CONCLUSION

The present study has attempted to reveal how, in different eras and throughout the twentieth-century, South Africans have forged their selves under very trying circumstances. The process of forging such identities also involves a rejection of imposed identities and an affirmation of what the subjects feel are their true selves. To say ‘no’ to ascribed identities and dispossession is to act. This perspective arises from Mongane Serote’s poem, There will be a Better Time, a view better illustrated by the following lines:

if the we is the most of us  
and the most of us is the will  
the will to say no!  
there will be a better time  
when time has run out for liars  
for those who take and take and take from others, take  
forever!  
and keep taking  
for themselves alone  
take and take and take  
time has run out  
when we say no!  
no more -  
- no is not a word but an act, remember that - !

Kwame Anthony Appiah avers that identities grow out of historical times within which there are changes to the political, economic and cultural life forces, that they flourish despite the ‘misrecognition’ of their origins, and that reason plays no part in their construction. While I readily agree with the first two propositions, I do not believe that the third formulation, particularly within the South African context, necessarily holds true: certainly most of the texts studied here demonstrate that there was a
(hidden) role for reason in the construction of such identities: apartheid, despite its perceived lunacy, could not have survived for as long as it did if no one believed in its reasonableness, if it did not have fervent supporters. Although I do show that some autobiographical subjects – such as Levine and De Klerk – are disconcerting in how their selves are conceptualised and how they relate their lives within the South African polity, in general what the study hopefully shows is the hybridity within which South Africans realise their identities.

The fragment that forms part of the title of this dissertation, ‘who am i?’ shows how bewildering the South African experience was for some of its citizens, and how, in seeking to answer exactly this question, they strove to prove their humanity in a similar fashion to African-American slave narratives. Serote provides a clue to this process when he writes in The Night Keeps Winking (1982, 13) that: ‘we did amazing things to say simple things/we are human and this is our land’. Hence history plays a critical role in this study because the eras delineated herein show the acculturation process, the phases of ambivalence, those of outright political struggle and lastly the phase of composure, the assurance that comes with having come to grips with an identity with which the autobiographical subject is comfortable.

To take up Serote’s refrain: how to prove humanity within the South African context was for the most part a preoccupation that motivated black South Africans, like their African-American counterparts, to acquire learning, to master various disciplines of knowledge and ultimately to ‘write back’ in self-representation using the modernist vehicle of autobiography to reach a wider audience. Abrahams is the best exemplary of the above. Having proven their humanity through inscribing themselves in texts, what else could the autobiographical selves hope to achieve? I believe they achieved a lot: they made sure that the notion of apartheid racist thinking of the ‘native’ as a perpetual child seemed idiotic, nonsensical and utterly superfluous. Because the state did not have a place for the ‘uppity native’, exile was and remained the only way out of such demoralising and demotivating circumstances. In most instances the autobiographical subject recounts the historical subject’s most profound moments as the search for reason in a de-humanising environment and becoming an agent of change in that milieu - the autobiographies of Chikane, Farisani, Makhoere and Joseph display this aspect. In such instances, the self that comes across most strongly is ‘the scattered self’ since the autobiographical
subjects find themselves in an alienating and debilitating environment. While some autobiographies, such as Campbell’s, celebrate ‘the social self’ at the expense of other selves, believing the self to be the yardstick of (white) male strength and daring, other texts, notably Helen Joseph’s, show how incarceration even within the home can destabilise this ‘social/sociable self’ if their form of identity is not approved by the state. Only in recent autobiographical writings has there been an upsurge in the celebratory model of the ‘social self’.

In a way the readership of autobiography from South Africa is already framed in mind of the autobiographer – this reader has to be persuaded of the ‘truthfulness’ of the narrated political and personal hinterland, as the latest autobiography to hit South African book shelves, Gavin Evans' Dancing Shoes is Dead: A Tale of Fighting Men in South Africa (2002), illustrates. Published in England, this narrative of Evans’ life as a boxing journalist who was an underground operative for the ANC seeks to convince an outside audience of the veracity and righteousness of the struggle for a democratic South Africa even if it is tinted with political disillusionment. It does add a fascinating facet to the field of South African autobiographical writing, introducing as it does the men in the boxing rings of the country and the political battles fought in the vicious Eighties. The reader is made to see where the personal and the political intersect, to understand the choices open to the historical subject and the decisions arrived at.

One task of a majority of South African autobiographies has been to un-mask the official version of events for readers who might find it difficult to believe that such events can be possibly perpetrated on a country’s citizenry. Hopefully extracts from Natie Ferreira’s autobiography have demonstrated that denial of events that were embarrassing for the state was officially built into the South African political machinery (which might account for De Klerk’s reluctance about ‘truth’). Ferreira’s primary audience is internal: both literate black South Africans in general and white South Africans in particular. His task is to make sure that the willful self-blinding of the latter group cannot be sustained. Thus the reader of a South African autobiography has to be convinced of the veracity of the text, first, and then persuaded to the moral stance of the historical subject’s position (as the texts by Makhoere,Farisane, Pheto, Naidoo and Chikane illustrate). Not only were South African autobiographies written for internal consumption (if they were not banned
outright) but since most of writers had either been detained or in exile, a great many of them were initially published outside the country for wider dissemination. In this case the readership becomes international, having to vicariously re-live the horror of life in apartheid South Africa. Thus there is always a strong emphasis on the moral stance of the historical subject. If we take Mandela’s autobiography as an example, some salient facts will illustrate how the readership of the final text plays a role in how it eventually came to be published. The initial draft manuscript was smuggled out of Robben Island to England by Mac Maharaj in the 1970s. It provided the main body of work for Long Walk to Freedom (1995). But it could have been published even in the 1970s should Mandela have so wished. But I believe he wished for a political closure to his long struggle and incarceration, a closure that involved the resolution of the South African conundrum. Hence the long delay in publication. This is one text in which issues of identity, the political definition of identity and the agency of the autobiographical subject, as well as the historical circumstance and publishing history, are all closely intertwined. Thus the text assumes a moral authority, not of black nationalist triumphalism, but of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and in this way it assumes an international readership.

William Spengeman identifies three motives for autobiography in the Augustinian tradition: philosophical autobiographers who aim to search for the self, poetic autobiographers who express the self, and historical autobiographers who explain the self. These motives, I would contend, while apparent in some South African autobiographies, do seem to an extent inadequate to be applicable in this instance. I would propose a fourth category, namely the socio-political autobiographer who seeks to construct and persuade. The fragmentary psychological state suffered by many autobiographical subjects from South Africa (for example, as observable in Bessie Head’s text) attests to a bringing together of a multiplicity of selves to form a recognisable whole – ‘patches on a cloth’ as she terms the process of this re-assembling of selves. Mphahlele in particular raises the issue of fragmentation when, in a moment that must have been painful, he reflects on his life while living in South Africa and says: ‘Suddenly I felt as if my life had been one huge broken purpose’ (1959, 149). Thus Down Second Avenue, which achieved remarkable currency in being translated in seventeen languages, shows the persuasionary nature of South African autobiography in the search, not merely for a
singular self, but the re-construction of various fragments. Mphahlele (218), too, is aware of what that persuasion can involve, as he notes that:

I used to want to justify myself and my own kind to the white man (sic). I later discovered that it was not worth it. It was to myself and my kind that I needed to justify myself. I think the white man has no right to tell me how to order my life as a social being, or order it for me.

Included here is the South African reader, because the historical subject, in constructing an identity wishes to communicate it back to his own kind. This is the flip side of what Ferreira sought to do and in a sense it comes back to the notion of nationhood, not disparate ‘ethnic groupings’ but a nation in the making. To seek to persuade a black readership and divert it from its fragmentary tendencies is also part of the autobiographical subject’s objectives, as Naidoo’s text illustrates. In this way, the readership also involves the historical subject’s choice of which models of autobiography to use. Autobiography, as reflected by examples in this thesis, abides by different kinds of models: the biblical, praise poem, confessional, self-made person (sometimes as hero/ine), psychological, political and the epistolary models. These models are used in different ways by the historical subjects, contingent on what they wish to convey. An example of the sort of psychological model is Modisane’s text, while the model of the self-made individual within the community is used by Mphahlele. Forms of praise poem autobiography are interspersed with the political form in Magona’s two texts, successfully blending the two models. We should not forget Coullie’s point that, within the South African context, two ontologies and modes of consciousness are operative (1999, 75-76). And in the choice of which model to use with respect to the reader looms large in the consciousness of the historical subject. I would add the model of the ‘I/eye communal selves’ to the models above. In instances of overwhelming oppression, the South African autobiography written by various authors prior to the Nineties carried a strong sense of bearing witness to the daily grind engendered by apartheid. In this manner, the autobiographies from South Africa differ markedly from, say, those written by Kenya’s Gikuyu sub-nationality, for instance (although this might not always be the case since Kenya has had repressive regimes since its independence in December 12 of 1963). The critic James Olney’s rule of thumb here proves useful.
According to him, social and political dislocation underpin South African autobiographies:

The comparison between Gikuyu autobiography, with its great story of Gikuyu and Mumbi, and South African autobiographies, with its single pattern of exile and recollection, breaks down completely, for the pattern of South African autobiography is not determined by any internal cohesion or social logic, not by any internal social cohesion or social logic, not by what I have called social synecdoche, nor by cultural heritage that extends from the present individual back through legendary ancestors to a divine source. Rather the pattern is determined by precisely the opposite – by a social disunion, by cultural and political dichotomy. The classic pattern of South African autobiography describes a progressive alienation that, forced to the extreme, becomes spiritual and physical exile. (1973, 250)

Olney here captures the pattern quite succinctly: textual examples point to the veracity of his observation. For instance, this is the model under which Levine and Modisane’s complete feelings of alienation may be classified. We can also use it to comprehend Joseph’s spiritual exile and Head’s physical exile. In each of these texts there is no social or political cohesion precisely because separateness (apartheid) is the policy of the state that engenders alienation. Hence the need to document, for both an external and internal readership, the very real consequences of such an alienating country on its peoples. This might account for the lack of serious studies of South African autobiographies within its own academy since denial, guilt and feelings of inadequacy with the truth are features of contemporary South Africa.

But Olney’s observation, while important in studying South African autobiographies, is dated. As Stuart Hall points out, identities are contingent on the play of history, culture and power. What this study seeks to do is to analyse how the historical subjects understand their South Africanness, their being of a particular land. It is a striking detail that none of these texts studied here reflect ethnic identities that the state sought so hard to enforce through its policy of apartheid (except for the unfortunate Matanzima text Independence My Way). This remarkable
feature, commendable as it is, might undergo a change as power relations metamorphose. In the post-colonial world, as in a post-apartheid or even post-socialist one, identities muted in the past have a tendency to resurface and play havoc with the euphoria of freedom. Issues pertaining to culture (specifically based on language as its vehicle) tend to be divisive precisely at the time when unity is most needed to weld the sub-nationalities into a coherent whole. Eight years into the 'new' South Africa, ethnic rumblings have become more audible. This brings us to the rather puzzling non-action on ethnic identities in South Africa at present. Hitherto, all white ethnic groups constituted a 'race', which was ruled by civic law and which was contingent to change as circumstances arose. Black groups, in contrast, were said to be 'ethnic' in orientation and their biological make-up. This made their ethnic identities non-historical, immutable, and forever fixed. This meant that blacks could be ruled by customary law, and to this end the government went about setting up customary authority even where none existed before. This brought fixity to very malleable identities, malleable since the interconnectivities brought about by marriage, friendship and the urban work environments had begun to make these identities merely cultural. As noted in the study, the autobiographers eschew an overt ethnic identity because of its divisive nature. What does come across, as the Serote fragment shows, is that South Africans wish to be seen to be 'of this land', stressing in this manner their being South African first and something else second (or even not at all).

The reality today is that the South African democratic government has not begun to tame this colonial and apartheid imposed monster of (fixed) cultural identities which only exist in the minds of outright ethnicists. Perhaps there is a belief that some sense of South Africanness permeates all who live in the country. This is a cause for worry, not only because, in refusing to de-politicise ethnic identities, the state creates room for their currency. Mphahlele, in particular, is scathing when he notes that the ethnic factor is also built into the government when it tries to rule by ethnic exclusion. He shows historical depth in how colonial rule imposed itself on the various communities and the current practice of politically insensitive decisions. This is not the first observation from Mphahlele on this issue. Mahmood Mamdani, a respected African scholar, also makes a similar point in his Frantz Fanon Memorial Lecture (2001, 12) and I add his observations here:
In its reluctance to address the ethnic legacy of apartheid, contemporary South Africa is following the path treaded by several indirect rule colonies on the continent, such as postcolonial Nigeria, Kenya and Sierra Leone. Without joining the project to de-racialize civil law with a parallel project to de-ethnicize customary law, however, South Africa cannot create a single citizenship. Even if inadvertently, this downplaying of the ethnic legacy of apartheid will reproduce two spheres in South African society, one governed by a de-racializing civil law, speaking the language of rights, but the other governed by an ethnically-framed ‘customary law’, speaking the language of custom. If post-apartheid South Africa continues along this path, will it be an exaggeration to say that it will have reproduced a reformed, nonracial version of apartheid?

What Mamdani does is to re-visit the argument put forward in his Citizen and Subject (1996) about the Rwandan Massacres within the South African context. This is the potential danger facing the country: that there are in fact two streams of governance. One is urban and legalistic, the other is rural and based on nebulous cultural/ethnic predicates. The autobiographies studied herein demonstrate the dangers of such streams of governance since these streams tend to engender ethnic identities. The state wishes to discourage this ethnic thinking by launching a Millennium Project which aims to collect, collate and interpret the diverse heritage of South Africa so that a common identity and nationhood might emerge. And this, I believe, is what Mamdani decries, for such a project is predicated on making sure that civic law receives primacy without de-politicising ethnicity and rendering customary law subordinate to civil law, for all the citizens of the country. For, having seen such a heroic struggle to grant all South Africans an identity they can be proud of, it would be a supreme irony if the country ever experienced anything approaching the horrors of a Hutu-Tutsi conflict. That is the challenge in South Africa today, to make sure that its citizenry have one mediated identity that expresses their nationality while being able to celebrate their cultural identities without venerating them over and above the political one.

South African autobiographies show the perspicacity of Carl Niehaus’ observation that they, together with their compatriots, have ‘earned the right to hope’ for a brighter future. It is a future based on the belief that, having struggled so
hard to divest themselves of imposed identities, they can be able to construct a broader, more inclusive and common South African identity. The refrain, ‘who am i’ can thus be re-formulated, in the twenty-first century to more elaborate ‘who are we’? It is this sort of inclusiveness that informs current state president Thabo Mbeki’s ‘I am an African’ speech delivered on the 8th of May 1996 on the occasion of the adoption of the final post-apartheid constitution by Parliament (1998). While the dilettante had a field day dissecting and unpacking its claims, this speech, for our purposes, remains the most moving testimony to attempts to encompass the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid phases in the making of South Africans. It seeks closure to the contestations on identity, and in its panoramic view includes all the horrors visited on one group by another, extols and celebrates the land that all call home, and points to the inerasable marks the imprints of history have left on the soul of the nation in the making. Yet its final inclusive message is in many ways reflected and refracted by the kinds of identificationary role of the autobiographical subjects I have attempted to highlight in this study. To invoke Niehaus once more, South Africa, for all its contradictions and puzzling permutations, remains a land of hope. I believe that these autobiographies play a very important role in the collective memory of the people of the country, and through such studies it is possible that future generations will avoid repeating the idiocies of the past, if they but avail themselves of the written lives of those who went before them, and learn to cherish the role of their ancestors in showing them the pitfalls of identities withheld and fought over.