PART I: INTRODUCTION

...we know that while intellectuals wear themselves out with sterile rhetoric about how to understand “the other”, indigenous people continue to live the most horrendous injustices which have been perpetuated across the centuries.

Victor Montejo

The study of autobiographical writings in South Africa has been a growing academic activity since the turbulent mid-Eighties when it became apparent that the grand narrative of apartheid could not go on for much longer. Self-writing, life-writing as auto(self)/bio(life)/graphe(writing) is an important literary site since it interrogates issues of subjectivity, experience, writing a displayed self and a particular milieu. It is also found in all humanistic practices and endeavours. Contemporary readers immerse themselves in a particular spatial and temporal frame through reading of a fourth-century autobiography as much as a twenty-first century one. Historical study, as part of a field of signifiers, informs the contemporary reader in a meaningful way how subjectivity, cultural practices, sociology and everyday concerns come into play and make the reader fully involved in ‘reliving’ the life of the narrator. As Albert Stone argues:
Because each autobiography is a cultural artifact celebrating individual consciousness, style and experience, its readers must learn to adjust critical focus from individual text to social context to appropriate conceptual frameworks – and, I would argue, back to the single text again. For we are chiefly interested in autobiographies in order to find out how people, events, things, institutions, ideas, emotions, relationships have become meaningful to a single mind as it uses language to pattern the past. (1981, 8)

Stone here points to the interconnectivity a reader discerns in an autobiographical text, the interconnectivity discernible between the personal and linguistic fields. This makes a study based on South African autobiographical writings brimming with historical and social foregroundings - even while the autobiographical subject resists such foregrounding - important in that we excavate and make visible the unsaid, the under-stated, the evanescent of the South African world. For autobiographical narrators, it is important to place themselves at the front of often conflicting social processes as a subject worthy of consideration. This inevitably brings autobiographical writings to the attention of literary theorists who offer contesting readings of the literature.

But what is autobiography? In his text, On Autobiography, Philippe Lejeune provides a working definition of autobiography, expanding it to include what he considers to be its principal elements and how it may be differentiated from other modes of self-expression. He notes that autobiography is:

[A] retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his (sic) individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (1989, 4)

The four elements he states as being key to an understanding of autobiography are:

- Form of language
- Narrative in prose
  - Subject treated: individual life, story of a personality
• Situation of the author: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical

• Position of the narrator:
  • the narrator and the principal character are identical
  • retrospective point of view of the narrative

Lejeune makes a distinction between any work that fulfills all of the above in every single category is autobiography and those that do not do so. He notes that other sub-genres, while close to autobiography, do not necessarily meet these requirements, and lists these as follows:

- memoirs: (2)
- biography: (4a)
- personal novel: (3)
- autobiographical poem: (1b)
- journal / diary: (4b)
- self-portrait or essay: (1a and 4b) (1989, 4)

Although autobiographical writing can be said to date back at least to the fourth century, theory about autobiography as a serious and popular study began around 1956, 'about an hour ago as such matters must be judged' (James Olney, 1980: 6-7). Studies interested in the genre criss-cross the gamut of scholarly approaches, ranging from the de-constructionist stance, the post-structuralist school to humanist and sociological positions.

For the deconstructionist, autobiography is not in itself ‘truthful’. Rather it is determined by ‘discourses’ prevalent at the time of its writing. Margaret Daymond notes that:

Autobiography is mediated in the sense that it cannot be written outside a discourse; even a resistance discourse, such as a celebration of blackness, will be contaminated by the dominant values of the society in which it functions. (1995, 564)
Daymond here argues in a similar fashion to Paul de Man who makes a show of refuting the subjectivity of the autobiographical subject in rather grand terms:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all aspects, by the resources of his medium. (1979, 920-921)

Paul Eakin, however, resists this view of autobiography for, as he states, language cannot be seen to take primacy over the author, as though the author is a creation of language *qua* language:

Whether or not de Man’s practice corroborates his theory, his stated view of autobiographical discourse in particular and of language in general controverts the traditional conception of autobiography as a theatre of self-knowledge, and self-discovery. In his view, the balance of power in the relation between self and language in autobiography shifts decisively to the side of language: the self is displaced by the text, with the result that the portrait of the self is eclipsed, supplanted instead by knowledge of the trope of self-reference and its structural function in the rhetorical system. (1985, 189)

As I hope to show, while language, particularly in the post-colonial world, does make a significant contribution to how subjectivity is experienced by the subaltern, self-knowledge and self-discovery remain, to my mind, primary for the writing self, the historical subject of autobiography. Mark Freeman makes the point that we should not, in discerning internal conventions and structures of autobiography, fall into the fallacy of assuming that all that is in the text results from a careful, skillful (mis)use of language:
To confer primacy upon language need not result in breaking the covenant between word and world; it only breaks down the spell of the conception of the relationship which supposes language to be a mere mirror of the world, a transparent vehicle for its disclosure. But this is hardly ample reason to leap to the conclusion that words cannot disclose or reveal. To leap to this conclusion is in fact to fall prey to a fallacy as well as a particularly crude form of either-or-thinking: either language is a mirror or it is a reality unto itself, autistically self-enclosed, a veritable prison, in which there exist no doors leading out. (1991, 223)

While I view language as an area that shapes discourse, I would allow free reign to Freeman’s comment: in effect, I would argue that language, qua language, cannot in itself have primacy of consciousness even as it works within the interstices of consciousness. For thought to be, there must be a consciousness shaped in turn by culture expressed through language. To attempt to uncouple the two is reductive. Of course, De Man is ably supported by other scholars such as Willis R Buck Jr, who tend to see an autobiographer’s identity as simply ‘fiction’:

Few autobiographers, of course, are willing to acknowledge openly the fictionality of their constructed identities and the falsity of their writing simply because they share with every other human being the bias toward identity. But in this unwillingness, the autobiographer is guilty of a second degree of falsehood. Claiming to represent the truth about himself, while at best capable of offering a formalisation that is identity, the autobiographer makes false overtures to his readers. He is, as it were, guilty of a representational falsehood in portraying the fiction of identity as truth (1980, 483; my emphasis).

Since the present study concerns itself with the very construction of identity that Buck sees as fiction, it will in the coming chapters be interesting to test the validity of my readings of the autobiographies selected against his view of fictionality. Identity, I contend, is never fictionalised: it is a mediated aspect of our humanity, and although we cannot claim to have a central identity into which we pour all else, we can in fact adapt our given identity in such a way that it can add others to it: with time, for example, one’s identity can be stretched to include aspects of nationality,
ethnicity, multi-cultural dimension, and a global facet. Thus it may be that we might speak of an individual as encompassing these aspects that confer a multiple identity: South African, Tswana-speaking, cosmopolitan, citizen-of-the-world. Each of these aspects of identity points to the hybridity that comes with the modern age. Identity can be viewed as fiction if it is not seen and forced to conform to the view that it is opposed to truth. Here we should see fiction as formal construction, part of the social constructions we engage in from time to time.

Post-structuralists theorise on autobiography quite differently from deconstructionists. In this approach, the main argument is that writing supersedes the mind (a sort of Cartesian reversal!) and, as Edmund Smyth notes, this is in itself problematic:

For theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, the self is situated within the texture of the discourse; rather than being, in humanist terms, the origin of meaning, it is deeply implicated in language ... Just as the text was no longer to be considered univocal and coherent, so the subject has to be seen as fractured, disconnected and unstable. The emphasis on the decentred self would mean that autobiographical writing could no longer be regarded as a privileged and unproblematic site of expression: the unity of the text has been contested in parallel with the unity of the subject. (1995, 2)

Such assumptions do not take into consideration the fact that the decentred self can, under pressure, be so fractured as to become doubtful of it-self (as I hope to show with Bloke Modisane, for instance). I am struck by how difficult it is to reconcile these assumptions with the South African experience, how far removed they are from the narratives of South African autobiographies, and in a sense I find it unhelpful to apply such theories to the selected books. For the South African experience, while not unique, was one in which the very contestation over politics manifested itself in the creation, fostering and resistance to particular identities. This does not imply that South African autobiographies are homogenous and merely mimetic: some of the texts will conform comfortably with such theoretical contestations and assertions, some will not. What it does mean is that the social processes and strategies I mentioned earlier seeped into the conscience of South
Africans to such a degree that agency became the top priority. To contest the texts produced here would of course be germane: literary studies exist to make us see life and texts differently. But to challenge the unity of the self while it was actually trying to make itself coherent because of the very fracturing fostered by the state is unhelpful and inappropriate to the urgency of the autobiographical need: it is to carp from a theoretical laager. Scholars such as Jane Watts (1989) have shown that the South African experience has necessitated a different take on autobiographical writings. As the critic John Sturrock wisely suggests:

> It is no longer necessary to decide whether this episode or that in autobiography is perfectly factual when the factual and the fictive alike are *intentional*, a word I use here in its perhaps less familiar philosophical sense, as describing that which is not given by the world but "intended" by the mind … As theorists set on interpreting the contents of the text we can take comfort from knowing that the autobiographer was there before us, that what we are reading is *already* an interpretation and the writer was an active, not passive force. (1993, 287)

One of the reasons why a study of autobiographical narratives is important in understanding historical processes lies in the fact that the human subject has a capacity to be creative, interpretative and thus a shaper of his or her experience. Approaches to autobiographical studies in recent times have largely hinged on two preoccupations: those propagated by the proponents of post-structuralism and those with a humanist impulse. The former hold that an autobiographical text is a discursive play of various articulations by which de-centred human selves constitute their reality. The humanist critics hold that autobiography has the power to record, to give witness, and is the conscious exploration of the self. The self in this instance is a site of meaning even, as in the South African situation, when such meaning seems a Kafka-esque nightmare from which they are trying to awake. Thus to study the autobiographical texts of a society in which the very being of people, the self, was subjected to a conscious effort of ‘thingification’ is to study the tenacious spirit of a coherent (at any rate, a near coherent) self making meaning of a debilitating environment. In the words of Thengani Ngwenya, it seems simplistic to adopt European-derived post-structuralist emphases for the study of South African
autobiographies precisely because the (unified) selfhood of South Africans has been continually assaulted by the apartheid state, possibly with a view to rendering the black person in particular, but also all who opposed the state, a non-being (Ngwenya, 1996: 19). Certain historical particularities peculiar to regions and countries defy the neat categorisation of ‘universality’ of the human experience, and thus such narratives as those that emanate from these regions and countries make the post-structuralist theory of decentring inadequate as an analytical tool. Jane Watts raises this matter succinctly:

In this situation the writers’ need to find their own individuality becomes a prerequisite to literary creation. And indeed autobiography is the South African writers’ answer to this interference with their consciousness – they use it to try and reverse the conditioning process in order to free themselves, through reassessment of their entire growth and development, of their mental subjugation, to make their consciousness. (1989, 115)

The importance of this comment revolves around identities denied and enforced, identities becoming part of the way in which individuals hung onto their sense of humanity. Indeed, the manner in which pre-colonial South Africans constructed their identities cannot but be far removed from patterns in the period immediately following 1948, though certain remnants of such forms of identification still survive today. In order to apprehend and comprehend a life lived under such trying circumstances, the individual, in assessing the present, makes tangible sense of the past in asserting his or her humanity ‘within the totality of material practices of a social formation’ (Coullie, 1994: 13).

What some post-structuralist theorists set out to achieve is to deny absolutely the text’s stated positions and facts. It is as though, in reading, these theorists set out to ruthlessly tear down, falsify, find fault and render the text a fictive creation. As Njabulo Ndebele (1989, 28) notes, this sort of reading necessitates that the critic should `read primarily for the purpose of finding something to shoot down, and when [they] have found it, be ruthless in [their] mission of demolition, of shattering myths, and pulling down false gods'. While such a reading is important when coming to de-cipher charlatans who routinely wish to cash in on the world’s morbid
fascination with, say, Adolph Hitler, by publishing a supposedly ‘authentic’ diary or memoir of the subject, it simplifies matters considerably to imagine all autobiographical writings as subsumed by charlatanism. This points to the denial of everything to do with writing, the authority of the author and their agency. Key areas of this framework are, as Richard Freadman and Seamus Miller put it:

[T]he denial of the referential power of literature and its image of the individual; the adoption of decentred models of the self; the denial of [the] originary authority of the author; the (related) denial of determinate meaning, and so of determinate acts of interpretation of texts; the (again related) image of the text as embodying an infinite plurality of meanings. (1989, 100)

An acceptance of these positions would mean that the study of autobiography is but an act of futility, except where it seeks to show falsities, fractures and fault-lines. The present study, while indebted to much of the scholarship on autobiography, links up the significance of autobiography within a particular socio-political setting and its active function in that historical moment. It examines the form and function of autobiography in the context of an obsessive attempt by the South African government to erase people while attempting to secure unwanted group identities. In this instance, denial of the primacy of autobiography would seem superfluous because twentieth-century South Africa was in many ways a pariah state. Simply to assume that denial can work does not make autobiographical studies any richer. When agency is denied the historical subject, it is by means of narration that the autobiographical subject gains agency. A good example of how such a refusal to grant authority might result in resistance is Nelson Mandela’s autobiography in which he shows how the hegemonic structure that became known as apartheid invoked his own sense of counter-hegemonic agency, the human agency that cannot be erased by textuality:
I was not born with a hunger to be free. I was born free – free in every way that I could know … it was only when I began to learn that my boyhood freedom was an illusion, when I discovered as a young man that my freedom had already been taken away from me, that I began to hunger for it. (1995, 86)

This fits in with what Judith Coullie observes in her study of some South African autobiographical writings:

It must be noted …that apartheid effected a prolonged crisis of uncertainty on almost all its peoples, forcing South African autobiographers to attempt to forge selves that were worthy of telling about, to subvert the official versions of reality and thereby redefine the real, to generate ways of telling that might fit the tale. (1994, 8)

Within the limitations placed on the autobiographer by issues of textuality, therefore, what Coullie points at in this regard is the agency to disencumber the self and re-map reality in that self’s image.

Some autobiographical theorists are humanist in orientation. Chief among them is James Olney, who collapses the three distinct sectors of life-writing into a meaningful whole:

The *bios* of the autobiography, we may say, is what the “I” makes of it; yet as recent critics have observed, so far as the finished work is concerned, neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing – the third element of autobiography – assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. (1980, 22)

Thus, rather than reading for the characteristic ‘theoretical flaws’, the humanist critics look to a life as lived, with autobiography being a writing about life.
Interpretation here is important, for, as Janet Gunn explains, it is as though, in reading, the narrator and the reader merge:

This reading (or interpretative activity) takes place, moreover, by selves who *inhabit* worlds, not by a subject who has had to pay the price of world-habitation for access to itself. The self who reads, whether it be the autobiographer or the reader of autobiography, is the *displayed self*, not the hidden self. The displayed self is the self who speaks, who lives in time, and, by virtue of living in time, who participates in depth and thus can experience the inter and transpersonal grounds by which personal identity becomes possible. (1982, 9)

Autobiographers, in this instance, are active interpreters of events and developments within their era, just as the reader becomes included in that temporal space and apprehends the narrators as displayed by themselves on the larger canvas of their community. Such a reading is not to rarify history, of course, but to see how the narrator mediates time and place. From this distance, William Spengeman notes that autobiography is to be read

not as one thing that writers have done again and again, but as the pattern described by the various things they have been done in response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the ways in which the self may be apprehended, and the proper methods of reporting those apprehensions. (1980, xiii)

There are other theoretical positions which one finds compelling in studies about autobiographical writings, and which I will use sparingly in the course of this study. These include the sociological theoretical approach, for instance, which sees identity as mediated through subjects as they are reflected and refracted by those around them. In this regard Nick Crossley’s arguments against the duality of the body and mind are pertinent. In a similar fashion, Bakhtinian thought about dialogism dovetails with Crossley’s work quite well. In this approach, the self is not merely ‘for itself’. It exists and gains awareness of itself only because it is in an endless dialogue with others, and, whatever labels it accepts or rejects from them, it does so cognizant of
the act of dialogism. What I intend to do is to attempt a multivalent approach in merging my interpretation and analysis of the selected texts with these theoretical tools as an act of dialogism. While critical approaches, as I hope to have shown, are tools to deploy in research and analysis, one of the more nuanced approaches that I find applies more readily to this study is a post-colonialist and cultural one extensively used in cultural studies and based primarily on the works of Stuart Hall. I discuss this approach in the next section as well as why, in my view, this study is different from others done in South Africa.

Focus of Study

The theoretical approach adopted in this study is one advanced by Stuart Hall, together with a sociological and dialogic understanding of texts and the world from which they emerge. Autobiography, in this instance, is viewed as a quest for meaning even as the autobiographical subjects construct identities for themselves using the material predicates of culture, power and history. These three elements of societal evolution and development take on a particular bent and hue when viewed through the prism of post-colonialism. A careful reading of the post-colonial world reveals a multiplicity of identities that underlie national identities and in this regard it is important to take Hall’s observations about Caribbean and related identities into account. Having discussed the first position on cultural identity that he views as homogenising in its insistence on ‘oneness’, Hall posits the second observation about identity thus:
There is ... a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (1994, 394)

This second position accounts to a large measure for the trauma of the colonial experience. Dominant regimes wrote their own version of (cultural) identities in the psyche of their subjects, and apartheid South Africa was no different. To return to Hall’s formulation, it is not only in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense that subalterns were constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by dominant regimes but also that those regimes had the power to make them see and experience themselves as ‘Other’ (394). It is important, particularly in chapter five, to observe Cabral’s injunction that national liberation is an aspect of culture, thus of cultural identity. In the post-colonial world, cultural identity can and has been confused with a static, rarified and fixed notion of an ‘ethnic’ identity. This view of cultural identity then becomes wrought with difficulties if it is collapsed with an ethnic identity. Some post-colonial African problems - such as the Rwandan massacre of 1994 - are as a result of the ‘othering’ process of ethnic thinking engendered by colonialist/apartheid rule, which process tends to survive the national liberation phase. I attempt to separate cultural and ethnic identities in the concluding section of the present study because in most instances these identities are routinely collapsed together as being exactly the same when, in fact, scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani convincingly show that they are vastly dissimilar.
I explore the implications of Hall’s observations within African and African-American communities more fully in the second chapter. The study looks at the construction of identities in South African autobiographical writings from the turn of the twentieth-century to its close. Of the hundred or so texts studied, direct reference is made to thirty, and a careful analysis of them is undertaken in the last three chapters. This study hopes to expand the field of analysis of South African autobiographies through this wider scope. To date, South African academics have undertaken three major doctoral studies on autobiographical writings, and numerous sociological studies have been done in which the subjects of the interviews give voice to their subjectivities. Each of the three doctoral studies deals with various aspects of autobiography: Judith Coullie’s looks at subjectivity and how a life is inscribed in a text using a wide range of sub-genres that constitute autobiographical writings such as worker autobiographies. Thengani Ngwenya’s seeks to excavate ideology and literary form in seven selected autobiographical texts. Lynda Gilfillan’s investigates how autobiographers mediate and supersede a hegemonic structure like apartheid. My study, in contrast, seeks to overarch the field in that I do not make a clean break between black autobiographers and their white compatriots and I include a range of male and female autobiographers from the whole of the twentieth-century. The contextual approach I adopt is necessary if we are to understand how the South African reality and contestation over identity were mediated by those whose lives, past and present, have encompassed them. As Ngwenya himself notes in his study:

A careful analysis of the internal organisation of autobiographies as well as their contextualisation in relation to broader socio-historical conditions will reveal the attempts of different writers to engage with ideological issues while recording the unique character of their experiences as South Africans. (1996, 24)

This would have been a rather sterile research project if I had chosen to read these autobiographies without placing them within the contexts in which the historical subjects found themselves. The conditions and eras in which, say, Frank Chikane and Alan Paton grew up are different. Yet each in his own way sought to define for himself a sense of South Africa, what the country meant to him. While
autobiographies by white writers tend to be individualist and to celebrate the writers’ achievements in a particular field (Ngwenya: 1996, 19), there is, of course, a significant corpus of white autobiographies who do break the bounds of individualism and of “race” as lived and understood in the South African context, and thereby attain transcendence. Again, the era in which Helen Joseph experienced and brought through her subjectivity and identity is markedly different from Caesarina Makhoere’s. And yet each in her own way strove for one objective: a South Africa they could, with pride, call ‘home’. What I am contending here is that each of the autobiographers had a sense of looking at South Africa in a way that allowed them to thoroughly identify with it. It is this peculiarity, this understanding that this is ‘home’, that for most of these autobiographers constitutes an identity. Identity here is closely tied up with the concept of ‘home’. Hall, in yet another facet of his notion of identity, argues that identity cannot become if it does not take into account the contestations between language, culture, history and power.

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself … not the so-called return to roots but a coming to terms with our ‘routes’. (1996, 4; emphasis added)

For the present study, this is the theoretical position I find most useful: it buttresses the idea of identity as a construct at the same time as it seeks to show that, without a consideration of the ‘routes’ by which we appraise the self in the present, our ‘roots’ are but metaphors constructed through time. While encompassing twentieth-century autobiographies from South Africa, the study is defined by key moments, key eras in which the events shaping the individual narrator forged their agencies, changing in turn their destinies. It is impossible, as I stated earlier, to examine these autobiographies without necessarily casting an eye on the routes (to use Hall’s term) by which the authors can claim ‘to become’, how they are represented and how they seek a unique disencumbrance.
A second consideration is that, with the dawn of democracy in South Africa, black people may be said to have found their voices. I believe this to be a fallacy. Black and white people have always had their voices. It is simply that South African academe in general was not listening, implicitly colluding with the state. Autobiography has been the dominant form of writing by black South Africans which, while in some instances suppressed by censorship or banning orders, nevertheless made itself felt in the society. This has given rise to a number of preening assertions by white academics. Guy Butler believes that the autobiographical form exists because, in the face of constant onslaught, black South Africans could not produce literary works of art:

Some have, however, produced works in English, mainly short stories or biographies which give us insight into what it is like to be on the other side of the colour line (Ezekiel Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams, Nat Nakasa, Boetie, Noni Jabavu). Perhaps a people in so rapid a state of growth and transition cannot be expected to achieve the degree of detachment needed for extended fiction. (1972, 6)

This is a rather unfortunate observation made by a South African academic who at the time the comment was made did not realise, perhaps, the serious implications the construction of alternative identities meant to the authors, the resistance of a hegemonic social system. Post-modern criticism, for one, would place such observations under erasure. Development is one thing, survival is quite another. The existing and increasingly award-winning fiction by black South Africans points to the fallacy in Butler’s observation: before 1994, there simply was no attempt to fictionalise a reality that was, in itself, un-real. In a sense, this accounts for the reticent style with which Coullie, as a white, recognises her situatedness:

I will never fully understand what it means to be impoverished, black, illiterate: but I do believe that by paying attention to the life stories of the oppressed I am, in a small way, helping to erode the gap between academic activity and activism….Academic analysis is never a substitute for the testimonies of the oppressed. (1994, 18)
I try to avoid this sort of pitfall by re-reading South African autobiographies from a perspective based on by eight years of democracy. This brief period has produced an opportunity to see if a certain South Africanness is possible, assisted in part by the process of ‘reconciliation’ (toenadering) that seeks to close these ‘gaps’ in perception that academics inadvertently engendered. Autobiographical study is a growing field in South Africa today, and the issues of identity and identification should become part of that scholarly activity.

This study is divided into two parts. The first section is theoretical, concerned with the orientation and tools I use for the research on South African autobiographical writings. The section (consisting of three chapters) explores issues of identity, the genesis of autobiography and its spread, and includes a chapter on Southern African cultural practices that show remarkable (auto)biographical instances. Specifically, the initial chapter explores issues of identity, attempting to arrive at a conception of identity that is germane to the modern age. To this end, as stated, I explore the views of Stuart Hall, as opposed to other views on identity formation, and I look at issues of the ‘decentred self’ within the context of the South African and the African-American experiences. What I contend is that, in each case, to seek to arrive at a ‘stable self’, given the vagaries of slavery and colonialism, is futile: these selves were forged under difficult conditions and circumstances. Historic imperatives made such a forging of self an odious undertaking, and Frederick Douglass, together with Sojourner Truth, are ready examples. Sidonie Smith captures this view succinctly when she observes:

The fictions of the autobiographer are always mediated by a historic identity with specific intentions ... of interpreting the meaning of her lived experience. (1987, 46)

Chapter two explores the origins and spread of autobiographical writings, a literary genre often seen as problematic by scholars because they cannot determine the fault lines through which they assume autobiography is constructed. Autobiography, as a genre, remains tied to argumentation about its truthfulness. There may well be a measure of validity in such claims, but, equally, the practice of rarifying one autobiographical text over another points to the instability of theories
about the genre. In this instance, Stephen Gray returns to the problem of disbelief in the South African context:

Autobiographical works about the rise and entrenchment of apartheid in South Africa are notoriously unread in general, because autobiography itself as a literary category remains highly problematic; for our current tastes it is the form of sell-out bourgeois individualism. (1990, 101)

Bourgeois individualism, or testimonial writing? The last clause in the sentence is unfortunate, as Gray highlights the reluctance in South Africa to undertake a serious study of autobiographies, if not by academe, then certainly by the general public who do not wish to be told of the unfortunate and impoverished lives of their compatriots.

Chapter three examines African conceptualisations of self through the medium of oral literature (orature). While it is true that Southern African communities did not have a system of writing, it is fallacious to assume that the concept of self was not part of their cultural experience. Indeed, such conceptualisation gave rise to the present system of surnames in African communities. Naming, an important cultural practice, imposed on Africans a burden of poetry: each clan had to have a family praise poem, each person had to be poetic in praising themselves. Praise poetry, far from disappearing, is still practised in this age, and Liz Gunner’s work in the area of Kwazulu-Natal in particular points to the importance of the practice, and how a previously stultified academy is now seriously studying self-conceptualisation in South Africa. The chapter also mediates the transition from such pre-colonial practices to the adoption of the written autobiographical form. Here I examine issues surrounding the imposition of an ethnic identity, its rejection, and the importance of an urban environment in that rejection as a South African identity is forged.

Part II of the study moves from theory to specific historical and textual practice. In the introduction I look retrospectively at the making of the South African state and what this meant for its citizens. I attempt to show how the South African War made possible the ‘de-horning’ of black South Africans’ frugality. The Land Act of 1913 (extended in 1936) created circumstances under which black South Africans were made a proletariat class in itself, ushering in a new era in South African socio-
historical and economic experience. This in turn gave rise to a virulent attempt by black South Africans to regain lost identities which had been erased by the progressively racist nature of the state. Through organizations such as trade unions and later political parties such as the Communist Party and The African National Congress, an impetus began to gain momentum as Africans in particular fought to ameliorate their lot and regain their collective sense of worth. An example of an autobiography describing these early struggles would be Gilbert Coka’s The Autobiography of Gilbert Coka 1910 – 1935 (1991). As the secretary of the Vryheid branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (I.C.U.), Coka witnessed the first mass movement of black South Africans, providing vital insight into many aspects of life at the time: education, social relations, everyday happenings, aspirations and the activities of those early political activists. The year 1948, while seminal in South African historiography, was but a culmination of progressive social engineering. Institutionalised racism had become a way of life from the beginnings of the twentieth-century and, while many South Africans would not deny its damage to themselves, the autobiographers point to how their selves were forged in resistance to or acquiescence in apartheid. I also examine, in brief, two autobiographies that show these broad strokes by which we can read such acquiescence and resistance: Gordon Winter’s Inside Boss: South Africa’s Secret Police (1987) and Sindiwe Magona’s To My Children’s Children (1991).

In chapter four I examine the autobiographies written between 1900 and 1960. I look in close detail at The Autobiography of William Plomer (1975), Roy Campbell’s Light on a Dark Horse: An Autobiography (1951) and contrast these with Peter Abrahams’ Tell Freedom (1954), Es’kia Mphahlele’s Down Second Avenue (1959), and Bloke Modisane’s Blame Me On History (1963, rpt 1986). The discords of South Africa are examined through a close analysis of the texts, and through a refraction of observations gleaned from them concerning how they mediate their hybrid selves. I end the chapter by examining the autobiography of Trevor Huddleston, Naught for Your Comfort (1956). The linking concern in the readings of these autobiographies is to discover how they mediate the socio-political circumstances in which they find themselves.

In chapter five I examine the literature produced as a result of writers having been incarcerated in the bowels of hell to which South Africa descended after the
rule of law was discarded (1960-1980s). In particular, I look at political and prison autobiographies, examining Frank Chikane’s No Life of My Own: An Autobiography (1988), Helen Joseph’s Side By Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph (1986), Janet Levine’s Inside Apartheid: One Woman’s Struggle in South Africa (1988), Indres Naidoo’s Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63 (1982, reissued 2000), Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid (1988), Tshenuwani Simon Farisani’s Diary from a South African Prison (1981), and Molefe Pheto’s And Night Fell: Political memoirs of a prisoner in South Africa (1983). In each of the texts, I examine how the writers contested the ways in which state apparatus moved to erase people’s self-conceptualisation and identities. In particular, I excavate the fault lines of race as a predicate upon which identities were rendered visible and, of course, invisible. The tragedy that was apartheid is captured movingly in these texts, and the very ‘routes’ by which the country attained its national selfhood are vividly defined and inscribed in them. In this instance, national selfhood reveals the political engineering needed to demolish the apartheid ideology’s myth of assigning identities. Apartheid mythology assumed that, while all whites belonged of course to ‘races’, all black people belonged to ethnic groups, thus necessitating the deployment of civil laws for the former and ‘customary’ laws for the rest. While civil laws were susceptible to change in certain circumstances, ‘customary laws were static. In this manner, ‘traditional’ authority became the site for a fixed, rarified ‘cultural’ identity that could not attain citizenship. Resistance to apartheid ideology and the attainment of nationhood involved removing these binary opposite identities.

The closing chapter looks at the self-writing of two key South African authors, Bessie Head’s A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings (1990, edited by Craig Mackenzie), and Es’kia Mphahlele’s Afrika My Music (1984). Head in particular is chosen because she in many ways encapsulated the difficulties of being a woman, of mixed race (‘Coloured’), and exiled from South Africa. She was to be denied the citizenship of Botswana, India and a host of other countries and yet she managed to create an identity so powerful that it is inconceivable that her texts were not prescribed on South African undergraduate courses. Head is contested as a Botswanan and South African author. Mphahlele, by contrast, chose at one point to return voluntarily from exile to apartheid South Africa. His autobiography records in
minute detail how attempts were made to re-tribalise/re-ethnicise his cosmopolitan self, and how he was in effect ‘re-cycled’ by the apartheid machinery. In resisting such re-cycling, he shows how a self that has grown larger than the cages of South Africa can make its own music; for, as long as the soul is free, chains to him are mere nuisances.

In the last part of chapter six, I contrast F.W. de Klerk’s The Last Trek – a New Beginning: The Autobiography (1998) with the sort of self-conception the esteemed South African writer J.M. Coetzee, reveals in the autobiographical sections of Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews (edited by David Attwell). Coetzee, like De Klerk, sees himself as a South African. Both men are, of course, Afrikaners, but their Afrikanerness itself is contested on the larger terrain of what it means to be South African. The fractures even within Afrikanerdom are apparent, as shown by Carl Niehaus in his autobiography Fighting for Hope: His Story (1993). These men reveal how, as Hall has argued, identities are contingent on a myriad socio-historical strategies and processes, and how identities should be conceptualised as being in a constant state of flux, never fixed, or immutable.

In such a vast subject area, straddling theory, texts, language, history and identity, I have made selections or these divisions solely to achieve a workable organisation of material and foci for analysis. But then, as Michel Foucault (qtd in Coullie, 9) points out, a reading of such texts must entail:

An awareness that criticism – understood as analysis of the historical conditions which bear on the creation of links to truth, to rules, and to the self – does not mark out impassable boundaries or describe closed systems; it brings to light transformable singularities. (1984, 335)

I take this to mean that there ought to be a close link between the process of analysis and the actual historical conditions. The ‘singularity’ of the South African experience is ‘transformable’ by the very act of writing and interpretation.