PART II: INTRODUCTION

Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the present.

Homi K. Bhabha

This introduction focuses on the three categories of South African autobiographical writings that I shall be examining in the remaining chapters. I look first at what might be seen as ‘traditional’ autobiographies, that is, those written to show the binary divisions of South Africa prior to and immediately following the introduction of apartheid. I then examine how, within the hardening political phase of the 1960s and beyond, prison writings became common, often cut across by intense gender awareness. Lastly I examine those autobiographies written in the period I term the ‘interregnum’ (the early 1960s to the mid 1980s), a period in which exile was the dominant generic category. In every instance, I attempt to see how autobiographical subjects shape their sense of themselves and how they view the ever-changing South African socio-political landscape. In particular, I show how South Africanness was contested terrain, but also how autobiographical subjects mediated it for themselves. For instance, in her autobiography To My Children’s Children, Sindiwe Magona (1991, 3) places a high premium on her South Africanness: ‘Born before the end of the Second World War, when South Africa was still a British Colony, I was, therefore, a South African citizen’. This is a good distinction to make, for the changes that were to occur after 1948 negated the very South Africanness she felt was her birthright. In her second autobiography, Forced to Grow, she writes about a significant point when, returning to South Africa after spending time abroad as a student, she is faced with two signs at the airport: ‘South Africans. Aliens … the signs
above the counters shouted. I fell in line with the other foreigners. Verily, I was back home.’ (1992, 218). The irony of ‘home’, as we shall see in the section dealing with exile and political autobiographical writings, is apparent: whereas Magona points to the fact that she was born a South African citizen, the state sees her as an alien.

The turn of the century produced some remarkable individuals whose lives were to be intricately interwoven with that of the country. In the truest sense of the word state, at that time there was a country with a sovereign state, but there was no nation. There were conglomerates of contending, disparate groups all in the process of attaining their version of South Africanness. Individuals born in this era who have written their autobiographies include Alan Paton, Nelson Mandela, ZK Matthews, Frieda Bokwe Matthews, Ellen Kuzwayo, and Helen Joseph. What is observable in most of these autobiographical writings is a need, within the exigencies of identification, to ‘place on record’, as it were, the myriad routes by which the individual arrives at an understanding of the country, its peoples, hopes, and aspirations. But, and this is the paradox, this need to bear witness cannot be attained outside the matrix of the body politic’s historiography, and hence the conflation of the individual with the history of the land. Of course, it is quite reasonable to expect to find some autobiographies that are intricately private (such as Stephen Gray’s An Accident of Birth or William Butler’s Karoo Morning), in which the body politic does not intrude on what is seen as a life lived without constraints, and which thus contemplates the autobiographical subject’s place in the use of historical and discursive raw materials.

That a system ostensibly created to assign identities could end up facilitating a whole range of other sites of meaning and self-realisation is fortuitous only if we deny the recipients of such actions the agency with which their autobiographies abound. Though 1948 is one of the more seminal years in the country’s history, most of the autobiographers begin with the early part of the century in terms of recalling and recording their life histories. For they constantly speak of the time when they were children, unaffected by what they did not realise till much later in life, and their individual responses to the reality of the country. The instability of race as a signifier - which I pointed out in the previous chapter with the example of Don Mattera - will become apparent when we discuss autobiographical texts from the 1940s especially, but it is a constant thread that we should not lose sight of. From the 1960s, for
instance, a prominent black newspaper columnist, Nathaniel Nakasa, wrote intelligently and with much decorum that belied the anxieties he felt about this over-concentration on race. The newspaper which gave him this opportunity, the Rand Daily Mail, has the good fortune of claiming that, by providing Nakasa with regular column space (an unheard of phenomenon in the 1960s), it made it possible for him to become the epitome of ‘the journalist as autobiographer’. With his column ‘As I See It’, Nakasa was even then prodding the interstices of racial categorisations in such seminal contributions as the following:

I am a Pondo, but I don’t even know the language of that tribe. I was brought up in a Zulu-speaking home, my mother being Zulu. Yet I can no longer think in Zulu because that language cannot cope with the demands of our day. I am a South African - my people are South Africans. Mine is the history of the Great Trek, Gandhi’s passive resistance in Johannesburg, the wars of Cetwayo and the dawn raids which gave us the treason trials in 1956. They are part of me. (as qtd in Singh, 2)

The rejection of ethnicity as noted also in Mathabane’s autobiography, the affirmation of a milieu called ‘South African’ - even though some would bitterly reject Nakasa’s claims to be a South African - reveal the foresight that a crisis with identity can foster in a doubting self: who am I, essentially? That he is a Pondo by patrilineal fiat (a sub-ethnic group of the Xhosa) and his mother a Zulu is a further marker of questions that are resolved by his claiming to be a South African: who are my people and what is my history? Nakasa’s quest and arrival at who he is exemplify the inter-related processes of power, history and culture in how we formulate, and are made to forge, our myriad identities.

While such texts as those preceding the fateful year of 1948 will be used sparingly in favour of those written during and after the 1940s, reference will constantly be made to them. A key text in this regard will be Z.K. Matthews’ Freedom for My People: The Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews (published posthumously in 1981). This text is not chosen arbitrarily, but because for almost the entire century Matthews reflected aspirations of a common identity in meaningful ways. If self-realisation is marked by peaks of euphoria amid troughs of despair and self-doubt,
there can be no doubt that Matthews’s life was heavily indebted to the former rather than the latter position. A gifted scholar, he qualified as the first black Bachelor of Arts graduate from Fort Hare in 1924, became the first black principal of a college of higher education - Adams College in Amanzimtoti, Natal; the first black law graduate from the South African University in 1930; the first black South African to hold an M.A. from Yale University in 1934; and became, in 1935, a student of the famous Social Anthropologist, Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Thereafter he began lecturing at Fort Hare as a full member of staff in January of 1936, mainly in Anthropology, Bantu Law and Administration.

Later that year he was honoured as a member of the de la Warr Royal Commission on Higher Education set up to investigate and report on the status of higher education in the territories of Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The recommendations led to the setting up of Makerere College in Uganda. He was Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York during the academic year 1952-3. In 1962, having left Fort Hare rather than submit to the authority of a state busy creating it as a ‘tribal’ university for the exclusive use of Xhosa students - done with the aid of the Separate Universities and Fort Hare Transfer Act - he was chosen as Secretary for Africa in the Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service of the World Council of Churches. His last honour, before he died, was to become Botswana’s first Ambassador to the United States and Representative to the United Nations. Matthews received many honours, including a Doctorate of Humane Letters from Baker University in the United States and a posthumous LL.D, honoris causa, from by Lincoln University. He passed away in 1968 while serving as Botswana’s Ambassador in Washington.40

Throughout a life of turbulence, he remained a member of the African National Congress, an organisation with which he fully identified and to which he committed a significant part of his activities and time. He was also one of the Treason Trialists, most of whom were arrested in the early hours of 5 December 1956. His arrest coincided with that of his eldest son in Durban, Joseph Gaobakwe. The title of his text, Freedom for My People, betrays its major concern.

In choosing one text to elucidate an era, I do not wish to negate others, nor to validate Matthews over other autobiographers. It is merely that, as Kaja Silverman (1983, 180) notes: ‘Language … ensures that all of the members of a group inhabit
the same psychic territory, and regiments the exchanges which take place between
them’. The language to which Matthews is subject, the historical forces that at once
inhibit and enable his self-realisation, together with his own courses of action make
the text a fascinating study of subjectivity and of an unwillingness to be subjected to
social and political domains in which he cannot act as an agent of change. Matthews
was the proposer and prime mover of the ‘Congress of the People’ held in an open
field in Kliptown Johannesburg, on June 26-27, 1955. From this meeting, attended by
hundreds of delegates from country-wide organisations, emerged the Freedom
Charter, a document that was to guide the aspirations and values of those South
Africans who believed in non-racialism. Frieda Matthews, his wife, has written:

Well do I remember the day my husband and sons, with us concurring,
first mooted the idea of a Congress of all people of South Africa
regardless of colour or race or party politics, coming together to discuss
the possibilities of a non-racial constitution, one that would recognise that
South Africa is multi-racial, that all its peoples have contributed equally to
its development - the White man with his initiative and capital and the
non-White with his labour. Neither of these could be called less in value
than the other because they need one another and are complementary.
(1995, 55)

South Africa is a land of infinite ironies and wasteful of far-sighted opportunities: it
took a further 41 years for a constitution of just this sort to be adopted by a
parliamentary body. On May 08, 1996, the South African parliament adopted its
constitution by an overwhelming majority of all its peoples’ representatives.
Furthermore, the arbitrary use of ‘race’ as a marker of who could be ‘truly’ South
African was rudely shattered, on April 10 1993, when Janus Walusz, a Polish
immigrant, murdered Chris Hani in his driveway as Hani alighted from his car.
Immigrant South Africans have in the past been associated with vicious forms of
brutality, and Walusz’s act explains why Magona observes in her autobiography, To
My Children’s Children, that while she worked as a domestic she had an aversion to
immigrants. I quote her at some length:
Mrs Paporokoulus, an immigrant like her husband, seemed to have chosen her new country because it answered a deep need within her being, struck a chord within her soul. She had heard that in South Africa the black people do not enjoy the protection of the law; that the workers, especially domestic servants, were at the mercy of their employers. From this family, newly immigrated to South Africa, I inherited resentment. Resentment that any white from anywhere in the world can come to South Africa and be what I could never be. Do what I could never do. Enjoy luxury I could never dream of … The same government lavishes on these transplanted whites (for that is the only criterion for the invitation) even the political rights it has systematically taken away from me and mine, over the centuries … of all the members of the oppressing class in South Africa, it is, to me, this group that chooses to be my exploiters, my oppressors; the rapists of my pride and violators of my humanhood, that I find hard to swallow. (1991, 136 -137)

The actions of white immigrants towards black South Africans have made them the target of deep-seated resentment. As the semi-autobiographical novel by Miriam Tlali, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1987), shows, this group of people, such as the Lithuanian Jews who had sought refuge from the worst excesses of European anti-Semitism and ruthless discrimination, had no compunction in becoming oppressors themselves. Domestic servants in South Africa, as Magona’s example showed, are the most horribly abused and under-paid class of worker, and treated more or less as blocks of wood that must at all times be in attendance. Like the farmworkers, domestic servants face the fundamentals of racism, where not to countenance appalling treatment leads to dismissal and almost certain starvation. Farmworkers in particular are the subject of on-going murders. It is testimony to the resilience of Magona’s spirit that, when she is dismissed from such servitude, she starts scrubbing, cleaning, cooking and selling sheep heads in her township of Gugulethu simply to survive with her three children and five siblings. At this point in her life she was subsisting at a level close to foraging. One point that leaves the reader truly aghast is that, in a relatively rich country like South Africa, black lives should be so bleak: having nothing to cook for the evening, she nonetheless places a pot filled
with water on the primus stove. But, as the children are still young, the longer it
takes to prepare supper, the sooner they nod off:

The picture is clear today for it has not, for one day, left me. I had a pot
boiling away on the primus stove. The children waited and waited. The
pot boiled away on the stove. The children waited for the food to cook
...without the hope that they would be getting something to eat, the
children would have been restless, crying for food. They had fallen asleep
unaware that nothing but God’s clean water was in that pot busily boiling
away on the primus stove. (1991, 180 - 81)

I have found this an unforgettable image because it shows the depth of
poverty that Magona underwent. But equally, I think its power lies in its honest
assessment of her situation. It is in such instances that the ‘arbitrary’ nature of who
is considered South African can be contested. Textual encoding of individuals such as
Magona, especially where she becomes a cipher in her own eyes as a domestic,
should enable us to read these texts as ways in which autonomous selves are
sometimes reduced to stereotypes or to absences. The selection of moments such as
these is often a guide to instances where a country’s underbelly is laid bare, its
putrid culture seen in stark terms. In such de-centring of the self, the linear
narratorial story is made to be (dis)jointed. But Magona’s ultimate aim is not to carp,
only to reveal how, even as an individual, it is possible to lose that sense of
individuality in moments where nullity, brutal deprivation and what I term
‘thingification’ - that is, the gradual processes of social intercourse by which an
individual literally becomes a ‘thing’ in the eyes of the beholder - are operational.
This straddling of incompatible discourses is nowhere so apparent as in the following
extract from Magona’s text. Going to work with other domestic servants one
morning, she is surprised at her own insight into the lives of the other women on the
bus who, like her, are subjected to a process of de-individualising. These women are
flesh and blood people, with opinions, views and clearly defined subjectivities:
I was struck by the wholeness of women who, I knew, would be transformed, the minute they opened the gates of the houses where they toiled. From the alert, knowledgeable, interesting people they were on the buses, they would change to mute, zombie-like figures who did not dare have an idea, opinion, or independent thought about anything, anything at all. Not even what colour they would look best in! (1991, 145)

As a survival strategy, ‘thingification’ is therefore a recognisable code in which both oppressor and oppressed partake, though it cannot be said that they experience it in equal measure41. Nevertheless, there exists a definite ‘co-voicing’ of the process, an unfortunate but necessary agreement between unequal collaborators in a dialogic relationship. It must be added, however, that not all relationships between master/mistress and servant functioned at this crude and demeaning level. Some of the texts record precisely the subjects’ refusal to become ‘things’, and an assertion of their individuality in stringent terms. Not all the stereotypes are accepted by the recipients, and therefore the autobiography as a record of personal achievement is intertwined with accounts of attempts at nullity, brutal deprivation, mere survival (Coullie, 1991, 77).

The categories of autobiographical writing to be discussed in the next three chapters are in most instances determined by the autobiographical narrator: the writing subject. Many, as mentioned, met difficulties in their routine lives and strove to overcome them. Partly this accounts for the predicate of hardship-as-context for works such as Caesarina Makhoere’s No Child’s Play: In Prison Under Apartheid (1988) or Emma Mashinini’s Strikes have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography (1989). Even where autobiographical narrators rank experiences by starting with their childhood, a great deal of the work concentrates on the contingency, the context giving rise to the text. Thus, we can legitimately categorise the examples above as falling within two distinct genres: prison autobiographical literature and political autobiographical literature. But one can make a further delineation: that the prison texts may also be coupled with the politically overt autobiographies. Not many people who landed in a South African prison came out to write a “true account” of their experiences if they were not deemed ‘political’. Criminals, pass offenders and such-like prisoners are not given to making this genre a vehicle for an explication of their experiences - either because of shame, fear, lack
of education or merely the opportunity to do so. But, to complicate matters further, prison/political may also be deemed as a form of exile literature, for the autobiographical narrators of exile literature, unable to return, were quarantined in psychological prisons. While we can see distinctions within internal exile (prison, banishment, house arrest), we need also to see physical exile as a tortuous form of imprisonment: denied the right to come home, denied the right even to be present at the funerals of kin, seeing the long years of sometimes fruitless ‘struggle’, some lives began to disintegrate horribly. My assertion at this point is that physical exile was not, and cannot be viewed as, a soft option, and that exiled self-writing is a part of prison-writing and political autobiography.

The second category of autobiographical writing seems to suggest itself: prison-and-gender in politics. The second aspect of this category, gender, seeks to capture a facet of South African women’s lives. It is an often repeated truism that to be a woman, a mother and at times a professional, is challenging everywhere, but no more so than in South Africa. One should add that the unstable marker of black/white resonates with all the elements of patriarchy that are common to South Africa. As Coullie points out:

The fluid configurations of gender have to be probed with greater sensitivity. This is especially true of South Africa, a country with enormous cultural diversity (Malay Muslims, Xhosas, Jews, Zulus, Afrikaners, Portuguese, Tsongas, English, ‘Coloureds,’ Hindus of Indian descent, and many more), but with one common denominator, viz., the oppression of women. The forms that this takes range from the extremes of desperate poverty, abuse and rape (many have claimed that South Africa’s rape statistics are amongst the highest in the world) to job discrimination and sexual harassment. (1991, 54)

In this instance, therefore, one has to have a greater awareness, by looking at the enormous difficulties faced by women in South Africa, of how their selves and how they could have been constructed within the quagmire that Coullie delineates. A significant number of quotations in this study point to Sindiwe Magona’s two autobiographical texts, To My Children’s Children (1991) and Forced to Grow (1992). Another text in this gendered category will be Bessie Head’s A Woman Alone:
Autobiographical Writings (1990), an edited collection of her correspondence. There is a reason for the choice of these texts. It has become apparent that they have not, surprisingly, received the critical attention they deserve, apart from an essay here or there by Margaret Daymond and other scholars in South Africa, or the occasional review article. While South African women have contributed to this category (the texts by Zola Budd, Ruth First, Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, Helen Joseph and Ellen Kuzwayo spring to mind), thoroughgoing critical attention to such texts remains minimal, as though their authors’ identities were not also under the anvil. How such women, diverse and dispersed, construct for themselves spaces for their identities to flourish (or not) remains a key concern of this thesis.

The third category in this study will concentrate on what may prove to be a suitable point to end: autobiographies written in the interregnum phase and post-apartheid and autobiographical writings. Here the texts that already suggest themselves include F.W. de Klerk’s The Final Trek, Bessie Head’s A Woman Alone, and Es’kia Mphahlele’s Afrika My Music. I end with J.M. Coetzee’s view of the new kind of South Africanness that he wishes to see and interrogate its premises. This phase of autobiographical writing can, at the best of times, be highly amusing, entertaining and irritating (sometimes all at once). Part of the reason for this stems from seeing the slippages, the attempts at exculpation for some historical events, which led their autobiographical narrators (the ‘I’ who writes the story) into contortions of what may be accepted as falsities and downright lies. Since scholarship places such a high premium on seeing autobiographical writings as ‘truthful’, the unmasking of certain textual idiosyncrasies here will be unavoidable, not because one is vindictive, but because the dictates of scholarship cannot be superseded by expediency. It is my considered opinion, for example, that De Klerk’s text should be analysed for the ‘un-truthfulness’ it seeks to make ‘truthful’. This is what cynics call autobiographical autopsy, and the book has been met with harsh reviews.

A final qualification is that, while texts may be read according to categorisations to facilitate case study readings, the case for seeing the subjects as transgressives is important. The transgression of social barriers is also an intricate aspect of self-realisation, self-formation. What a number of autobiographical subjects record is a willingness to move to plains not previously thought attainable: Es’kia
Mphahlele with his interest in English Literature; Nelson Mandela taking on his gaolers; Karl Niehaus taking on his tribe; Sindiwe Magona holding onto a dream of her betterment through education; Mamphele Ramphele attaining the office of Chief Executive Officer of a formerly white institution; Helen Joseph emerging as a stalwart of political struggle, even as she suffers house arrest. The list is long. Also of significant value, so far as the women autobiographical subjects are concerned, is to see the various previously forbidden spaces that they manage to make their own. In a perceptive essay, Betty Bergland (1994) makes an important contribution to the study of women’s autobiographies by seeing the different spaces the subjects strive for. She uses a good metaphor - the chronotope - to substantiate her analyses:

In *The Dialogic Imagination* M.M. Bakhtin argues that our image of what is human is always concrete - temporally and spatially positioned in the universe. Bakhtin’s term for this time-space dimension, chronotope, borrowed from mathematics, expresses “the inseparability of space and time.” Bakhtin argues that our image of the human being is “intrinsically chronotopic.” In the literary context, he claims, the “chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins …” Further, the abstract elements in fiction and “the philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope” (250). He also argues that this category functions to situate historical figures in time and space to make that place seem natural. Certainly one could argue from Bakhtin’s observations that it is through the flesh and blood of the chronotope that ideology operates, making a certain social order seem natural because it is seen to reside in flesh and blood.

It seems to me that a chronotopic reading of some texts by both men and women would be apt for deciphering spaces forbidden and naturalised. What Bakhtin alludes to is intricately bound to what I am to explicate. For, in this constant interplay of space and time, as autobiographical selves mediate routinely lived everyday existence, are encoded cultural biases and absurdities that the subjects decipher, not
as stereotypes of brutalisation but as trangressives. This trangressiveness on their part, however, is seen by them as ‘natural’, imbued with ‘flesh and blood’ since their very presence in forbidden spaces attests to their humanity. Chronotope as time/space provides what we may perceive as a noncognitive and nonlinguistic strategy for examining the subject of autobiography. For life-writing is linked in some important ways to the chronotope. Because autobiography possesses power to shape an image of the human, as the reader imagines the speaker in the here and now of the speaking ‘I’, the chronotopic placement provides important ways of situating the speaker in the world (Bergland, 154). But, since some of the reading has to be based within nonlinguistic parameters, it is also crucial to see how autobiographical subjects, consciously or not, situate themselves within the social formations that give them a sense of ‘arrival’, signalling to the cultural ‘Other’ (and the reader) an attainment of being. Chronotopes, in this sense, are not ‘natural or self-evident categories, but are culturally prescribed and embedded with cultural meanings’. (Bergland, 156)

I begin the survey in the 1900s. The texts show themselves to be locked within the South African discursive fields even as they reflect different eras. While this was an era of industrialisation, coupled with spectacular urbanisation as the rural areas could not support the majority of the inhabitants, it placed irreconcilable Afrikaner/English/Liberal political alignments in conflict. While the Great Depression resulted in the impoverishment of many platteland (the hinterland) white farmers, a phenomenon that led to many of them losing their farms and coming to the cities, it made competition for jobs a difficult area of social interaction. This phenomenon was so significant that the Carnegie Institute in the United States funded a study on what was termed ‘the poor white problem’ (see, for instance, the text on South African photography titled Democracy’s Images, 1998). Afrikaners were fearful of the English when, in an effort to play fair, the then ruling United Party reformed aspects of the colour bar and increased African education. These reforms fed concern among Afrikaners that the English intended to abandon the post-Boer War deal of white unity via segregation. Having lost most of the arable land through the Land Act of 1913 and the Extension of the Land Act in 1936, African communities began to move into the cities in a regular but steady flow. Matters were certainly not helped by the strike of 70,000 African mineworkers in 1946 who, in the light of British victory in the
War, pushed for and expected better salaries and treatment (Marx, 103). Afrikaner nationalism believed that it had to act as a bulwark against what was perceived as a threat from the African majority. The ultimate aim was of course for the two ‘races’ to be totally segregated, dividing South Africa into two states, black and white. Because of economic necessity, however, this aim was ‘not practical’. Even though the Tomlinson Commission had shown that ethnic homelands were viable only if they received massive financing, the state was not in a position to implement this policy. But the seemingly inexorable laws of apartheid were, nevertheless, passed. A reading of these shows that little heed was given to their ultimate consequences, and that the end was certainly seen to justify the means. Anthony Marx writes:

The 1950 Population Registration Act set the foundation for apartheid by establishing distinct racial categorization of the population according to subjective interpretations of reputation and “appearance.” Complementary acts forbade cross-racial marriage or sex [Mixed Marriages Act, 1950], ignoring past Afrikaner indulgence. The Group Areas Act of the same year reinforced residential segregation, the pass system was “rationalized” in 1952, and in 1953 the Bantu Education and Reservation of Separate Amenities Acts divided schools and most public facilities accordingly. Even the potential alliance with coloureds, formerly embraced by Afrikaner nationalists, was abandoned as inconsistent with racial domination. As most coloureds had supported the United Party, the Nationalists paid little costs in 1956 in depriving the coloureds of direct representation. They were placed on a separate voters’ roll. (103-04)

With the laws passed and enacted, particularly the Population Registration Act, there followed the idea of ‘giving everyone in South Africa his or her own identity’. Some people resisted these ethnic identities, others sought their own version of identity through the porous terrain of apartheid dogma. An amusing anecdote about this process is narrated by Phyllis Ntantala (1992, 130). While house-hunting in Cape Town in 1945 - not easy then - she and A.C. Jordan, her husband, went around Athlone after being referred to certain house owners. They usually assumed that the people they had been referred to were black Africans because of their surnames, but in most instances they encountered ‘coloured’ individuals. Each time they arrived at,
say, Mr Ndlovu’s home (in the Nguni languages, ‘elephant’) they found a Mr Oliphant (elephant in Afrikaans), who was then a Coloured person. A Mrs Siphondo would invariably turn out to be a Mrs Spawn, and Mr Segalo a Mr Segal, a Coloured person. Mr Mthimkulu (in the Nguni languages, literally ‘Big Tree’) turned out to be Mr Grootboom, a Coloured person. As we observed with the naming of people within African communities prior to colonialism, cultural practices themselves can change if placed under erasure. ‘Beating the system’ by ‘passing’ for what one was racially not (coloured, even white) and forging a false identity at the time when the Western Cape had been decreed as the home of ‘whites’ and ‘coloureds’ was one way in which identities could be nullified and others simply adopted (shades James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man – first published in 1912 – a text that emphasises biological and psychological determinism). This was also because of economic and social necessity. The policy of granting the Western Cape to the coloureds - that is, through the Coloured Labour Preference Policy - stipulated that, unless there was no coloured person to fill a particular position or vacancy in an organisation, then and only then could an African be employed for that task. While job discrimination is certainly a world-wide phenomenon, only South Africa could have dreamt of the dubious honour of legally creating unemployment (Magona, 1992, 2-3).

Further laws, as the years went by, included the following: the widely interpreted Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 and the stringent Criminal Amendment Act of 1953. Through these two laws in particular, the government sought to throttle dissent and protest. These laws worked in tandem with earlier ones, such as the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923, making local authorities responsible for the welfare of Africans in their midst, as well as the Riotous Assembly Act of 1929. While the Criminal Amendment Act made it virtually impossible not to break any law, however trivial, by way of ‘protest’, it was, in Paton’s view, through the Suppression of Communism Act that the government became a law unto itself:
The Suppression of Communism Act was our first deliberate step from the rule of law. The powers given to the Minister and the actions taken by him under the Act were not subject to the review of any court of law. If he ‘deemed’ a person to be furthering the aims of communism, he could ban such a person from public life. The most extreme step taken by the Act was house arrest, and the most extreme form of house arrest was to be confined to one’s home for twenty-four hours of every day (1988, 36).

Such, then, was the triumphalist spirit of the Nationalist government in its first few years in power. These laws were to play a crucial role during the next forty-six years, augmented and aided by a myriad other laws such as, in the 1960s, the Criminal Procedure Act of 1965, which allowed the Minister of Justice to detain persons without charge or trial for periods of up to one hundred and eighty days. This period was renewable at the Minister’s discretion.

One of the first South Africans to express feelings of autobiographical subjectivity was Gertrude Sarah Millin, with her text The Night is Long (1941). James Rose-Innes’ Autobiography, though posthumously published in 1949, was written in early 1927 and was the very earliest autobiographical text to appear in twentieth-century South Africa. The first texts documenting the mounting frustration of an autobiographical subject on paper were by Peter Abrahams, whose Return to Egoli (1953) and Tell Freedom (1954) record the intense feelings of subjection to the inexorable and the closing of topes (spaces) to the intellect and aspirations. Prior to Abrahams there were autobiographies which were largely divorced from the social milieu within which their subjects lived, such as Roy Campbell’s Light on a Dark Horse: An Autobiography (1951).

My intention is to place autobiographical texts in one of the three chronological chapters based on when the autobiographical narrator, the ‘I’ who writes the story, was born and the period being described, rather than when the text was published. The cradle-to-grave autobiographical format, while traditional, is not necessarily the format always followed by autobiographers, and their texts are not necessarily published soon after being written. The majority of autobiographies, such as prison memoirs, are contingent, based on the context that the autobiographical narrator deems important to the idea of his or her identity, or even of its denial. Most
end at the moment of triumph over adversity, climaxing with a sense of achievement in spite of the odds.

The second criterion for the chronological placing of an autobiography will be the period being narrated by the autobiographical subject, the speaking ‘I’ in the narrative. This is chosen because, as indicated, the periods covered by the historical subjects - referring to the biological life - are sometimes similar, so that contemporary intertextual links can be made. Thus the selection of one text over others is not because of a hierarchical decision, a sort of ranking according to literariness, but because of judgements on which of the autobiographical subjects, in the articulation of the imperatives of writing, best capture the flavour of an era.

The three defined eras in the study are the years 1900 and 1960, the period between 1960 and 1980, and the period after 1980. One of the last works to be discussed introduces a popular autobiographical process, self-justification of actions over the years. New ground within a familiar field must now be tilled, for, while the South African past cannot be undone, it must be transcended.