CHAPTER THREE: `Experiencing identity`: Self-conceptualisation in early and modern South African communities

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The preceding chapters have attempted to look at self-conceptualisation as societies changed under the pressures of time. Chapter one examined the critical work on self-writing and chapter two looked at how life-writing spread in societies where the practice became common currency to such an extent that slaves adopted it. In the present chapter, I examine pre-colonial and modern conceptions of selfhood within African communities as a way of forming a link with the preceding chapters.

As we have seen, scholars who share Sidonie Smith’s thinking (1992), locate the rise of individuation within the enlightenment period, and later within the spread of commerce through capital accumulation which became possible with the Industrial Revolution. While in no way disregarding the intricacies of this argument or of the historical events to which it refers, we must not forget that, at, say, the time of the French Revolution, larger communities were being created in the southern hemisphere, and by individuals with as much ambition as Napoleon. In this instance we may speak of Tshaka, King of the Zulu nation, who in twelve short years built an
empire that could, in its day, rival militarily superior nations. For such figure, a sense of his own individuality – the conviction that he was a person of destiny - had to begin with the triumph of his subjectification (a new capacity for self-determined agency) over another form of subjection (such as loyalty to a monarch or chief). This implies that identities are formed in the interaction between objectivizations that society makes of persons and groups and subjectivizations that people themselves are able to create (Birgitta Svensson, 1997: 71-104). The biography of Tshaka persuasively illustrates how the seal of subjection can be broken. In the process, an individual, answerable to a higher authority such as that wielded by a king or chief over his subjects (an authority traditional in most pre-colonial societies) begins to construct a subjectivity in order to inscribe his/her own ‘seal’. This process entails the necessity of self-mastery, self-knowledge, self-expression and self-fulfillment.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to show how individuation was as much a part of the African milieu as of any other. Indeed, secondary readings such as D.P. Kunene’s Heroic Poetry of the Basotho (Oxford, 1971) cogently illustrate this point. It is accepted that most pre-colonial African societies were oral ones, that is, they had not evolved writing as a means of communication. But it makes no sense to see their art forms as ‘primitive’ and ‘backward’. Kunene’s text is selected from a host of others for reasons of locality – Southern Africa - but also because the author is a world-renowned oral literature practitioner and educationist. He engages the reader in a sophisticated and thoroughgoing analysis of heroic poetry in which, for our purposes, we begin to see how speakers for communities conceived of themselves as subjects-in-the-world while perceiving objects-in-the-world. Also, it is important to realise that a great deal of what Europe came to know about African communities was mediated through the biased comments and writings of explorers’ travelogues and missionary accounts. This unfortunate fact is why, in today’s terminology, we may distinguish between trained native and untrained or alien ethnographers. The myths about pre-colonial African societies constructed by untrained, non-native ethnographers have not been easy to displace, and have endured in many ways: indeed, they have even significantly influenced diasporic African communities. It is useful, at this point, to consider the myth of the African as a ‘noble savage’, a ‘perpetual child’. A ready example of such tenacity, found in Kunene’s introduction, illustrates this mythologising aspect of missionary explorations. He writes of two
white missionaries who, in describing the performance of oral poetry by a native, choose to say:

In a large gathering, sitting round waiting to hear a royal message, a man seems suddenly seized by an irresistible devil \([sic!]\). He leaps forward, parades in front of his friends, his head held high, his eyes large and staring, his face contorted, his voice raised in pitch, making violent gestures; he declaims his praises but without varying the intonation of his voice, and with such a stream of words that it is difficult to understand all the words. He goes on and on as if deluded, possessed and mad, and when he reaches the end of his long poem, he engages in several wild capers, his feet kicking the dust around him, sketching with his hand the gestures of a warrior hitting his enemy or stabbing him with a spear. Then his features relax, a contented smile takes place of the ferocious expression of a moment ago and he goes calmly back to his place among his friends, to listen to and admire the grimaces of him who has replaced him in this strange exercise. The white man laughs, finding this infantile, ridiculous and grotesque. As for the black man, he admires, he exults at this spectacle which for him is worthy of heroes and which responds to his most intimate ideas and to all that is virile in him. (Kunene, 1971, xii)

This passage makes it easy to perceive why non-native ethnography is still difficult to accept in Africa. There is no ‘identity’ here but an ‘irresistible devil’ who causes madness, whose prime form of expression is ‘wild gesticulations, contortions, violent gestures’. Clearly, in the view of the outsider, this performer has no idea of ‘poetry’, for his tone is raised high, with little or no variation, despite the length of his poem. Delusion, madness and fawning praise are standard in this poetic expression. Thus ‘the white man laughs’. Of course he should, for he is among a community which he perceives as composed of perpetual ‘infants’ (the kind of thinking, as we shall see, displayed by Smuts), whose most intimate ideology remains at the virility stage. Early ethnographers conflated ‘civilisation’ with maturity, and, finding communities with a different culture from theirs, labelled them as centres of ‘perpetual childhood’. It must be added, however, that not all non-native ethnographers display this uncouthness towards cultures not their own. Hoyt
Alverson’s text, Mind in the Heart of Darkness: Value and Self-Identity among the Tswana of Southern Africa (1978), falls into this category. As we shall note with Alverson’s study, the ethnographer who confers agency on his subjects makes more sense of their cultural practices than one who comes with pre-conceived notions of ‘native’ practices. Svensson (1997, 91) opines thus on this area: ‘One’s personal cultural competence is decisive for who one becomes, the identity one acquires. A sure self-identity is important if one is to be able to identify what one wants, which in turn expresses who one is. The choice directly reflects the self’. Thus, to understand the poet’s oral performance even within a pre-colonial setting, we need to know what the subject matter of his poem is, when it was composed, and how he locates his being-in-the-world through his poetic rendition.

The purpose of names among African communities

One of Kunene’s important contributions to identification (a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination as Stuart Hall would have it) is through his demonstration of the function of orality in pre-literate societies such as the Sotho. Using heroic poetry as a point of departure, he re-constructs how early Basotho communities conceptualised their being-in-the-world. The poetic rendering of warriors and kings’ heroic deeds in pre-colonial societies, emphasising the virtues of manly prowess, resembled precisely the oral traditions of the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. Thus Kunene begins with the ‘manhood of man’ by showing how the name of a great king, Moshoeshoe, came into being. After a successful cattle raid, Leqopo of the Basotho began to sing his own praises thus:

Ke nna Moshweshwe moshwashwaila wa ha Kadi
Lebeola le beotseng Ramonaheng ditedu.

I am the sharp shearer, the shaver, descendant of Kadi,
The [barber’s] blade that shaved off Ramonaheng’s beard. (Kunene: 1971,1).
Leqopo coins the name ‘Moshweshwe’ on an occasion suitable to himself, thus signaling how he is to be described in future. Prior to this raid, Lepoqo (c. 1786-1870) was an ordinary mortal, but through such a deed of daring, of testing himself against adversity, he can choose a new name and become someone else, for his action has demonstrated depth in personality and courage. This point is re-iterated by M. Damane and P.B Sanders in the introductory chapter to their text, Lithoko: Sotho Praise Poems (1974:13), where they write: ‘After initiation...young warriors were expected to prove their manhood, and they generally did this by cattle-raiding’.

C.M. Bowra explains that cattle-raiding was necessitated neither by starvation nor war. It was mainly to test and acquire one’s place-in-the-world, comparable to the traditional Masai lion-killing rite of passage. Heroic poetry works precisely because it shows that obstacles in the path of the protagonist have been overcome: ‘It works in conditions determined by special conceptions of manhood and honour. It cannot exist unless men believe that human beings are in themselves sufficient objects of interest and that their chief claim is the pursuit of honour through risk’ (Kunene, 8).

Thus, through an accepted cultural praxis of raiding one another, a man comes into ‘being’. Valour was an indispensable aspect of these communities, and conditions under which it was tested included frequent wars, battles, and skirmishes, encounters with wild beasts, hunting expeditions, cattle raids and, generally, the presence of any source of danger to life and property.

Praise poetry, as praxis, also had to do with initiation and the conceptualisation of individuation. Alverson remarks that, among the Tswana, this was seen as a way in which a name (leina) came to acquire deeper meaning for each initiate:
The word “name” (leina) in ordinary usage refers not to a proper designation of a person but to a genre of oral poetry which every Tswana (traditionally, at least) was expected to master – as a composer – in the process of growing up. In former times young adolescents were sent to “initiation schools” where they underwent a complex and lengthy rite-of-passage into adulthood. This rite was an extended period of instruction in the knowledge and skills associated with leading an adult life as a responsible member of Tswana society. As part of this schooling youngsters were taught how to compose poetic formulations which would capture the essential meaning of the various deeds the child would accomplish in the school and later on in adult life. Each child was taught literally how to compose poetic praises of self. Public, poetic self-praising was explicitly taught as a prerequisite to acquiring a proper adult social personality. These praise poems composed to oneself and for everyone are called leina or (literally) “praise names.” (1978, 194)

As we shall see in the following sections, praise poems played, and continue to play, a significant role as autobiographical sites, extending and reinforcing selfhood. Naming in itself is important in that it begins the process. What Alverson relates shows that each initiate symbolically creates ‘experience’. In Alverson’s view, such skillful composition and artistic praises predicate upon the self the epithets of the heroic, which are then central to understanding Tswanan self-identity (192). The Tswana, cognisant of the ‘treasure’ they carry in names, induce behaviour in individuals that attests to the correctness of a particular name, and hence its identification is constantly being made and re-made. Like the Sotho-speaking peoples of Southern Africa, the Tswana believe very strongly that a name is destiny (leina le ya boreelelong). The naming process in the Basotho community is pertinent here if we are to understand how, in constructing eulogies and praise poems, the naming transference and perpetuation were seen as critical. For the Sotho-speaking sub-nationalities of South Africa (Western, Northern and Southern Sotho groups), a common proverb states that names had to be a tag of identity within whose contours and parameters a child had to stay, otherwise a bad name pre-destined its bearer to a life of delinquency, mischief and infamy (ina lebe seromo).26 Here is an extract from Kunene that neatly captures this argument:
In naming a child, the [...]Sotho did not, as a rule, choose a name simply because the parents liked it, but for its relevance to a given situation, or for a certain purpose that the name was supposed to fulfil; this in addition, of course, to naming the child after someone, a relative. There was, besides, the belief that when it grew up, a child might act according to its name. The saying, *Lebitso-lebe ke seromo*, ‘An ugly name makes its bearer behave according to it’, reflects this attitude. Thus choosing a name for a child was a serious matter, and not always an easy one. (13)

Cowardice in these communities was anathema, a way of bringing dishonour to your age set. A ready example of how cowardice - and its consequences in buttressing identity by lineage - was viewed follows, where suspect defecation is used as censure for cowardice:

Mohlang moo ha kgetahala batho,
Yare mapjheha a ikgetha, a ipontsha;
A ngwapaka dithaba,
A hasa thaba ka masepa, mapjheha:
Mapjheha a ipjhehela mesifa!

Mapjheha a tshwarwe, a faolwe, a se tswale!
A ya tswala ba jwang bana?
A ya tswala maperere!

On that day there was a separation of men,
Yea, the cowards separated themselves, and were seen;
And they clawed the mountain-sides,
They splashed the mountain with their liquid excrement,
The cowards splashed their heels with liquid excrement!

Let cowards be apprehended and castrated, and they should not beget!
What kind of issue would they beget?
They would beget [other] cowards! (Kunene, 8-9)
The poem illustrates the importance of lineage, in that the progeny of cowards would have led a harsh existence, the ‘sin of the father’ being translated to subsequent generations. As a means of social control, and of ensuring group cohesion, the value of bravery was significant in that it ensured a particular ethic. It may also be pertinent to point out that surnames proper have a different connotation for the Nguni (Zulu and Xhosa) and Sotho (Tswana, Pedi and Sotho) speakers. In the Sotho cluster, a surname is seboko, and in the Nguni cluster it is called isibongo. The root of these surnames is found in praise names, so that each family must have a praise poem dedicated to it. Praise poets, in turn, are called sibongi/seroki. Thus we understand that ‘praise poems’ (now generically called isibongo/dithoko) of the kind embodied in surnames, were a significant means of identifying the individual, the family, the clan and the extended family and in this way served as (auto)biographical sites of the clan. But, as illustrated above, such sites can embody such characteristics as valour or cowardice and serve as reasons for social ostracism.

In an interesting recent illustration of lineage, the poet Antjie Krog demonstrates how an old witness to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission explained who he was. Punctuating each one of his nineteen generations of forebears by striking his knobkerrie on the floor, Chief Anderson Joyi would not countenance beginning his testimony without outlining his ancestral lineage; and in explaining why he began his testimony in this manner, he said that these names gave his story a “shadow”, placing in perspective what had happened to him. This granted him the ability to endure past and present. This is an important observation in that it demonstrates lineage and how chief Joyi conceives of his selfhood. Of course, as recounted in English by Krog, his preamble resonates with Biblical overtones and does not do justice to its rendition in the Xhosa language:
King Thembu begat Bomoyi; and Bomoyi begat Ceduma; and Ceduma begat Mngutu; and Mngutu begat Nxego; and Nxego begat Dlomo; and Dlomo begat Hala; and Hala begat Madiba; and Madiba begat Thato; and Thato begat Zondwa; and Zondwa begat Ndaba; and Ndaba begat Ngubenuca; and Ngubenuca begat Mtikara; (this is the house where Matanzima comes from, the right-hand house); and Mtikara begat Gangeliswe; and Gangeliswe begat Dalindyebo; and Dalidyebo begat Jongiliswe; and Jongiliswe begat Sabata; and Sabata begat Buyelekaya; and this is where I begin. (1998, 136-7)

Southern African communities, at a time when they were totally unaware of European philosophical discourse, set great store by identity and the politics of identity and identification. An identity that came with a name was seen as both given, as in the proverb, and assumed, as Moshoeshoe’s example illustrates. This kind of concern with naming and identity in Western Europe has long been the subject of scholarly enquiry, seen for example in Jean-Paul Sartre’s The Problem of Method (1963a). The dialectics of subject-object have also long been the concern of Southern African peoples, and the reflective and pre-reflexive debates have been an aspect of their lives too. If, for Sartre, the division is simply to compare written notes on the division of consciousness, it stands to reason that for Moshoeshoe and Tshaka this was not important, since philosophising on such matters did not need to be put in writing: they knew who they wanted to be (nation builders) and acted according to their subjectivizations. This does not suggest that both were non-reflexive individuals, but that life stories (narratives in which one person presents his or her self on the basis of a structured perception of the self) came out of praxis, that is, after concrete action which would then make up life histories (history outside the control of the individual). For the modern conception of selfhood, this becomes the crux between story and history, particularly if the individual is prominent. This points to the close, at times contrasting relationship between personal and public narratives in the form of (auto)biographies and history per se.
Praise poetry as an aspect of modern Identification

The contemporary scene makes us aware that this form of self-conceptualisation is still very much alive within present-day Southern African ethnic groups. Liz Gunner’s fascinating study of Zulu women’s praise poetry confirms this. In her article ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’, she says that ‘the poems are statements of individual identity’ (13). While most Zulu poetry is concerned with individual identity, it is also performed in social events meant for public or group consumption. As Gunner observes, performance in itself is a requirement of this society:

Not to perform (on suitable occasions), to hold back, is regarded as a clumsy, anti-social act, and to perform, even if one cannot be outstanding, is highly approved of. Composing praises and participating in praising is part of the way in which an individual conforms to the high value which the culture still places on the verbal, vocal and dramatic skills. (as quoted by Coullie: 1999, 67)

Gunner emphasises the importance of praise poems for a woman since they can make her widely known among her contemporaries. In turn her contemporaries may greet her in their praise poems. Her praise poem, or part of it, may be quoted if she is the topic of conversation, and in this sense a woman’s izibongo stands as a celebration of her personality and achievement. Examining their allusive language, metaphors and forms of parallelism, Gunner divides women’s praise poems into a) those of married women; b) royal women; c) those composed by mothers for their infants (izangelo), and d) those of diviners of the future (izangoma), who are usually women. Such poems are performed on a variety of social occasions, sometimes in the privacy of a homestead, often in open courtyards or fields. Since great store is placed by rural communities on the marital status of women, it is incumbent on such women to act in unison as a group, emphasising group identity. Thus, it is highly unlikely to find a married woman constantly in the company of the unmarried, and in her own group she will be expected to perform accordingly. Apart from much else, what the praise poem does is to locate its subject within a particular milieu, and
Gunner concludes that to be known by a praise poem is to strengthen one’s sense of belonging to a community and cultural group. Coullie goes further. In her appraisal, she notes that praise poems, as autobiographical utterances and sites of biographical details of the family and clan, serve a wider purpose:

The praise poem...is a statement of identity in community, its appeal lying in social anchoring and the pleasures of performance and the performer, whether that be the subject of the poem or not, and the auditors. Instead of a developmental depiction of a subject, of a self split between the private, interiorized ‘real’ and the public persona, the self in oral poetry is addressed as a knowable, stable and unified entity. The subject is hailed, interpellated, known, through the praises, to him-/herself and to members of the community. Instead of the economy of personal revelation, of individualised confession, oral forms rely on communalism, on shared knowledge and ritual, on conformity and concord. (1999, 72)

The praise poems act as vehicles for identification, though, as Coullie notes, the entity of self is seen as remarkably stable. This is because, as she observes, there is little ‘scission’ between past and present:
Praise poems do not need to convey a linear, quantified sense of history in which causality and secularist logic predominate because in unadulterated South African cultures there is no scission between knowledge and belief, the secular/material and the religious, as there is in settler culture...The hailing of the subject in praise poetry thus carries with it a significance beyond an obvious social recognition. The subject of the poem is defined, identified, recognized, named adjectivally for living auditors and for the ancestors. The subject is situated in an almost unpunctuated stream of time, from the past of the ancestors to the future generations who may invoke the subject through the performance of the praises. The whole subject – physical, psychological, and spiritual - is hailed. A person is not construed in terms of the Western separation of technologies for mind and body and soul (represented in the largely incompatible and highly specialised disciplines of psychology, medicine and theology). Individual southern cultures conceive of being as a continuous state. (1999, 75-6)

What is discernible in Coullie’s observations are two vastly different kinds of ontology - Western and African - which carry with them divergent values in terms of aesthetics, forms, and techniques with regard to self-representation. Both modes arise from a need to fix, define and construct an identity. In narrative, autobiography emanates from the authorial self, while in praise poetry it issues from the community and the self (Coullie, 62). Yet, as with many other forms of post-colonial baggage, Black Southern African autobiographers have adopted the Western mode of constructing identities. Jane Watts observes that South African black autobiographies seek identification with the community, giving it a voice through representation:

The form does seem in many ways peculiarly adapted to the needs of South African writers, absorbed as they are with their own and their people’s search for identity, with the evolution of consciousness, with the attempt to make sense of their life and condition. (1989, 108)

It must be added too that apartheid’s miasmic atmosphere made even knowledgeable white academics behave out of character: with few exceptions, the majority completely ignored the rich oral heritage of Southern Africa, seeing it as
part of the uncultured, thus uncouth, nature of the ‘natives’. The ignorance of such a cultural heritage was driven by ideology, for to acknowledge African ontologies and teleologies was to give them a cultural history at odds with apartheid thinking. The paradox, of course, was that when it became necessary to understand the ‘natives’, subjects and departments such as Bantu Studies and Volkunde sprang up at some universities with curricula in keeping with apartheid ideology, in which whole cultural practices were invented, rarified and thrust down the throats of the ‘natives’. It was left to ‘native’ scholars to produce literature on orality and oral literature itself. These included Z.D. Mangoeala, E.S. Segoete, Sol T. Plaatje, B.W. Vilakazi, H.I.E. Dhlomo, Godfrey Pitje and C.T.D. Marivate.28

The Self-in-Others

A less exalted but equally crucial way in which African individuals define themselves, for the purposes of the present discussion, may be defined as ‘self-in-others’. Because of the strong bonds of kinship within African communities, it is virtually impossible for one’s identity not to have external or group referentials. This is a phenomenon in which, should someone meet the individual, they can easily recognise an identity that has to do with significant others, witnessed for instance through one’s surname. This ‘being-for-others’, or ‘self-in-others’, comes close to the African understanding of being in the world because others are manifestly there and because the identity of an individual depends on the existence of other people. A common saying in Southern African communities, motho ke motho ka batho/imuntu ngu muntu nga bantu (literally, a person is a person through other human beings), which describes the process whereby one’s humanity is confirmed by people to whom one is related or by bonds of friendship. This major plank in the edifice of Southern African communities’ life conceptualisations has evolved as a philosophical discourse called botho/ubuntu. Although not specific to Southern Africa - sharing central tenets with Christianity and Socialism - it has become the key manner of describing the worldview of the region’s peoples. It operates both at a macro and micro level - that is, it may be used at the national level to urge participation in government initiatives, or at the personal level where an individual feels incomplete.
A ready example – at the micro level – of the feeling that a self cannot exist without a community around it is given by Sindiwe Magona who, in Forced to Grow, recounts visiting the United States of America as a student. What her text reveals is a deep sense of dislocation when all the individuals whose presence used to assure her of her identity are absent from her milieu: ‘[N]ow I was alone. Absolutely petrified, I saw how insignificant my new-found independent living made me. I was nobody. I counted for nothing’ (1992, 207). This strong illustration of a sense of identification, a ‘self-in-others’, though often seen in Western terms as typically female, is also applicable to African males. What Magona attests to is that, for her, such human relationships as those she enjoyed in Gugulethu township sustained her: the image she writes about of herself as a ‘faceless blob’ is particularly striking in that, though she is alive, she feels unrecognised and unrecognisable, thus robbed of a sense of who she is, a sense also determined by how others see her (face). As a daughter, sibling and mother, she knows her township persona operates on three levels, so that she is recognised by elders, that is, by those of her mother’s generation, by the younger generation of her younger siblings – who use ‘Sisi’ to describe her – and by her own children’s generation. Thus her sense of identity would be multifaceted. An individual may not know that she is Thembeka’s mother, for instance, but would know that she is MaNtumbeza’s daughter, and so on. To overcome this sense of dislocation, Magona draws her Ugandan friend, Erlin, into an arrangement: they will call each other at least once a day in order to confirm that they are both alive and well, even if it means letting the telephone ring twice without a verbal exchange. As she says, this method of communication ‘not only kept me sane but increased my appreciation of my children and my family. These were the people with whom I identified myself. They gave meaning to the life I lived, the me I knew, and whatever tranquillity I enjoyed’ (208).

Thus, it is possible to realise that, whereas self-definition as encapsulated by praise poems is one way in which individuals experience their subjectivity, the need for definition as conferred by others is also strong.

It should be stated that the stages of African self-conceptualisations described so far in this chapter operate simultaneously as an endless process of dialogism. For the initial phase, a child’s name is chosen by the parents and no child has control over such a process. Yet the same name can be incorporated into a
praise poem in order to differentiate the individual from others, while the self-in-others stage cannot be avoided, for the individual is constantly surrounded by it. From the time individuals are born, they are so-and-so’s child. Later, as they grow, they are so-and-so’s brother, sister and cousin. Much later, should they so choose, they become so-and-so’s wife and husband, and so-and-so’s parent, until they become grandparents, and later join in their progeny’s ancestry. Hence Magona entitles her first autobiographical instalment To My Children’s Children (1991). What she attempts to do is meld the oral and the written traditions and communicate directly with descendants who are not living, at least at the time when both instalments were written. The opening of the first book reads: ‘Child of the Child of My Child. As ours is an oral tradition I would like you to hear from my own lips what it was like living in the 1940s onwards. What it was like in the times of your great-grandmother, me…’ (1: italics in the original). Magona’s second text, Forced to Grow (1992), closes in the same oral style with which the first text begins. And since the grandmother would, in a traditional setting, be the storyteller, Magona reverts, at the end, to this mode as her closure: ‘So, my child, that is the story of your great-grandmother. That is the story of where you come from. Listen: ‘Kwathi ke kaloku, …’ (231-32). Although in neither of these texts does Magona use praise poems for herself, she uses and minglesthe two other forms of self-definition, and in so doing hopes to leave her intended progeny-audience in no doubt about who she is.

Political identity

A further important strand in the self-definition of black South Africans comes through the resistance they collectively placed at the centre of their political identity. This strand, which begins most tellingly in 1912 with the first political organisation being set up by themselves, reflects the twentieth century as a period of resistance and protest about lack of political power, and becomes a major theme of twentieth-century South African history.

At the turn of the twentieth century, from 1899 to 1902, Britain and a section of South African whites, the Afrikaners, fought a war which resulted in the two Boer (Afrikaner) republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal joining the other
two provinces ruled by the British, the Cape Colony (since 1806) and Natal. Thereafter, Britain wooed the defeated Afrikaners into forming a union of political power, which resulted in the Union of South Africa in 1910. Anthony W. Marx’s remarkable study, Making Race and Nation, sets out with clarity and calm authority the way in which the idea of a union was conceived, with its obvious benefits, but also the impetus behind such an initiative, the ‘native problem’:

In 1906, one of Milner’s aides wrote what came to be known as the Shelborne memorandum. This text sets out British interest with astonishing clarity, advocating the formalization of a single state based on a union of English and Afrikaners. The division of South Africa among “separate governments” of colonies and defeated republics was decried, not least because these polities did not correspond with the “natural conditions … the division of race” unifying whites. Disunion was further decried for the resulting lack of coordination of railway development and fiscal policy, but it was “the native problem” that was most significant. Without a “federal union of some sort,” whites would never be able to defend themselves from the majority. This problem prompted the obvious solution: “a fusion of thought, aim and blood between British and Boer stock” and “political institutions “that would give expression to such “unified South African nationality” based on “the mutual respect begotten in the arduous struggle” of the war. (1998, 93)

What the memorandum thus envisaged was that, out of the blood spilt, a state would arise, but not a unified nation. Britain was intent on consolidating its imperial conquest, and the imperative for consolidating its control over its prize was worth much more than any moral commitment to blacks (Marx, 94). Imperial states need noble reasons to go to war, and, ironically, in this instance Britain’s stated reasons had been ‘to protect the natives’ (Paton, 52). Black South Africans, excluded from the Union, remained discontented, and the various changes that came over the country from the beginning of the union saw their description, and hence their identities, changed accordingly. First, black South Africans were called ‘Natives’, that is, native to the land. Then they became known as ‘Kaffirs’, that is, non-believers in Christianity. Then it was decided by government to call them ‘Plurals’ as a way of
describing the various ethnic groups of the country. Later, they were known as ‘Bantus’ (singular ‘muntu’). This arose from the Nguni word for people, which is ‘abantu’. At times this group of South Africans was known as ‘non-Europeans’ and ‘non-whites’. Until fairly recently, that is, towards the close of 20th century, these were the official identities of black South Africans until they in turn gave way to the new appellation ‘Blacks’. Currently, however, the appellation ‘blacks’ has given way to ‘people of colour’ in mainstream newspapers. The changes denote the various phases in which the political order of South Africa became contested terrain, and this contestation had to do with the denial of identity to the major section of the populace. The various stages of the struggles for self-definition (the term ‘black South African’ was favoured by the blacks themselves) illustrate the fact that an identity imposed from without can have serious repercussions if the recipient does not agree with it. More specifically, such an identity, as in the case of South Africa, carries with it ideological overtones that make it impossible to accept.

The Anglo-Boer War had given the Afrikaners a sense of themselves as a people. The act of war, with its metaphors of crucible, fire and brimstone, forged an identity that had not been there, or at least at the time was not as binding on Afrikaners as a feeling of being under threat of annihilation. Commenting on just such a process, Chinua Achebe reminds us that identities are malleable, contingent, and evolving:

The duration of awareness, of consciousness of an identity, has really very little to do with how deep it is. You suddenly become aware of an identity which you have been suffering from for a long time without even knowing. For instance, take the Igbo people. In my area, historically, they did not see themselves as Igbo. They saw themselves as people of this village or that village. In fact in some places “Igbo” was a word of abuse; they were the “other” people, down in the bush. And yet, after the experience of the Biafran War, during a period of two years, it became a powerful consciousness. But it was real all the time. They spoke the same language, called “Igbo,” even though they were not using that identity in any way. But the moment came when this identity became very, very powerful … and over a very short period of time.
What Achebe recognises in his own West African situation is also applicable to South African Afrikaners. The Igbo communities shared a language, but were not, in the strictest sense of the word Igbo (at least to themselves), ‘Igbos’. But the identity that came with the war, and the manner in which, in northern Nigeria, they came to be known as Igbo, and thus to be singled out for massacres, accounts for their adopting the identity, not as ‘people down in the bush’, but as themselves. Similarly, the term ‘Afrikaner’ was hardly known among the people who later became Afrikaners. For much of the eighteenth, and even well into the nineteenth century, they still called themselves Dutchmen and women, descendants of those who had arrived in 1652. But, as Vernon February shows in his text Mind Your Colour, the civil disobedience of one Hendrik Bibault with his cri de coeur in the streets of Stellenbosch in 1705, shouting ‘Ik ben enn Africaander’, later led this to become the collective term for white South Africans of Dutch descent. War would later harden this identity.30

A further qualification is necessary. The term ‘South African’, as may be seen from the preceding, was for a long time an arbitrary, messy and slippery one. Among the authors of almost 120 autobiographical texts, who can claim to be an authentic ‘South African’? Coullie again provides some useful insights:
The term ‘South African’ is used rather loosely here to include autobiographies by people who were born in South Africa as well as those who were born elsewhere but who define themselves as South African or describe their experiences in South Africa. In such cases, ‘South African’ refers to the second aspect of the genre’s defining nomenclature, viz. bios (life), where texts deal with the lived experiences of the author/narrator/protagonist while living in South Africa (never overlooking the arbitrariness of this geographical legacy from colonialism). My reading of these texts as a body of ‘South African’ writing seeks to reaffirm the indissoluble links between all who were subject to this national nightmare, whether categorised as members of the oppressor or oppressed classes and also to contribute - in spite of cogent arguments against the use of such arbitrary historical demarcations - to the reclamation of a (diverse) national identity which is important in the healing process of nation-building. It is well to bear in mind that very many of the autobiographers were denied South African citizenship when they wrote their texts. (1991, 10)

The qualifiers that Coullie adds - the arbitrariness of colonial legacies, the nightmare of identities denied and withheld, the tenacious will to self-define the author/narrator/protagonist as ‘South African’ - all point to the difficulties an undertaking such as classification can involve. Concomitant with Coullie’s qualification, therefore, I will provisionally accept that the second aspect of the defining features of autobiography, that is, bios (life) within certain recognisable national boundaries, be the yardstick which will guide the discussion of the texts. However, I have to add a qualifier at this point: ‘South African’ was for many years both a term of use and abuse, particularly by members of the oppressor class who were either born in the country, or arrived in it as immigrants. Those from the oppressor class who benefited most from the oppression of the black South African almost always took flight: nothing illustrates this fact more than the autobiographies of William Plomer, The South African Autobiography (1984), Dan Jacobson’s Time and Time Again: Autobiographies (1985), and Christopher Hope’s White Boy Running (1988). This is not to score a moral point in relation to the project of nation-building and reconciliation currently under way: it is to make a distinctive delineation of those
who, precisely because of an accident of birth, could choose to take flight from South Africa. In a sense, they were the beneficiaries of both colonial oppression and apartheid brutalisation of the ‘other’. Materially, educationally and culturally, they benefited from these interlinked processes.

The reverse side of these processes is shown by Gordon Winter’s memoir, Inside Boss: South Africa’s Secret Police (1987). Winter arrived in South Africa from the United Kingdom as a near-destitute, hippie-type of youth with a criminal record. Showing contrition and wishing for a better start, he became a trainee journalist, worked hard and pretty soon fell in with the ‘master race’ philosophy of the Nationalist Government, becoming a state spy who destroyed lives as he passed on confidences from black South Africans to the cynically named Bureau of State Security (BOSS). What Winter says about his actions shows what kind of atmosphere was being engineered by BOSS: ‘One of my first victims was Raphael Tshabalala, the man who taught me about the Pan-Africanist Congress and its anti-Communist policy. I asked Raphael if he knew any black who had been approached [to spy for BOSS]’ (1987, 58). This is a rather difficult autobiographical text to read, precisely because the trust that so many individuals place in Winter is repeatedly broken. Winter uses his political identity to dupe political activists into a web of intrigue leading to their incarceration, torture and possible death. How to define him as a ‘South African’ is truly problematic, since he not only wrought havoc in such a manner that lives were sometimes lost through his spying, but he later fled the country, made himself a good book deal and presumably lives on the proceeds. Winter, like most immigrants in South Africa, did not pause to decide if the oppression of blacks by whites was necessarily a bad thing. The giveaway, in his account, is the alacrity with which he signed up for BOSS, because, as he relates, he was repaying South Africa’s ‘kindness’ to him (Winter, 37).

The use of British dual citizenship, that is, the unbroken connectivity of kith and kin to Britain from its former colonies, is also one of the reasons why it is inappropriate to classify individuals who spend time in South Africa as ‘South African’, which again places the reconciliation project under the microscope. Indeed, ‘race’ itself is not a stable signifier in this process of finding out what the self makes of its life and milieu. Commenting on this aspect, Coullie writes:
Race has also been treated as an unstable signifier: although race has been a prime signifier in South Africa, not all individuals belonging to a specific race group define themselves primarily in terms of their official race classification. Many defy racist discourse precisely by refusing their given racial classification. All labels are used provisionally, and with great care to prevent reifying them (1991, 15).

What this signifies is that, while racist thinking was a key aspect of identification as seen by the state, individuals who saw themselves in a different light transgressed the boundaries set by the state. The state itself assisted people who wished to be ‘re-classified’, although the tests to be undertaken in the process were truly bizarre, and in this instance Don Mattera’s *Memory is a Weapon* (1987) comes to mind. Born of ‘Coloured’ and Tsonga parents but tracing his lineage to an Italian grandfather and Tswana grandmother, he still had to undergo a test to ‘prove’ his ‘colouredness’.

Afrikaner nationalism was, of course, not tied solely to the so-called Anglo-Boer war itself. From the time of the Great Trek from the Cape Colony (1838) by those who were then termed the free burghers, to the advent of the war, the Dutch descendants could not tolerate equality in ‘State and the Church’ with anyone not of European descent. Paton explains as follows:

There were many causes of the Trek, but the prime cause was the desire of the Boers to get away from these alien ideas of racial equality which to them were abhorrent. In the course of their trek north, the Boers conquered one black chiefdom after another, they set aside inadequate land for those they conquered, and they finally established their two republics, of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the Transvaal, it was categorically laid down in the constitution that there was to be ‘no equality in Church or State’. It was hardly necessary to say what kind of equality was meant. (1988, 5)31

The National Party’s political triumph in 1948 saw a further consolidation of this position. There was no mistaking how the triumphant administration of Dr Malan, the elected Prime Minister, felt about its ‘manifest’ destiny, as Christopher Hope
illustrates from his autobiography White Boy Running (1988, 50): ‘The incoming administration of Dr Malan wore its distinguishing marks proudly: it was ‘pure’ Nationalist, Calvinist, racialist, isolationist and one hundred per cent Afrikaans; it did not see itself as having a mandate but rather a mission to remake the country in its image’. Paton expands on this triumphalism and the re-making of the country in these terms:

However, one new element would enter into these new politics and the new philosophy, an element noticeable in the days of the old republics. These resurrected doctrines would be given new justification, not merely that of self-preservation, but that of peace and security for all peoples in South Africa. Each race would be given an assurance of the maintenance of its racial identity, of its culture, of its language, of its God-given right to develop along its own lines. ‘Apartheid’ was the keyword of the new politics, but ‘identity’ was the keyword of the new philosophy. Learned men – who should have known better - talked of ‘identity’ endlessly. If the Afrikaner had found his identity, he would help everyone else find it too. And God help those who didn’t want to be helped find it. (7-8, emphasis added)

In this wry extract, Paton comments on the manner in which, in order to protect themselves, the Afrikaners embarked on enforcing ‘identities’ that the recipients did not want. The numerical weakness of the whites in general had much to do with the ‘new thinking’, so that ethnic identities coterminous with the territorial ones that substituted for ‘homelands’ (KwaZulu, Bophuthatswana, QwaQwa, Lebowa, Gazankulu, Venda, KwaNdebele, Kangwane, Transkei and Ciskei) could account for all black South Africans as ‘nations’, with the rest of the country left to the whites. But, as Paton’s last sentence makes clear, this was never going to be a process of free will but only a process of ‘enforced identities’, a process in which those who sought to carve out for themselves different identities from those prescribed by government officials would be doomed. As far as the government was concerned, it was the sole arbiter of what each identity’s parameters and contours were. And it is important in this regard to mention one point: the ethnic variety of whites was not a barrier to all white people being regarded as ‘one race’ which could conceivably be
viewed as ‘one nation’, while the black people were seen as ‘other nations’. White immigrants had merely to subscribe to one of the two official languages, English and Afrikaans (the latter being made an official state language in 1925 by Barry Hertzog) for the schooling of their children, business transactions and general communication. Their languages, which would ethnically distinguish them, were not essential to their being ‘South Africans’, and history had proved, with the French Huguenots, that such assimilation was possible.

Central to the thinking of the new politics was the fact that, since black South Africans spoke various languages, they were ‘different nations’. It must not be thought, however, that the era from 1910 to 1948 passed unproblematically. Far from it. The Prime Ministers who ruled before 1948 tried to out-do each other in showing who was most serious about solving the ‘native problem’. For instance, the reason for the 1934 fusion of Hertzog’s South African Party and Jan Smuts’ Nationalist Party into the United Party was because both saw racial discrimination as the best way for the survival of white South Africans. As Marx observes, Hertzog and Smuts agreed that ‘to build a white nation in South Africa it was essential that the principle of differentiation shall be the principle of native policy’ (102). Dr H. F. Verwoerd was adhering to a time-honoured principle, therefore, when he became Minister of Native Affairs. His ministry became a major avenue for the propagation, proposal and implementation of acts of parliament aimed at emasculating black South Africans through a stringent form of Afrikaner ethnic domination. As Professor Z.K. Matthews commented at the time, Dr Verwoerd seemed determined to get everything African under him, and had the Afrikaans Press supporting his ideas. A history to be written in human blood thus awaited the land. It is infinitely ironic, too, that Paton, with prescience, published his seminal novel Cry, the Beloved Country at the end of January, 1948. On May 26 that same year, the Afrikaner Nationalists came to power.

The uses of self-writing

It is possible for autobiography in the modern sense to be used and conceived as a repository of history. That is, some autobiographers continually de-centre themselves
and highlight the social and political issues of their time. The process of writing is itself important, expressing and filtering experience. As James Olney comments,

The bios of autobiography, we may say, is what the ‘I’ makes of it; yet as recent critics have observed, so far as the finished work is concerned, neither the autos nor the bios is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing – the third element of autobiography assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image as between two mirrors. (1978, 22)

The act of writing, therefore, gives the ‘autos’ and the ‘bios’ a chance to conceive of a form, a presence, of self-conception, with avenues of referentiality and thus of a consciousness. In so doing, an identity is forged in the act of writing and is maintained. It cannot be an identity at odds with that image constantly bounced between an ‘autos’ and a ‘bios’. If we begin with the autobiographies of individuals who lived during the era sketched above, we cannot but be drawn into this historically specific period, for its referentiality in the lives of individuals was profound, making it difficult to ignore the psychic dimensions of a history of racial discrimination and formalized apartheid. While it would be unfortunate to view every life story as having to do with apartheid (a sort of deficit discourse since the writers would see apartheid as the ultimate signifier), it is equally true that most life writings from South Africa do not shirk the ‘socio-political determinants’ of their day. Some critics, such as Paul John Eakin (1985, 3), are adamant that the separation between autobiographers as historians and as literary artists is untenable: ‘They perform willy-nilly both as artists and historians, negotiating in narrative passage the freedoms of imaginative creation on the one hand and the constraints of biographical fact on the other.’ Or, as Karl J. Weinstraub implies, self-conception cannot be without a definite locale, for self has to be seen to be in the act of becoming in a particular environment and place:
It would seem that autobiography adheres more closely to the true potential of the genre the more its real subject matter is character, personality, self-conception - all those difficult-to-define matters which ultimately determine the inner coherence and the meaning of a life. Real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout inter-related experience. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions interpenetrate easily, but are all centred upon an aware self aware of its relation to its experiences. (1974, 824)

It is the inter-related experience of much the subject’s life that draws us as readers to an autobiographical text, the more so if and when it displays that difficult to define aspect of life: character. As readers, we are vicariously transported to space and time that gave the displayed self meaning.

Forging and resisting identities in South African autobiographies

In examining how African self-conceptualisation has evolved, it is clear that the colonial baggage carried by people of African descent has deeply affected the processes of self-representation, self-formation, and identity. Many autobiographical texts from South Africa grapple precisely with this: self-presentation of a character against the backdrop of a larger canvas of the challenges of growing up and maturing in a (then) divided country and society. ‘Life-writing’ attempts to portray a life as understood by the subject, a life being lived and reflected upon. In many instances this is a kind of justification of a life whose narrativity becomes exceptional, whose contours and parameters the autobiographical act seeks to recount as justifiable and justified. The design of autobiography may be a quest to bear testimony to the imagined, constructed self fashioned out of the act of writing. But what this act of construction deploys as its raison d’être is its witness to truth in the details of the ‘narrative’. Unlike fiction, the autobiographical act, at its core,
places ‘truth’ as its underlying motive, particularly since the reading public may make it a point to check for factual accuracy (or inaccuracy). The subject operates on the assumption that what it discloses is believable and germane to the interests of itself and the reader. Hence it is this self that constructs meaning, thereby locating itself discursively as a site of meaning. Thus autobiographical acts are seen as literature. And yet it important, always, to read these texts not as transparent historical documents (which would defeat the aims of the texts as literature). A caveat by Linda Gilfillan (1995, 13) here is appropriate:

The writing of autobiography at such a moment has a variety of functions, including the following: it tells black people “who they are, and where they come from, and what they should be doing about [their oppression]” (Mphahlele 1981b:44); it “documents” black people’s “physical and human settings in stark, grim detail” (Mphahlele 1987:54). However, it would be inappropriate to the present task to read these autobiographies as transparent historical documents or anthropological source-books, texts “non-Africans, desiring to discover some putative “truth about black Africa”, might mine. (Christie et al 1980:122)

The examples used herein under seek to illustrate in minute detail aspects of resistance and the forging of alternative, counter-hegemonic identities. And although I do necessarily concentrate on black autobiographers to the exclusion of others, I believe that since this is the group denied the agency to forge its own identity, the preponderance of the majority of examples used are taken from this racial group because it was the one whose struggles with authoritarian engineering was more eminent. The function, therefore, of bearing witness is utilized by these autobiographers, forming what Gilfillan theorises as ‘affirmative deconstruction’. (13)

If we theorise literature as a social institution, then it is important to understand how literature can be seen as ‘a field of institutionally regulated textual uses, functions and effects’, and not as ‘a formally unified set of practices of writing in need to be explained socially but as, precisely, a specific region of sociality’ (Tony Bennet as quoted by James Ogude, ‘The Sociality of Literature’: 1998, 3). Literature has to be understood, in this instance, in the context of changing social practices with which it is contemporaneously co-existent. Thus it opens itself to intertextuality
and dialogic engagement between itself and other ‘adjacent zones of institutionally regulated practices’ (qtd in Ogude, 3). If we see, as has happened in South Africa, racism as an institutionalised social practice, then ‘life-writing’ as literature seeks a systemic and systematic engagement with that institution which proscribes the self’s humanity. This strand of identity construction and interrogation of the self assumes a teleologic understanding of it-self and its world. Starting with Peter Abrahams’ Tell Freedom (1954), Es’kia Mphahlele’s Down Second Avenue (1959), Albert Luthuli’s Let My People Go (1962), and including Mark Mathabane’s excoriating Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth’s Coming of Age in South Africa (1986) and Kaffir Boy in America: An Encounter with Apartheid (1989), South African autobiographers could not fashion a self that was not in some important way linked to institutionalised racism. Apartheid sought to construct an identity of the African as timeless, fixed, immutable. Over-stressing the fixedness of African ethnicity as ‘biological’ while viewing [the] white South African component as homogenous, the fact is that this component comprised the following ethnic constituencies: English, Welsh, Scots, Afrikaner, Portuguese, Australian, Polish, Jewish, Italian, German, and Greek. Pertinently, this configuration of whites as a ‘race’ excluded the Chinese and Indian South Africans. While the Chinese were designated ‘honorary whites’, the Indians remained Indians. All this made ethnic identity a big lie, as was life under apartheid. Es’kia Mphahlele noted concerning life under such a system: ‘[Blacks] tell whites a million lies a day in this country. First, because we have to survive, second, because they themselves already live a big lie.’ (1984, 6-7)

Thus, if we are to make sense of any South African identity as it appears in autobiographical writings, we need to grapple with the construction of identities within a framework of institutionalised racism. Racial classification under South Africa’s laws was one of the most confusing and debilitating areas of living in a divisive and divided society. For instance, it was possible for a white person to apply to be classified ‘Coloured’, i.e., as a bi-racial individual. It was also possible for a bi-racial person to apply to be classified ‘white’. It was not possible, however, for any individual to apply to be classified as ‘black’ by choice, or to change from being originally classified as ‘black’ to being re-classified as ‘white’. Primarily this was because re-classifying a ‘white’ person would have played havoc with the myriad laws pertaining to every aspect of that individual’s life such as housing, education,
taxation, marriage, sports life, use of amenities and so forth. And yet, in all their absurdities, apartheid laws decreed that any visiting African-American was, for the duration of his or her stay, to be classified as an ‘honorary white’, thus affording the visitor the benefit of using the hotels and other facilities which such an individual took for granted in the United States. For the purposes of this discussion, the following schemata of South African citizenship will apply: white equalled ‘first class citizen’, Indian/Asian equalled ‘second class citizen’, biracial equalled ‘third class citizen’, and black equalled ‘fourth class citizen’ or ‘foreign native’. It must be noted, however, that over the years there was significant overlap between the second and third citizenship, particularly in terms of state-designated amenities.

In the South African situation of institutionalised racism, expression and identity were irrevocably interlinked with constraints such as location, period and ‘citizenship’. As Stuart Hall has noted,

...actually identities are about using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside of representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as ‘the changing same’ (Gilroy, 1994): not the so-called return to roots but a coming to terms with our ‘routes’. They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field. (1996, 4)

In this extract Hall points to how, in speaking about our innate ‘identities’, we are actually positioning ourselves in history: that is, we use the historical, linguistic and cultural treasure troves we have inherited to position ourselves in the present. The manner in which we access our selves is through the narrative of history. In this
manner we arrive at ‘who we are’, given that we cannot be without reference to those who preceded us: we represent ourselves by reaching into the past to justify our representation of ourselves and how we perceive ourselves. In this sense, therefore, the three categories around which identity hinges - history, language and culture - tend to operate at an interpellative level of discourse. For instance, we do not, as a rule, imagine a pre-linguistic self, and a state of being pre-linguistic seems rather too far-fetched. Most of us would accept that, while culture evolves and in that evolution buttresses both language and history, we of necessity relate to those from whom we sprang, be it the Gauls for the French, the initial Dutch settlers for the Afrikaners, the Celtic and Scandinavian nomads for the British, Shaka for the Zulus, Mosheshoe for the Basotho, and so forth. It is in this manner that one understands Chief Albert Luthuli when, at the beginning his narrative, he makes a case for ‘The Home of My Fathers’ in chapter one. Significantly, he places himself in the grand narrative of the Zulu people, thus endorsing his ethnic identity (though, as the narrative progresses, one notes that he chooses not to wallow in it):

At the time when the Battle of Waterloo brought to an end the turbulent and disruptive career of the Emperor Napoleon, a man of similar ambition came to power in far-off and little-known Zululand. In a brief twelve-year reign, Shaka, undoubtedly the greatest of the Zulu kings, welded a number of bickering clans into a strong united nation...Groutville is my home, and the home of my fathers. (17-19)

A number of interesting observations points about the discourse on identity can be teased from the extract. There is, for example historical depth: the use of Shaka in the ‘father of the nation’ mode of identification when writing of one’s Zulu background, seen as having been ambitious as Napoleon. Then there is the creation of a nation as an act of will, and also the territoriality that goes with identity-formation. This is an ethnic identity foregrounded by Luthuli in the opening chapter. For some autobiographers, however, ethnic identity is erased. This can be seen in how the urban-rural divide, the very cornerstone of apartheid ideology, made many black South Africans identify with the cities in which they were born. In her text Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life, Emma Mashinini emphatically disavows an ethnic background in place of a cosmopolitan identity that a city such as
Johannesburg can nurture: ‘I was born on 21 August 1929 at 18 Diagonal Street, Rosettenville...Just across a vacant field from us was the white suburb of Westdene. The field was there to divide us, but black and white children used to meet regularly and play with one another. It seemed the most natural thing to do.’ (3-4). Mashinini conceives her identity in a manner that repulses any notion of an ethnic identity: she is an urbanite. Hence the emphasis on her place of birth: 18 Diagonal Street, in the middle of Johannesburg. While Luthuli makes a case for his ethnic identity through accretion, Mashinini works hers through deduction and expects the reader to ‘fill in the blanks’ as it were. Secondly, Mashinini grew up in a multicultural era of South African history when race, though pervasive, was not yet institutionalised. In the entire autobiography ethnicity is hardly mentioned. The urban environment breaks down the boundaries of grand apartheid, leading the inhabitants of townships to construct a form of ‘identification’ not anticipated by apartheid engineering. In this case, identification will be taken as a construct.

When 1948 saw the political ascendancy of Afrikaners under the aegis of the National Party, it was particularly their policies which to a large extent reinforced identification within the African communities. As Minister of Native Affairs under the Malan administration, Dr H.F. Verwoerd had an ideal ‘native’ in mind, and creating this ‘native’ required that he attack everything the majority population had achieved thus far, particularly through missionary education. What is of interest is that such a divisive political strategy made it possible to construct the very identification represented as undesirable, that is, identity via negatives. An allegiance cannot come about if it does not place an earlier version of one’s identity under significant threat. Consider what Luthuli renounces as anachronistic thinking here:

The ethnic grouping principle in education and other spheres of life is significant. Africans were very painfully beginning to shed themselves of purely tribal allegiances. Even in the most backward areas they are beginning to see themselves as part of a larger African community, and many made the step of expressing allegiance to South Africa as a whole, and to the family of mankind. (48)

Thus when the attempt to create a Verwoerdian ‘native’ became apparent, Africans who had begun to construct a version of themselves felt wholly deprived of their
identity as being South Africans. From this point in their history, every aspect of black South Africans became ethnicised: marriage, housing, schooling and tertiary education, tenure of land, cultural practices, and authority in the various ethnic reserves. Opposition to any prescribed aspect of black life was from 1948 construed as ‘seditious’. What this means, in effect, is that any form of questioning, of disagreeing with what the state apparatus decreed as germane for Black people was met with a strong message of verboten since the White people in government had the ‘right’ answers. An ‘urge towards self-discovery’ (Watts, 107) became unavoidable.

Exiled from the self: physical, spiritual, and mental exile

One way in which to make sense of South African identities is to read the autobiographies as expressing the metaphor of exile. As a metaphor, exile here may be understood as alienation from one’s truer self and denial of the human spirit, the psychic dimension which, ultimately, leads to physical exile from (or incarceration in) the land. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Mathabane’s Kaffir Boy. Growing up in the township of Alexandra, he experiences the harshness of black life through the unremitting intrusion of police into the community’s affairs. He witnesses the humiliation visited on his parents by the constant demand for legitimacy in ‘white’ South Africa and the utter terror caused by pass raids. Early in the text he makes an observation which, in its starkness, takes the reader beyond the point of shock. His father, the bread-winner, is incarcerated for a pass book offence and has to provide labour for a farmer in the then Eastern Transvaal in near slave-conditions. This leaves his family in serious problems since the mother, seen as an illegal person in the urban area, and un-schooled, cannot find employment. Thus the family actually starves. At some point Mathabane notes how ‘suffering had finally succeeded in penetrating to my very soul and established within my consciousness a certain fear of living’. At the age of ten, he has begun to lose hope: ‘Strangely enough, however, on each birthday I somehow got the feeling that I had aged more than a year. Suffering seemed to age me more than my birthday’ (162). Beyond the cruel childhood Mathabane experiences in a township adjacent to what is the richest
property in South Africa, is the absence of hope in someone so young. Neither school nor home offers any reprieve from the daily grind of hunger, fainting spells and a constant worry about where money for health considerations and food will come from. Gangsterism, the life of a street urchin, beckons and he nearly succumbs. What saves him, paradoxically, is the throw-away rubbish of his grandmother’s employer: a tennis racket and old books, such as Treasure Island, and comic magazines: ‘These books and toys revealed to me a new reality. They moulded my thoughts and feelings and made me dream. My interest in learning increased’ (171).

He develops a voracious reading appetite and a passion for tennis which sees him survive the grimness of the township. Ultimately, he leaves South Africa on a tennis scholarship arranged by the American international player Stan Smith, whom he had the good fortune to meet during a tennis tournament. Yet, as he observes, ‘Deep within me I knew I could never really leave South Africa or Alexandra. I was Alexandra, I was part of what Alan Paton described as “a tragically beautiful land”’ (348). Mathabane chooses physical exile, even while remaining psychically linked to South Africa, just as Es’kia Mphahlele goes into exile in order to find out who he is but uses South Africa as a prop to most of his intellectual output. Down Second Avenue narrates this quest for connectivity, this passionate need to divest oneself of an imposed identity while searching for one’s ‘changing same’. When he is forced to abandon a secondary school post rather than teach Bantu Education as introduced by the Nationalist Party, he goes to Lesotho, ostensibly to teach. He knows that he cannot embrace bitterness, but what he actually wants is unclear: ‘I went to Basutoland in search of something. What it was I didn’t know. But it was there, where it wasn’t, inside me. Perhaps it was hate, maybe love, or both; or sordidness; maybe it was beauty.’ (1959, 184).

Mphahlele, who grew up in the slum of Marabastad, later demolished because of its proximity to Pretoria City, eventually returned to Johannesburg to work as a fiction editor for Drum magazine. But somehow he felt a need for the classroom and this explains his acceptance in September 1957 of a teaching post in Nigeria. The state made much about giving him a passport. This was the beginning of a twenty-year teaching career that later included work in France, Kenya, the United States, and Zambia before an ultimate return to South Africa. More than anything, Mphahlele brings into his quest that extra dimension of someone who, while searching for his
truer self, nevertheless feels duty bound to excel, to be equal to men and women anywhere. He writes movingly of the sense of liberation he felt when in Nigeria. Having been denied his basic humanity, and thus an ability to attain his truer self, he sees the relative ease with which Nigerians live - as though confirming that colonialism is but a phase in their lives - and feels his inner self thaw. He emphasizes that he is drawn to ‘the abundance of humanity in Nigeria and Ghana and their theatrical lifestyles. First there was the scintillating sense of freedom and daytime, after the South African nightmare. You wanted to slow down, shake off the cold sweat after the nightmare had spat you into the full glare of Nigerian daytime.’ (20-21). In a sense, what Mphahlele records is the unreality of his then reality. For him, reality always meant Kafka’s nightmares, not as the literary reflections of a writer’s insights into the breakdown behind the normality of everyday life, but as the normality of everyday life itself (Watts, 110). Hence he comes to identify with South Africa, never rejecting it as he perceives its tyranny of place and time in his life. He later feels the pain of Sharpeville and the Student Uprising of 1976. The two countries, Ghana and Nigeria, function as a restorative for him, so different from an Africa that was being debased in the south:

Yes, Nigeria and Ghana gave Africa back to me.

.....

There we were, urbanites who had not yet shared in the full urban life of the white man in South Africa - where we had felt police terror as children, Rebecca and I; where missionary and government authorities had been tugging away at our souls, each claiming our loyalty, and to hell with the ancient traditions of our people, their humanism. The bonfire - so much for your traditions: the Christian god be praised; Ezekiel is his name, his sins have been washed away... (26-27)

We get here a sense of how angry Mphahlele was, how debilitating the whole religious and state ethos he grew under must have been. First, we witness the ever-present terror of the police, much as in Mathabane’s life. Second, there is the ruthless suppression of what was a defining aspect of his people, their cultural practices, their innate humanism. Third, the labelling aspect of Christianity that was usurped by apartheid’s petty officialdom: from now on you are Ezekiel. In order to
get an officially approved passbook, one accepted any name an official might think fitting - Piet, Kobus, Petrus, John, Mirriam, Gladys, whatever. It is a crucial point to make at this juncture since, when Mphahlele settled down to continue his quest in exile, he decided that, as a name, ‘Ezekiel’ was too Judaic and thus not really himself. In rejecting it in favour of ‘Es’kia’, he also closed the door on Judaeo-Christian heritage in his life. But when he returns to South Africa in 1977, it is to go through a painful experience of being ‘re-processed’, as it were: ‘The moment we arrived in Johannesburg to work at Wits Rebecca and I realised that we were being re-cycled into the ‘Bantu-designated’ stream’ (Afrika My Music, 224). But they have achieved fortitude through years of being abroad, and they bear up.

Before her eventual exile, such worries never troubled someone like Ruth First. In the foreword to her book 117 Days, Albie Sachs movingly captures the kind of person First was, and I quote him at length:

We pride ourselves on belonging to a nonracial organization dedicated to building a nonracial society, but we carry with us a multitude of complexes, whether of inferiority or superiority, very real cultural differences, related principally to language but also to customs, ways of doing things, cuisine, even modes of address and styles of speaking. Growing up as a critic of apartheid in the rich but sterile world of the oppressors in the lush northern suburbs of Johannesburg is not the same thing as growing up in the spartan but vivacious universe of the oppressed in Soweto. How did Ruth respond to this contradiction? For her there was nothing problematic about being in the struggle against national and class domination. South African society was manifestly, even grotesquely, oppressive and everyone had to do everything possible to replace it with something better. There was never any onus on her to justify being in the struggle; on the contrary, the onus was on those outside to justify their nonparticipation. What was important was that she was not a white fighting for the blacks, but a person fighting for her own right to live in a just society, which in the South African context meant destroying the whole system of white domination. (8)

Thus it would be wrong for any reader of Ruth First’s text to perceive here a negative personality. She might seem intimidating, but was she not arrogant or
dismissive. First believed from her student days that apartheid was wrong, and no amount of debate could convince her otherwise. For her, to be white was merely an accident of birth, and she brought all the resources of her privileged background to the struggle which tragically claimed her life. Such observations in these texts illustrate the complexities that needed negotiation in the process of self-definition in South Africa. Such identification is also apparent in Joe Slovo’s Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography. For Slovo, in particular, it was incomprehensible how the Jewish community in South Africa, having known so much pain, could itself inflict unremitting suffering on others (Slovo, 22). An immigrant from Lithuania, Slovo could have ended up in Argentina and become a Latin American with all its cultural implications, if, that is, his father had had his way. Slovo forged his identity in South Africa and created room for himself in the hearts of the oppressed. Thus the struggle for human rights, human dignity, and an identity everyone could be justly proud of, interpellated not only locally born South Africans but immigrants as well. Take, for instance, the kind of identification shown by Michael Dingake’s autobiography My Fight Against Apartheid. Born in neighbouring Botswana, Dingake initially comes to South Africa as a student who later, because of financial constraints, works in Johannesburg in order to save money for tertiary education. Since the concept of ‘foreign native’ does not apply to him. - in apartheid South Africa, non-South African black people were ‘foreign natives’ but were as equally discriminated against as ‘local natives’. Thus Dingake feels the same daily humiliation as Africans in South Africa. This is an angry text, for Dingake describes, in minute detail, just how invidious passes are to black dignity and self-esteem:

The pass laws are a humiliation to African dignity, a scourge to their economic opportunities, and a shameless badge of slavery. Passes - permits, reference books, identity documents, passports, whatever the official form of the moment - are a nightmare to Africans in South Africa. Nightly, they dream of raids on their homes for passes, queueing up at the pass office for passes. (30)

Such statutory identities are also the cause of tremendous harm to the communities. For example, should one’s pass not be in order, one cannot get employment, or even venture out of the township in which one is living. Thus, out of desperation,
individuals begin to socially cannibalise those closest to them by becoming criminals and robbing other community members of their pay (46). Through a combination of anger, frustration and ‘sober consideration’, Dingake joins the African National Congress (ANC) and assumes another facet of his identity by becoming a member of the National Secretariat. He does not contemplate going back to Botswana to save himself when the Emergency of 1962 takes its toll: ‘Running home to Bechuanaland was easier said than done for me. For 16 years I had worked and lived in Johannesburg and many of my friends did not even know my Bechuanaland connections.’ (78). When he does go to Botswana, it is to evade detection by the security police. Unfortunately, during an attempt to visit the ANC in exile in Tanzania, he is kidnapped by the then Rhodesian security police and handed over to their South African counterparts at the Beit Bridge border post. Thus begins a period of fifteen years with hard labour on Robben Island. The rest of the text describes the daily grind of life on the island. Paradoxically, only here does Dingake, under difficult conditions, achieve his ambition for higher education - he leaves the island in 1981 with three degrees.

One of the most remarkable ambiguities of the South African furnace was how it placed individuals at a crossroads: one was either for ‘the struggle’ or not. This is what the narrative of Tim Jenkin, Escape From Pretoria, so movingly captures. As a young man growing up in middle class suburban South Africa, he gets a lesson in realpolitik when a canvasser from the white opposition Progressive Party makes him aware of how limited his choices really are. To make his point he held up a hand with outstretched fingers and said that for every white person there were five choices: joining the Nationalist Party, doing nothing, leaving the country, doing something unconstitutional, or, lastly, joining the Progressive Party (Escape, 10). Three years at university teach him and his friend, Stephen Lee, one thing only: that education reinforces apartheid rule. In the Sociology course he learns, for instance, that everyone in their station served a function, that black people provided the labour which the country needed and that whites had to rule as a result of skills and the tradition of ruling. Any conflicts, it was noted, were brought from outside by communists bent on destroying a perfectly working system of governance (6). Jenkin and Lee begin a systematic process of self-education, reaching for colonial and imperial roots in order to understand their society. They decide, in their final year at
university, to do something ‘unconstitutional’ and join the ANC from Europe. Earlier on, however, Jenkin has to unlearn his naive cultural upbringing. On a visit to Britain in 1970, he writes about how, needing work, he becomes reluctant to take a job in a factory:

> After spending a few weeks with relatives in London I managed to get a job in a glass-fibre factory in Kent. It was on the shop floor and at first I was a bit reluctant to accept it, as I always considered factory work beneath my dignity. In South Africa only blacks worked in factories. (3)

This illustrates the often confusing metamorphosis that most whites had to undergo. When confronted with his naivete about South Africa by friends and relatives, Jenkin becomes aware of the lie he had been living. By joining the exiled ANC organisation, he and Lee assume a dangerous identity, at least as defined by the state. From Europe they return to South Africa to propagate the message that apartheid is wrong. Adopting global Communist party practice, they constitute themselves as a cell and plant numerous leaflet bombs in major cities. Such acts were always meant to coincide with an important event in South African history from the ANC’s point of view: March 21 for the Sharpeville commemoration, June 16 for the Student Uprising, and so forth. Crucially, the two bring into perspective the different ways in which skin pigmentation had sunk into the psyche of South Africa’s body politic:

> Changing premises, purchasing equipment and just doing what we were doing made us realise what an advantage it was to have a white skin while running an underground cell. No one suspected a white person of being engaged in subversive activities against the state - whites were never ‘terrorists’. A white skin was a passport to places where blacks would automatically be under suspicion. (23)

Thus skins (and skeins) of meaning collided in a manner that, for all a white person’s bravery, made the security police fanatically detest anyone caught who happened to be a ‘subversive’. In most instances the police felt ‘betrayed’ by someone whom they were protecting. What was even more annoying for the security police was how the two, Jenkin and Lee, broke down interracial sex barriers and openly flaunted their
lovers: Jenkin with Daphne, a biracial woman he met at the University of Western Cape, and Lee with Feroza, a South African Indian woman. For their troubles, Jenkin and Lee received twelve and eight-year prison sentences respectively.

Possibly the most moving chapter in the text is when, as 'bandiete', Jenkin and Lee 'meet the comrades', that is, all the white political prisoners held in Pretoria Prison. Here, in the 'New European Section', were collected all South Africa's detested white prisoners: Denis Goldberg, Dave Kiston, John Matthews, Alex Moumbaris, Raymond Suttner, Tony Holiday, David Rabkin and Jeremy Cronin. Here jail terms ranged from seven years to three life sentences in the case of Goldberg. These men, whose professional pursuits ranged from law to the academy, all had one identificationary ethos: they were members of a revolutionary organisation, and to that extent shared with Jenkin and Lee their need to escape. Through carving wooden keys and working steadily on all the doors, Jenkin, lee and Moumbaris eventually escaped to Swaziland, then to Angola and re-joined the ANC in Dar es Salaam.

When a reader contemplates other autobiographies by white activists, the picture that emerges is remarkably similar to Jenkin and Lee's in that such activists were raised in families of English-speaking South Africans. Carl Niehaus, on the other hand, is an Afrikaner and suffers the worst backlash from his own family and community. In the brilliantly written Fighting For Hope, Niehaus considers the options open to him as he grows to understand his world, his people, his culture. He calls chapter two 'Learning to see through their eyes'. Yet he seriously wants to know what kind of person he is likely to become, and with what kind of individual he is most likely to feel comfortable (36).

This quest, even during his teenage years, makes him dig into the self in ways that make it easier for the reader to comprehend Afrikanedom. He chooses to reject indoctrination even at high school, but suffers tremendously for his lonely choices, even having debilitating fights with his parents. But, as he writes, when he questions the right of black people to protest, he recognises that he is growing up the hard way: 'That morning in the cloakroom was the forerunner of many occasions when I faced hard decisions which at times were associated with terrible loneliness and even despair' (40). After high school he goes to the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) in Johannesburg and begins to be indoctrinated in the same way that Jenkin
and Lee were at the University of Cape Town. If a skeptic questions why apartheid succeeded so well, the following extract is a useful reminder of how education in ethnically designated universities actually made apartheid succeed:

With few exceptions, our lecturers were conservative and our lectures confined to the dogma advocated by the university. Anthropology was really ethnology. In political science we learned about the Government’s homeland policy, which the university strongly supported, and in philosophy much attention was given to the Dutch philosopher Dooyeweerd’s Calvinistic notion of “sovereignty in one’s own circle”. (50)

The above extract is instructive since it illustrates a number of points: the utter subordination of education to political ends, the longevity of the dream first introduced by Verwoerd (a citizen of the Netherlands who emigrated to South Africa, bringing strong Calvinistic leanings in his philosophy), and the tenacity with which educated Afrikaners, themselves the beneficiaries of the political victory of 1948, could come to buttress apartheid.¹³⁵

When Niehaus begins to question the very basis of apartheid education in the light of on-going agitation for change in the townships, he is met with utter hostility. Eventually suspended from the university for ‘subversive’ activities, he goes to the University of the Witwatersrand where, in student activist circles, he meets further rejection: ‘Virtually from the very first day that I began to attend Nusas [the National Union of South African Students] meetings, rumours began to circulate that I was a spy for the “regime”'(103). While many reasons may be postulated for the callous behaviour of the Wits student leadership, it is instructive to learn how Niehaus finds companionship in the township of Alexandra, where he forges and deepens his own sense of what he would like to be seen as: a South African of Afrikaner stock. In Alexandra he confronts a different youth. He meets individuals such as Obed Bapela and Paul Mashatile. The role of identities and how these may be bridged is illustrated by how Mashatile in particular was fond of calling Niehaus boertjie (little farmer), but in an affectionate and endearing manner, and eventually learns to trust him. Niehaus begins to see how much of their lives is a total commitment to fundamental change:
In their student organisations, sports and youth clubs, they were fighting to preserve their dignity under the apartheid system. They tried bravely to clean up the dirty streets of Alexandra, which had no sewerage system or regular rubbish removal service. At an early age it became clear to them that they had to fight for fundamental change. (87)

It is through his interactions with the Alexandra community that Niehaus finally takes the plunge to become an ANC member, despite its use of violence to overthrow the state. This is not an easy decision, and when he and his then girlfriend are charged with high treason he knows that he can never go back to being a simple South African middle class citizen. Like Ruth First, he attempts suicide, something he only discloses in the book. More than any other individual, Niehaus is candid about how his identity, in the cooped-up environment of prison, was ‘shaped and re-shaped’ (139).

Post-apartheid ‘self-writing’

There appear to be many reasons why autobiographical writings in post-1994 South Africa are being published. Some authors are essentially caught in the paradigm of identity-formation and clarifying their roles in the struggle. Some, however, justify a particular viewpoint to a self that is now ‘almost’ recognisable, that is, they are attempting to find out how they became who they are at this point in South African history. Such a text, for example, is J.M. Coetzee’s Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997) and Youth (2002). Coetzee looks back to a self fifty years ago and analyses the formative years of his life, and arrives, ultimately, at ‘the changing same’ (after Hall: 1996, 3). I believe it was incumbent on Coetzee to write his autobiography since he is, at best, the most misunderstood South African writer with an international reputation. His books are often perceived as ‘cold and sterile’ even when they extensively expose South African reality. The reasons for the texts’ ‘coldness’ might well be that they have the ‘cross-border’ reader in mind; hence some South Africans may feel that they are downright condescending to South Africa itself, with what is perceived as ‘remote intellectualism’. Consider the fact, for
example, that he makes allusions, in his titles, to Flaubert, Tolstoy, and William Cooper, writers virtually unknown to South Africa’s majority population as a result of an anorexic educational system.\textsuperscript{37} At any rate, the autobiography itself is a scrupulous memoir on growing up in a household of mixed parentage, with his mother of German extraction and his father an Afrikaner. As a child, he has to make serious choices about Afrikanerdom, Anglophone culture and even religion since his family is atheist. It is a penetrating study of what it meant to grow up in apartheid South Africa, and at one point, when the question of religion arises, he chooses to be a Roman Catholic and escape the enforced religious observance that Afrikaner students are subjected to. More pertinently, he writes (18):

\begin{quote}
The topic is difficult to raise at home because their family ‘is’ nothing. They are of course South Africans, but even South Africanness is faintly embarrassing, and therefore not talked about, since not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African.
\end{quote}

This is a significant extract because it reveals how South Africanness is contested terrain. The family may be embarrassed, yet are of South Africa with its farms (one of which, in an echo of Michael K, Coetzee sincerely loves) and vales and dales; yet also they are acutely aware, as a family, that some are denied this South African identity. Thus, although Coetzee does not elaborate, in keeping with the incomprehension of youth, as readers we are expected to know what the child narrator leaves out. This is a problematic tactic, particularly since Coetzee chooses the third-person narrative stance; yet, as Shaun De Waal asks: ‘How many people, looking back 50 years...can use “I” without feeling, to some degree, that it means a different person? Many autobiographies are precisely about the mutations of that ‘I’ over time, attempts to gather all those instances of ‘I’ into a coherent whole’.\textsuperscript{38} Thus the child can, dispassionately, discuss racial issues and contentious points quite innocently. To this extent, therefore, settling for the third person allows Coetzee to look back at that evolving ‘self’ with some measure of objectivity. He does not justify himself, makes no grand-sounding disclaimers, but simply reviews his younger self in the light of the recent past. In this way we, as readers, can gauge the porous surfaces through which South African identities slipped during the difficult years.
In this chapter I have attempted a number of fundamental analyses, beginning with and demonstrating the longevity of orature in present-day black South African lives as (auto)biographical sites for clan and the self. I traced this to the manner in which praise poetry has always played a very significant role in the lives of African communities, as shown by Alverson’s analysis of the concept of naming among the Batswana and Kunene’s study of the role of heroic poetry among the Basotho. I pointed out the ‘self-in-others’ as an important strand of identification common in Southern Africa as a further distinguishing feature of autobiographies from the region. I then showed how the processes of acculturation and colonialism bring into being bi-polar social dynamics — for example, repression of Africans — which later results in their resentment and rejection of the ethnicisation of their lives. I have demonstrated how urbanization as a site of political growth brings forth a sort of identification that was not anticipated by apartheid ideologues: witness Magona’s positioning of herself as ancestor to her great-grandchildren within the tradition of orature, Jenkin and Lee’s insurgency, Niehaus’ refusal to be a ‘pure’ Afrikaner and the myriad routes by which Kuzwayo and Mashinini eschew safety and participate in the broader goal of re-configuring South Africa according to the ideals of its inhabitants.

It is becoming clear that we can learn more about South Africa’s human past from reading these autobiographies than through endless re-readings of official history. What emerges essentially are bitter struggles for justice, human rights and dignity. Enmeshed within all these struggles is an attempt to eradicate imposed identities for all. Looked at from that angle, the reader of these texts realises the enormous price paid, but also cannot miss the massive, almost titanic, triumph of will shown by the people. Autobiographies such as Coetzee’s further enrich an already fascinating field of literary discourse.

In the next three chapters, which form Part II of this study, I undertake a close reading of three distinct periods in the evolution and growth of autobiography in South Africa. These chapters are preceded by an introductory section outlining the historical periods and the autobiographical modes prominent in the twentieth-century struggle for South African identity.