CHAPTER FOUR: ‘An eternal alien’: Autobiographical beginnings, 

1900 – 1960

Africa is very difficult to see because it is gun-shaped and heart-shaped. It takes heart to see her. It takes some cultural and racial overcoming. Actually, it takes being a true richly grounded human being to see her without prejudice, superiority or an agenda.

Ben Okri

In this chapter I examine the manner in which South Africans born within the first part of the century articulated their identity and in what ways the idea of 'South Africanness' came about. Twentieth-century South African identity cannot be assumed to have come out of the blue: because of South African colonial history, because of the myriad ways in which white and black inhabitants of the land perceived their enforced separation, it cannot be assumed that all South Africans understood one another as South Africans. To understand how we have arrived at a situation in which the coat of arms of South Africa celebrates unity in diversity because of the polyglot nature of the nation is to explore the ways in which 'identity' was a crucial aspect of defining the citizens of the land and thus the nation.

A nineteenth-century North American intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, once suggested that a major issue of contention in the twentieth-century would be over the question of the ‘color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea’ (1903, 54). It was as
though Du Bois had foreseen the way in which race and racialism would define the world, giving rise to so many of the twentieth century’s problems and struggles. Indeed, for South Africans who penned their life writings early in the century, it is as though there is a compelling need to say something about the racial nature of the society in which they found themselves. Defining one's self made it imperative to speak of the Other and its place in the universe (though, in the contemporary context, such identification is proving more and more difficult). This reflection on a divided society found its earliest articulation in literature, as may be seen in such texts as Thomas Pringle's poem 'Afar in the Desert' and Olive Schreiner's groundbreaking novel, Story of An African Farm (1883). Living in the then British colonies of the Cape and Natal, writers who attended to the beginnings of what would later become known as South African Literature did not on the whole avoid questions thrown up by 'the color line', and later autobiographical writers also wrote on this same topic. Frantz Fanon (1971, 73), writing on aspects of communities closely sharing a geographic space but ideologically apart, postulated that ‘the Manicheanism of the settler [community] produces the Manicheanism of the native [community]’. Race, which over-determines South African culture and society, is central to the process of analysing ontology and epistemology and the relationship between consciousness and the materiality of lives. The relationship between ways of being, seeing and speaking are what might be seen as discursive construction and re-construction of the historical subject.  

Early literary utterances on the racial nature of South African society necessarily had to do with how the society evolved from the so-called Kaffir Wars of conquest in which the African and white communities met at the cutting edge of colonisation. Pringle (1789 -1834) and Schreiner (1855-1920) thus created what Michael Chapman (1981, 16) labels the liberal humanist voice which informed South African poetic activity and reflected the times in which they lived. And this in some instances also became evident in the autobiographies that came to reflect early twentieth-century South Africa. There is thus a strong link, in these early autobiographies, with literature. Poetic expression was seen as the 'educated man's affair' and it is mainly male writers who brought into being South African poetry written in English. What may be observed, however, is that self-identity in these early autobiographical poems and, later, autobiographies was grounded in where
they originated and how they came to South Africa. In such texts there is more a stress on trans-national identities (British South African, Jewish South African, etc) than on a single identity (South African). The feeling that South Africa was provincial to the United Kingdom underlines this emphasis on ambivalence, liminality, and 'in-betweenness', and only later is a distinct South African identity brought into being. Texts such as Cecil Margo’s Final Postponement: Reminiscences of a Crowded Life (1998) and Isie Maisels’ A Life at Law (1998) well illustrate the liminality that routinely crops up in some South African autobiographies.

Stylistically, the nature of South African autobiographical writings differs according to the demands placed on the historical subjects. This kind of difference is offered by Ngwenya when he observes that:

As a result of racial divisions which pervaded South Africa, autobiographies written by black and white writers tended to exhibit markedly different styles and themes. The extent to which self-conception is shaped by external social, political and historical forces is clearly observable in these fairly distinct thematic and structural differences between autobiographies of black writers and those of their white counterparts. While the former invariably recount their struggles against debilitating social milieux, the latter tend to celebrate the nurturing effect of family and community on the growing consciousness of the writer. Black autobiographers focus, almost exclusively, on the effects of racial subjugation on their communities as well as on their personalities as individuals. They write about the experience of growing up in impoverished urban residential areas set aside for blacks such as Marabastad, Vrededorp, Sophiatown and District Six and the struggle to escape from these materially deprived areas. While white autobiographers take the myth of happy childhood for granted, black authors tend to dwell on circumstances which made their childhoods abnormal rather than normal and happy …South African black autobiography exhibits a communal orientation not found in autobiographies by South African white writers. (1996, 140-141)

Among the texts that show this sense of ambivalence (some of which I discuss here) are William Plomer’s The Autobiography of William Plomer (1975), Guy Butler’s Karoo
Morning: An Autobiography (1977), Mary Benson's A Far Cry: The Making of a South African (1990) and Roy Campbell's Light on a Dark Horse: An Autobiography (1951). These will be contrasted with Peter Abrahams's Tell Freedom (1954), Es'kia Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue (1959), and Bloke Modisane's Blame Me on History (1986), which reflect another version of this ambivalence. The various ways in which culture, language, history and power are able to speak though the subject, influencing the subject's consciousness to arrive at a point of understanding who they are, will be analysed. The self is constituted by and in such societal interplays, hence Michel Foucault's remarks:

It is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices -- historically, analyzable practices. There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them. (1984, 369)

Ambivalent selves: William Plomer and Roy Campbell

It can be said that the genre of autobiographical writing in South Africa, as with all of the country's written literature, began as a 'borrowed' cultural practice that was distinct from how black South Africans articulated their selves. As we observed in chapter 3, early African conceptions of selfhood came from a different ontological stream. The textual construction of a self owed much to western forms of learning and the ability by the historical subjects periodically to move between South Africa and the United Kingdom adds to this sense of 'borrowedness' (at least with the early texts). The 'symbolic' institution of colonialism gave a significant number of South African autobiographical subjects their constitution, as may be observed in William Plomer's case. Plomer was to play an important literary role in South Africa and his text Turbott Wolfe (1926) remains a milestone in the country's literature. Near the end of the nineteenth century, his father, Charles, got into a spot of trouble in England and the writer's grandfather came to the rescue in a rather novel way. Plomer relates how this came about:
My grandfather said he would pay for Charles's debts, but he must go to South Africa. It was 'the coming country' and one with great prospects, it was said, in the matter of wool: besides, the climate was good for asthma. Convention had triumphed again: the lightly erring youngest son was packed off to 'The Colonies', to sink or swim. (1975:45)

Charles Plomer thus comes to South Africa and becomes, in a sense, a 'naturalised' South African. The manner in which he hopes to resist this 'naturalisation' is shown by the fact that, as the narrator avers, he never feels settled and later goes back to England at the advent of the Anglo-Boer War. Of course he is shunted back to the country by the stern grandfather who sees the war in a way that would have been common for a military person of his times:

'What on earth have you come back for?' asked the astonished colonel. 'Aren't we fighting for you? It's your duty to go back at once and help.' That phrase 'fighting for you' suggests that he now regarded his youngest son as a naturalised South African. (57)

When Charles Plomer therefore comes back to South Africa, he brings with him a wife and thus later his children, destined to spend a significant part of their lives in the country. The question of a trans-national identity owes much to the ability of the dominant nation to allow for such an arrangement. William Plomer himself is born in the country, though for the parents this link with South Africa is rather temporary as his mother in particular could never think of South Africa as 'home' (98). While Charles Plomer does a variety of jobs in the then Northern Transvaal, he ultimately lands a position in centrifugal Johannesburg, and the family treks to the South. It is here that Plomer's self-definition and identity meander between a limited acceptance of colonialism and defensiveness about the ways in which such a practice might be seen as beneficial to the colonised. The question of the Other looms large in these parts of the autobiography, and the subjectivity of the narrator depends in large measure on how he mediates the institution of the mine. Of particular interest is how he writes of the pass system:
The pass system can be regarded as a kind of slavery and was much hated by Africans, not least because failure to produce a pass on demand led more and more as the years passed to their being bullied, victimised, and penalised by hectoring and vindictive policemen. In any case the obligation to carry a pass was imposed by white men and may well have seemed to be the stigma of a serf: but it is difficult to see how so large and fluctuating a migrant population could have been controlled or provided for without some such a system. At least no African, I believe, ever thought of my father as a slave-driver or indifferent to social justice or what may be called human rights. (996-7; emphasis added)⁴⁶

If the viciousness of the pass system is analysed, it would seem Plomer is being economical with the truth in this instance. For to stay near the mines, as his family did, meant to observe the daily grind of the Other. In any event, the text skillfully avoids questions of why it was necessary for the settled communities to suddenly become a 'migrant population' under the vicious imposition of the Hut and Poll Taxes. The kind of analysis one finds in a text such as Sol Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European and the Boer Rebellion (first published 1916) is absent from Plomer's text, thus making it difficult to explore in detail how he sees his identity at this point, beyond that of a trans-national citizen. Indeed, at one stage Plomer is compelled to defend colonialism in a deft and remarkably self-justifying manner:
The black men had come to the Rand not because they wanted to but because they had to earn money to pay taxes and could not earn it at home. This economic pressure, or exploitation, would now, I suppose, be called 'colonialism'. This propagandist word had not then been invented: the process of developing, or milking, 'new' countries was still called colonisation. Sensible men knew that, like all other human activities, including Christianity and Socialism, colonising sometimes led to terrible abuses but need not necessarily be an evil thing. Mid-Victorians, like my father, who had been brought up to be obedient and to think and do what they were told, and who were not of the questioning or analytic turn of mind, took it for granted that colonisation was on the whole a good thing, which, properly managed, brought the supposed benefits to the colonised as well as undoubted profits to European entrepreneurs and prestige to European empire-builders. (94-95)

It is such conviction regarding the division of self and other, self and reality, that allows the narrator to perceive his opinions as being due to independent thought: there is no sense of their being shaped by current discursive practice. If the reader recognises that ‘the knowledge that the human subject possesses about itself figures within discursive systems of power that are available at a given historical moment’ (Nussbaum 1989:15), then the fact that Plomer is able to construct such an observation about colonialism in his autobiography becomes indicative of features of the distribution of power in the social formation of the time. These are features of patriarchy and racism, which may be seen structurally to heap confidence and might upon a white male such as Plomer (Coullie, 85). Thus, what had been brought about by conquest, 'new' countries, while being milked, are being so in a benevolent and 'civilised' manner (in the European tradition). Plomer's sense of identity would suggest that to live in 'The Colonies' necessitated benevolence and a certain level of paternalism predicated on trusteeship. His sense of being operates within the settler myth with all the baggage such a myth entails.

Having narrated his coming to age, schooling, and literary endeavours (such as the setting up of the groundbreaking literary journal, Voorslag, with Roy Campbell), the narrator takes up the rest of the text with his life in England, permanently removed from the ambivalence of identity. South Africa was still to
provide the impetus for his literary endeavours, however, and he does take an honoured position as a South African writer.

If Plomer’s measured but distanced narrative of his autobiographical self in South Africa reveals a certain reluctance, Roy Campbell, in his text, goes for the colonial mythologies in re-membering the self that came into being at the time. Campbell portrays a unique, autonomous self that denotes the vagaries of the white male conqueror let loose in the proverbial Garden of Eden. The reader cannot fail to see these conceptualisations of self from the opening chapters: as a boy he had a full and wholesome life, hunting wild pigs, killing snakes, and being a crack shot in adolescence. He enacts the trek by going on a hunt in the then southern Rhodesia (present day Matebeleland), and later, he is a stuntman doing all sorts of acts such as falling from high places, eating fire, and chewing glass (1951, 243). Later, in Provence, he becomes an accomplished bull-fighter, besides being a skilled sailor, expert horseman, swimmer and marksman. He goes to the Spanish Civil War, keeps his charge-sheet ‘stainlessly’ clean, and emerges with an honourable discharge (237). For Campbell, there is no ambivalence in so far as his intellect is concerned: he is above average, a soldier and adventurer. He constructs a transcendental being, capable in almost all fields of knowledge and (masculine) occupations and is a master of languages. Consider how he inscribes his attributes:

I am able to address the barrack-square as a Sergeant-major, and explain the parts of a machine-gun, speaking as one ranker to another, in English, Swahili, or Chinyanja; I can address the English Society at Oxford or Cambridge from the same platform as T.S. Eliot, or Sir Osbert Sitwell: confer ceremoniously in flowery Zulu or Sintabele with delegations of headmen: I can join a knot of stokers in a pub in Glasgow or Liverpool as one of them: I can lecture in French or Castilian to the Universities of France or to the Ateneos of Madrid and Barcelona: I can give a talk to the Portuguese people, from the B.B.C., in Portuguese, on street-warfare, Civil Defence, as I did in 1941 … and feel equally at home in the Sergeants’ Mess or the high table at Magdalen College. (62)

Of his forebears, Campbell is clear that he has inherited the best from all of them: from his maternal grandmother, a Gascon, he inherits his love of bull-fighting, French
and Spanish poetry; from his paternal grandfather the ‘malady’ of versifying; from his father an uncanny ability to deal with his fellowmen and a mastery of horses.47 In true colonialist style, Campbell regards all African men as ‘boys’ and women as ‘girls’. He states positions that are in line with the prevailing ideology of the times, an ideology of apparent exclusion and (conditional) inclusion. At one point he observes: ‘There is no doubt that the average native is socially inferior to the white man, but he should not and cannot be prevented artificially from becoming his equal, for the good of all concerned’ (163). Living in close proximity, in Natal, with African and Indian South Africans does not in any way mediate how his ambivalent self can, through acculturation, be hybridised. Local culture is relegated to a set of ‘superstitions’ (47), symptomatic of a bygone era. The inconsistencies revealed by the need to include, however, are not sustained. Some of the crudities inherent in the text resonate with the discourses of racism and sexism, as the following observation on black-white relationships reveals:

I think it is silly to interbreed, though I have no colour prejudice. Hybrids are rarely any good, except in the case of a donkey stallion and the mare of a horse. When super-annuated English society-tarts take up negro lovers, it is generally a sort of perversion like the exaggerated feeling for dogs and cats. I knew one who went negro in order, as she said, to ‘study conditions amongst the negroes’. Having selected the negro with the largest ‘condition’ she could find, she brought him to Europe. I knew this couple who happened to call on me in a Levantine port … I was working in this town in partnership with three very deeply-coloured Saracen-like gentlemen and they were highly indignant when they saw me sitting at the same table with a negro. I explained it away by saying it was an aunt from South Africa with a dear old faithful servant. It did not help matters when she started wiping his nose for him in front of everybody, and then putting his tie straight. (162-3)

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

Farewell, terrific shade! though I go free
Still of the powers of darkness art thou Lord:
I watch the phantom sinking in the sea
Of all that I have hated or adored.

The prow glides smoothly on through seas quiescent:
But where the last point sinks into the deep,
The Land lies dark beneath the rising crescent,
And night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep.48

The markers of ambivalence, disdain and fear are apparent. The mountain itself is a ‘terrific shade’, and the seemingly inescapable ‘darkness’ of Africa is embodied in this mountain; he has both hated and adored, perhaps in equal measure; and that presence, that figure in the door – ‘the Negro’ – is still somnolent but shows murmuring intimations of awakening discontent. Campbell, like Paton after him, admires the beauty of the land and its seductive spirit. The point of identification with a land is a double bind since one cannot conceive of ‘promised lands’ without any inhabitants, hence the ambivalence as far as ‘the Negro’ is concerned. It is this sort of ‘in-betweenness’ about South Africa that he also reflects on in his poem ‘The Serf’. Campbell eventually died in a car accident in Portugal as an expatriate who had fought with the Bloomsbury Group in London from which he was ostracised.

The inter-cutting discourses of incessant political manoeuvrings in colonialism, nationalism and post-colonialism reached their apogee in the Nationalist
Party victory of 1948 with the incoming ideology of state-sanctioned separation of the races. While Afrikaners knew that their policies of total racial and ethnic separation were an inherent aspect of their survival, the preceding years had ushered in a discordance over how other South Africans viewed the future of the country. Commenting on the prevailing ideological discourses, Tom Lodge, who refers to these struggles as the ‘second phase’ (1983, 123) of black resistance to oppression, writes:

The phase of mass political campaigning … was to develop as a result of the incorporation by political organisations of the new social forces released in the previous decade. The new nationalist movement contained within it several different tensions, between ethno-nationalists and social radicals… (1983, 141)

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

Forced to Grow: Peter Abrahams

Growing up in the late Thirties and early Forties in South Africa was a difficult period. And yet the inherent wish to collapse debilitating separatist identities of race, buttressed by sharp class distinctions, could not even begin to be realised in situations where the overlordship of race became stridently shrill. Peter Abrahams's autobiography, for one, details a painful coming of age and conscious growth. In the process, his text disrupts many of the prevailing, dominant ideologies even as he knows that he cannot fulfill his potential within the stifling, ever tightening social
milieu. What he aims for is a multi-vocal discourse by which he can create a fluctuating, liminal identity that eludes categorisation. While the written text depicts events between 1919 and 1938, it was written at the time when the state began to campaign for popularisation of notions of eie kultur, eie volk, eie land (Gilfillan, 108). But being what is called “Coloured” in South Africa, Abrahams could not be so easily dispensed with, and his description of who he is instructive:

My mother was a member of the Cape Coloured community. Coloured is the South African word for the half-caste that was the by-product of the early contact between black and white. The first children of Europe who reached the Cape of Storms were men without women. They set up a half-way house to the East there. There was intercourse between white men and black women. The result was neither white nor black. (10)

The confirmation of an identity that is neither-nor, and especially the ‘in-betweenness’ of it, troubles the younger Abrahams. It appears at first as though the racist stereotypes of the period are acceptable to the narrator, but the text quickly disproves such a reading. While, as a child, he is taken to live with his aunt Liza in Elsburg because the family falls on some pretty tough times after the death of his father, Abrahams, on his way home from buying crackling, comes across three white schoolboys who insult him and his deceased father. Enraged, he fights them, but is soon to know that no one touches white people. At night, the father of one of the boys arrives at the family shack, and Abrahams’ own uncle beats him up severely at the behest of the white man. He is then instructed to beg for forgiveness:

Uncle Sam stopped. I lay whimpering on the floor. Aunt Liza sat like one in a trance.
‘Is he still stubborn, Sam?’
‘Tell the baas and basies you are sorry.’
‘I’m sorry,’ I said.
‘Bet his father is the one who believes in equality.’ (40)

Later on Abrahams meets a young man called Joseph, who announces himself as “Joseph! Zulu”. Abrahams can only recall that he is Lee: “Lee …’ But I did not know
what I was apart from that” (43). Later, his aunt instructs him in the order of the social hierarchy:

‘You are Coloured. There are three kinds of people: white people, Coloured people, and black people. The white people come first, then the Coloured people, then the black people.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is so.’

Next day, when I met Joseph, I smacked my chest and said:

‘Lee! Coloured’

He clapped his hands and laughed. (44)

Abrahams’ identity, given his family genealogy, is incomplete at this point, and he later learns from his mother that he is the descendant of Abyssinian kings, his father having migrated from Ethiopia to work in South Africa as a mineworker. For a while this centredness satisfies the child-narrator, but it is not enough to displace the squalour and poverty of Vrededorp where he returns. He is lice-ridden, a typical township ‘skollie’ (child vagrant) who pilfers, does not attend school and is underfed. Part of his growth involves learning that one of his friends, Dinny, whom he always assumed was ‘Coloured’, is in fact ‘half-Indian’ (97), a further collapsing of the rigid structures of apartheid in his mind. Soon, he learns to interact with the harsh reality of the suburbs as he sells firewood. In scenes that resemble the younger Es’kia Mphahlele’s travails as he ventures into the white world, Abrahams nevertheless attains a shift in consciousness as he is introduced to a world of deprivation and then to one of fulfillment. He begins to question the obvious divisions between the suburbs and Vrededorp, his mind grappling with the enormity of it all
We walked away from Vrededorp, away from the narrow, mean streets, away from the throb of the pushing crowds. We walked steadily till we got to the broad, tree-lined streets of upper Fordsburg ... The broad pavements were clean. No black water ran down the gutters of these streets. No half-naked, potbellied children fought and played in these gutters. The houses were of bricks ... A stranger walking here, in the shade of the broad pavements, seeing the trim, fenced-off houses, and the riot of flowering colour within each front garden, would find it hard to believe a place called Vrededorp was less than half an hour’s walk away. The contrast was so great, I might as well have stepped into another world, on another planet. (1954, 103)

This is exacerbated by his introduction to formal learning ‘quite late for a beginner’ and his discovery of language and literature. As Lynda Gilfillan notes, in these childhood experiences, of course, the autobiographical self constructs, in the intersection of race and class, the subversion by graphos of articulating its wish for freedom. The graphos ‘tells’ of the unfreedom of the autos, betraying the subject’s interpellation by notions of race and class. It is a deliberate post-colonial writing strategy. Helen Tiffin notes that the post-colonial text seeks

the erosion of that former authority and a liberation into a world in which one’s own identity may be created or recuperated not as an alternative system or fixture, but as process, a state of continual becoming in which author/ity and domination of any kind is impossible to sustain. Through polyphony, hybridisation, and the continual erosion of all traditional strategies of European containment, post-colonial texts liberate themselves from both historical capture and contemporary containment; and escape relegation as “other” by recuperating “self” in the process of annihilating such constricting binaries. (1988,179)

Thus when the text is authored, Abrahams confesses to a selectivity of points to highlight aspects of his reclamation of identity as he perceives it, not as he would have it officially sanctioned and conditioned. At any rate, because of liberal institutions, which tended to accommodate indigent students, Abrahams and others like him did not have a choice of the kind of institutions they could attend. At the
Diocesan College outside Pietersburg he mixes as freely with groups of fellow students (as he would at St. Peter’s in Johannesburg, where he was to meet Es’kia Mphahlele). While here, in this ‘valley of peace’, he re-assembles his self in a place where is he ‘Peter not ‘kaffir’, though he is nevertheless not out of reach of those who would shatter this sense of identity. In Pieterburg one day he is most rudely pushed away as he emerges from a shop through a door reserved for ‘Europeans’. He asks himself about the person involved after he relives the encounter:

Why did he look so sick with disgust? The other wouldn’t have mattered if he had not looked so sick with it. Am I really like ordure to him? Only the touch of that could make me feel and look as he did. Only that. Only that. Sick with disgust. Only that … The disgust one feels when touching human waste … Savagely, insistently, my mind forced the error of the equation into the peaceful valley of the Grace of God. (245)

Of course, for Abrahams, the problem he faces is eminently one of how black bodies are experienced in the colonial and oppressive environment. He finds it difficult to reconcile his conception of his self with what the pusher propagates: that of ‘thingification’/objecthood. Nick Crossley, who must be quoted at length, captures Abrahams’ predicament:
At one level this entails, as Cooley (1902) famously argues, that we derive our sense of self from the image of our self that others reflect back to us in interaction. I may be my own blind spot but others have a direct experience of me. They are direct witnesses to my various moods and preoccupations. I am an object in their perceptual field; an object which they must typify and classify with all other objects of their experience. And they will communicate their experience of me, their judgements and types, back to me in the course of our interactions. This may be direct, as, for example, when they explicitly label me. But it could be indirect. The view they have of me is embodied in the way they act towards me and that view is thereby conveyed to me. This is not to say that the agent must accept each and every label that is thrown at them. They may resist labels and or attempt to negotiate the specific labels that are applied to them … agents go to great lengths to create particular impressions of self and to manage the flow of information about their self that circulates in any social situation. Notwithstanding this, the only court of appeal regarding the ‘self’ that is available to agents, even if they only wish to convince or persuade themselves, is the realm of (potentially) publicly available action. (2001, 143)

What Abrahams experiences shows the veracity of Crossley’s observations. His bewilderment shows that while he accepts who he is, he cannot accept the label attached to him by the white man. Of course, for the white man he is no different from what Abrahams himself rejects, a ‘kaffir’. There is communication between how he experiences his body and how it is experienced by the white man. For Abrahams, it is a particularly painful experience. Theorising on this aspect of how black bodies are experienced in a colonial or repressive environment, Frantz Fanon (1986, 109) writes:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find meaning things, my spirit filed with a desire to attain to the source of the world. And then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood … the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there … I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.
It is this process of re-membering that Abrahams needs to undertake, to get to a point where he feels ‘whole’ once more. From here Abrahams moves from community to community, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and then Durban where he finally boards a merchantship bound for England. Although well-known by now as a poet, he struggles to make ends meet and feels the welter of racism. He knows he has to get out of South Africa in order to breathe freely, fully. Tell Freedom is the result of the reflection England affords him. It is a remarkable text – the first autobiography in English by a black South African – and the more so as it documents the first twenty-one years of what must have been a truly difficult coming to consciousness.

Re-telling a life: Eskia Mphahlele

That life (bios) can at the best of times become ‘mere fragments’ is borne out by Es’kia Mphahlele’s autobiographies, Down Second Avenue and Afrika My Music. From its opening sentence, reminiscent of Abrahams’ own experience, Down Second Avenue registers bewilderment: ‘I never knew why we – my brother, sister and I – were taken to the country when I was five’ (11). Bewilderment as a child is at best temporary, but in Mphahlele’s case it forms a leitmotif. His consciousness struggles to break through, and awareness is very slow to envelop the self. This of course is compounded by the early age at which this seemingly incomprehensible world becomes apparent to him as we notice in the first sentence. He is constantly at sea moving in ways that are not of his own choosing or volition. After his mother comes to fetch the children back to Pretoria, he is thrown into the urban slum of Marabastad: he is just as suddenly yanked back to the city as when he was ‘shanghaied’\textsuperscript{49} to the paternal village:
I never dreamt that I should go back to the city, which I couldn’t picture in my mind anyway … Three things stick out in my mind about those few days. The few days when whatever hand it was that drove the train of my life across the trackless wilds suddenly decided to take a capricious turn. First, my grandmother cried. I had only seen her cry at revival services in the Methodist church house. I knew my mother couldn’t just come in the middle of the year like that to move a hard-hearted mother-in-law to tears with a kind of domestic joke. Secondly, my mother shook our lousy rags and scrubbed us clean and wrapped us in brand new clothes … Thirdly, those bright lights we found on Pietersburg station after travelling many miles of dusty road. (23-5)

His brief sojourn in the village gives him an ancestral identity which would later be eradicated by urbanisation. He labels the chapter ‘The Tribe’ as a way of showing, at one level, the vestiges of tribal life, and at another, the disintegration of the same tribe through urbanisation. This is the process that Nationalist Party policies would later try to reverse, policies that decreed a black person had only one (tribal) identity.

His introduction to slum life is also an introduction to his parents’ fragile relationship, so that when it breaks down the whole family joins his maternal grandmother’s home in the Second Avenue of the title. The grim existence begins, and Mphahlele describes it with an acute sense of remembered pain. With school a terrifying environment, home uncomfortable because of overcrowding, and the world outside hemmed about by racist practice, it is no wonder the autobiographical subject alludes to these early mingled memories as a ‘jumble’. Rational, linear ordering is impossible with conflicting memories underlined by loss: ‘No use trying to put the pieces together. Pieces of my life. They are a jumble. My father’s image keeps coming back only to fade. I can’t think of him but as a harsh, brutal, cold person.’(74-5). For a sensitive personality, this must have seemed the harshest of times. Here a sense of self is seemingly denied a chance to grow since it has to emerge out of other experiences that should make sense, and consciousness must be moulded by such experiences. Hence the leitmotif of bewilderment: ‘All the way to Sunnyside in the morning I was confused. I wondered whether this was the sort of life one was to continue to live until one’s death…’ (50). Even in high school, this
sense of life lacking purpose persists: ‘I hadn’t the slightest idea what high school education was for, and for a long time I was bewildered’ (125). The one thing that does break through his foggy mind is what his station in life is designed to be, and thus he begins to see a chink through which he forges his identity:

For the first time in my life, when I was at St. Peter’s, an awareness was creeping into me: an awareness of the white man’s ways and aims. There was complete harmony between us and white teachers at school and between them and the African staff. And yet no one, Brother Roger or the Principal, or the Community fathers, ever said anything about the attitude they thought we should adopt towards whites and white authority outside school. Slowly I realized how I hated the white man outside the wall[s?] of St. Peter’s. (126)

This awareness, as it dawns, is important: it draws distinctions concerning behaviour that are racial and human. The relationship at St Peter’s is harmonious, an island in a sea of racial tensions and discordance. The distinction between one set of white men and another points to the humanistic level at which Mphahlele operates, rather than to a totalising and counter-racist attitude. Since the staff is African, the observation also qualifies how he views employer-employee relationships. Having grown up in a situation where his grandmother, mother and aunt were domestic workers, it is a salient point, for he then knows that this harmonious relationship is rare outside the walls of St. Peter’s. It is an inclusive awareness, therefore, declaring as it does a sense of his identity in relation to others about him.

It is here, too, that he meets Peter Abrahams, who at this stage is working hard at being a poet. Abrahams was writing verse influenced by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican activist who advocated a return to Africa by African-Americans. Writing on this aspect of Mphahlele’s encounter with Abrahams’ verse, Gilfillan (165) makes an important observation:
He recalls Abrahams’s poetic celebration of blackness in the tradition of Marcus Garvey: “I remember how morose the verse was: straining to justify and glorify the dark complexion with the I’m-black and proud of it theme (Mphahlele in Down Second Avenue, 128). Indeed, given the “either/or” – in Abrahams’s case, the “neither/nor” – logic of official race classification, it was predictable that Abrahams would reject the classification “coloured” and embrace instead (however briefly) the Africanism of Marcus Garvey. Mphahlele’s recollection of Abrahams at St. Peter’s is more than a little satiric. By representing a desperate Abrahams attempting to assume a “black” or African identity, Mphahlele distances himself from the quest for identity through the valorisation of blackness. He implies, moreover, that Africans such as himself had neither access to nor need for theories that “justify and glorify the dark complexion”: “I remember him vividly talking about Marcus Garvey, taking it for granted we must know him.” (Mphahlele in Down Second Avenue, 128)

Gilfillan’s reading of the encounter is important since, in exile years later, Mphahlele would go on to challenge even the exponents of blackness celebrated by Leópold Senghor as disciples of ‘Negritude’. What Gilfillan demonstrates, of course, is the contrasting swirls of conscious decisions someone like Abrahams attempted to make in rejecting the official identity meted out to him, showing too that at this point in Abrahams’s life identity was a critical issue that found a creative outlet. Later, Mphahlele had reason to change his mind about Abrahams. As an M.A. student, he says: ‘When I read Abrahams’s books I began to understand what it must have meant to him to want to justify himself’ (195).

While Mphahlele may satirise Abrahams’s quest, he himself was not having matters made easy by his own growing sensibility. As his awareness unfolds, this sensibility becomes a niggling ‘foe’:

I was restless. My sensitivity was a foe at the time. I took offence at the slightest remark from the white man if I vaguely suspected that it was meant for me. I had chronic emotional upsets, so that the more I tried to think things out the faster my spleen seemed to fill up. (137)
It does not ease matters that at the time he has these emotional upsets he is working as a messenger in a lawyer’s office in Pretoria. Being a messenger in itself is a lowly position, but it brings its own share of bruises to the sensitive person. Whites with whom Mphahlele interacted did not make it easier:

…‘yes, John,’ here; ‘yes, Jim,’ there; what do you want, boy?’ here …
That girl who phoned an official next door and said in Afrikaans: ‘---, here is the Kaffir with the documents.’ The old man who tottered up to me and said, ‘Jim, where is the General Post Office?’ The post office clerk who shouted across the counter: ‘If you Kaffirs doesn’t bloody well stand straight in line I won’t serve you.’ One insult after another came back, fresh and poisonous, to plague my sleepless hours… (137-8)

What the extract illustrates is that, coupled with what would by now be a growing sense of self, the autobiographical subject grapples with two irreconcilable processes: understanding his world and his place in it, and also, making up a coherent sense of himself and his apparent loss of dignity. If forming an identity goes hand in glove with a right to dignity, the extract demonstrates that for the white man and woman in South Africa this was not the case when it came to Africans. The same nonchalant insults, and their seeming inexplicable casualness, are understated in the autobiographies of Plomer and Campbell. There wasn’t much conscious thought as to the insults. They were a way of life.

The quest for an identity with which Mphahlele’s autobiography opens is consolidated in the life by a number of circumstances: he starts writing fiction in order to better understand his world, becomes a teacher, expelled for daring to question the provisions of the Bantu Education Bill, and a fiction editor on Drum Magazine in Johannesburg. Importantly, he constantly realises that in a way the urbanised African was becoming a new person with the demise of the tribal system. While the authorities stress the development of Africans ‘along their own lines’, he notes that: ‘We couldn’t see the lines and footprints. They got so mixed up with other footprints in the course of time, and the winds had been blowing away some, too’ (166). In a number of ways this statement anticipates post-coloniality, the hybridisation of intermingling cultures and the constantly shifting borders and
limitations that such an intermingling entails, and which in turn produces dynamic identities. For as Edward Said notes, cultures tend to

cross national boundaries, [and] defy the police action of simple dogma, and loud patriotism. Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more “foreign” elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude. (1993, 15)

The dynamic identities of Mphahlele and his contemporaries’ were hybrid identities, able to mediate western influences with African ones. This was what the state did not want and actively worked against. Because of immense frustration as a fiction editor, he knew, like Abrahams before him, that in order to freely breathe and to fulfil his potential he had to leave South Africa. An African with a Masters degree in English Literature, he was not going to be of any use in a country that consciously prevented Africans from personal growth beyond ‘certain forms of labour’. In one of the interludes that punctuate the chronological narrative, he notes both the irony and the choices open to him:

Of course, the easiest way out would be to leave the soul in this cage, and start a new life, resolve to fling ambition to the winds, and just become a thoroughly sensuous animal; leave aspirations, ambition, ideals, planning and aesthetics to the elect. Or you might deny existence of that in you which cherishes ambition and the rest, and seek no more than food, shelter, clothing. What joy and abundant satisfaction they must derive from life who did not wish for anything more than the bare necessities, like an ox! Or you might booze all extra-physical stirrings out of your system, as so many, oh so many, educated Africans do…But of course once sensitive to things that are, enough to know that they weren’t there and should be, you know you couldn’t go back, could you? And your tribal cord had long, oh so long been severed and all talk about Bantu culture and the Black man developing along his own lines was just so much tommy rot. You just felt the world getting too small for you, ever-contracting and shutting you in. (202-3)
It is in this instance, therefore, that, rather than give up those ambitions, suppress those stirrings that would have him subsist as an ox, Mphaphele chose exile. He notes, of course, that the Verwoerdian dream of separate development is ‘tommy rot’. To have done so as far back as 1959 shows remarkable perspicacity, and to live to see the demise of the system of apartheid was immensely satisfying. This sort of foresight may be contrasted with the inanity of positions a reader picks up in, say, K.D. Matanzima’s maudlin text Independence My Way (1976). Matanzima was one of the brutal ‘homeland’ leaders who, in 1976, chose Pretoria’s offer of ‘independence’ for the Transkei in the present day Eastern Cape Province. Apart from anything else, the text reveals how ethnicised identities were to an extent taken up by some South Africans and used for ostensible political gain.

In exile Mphahlele was to have a life-long engagement with issues of identity. From the publication of occasional essays in journals such as Présence Africaine to The African Image (1974) and beyond, issues of identity were to engage his attention. Always, he was profoundly aware of the constant ‘dialogue of two selves’, ‘between two streams of consciousness: the present and the living past’ (Gilffillan, 173). Indeed, his dialogic notion of identity makes sense when viewed against the backdrop of what Homi K. Bhabha discusses. Bhabha makes the point that identity is never a priori a finished product; it is only ever the problematic of access to an image of totality [which] marks the site of ambivalence. Its representation is spatially split – it makes present something that is absent – and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always there, a repetition. (1994: 51)

Formulating selves: Bloke Modisane

A distinctly individualised and communal voice pervades William ‘Bloke’ Modisane’s autobiography, Blame Me on History. In this text, Modisane extends the ambivalence, the hybridity of the other autobiographies discussed so far. From the provocative title suggesting the author as a mistake of history, the self as an historical subject inscribes the processes by which he views himself as a ‘mistake’ of
history. For instance, the text eschews (conventional) chronological ordering of the narratorial self, and it is also significant in that it was written at the apogee of self-exile as a choice open to Black South Africans, when Modisane left the country in 1959. Nineteen sixty was to be a watershed year in South African politics. For in that year the Sharpeville Massacre conscientised a hitherto uncomprehending world to the brutalities of apartheid, a year in which armed insurrection by the African National Congress and the Pan-African Congress became a reality. What followed after 1960 in terms of South African autobiographical writings could not ignore these seismic changes to the body politic, except as an act of wilful self-blinding. Indeed, Modisane chooses a moment in time that demonstrates the tearing down of certainties, and compacts such destruction with his self. This communal self acts as a voice protesting at the loss of place in much the same way as do sections of Trevor Huddleston’s autobiographical text Naught for Your Comfort (1956). The autobiography begins with the destruction of Sophiatown, the freehold African suburb whose demolition began on February 10, 1955 and took all of three years to complete. Modisane articulates a communal death and sees it as the death of something within himself:

Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown; it was the winter of 1958, the sky was a cold blue veil which had been immersed in a bleaching solution and then spread out against a concave, the blue filtering through, and tinted by a powder screen of grey; the sun, like the moon of the day, gave off more light than heat, mocking me with its promise of warmth — a fixture against the grey-blue sky — a mirror deflecting the heat and concentrating upon me in my Sophiatown only a reflection. (1986, 5)

Here Modisane strives for a language that can best capture his sense of alienation. He describes how he walks through the shattered suburb, mentioning the names of those whose houses were long ago torn down until he stands on the ruins of his own former home. Standing on these ruins, he further accentuates his sense of loss:
The house in which I had been born was now ground into the dust and it seemed appropriate that I should be standing there, as if to witness the closing of a cycle of my life in its destruction; my friends were leaving the country, Ezekiel Mphahlele had taken a job in Nigeria, the Millners were gone to Ireland, Arthur Maimane was in Ghana, and soon the crew of ‘Come Back Africa’ would be leaving. (1986, 10)

It is from this position of alienation and desolation that Modisane begins to unravel his sense of self, his growing up in Sophiatown and how with its death he chooses to flee the country. The sense that this enforced uprooting was an injustice provides the narrating self with a launch pad to view his life teleologically as forever linked with this event and place. This is observable when he describes what Sophiatown mean to the community:

Whatever else Sophiatown was, it was home; we made the desert bloom; made alterations, converted half-verandas into kitchens, decorated houses and filled them with music. We were house-proud. We took the ugliness of life in a slum and wove a kind of beauty; we established bonds of human relationships which set a pattern of communal living, far richer and more satisfying – materially and spiritually – than any model housing could substitute. The dying of a slum is a communal tragedy, anywhere. (1986, 16)

Describing the same destruction of a community in which he had lived for twelve years, Huddleston is more blunt:

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

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

[H]istory revealed that truth may have a double morality standard; the white man petitioned history to argue his cause and state his case, to represent the truth as he saw it; he invoked the aid and the blessing of God in subjugating the black man and dispossessing him of his land. It was impossible to understand history, it showed a truth I could not accept, so I learned my history of South Africa like a parrot, I reproduced the adjectives describing African chiefs, and for external examinations I added a few of my own adjectives to flatter the white examiners...And there in Sophiatown I seemed to be walking on the pages of history, a broken, defeated soldier, crushed and humiliated... (1986, 45-6)

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

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

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

I was alienated by a culture which at the same time imposed upon me an observance of its values; but there was always present the provision that if I was law-abiding and accepted the denials of this discriminating civilisation, that if I conducted myself – even though I was subhuman – like a civilised man, I might, God willing, be accepted and welcomed into the exclusive club in about 2,000 years. I am a freak, I do presume an appreciation for Western music, art, drama and philosophy; I can rationalise as well as they (educated whites) and using their own systems of assumptions, I presume myself civilised and then set about it by writing a book with the title, *Blame Me on History* which is an assumption that if I am a freak it should not be interpreted as a failure of their education for a Caliban, but a miscalculation of history. (1986, 178-9)

In an attempt to escape his dilemma, Modisane begins to write short stories, but this soon proves inadequate, just as political involvement soon reveals itself to be less than fulfilling. It is then that he takes a bizarre decision: to enjoy life to the fullest and to make love to as many women as is physically possible. It is a
counterpoint to the alcoholism as a bane of educated Africans that Mphahlele writes about. Modisane develops morbid habits:

It became a moment of urgency in my life that before they lead me into a South African jail or my mutilated body is lowered into the cold earth, I must have savoured every pleasure, languished upon the taste of every experience of vice, and thus demonstrated an appreciation of the life I was permitted to live. I searched for new vices, did research into little-explored experiences; sought out and devoured anything vaguely pornographic, and then turned round looking for rationalisations, a philosophy to justify the depravity of my life. (1986, 207)

In trying to confirm his humanity, his manhood (he sees racism itself as inherently male-oriented), Modisane goes the way of most sexists and it is about such moments of crisis in his narrated life that South African critics in general have had vociferous disagreements. Having shunned political involvement of any kind, he seeks his salvation in depravity, while aware of the overwhelming loneliness that conquest after conquest engenders. Even inter-racial love affairs prove particularly risky because of the then Immorality Act and the Prohibition of the Mixed Marriages Act. His marriage to Fiki Plaatje fails precisely because he has conditioned himself not to feel, not to pay attention to those who profess love to him. Being denied a scholarship to study in the United States does not ease matters, and at some point he curses the country: ‘I do not care to be South African, nor do I particularly feel myself persuaded to become Christian in accordance with the doctrine of a faith so heavily putrified by the ethics of Calvinism’ (1986, 179). His attempts to acquire British citizenship for Fiki and himself are thwarted, and, having no passport, Fiki refuses to go on what she sees as a reckless dash for the unknown. Determined to leave, Modisane resists all forms of maternal pressure to stay. Without a passport and with little prospects of obtaining one, he chose to escape the country using the trans-national trains running between South Africa and its neighbours. Knowing the holiday spirit of a long weekend in the country, he correctly gauged that security during such a spell of merrymaking and relaxation would be lax. Like the opening to the text, the closing paragraph captures the poignancy of the departure:
Then the train entered and puffed its way out of Mafeking, and South Africa and everything I have known, loved and hated remained behind me. I was out of South Africa. But it was no victory or solution, the compulsive agony was still with me, the problem was still with me … [M]y physical life in South Africa had ended. (1986, 311)

The narrator points to a physical excision of himself from South Africa. That also concludes the narrative, but he does not give an account of his life outside of the country, as though his rootedness is to a place, a milieu, and a locality. The end of a South African physical life obviously does not mean the end of life itself, and precisely because he chooses not to narrate that other aspect of his life in other countries (much like Mphahlele, who revisits his re-entry into South Africa after exile in Afrika My Music) readers are then tied to ‘the tyranny of place’ in the life of an individual and community. In a sense, it is a way of tying up the title to the locality, as if to say: ‘I am what I am because of this place, this system, these people, and what comes after is not as crucial in my formation and identification as these indelible years of my life’. His daily existence seems a repetition of the same, as he notes:

I PROHIBIT YOU! I prohibit you! I prohibit you! Whenever I turned – in my mind, in waking hours, in my sleep – this was the confrontation glaring at me; it shouted at me out of the legislature, the Church, in the streets, I saw it in men’s eyes, in the anger of their impatience, and like the sun against the sky it was fixed implacable in the soul of the white man (1986, 205).

This alienating environment is echoed in Mphahlele’s autobiography. How he chafes at these billboard warnings at all times! Having experienced such a constant denial of his hybridity, Modisane eschews further discussion of what the world outside South Africa must have been like, which is in itself a powerful indictment of the country (Gilfillan, 165). Modisane went to live in exile, first in England, and died in March 1986 in Dortmund in the then West Germany.
Out of Africa: Trevor Huddleston

The ambivalent lack of, yet presence of, identification reflected in the texts above is mediated in part by Trevor Huddleston’s thoughts on what it means to be a South African. Having spent almost fifteen years in South Africa, and most of it in Sophiatown, Huddleston was an eye witness, and as a man of God lived faith to the fullest. As a priest of the chapel of St. Mary Magdalene in the Church of Christ the King in Sophiatown, Huddleston experienced his milieu and its struggles as one of the community. As such, his autobiography is less a literary or even political work than an indictment of apartheid South Africa. The text does not begin as most others discussed here with childhood experiences, growing up and reaching maturity. It begins with what his commitments are. He narrates how his taking of vows was to map the course of his resistance to racial discrimination in South Africa:

When, fifteen years ago, I stood before the High Altar in our great and beautiful church at Mirfield, to make my vows, I knew what I was doing. I knew amongst other things that the vow of obedience, willingly and freely taken, would inevitably involve not the surrender of freedom (as is often supposed) but the surrender of free-will. I knew that it would involve, some day, somewhere, the taking-up or the laying down of a task entrusted to me by the Community, a task to be done not by myself alone, and therefore not dependent upon my own desires and wishes. I knew what I was doing. I was glad to do it. I am still glad, and thankful, to have done it. For it is this vow of obedience which alone gives man the strength, when he most needs it, to die parting from what he loves. (1956, 13-14)

The opening makes the reader aware of the sense of commitment the subject is capable of. It is this sense of commitment to the Church in particular and to human kind in general that affords Huddleston the uncompromising stance he takes during the time he spends in South Africa. While the reader might get a sense of what South Africa was like in 1945 and onwards in historical tomes (such as, for instance, Tom Lodge’s Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945) the human side of such a
narration (as history surely narrativises), the lived experience under cruel circumstances surely belongs to autobiographical texts. Huddleston’s text addresses in large measure Karl Weintraub’s suggestion that readers ought to put themselves in the position of the writing subject:

The dominant autobiographic truth is, therefore, the vision of the pattern and meaning of life which the autobiographer has at the moment of writing his autobiography. Autobiography cannot be read in a truthful manner if the reader cannot, or will not, recapture the standpoint, the point of view of the autobiographer as autobiographer. (1975, 827)

That Huddleston is a man of the cloth, a priest and monk, makes it imperative that our sense of what is truthful in the narrative be confirmed: it seems profane to even question his viewpoint. His understanding of past events, what they signify and the role he feels bound to play in them makes one crucial point: in organising his text, the narrating subject wishes to account for his vow of obedience. Hence the chapters will highlight the disparities, the hardship of black lives within post-World War II South Africa, without necessarily striving for an episodic, chronological order. The point of identification with the community in which he lives is placed early in the text:

What I shall try to avoid is that common persistent error in all such assessments – the attempt to be impartial. By this I mean that I shall write this book as a partisan, for I believe that Christians committed in the field of human relationships are partisan, I believe that, because God became Man, therefore human nature in itself has a dignity and a value which is infinite. I believe that this conception necessarily carries with it the idea that the State exists for the individual, not the individual for the State. Any doctrine based on racial or colour prejudice and enforced by the State is therefore an affront to human dignity and “ipso facto” an insult to God himself. It for this reason that I feel bound to oppose not only the present Government of the Union of South Africa but the legislation which flows from this policy. (1956, 16)
With this sort of understanding of human relations, Huddleston was to become a major critic of the South African government. The text, written in exile in England after the Community of the Resurrection decided that he was in danger of imprisonment, takes a moralistic stance against the imposed and enforced identities that the government wished to make a given. The suppression of personal liberties (as exemplified in Modisane’s and Mphahlele’s texts) was anathema to Huddleston. While choosing every terrain in which to advance his view of this abhorrence, he was of course raising the ire of state officials and was labelled ‘disloyal to South Africa’. He wrote in particular to sections of the English press describing the lack of civil liberties faced by Black South Africans, the erosion of their humanity. And he did not agree to being labelled a traitor to the country:

I cannot accept that criticism, for I feel convinced that the Christian has a loyalty which stands above – far above – such considerations. Apart from the need to arouse the Christian conscience in the world, there was in my heart, from that moment in clear and unmistakable form, the desire to identify myself with the African people in their struggle for human rights and personal freedom ... identification means more than words, more than speeches. For the Christian, so it seems to me, it is part of the life of faith itself. It is this mystery which finds its very expression in the Stable of Bethlehem: God, Almighty and Eternal, identifying Himself with man at his most helpless, with Man in his utter littleness and poverty ... I have knelt in the sanctuary of the lovely church in Rosettenville and washed the feet of African students, stooping to kiss them. In this also I have known the meaning of identification. The difficulty is to carry the truth into Johannesburg, into South Africa, into the world. (1956, 57-58)

Huddleston surely is aware of the huge irony of this extract: by using the Christian faith to attack a doctrine of racial discrimination supposedly supported by the Bible, he exasperates Afrikaner dominees beyond description. In chapter Four, he tries to understand the foundations of such a philosophical-religious outlook as that espoused by the Dutch Reformed Church. The Church was a powerful psychological crutch in the lives of Afrikaners, and what it preached and taught was not challenged (at least until dissidents such as Beyers Naude, then moderator of the Nederlands
Gereformeerde Kerk, came onto the scene in the early Seventies to say apartheid was wrong and anti-God). Dutch Reformed adherents were taught that South African differences were not politically engineered but ‘eschatological’:

I do not think it is an exaggerated view of the underlying belief of the Dutch Reformed Church. And it is a view held and preached by the minister in the pulpit. With all its faults and errors, the Dutch Reformed Church seems to have succeeded where many other Christian bodies have failed, in giving its lay members a theological outlook in life ... Basically the Dutch Reformed Church cannot conceive of a relationship between black and white in this world which is in any sense real or tangible in terms of love. Perhaps at the end of time, in the last days (which is what eschatology means) it may be possible. (1956, 51)

It is against this viewpoint of a church favouring the doctrine of racism that Huddleston bristles. Indeed, the motivation for writing this autobiography is partly based on his heroic efforts to stop the removal of blacks from Sophiatown. Providing official reasons why this removal was deemed necessary (and foreshadowing the mass removals of the sixties and seventies of ‘surplus peoples’) Huddleston is uncompromising:

The “problem” of the Western Areas was added to all other “problems” of South Africa. But basically the issue is dead simple. It was just this: that white Johannesburg had encroached on black Johannesburg, and so, naturally, black Johannesburg must move on. MUST MOVE ON. That is why the Western Areas Scheme is so terribly important to the Christian: or rather, why it ought to be. An African freehold township, established for fifty years, can be uprooted and totally destroyed, because it is contiguous with a European suburb. The question of right or wrong does not make any relevance. The story of Naboth’s vineyard rings no bell. Arguments soundly based on economics, or town-planning and on history, have no meaning whatsoever. If a black township stands where a white suburb wants to stand, the township must go. We can think of a justification afterwards. (1956, 138)
It might be easy for the reader to decide that this accusation is excessive and therefore false, but secondary readings such as Tom Lodge’s Black Politics in South Africa since 1945 (and its updated version) would be enough to bring a sense of objectivity to such a view. As Huddleston further reiterates, his anger is against this blatant opportunism and prejudice that lacks Christian moorings:

I weep because the Western Areas Removal Scheme, and the uprooting of sixty thousand people, is being carried out with the connivance of the Christian conscience of Johannesburg. I weep because in spite of all we tried to do, we have failed so utterly to uphold principle against prejudice, the rights of persons against the claims of power. (1956, 143)

Huddleston lived a rather unusual creed as a South African: he was imbued with the ethos of practising what he preached at a time when ideas of racial superiority and inferiority were in their prime. And yet he had the common touch to make friends with any person within and without the community of Sophiatown. He was instrumental, as he narrates, in starting the African Feeding Scheme (feeding destitute school children and thus guaranteeing them at least one meal a day), the building of the Orlando Swimming Baths (which still stand, and which this writer has used), the emergence of the Huddleston Jazz Band (which gave Hugh Masekela, amongst others, a start to his brilliant musical career), the Newclare Squatters Fund, and a host of other commendable ventures of community service. And amidst all these there has been his ability to shame the wealthy into giving generously to his requests (much as Mandela does now, shaming big business into building schools and health centres in the more under-developed areas of the country). Thus the complications of race in South Africa need to be mediated by an understanding that matters of such profundity have significant areas of grey within them. Huddleston at some point was under serious threat of imprisonment, possibly even bodily harm. The Community of the Resurrection recalled him to England, where he was to launch an impressive second phase of his engagement with the South African state as an anti-apartheid activist. When he died, his ashes were returned to the re-named Sophiatown and consecrated in the Church of Christ the King. This was as he wished, for as he writes in the text, his memories are intricately tied to Sophiatown:
My recollection of Sophiatown will always be set in the context of the laughter of children: the swimming pool on a summer day, with the mass of glistening brown bodies and the noise of them splashing and the water pea-soup, so thick you cannot see the bottom. It was a good sight and a good sound to come to when one had been walking the streets of the city or attending some dreary committee of church finance. (1956, 157)

From Huddleston’s autobiography, the reader is invited to view what other South Africans later managed to achieve: cross-racial transcendence. This sort of transcendence involves more than interracial contact or exposure. Most of all, it involves convictions. It also displays one crucial fact about identity: that it is a tenacious and uncompromising aspect of human beings.

In this chapter I have attempted to analyse how the authors negotiated their selves while enmeshed within the discursive fields of their various eras, beginning with twentieth-century attitudes towards colonialism and the place of the coloniser and the colonised. In particular I have stressed how, even without a conscious effort on the part of the subjects, a level of hybridisation became apparent: Campbell, for instance, makes bold claims of being able to discourse with every social strata at home and abroad. And yet he comes across as an ambivalent person, neither fully European nor fully African, something he only resolves through flight to Europe. Hybridity in this instance is shunned, even as it imprints itself and gets an airing in his poems. The same claim can be made against Plomer, the coloniser who accepts (in Albert Memmi’s terms). Both individuals follow the standard model autobiographical writing dissected so neatly by Sidonie Smith: that of emphasising the individual’s senses as originary loci for knowledge, with a marked preoccupation with self-absorption where individual experience is concerned (Campbell more than Plomer). The selves portrayed here are those of ‘self-made men’, strongly predicated on industriousness, thrift and a special endorsement of human capacities. In both texts there is little that shows identification with South Africa other than as a backdrop and Muse for their literary output.

The other models of autobiography I have discussed in this chapter are markedly different from Plomer’s and Campbell’s. Abrahams’ text is an assault on what it means to be classified ‘coloured’ within the South African milieu. His coming to consciousness is problematic because of the negative implications of that identity,
and as the state hardens its policy of separate development, he finds himself in a situation where he cannot acquiesce in an imposed identity. In essence, Abrahams becomes the first recorder of a struggle, as a black person, with the constraints of hybridity within an asphyxiating political environment that seeks to encumber his true self as a writer. In order to ‘breathe’, he chooses exile, becoming, at least in written form, the country’s first ‘eternal alien’.

Because of what he believes apartheid did to him, Bloke Modisane writes a psychological autobiography that eschews a linear structure, lacks any chronological ordering, and bases itself on the tragedy that arises from ‘slum clearance’. As might be seen in some political autobiographies, Modisane’s autobiographical subject identifies so much with a locale that it becomes inseparable from him. But in using such a narrative strategy, the subject then excoriates his self by suggesting that all his life’s ambitions were frustrated by the system under which he matured. The destruction therefore of Sophiatown is the destruction of all he and his community hold dear. By contrast, Mphahlele uses the conventional style of writing an autobiography, with one difference: he uses the leitmotif of bewilderment to confound any simplistic reading of his text. That is, he uses this leitmotif to reflect and refract any claim that black lives could not have been that extreme. Importantly, he also utilises the stream of consciousness technique in the interludes that punctuate the text. In these interludes, he pauses the flow of the narrative to make broad social commentary, and here the ‘I’ of the autobiography turns to the ‘eye’ of the witness. The harsh criticism he meets in the interludes also reflects the hybridity that Modisane feels, the notion that, for better or worse, he and his people have been de-tribalised and are willing and capable of living within the cultures of the twentieth-century.

Lastly, Huddleston uses the polemical style of autobiography. He is quite clear that his form of identification with the plight of the African community of Sophiatown in particular is morally correct, and this allows him to lambast apartheid ideology. He predicates his polemic on the doctrines of Christianity, and this serves as a foil for the belief in the minds of apartheid’s supporters and practitioners that it was actually sanctioned by the Bible. Moreover, Huddleston shows the porous nature of ‘race’ as understood and experienced in South Africa. This also becomes a major factor in the autobiographies of white South Africans who defy separate development.
As South Africa enters its own phase of nation-building, it is no longer enough simply to view another person as racially different from oneself. Instead, linkages of the sort discussed here come to signify new beginnings. The critical phase of ambivalence and the hybridity discussed here point to the role culture plays in mediating self-conceptualisation and actualisation. That so many South Africans could only find fulfilment of their selves outside of the country points to the important role of adaptation to other cultures. Access to European cultures in South Africa was denied to the ordinary citizen, hence the constant need for flight. Yet the lure of home was strong enough for those who survived to see the dawn of a new era and return to South Africa as South Africans. New beginnings had to be re-configured. Such beginnings had to negotiate the "darkling plain' that the country faced from the Sixties through to the Eighties - the subject of the next chapter.