"An Eternal Alien": South African Autobiographical Beginnings

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Summary

This article examines South African autobiographical writings from the early to the middle twentieth century. A careful reading of these writings shows that the various ways in which the autobiographical subjects constructed their "South Africanness" was a result of the interplay between power, history, racism/placism and culture. These discourses are discussed in relation to how they affected the subjectivities of the authors and led to aspects of hybridisation, alienation and exile. The polyglot nature of South Africa is examined as part of the subtext of identity formation and fostering within the bounds of postcolonial/post-apartheid autobiographical possibilities as part of national identities. In conclusion, this article reflects on present-day autobiographical practice. Questions of how to wrest the practice from the stultifying theory and criticism of Western scholarship are posed in order to identify further research possibilities and, hopefully, an epistemological break in African autobiographical studies.

A close reading of the texts of Roy Campbell and Bloke Modisane is therefore undertaken. The rise of a literate class played a significant role in ushering in autobiographical writings since literary beginnings gave a sense of permanence and fulfilment to these writers and led them to assume local and international identities which they experienced differently. A particular aspect that is examined is the cross-racial transcendence which some of the autobiographical subjects attained as a way of overcoming hybridity and ambivalence in South Africa, for example as is reflected in Helen Joseph's moving text *Side by Side* (1986).

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek Suid-Afrikaanse outobiografiese geskrifte vanaf die vroeë tot die laat twintigerjare. 'n Sorgvuldige ondersoek van hierdie geskrifte toon dat die verskillende maniere waarop die outobiograwe hul "Suid-Afrikaansheid" gekonstrueer het 'n gevolg was van die wisselwerking tussen mag, geskiedenis, rassisme/plasing en kultuur. Hierdie diskoerse word bespreek in terme van hoe dit die outeurs se subjektiwiteite beïnvloed het en gelei het tot aspekte van hibridi-sering, vervreemding en ballingskap. Die veeltalige aard van Suid-Afrika word ondersoek as deel van die subteks van identiteitsvorming en -bevordering binne die grense van die postkoloniale/post-apartheid outobiografiese praktyk. Vrae oor hoe die praktyk van die afstompende teorie en kritiek van Westerse vakkundigheid bevry kan word, word

gevra ten einde verdere navorsingsmoontlikhede en hopelik 'n epistemologiese breuk in outobiografiese studies in Afrika te identifiseer.

'n Deurdringende studie van die tekste van Roy Campbell en Bloke Modisane word onderneem. Die opkoms van 'n geletterde klas het 'n belangrike rol gespeel in die inluiding van outobiografiese geskrifte aangesien dit hierdie skrywers 'n sin van permanensie en vervulling gegee het en daartoe gelei het dat hulle plaaslike en internasionale identiteite aangeneem het wat hulle verskillend ervaar het. 'n Besondere aspek wat ondersoek word is die kruiskulturele transendensie wat sommige van die outobiograwe bereik het as 'n manier om hibriditeit en ambi-valensie in Suid-Afrika te oorbrug, byvoorbeeld soos weerspieël word in Helen Joseph se hartroerende teks *Side by Side* (1986).

Exordium: The Temporality of the Post-Enlightenment and Problematic Selves

The North American intellectual, W.E.B. du Bois, once suggested that a major issue of contention in the twentieth century would be over the question of the "color line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" ([1903]1963: 54). It was as though du Bois had foreseen the way in which race and racialism would define the world, giving rise to so many of the twentieth century's problems and struggles. Significantly, du Bois posed a timeless question when, in relation to black people he asked: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 43). The same point is inflected differently in the contemporary world when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak bemoans "the problematic self". Indeed, for South Africans who penned their life writings early in the century, it is as though there is a compelling need to say something about the racial nature of the society in which they found themselves. Defining one's *self* made it imperative to speak of the Other and its place in the universe, the re-enactment of the Enlightenment template in relation to the problematic palimpsest.

This reflection on a divided society found its earliest articulation in literature, as may be seen in a text such as Olive Schreiner's ground-breaking novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Living in the then British colonies of the Cape and Natal, writers who attended to the beginnings of what would later become known as South African Literature did not on the whole avoid questions thrown up by "the color line", and later autobiographical writers also wrote on this same topic. Frantz Fanon ([1961]1971: 73), writing on aspects of communities closely sharing a geographic space but ideologically apart, wrote: "[T]he Manicheanism of the settler [community] produces the Manicheanism of the native [community]". Race, which overdetermines South African culture and society, is central to the process of analysing ontology and epistemology and the relationship between consciousness and the materiality of lives. The relationship between ways of being, seeing and speaking are what might be seen as discursive

construction and reconstruction of the historical subject (Gilfillan 1995: 11).[1]

Early literary utterances on the racial nature of South African society necessarily had to do with how the society evolved from the so-called Kaffir Wars of conquest in which the African and white communities met at the cutting edge of colonisation. Pringle (1789-1834) and Schreiner (1855-1920) thus created what Michael Chapman (1981: 16) labels the liberal humanist voice (not always uniform, it should be said) which informed South African poetic activity and reflected the times in which they lived. And this in some instances also became evident in the autobiographies that came to reflect early twentieth-century South Africa. There is thus a strong link, in these early autobiographies, with literature. Poetic expression was seen as the "educated man's affair", and it is mainly male writers who brought into being South African poetry written in English. What may be observed, however, is that self-identity in these early autobiographical poems is grounded in locality, where each originated and how they came to South Africa. In such texts there is more a stress on transnational identities (British South African, Jewish South African, etc.) than on a single identity (South African). The feeling that South Africa was provincial to the United Kingdom underlines this emphasis on ambivalence, liminality, and "in-betweenness", and only later is a distinct South African identity brought into being. Texts such as Cecil Margo's *Final Postponement: Reminiscences of a Crowded Life* (1998) and Isie Maisels's *A Life at Law* (1998) well illustrate the liminality that routinely crops up in some South African autobiographies.

It is germane to provide a sense of theorising that crops out of some autobiographies from South Africa that enact the post-Enlightenment self. Georges Gusdorf's 1950s essay on autobiography provides an idea of why the post-Enlightenment self is itself a racialised entity when used in an autobiographical practice. Gusdorf opines that

> [a]utobiography is not found outside of our cultural area; one would say it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality not their own.
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> (Gusdorf 1980: 29)

Gusdorf ingeniously ties conquest with the autobiographical practice, and the colonised as partakers of "a derivative discourse" (following Partha Chatterjee 1986). More crucially, he fails to see how these "technologies of power" can be indigenised and that far from being annexed to an intellectual colonising mentality the "problematic" selves, following Tiyo Soga, would

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1.   Gilfillan's chapter on *Tell Freedom* and *Down Second Avenue* offers a comprehensive view of the changes in Mphahlele's writing, reading and thought. I have relied on it to plot this section of the essay.

indeed transculturate these technologies and with them rewrite modernity (see Atwell 2005).

Within the South African polity, therefore, early white South African autobiographical writings displayed, in a sense, the fact that as kith and kin of European settlers, their cultural selves were intricately linked with Europe. Mimicry is thus intricately part of the "displayed selves" in their writings. To use Homi K. Bhabha's formulation, this discourse of mimicry is "constructed around an *ambivalence*: in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1994: 86). Reading these autobiographies closely one gets a sense of an ingrained superiority complex that makes them distinctly different from their black South African counterparts, hence the formulation deployed herein of the post-Enlightenment and problematic selves.

Key aspects in which the post-Enlightenment and problematic selves of South African autobiographical practices differ are offered by Thengani Ngwenya when he observes that

> [a]s a result of racial divisions which pervaded South Africa, autobiographies written by black and white writers tended to exhibit markedly different styles and themes. The extent to which self-conception is shaped by external social, political and historical forces is clearly observable in these fairly distinct thematic and structural differences between autobiographies of black writers and those of their white counterparts. While the former invariably recount their struggles against debilitating social milieux, the latter tend to celebrate the nurturing effect of family and community on the growing consciousness of the writer.
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> (Ngwenya 1996: 140-141)

Among the texts that show this sense of ambivalence (some of which I discuss here) are William Plomer's *The Autobiography of William Plomer* (1975), Guy Butler's *Karoo Morning: An Autobiography* (1977), Mary Benson's *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (1990) and Roy Campbell's *Light on a Dark Horse: An Autobiography* (1951). Again, following Bhabha, a careful reading of the texts reveals that "the dream of the post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms" (Bhabha 1994: 86). Through language, a reader can discern the very split at the centre of the displayed selves as they articulate a defence of Empire. To borrow from the field of theology, the one discursive tool with which one might read these autobiographies open, it would be apophatism, that is, "negative theology", in order to show the *negativity* of the writings (see, e.g., Livescu 2007).

Such a reading will be contrasted with Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1986), a text that reflects the "problematic" self at the centre of the writer's consciousness. Here the writer shows a remarkable attempt to, in Philip Holden's apt phrase, "indigenize modernity". Holden observes that

> [m]odernity was a battleground in the colonial world, in which colonized elites drew on indigenous resources, and indigenized others taken both from the colonial state and, through connections frequently forged in the colonial metropolis, from other societies struggling to emerge from colonialism. [I]t was a process in which new communities were forged or older ones were remade in reaction to the technologies of rule; it was a narrative that people told themselves and saw their lives as participating in, with its denouement always over the horizon of the future.
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> (Holden 2008: 29-30)

Of course, in of his magisterial work, James Olney lets us believe that Africans only write one form of autobiography, which he labels "auto-phylography", meaning the autobiography of the group [phyl]. Here there is very little to distinguish one individuated African voice from another since the autobiographer is so immersed in the community that he merely reproduces its struggles, its dreams and its hopes (1993: 218). It is against such theorising that I reread the autobiographies of the "problematic" selves in these early beginnings to reveal the fallacy at the centre of Olney's bathetic reasoning. There is a need (Berger 2010) to decolonise African autobiography from these Western postulations, which are rather unhelpful. The various ways in which culture, language, history and power are able to speak through the subject, influencing the subject's consciousness to arrive at a point of understanding who they are, will be analysed. The self is constituted by and in such societal interplays.

An Ambivalent Self: Roy Campbell

In his text Roy Campbell adopts the colonial mythologies in *remembering* the self that came into being at the time. Campbell portrays a unique, autonomous self that denotes the vagaries of the white male conqueror let loose in the proverbial Garden of Eden. The reader cannot fail to see these conceptualisations of self from the opening chapters: as a boy he had a full and wholesome life, hunting wild pigs, killing snakes, and being a crack shot in adolescence. He enacts the masculinities and mythologies generic to the trek by going on a hunt in the then southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) , and later, he is a stuntman doing all sorts of acts such as falling from high places, eating fire, and chewing glass (1951: 243). Later, in Provence, he becomes an accomplished bullfighter, besides being a skilled sailor, expert horseman, swimmer and marksman. He goes to the Spanish Civil War, keeps his charge-sheet "stainlessly" clean, and emerges with an honourable discharge (p. 237). For Campbell, there is no ambivalence insofar as his intellect is concerned: he is above average, a soldier and adventurer. He constructs a transcendental being, capable in almost all fields of knowledge and (masculine) occupations and is a master of languages.

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In true colonialist style, Campbell regards all African men as "boys" and women as "girls". He states positions that are in line with the prevailing ideology of the times, an ideology of apparent exclusion and (conditional) inclusion. At one point he observes: "There is no doubt that the average native is socially inferior to the white man, but he should not and cannot be prevented artificially from becoming his equal, for the good of all concerned" (p. 163). Living in close proximity, in Natal, with African and Indian South Africans does not in any way mediate how his ambivalent self can, through acculturation, be hybridised. Local culture is relegated to a set of "superstitions" (p. 47), symptomatic of a bygone era. The inconsistencies revealed by the need to include, however, are not sustained. Some of the crudities inherent in the text resonate with the discourses of racism and sexism, as the following observation on black-white relationships reveals what I see as apophatic criticism of interracial relationships that anticipate the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act No. 55 of 1949:

> I think it is silly to interbreed, though I have no colour prejudice. Hybrids are rarely any good, except in the case of a donkey stallion and the mare of a horse. When super-annuated English society-tarts take up **n**egro lovers, it is generally a sort of perversion like the exaggerated feeling for dogs and cats. I knew one who went **n**egro in order, as she said, to "study conditions amongst the negroes". Having selected the negro with the largest "condition" she could find, she brought him to Europe. I knew this couple who happened to call on me in a Levantine port … I was working in this town in partnership with three very deeply-coloured Saracen-like gentlemen and they were highly indignant when they saw me sitting at the same table with a negro. I explained it away by saying it was an aunt from South Africa with a dear old faithful servant. It did not help matters when she started wiping his nose for him in front of everybody, and then putting his tie straight.
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> (Campbell 1971: 162-163)

The extract shows the levels at which Campbell inhabits a cognitive prison occasioned by prevailing discourses of the time. Sexism and its corollary, racism, inhere with an exaggerated conceptualisation of himself as the ideal, the yardstick of ideal white malehood. In a sense, and although he hardly wishes to bolster colonialist claims as William Plomer does, he partakes in the enterprise, nevertheless, at the cultural, thus social level. Like Plomer, he was to use the South African landscape for much of his poetic output, and "The Flaming Terrapins" is as fine a poem as any he wrote, confirming his status as a major poetic voice. Even more puzzling are some of his prophetic poems in which he realises the coming consternation over political power that was to engulf South Africa from the 1950s. Poems such as "The Zulu Girl" (the "girl" part is surely instructive as the subject of the poem is actually a mother!), "The Serf", "Rounding the Cape" and others show a foresight about the coming uprisings that few poets reflected at the time.

Campbell, like Paton after him, admires the beauty of the land and its

seductive spirit. The point of identification with a land is a double bind since one cannot conceive of "promised lands" without any inhabitants, hence the ambivalence to the presence of "the Negro". It is this sort of "in-betweenness" about South Africa that he also reflects on in his poem "The Serf".

This nature of the ambivalent, distinctly apophatic self would be challenged by social movements that sort to create spaces of identification for themselves. While Campbell might well have been ignorant of the vast discontent that the polity he took for granted engendered in others, certainly movements such as the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union had begun to tap into an inchoate, nascent nationalism described in graphic detail in Gilbert Coka's autobiography (1991). Such nationalism would be propelled by the second phase to fruition.

The Eternal Alien: Bloke Modisane

A distinctly individualised and communal voice pervades William "Bloke" Modisane's autobiography, *Blame Me on History*. In this text, Modisane extends the ambivalence, the hybridity of the other autobiographies dis-cussed so far. From the provocative title suggesting the author as a mistake of history, the self as a historical subject inscribes the processes by which he views himself as a "mistake" of history. For instance, the text eschews (conventional) chronological ordering of the narratorial self, and it is also significant in that it was written at the apogee of self-exile as a choice open to black South Africans when Modisane left the country in 1959. Nineteen sixty was to be a watershed year in South African politics, – in that year the Sharpeville Massacre conscientised a hitherto uncomprehending world to the brutalities of apartheid; a year in which armed insurrection by the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress became a reality. When Modisane arrived in London later, he appeared on television and, prophetically, warned of a bloodbath that was about to befall South Africa; while this was greeted with guffaws, the bloody massacre of 69 protestors in Sharpeville did happen almost a year after he had left South Africa. What followed after 1960 in terms of South African autobiographical writings could not ignore these seismic changes to the body politic, except as an act of wilful self-blinding. Indeed, Modisane chooses a moment in time that demonstrates the tearing down of certainties, and he compresses such destruction with his *self*. This communal self acts as a voice protesting at the loss of place. The autobiography begins with the destruction of Sophiatown, the freehold African suburb whose demolition began on 10 February 1955 and took all of three years to complete. Modisane articulates a communal death and sees it as the death of something within himself:

> Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown; it was the winter of 1958, the sky was a cold blue veil which had been immersed

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> in a bleaching solution and then spread out against a concave, the blue filtering through, and tinted by a powder screen of grey; the sun, like the moon of the day, gave off more light than heat, mocking me with its promise of warmth – a fixture against the grey-blue sky – a mirror deflecting the heat and concentrating upon me in my Sophiatown only a reflection.
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> (Modisane 1986: 5)

Here Modisane strives for a language that can best capture his sense of alienated, problematised self. He describes walking through the shattered suburb, mentioning the names of those whose houses were long ago torn down until he stands on the ruins of his own former home. Standing on these ruins, he further accentuates his sense of loss that years later is poignantly refracted by Njabulo S. Ndebele's article.
 "A Home for Intimacy" (1996):

> The house in which I had been born was now ground into the dust and it seemed appropriate that I should be standing there, as if to witness the closing of a cycle of my life in its destruction.
>
> (Modisane 1986: 10)

It is from this position of alienation and desolation that Modisane begins to unravel his sense of self, his growing up in Sophiatown and how with its death he chooses to flee the country. The sense that this enforced uprooting was an injustice provides the narrating self with a launch pad to view his life teleologically as forever linked with this event and place. This is observable when he describes what Sophiatown meant to the community (1986: 16). Describing the same destruction of a community in which he had lived for twelve years, Huddleston is blunter:

> [W]e had to keep the citizens of Johannesburg awake to the plain truth that the Government's scheme was not slum-clearance but robbery: robbery carried out in the interests of and under pressure from the neighbouring white suburbs: a political manoeuvre.
>
> (Huddleston 1956: 139)

In a similar vein, Modisane extrapolates the myriad laws which had kept him at bay as a "native" (in much the same way as awareness grows in Mphahlele). School becomes the place for a questioning self to interrogate what could not be substantiated by observable reality, and, in making sure that he passes examinations, Modisane adopts flattery while disagreeing with his systematic manipulation. Knowing that the history teacher, for instance, could not in any way answer pertinent questions on the origins of his subjugation, he subverts the intentions of the school system. Comment-ing on his history lessons and growing awareness, he writes:

> [H]istory revealed that truth may have a double morality standard; the white man petitioned history to argue his cause and state his case, to represent the truth as he saw it; he invoked the aid and the blessing of God in subjugating the black man and dispossessing him of his land. It was impossible to understand history, it showed a truth I could not accept, so I learned my history of South Africa like a parrot, I reproduced the adjectives describing African chiefs, and for external examinations I added a few of my own adjectives to flatter the white examiners …. And there in Sophiatown I seemed to be walking on the pages of history, a broken, defeated soldier, crushed and humiliated ….
>
> (Modisane 1986: 45-46)

What the passage reveals is a hybridity that arises if such a process of acculturation is denied. On the one hand, the history books describe pre-colonial African leaders in unflattering terms ("malicious", "venomous", "inhuman", "beastly", "godless") which make the sensitive mind recoil from them, cutting the link of identification with that Africa, while in the present the self is told it must grow above a particular station, that it would need at least two thousand years to approximate "European civilisation" (the same kind of alienation Mphahlele mulls over when contemplating the non-physical needs of his narrating self). The conflicting messages create in Modisane an aesthete's personality caught between two cultures but expected to glorify one that he intuitively knows is not authentic. Having grown up in an urban environment with limited cultural outlets for black South Africans, Modisane nevertheless learns to appreciate art and music and to enjoy further reading as a result of his work as a journalist for *Drum* magazine and later as music reviewer for a newspaper called *Golden City Post*. Paradoxically, for him and others, being so educated and holding "respectable" jobs cause further alienation from the community. In effect, the split in identity is felt on both sides of the divide, as the following extract illustrates:

> I am *an eternal alien* between two worlds; the Africans call me a "Situation", by Western standards I am uneducated. If I had my life again, although I would select to be black, I would want a university education, to read philosophy, social psychology and history; in my loneliness I tried to learn too much and live too many lives, I tried to concentrate 2,000 years into thirty. Perhaps Dr. Verwoerd is right: Natives should not be educated beyond certain forms of labour. The inadequate education I received is responsible for my unrequited hunger ….
>
> (1986: 218; my italics)

Since the African community recognises his situatedness as an in-between personality, Modisane tries to join the very world whose culture he presumes to share to some limited extent. However, the strict laws on race separation make it impossible even to mix with enlightened whites:

> I was alienated by a culture which at the same time imposed upon me an observance of its values; but there was always present the provision that if I was law-abiding and accepted the denials of this discriminating civilisation, that if I

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conducted myself – even though I was subhuman – like a civilised man, I might, God willing, be accepted and welcomed into the exclusive club in about 2,000 years. I am a freak, I do presume an appreciation for Western music, art, drama and philosophy; I can rationalise as well as they (educated whites) and using their own systems of assumptions, I presume myself civilised and then set about it by writing a book with the title, *Blame Me on History* which is an assumption that if I am a freak it should not be interpreted as a failure of their education for a Caliban, but a miscalculation of history.

(Modisane 1986: 178-179)

Seen from Bhabha's perspective (1994: 44), Modisane's own version of mimicry occasions a splitting, seeking to be white and yet retaining the native's *avenging anger*. This doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once makes it impossible for the Modisane subject to accept that he is different from township *skollies* as a "situation", but not good enough for the master's table. In an attempt to escape his dilemma, Modisane begins to write short stories, but this soon proves inadequate, just as political involvement soon reveals itself to be less than fulfilling. It is then that he takes a bizarre decision: to enjoy life to the fullest and to make love to as many women as is physically possible. It is a counterpoint to the alcoholism as a bane of educated Africans that Es'kia Mphahlele writes about. Modisane develops morbid habits (1986: 207) until finally he opts for exile.

  Like the opening to the text, the closing paragraph captures the poignancy of the departure:

Then the train entered and puffed its way out of Mafeking, and South Africa and everything I have known, loved and hated remained behind me. I was out of South Africa. But it was no victory or solution, the compulsive agony was still with me, the problem was still with me … [M]y physical life in South Africa had ended.

(Modisane 1986: 311)

The narrator points to a physical excision of himself from South Africa. That also concludes the narrative, but he does not give an account of his life outside of the country, as though his rootedness is to a place, a milieu, and a locality. The end of a South African physical life obviously does not mean the end of life itself, and precisely because he chooses not to narrate that other aspect of his life in other countries (much like Mphahlele, who revisits his re-entry into South Africa after exile in *Afrika My Music*) readers are then tied to "the tyranny of place" in the life of an individual and community. This alienating environment is echoed in Mphahlele's autobiography. How he chafes at these billboard warnings at all times! Having experienced such a constant denial of his hybridity, Modisane eschews further discussion of what the world outside South Africa must have been like, which is in itself a powerful indictment of the country (Gilfillan 1995: 165). Nothing captures Modisane's problematised self better than the musical metaphor he chooses to deploy

when he mentions, sadly and with feeling, that

> my life is like the penny whistle music spinning on eternally with the same repetitive persistency; it is deceptively happy, but all this is on the surface, like the melodic and the harmonic lines of kwela played by the penny …. But contained in it is a sharp hint of pain – almost enjoyed in a sense – as is at times heard in the alto sax of Paul Desmond; the sadness is a rhythm unchanging in its structure, oppressive, dominating and regulating the tonality of laughter and the joy. My life, like kwela, has grown out of the gutters of the slums, from the swelling smells of open drains, out of the pressure of political stress and the endlessness of frustration.
>
> (Modisane 1986: 117)

As South Africa enters its own phase of nation-building, it is no longer enough simply to view another person as racially different from oneself. Instead, linkages of the sort discussed here come to signify new beginnings. The critical phase of ambivalence and the hybridity discussed here point to the role culture plays in mediating self-conceptualisation and -actualisation. That so many South Africans could only find fulfilment of their selves outside of the country points to the important role of adaptation to other cultures. Access to European cultures in South Africa was denied to the ordinary citizen, hence the constant need for flight. Yet the lure of home was strong enough for those who survived to see the dawn of a new era and return to South Africa as South Africans. New beginnings had to be re-configured. Such beginnings had to negotiate the "darkling plain" that the country faced from the sixties through to the eighties, culminating in the tragic death of Chris Hani on 10 April 1993.

In the final analysis, as South Africa enters the 21st century, it faces the difficult task of normalisation across so many sections of its society. Autobiographies in the past ten years are abundant: from writers, politicians, sport personalities, journalists, activists, medical specialists, artists and those in religious orders. All this has contributed to building a considerable oeuvre of informative, often fascinating texts that record participation in the social milieu that is South Africa (Gagiano 2009: 261). Unlike the autobiographies we started out with, Gagiano's study of the past ten years' life writing from South Africa While Mphahlele's assertion regarding the tyranny of place undergirds the autobiographies of the "problematised selves" that black South Africans attest to, there is a sense in which white South Africans explore the idea of "knowing one's place" in the evolving society (Barnard in Gagiano 2006: 3). Gagiano makes the important observation that

> [r]ecent South African autobiographers are as aware of their texts' historical situatedness as of the claims to place and to a shared civil space that they (explicitly or implicitly) stake. Unsurprisingly, during a time when much rewriting of history has been done or demanded on the one hand and when, on the other, so many younger South Africans seem to know or want to know

little about our recent past as a formally divided people, many of the autobiographers consulted here see their works as being in some sense archival contributions. Undertaken by some as a duty or a responsibility, the texts also testify (however modest in tone or intent) to pride taken by the author in his or her contribution to society.

(Gagiano 2009: 262-263)

Gagiano's observations here are important in what might be teased out of them. In the first place, the autobiographers' sense of duty to the diverse communities is profound, and they see their works as a duty. So, while political consensus reigns with regard to "a shared civil space", and the memory of the recent past is still a deeply felt experience, the rewriting of history attests to the embedded sense of an assemblage of the problematic self and the re-evaluation of the post-Enlightenment self. And it is not surprising that as much as the younger generation may wish to forget, memoirs such as Jacob Dlamini's problematic *Native Nostalgia* (2009) hold on to vestiges of a remembered past that makes sense to the authors concerned within the uncertain possible futures of South Africa. While some authors might opt out of South Africa – as J.M. Coetzee's *Youth* (2002) so ably demonstrates – most of these authors see themselves as "co-authors of our history" (Gagiano 2009: 263), and in that sense alone one might postulate that an inchoate, evolving South Africanness is possible that further displaces the problematic and post-Enlightenment selves. Gagiano's survey, which excluded autobiographies by sports personalities, covers, incredibly, hundred-and-five autobiographical acts in total, pointing to the outpouring of the memory and the need to assert both place and identity as intricately linked in the lives of the authors. In these autobiographies, therefore, can be discerned "an anguished sense of ownership that includes responsibility as much as hauntedness". It is therefore not surprising that adjustment to the unfolding historical processes is a major theme (p. 262). But an important proviso that Gagiano notes is that, unsurprisingly, autobiographical practice in South Africa does not reflect the demographics of the land.

  Philip Holden, in analysing Partha Chatterjee's concerns regarding the colonial state and the legacies it leaves for postcolonial studies (2008: 22), notes that Chatterjee explicitly sees the modern state as being unable to achieve the dream of homogeneity, consisting of citizens interacting freely in civil society. Rather, Chatterjee notes that the modern state is subject to the "politics of heterogeneity". For Holden, therefore, the self's relation to the collective is always complex: the self is individuated, yet also a member of a community already recognised by colonial and national polities. Thus, in terms of autobiographical texts we should note that individual and collective selves are perhaps less easily separated than we might initially think (2008: 27-28). Studies in autobiographical practice in South Africa, seen from this perspective of a merging of two selves over what was once contested terrain, will perforce necessitate an epistemological from the stranglehold of Western theorising in the study of autobiography.

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