upon which to build a future. A spirit of cautious optimism infuses his view. Analysis of the testimony certainly did not evoke a spirit of optimism, cautious or otherwise. Broadly speaking, a feeling of optimism about white subjectivity in post-apartheid South Africa seems to require an emptying out and renunciation of familiar subject positions in favour of potentially inhabitable alternatives.

Uncitizens of the Middle World

The idea of unfamiliar and alternative selves resonates with Breyten Breytenbach's ideas of the "Middle World" and the "uncitizen". There is a flexibility and fluidity in these concepts which makes them amenable to a fruitful reading of the testimony. The "uncitizen" is an inhabitant of Breytenbach's "Middle World". The latter, he informs the reader, is best understood as "a temporary name for what could be a passing phenomenon" (Breytenbach 2009: 135). This idea of a passing phenomenon relates to the recollection of experiences narrated by the interviewees, notably those of John, James and Matthew. As a fixed phenomenon, conscription did not permit the white man to pass it by, but at the same time liminal spaces were available for him to enact strategies by which it might be passed by. Because the call-up was one of the ways of defining a white man's South African citizenship, it can be said that by defying it he made an uncitizen of himself. In his essay "Of Camels and Dogs and Rats", Breytenbach says of his uncitizens: they are "defined by what they are not, or no longer, and not so much by what they oppose or even reject", and "they ventured into zones where truths no longer fitted snugly and where certainties did not overlap, and most likely they got lost there" (2009: 157-185). The latter definition tallies neatly with the confusion and self-doubt articulated by the five interviewees, as well as the notion of lostness explored by Minesh Dass. The first definition – that uncitizens are best defined in terms of "what they are not" rather "what they oppose or even reject" – reflects the fact that at times a cost for the interviewees of being "what they [were] not" during their years of resistance to conscription was to limit their view of "the larger picture", i.e. the lives of others along with other possibilities for themselves.

Interviewees' attempts at inventing and re-inventing themselves resemble the portrait that Breytenbach paints of the period of South Africa's history – that of the transition to democracy – in which the uncitizen might have found him or herself living, however shakily, in a middle world they could call their own. Breytenbach states that when South Africa "went through the birth pains" of transition to a New South Africa, it was "close to understanding ... that you can only survive and move forward by continuing to invent yourself" (2009: 148). The "close to" that prefixes his use of "understanding" makes understanding no more than proximate, and a proximate understanding suggests the unlikelihood of arrival. As has been seen, arrival's unlikelihood infuses the testimony of each of the interviewees. Their liminality is best read as an empirical actuality, simply what it is and not what it ought to be or to become. The capacity to move onward anew can be understood as too battered and broken to assure arrival, certainly not the kind of arrival that Dass suggests, however tentatively, is actualisable.

Conclusion

I have sought to provide evidence in this article of aspects of white masculine identity that were present in 1980s South Africa, and that have thus far received little scholarly attention. In my view, instead of abiding by the dictates of identity-thinking, analysis ought to take cognisance of a range of liminal subject positions that inhabit zones of being such as those articulated by Motha and Breytenbach. It has been shown that the interviewees' testimony presents a range of subject positions comprising symptoms and styles of being manifesting as an often confused, slippery and debilitated navigation of obstacles to the exercise of will instead of following a logic of cause, action and effect. It is hoped that the testimony analysed in this article has added to understanding the postures of resistance white men subjected to conscription adopted during the apartheid years, as well as to the interpretation of the lived legacies thereof. By extension, a consideration of such voices could contribute to critical discussion of white liberalism in general terms, as well as to an understanding of specific indeterminacies and fault lines within whiteness that originated in apartheid South Africa, and that extend into contemporary South Africa. A concern with such specifics of identity is an important point of entry for analysis, not only because it has received little attention, but also because a focus on styles of liminality articulated by Breytenbach and the five interviewees promises sharp political critique.

References

- Anker, Willem Petrus Pienaar
 2007 Die Nomadiese Self: Skisoanalitiese Beskouinge oor Karakter-subjektiviteit in die Prosawerk van Alexander Strachan en Breyten Breytenbach. PhD proefskrif. Departement Afrikaans en Nederlands en Departement Filosofie. Stellenbosch: Universiteit van Stellenbosch.
- Breytenbach, Breyten
 2009 Notes from the Middle World. In: Breytenbach, Breyten, *Notes from the Middle World*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, pp. 135-156.
 2009 Of Camels and Dogs and Rats When Walking the Words/Staging the Self, or: What it is Like to Live with Somebody Very Much Like Myself. In: Breytenbach, Breyten. *Notes from the Middle World*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, pp. 157-185.
- Dass, Minesh
 2017 "'Wishy-washy Liberalism' and; 'The Art of Getting Lost' in Ivan Vladislavić's *Double Negative*". *English in Africa* 44(3): 9-30.
- Grobler, Marel
 2015 Breyten Breytenbach's "Middle World": The Middle World as Diaspora, Identity, and Consciousness. PhD thesis. Department of Afrikaans Literature, Media and Cultural Studies: Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

- Jones, Timothy Trengove
2005 Mystifying History: Things That Go Bump in the Night. In: Hoad, N., Martin K. & Reid, G. (eds) *Sex & Politics in South Africa*. Cape Town: Double Story, pp. 136-139.
- Krog, Antjie
1998 *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. Cape Town: Random House.
2009 *Begging to be Black*. Cape Town: Random House.
- Mason, Paul
2013 Countercultural Influences on Resistance to Conscription in 1980s South Africa. *Safundi* 14(3): 345-356.
2015 Contesting Masculinities: A Study of Selected Texts of Resistance to Conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the 1980s. PhD thesis. Department of Literary Studies in English. Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- McRae, Donald
2012 *Under Our Skin: A White Family's Journey Through South Africa's Darkest Years*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Motha, Stewart
2010 Begging to be Black. *Theory, Culture & Society* 27(7/8): 285-305.
Online: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0263276410383720>>.
8 February 2020.
- Robson, David
2012 Under Our Skin by Donald McRae: Review. 2 June. Online: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/biographyandmemoirreviews/9229709/Under-Our-Skin-by-Donald-McRae-review.html>>.
16 Augustus 2019.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission Special Submission on Conscription, Cape Town, 23rd July 1997. Online: <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/conscrip/conscr01.htm>>.
5 July 2019.

Paul Mason
Rhodes University
pm6308@gmail.com