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Coullie et al./Selves in Question

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I INTRODUCTION

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN IS THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PLACE.
—Niyi Osundare

Auto/biographical Identities:
Placing Selves in Question

The desire to grapple with the riddles of existence through auto/biographical accounts permeates human symbolic expression.1 Using self-representation to question and define our notions of self, we relate earlier to later selves, thereby constituting personal identity; we also relate ourselves to others, thereby constituting collective identities. Moreover, in addressing others through our auto/biographical accounts we enter the public sphere and situate ourselves in relation to an audience. Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography pursues, by diverse means, the role of narrative in general and auto/biography in particular in the constitution of identities in a contemporary southern African context.2

The personal identity we create through auto/biographical accounts is connected to issues of time, meaning, and action. Pursuing the question How did I become who I am? we plot our stories along a timeline, tying together our past and present, our earlier and later selves. Notwithstanding the narrative identity we create over time, there are significant ways in which autobiography (an account of the self) is also, in the words of J. M. Coetzee (on p. 216), autre-biography (an account of another self). In relating earlier and later selves to each other we seek to make sense of our experiences, with greater or lesser success. But we also relate earlier to current selves in order to place ourselves in the present. Guided by the question Who am I? we interpret ourselves in the hope of gaining some clarity about what our present identities and needs may be. To the extent that our lives are still in the process of unfolding, the specific connections and interpretations we establish are always open to revision. The accounts we produce of the past and the understanding this gives us
of ourselves in the present also place us in a specific relationship to action and the future. Depending on the different stories we tell about our past and present selves, we open up different identities from which we can imagine different potential futures for ourselves in answer to the question *Who do I want to become?* In this sense, auto/biographical accounts can play a considerable role in the scaffolding of agency.

The collective identities we create through weaving our auto/biographical accounts into those of others are tied to issues of association and disassociation, power, and social action. In situating ourselves in relation to others, we associate ourselves with them or distance ourselves from them. Through auto/biographical accounts we establish and cement relations to significant others, friends, colleagues, citizens, and comrades and disassociate ourselves from strangers, adversaries, opponents, and enemies. In this manner we construct social realities that open up or close off certain forms of collective existence. Placing ourselves in relation to others also means ranking ourselves in existing status hierarchies. By implication our auto/biographical accounts either entrench or challenge these hierarchies, sometimes also offering alternative ones. Through the collective identities they constitute and the status hierarchies they affirm or question, our auto/biographical accounts mobilize collective action. Citing colonialism, racism, fascism, sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance as its consequences, critics of identity thinking have warned against the violent suppression of difference in individual and collective identities. This raises the pertinent question whether nonrepressive forms of identity constitution are possible and the role auto/biography could play in this.

When we address an audience—testifying about our personal and collective identities through auto/biography—we enter into communicative relations in public spheres and engage ourselves in struggles for justice. Through publicly oriented self-reflection we cross the boundaries between the private and the public. Intentionally or not, and whether positively affirmed or contested by our audience, our auto/biographical accounts become entwined in struggles about justice. We use these accounts to hold up to public scrutiny the values informing our lives and those of other protagonists. In doing so, we appeal for recognition of individual and collective identities. Implicitly or explicitly, we also use these stories in struggles over distribution and redistribution and in demands to participate in the life of society. However, the communicative relations we enter into with our auto/biographies are shot through with power. As a result, the media of communication—language, media technologies, and
institutions—through which they are conveyed mold the accounts we give of ourselves. These social settings of identity reverberate globally, within nations, families, and individuals, and affect notions of the self and the nature of auto/biographical accounts. Accordingly, auto/biographical accounts can function as sites of governmentality that produce normalized subjectivities as well as practices that hold the promise of emancipation and autonomy.

Shifting our attention to the public spheres in which our auto/biographical accounts circulate along with auto/biographical accounts of others, it soon becomes evident that our identities are not only constituted by the accounts we offer about ourselves. Our notion of self is also constituted through the accounts others give of us. The coexistence of these two forces leads to a particularly interesting further way in which the self is constituted, namely, in the contestations associated with aligning the autobiographical accounts we give of ourselves and the biographical accounts others offer about us. The contestation involved in seeking to attain such alignment has implications for both the individuals and collectives involved.

Seyla Benhabib puts it as follows: “From the time of our birth we are immersed in a ‘web of narratives,’ of which we are both the author and the object. The self is both the teller of tales and that about whom tales are told. The individual with a coherent sense of self-identity is the one who succeeds in integrating these tales and perspectives into a meaningful life story” (1992:198. See also Benhabib 2002:15–16). Drawing attention to the larger social and political effects of aligning different auto/biographical accounts, Benhabib continues, “When the story of a life can only be told from the perspective of others, then the self is a victim and sufferer who has lost control over her existence. When the story of a life can only be told from the standpoint of the individual, then such a self is a narcissist and a loner who may have attained autonomy without solidarity. A coherent sense of self is attained with the successful integration of autonomy and solidarity” (1992:198; cf. also Bruner 2001:34 and Frisch 2004).

This dialogical approach to auto/biographical accounts of the self, the contestation it may entail, and the effects of such contestation can be illustrated with a few southern African cases. Relatively harmless examples consist of the subtle addition of extra information or alternative interpretations of existing facts which are largely in harmony with a person’s overall representation of him- or herself. This is common with sympathetic reviews, such as Lewis Nkosi’s reviews of Es’kia Mphahlele’s autobiography Down Second Avenue (Nkosi 1990a) and Bloke Modisane’s autobiography Blame Me on History.
As Doris Lessing’s altercation with Carole Klein (see p. 234) shows, matters can become less amicable, though, as struggles erupt for control over the narrative of a life.

The divergences in these two examples take place, so to speak, outside the autobiographical text. But they can also be made internal to it. This is the case with the divergence between her own account of a childhood journey, and the official family version that Doris Lessing offers us in the opening pages of the first volume of her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994:40–43). There is also a genre that is common, but by no means unique to southern Africa, in which such alignment of self-representation and representation by others is internal to the production of the text. In collaborative auto/biographies—also known as “mediated testimony,” and sometimes classified under oral history, such as Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981); Wulf Sachs’s *Black Hamlet* (1996), and Raymond Mhlaba and Thembeka Mufamadi’s *Raymond Mhlaba’s Personal Memoirs* (2001)—an oral narrator tells her or his life to a writing author, who prepares it for publication. In most of these cases the amiable relations between collaborators smooth out contestation.

The effects of contestation can be more severe and wide-ranging than mere personal squabbles. Contestations about the validity of an auto/biographical account can lead to the public shaming of individuals and to publishing scandals. They can also shatter existing assumptions about the nature of scholarship. All these consequences can be found in the debates surrounding Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (1995) (Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939–1948 [1997]). As the example of the contestations around Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta Menchú* show, cultural and political battles can be unleashed with repercussions for social movements. In southern Africa too, there is a whole field of auto/biographical contestations with socially relevant and far-reaching consequences.

In southern Africa too, there is a whole field of auto/biographical contestations with socially relevant and far-reaching consequences. This has been particularly evident in testimonies emerging from and around South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in which there have been disagreements between perpetrators of injustice and their accusers. One prominent case is the account by the last apartheid president, F. W. de Klerk, *The Last Trek* (1998), and death squad operative Eugene de Kock’s *A Long Night’s Damage* (1998), in which de Kock contests de Klerk’s protestations of innocence.

As these examples illustrate, while subjects may use auto/biographical accounts to situate themselves, these accounts themselves are also placed in relation to other accounts and in relation to larger narratives, which are in turn embedded in social relations and struggles. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s
auto/biographical account of her meetings with de Kock, *A Human Being Died That Night* (2003), raises pertinent questions in this regard: to what extent does the project of social and political reconciliation between perpetrators and victims—which is necessary for future coexistence—hinge on the reconcilability of divergent auto/biographical accounts? How much divergence in our auto/biographical accounts can be borne by our social solidarity with each other? And when do divergences in the content of auto/biographical accounts also rupture the social fabric?

As noted, weaving our auto/biographical accounts into larger accounts about collectives—such as gender-specific groups, survivors, or citizens of a state—is crucial to our identities. Writing about the nature of the relationship between individual and collective identities, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that we think of the latter in terms of scripts. These scripts constitute “narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and telling their life stories,” either through copying or deviating from them (Appiah and Gutmann 1996:97; also Appiah 2001:243). Similarly, Benhabib asserts, “We are born into webs of interlocution or narrative, from familial and gender narratives to linguistic ones and to the macronarratives of collective identity. We become aware of who we are by learning to become conversation partners in these narratives” (2002:15. See also Kureishi 2004:7).

The idea that our identities are constituted in the relations we establish with other individuals or with collectives is a central tenet of symbolic interactionism and certain forms of feminism that theorists like Benhabib adhere to. It is also the essence of African humanism or *ubuntu*, elaborated on by Es’kia Mphahlele (2004:241–304), and which Ellen Kuzwayo (1990:122) sees encapsulated in the Tshivenda saying “Muthu ndi muthu nga munwe” (a person is a person through other persons). It is such dialogical notions of the self that echo in Breyten Breytenbach’s assertion that the “sense of I (identity, the I-ing of self, id-entity) is dependent on interaction with some thing or some body ‘out there.’ Community is usually the mirror. ‘I am a human through people.’ We identify/situate ourselves in our interaction with and relation to cultural constructs such as language, religion, ideology, a shared narrative of history or destiny, adherence or resistance to specific values. In this sense, the shaping of identity and the resultant (self)identification is very much the product of a given society” (see p. 274).

Exactly how individuals draw on collective identities in constituting their individual narrative identities, which collective narratives they relate their own lives to, and how they deal with the impact of shifts in these collective narratives on their narratives of self raise a multitude of questions to which an
exploration of auto/biographical practices such as the one offered in this book may offer tentative answers. Regarding the relationships that are established with specific collectives, Bothale Tema (2003 and 2005) prioritizes relations to the family, Ato Quayson (1995:87) foregrounds the relationship to the state, Carol Fleisher Feldman (2001) focuses on the nation, while Philip Holden (2005) elaborates on the continuities between the nation and global society. Relations to the state and the nation are particularly interesting because they reveal some of the discrepancies common in southern Africa between the formation of identity through actual experiences on the one hand and the selves that are constituted in auto/biographical accounts on the other. While the actual experiences of many individuals in southern Africa are regionalist rather than national (in the sense that they either cross state borders or do not share in the real or imagined community of the nation-state in a meaningful way), most auto/biographical accounts lean towards a narrative alliance with national identities, a phenomenon which requires further scrutiny.

The view that our identities are constituted in the contestation between accounts we offer of ourselves and accounts others give about us is informed by the arguable assumption that auto/biographical accounts are comparable. While this assumption is relevant to all auto/biography, it is particularly evident when a self intimately connects her or his auto/biographical account to that of other individuals or collectives. This applies to family memoirs like Athol Fugard’s Cousins (1994) and Elinor Sisulu’s Walter and Albertina Sisulu (2002). It applies equally to memoirs of political movements such as Albert Luthuli’s Let My People Go (1962) and Helen Joseph’s Side by Side (1986). The extent and nature of such disjunctions is illustrated by Gillian Slovo’s Every Secret Thing (1997)—her memoir of a family deeply steeped in the anti-apartheid struggle—which is constructed along the lines of personal memory rather than public history (pp. 319–320).

As the example of Every Secret Thing shows, we need to consider not only the strain on collective existence and solidarity when different selves tell the same type of story but disagree with each other about its content. We also have to consider the consequences of the possible incommensurability of different types of auto/biographical accounts—such as testimony, psychobiography, izibongo, confession, and oral history—and the notions of self they imply. What are the consequences, we must ask, of the fact that selves are also constituted in webs of different types of auto/biographical accounts that resist comparison, in the same way as some theorists believe different scientific paradigms or natural languages are incommensurable? This may raise problems for scholars of auto/biography who pursue integrative approaches that seek to estab-
lish conversations among different auto/biographical accounts. For scholars, but also for the selves and societies concerned, interpretation may break down if there is disagreement about the nature of divergences, i.e., when there is disagreement whether they are divergences in content or whether they are disjunctions between different types of auto/biographical accounts and the notions of self these different accounts imply. Problems for the constitution of identities may arise when what appears to be a conversation among selves is at best a chorus of incommensurable soliloquies, of selves talking past each other. Finally, problems of integration can arise for societies if the various auto/biographical paradigms and the notions of self they are tied to are indeed so incommensurable that the communicative preconditions for the flourishing of solidarity are not fulfilled and what has the outer trappings of a community is in fact not—yet—one.

The interviews gathered in *Selves in Question* allow readers to explore these theoretical views regarding the role of auto/biographical accounts in the constitution of individual and collective identities from a southern African perspective in more concrete detail. To begin with, when read individually the interviews offer us insider views of the ways in which different individuals have reflected upon or constructed themselves in telling their own life stories. Read together, the interviews display the heteroglossic nature of individual and collective identities shaped by the intersection of a web of narratives. Following from this, the interviews also reflect the ways in which various practitioners negotiate the discrepancies between self-representation and representation of self by others. Finally, the collection offers views of how auto/biographical accounts are positioned in relation to narrative accounts of collective identities and the consequences of this relationship for individuals and society at large. By implication, the interviews open the road to an exploration of the ways in which auto/biographical accounts in southern Africa foster the autonomy and solidarity crucial to the self and society.

Focusing on the constitution of selves through auto/biography need not necessarily imply a commitment to identity politics. Therefore, while some readers may take the opportunity to fit these interviews into a larger project of state-guided identity construction through nation-building and the African Renaissance (Mante Mphahlele 2002, Faber pp. 418–420), others may find in them ample evidence of the extent to which identities are elusive, ruptured, and recalcitrant (see Spivak 1995; Butler 1995; Gilroy 2000 and 2004; and Casarino, Morgan, and Radithalo p. 439). In contrast to the coincidence—in Europe—of life narrative, the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity, the development of the bourgeois public sphere, and the nation state, the effects of
hybridization, trauma, and large-scale social transformation may well mean that, through placing selves in question, auto/biographical practices in southern Africa point the way towards alternatives to identity politics.

The interviews in this collection are informed by the need to question both the ontological status and the representation of the self in autobiographical accounts. They remind us that the self is constantly under construction and that its status and representation are always in question. The contributors explore ways in which auto/biographical acts contribute to the understanding of the self and selves. They deal with topics such as the contexts that are conducive to the flourishing of a rich variety of auto/biographical practices, the nature of the different production processes, the contents and the forms of auto/biographical accounts, and, finally, their impact on the producers and audience. In doing so they probe a multitude of variables—including the specific historical juncture, cultures, languages, geopolitical locations, ages, genders, social positions—in their relations to auto/biographical practices. The interviews bear witness to some of the specific southern African modalities of subjectivization. Looking back, they offer insight into the crises of agency and identity construction unleashed by colonization. Looking towards the future, they explore the new alternatives, dilemmas, and possibilities opened by decolonization and democratization in the postcolonial era.

Staking out a generic field is usually achieved through entrenching definitions. The spectrum of auto/biographical expression in the region, along with the specificity of some of its forms, prompts an ongoing search for appropriate terminology. Although it is only an approximation, we have settled on the term auto/biographical account. We use auto/biographical account to signify a wide assortment of symbolic expressions in which the life or part of the life of a material person or persons is represented. We find terms such as life narrative and life writing wanting because they are biased against nonnarrative, oral, and nonverbal accounts. Within the parameters of the written word, local auto/biographical accounts take the form of narrative prose, which includes the conventional autobiography, biography, and memoir, as well as diaries, journals, and letters, but also extends to such nonnarrative forms as poetry. Although this collection of interviews focuses largely on narrative verbal expression, this is not meant to imply that representation of the self is confined to the written or the spoken word. Many pertinent issues are also raised by the representation of lives and selves through nonnarrative forms such as izibongo, oral accounts such as dramatic performance of the self, and
nonverbal representation such as music, painting, photography, cinema, television, and the exhibition of material objects from everyday life.22

The distinction signaled by the concepts autobiography and biography also does not capture the ways in which these forms actually flow into each other, which is why we use the term auto/biography. The use of two distinct concepts obscures the ways in which the differences between autobiography and biography are eroded by auto/biographical practices such as izibongo and collaborative auto/biography. Izibongo, for example, often fudge the distinction between the self-representation of a single individual (as in autobiography) and the representation of another person (as in biography). Collaborative auto/biography likewise questions the soundness of the distinction between autobiography, in which the self produces his autobiographical account about himself out of himself, and biography, in which an author produces a biographical representation of another person.23 In other words, both izibongo and collaborative auto/biography reflect the ways in which the construction of selves happens at the interface between autobiography and biography, between the intrasubjective and the intersubjective.

The arrangement of the interviews is predominantly thematic rather than chronological. Singing the Praises, Performing the Persona deals with izibongo and popular culture. In Representing Silence the contributors discuss ways in which auto/biographers speak on behalf of others. Relating the Self focuses on relational notions of the self as constituted in collaborative auto/biographies. Fact or Fiction treats the constitution and representation of self in fictional and auto/biographical writing. In Subject to Metaphor the role of the imaginative in the constitution of auto/biographical identity is explored. From Daughters to Mothers probes the auto/biographically mediated relationship between daughters and their mothers, while Disarming White Men investigates the auto/biographical performance of masculinities on stage. In Commemoration, Confession, Conversion the use of auto/biography in coming to terms with the past is discussed. Confessing Sexualities looks at the politics of intimacy in auto/biography. The last section, Re-collecting the New Nation, explores contemporary notions of self-representation and the self in relation to collective identities.

The rest of this introduction provides background to auto/biographical practices in southern Africa and to the interviews. In “Auto/biographical Accounts in South Africa in Three Parts” we sketch some of the key features affecting the historical evolution of auto/biographical practices in South Africa (pp. 10–38). “Thematic and Theoretical Issues in Southern African Auto/biography: An Overview” groups some topics that contributors to this collec-
tion raise and fleshes out the theoretical issues at stake regarding the nature of auto/biography and the self (pp. 38–62). The introduction concludes with some comments on the scope of this anthology, its objectives, and limitations (pp. 62–68).

AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS IN SOUTH AFRICA
IN THREE PARTS

This survey of auto/biographical accounts in South Africa begins with a broad survey from precolonial times to the present and sketches a few of the theoretical issues related to the politics and epistemology of auto/biographical practices where indigenous, colonial, settler, and postcolonial traditions overlap. The second part focuses on apartheid auto/biography in greater detail. It outlines the effects of brutal racial discrimination on auto/biographical practices and stakes out trends in the resistance or indifference to injustice as reflected in auto/biographical accounts. Part three explores the continuities and discontinuities in auto/biographical practices following the watershed years of the Mandela Republic and outlines emerging developments in the ways in which auto/biographical accounts contribute to the construction of alternative identities.

South African Auto/biography: Izibongo, Travel Writing, the Sciences of Man, Resistance, and Reconciliation

For hundreds of years indigenous peoples in southern Africa have formulated and performed self-representational compositions, the most notable of which are rather misleadingly referred to in English as “praise poems” (termed izibongo in isiZulu and isiXhosa, and lithoko in seSotho). Although neither static nor standardized—and ongoing transformations and differences in the practices are important—the custom of “praising” can be found in the distant histories and present-day practices of diverse southern African cultural groups such as the Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Ndebele, Xhosa, and Zulu. Referring to the custom among the Zulu—and we can generalize this to many other ethnic and linguistic groups in the region—Noverino N. Canonici describes the composition of izibongo in this way:

[They] are developed from initial “praise names,” that an individual is given or gives himself, which briefly describe or epitomize an event in his life, his achievements or failures, or a physical characteristic. When a praise name is explained or expanded, it becomes a “praise phrase” or a “praise sentence”:
this may constitute the nucleus of a praise poem, which will then grow with episodic and occasional additions as demanded by events. (1996:226–227)

*Izibongo* are not now, and perhaps never were, uniform in style or length. They range in length, complexity, and theme from the praises of chiefs and other important people (past and present), which run into hundreds of lines, with intricate poetic patterns, to the short and simple praises of children and ordinary individuals. The praises of important persons are usually composed by professional bards; while retaining fundamental features in each performance, variations occur from one performance to the next. *Izibongo* are nonnarrative; furthermore, they may be performed by the subject of the poem or someone else. Since composition is not usually confined to any one author, *izibongo* generally blur the distinction between the autobiographical and the biographical.

Many *izibongo* of long-deceased individuals constitute scripts that continue to be performed and serve to communicate important aspects of the community’s history and value system and thus to shape both individual and collective identities. They constitute what Nancy Fraser (1989:144–160) terms the sociocultural means of interpretation and communication, which allow people to interpret themselves and their needs; they are a source of pride, and they can strengthen the community’s sense of belonging. Moreover, if certain lines from a famous person’s *izibongo* are incorporated into those of a living individual, then something of the status of the original subject will be conferred on that individual. With regard to the much shorter praises of ordinary individuals, there are the praises of childhood, composed by mothers and performed in the confines of the close family. Although *izibongo* are less common nowadays than they used to be, praising among common folk nevertheless continues. Noleen Turner has recorded and analyzed contemporary auto/biographical practices among the Zulu in both urban and rural locations: *izihasho* is the term given to these short, often scatological and frequently derisive “praises” (see Turner 1995). Comparatively recent adaptations of the genre include praises of trade unions, football teams, and religious movements.

*Izibongo* are performed in social circumstances that warrant the “naming, identifying and therefore giving significance and substance to the named person or object” (Gunner and Gwala 1994:2). They are performed at community rituals, in intimate family circles, at clan gatherings, and recently on popular records and at mass political assemblies. The genre has evolved in terms of form, function, and popularity. Writing about Zulu *izibongo*, Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala point out that in the latter days of apartheid, *izibongo* were “used
both within an ‘authoritarian populism’ and an emergent ‘popular democratic’ culture. They are thus at the center of contested terrain and are a key art form in the political discourse of the day” (1994:12).

So although indigenous oral auto/biographical practices tended to be overshadowed by the practices of writing in the colonial and apartheid eras, they were never eclipsed by them. Many scholars have examined the relationship between orality and literacy. Jeff Guy, for instance, argues that “[o]rality and literacy are not isolated phenomena, they are relational, interacting with one another, coexisting, the nature and relative significance and strengths of each changing with context and with history. But the point is that their coexistence and interaction does not make them the same” (1994:8), thus reminding us of the complexities surrounding the in/commensurability of the oral and the written. Recent studies in oral history and oral performance that go beyond the barriers posed by focusing on hegemonic or official languages have extended the range of academic perception about what is going on in the field of life-text (Lawrence 2001), and a cursory glance at the history of auto/biographical composition in southern Africa reveals layers of imported and indigenous influences equally evident in other parts of Africa.

Coullie, focusing more specifically on the relationship between orally performed auto/biographical texts and prose narrative, also argues for acknowledgment of the distinctions between the two approaches in essays on Ellen Kuzwayo (1996) and on the relationship between izibongo and narrative autobiography in South Africa (1999a). In the latter she investigates the socio-political implications of the different traditions. Westernized self-representational practices, the published prose narrative auto/biographies including those of famous people, operate in terms of

Modern capitalism [which] requires individuals to act in accordance with the ethos of bourgeois individualism: the self is, in this conception, largely private property . . . . It entails a distinction between the private and the public domains, so that there are parts of the self which can only be known to the self which—when revealed in personal testimony—enormously increase the value of that account. There is, in such a world, an individualisation of artistic production which is manifest in commodification, consumerism, reification of artistic process, and in increasing specialisation of practice which contributes to class and interest stratifications and a process of social fragmentation. (1999a:81)

She notes that the decline in vernacular oral auto/biographical practice and the increase in prose narrative auto/biographical publications (usually in
English) by Africans involves, for the practitioner, a shift to westernized interpretations of a range of fundamentally important features of experience and representations thereof: namely, time, creative productivity, responsibility and reward, notions of knowledge and belief, and—perhaps most important—conceptions of self (ibid.:81). She concludes, however, with the view that although western conceptions of authorship and authority seem to be gaining currency among indigenous sectors of the southern African population, “The continuing tradition of praising shows that African societies have . . . been able to accommodate literacy without entirely capitulating to it. . . . African beliefs, practices, ways of being are likely to survive (in ever-changing forms) the globalization of capitalism and the onslaught of American-European hegemony, at least in the short-term” (ibid.:82–83).

Auto/biographical compositions, both performed and published, by indigenous peoples were and are both vital and significant. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the impact of European settlement in southern Africa. Many factors contributed to the domination of white writing in the output of printed auto/biographical texts. One key factor was the hegemony of Christian conceptions of self. Another was the dominance of the European languages (English, Dutch, Portuguese, and German) and of that European-African hybrid, Afrikaans, in the official public spheres. Also important were the education systems designed by the settler leaders to prepare settlers for roles in the professions and in business and to curb the range of expression of the indigenous peoples so as to fit them exclusively for serfdom and proletarian labor. Moreover, the sealing-off of the technological means of production (first the print media and later the electronic media) from a wider populace (Hofmeyr and Nuttall 2001:6), and the insulation of various groups from each other on the basis of race and language served to skew auto/biographical production in favor of whites.

As elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, much colonial auto/biography has survived in the form of travel accounts written by Europeans. These early travel writings by Europeans in Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French often portray a self who functions as the central narrating, focalizing, and ideological point from which the landscape and local peoples are interpreted. This is especially evident in the seventeenth-century writings of administrators such as the first Dutch governor of the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, whose 1652 journal (1952), kept for the benefit of his employers, the Dutch East India Company, seeks to convince them that he is in control of the land and people of the new colony. Slightly different angles are offered in accounts by European women who accompanied administrators, such as Lady Anne Barnard, by British set-
tlers such as Thomas Pringle, who found themselves at loggerheads with the representatives of the colonial government, and by Catherine Barter’s unique 1866 account of a settler woman traveling on her own with native helpers (*Alone Among the Zulus*, 1995). Travel accounts written in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by missionaries such as David Livingstone sometimes convey a philanthropic engagement in their representations of indigenous individuals and themselves (Pratt 1992:38–68). Although these colonial travel narratives address a European audience, their attempts at centering authorial identity in the southern African landscape and among local people means that they inevitably contain kernels of auto/biographical accounts of the people in the contact zone between the indigenous inhabitants and arriving Europeans. This invites readings of, for example, the vignettes of Krotoa-Eva in Van Riebeeck’s journal, as well as Pringle’s journalism and poems, as constituting early forms of biographical writing about indigenous subjects.

These early travel accounts provided the ground for auto/biographical accounts within the framework of the budding “sciences of man.” Often the amateur ethnology that emerged from travel writings contributed to the perception of indigenous individuals as ethnic types, paving the way for the display of persons like Saartjie Baartman as spectacularized bodies in the freak and ethnological shows of Europe. In the course of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt’s theories, according to which each language reflects a particular view of the world that needs to be taken note of, along with missionary policies to preach in the language of the audience, inspired a turn to greater communicative interaction between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the vernacular. Accordingly, philologists such as Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek in the Cape (see Deacon 1996 and Szalay 2002) and missionaries such as the Ellenbergers in Lesotho (see Ricard 2003) initiated increasing scientific interest in the narratives of indigenous people, thereby paving the way for recordings of their lives in the vernacular. Around the turn of the twentieth century, as ethnology and the other sciences of man gained greater academic institutionalization in Europe and the United States, fieldwork became a sine qua non, and it supported a steady growth in interest in the lives of indigenous peoples as objects of inquiry in their own right rather than merely as a foil for the author’s own inquiry into his or her personal identity.

Nevertheless, new problems arose regarding biographies of indigenous people generated within the framework of the sciences of man. To begin with, as Patrick Harries (2002) has argued with regards to the missionary anthropologist Henri Alexandre Junod’s *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1912–1913),
dubious interpretative schemas, such as those indebted to Darwin, were mapped onto local life with the effect that individual lives were eclipsed by social and cultural generalizations premised on built-in hierarchies. This tension between the generalizing requirements of ethnology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis as scientific disciplines seeking to make universal claims and the concern with the life of a particular southern African individual, remains evident well into the twentieth century in the collection *Ten Africans* edited by Margery Perham (1936), in Westermann's *Afrikaner Erzählen Ihr Leben* (1938), in Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet* (1996, first published in 1937), and in Hourwich Reyher's *Zulu Woman: The Life of Christina Sibiya* (1999, originally published in 1948). This trend is evident as late as the end of the twentieth century in American anthropologist Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981), a book that seeks to break with the model by alternating generalizing anthropological and ethnological theses on the !Kung-San with the individual life of her informant “Nisa.” All in all, by defining large sectors of the population as colonial subjects who needed to be managed, as exotic subalterns whose cases had to be advocated, or as curiosities and cultural emblems that needed to be understood as scientific objects, autobiographical travel writing by Europeans and biographical narratives produced in the paradigm of the sciences of man usually meant that the accounts of indigenous southern Africans' lives were appropriated, reified, or instrumentalized for the author’s own purposes.

As will be shown in the more detailed discussion of apartheid and post-apartheid life writing, this paradigm changed around the middle of the twentieth century as indigenous South Africans themselves, admittedly in small numbers and generally representing an educated élite, became authors and the subjects of their own life stories. The autobiographies of Peter Abrahams (1954), Ezekiel Mphahlele (1959), Noni Jabavu (1960 and 1963), and Bloke Modisane (1963) were important not only because they wrested control of their own narratives from the hegemonic settler class, but also because their life stories, detailing—inevitably—the realities of racial oppression, served to support the liberation movement. These autobiographies and others of that generation increasingly evince a kind of double consciousness, addressing both an international and local readership. They can thus be contrasted with the travel narratives produced for a European home audience and the sciences of man texts written mainly for an academic readership in Europe and the United States. Because many of these texts have a different agenda from the sciences of man—namely, to inform and raise consciousness—they engage in a different rhetoric and provide contrary insights into colonialism and its conse-
quences. From the 1950s to the 1980s the imperatives of the regional liberation struggles, followed by an era of political caution in the last decade and a half, often accorded these auto/biographies an untouchable status beyond the reach of criticism. According to Breyten Breytenbach, the desire for a “‘strong man’—as leader, prophet, saviour . . . who can give meaning and show the way forward” led to the construction of icons, “obliterating a critical reading” (see pp. 272–273). As discussions in this collection suggest, this may be changing, allowing more “rereadings now happily relieved of any need for solidarity” (Nkosi 1990a:3).

Since the 1970s there has been a phenomenal mushrooming of interest in auto/biographical accounts. The number of published accounts has boomed, and the genre has undergone significant transformations. These developments can be explained by real changes in auto/biographical output as well as by changed perceptions of the practice. Transformed political environments, contributing to the rise in literacy and greater access to the means of literary production, have resulted in increased numbers of potential local producers and consumers of written auto/biography. In the wake of democratization, local people have also shown a greater interest in the lives of their fellow citizens (see Nixon, pp. 279–280). On the one hand, the stature of public heroes such as Nelson Mandela (1994) and Walter and Albertina Sisulu (2002) has been reinforced by their auto/biographies. On the other hand, a reconsideration of the value of everyday life for history and the social sciences (Eckert and Jones 2002) and a return to the ordinary (Taylor 1992:211ff; and Ndebele 1991) has meant that the scope of what is perceived as a life worth telling has expanded from the narrow confines of the (white male) hero to the everyday lives of ordinary people. There is hardly a more striking barometer of these changes than the shift from the apartheid-inspired Dictionary of South African Biography (1968–1987) to the New Dictionary of South African Biography (launched in 1995). Endorsed with a foreword by Nelson Mandela (vol. I), with the sentiments echoed in a foreword by Kader Asmal (vol. II), the New Dictionary of South African Biography seeks to “record for posterity the role of many unacclaimed people” by extending the scope beyond the “lives of the illustrious minority who achieve greatness” to “those who are less famous” yet “also give us much inspiration . . . in a racial and cultural mosaic that is truly nation-building” (Asmal 1999; see also Mohlamme 1999). In addition, oral performance and popular culture in African languages have attained a new visibility previously denied by Euro-focused state apparatuses, publishers and academic institutions fixated on the valorized “high culture” of print (Brown 1998, Brown, ed., 1999; Coullie 1999a and 2002).
Contemporary auto/biographical accounts in the region have to a large extent liberated themselves from their precursors in travel writing and the sciences of man and gained a status of their own. The demise of the privileging of fiction, the deaesthetization of literary studies since the 1980s, and new trends in auto/biographical practices have meant that auto/biology, as genre and area of inquiry, has acquired respectability. Of course travel writing and texts informed by the sciences of man are still produced, they are still evolving, and they find ready markets even beyond the academy. And there is an ongoing production of texts inspired by a desire for emancipation, although the terms in which this is understood are increasingly broadening.

Travel by southern Africans of all races continues to be a theme. As may be expected, travels in other parts of the world feature heavily in the writings of those southern Africans who have studied abroad, or have lived (or continue to live) in exile. Todd Matshikiza’s *Chocolates for My Wife* (1961) offers an incisive look at British society; Ezekiel Mphahlele’s *Afrika My Music* (1984a) explores his wanderings in Africa, Europe, and the United States and his return to South Africa in 1977, and Peter Abraham’s *The Black Experience in the Twentieth Century* (2000) traverses the broad canvas of the Black Atlantic. With *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts* (1960) and *The Ochre People* (1963), Jabavu offered the first books of travel in southern Africa written in English by a black woman, while Peter Abrahams’s *Return to Goli* (1953) offers a view by another black South African who writes about his return to the country of his birth. Increasingly, white South Africans such as Breyten Breytenbach (1976, 1994, 1998), Sarah Penny (1997), and Antjie Krog (2003) are also using travel writing to inscribe their individual narratives into the collective sheaf of (southern) African narratives, thereby reinterpreting their white African identity. The transition to a democratic South Africa has initiated new ways in which black South Africans relate their individual narratives to the collective narratives of the country. Gobodo-Madikizela, for example, remarks on that change as follows:

> When I returned to South Africa in June of that year [1994] . . . I became aware for the first time that in my past travels I could not have described myself as a South African. I could only say that I was from South Africa. I remember thinking as my plane landed that day in Cape Town, This is *my* country, *my* home (2003:6–7).  

It is possible that, as travel narratives become more common and gain greater visibility, there may be a shift from the discrepancy between regionalist experiences and nationalist narrative identities still so widespread in auto/
biographical accounts from southern Africa to alternative individual narrative identities, emerging as auto/biographers increasingly construct their personal identities in relation to larger regionalist rather than national collectives.

More recent texts produced within academic institutions and written in the paradigm of the human sciences have been less hasty in their extrapolation of universalist conclusions from the narratives of individuals. Instead, the life-history method is now often seen as a way of supplementing or even countering the tendencies in quantitative methods that construct aggregates from many samples, and historical accounts where the emphasis on categories such as class and modernization force the details of everyday existence into the background. Poised as they are between “the subject’s worlds of knowledge and experience” and “a social construct which constitutes social reality,” auto/biographical accounts within the human sciences are also perceived as a way of integrating the analysis of subject and society, agency and structure, private and public (Eckert and Jones 2002:9 and Van Onselen 1993).

In *The Women of Phokeng*, Belinda Bozzoli pursues such an equilibrium between the factual details drawn from auto/biographical accounts and sociological analysis. Drawing on oral life histories recounted in the vernacular in interviews with seventeen women, she strives for a qualitative, detailed, and varied picture of the connections between their consciousness, life strategies, and migrancy. In an attempt not to “impose upon qualitative and subjective material such as this the heavy artillery of the sociological armory, weighing down modest life stories with an interpretative framework” (1991:12), Bozzoli reproduces large extracts from the transcriptions of the life narratives that she hopes the reader will interpret “much as [she] would a work of literature” (ibid.). However, she displays no naivety about the ability of “‘raw’ oral histories,” which are “often opaque or merely anecdotal,” to provide sociologically interesting information on their own to readers who lack knowledge of the context. Therefore she sees it as a task incumbent on the social scientist to embed these life narratives in a framework that will permit a richer understanding and hence the basis for more adequate sociological interpretations (ibid.). While resisting the historical tendency of the sciences of man to instrumentalize auto/biographical accounts in social engineering projects, Bozzoli’s interest in social processes nonetheless smudges the distinctions between individuals. This raises the question, therefore, of the extent to which disciplines geared towards an understanding of social structures can, in fact, accord speaking subjects the degree of individuality that is a sine qua non of autobiography.
In addition to Manganyi’s psychobiographies of the author Es’kia Mphahlele (1983; Mphahlele 1984b) and the artist Gerard Sekoto (1996 and 2004) (see pp. 162–170), one of the most striking recent auto/biographical accounts in the paradigm of the human sciences is Gobodo-Madikizela’s psychobiography of one of apartheid’s most notorious violators of human rights, Eugene de Kock. As the first black female South African psychologist to write extensively on a white South African male, Gobodo-Madikizela turns the tables on the tradition established by Wulf Sachs in *Black Hamlet*, in which white male psychologists take indigenous Africans as their subjects. On the basis of forty-six hours of interviews with de Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela draws a psychological and psychosociological profile of him driven by the question, “How does conscience get suppressed?” (2003:50) At the same time she keenly scrutinizes herself as well, assessing her compassion for both de Kock and his victims and the implications of this in terms of complicity. Thus she fulfils what Manganyi describes as one task of psychobiographers, namely, that “in seeking the truth of their subject, [they] must seek their own truth simultaneously” (1991:71). Interweaving her own memories of political violence in the 1980s and 1990s and her visceral revulsion to and yet sympathy for de Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela’s account also probes the possibilities for individuals in southern Africa to use narrative as a forum for relating their individual identities to a collective narrative identity that includes the divergent life stories of those who perpetrated and benefited from violence, as well as the life narratives of their targets.

As could be expected, the first decade of democracy in South Africa has brought about several changes to auto/biography in the resistance tradition, which we will discuss in greater detail below. But resistance auto/biography did lay the important groundwork for the ongoing relevance of auto/biographical accounts in struggles for restitution, as, for example, in the joint action case brought by the Khulumani group against international businesses involved in upholding apartheid. Also, as has been the case in many other parts of the world that have seen an upsurge in identity politics, disputes or areas of protest and emancipation have multiplied. Auto/biographical accounts by individuals affected by HIV/AIDS serve both as testimony and protest against social disregard, and they feature prominently in struggles for justice related to health and gender equality.46 A broadening of emancipation and resistance can be seen in accounts which have further diversified an area pioneered by feminist concerns with gender and reconceptualizations of masculinity.47 Some of these explorations of sexual identity and sexual orientation include

As these examples suggest, auto/biographical accounts in the oral tradition, travel writing, the sciences of man, and resistance writing are still pursuing their own trajectories, while simultaneously leaving their traces in an ever-diversifying contemporary practice.

**Apartheid Auto/biography, 1948–1994**

Apartheid did not usher racism into southern Africa. From the outset, many of the earliest European settlers on the southern tip of Africa in mid-seventeenth century held the indigenous peoples to be inferior and treated them accordingly. Over the next three centuries such prejudicial attitudes informed settler land-grabbing, legal, political, and economic policies, and fueled much bloody conflict. Conflict deepened the colonists’ fear of the natives, and this fear, common to Briton and Boer alike, encouraged the effort to establish a pro-white union of the four European-controlled states after the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War (1899–1902). Inaugurated in 1910, the new “nation’s” parliament promptly began to pass racist legislation, perhaps the most devastating of which was the 1913 Natives’ Land Act which divided South Africa into “white” and “black” areas and prohibited Africans (67.3 percent of the total population, according to the 1911 census) from owning or renting land outside designated reserves (7.5 percent of the land).

Thus racism—institutionalized as well as informal—pervaded the South African landscape before the masterminds of apartheid, the predominantly Afrikaner National Party, won the election in 1948. Racism prior to apartheid is powerfully documented in the life writing of many, such as Clements Kadalie (My Life and the ICU, 1970), Naboth Mokgatle (The Autobiography of an Unknown South African, 1971), Dr. Goonam (Cooie Doctor, 1991), Pauline Podbrey (White Girl in Search of the Party, 1993), and Robert R. Edgar and Hilary Sapire’s 1999 biography of Nonthetha Nkwenkwe, a woman prophet who was confined to a mental institution for thirteen years until her death in 1935. What distinguished apartheid from earlier racism (known as the color bar)—and life writing shows this too—was the slew of increasingly ruthless, as well as increasingly petty discriminatory laws and the brutal suppression of opposition. It was this intensification that prompted journalists Can Themba, Mdisane, and Nkosi to leave South Africa on one-way exit permits.

Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) put South African racism on the international agenda; texts like Peter Abrahams’s *Return to Goli*
and Tell Freedom, and Albie Sachs’s Jail Diary, kept it there. Autobiographies—many of which were banned in South Africa—by Trevor Huddlestone (Nought for Your Comfort, 1956), by Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Luthuli (Let My People Go, 1962), as well as biographies like Mary Benson’s of Luthuli (1963) and of Nelson Mandela (1986) and Donald Woods’s biography of Black Consciousness campaigner Steve Biko (1987), were effective in helping to ensure that apartheid was prominent in international debates.

Opposition voices, particularly in print, were to a large extent silenced in apartheid South Africa. Christopher Saunders and Nicholas Southey note that “in the early 1960s many of South Africa’s black writers had their works proscribed, and by the later 1980s well over 30,000 works had been banned” (1998:40). On the one hand, this meant that oral vernacular performance “poetry” became extremely important at large political gatherings as reminders of the colonized/oppressed’s once proud heritage and of their own heroes. Rousing performances of izibongo would reinforce group solidarity and strengthen the crowd’s commitment to resist the apartheid state. On the other hand, the increasing output of published texts by black South Africans indicates that many had turned to narrative prose—in English—in order to give voice to their experiences of racism so that white South Africans and the international lobby would be alerted to circumstances in South Africa. English is the medium in which by far the largest number of auto/biographical texts are published, even by writers whose mother tongue is not English. This may be explained, in part, by writers’ and publishers’ awareness of the greater potential readership—within South Africa and abroad—for English texts rather than those written in isiZulu, seSotho, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, or other indigenous languages. But English may also have been the language of expression during the seventies and eighties because it was widely perceived as the language of liberation.

Once the Nationalist government came into power in 1948, laws prohibiting interaction between the races—even on such petty levels as standing at the same counter in a post office—were promulgated in rapid succession. As Modisane so powerfully narrates in Blame Me on History, normal social interaction between the races was outlawed. In this climate, it was possible for the state to control the movement of people—and to force people to move—to delimit economic prosperity in racial terms, to proscribe socializing and to disseminate only officially sanctioned versions of reality. From 1948 the white electorate had diminishing access to information and increasing exposure to state-controlled interpretations of events. It was to some extent because of massive white ignorance about the living conditions and daily humiliations of
the voteless majority (who rarely appeared in “white” South Africa as anything other than laborers and servants) that life writing (especially prose narratives in English) during the apartheid period became an increasingly important weapon in the anti-apartheid struggle. Life writing—the openly anti-apartheid accounts by activists of all races (often illegally circulated), as well as the seemingly nonpolitical, and therefore uncensored, autobiographies and biographies with black subjects—strengthened and broadened the liberation struggle in part because life stories served to educate whites about the realities of life under apartheid and of the maltreatment of those who opposed it. Under apartheid, individual worth and a person’s prospects for education, employment, decent living standards, and justice were all crudely determined solely by the hierarchical system of racial classification. Auto/biographies like Ezekiel Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue*, which recounts in searing detail the degradation that ordinary and extraordinary “non-white/nie blanke” individuals were daily compelled to endure, contested apartheid’s obsession with group identity and its concomitant erasure of individuals.

State repression under apartheid led to escalating violence and human rights violations. The experiences of being “banned” and internal banishment (long-term house arrest) are recounted by many auto/biographers, such as Hilda Bernstein (*The World That Was Ours*, 1967); Winnie Mandela (*Part of My Soul Went with Him*, 1985, revised 1986); Helen Joseph (*Side by Side*, 1986); Frank Chikane (*No Life of My Own*, 1988). Over the forty-six years of apartheid, the greater proportion of life writing focused on the political, often correcting false official versions of history. Mokgatle’s *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African*, Philip Kgosana’s *Lest We Forget* (1988), Mosiuoa Lekota’s *Prison Letters to a Daughter* (1991), and Maggie Resha’s *‘Mangoana Tsara Thipa Ka Bohaleng: My Life in the Struggle* (1991) all seek to rectify patent lies in state-authorized accounts. Because of its potential political impact, much life writing was banned, including most of the aforementioned texts as well as everything written by banned or listed persons such as Ruth First’s biography of Olive Schreiner and Mary Benson’s biography of Luthuli (1963). Prison memoirs—that subgenre which responded precisely to the erosion of the rule of law and the concomitant emergence of the police state in apartheid South Africa—were also banned: Ruth First’s *117 days* (1965), Albie Sachs’s *Jail Diary*, Quentin Jacobsen’s *Solitary in Johannesburg* (1974), Hugh Lewin’s *Bandiet: Seven Years in a South African Prison* (1981), Molefe Pheto’s *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (1983), Tim Jenkins’s *Escape from Pretoria* (1987), Tshenuwani Simon Farisani’s *Diary from a South African Prison* (1988) and Caeserina Kona Makoere’s *No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988)
are but a sample. Breyten Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) is a notable exception in that it escaped banning.

In the first half of the twentieth century, life writing accounts by whites heavily outnumbered those by all other race groups. However, as the apartheid machinery became increasingly sophisticated, growing numbers of South Africans across more representative class, gender, and race lines recorded and published their life stories. Documenting the early imbalance most startlingly is Rowse Ushpol’s *A Select Bibliography of South African Autobiographies* (1958), which records 143 autobiographies published in English or Afrikaans over more than a century. Judging by the authors’ names, out of this total of 143, 142 appear to have been written by white South Africans. In the 1950s only two black South Africans published autobiographies (Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele); by the 1980s, however, if one includes short pieces of testimony that were published in collections, black life writers had become more prolific than white.

In addition to the trend towards a more even racial spread of auto/biographical production, published life writing evinced greater gender diversity as apartheid progressed, even though throughout the period men continued to publish more than women, with white men usually predominating. Of the white women who published their memoirs in the fifties and sixties, most enjoyed some prominence. Sarah Gertrude Millin, the world-famous novelist, published two autobiographies (1941 and 1955); the singer Perla Siedle Gibson published her autobiography in 1964; Moira Lister, who made her name as an actress in London, published her autobiography in 1969. Sometimes the women autobiographers achieved prominence through their husbands or fathers: Marjorie Michael, whose husband was a game hunter and filmmaker, published the aptly titled *I Married a Hunter* (1956); Kathleen Mincher, the adopted daughter of the statesman Jan Smuts, published *I Lived in His Shadow* in 1965; and in 1969 Joyce Waring, whose husband was at the time the only English-speaking cabinet member in the Afrikaner Nationalist Government, published *Sticks and Stones* (a title that points to the hostility of English-speaking South Africans to the apartheid government). Also publishing during this period were those activists who had achieved fame/notoriety in South Africa. First’s prison memoir was banned in South Africa, as were Joseph’s works, the titles of which point to her embattled status and to intensifying state repression: *If This Be Treason* (1963) and *Tomorrow’s Sun: A Smuggled Journal from South Africa* (1966).

Of course, famous personalities continued to publish memoirs throughout the apartheid period: Louwtjie Barnard (the former wife of Christiaan
Barnard, the surgeon responsible for the world’s first heart transplant) published *Heartbreak* in 1971; Olympic athlete Zola Budd published *Zola* (with Hugh Eley) in 1989. However, toward the end they were joined by women who were relatively unknown outside their communities. Johannesburg councilor Janet Levine probably received more publicity in her adopted country America than she had done in South Africa. Her autobiography, *Inside Apartheid: One Woman’s Struggle in South Africa* (1988), recounts her attempts, within a liberal framework, to undermine the apartheid state. Significantly, in the eighties it appeared that white women were more in evidence as scribes or editors of the stories of apartheid’s underdogs than as autobiographers. Among these are Barbara Schreiner, who wrote Frances Baard’s story (1986); Beata Lipman, who published interviews with women (*We Make Freedom: Women in South Africa*, 1984); Anne Benjamin and Mary Benson, who compiled Winnie Mandela’s autobiographical text from tapes; Janet Hodgson, who attempted to reconstruct a Xhosa woman’s story from three surviving letters (*Princess Emma*, 1987); and Suzanne Gordon, who collected the life stories of South African servants (1985).

Although the numbers of people concerned are admittedly small (though more than listed here), nevertheless this evidence does seem to indicate an important shift in the mindset of many white South Africans: a sense that the stories that needed to be heard were not their own, and that their most useful contribution would be to facilitate the dissemination of testimony by the oppressed. These mediated testimonial works were important not only as a means to inform the hugely complacent white public about the living conditions of the black majority, but also to assert the gravity of abuses heaped on the victims of apartheid. Black South Africans had for centuries been ignored or been the objects of others’ study; now, in these texts, they were positioned as knowing subjects.

The first black South African woman autobiographer was Jabavu (*Drawn in Colour*, 1960, and *The Ochre People*, 1963). After fifteen years, the next autobiographical book with a black woman subject was the somewhat fictionalized life story of the Xhosa woman, “Poppie Nongena.” This account, written on the basis of interviews by the white Afrikaans writer Elsa Joubert, was first published in Afrikaans as *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978) and then translated into English (1980). Although it dramatizes in relentless detail the brutalities of apartheid (and thus a pseudonym was used to protect the identity of the informant, “Poppie”), the book escaped banning because it was hailed by most critics as a story of human tragedy, rather than as a black woman’s personal tragedy arising out of the apartheid state’s systematic racist assaults on her dignity and rights. After *Poppie*, more and more life stories of black
women were published, some in full book-length conventional auto/biographies such as Kuzwayo’s well-known Call Me Woman (1985); Emma Mashini’s Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography (1989); and Phyllis Ntantala’s A Life’s Mosaic (1992) and some as collaborative autobiographies with black women subjects written by white writers. Examples of the latter include The Diary of Maria Tholo, written by Carol Hermer (1980) and Miriam Makeba’s Makeba: My Story (1988), written by James Hall. Black women’s memoirs also appeared as short pieces in anthologies like Lesley Lawson and Helene Perold’s Working Women (1985); the collection edited by Jane Barrett, et al., Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women Speak (1985); Hanlie Griesel’s edited volume, Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza (1987); and also in deindividuated accounts such as Bozzoli’s Women of Phokeng (1991) and the quasi-autobiographical but anonymous Thula Baba (1987). Some collections did not confine themselves to the testimony of women of particular race groups: Diana Russel’s Lives of Courage (1989) includes activists of all races, and Barbara Schreiner’s anthology of women’s prison writings, A Snake with Ice Water (1992), includes writings by prisoners of all race groups whose crimes were not solely related to political activism.

Early in the apartheid period the subjects of published autobiographies, whether black or white, usually enjoyed some eminence in their communities and belonged to the professional classes. Both Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele, poverty notwithstanding, belonged to the mission-educated class. Jabavu’s background was even more markedly elitist than that of Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams. She belonged to the small Xhosa, mission-educated, and Christian (thus westernized) intellectual class. (Her grandfather was founder and editor of the first black-owned newspaper in South Africa, and her father one of the first black South Africans to be awarded a professorship.) But gradually, notably in the 1980s, the stories of apartheid’s most oppressed—the uneducated, unemployed, or blue-collar workers—were, for the first time, being published in significant numbers. There is, for example, the blue-collar worker and trade unionist, Alfred Temba Qabula’s A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief (1989) and Caroline Kerfoot’s collection of short testimonies by a diverse range of individuals entitled We Came to Town (1985). This trend towards inclusion of ordinary people in the archive could also be seen in printed collections of oral self-representational texts. For instance, where Trevor Cope’s Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems (1968) records versions of the izibongo (praises) of Zulu heroes, royalty, and chiefs (and a handful of prominent whites), Gunner and Gwala’s Musho: Zulu Popular Praises (1994) includes those of ordinary Zulu men and women.
In addition to the widely performed vernacular oral poetry—in particular, those of trade unions and of national heroes like King Shaka and Nelson Mandela—there were also performances of western-style biographical and autobiographical dramas. Nat Nakasa’s story of the black boxer King Kong Dlamini was reinterpreted in 1959 as the musical *King Kong* (Harry Bloom, 1961), the cast’s adventures being recounted in Matshikiza’s *Chocolates for My Wife* (1961). Other examples include Stephen Gray’s biographical play about Olive Schreiner (1983), and Athol Fugard’s autobiographical play, “*Master Harold* . . . and the Boys” (1983).

As Chris Weedon has argued, the meaning of experience is perhaps the most crucial site of political struggle over meaning since it involves personal, psychic, and emotional investment on the part of the individual. It plays an important role in determining the individual’s role as social agent (1987: 79–80). When experience is largely determined—and, for individuals under apartheid, this cannot be overemphasized—by racial classification, it is obvious that the experiences of one individual in a group will be similar in many respects to those of others in the same group (bearing in mind that racism, like most social systems, is not gender neutral). This is true of white South Africans to some extent, although there were important class and gender differences, but it is particularly true of apartheid’s victims, whose lives were rigidly controlled by the state. What this means for life writing is that accounts of oppression tend to be remarkably paraphrastic. It also means that the experiences of one victimized individual can serve metonymically as commentary on the lives of millions. In turn, this means that readers who belong to the oppressed masses will readily find their experiences echoed in the testimony of others.

Thus, as the decades rolled on and as apartheid intensified, there was a corresponding increase in the value accorded to purportedly truthful personal narratives by an ever-broadening South African readership. Life writing more frequently addressed a wider black readership, sometimes including those who were themselves only semiliterate. *The Story of Mboma*, by Mboma Dladla and recorded by Kathy Bond (1979), is aimed at an unschooled black readership, as are the almost pamphlet-style account of a foundry worker’s life, *The Sun Shall Rise for the Workers* (by Mandlenkosi Makhoba and an anonymous friend, 1984), and the aggregated story of a domestic worker entitled *Thula Baba*. Some of these testimonies, such as Kerfoot’s *We Came to Town*, arose out of literacy classes and were designed to be used in such classes. Intending to validate the learners’ sense that their lives and those of people whose circumstances were similar were important enough to record and disseminate, such
testimonial texts were not overtly political, but they did undermine apartheid’s goal to persuade all South Africans, black and white, that black people’s lives were unimportant and to keep most black South Africans illiterate and thus part of the unskilled laboring class (and thus no threat to white jobs).

Conversely, the systematic and inexorable erosion of individual difference, the determination of people’s lives in accordance with their racial classification, means that the life stories of victims who had all been subjected to the same indiscriminate legalized brutalities can begin to lose their shock value due to repetition. The iterativeness of many of the life stories of the oppressed is also due in part to the fact that many writers chose not to focus on the distinctiveness of the subject’s experiences, but rather on its typicality. This can be seen in a range of texts as divergent as Dugmore Boetie’s purported “autobiography,” the fanciful Familiarity Is the Kingdom of the Lost (1984), Kuzwayo’s Call Me Woman (1985), Mark Mathabane’s Kaffir Boy (1986).

By the 1980s and 1990s auto/biography was accorded greater prestige in the academy, and texts such as Breyten Breytenbach’s The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Christopher Hope’s White Boy Running (1988), and Rian Malan’s My Traitor’s Heart (1990) won literary awards. Coinciding with a growing readership for life stories was greater ease of having such texts published, often because publishers were also motivated by their own opposition to apartheid. Examples include pioneering South African publishers such as Ravan Press, Skotaville, and Ad Donker; independent periodicals like Staffrider; and various publishers abroad, including The Feminist Press and Zed Books.

With greater inclusion of formerly silenced subjects, formal heterogeneity also occurred. Conventional, western-style prose narrative life stories by black South Africans appeared, such as Richard Rive’s Writing Black (1981) and Frieda Matthews’s Remembrances (1987); there were about thirty of these published in the eighties. And these were joined by researcher-authored or collaborative records, such as those already mentioned and Tim Keegan’s Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa (1988). Compilations of testimony usually comprise stories of illiterate or semiliterate victims of apartheid, many of whom, like Joanna Masilela in Barrett et al.’s Vukani Makhosikazi and Sibambene, edited by Griesel (1987), expressed their delight at being able to “make history.” At the other end of the formal innovation scale are the self-reflexive—at times, almost deconstructive—experiments by Breyten Breytenbach (The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist) and Lyndall Gordon (Shared Lives, 1992). Both Breytenbach and Gordon foreground generic convention in order to question it and to probe the limits of “the truth,” a concept
which would later gain considerable currency with the institution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see pp. 56–57).

Interestingly, apart from biographies of Nationalist political leaders (usually in Afrikaans), texts supporting apartheid are scarce. Waring’s *Sticks and Stones* is a rare example of explicit endorsement of apartheid. Roy Campbell’s *Light on Dark Horse* (1951/1971) condemns apartheid but expresses startlingly crude racial prejudices. Marjorie Michael’s *I Married a Hunter* is ostensibly apolitical, but expresses views—common among whites of the time—which now seem appallingly arrogant and racist. Some writers, like Meta Orton, reject apartheid but argue nevertheless for the retention of some racist policies. A sample of biographies on—and in support of—apartheid politicians includes John D’Oliviera’s on B. J. Vorster (1977), and homages to H. F. Verwoerd (by Marie van Heerden, 1984, and Gert Scholtz, 1974) and P. W. Botha (by Dirk and Johanna de Villiers, c.1984). One little-known autobiographical account by a black South African—Nelson Mandela’s nephew, in fact—supports the ultimate goal of the apartheid state to keep South Africa white by confining all black South Africans to ethnically delimited “self-governing” states. “Bantustan” leader Kaizer Matanzima’s *Independence My Way* was published in 1976. The year of publication is noteworthy—Transkei having been the first “Bantu homeland” to gain “independence” from South Africa in 1976—as is the publisher: this text was published in Pretoria by the Foreign Affairs Association of the South African government. The extent to which the state influenced the shape of the text or motivated its writer to endorse the creation of unsustainable rural slums for disenfranchised black South Africans is unknown.

While not explicitly supporting apartheid, some South Africans continued to produce life stories that focus on the individual and pay scant attention to the profound impact of institutionalized racism on all lives, black and white. These include obscure texts like Ulf Boberg’s *The Boberg Story* (1957), Gordon Forbes’s *A Handful of Summers* (1978), E. G. Malherbe’s *Never a Dull Moment* (1981), Ernie Duffield’s *Through My Binoculars* (1982), and Ruth Gordon’s self-published, *Alive, Alive-o!* (1984). All are by white South Africans for whom (it would appear in their memoirs) apartheid was unquestioned. What is signified by the failure of so many whites to address, in their life stories, the extreme political engineering that affected every aspect of their lives is open to interpretation. One can surmise that it was partly due to the effectiveness of apartheid: whites were so insulated from the realities of black people’s lives—they were not permitted to enter black townships, and censorship created massive distortions in perceptions of political and social realities. But one must also
consider that the apparent disregard of many white auto/biographers of the gross violations of human rights was due to conscious or unconscious racism: the horrors of apartheid for people of other race groups did not impinge on their day-to-day lives because those suffering were simply considered unimportant. Such an attitude was not, however, displayed by all whites or for any of those millions classified as “nonwhite.” White South Africans who were compelled to address their peculiar political circumstances include Natie Ferreira, whose bilingual (English and Afrikaans) *The Story of an Afrikaner: Die revolusie van die kinders* (1980) agonizes over his Afrikaner identity, and Malan, whose multiple-award-winning *My Traitor’s Heart* is, as the title implies, a guilt-stricken account of a privileged but confused individual. In his autobiographical works published during the apartheid era, Breyten Breytenbach questions all aspects of identity: his African-ness, his South African-ness, his ties to the Afrikaner volk and language, his whiteness, and his masculinity. During apartheid, Stephen Gray’s *Accident of Birth* (1993) attempts to work through the personal implications of the trauma of the experience of violent crime. The experience, he tells his interviewer, is one which forces him to judge not only the thugs who robbed and assaulted him, but also himself, as a white South African.

Whereas autobiographical attempts by whites during the apartheid period to probe the meaning of race are few, those by blacks are more numerous: Modisane’s *Blame Me on History* remains one of the most powerful works anywhere by a black man on the corrosive effects of racism on masculinity. Other texts depicting the erosion of self-esteem by systematic racism include Ezekiel Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue*, Sindiwe Magona’s two-part autobiography, *To My Children’s Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992), and Shula Marks’s compilation, *Not Either an Experimental Doll* (1987), the collection of letters between a Xhosa schoolgirl (under the pseudonym Lily Moya) and a white academic, Mabel Palmer. Some South Africans indicated their refusal to be cowed by their racial classification through the mocking racial epithets in their titles: Breyten Breytenbach refers to himself as an albino; Hope, parodying the dismissive diminutive used for “nonwhite” men, calls himself a white boy; Goonam and Jay Naidoo (1990) call themselves coolies; Mathabane calls himself a kaffir boy.

**Auto/biographical Accounts in the New South Africa**

The desire for a clean slate is expressed—and perhaps even partly satisfied—in the rhetoric of the “new South Africa.” While this implies, incorrectly, that everything has changed—for most South Africans racially based dis-