
I write best if I can hear thunder behind my ears. Not even Rain Clouds was real thunder yet. Some of my letters to friends are faint rumblings of it.

Bessie Head

This chapter examines a selection of South African autobiographical writings produced in the immediate aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960 and beyond. The epoch that followed this key event in South African history changed the country forever, although this change was not apparent until the middle of the decade.

At the international level, repeated criticism of apartheid policies made South Africa, early in the decade, withdraw from the Commonwealth, and on May 31 1961 it became a republic. This meant that no country could meaningfully intervene, diplomatically or otherwise, in how the state ran its affairs. Once more, as mentioned previously, this led to an exodus of South Africa’s more gifted citizens as the noose of segregation, recrimination and prosecution drew tighter. Many departed on exit permits for voluntary exile or left the country surreptitiously. There was the banning of organizations deemed a security risk and the detention on charges of high treason of the leadership of these organisations, who came to be known as the Rivonia trialists. There was also a constant snipping away of sympathisers with the banned
organisations as political power shifted towards the ruling Nationalist Government of H.F. Verwoerd. Organised protest was no longer viable, and the state’s position seemed unassailable. It was a grim period, but also one of relative calm in which the economy of the country took off, with annual growth of up to six percent. However, almost overnight, the social fabric of communities and the common points of reference for people’s identification had disappeared. Because so few autobiographers write of the debilitating circumstances they found themselves in during the first four years of the 1960s, or of the communities as they literally disappeared before their eyes, among those who did write this might account for their need to make known the profound impression, as witnesses, such social disruptions had on their and others’ lives. Texts such as Bloke Modisane’s Blame Me on History, where the destruction of Sophiatown forms the main narrative, operate within this discourse. For others, the main aim was to strive to articulate and engage their sense of bewilderment, loss, and alienation. Hence Bessie Head’s collection of pieces that its editor, Craig Mackenzie, says defy classification. As he explains (A Woman Alone, 1990), the heart of the collection comprises letters and journalistic essays which act as philosophical reflections on the future of South Africa. Some are fictional, some forewords to her own texts and others’:

The generic classification of the pieces in this volume poses a challenge to the literary critic. They span a number of overlapping genres: letters, journalism, autobiography, fictional sketches, essays, forewords, explanatory notes on novels … The truth is that the majority of the pieces assembled here defy classification. At their two extremes they represent autobiography and (very nearly) pure fiction. Most of them are however strung somewhere between the two extremes, and each (with a few exceptions) represents an amalgam of self-reflection, semi-fictional narrative, journalistic reportage and cultural comment.
The collection’s value lies in how it ‘reveals something of the extraordinary life of the author Bessie Head’ (Mackenzie, ‘Introduction’, xiii). She lived a life of such extremes, and yet emerged to become one of Southern Africa’s most celebrated novelists. Hers is a story that not only reflects unwarranted discrimination and lack of an identity, but which also constantly re-shapes the world according to the wonders that she wishes to see in it. Born out of wedlock, Head literally had no genealogy, no traces of family, no sense of her being-in-the-world. She writes of her beginnings with a sense of detachment:

There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity or disaster, the sort of person who is a skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet. The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history. I have no single known relative on earth, no links with heredity or a sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or great-grandmother. I have always been just me, with no reference to anything beyond myself. I was born July 6, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white and my father black. No details were ever available about my father beyond the fact that he worked in the family stables and took care of their racehorses. (3)

This detached writing about her beginning makes for much conjecture. It immediately brings to the fore the question of who Head is, since without any family (she is ‘the skeleton in the cupboard’) she has no way of shaping her identity according to those around her, something a basic family unit usually provides for an individual. She is, in Sartrean terms, a ‘being-for-itself’, with no inkling of possible hereditary traits, mannerisms, appearance (right down to ‘a fingernail’) and temperament. Significant persons who help a self to form an identity that might be taken for granted, as in parentage, siblings, relatives and others, are non-existent for
her. What she has is a name (born Bessie Amelia Emery) and an understanding that she is ‘unwanted’, necessitating an obliteration of any connection with the family on her mother’s side. Importantly, the reader realises that the third aspect of analytical categories is discernible in her opening paragraph, that of class (the other two being race and gender). By her account, her maternal family were racehorse owners. This implies wealth, a position in society, and influence. That she is born in Pietermaritzburg, a city not far from Durban on the South African seaboard, is not difficult to fathom. Durban is the prime city in the country where owning horses implies immense wealth and where equestrian competitions take place. For her mother to fall pregnant to a stable hand was too much for the family, who must have planned accordingly:

I gained a hazy impression of my beginnings, of a pathetic letter written by my mother in the mental hospital, stipulating that above all things, it was her earnest desire that I receive an education and that some of her money be set aside for my education, of a period of emotional instability and depression in her life that had led her to inflict a terrible disaster on herself. She had been married and when the marriage fell through she returned to the family home. In a sudden and unpredictable way she decided to seek some love and warmth from a black man. But the family belonged to the top racehorse owning strata of South African society. The family home was Johannesburg and it became necessary for them to hide their skeleton in the cupboard far from home. (4)

Head’s beginnings make her life a tragic blend of enigma and human prejudice, a life filled with ‘immense sufferings and privation, crippling alienation, and perhaps, most of all, personal confusion (Mackenzie: ‘Introduction’, ix). She fashions a life with no referents save for that ‘hazy impression’ about her mother. After years of living with foster parents and being enrolled at boarding schools, she qualifies as a schoolteacher with a good grasp of the English language, but with, however, a fragmented and brutalised sense of self. She later abandoned the idea of being a schoolteacher and went to Cape Town to find a job as a reporter, after a brief sojourn as a journalist for the Golden City Post (later the Post) in Johannesburg. Living in Cape Town in the early 1960s, she experienced loneliness as the community
around her crumbled. Prior to this event, she had exulted in the warmth of Capetonians and made a point of stressing that, even if she was not fully of the country and without kin, at least Cape Town restored her to humanity:

I love the Cape because it can give me, a writer, a fierce individualist – a warmth, a sense of something that is the opposite of isolation and a sense of belonging, if not to the country, at least to the human race. I found all this among the Coloured community in the Cape. (10)

This was set to change as government vigilance rendered futile any collective effort at ameliorating the circumstances under which the community lived. In an intense letter written during 1963, Head appraises her life without friends or companionship, a life influenced by ideals generated by politics:

One is constantly losing friends these days. Some of the refugees, like my friend, ‘D.B.’ [Dennis Brutus] did not want to leave. Wherever he is now, I know he is very unhappy. For those of us who are still here, life becomes lonelier and intensely isolated. South Africa is an intensely lonely, intensely sad country. It must have always been but you only begin to notice the loneliness when all your friends are gone ... Suddenly that happy, warm laughing world is shattered and you are left alone to face a horror too terrible to contemplate ... The fantastic thing about friendships in South Africa is that one always and only meets one’s friends through politics. Every and any man, woman who ever thinks in this country gravitates to some political party. Outside this you may have friends but none that you could carry on a reasonable or intelligent conversation with. Many people prefer not to be enlightened. The world terrifies them and yet their very refusal to be enlightened terrifies them more. (13-15)

It is ironic that Head writes so movingly of political organisations, as she would have an aversion to them later in exile. Equally ironic, she was at some point picked up in a series of arrests following the Sharpeville massacre, and earned her freedom only by turning state witness against the Pan-Africanist Congress, whose political philosophy she shared (Mackenzie: 'Review', 120). It is from the midst of
such conditions that Head considers life as a refugee. The extract from the letter reveals a sensitive personality, inquisitive and reflective. The sense of a need for a larger community beyond the immediacy of family to allay isolation is apparent. The sense of politics as cement for commonly-held aspirations and views is dispersed by fear, an important determinant in pre-1994 South Africa. And under these circumstances, Head cannot begin to write or order her life in any meaningful way. While she has material that she can shape into a meaningful narrative, she feels she cannot because of what she perceives as ‘the permanent madness of reality’. She speaks of an idea for a story about a railway worker in Cape Town who, because of travel concessions, makes up his mind to spend holidays in Durban with his wife. This man, on the eve of his departure, throws a party and rejoices with neighbours and friends as this is the first time the community has heard of someone going to a ‘foreign’ city just to ‘holiday’. At the last moment, as the train is about to pull out, the man’s courage fails him, and he and his wife go home. Everyone who had come to wish them well simply understands. Cape Town is home and its face – the familiarity important to identity - is comfortably reflected in the faces around him:

Well there it is. I would like to write a story of the man and his wife who never took the train journey, but I can’t. When I think of writing any single thing I panic and go dead inside. Perhaps it’s because I have my ear too keenly attuned to the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives. Perhaps I’m just having nightmares. Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because I’ve just got to tell a story (7-8; emphasis in the original).

This extract, from a letter written in 1962, exudes constriction, a sense of being confined to some corner from which it is difficult to extricate the subject. Head is aware of her talent and its compulsion. It is indicative of her sense of not being fulfilled that she writes of her ‘manifold disorders’, partly admitting in this instance the psychological difficulties that were to assume such prominence in later life. The restraints on her talent are her keen sensibility and a need for an enabling environment. It may be that this special kind of writer’s block which afflicted Head at this time leads her to eventually leave South Africa. And yet she is keenly aware of her self and those who are like her:
Any biographical detail takes in innumerable people of my generation who are scattered throughout the world as refugees. We were forced out of South Africa because, unlike our parents and our ancestors, we refused to call the white man baas (‘master’). In South Africa it was always the white man or woman we considered to be living at death’s door, because we could kill them rather than cower … I think we are as desperate as anything to make Africa the black man’s land because I see no other place on earth where the black man may come into his own, with dignity. I have a sort of bitter ha, ha behind everything I say. I knew some time ago that I am a useless kind of person in any liberation movement or revolution; I can’t stand them or the people who organize them. But I did move, in 1964, one door away from South Africa to Botswana. (27)

While eschewing direct political involvement, Head nevertheless sees herself as a part of a growing tribe of South African wanderers who cannot abide the injustices of a country that rejects them. The vignette shows the double bind of refugee life: to be independent of political organisations while fully aware of the reasons for their existence. Moving to Botswana, it is as though Head wishes to be close to the country of her frustrations and anguish. She settles in Serowe, a village in north-eastern Botswana which she describes as ‘a quiet backwater’ and where she writes brilliant novels – all of them designed to challenge hegemony and prejudice within Southern Africa and the world in general.
The least I can say for myself is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamour for revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems. My work was tentative because it was always so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; it battled with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not qualify who was who – everyone had a place in my world. But nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person. (28; emphasis added)

Thus the humanity with which Head infuses her novels emanates from her birth and upbringing, her feeling that she is ‘unwanted’, a ‘stateless person’ who knows what it is not to be rooted. While living in Botswana, she could not be granted citizenship as the government was reluctant to antagonise its powerful neighbour. As Mackenzie observes, the decision to settle in Serowe was a paradox that Head deeply resented. An extract from a 1973 letter reads:

When one looks at a life of blunders, I wish to undo only one blunder, the decision to build a little home in Serowe. It was as though howling hell itself tore at me when I decided to stay here and where the hell could I go? (Mackenzie: ‘Review’, 121)

The sort of hell Head writes about is her sense of alienation from a community whose ways, values and mores she could hardly begin to understand. Hailed as ‘the finest novelist in Africa’, she is nevertheless ‘a woman alone with her son, living in a two-roomed dwelling without the convenience of electricity or plumbing’ (Mackenzie: ‘Introduction’, xviii). The paradox lies in the fact that, for all her sense of alienation and feeling ‘unwanted’ by her adoptive country, she was to pay homage to Serowe in a brilliant biographical account of the village published as Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (David Philip & Heinemann: 1981). This tender biographical account was prompted by Head’s deep appreciation of the fact that, as a British Protectorate that
was found ‘unprofitable’, Botswana was largely left intact. As a victim of total deracination in the land of her birth, this almost uninterrupted African history in Botswana had ‘an immediate and profound influence on her’ (Mackenzie: ‘Introduction’, xvii). Assessing what Serowe meant to her, Head provides an inkling of her shattered sense of self and its re-constitution, its re-membering:

Somehow, by chance, I fled to this little village and stopped awhile. I have lived all my life in shattered little bits. Somehow, here, the shattered bits began to come together. There is a sense of wovenness; of wholeness in life here. There were things I loved that began to grow on me like patches on a cloth.... (30)

Written in 1965, this extract comes as near as anything she was to write later to revealing what her life in South Africa must have meant to her. While she was to suffer repeated bouts of depression and, later, severe mental illness (in 1967 she was admitted to the psychiatric hospital in Gaborone), the growth of ‘things [she] loved’ in her is important if we regard the fracturing of a self as cruel. It is from Serowe that Head gets a sense of balance and learns to have a reverence for ordinary people, which is shaped in part by her feelings that their rootedness is awe-inspiring. Comparing her inability to write in South Africa with how she could do so in Botswana, she makes a perceptive observation about place:

I have attempted to solve my problem by at least writing in an environment where all the people are welded together by an ancient order. Life in Botswana cannot be compared in any way to life in South Africa because here people live very secure lives, in a kind of social order shaped from centuries past by the ancestors of the tribe. I have tended to derive a feeling of security from this, so I cannot be considered as a South African writer in exile, but as one who has put down roots. And yet, certain strengths in me, certain themes I am likely to write about, have mainly been shaped by my South African experience (62; emphasis added).
Here Head, in line with the interwovenness she mentioned earlier, shows the importance of rootedness to place, while at the same time pointing to how her experiences in South Africa remain part of her self. The extract seems to validate in part Karl J. Weintraub’s observation about the role of the self in autobiographical writing:

It would thus 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 meaning of a life. Real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout inter-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 all are centred upon an aware self aware of its relation to its experiences. (1975, 824)

Head thus shapes her world in line with the experiences that impact upon her, as a writer and as an African. Her range of themes (refugeeism, racialism, patterns of evil, and the ancient Southern African historical dialogue) allows her to take part in and contribute to the world as a whole. In arriving at what she has given to the world of the intellect (the ‘self-clarification’ Weintraub posits), she writes: ‘I view my own activity as a writer as a kind of participation in the thought of the world’ (Head, 95). This is a perceptive observation of a self whose very beginnings were so tangled, so confusing and debilitating. Although she was never to be ‘a political writer’, Head certainly found racialism a monumentally frustrating aspect of life. She struggles against this constraint and emerges, from these selected letters, as a wholly capable individual with a clear sense of an identity and of rootedness. As always, she is aware of what her generation achieves through its agonising search for itself. Writing early in 1968, she points out that her generation opened doors through which others could come in their quest for humanity:
Because what is not too late is the firm and established conviction that the underdog is already outside the closed door in which he was locked up. It is the most peculiar sensation and I can only express it in a personal way, restricted to the feelings of my own life. It was as though up to my generation we were all locked up together in a dark air-tight room. We even seemed to excrete together there and the stench was awful. Then some mysterious hand opened one of the windows and we received our first breath of fresh air which contrasted strongly with the stench in which we lived. At the same time this mysterious hand opened the door. And as we ran out we kept on saying: ‘I’m not going back in there. I’m not going back in there.’ A few of our oppressors who had been so accustomed to seeing us locked up, ran after us to put us back and we turned and rent them to pieces. But we still have this sensation of running because of the horror out of which we have come. We don’t know where we are running except that we must run. Once I began to feel this sensation of running, running, it was at this point that I wanted a haven to run towards. Something that made sense. Something worthy of all the anguish of my life, because I can’t have it mucked up by politicians, by the tom-tom drum-beaters and crooks of our so-called liberatory organisations. (48)

This observation forms part of the ending to Maru, her second novel with racialism as a central theme. Head is thus able to strive towards a subjectivity (for herself and her generation) that is signalled especially by the title of these autobiographical writings. She obtains a voice as speaking subject, and, as Dorothy Driver notes, begins to understand her subordination and resistance:

One achieves a voice – or attains subjectivity as an individual – at the point one recognises the ways in which one has been subordinated by a political system, and thus made to fit a political category at odds with one’s own experiences of aspirations in the world … Subjectivity (or voice) depends on placing oneself as cognitive subject in language. This means recognising the ways in which one has been constituted in terms of specific discourses and thus dissociating oneself from them while at the same time claiming a particular and different place within language.62
While Head attained a semblance of wholeness in Botswana, she was, sadly, never to come back to South Africa, the country of her birth. She died in Botswana on 17 April 1986, in Serowe, of hepatitis, aged 49. Returning to her home country was denied her (and many of her generation) by the imperatives of exile. It is important, in reading A Woman Alone, to understand why Craig Mackenzie, its editor, took on so mammoth a task. The reason, I would argue, may be found in Roy Pascal’s reminder of the essential necessity of autobiographical writings:

> All good autobiographies are in some sense the story of a calling, that is, they tell of the realisation of an urgent personal potentiality. But in some cases the inner calling merges into a social function, a profession, and a public personality grows out of the private. The autobiography may then be written not primarily for private reasons, but for the public, perhaps to satisfy public curiosity, to illuminate the nature of the public achievement and perhaps to reinforce it. (1960, 112)

Thus we have, in her own words, Head’s difficult but truly productive life as lived in South Africa and Botswana. She did not, of course, live to see the new South Africa.

Re-cycling and re-making ‘natives’: Es’kia Mphahlele

One individual who eventually returned and wrote of the process of being ‘re-cycled’ into the ‘Bantu-designated’ system of the then apartheid South Africa was Es’kia Mphahlele. His second autobiography after Down Second Avenue (first published in 1959), Afrika My Music: 1957-1983 (published in 1984), records in minute detail the harshness of exile and the improbability of being a world-respected professional in a country that does not concede such a status to its own citizens. It incorporates Mphahlele’s twenty years of exile, but more especially his attempts to return and contribute to his own country’s development, something he and family find very difficult. Arriving in August 17, 1977 as a Professor of English Literature, he could only work in this capacity if he agreed to be ‘re-tribalised’, that is, if he sought employment only in the self-governing homeland of Lebowa and at the tribal’
University of the North. Given the regime’s antipathy towards the English language, he was never going to be gainfully employed at any tertiary institution where his expertise might be meaningfully engaged.

It is important to deal, first, with the reasons why the Mphahleles, safely ensconced in Philadelphia when they decided to return, eventually did so. Mphahlele writes of how, after many years in exile and being part of the international community, he and his wife Rebecca felt a need for the connectivity that South Africa exerted on them. Writing about this wish to have a final resting place ‘at home’, Mphahlele introduces an important aspect of his and Rebecca’s identities that also points to the importance of a joint or multiple identity, the spiritual dimension:

I stop to contemplate a serenity I have discovered in the northern Transvaal landscape. I realise how cosmopolitan, how suburban my family’s lifestyle has become; for better, for worse we have become bigger than our urban ghetto beginnings. The bonds that have held us to the original African experience, though, have remained intact during our travels. We still feel a strong identity with our ancestors: the living dead who are the spiritual dimension of our reason for returning. *Come back native son, native daughter come back!* (9; emphasis in the orig.).

Mphahlele writes of the sense of an African identity that has also to contend with a need for enlargement, to be part of a bursting world able to accommodate talent not because of race but merit. He had lived a fulfilling life in exile, but feels the need to ‘return to base’. Although he provides many reasons for this, one of the most compelling is that he feels the sense of adventure for him and his family has cooled, and especially the mental stimulation he had sought which was denied him in South Africa:
Teaching, writing, writing, teaching, the same interminable cycle in the long, long quest for a metaphor, for the right word, lucid, fresh like water straight out of rock, or like city lights on a clear night that I have viewed on the foothills of the Rockies, reassuring, promising, seeming to breathe like the life that is stirring down there. If only, if only – ah these days the if-onlys seem to come from unexpected corners, in numbers, in broken ranks like bedbugs – if only I could teach in my own native land or continent! … The gods help us: how can a man teach among people whose cultural goals he cannot share? How long can one subsist on the mental stimulation one has found? (163)

Earlier in the autobiography, Mphahlele had written of how Nigeria, his first adoptive country after leaving South Africa, had ‘restored Africa back to me’. The typical Nigerian was so unlike the typical white South African that he could re-identify with the continent once more. This is an important stage of his life, for he was to work tirelessly as the Director of the African Programme for the Congress of Cultural Freedom to re-assert aspects of African cultural experience. Through this programme, he was instrumental in setting up the Mbari Writers’ Club in Ibadan, Nigeria, and the Chemchemi (Swahili for ‘fountain’) Writers’ Club in Nairobi. Furthermore, he was involved in organising historically important conferences (such as that at Kampala in 1962) and writing-competitions throughout Africa. Not least he saw the founding of both Black Orpheus and Transition, seminal literary journals before political pressure and financial constraints combined to force their collapse. This period, from 1957-1966, was truly reascent, marked by optimism about African political self-assertion and cultural output. Identifying with Africa as a whole, however, had its drawbacks as individual personalities and nationalities tended to get in the way of meaningful work. For instance, the Chemchemi venture was not as well received in Kenya as Mbari was in Nigeria. As members of the organising committee began to resign, Mphahlele recounts this difficulty:
Why all the disaffection? I asked the committee members individually, as they would never come to meetings. After all, I only had half a year to go [as director of the centre]. I firmly believed that the Congress and its sponsoring foundation could enjoy credibility only if they supported an institution managed by the people of the country in which it operated. Why, why the veiled vendetta by the very people who invited me? (87-88)

What Mphahlele realises here is the importance individuals can attach to nationality, and the fact that, as an outsider, he is seen as an obstacle to the advancement of the very people who initially invited him. The Pan-African solidarity with which he started out in Nigeria receives a rude blow in Kenya, illustrating how easily glib assertions of brotherhood or personhood can unravel under, for example, the strain of scarce resources. When he gets a teaching fellowship at the University of Denver’s Department of English at the end of 1966 (he was to stay until 1974), he vows never again to take up the cudgels for an assumed and shared identity:

I made a decision that survived my vanity: I was never again to fight other people’s cultural battles. Even if I was invited or requested, I would define the limits in a way that allowed me a relatively unobtrusive role, under someone else’s direction, full stop. Only in South Africa, I resolved, would I take things in hand where there was an opportunity for initiative that needed taking. I kept my resolution among African-Americans in the United States. (100-101)

Mphahlele’s case shows the level at which a person’s identity might at times be compromised by nationality, however suitably ‘qualified’ the person might be. To decide not to be an active agent in cultural change and exchanges must have been a major decision for him. That telling phrase ‘only in South Africa’ reveals the extent to which he reflected on the issues of rootedness and alienation. For to have been in the United States in the 1960s and yet to have remained uninvolved in African-American struggles, as an aware African whose identity encompasses issues binding ‘the Black Atlantic’, suggests resoluteness of a very high order. Indeed, the episode shows the veracity of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s observation that ‘race’ might sometimes be an illusory concept:
"Race" disables us because it proposes as a basis for common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort; it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the "intraracial" conflicts that rise from very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and the world. (1995, 107)

Mphahlele looks forward to intellectual stimulation and growth in the United States, having experienced such disappointing episodes in Africa. Indeed, further to the Nairobi episode, from August 1968 to February 1969, Mphahlele had taught at the University of Zambia as a senior lecturer in the Department of English. He and Rebecca left when the government of Kenneth Kaunda could not guarantee their security of residence, at a time when the South African government was pressurizing its northern neighbours to expel all South African expatriates. He joined the University of Denver’s English Department as an associate professor and as a permanent resident of the United States. He recounts his brief Zambian excursion as ‘utter waste’. This move to America, however, has its own drawbacks, as his children more than assimilate to the dominant culture there:

The American culture, to whatever extent we can call it ‘American’, was sucking them in limb by limb, voraciously. There are levels at which it is extremely accessible, even pleasurably so. Not because it has anything to gain by adding five young Mphahleles to its numbers. But simply because its mouth is forever open. To use another analogy, American liberty, however relative, forges its own chains of enslavement. After all it’s a living organism … This can be painfully bewildering for immigrant families. One is constantly fighting to instil a basic sense of common decency in one’s children, in the absence of a communal structure that could foster and promote a distinctive pattern. This is the paramount thing African-Americans enjoy and which neutralises the pain of white racism and political impotence at the top levels of national administration. (139-140)

Coming from an African background where good manners and respect for elders are of paramount importance in the young, the Mphahleles have to contend
with this lack of decency in American youth, and at the same time watch as their children adopt Americanisms and slowly drift away from them. The children’s in-betweenness, their hybridity, is a source of friction, particularly between parents and the oldest three: Tony, Puso, and Chabi. There is also the serious dimension of language, though, to their credit, the Mphahleles do not force their children to speak Northern Sotho at home: ‘We reckoned that a child conquers his environment through language’ (138). Importantly, the couple realise that it makes little sense to resist the Americanisation of their children. Theirs is to provide the right domestic atmosphere and not to lose sight of their cultural rootedness and thus their specific and distinct identity:

[T]here comes a moment every immigrant youth – European, African, Oriental, Oceanic, Puerto Rican, Chicano – comes to acknowledge along with the realisation that they are still outsiders: it is that the parents are still where they always were culturally and provide a climate of love, stability, protection. They will always be there, like a boulder … This is the cultural equipment we took into the American setting. At first we resented watching our children act out the American ritual, but we came to understand, to accept here and reject there. As we did not want to live indefinitely in the U.S. The tug-of-war had to continue …(139 & 144)

The tug-of-war Mphahlele alludes to comes to him at 55, when he realises that he is an outsider, and a highly visible one at that: ‘I live in a glasshouse, the one I ran into eighteen years ago. It’s roomy but borrowed.’ Though he had permanent residence status in the country, he feels irrelevant to the American system of education. He wishes to be in a place where, as he puts it, ‘your shadow [status] is noticed’:

I could, if I chose, renew my lease indefinitely in this glasshouse, quite forget, write off my past, take my chances in the new territory. I shall not. Because I’m a helpless captive of place and to come to terms with the tyranny of place is to have something to live for that saves me from stagnation, anonymity. It’s not fame you want, it’s having your shadow noticed, it’s the comfort that you can show control over your life, that you can function. (161)
The metaphor of place as a tyrannical presence in his life is one of the most salient reasons why, on August 17th 1977 – just over a year after the Soweto Students’ Revolt – the Mphahleles returned home for good. The need to be amongst those who appreciated them, who understood and shared their cultural being, becomes an assertion of their identities, even when faced with almost insurmountable odds and uncertainties. In a poignant vignette, Mphahlele writes about the difficulties Puso – who had decided to accompany them home - had in South Africa before deciding to return to America. There just was no way Puso’s South African identity could be wrought overnight:

I gave Puso regular English lessons to keep him busy while we waited for a reply to his application from Lesotho High School in Maseru. By the time the reply came in February 1978 saying he should come, we had all had second thoughts about the enterprise. He was too restless and psychologically suspended between acceptance of the South African human landscape and resentment of its political climate. He would have to learn Afrikaans if he attended a South African school, and the bush town of Pietersburg had already soured his life with racism. One day he drifted into a Wimpy Bar and sat down at a table to be served – as anyone might do in a hamburger joint in the United States. The African waitress told him politely that he was not allowed to sit down. We hadn’t seen him go in. Outside he huffed and blurted, ‘These turkeys!’ … In March 1978 Puso and we decided that he had better return to the United States. It was done. We had to give him back to America, as it were. Either way you bleed, if you are a black person. Some bleed fast, others slowly. (198 - 199)

These clashing contexts in one (actual) setting place Puso at the intersections of multiculturalism, dis-remembering rather than re-membering or ‘suturing’ his identities. Puso, who grew up enjoying very liberal American liberties, is in South Africa a danger to himself, as he is forever being thrown back on the one aspect of his being he had grown up taking for granted - his blackness - in a country where to be black is in itself an indictment of one’s humanity. His displacement and alienation are obvious. He has no cultural moorings here, no social antennae that can guide
him to avoid harm. His cosmopolitan outlook is at odds with the racist provincialism South Africa espouses at this stage. Thus he has to return to a cultural milieu he can comprehend, assume an identity he can wear like a second skin. As Mphahlele writes, the pain (‘you bleed’) of separating from the children was profound. As he contemplates this eventuality, he writes: ‘Whenever we reckoned the profit and loss entailed in exile, the line between them was never clear when it came to our children’ (193).

Having decided to return home, the Mphahleles’ attempts to re-assert their African selves are not easy. Indeed, to come back at that stage was particularly brave, for one could just as easily be ostracised by the Black community as a ‘traitor’. Over and above the expected and routine humiliations he suffers while applying for an identity document, driver’s licence, work permit and residential permit in Johannesburg, Mphahlele is called a traitor by a group of exiled students at the National University of Lesotho:

A group of refugee students decided to bait me. I was accused, in effect, of intellectual dishonesty, of rationalising my return and the aborted intention to teach in a university (the North) that had been established under a system I had attacked and was attacking … In brief I explained that wherever African students are to be found, and I am allowed to teach them, I will do it; I had come back to claim my ancestral heritage, to assert my role as a humanist; there was nothing that said a person cannot and should not work in a system he abhors.64 (212)

This vignette shows in a veiled way the further vagaries of exile: how, even in this situation, communal fracture demands group solidarity, even when the eventual outcome is uncertain. Exile, in this instance, cloisters and suffocates individuality. It is quite possible that the students are motivated by envy, by a sense that, while they have to act as a collective, Mphahlele follows the impulses of his heart. Crucially, he is no longer agnostic, but a humanist, a believer in the Supreme Being who unifies all creation, an inclusive entity which does not exclude on any basis. Yet, contrary to all this, he is, still, the outsider in his own country when he has returned to it:
We sought community, we found it. We sought an identifiable culture, we found it. We sought relevance, we found it. We sought a return to ancestral ground, this is it, and it cuts across all man-made boundaries. We tasted liberty - freedom of association, expression, mobility. We came back to none of these. (250)

This extract brings to mind the observation by Nadine Gordimer that ‘disaffected African intellectuals use the autobiographical form as catharsis for the suffering of second-class citizens with first-class brains’ (1974, 7). Among the many things the Mphahleles found on their return, however, despite all the problems of exile, were, I would argue, dignity and respect accorded them by society – the sort that Es’kia writes about when he says it is important to have one’s shadow noticed. It is fitting that among the many sobriquets that he is now known by is 'Dean of African Letters' - a revered title. At last he does indeed cast a long shadow. His life exemplifies what Homi Bhabha discusses when he notes that, in many instances, the phenomenon of denied knowledge enters the dominant discourse and estranges the basis of its authority (Bhabha: 1994, 114). Summarising Mphahlele's writing, Lynda Gilfillan invokes ambivalence and counter-hegemony to describe the autobiographies:

Mphahlele’s autobiographical writing represents, like the poetry of Senghor that Mphahlele has praised, a self that is “the meeting point of Europe and Africa … an ambivalent continent” (1963:83). In short, writing that inscribes racial and cultural liminalities, re-members a marginalised community's history, and reconstructs the self in terms forbidden by the apartheid state, is an undeniable counter-force to the hegemonic ideology of the day. (1995, 191)

What Gilfillan observes is the manner in which Mphahlele celebrates the multiplicity of cultural contexts he occupies without giving primacy to any. In doing so, he becomes a voice of the voiceless, he re-presents a community of which he is a part. In this manner, too, he gives the lie to apartheid's attempts to 'straight-jacket' South Africans’ identities into neat boxes overarched by ethnic considerations, always separate, always antagonistic and at odds. This sort of re-writing the self is proof that autobiographical writings can be counter-hegemonic, for, despite the banning of
Down Second Avenue in South Africa, it reached the world in seventeen languages, testifying to the power of his portrayal of the horror of his native land.

Re-writing histories?: F.W. de Klerk

By contrast, an autobiography from South Africa depicting its provincialism over many years is F.W. de Klerk’s The Last Trek – A New Beginning (1998). It appeared opportunistically, just before the second multi-party elections of June 1999 in a now democratic South Africa. In a sense, while it may suggest multi-layered readings of closure to Afrikanerdom’s claim to political power in South Africa, it also, by its very title, makes such readings suspect. The volk embark on a last trek, which is seen as ushering in a new beginning. De Klerk’s autobiography places heavy emphasis on the autos, and it relies on Afrikanerdom as the beginning and ending of its identification. Thus the reader should not expect De Klerk to disavow Dutch settler history because such a history is used skillfully by the autos to construct its identity and to make claims on the present: hence a ‘new beginning’. From the opening chapter the reader is made to see how, using history, De Klerk teleologically places himself among the persecuted as he recounts his family history from Zeeland in the Netherlands. He is of De Clerq stock (note the change in the spelling, pointing to linguistic subordination, identification through acculturation), people who were persecuted immigrants from France. Given the long history of settlerdom, he is born much later as the nephew of Hans Strijdom, who, following the National Party victory of May 1948, became the second Prime Minister of South Africa after Dr. D.F. Malan. An interesting point about the opening chapter is how it obliquely continues the dialogue between Dutch and English descendants of the settlers who fought the two inter-ethnic wars that finally defined the Union of South Africa in 1910. For example, while de Klerk writes authoritatively of the killing of the trekkers who had erroneously believed they could settle in Natal under the Zulu king Dingane (the ‘bulalani a bathakathi’ episode which precipitated the Ncome [Blood] River episode), nowhere in the entire chapter is there any mention of the untold sufferings of black people in the two inter-ethnic wars. This is in sharp contrast to Sol Tshikedi Plaatje’s accounts of the same periods in Mafeking Diary (published 1973). It is this small but significant
detail that reveals how history and race are used selectively, and such selectivity is a defining characteristic of the text as a whole.

De Klerk records as his first conscious memory the laying of the foundation stone for the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria on December 16, 1938, when he was two and a half years old. It is an apt choice, showing the awakenings of Afrikaner myth-making and struggle in the twentieth century. Thereafter he became an ardent National Party Youth organiser at school, “forever mobilizing my friends to participate in political activities’ (Last Trek, 12). Later, at university, he extended his activities. Here he had occasion, as the Afrikaanse Studentebond (ASB) president, to invite Chief Albert Luthuli to speak to the students as he was venerated for ‘his position as a Zulu chief’ (Last Trek, 13; emphasis added). It is this slipping in of Chief Luthuli’s status, nationally and ethnically, that sets the tone for the manner in which De Klerk would later deal with representatives of African peoples. The chief’s position within Natal’s Groovlei community, and how he came to lose that position, are not important matters in the De Klerk narrative: what is important is the attempt to reveal the narrator as a forward-looking person (verligte in Afrikaans, as opposed to verkrampte, or conservative), a leader who can be unconventional when the circumstances dictate. Gushing over the traumatic Sixties decade, De Klerk comes up with an extraordinary comment. When writing about the bannings of the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress (described as “radical”) and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, he claims:

My reaction, and that of most of my friends at the time, was one of huge relief. We were confident we had broken the back of a communist-inspired revolutionary conspiracy. Now we could get on with the mission of developing the black population. (37; emphasis added)

I choose this extract for what it reveals about the subject. First, here is a mature individual who exults over a perceived enemy vanquished by Verwoerdian brutality (without recording what little dissent there might have been among his friends). The combined institutions of church and state must have played a crucial role in the indoctrination of the subject, for, as a student at Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, he was also an active member of the Nationalist Party Youth League and Broederbond. Second, the subject, even at this time when
decolonisation was in full swing in many parts of Africa, believes that the white civilising mission is still on, a paradigm that leads in South Africa to the homelands system. The implications for development, apparent later in the text, are that black people at this time were less than civilised, needing the strong tutelage of the seemingly indispensable Afrikaners.

These observations are crucial if the reader examines the systematic indoctrination de Klerk must have imbibed. Potchefstroom is the home of three big churches, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Dutch Reconstituted Church, and the Reformed or Doppers Church. De Klerk was raised as a Dopper and thus followed the teachings of the late-nineteenth century Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper of Amsterdam. Dopper ministers honed their brand of theology into an exclusionist, anti-revolutionary, authoritarian and elitist neo-Calvinism. They believed that all life was divided into ‘spheres’ – politics, culture, religion, home, and education – with each sphere governed by male representatives of God. Thus, knowing De Klerk’s religious and educational background prepares the reader for the self-justificatory tirades that make the book a mockery of common sense and the many deaths endured in the cause of freedom. The adherence to the division of phenomena into spheres of influence of control and separateness is part of the reason why separate ‘development’ was steadfastly clung to. Writing of the homeland system, for instance, he declares:

One of the main concerns of the National Party at the time was to promote the rapid implementation of the homeland policy, a position I, as an office-bearer in the party, fully supported … I was convinced that this was in the interest, not only of white South Africans, but also of moderate and peace-loving black South Africans. At the time the newspapers were full of horror stories brought back by white refugees from the Congo and other independent territories, where the hasty transfer of power to the former revolutionaries had led in many instances to the collapse of effective government and law and order. (38; emphasis added)

Two points from the extract are observable: first, with its strong anti-revolutionary message, the Dopper section of Afrikanerdom made any revolutionary gesture anathema, hence the jailing of leaders of black South Africans wishing to advance
change. In de Klerk’s terms, only ‘moderate and peace-loving black South Africans’ were worth consideration. The extract assumes that such ‘peace-loving’ South Africans apparently approved of both their land dispossession and forced removals to drought-stricken areas of the country. Second, De Klerk is skilful in manipulating the facts of decolonisation. The point about the ‘hasty transfer of power’ bolsters the point initially made about ‘developing the black population’, since it subtly demonstrates that in other parts of Africa black people were ‘under-developed’. A whole sad history of outside interference in the Congo is elided: the assassinations of revolutionaries such as Patrice Lumumba are simply seen through the prism of ‘horror stories’. The fact that such neo-colonial actions quickly moved independent Africa into post-colonial uncertainties, nihilism, and downright ruthlessness is not given historical context. The function of ideology here is apparent, and its interpolation for the reader is such that the later periods of uprising in South Africa are seen through this focaliser of disunity and power-hungry black organisations. But, in this context, it is understandable that De Klerk is struggling with his ‘roots’ rather than the ‘routes’ of his present identity as a member of the ruling class and party. He cannot unequivocally discount his settler ancestry, or give account of the manner in which South Africa was ‘developed’ without brutalities being perpetrated on the indigenous populations. This is where identity becomes an encumbrance. As Judith Coullie (1994, 106) points out in another context, here the subject is ‘textually constituted, in part, by what can be identified as the discourse of western individualism – out of which traditional Western autobiographical practice emerges’. The ‘I’ of De Klerk’s autobiography struggles to make the present believable. Coullie here captures this point rather well:

The “I” is a concentration of selves, and memories (constructions) of past selves. And these selves are implicated in the discursive representations of self that culture and history make available. As Norris observes: “there is not privileged ground of reflection from which thought could ever organize or control the flux of temporal experience ... Perception is always already representation” (1982: 47-8) Telling of the present of writing involves telling of the past (which is part of the present). Telling of the past, however, is no less problematic, for the discourse will always be coloured by the present of the narration. (1994, 123)
I believe this quotation very aptly accounts for the manner in which, as a member of the of the then Prime Minister BJ Vorster’s cabinet, the narrator begins to shift direction from accounting for the homelands system to the ‘rearguard’ action he depicts himself as fighting. He comes across as a closet reformer, applying such laws as the Registration of the Population Act in ‘as humane a manner as possible’. This is the telling of the past Coullie writes of as being problematic. When De Klerk later has an opportunity to lift the ban on the ostracised organisations of the country, we are invited to see such an act as that of a deeply principled person. Of course, there is no moment of epiphany, no road-to-Damascus miracle. All of his actions are seen as a result of his ‘moderating’ influence and ‘watchdog’ role. For instance, in writing of the internal power struggles within the party when Vorster was forced to resign, De Klerk makes sure the reader is left in no doubt of his principles when refusing to be drawn by lobbyists:

My overwhelming sentiment at the end of the Vorster era and following my first participation in the election of a new party leader was one of disgust. I had no desire for this dark side of politics – the back-stabbing and the manoeuvring for position, the rapid changes of loyalties and intrigues, often inspired by unbridled ambition – which would characterize the time. I firmly resolved not to allow myself to become part of this type of politics. (63-4)

In the light of such sentiments, De Klerk would later defend the activities of the security forces when, in the Eighties, the country experienced a low-intensity war. In attempting to justify the search-and-destroy policy of the security forces, he invokes a legalistic rhetoric:

The normal processes of the law seemed incapable of effectively dealing with this situation. Members of the security forces watched, with increasing frustration, while revolutionary movements organized, mobilized and intimidated or killed their opponents, seemingly at will. The security forces were forced to play by the rules while their opponents could, and did, use any methods they liked. (121; emphasis added)
I fail to understand which ‘normal processes of the law’ the narrator is writing about. The Eighties in particular were a period in which the government twice imposed a State of Emergency, suspending in large measure the paltry ‘rules’ of law in existence. In this period, many people were detained, tortured, driven mad by solitary confinement, or killed in truly brutal fashion (see for instance Mashinini’s account of her solitary confinement in Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life). Later, in the process of illuminating the murky past, De Klerk once more comes up with a rejection of the evidence:

I reject without qualification that my government was ever behind the violence. Although it was now indisputable that some of the security forces were involved in secretly instigating and perpetrating violence, their actions were in direct violation of my explicit instructions. (202)

This, the ‘bad apple’ theory, would be the defence advanced by so many security personnel and government officials at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Into this world of a reformist De Klerk enters Mandela, circa. February 11, 1990. For this momentous event, De Klerk must of course claim his pound of praise: ‘[I had] laid the foundation for the announcements I would make on 2 February 1990 even before I became president. On 12 September 1989 I announced a new policy to permit marches which had been forbidden under the State of Emergency regulations’ (Last Trek, 159). The deepening political resolve that the marches illustrated was aimed to coincide with pressure to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Thus De Klerk removes agency from the masses. Allowing such marches made perfect sense as a safety valve and in order that business activities should not be disrupted. At the time, it was apparent that the unbanning of the African National Congress, The South African Communist Party, and the Pan Africanist Congress, together with a host of minor parties, was not an act of goodwill. Apartheid’s bankrollers had begun to withdraw help. The rot set in when Chase Manhattan Bank refused to renew the government’s short-term loans and the campaign for sanctions began to be felt. The years in which the economy was deliberately depressed to allow the government to produce a surplus on the balance of payments in servicing its debt were over. Sanctions and the looming inevitability of a race war brought the de Klerk government to its senses. In a sense de Klerk validates Barret John Mandel’s
observation that, in making these ‘verbal constructs’, De Klerk wishes to ‘account’, to settle matters about how he arrived at this point in history:

Autobiography is a retrospective account of a man’s whole life (or a significant part of a life) written as avowed truth and for a specific purpose by the man who lived the life. Autobiography is a literary art in the Aristotelian sense that it is a conscious verbal construct written for a specific purpose – a purpose which helps to shape the work and without which there would be no work.  

One of the book’s defining aspects is the grudge between Mandela and De Klerk. It is also unfortunate for De Klerk that Long Walk to Freedom came out in 1994, because he writes in a defensive mode when referring to Mandela (see The Last Trek, 174; 201; 206 and 242). When the ‘talk about talks’ phase of the negotiations was over and the real business of mapping out the new dispensation to follow began, these grudges loomed large. For the narrator, issues such as strikes, rolling mass action, the release of political prisoners, and numerous deaths caused by seeming ‘black-on-black’ violence all stemmed from Mandela’s being a prisoner to ‘radicals in his party’. It is as though De Klerk, in writing the book, wishes to show that his side was not out-maneouvred by skillful negotiators (for instance, Cyril Ramaphosa, the leading ANC negotiator and later chair of the Constitutional Assembly, is portrayed as having ‘cold calculating eyes, which seemed to be searching continuously for the softest spot in the defences of his opponents’, Last Trek 238). As Anthony Sampson characterises de Klerk’s tirade, it would seem that, as the deceiver, De Klerk himself was deceived. Perhaps, as with Chief Luthuli, he supposed that Mandela was a cuddly, fuzzy ‘tribal’ chief with unusual charm and warmth who had earlier endorsed him as a man of integrity. But Mandela could never trust him and, as South Africa boiled, soon turned on him with viciousness. The tussle between the two would lead De Klerk to abandon the Government of National Unity set up by the Interim Constitution and later to resign from active politics. Very little of the subject reflected on here is endearing. Perhaps Anthony Sampson summarises the autos here with greater accuracy than most reviewers. He notes that De Klerk, like Gorbachev before him, never had Plan B of the negotiated settlement for history’s many cunning passages and contrived corridors. Despite
being the joint recipient of the Nobel Prize with Nelson Mandela in 1993, De Klerk unwittingly sidelines himself and emerges, in the text at least, as a footnote to history. If De Klerk’s autobiography is to offer the other side of the coin, as it were, it is infinitely ironic that he is seen, in more unreasoning Afrikaner circles, as a ‘volk’s verraier’, the people’s traitor who sold out their ‘way of life’ to ‘the swartes’. It is sobering to note just how hard he attempts to justify his political choices in the face of overwhelming rejection.

The foregoing discussion might reveal why identity in South Africa has been such a contested terrain. It is difficult sometimes to imagine what life must have been like for each of the autobiographers without the hindsight of knowing that identity is a complex concept. For this reason, what J.M. Coetzee says of the pitfalls of identity has merit. This is because it is possible to avoid being marginalised by a debilitating identity. Asked if he considered himself an Afrikaner, Coetzee provides this answer:

No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner. That, it seems to me, is the acid test for group membership, and I don't pass it. Why not? In the first place, because English is my first language, and has been since childhood. An Afrikaner (primary and simplest definition) is a person whose first language is Afrikaans. In the second place, because I am not embedded in the culture of the Afrikaner (I have never, for instance, belonged to a reformed Church) and have been shaped by that culture only in a perverse way.

What am I, then, in this ethnic-linguistic sense? I am one of the many in this country who have become detached from their ethnic roots, whether those roots were in Dutch South Africa or Indonesia or Britain or Greece or wherever, and joined a pool of non-recognizable ethnus whose language is English. These people are not, strictly speaking, "English Africans", since a large pool of them - myself included - are not of British ancestry. They are merely South Africans (itself a mere name of convenience) whose native tongue, the language they were born to, is English. And, as the pool has no discernible ethnus, so one day I hope it will have no predominant color, as more 'people of color' drift into it. A pool I would hope then, in which differences wash away. (1992, 342)
The hijacking of the linguistic/cultural label 'Afrikaner' since the 1880s should give us reason to pause. Before it became an exclusive term of classification, it encompassed other Afrikaners who did not happen to be white (such as Bessie Head). When it became anti-British, and later anti-black, it alienated rather than reconciled. Coetzee is in this instance anticipating the community of 'returnees' from exile with their children who belong to no particular 'ethnos'. There has been a gradual growth of Coetzee's pool since 1992, in which the basic identity is 'South African' and the stress on speaking the English language. Certainly this pool is the one in which Puso Mphahlele would fit. The tragedy of such a pool is its location in the urban, thoroughly cosmopolitan, cities of the country. The missing point in this observation by Coetzee is the fact that the larger pool is composed of those who, while quintessentially South Africans, believe in their cultures, the authenticity of their mother tongues, their ancestral beliefs. Also, he tends to forget that, apart from the indigenes, South Africa is a colourful country of immigrants. Every other day the Italian South Africans, German South Africans, Jewish South Africans, Portuguese South Africans, Polish South Africans, Chinese South Africans, or any other grouping, may be celebrating a festival of their mother country. These identities remain a strong component of significant communities in South Africa, and it will be years before an 'authentic' Coetzee-esque pool becomes a reality.

Of late, the human landscape has changed to include virtually every nationality on the continent as a result of South Africa's political stability and its relative economic strength. In a sense, for Africans the country is seen as a “coming out” country. One of the more pressing issues with so large a community of immigrants has been, paradoxically, identity theft! With ‘proper’ identity documents, the immigrant is guaranteed the life of a South African with all its concomitant benefits.

What Coetzee certainly shows is that it is possible, in contemporary South Africa, to drop an identity and become merely 'South African'. It also reveals that the various labels masquerading as identities that made the land hostile, a furnace, are imperceptibly dropping off. I conclude with this observation from Kwame Anthony Appiah, which seems to dovetail with aspects of the above argument at some key points:
There are, I think, three crucial lessons to be learned from these cases. First, that identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities. Second, that they flourish despite what I had earlier called our "misrecognition" of their origins; despite, that is, their roots in myth and lies. And third, there is, in consequence, no large place for reason in the construction - as opposed to the study and management - of identities. (1995, 108)

I tend to believe that Appiah's observation is apt if the foregoing discussion is placed within the statement's interstices. From the discussion thus far, it will be seen that identities are complex and are a response to what Hall sees as an interplay of power, culture, and history: what Appiah sees as his second point, which he calls their 'misrecognition'. I do not think that I would agree with Appiah's third point, that there is 'no large place for reason' in their construction. The fact that identities seem to be constructed through illogical and sometimes far-fetched claims to history is precisely why, when the lunacy of, say, the Serbian battle cry is heard, scholars need to highlight the reasoning behind the cry and then manage such discordant identities. Appiah would like to have it both ways: do not 'recognise' the lunatic but well-reasoned argument about a particular (often ethnic) identity, but do study its contours and parameters, its claims to authenticity, and do attempt to manage it. Such a position, I am afraid, lacks academic depth. Coming at the end of an excellently argued article, it leaves the reader bemused about Appiah's nonchalant dismissal of the logicality enmeshed within the illogicality by which certain identities are advanced. To be dismissive of all processes of identity formation and propagation is to lump all such identities as exercises in charlatanism. If we do not understand, within the South African context, the illogicality (brought to the fore by politicians as thoroughly logical) of ethnic and group identities in the years following 1948, we cannot account for the fractured selves as shown by the majority of autobiographers discussed here, who attempted to assemble their multiple selves into a coherent 'whole': 'patches on a cloth', as Bessie Head termed the process of re-membering her tortured selves.

In this chapter I have tried to reveal the difficult process of re-membering their multiple selves that Head and Mphahlele, both in exile, had to undergo. Head
was to spend most of her adult life just next door to South Africa, as it were, battling with the illogicalities of ‘colouredness’, sexism, lack of national status, and the difficult task of being a writer. Mphahlele, by contrast, had to assemble his fractured African self in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Zambia before combining this self with a cosmopolitan self. Only when he felt sufficiently re-membered was he to contemplate a return to the country of his birth. Both authors try to show how tenaciously they held onto their South Africanness, even if such a hold was tenuous at the best of times. While Head was to die in exile, Mphahlele had a difficult time on his return, but his autobiography shows just how successful the entire process of his search for a truer identity has been. He cannot be re-tribalised; he can be insulted but not ignored, and he achieves the sort of status apartheid believed was not possible for ‘natives’. Against such struggles I juxtapose De Klerk’s attempt, first, to remain faithful to his identity as an Afrikaner and, second, to de-politicise and possibly uncouple Afrikaner identity from the horrors of apartheid. It is a brave attempt coming from a former state president who at one time was responsible for many of the painful episodes that some of the autobiographers document. Afrikaner identity, I have tried to show, is itself riven by contestations around who exactly qualifies to be considered as such. Coetzee provides excellent examples of how on the one hand, one can throw away Afrikanerness but be a South African, or on the other, that Afrikanerness need not be an obstacle to identifying with the greater South African ‘family’, the nation. In a sense, while Coetzee opts for an unencumbered, cosmopolitan South Africanness, Niehaus shows how it is possible to be both South African and Afrikaner without any sense of shame, guilt or maudlin soul-searching through a steadfast belief in the greater wholeness afforded by a South African identity. As with all other ethnic groups in the country, it will be interesting to see how South Africans, now that they agree that they are all South Africans, simultaneously depoliticise and celebrate their ethnic identities in much the same way as African-Americans, Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Polish-Americans and a host of other (hyphenated) Americans are able to do.