

***Whiteness and the Narration of Self:  
An Exploration of Whiteness in Post-Apartheid Literary Narratives  
by South African Journalists***

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## Key words

### Whiteness and the Narration of Self: An Exploration of Whiteness in Post-Apartheid Literary Narratives by South African Journalists

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Critical whiteness studies

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Genre

Belonging/un-belonging

The 'colonial present'

Cultural illiteracy

Complicity

Gender

Transformation

The global sanctity of the white body

Hybridity

## Abstract

Whiteness and the Narration of Self: An Exploration of Whiteness in Post-Apartheid Literary Narratives by South African Journalists.

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Drawing on broader discussions that attempt to envision new ways of negotiating identity, nationalism and race in a post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa, this thesis examines how whiteness is constructed and negotiated within the framework of literary-journalistic narratives. It is significant that so many established journalists have chosen a literary format, in which they use the structure, conventions, form and style of the novel, while clearly foregrounding their journalistic priorities, to re-imagine possibilities for narratives of identity and belonging for white South Africans. I argue that by working at the interstice of literature and journalism, writers are able to open new rhetorical spaces in which white South African identity can be interrogated.

This thesis examines the literary narratives of Rian Malan (*My Traitor's Heart*, 1991), Antjie Krog (*Country of My Skull*, 1998, and *Begging to be Black*, 2009), Kevin Bloom (*Ways of Staying*, 2009) and Jonny Steinberg (*Midlands*, 2002). These writers all seem to grapple with the recurring themes of 'history', 'narrative' and 'identity', and in exploring the narratives of their personal and national history, they attempt to make sense of their current situation. The texts that this thesis examines exhibit an acute awareness of the necessity of bringing whiteness into conversation with 'other' identities, and thus I explore both the ways in which that is attempted and the degree to which the texts succeed, in their respective projects. I also examine what literary genres offer these journalists in their engagement with issues of whiteness and white identity that conventional forms of journalism do not. These writers are challenging the conventions of genre – both literary and journalistic – during a period of social and political flux, and I argue that in attempting to limn new narrative forms, they are in fact outlining new possibilities for white identities and ways of belonging and speaking. However, a close reading of these literary-journalistic narratives reveals whiteness in post-apartheid South African to be a multifaceted and often contradictory construct and position. Despite the lingering privilege and structural advantage associated with whiteness, South African whiteness appears strongly characterised by a deep-seated anxiety that stems from a perpetual sense of 'un-belonging'. However, while white skin remains a significant marker of identity, there does appear to be the possibility of moving beyond whiteness into positions of hybridity which offer interesting potential for 'becoming-other'.

## Declaration

I declare that *Whiteness and the Narration of Self: An Exploration of Whiteness in Post-Apartheid Literary Narratives by South African Journalists* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

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*The journey towards a PhD is most often a lonely one,  
but I was lucky to have beside me  
my biggest fan  
my fiercest supporter  
my safest haven  
my deepest love.*

*For Rory...*

*I carry your heart with me, I carry it in my heart.*

*In memory of my daughter, Keira Kate  
25 November 2011*

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# Chapter One

## An Introduction

*Whites need to find new narratives to explain who they are, what they are doing in Africa, and what their relationship is to the indigenous people and to the continent.*

Melissa Steyn 2005: 12

*... if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history ... Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies.*

Njabulo Ndebele 2000: 137

*How do I 'flee' towards black ... if I have never cared to know what black means? So my first question is this: is it possible for a white person like myself, born in Africa, raised in a culture with strong Western roots, drenched in a political dispensation that said black people were different and therefore inferior, whether it is possible for such a person as myself to move towards a 'blackness' as black South Africans themselves understand it?*

Antjie Krog 2009: 94

## Introduction

At the 2010 Franschhoek Literary Festival, authors and journalists Antjie Krog and Rian Malan engaged in an intense debate that foregrounded key issues in current discourses around whiteness. Malan argued that white South Africans were excluded from the national conversation due to their white skin, while Krog countered that South African whiteness continued to enjoy unwarranted privilege and protection. Eusebius McKaiser (2010, 13) later commented in *The Sunday Times* on this highly publicised debate and argued that the positions presented by both Krog and Malan with regard to whiteness in South Africa are flawed, but that “white consciousness can emerge from all of this in healthy shape by locating itself between the Krog-Malan dichotomy.” The subtext to these discussions is that white identity in South Africa is being subjected to intense scrutiny and contestation, and that white psyches continue to be challenged and disrupted.

The disintegration of apartheid resulted in dramatic shifts in the social and political landscape in South Africa. While it could be expected that after almost two decades a new equilibrium would have been established, social identities within South Africa remain highly contested and fluid, and issues of race and racism remain stubbornly insistent in the national discourse<sup>1</sup>. With this country’s history of racial segregation, its over-emphasis of racial difference, and its current attempts to build a non-racial (some might claim multi-racial) national discourse, it is unsurprising that

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the *Mail and Guardian* series titled “The Whiteness Debate” which ran between July and October 2011.

engagements with racial identity, particularly one as maligned as whiteness, are met with hesitancy and scepticism. However, in order to find their place within the national narrative, white South Africans need to re-think their stories, to re-define their positions in society, and to re-imagine their own narratives of identity and belonging. Importantly, this is not to re-centre a now displaced white privilege, but rather to begin to see South African whiteness alongside, dependent upon, and part of the multitude of South African narratives that intersect and overlap in attempts to create a new national story.

Narratives, or stories, travel through various generic forms: history, the novel or short story, and journalism are three 'authorised' forms most often associated with story-telling. It is the point at which these forms intersect, interpenetrate and compete that, I would argue, offers the most complex and fertile opportunities through which to explore stories and the way in which they produce narratives of identity and belonging. These moments of indeterminacy destabilise accepted notions of identity and belonging, and thereby allow for new forms to emerge. Thus, in order to link up with broader discussions that attempt to envision new ways of negotiating identity, nationalism and race, this project investigates the social construction of whiteness in South African narrative texts, specifically literary narratives by South African journalists. I have decided to limit this project to literary narratives written by contemporary South African journalists for two reasons: firstly, a number of studies have already examined whiteness and issues of white South

African identity within post-apartheid novels and fictional works;<sup>2</sup> and secondly, readers bring a very specific set of expectations regarding 'truth' and 'objectivity' to the work of writers they consider to be journalists, which gives these texts a particular power and charge. I will expand on this idea when I discuss the overlap between literature and journalism in Chapter Three. The central questions that concern this work are how whiteness is constructed and negotiated within the framework of literary-journalistic narratives, and what textual strategies the writers employ to re-imagine possibilities for narratives of identity and belonging for white South Africans. Furthermore, this project seeks to suggest what this engagement with whiteness has to offer broader understandings of South African identity and the construction of a productive national narrative of belonging, though one which does not admit of easy closure.

## Telling Stories

Antjie Krog (2007)<sup>3</sup> argues "while the readership of the novel was fast declining, the readership for non-fiction and real life stories was rapidly growing ... [as] a global postmodern world could no longer be expressed through the former genres and ... writers [are] slowly working towards a completely new form – as yet without name." It is this "new form" that several South African journalists appear to be engaging with as they attempt to limn a new set of narratives for white South Africans. It is significant that journalists have chosen a literary format for this engagement, in

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<sup>2</sup> See Georgina Horrell (2009) and Mary West (2009).

<sup>3</sup> This is an online source and does not include numbered pages.

which they use the structure, conventions, form and style of the novel, while clearly foregrounding their journalistic activities and priorities. The result is a form that might in places read like a novel but that enjoys what Tom Wolfe (1990 (1973), 49) described as “an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened.”

There is a common perception amongst many readers, and even some journalists, that journalists write ‘the truth’ and that their stories are presented objectively and without bias, or at least as something fairly close to this ideal. However, as South African journalist Max du Preez, says, “One of the reasons I haven’t gone into writing fiction is because ... I think there’s a higher obligation on the writer in terms of truth. My truth [as a journalist] can be tested ... When you write fiction you have to be truthful and authentic and it’s hard to test you” (quoted in Smith 2008). Traditionally though, journalists are seen as camping with the historians rather than the novelists and writers of fiction, in terms of the perceived veracity of their narratives. However, there exists a double-bind for historians and all writers of ‘fact’: while “history ... aims at the truth and deals with historical facts ... the very act of interpreting those facts in the name of truth leaves open the way for alternative explanations, and thus destroys objectivity” (Simms 2003, 88). Simms goes on to argue that “the reading of history and the reading of fiction both change social reality”, thereby implying that the actual ‘truth’ itself is not of paramount importance, but rather that through the struggles of meaning and the acts of interpretation and reading, individuals and societies begin to understand themselves (Simms 2003, 96). This idea is reinforced by Du Toit (cited in Norval 1999, 511) who, in examining both personal and national

history, “suggests that dealing with the past is a historical act of interpretation” and “it is through this activity, this memory-work, that we reshape and redefine ourselves, our communities and our histories.”

This drive to use narratives – story-telling – to make sense of a rapidly changing social and political milieu is voiced repeatedly. In *The Waiting Country: A South African Witness*, Mike Nicol (1995, 12) comments:

These days when history is so much with us; when sometimes I am truly afraid and when sometimes I know what is happening is unique ... I suppose that in the end all we really have are the stories ... These stories have to be told and retold because in the telling and the remembering and the not forgetting we may be able to create a narrative of our lives.

Attridge and Jolly (1998, 3) indicate that “the need to tell the underside of apartheid history, and to outline its implications ... is matched by a desire ... to find a *form of narration* capable of acknowledging difference without fearing it and without fetishising it” . I suggest that the literary narratives of Rian Malan, Kevin Bloom, Jonny Steinberg, and Antjie Krog, which this project engages with, are attempts to find this “form of narrative” that will open new rhetorical spaces in which South Africans can learn to converse. Both Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* (1991) and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* (1998) have provided rich ground for critical engagement and, interestingly, a number of papers present the two texts either in

opposition to one another or else attempt to establish a dialogue between them.<sup>4</sup> However, these articles have centred on the concept of confession, whereas in this project I attempt to expand this discussion to explore the depiction and construction of whiteness. I argue that, due in part to the authors' backgrounds in journalism, these texts offer a useful point of departure for an examination of whiteness in the post-apartheid South African context. I also turn my attention to Antjie Krog's most recent text, *Begging to be Black* (2009), in which she engages in a complex negotiation of identity as deeply relational. I argue that the challenging textual shifts Krog performs between geographic locations, time periods, content, and styles work to present new possibilities for a white South African identity that is not crippled and isolated by the past. I examine Kevin Bloom's text, *Ways of Staying* (2009a), which emerged in response to "the bizarreness of my own country ... the strangeness of life in post-apartheid (postcolonial) South Africa", and is a text that self-consciously engages with the theme, "for lack of a less hackneyed, over-used phrase, [of] 'post-apartheid white South African identity'" (Bloom 2009b, 72). Furthermore, Bloom's text responds to both Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* and to Krog's *Country of My Skull* in attempting to negotiate the issues of identity, racism, fear, and belonging facing white South Africans in today's complex national milieu (Bloom 2009b, 72). And I explore Jonny Steinberg's first creative non-fiction piece, *Midlands* (2002), for the ways in which he transforms his investigative journalism into a literary narrative account of whiteness in rural South Africa. These writers all seem to grapple with the recurring themes of 'history', 'narrative' and 'identity', and through exploring the narratives of their personal and national history, they attempt to make sense of their

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Van Zanten Gallagher (2002) and Osinubi (2008)

current situation. Because these writers operate from within the discourse of journalism, “a central cultural field which writers exploit for a variety of reasons and where, crucially, they self-consciously construct their public identities” (Hartley cited in Keeble 2007, 3), the narratives they produce are particularly useful for any exploration of identity, and in this case white identity.<sup>5</sup> For these narratives open a space in which both the writers and their readers are able to “[select], [edit], and [borrow] from the cultural resources available to them to reinterpret old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities” and to “invent and recombine fantasy and fact in both new and predictable ways” (Steyn 2001, xxi-xxii).

In order to explore the ways in which these writers negotiate form, content and genre in the construction of their narratives, I draw on poststructuralist assertions that “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested ... it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed”, and that “history [narrative] writing is a site of struggle over meaning which has important implications for how we understand the present and the possibilities for change open to us” (Weedon 1997, 21 & 171). I use a hermeneutic approach because, as Simms (2003, 50) points out in his discussion of Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of hermeneutics, “hermeneutics finds in the hidden intentions of its texts instructions on how to behave in the world, ethically and politically.” Furthermore, Simms (2003, 34-35) suggests that the “goal of hermeneutics is

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the public identity of author, poet and journalist Antjie Krog, see Anthea Garman’s doctoral thesis entitled *Antjie Krog, Self and Society: The Making and Mediation of a Public Intellectual in South Africa* (2009).



understanding. Hermeneutics is based on the premise that texts say something not only about themselves, but also about the world at large. By reading texts in a hermeneutic way, we come to a greater understanding of the world.” Thus, by exploring literary narratives written by South African journalists, this project attempts not only to understand the production of whiteness within those specific texts, but also to gain a broader understanding of the production of whiteness within South African society post-1990. The hermeneutic approach is therefore appropriate here as “we do not impose our understanding on the text, but rather let the text increase our understanding of life, which we do once we have put the book down” (Simms 2003, 41-42).

## The Postcolonial Space

In looking specifically at the narratives of identity of contemporary white South Africans, and in placing that examination within its historical context, it is important, as Coombes (2006, 1,3) comments:

to acknowledge that ideas of ‘self’ and ‘nation’ were forged not only in response to the heterogeneous nature of the aspirations of the migrant and largely European communities which first colonised and settled in what were often perceived as outposts of empire, but that they were *also* derived in response to the challenges presented by the reality of encountering indigenous peoples with highly differential political, cultural and social structures ... In other words,

the colonizers' dealings with indigenous people – through resistance, containment, appropriation, assimilation, miscegenation or attempted destruction – is the historical factor which has ultimately shaped the cultural and political character of the new nations, mediating in highly significant ways their shared roots/routes.

Postcolonial theory therefore offers a useful contextual framework for this project as it encourages an active engagement with what Dennis Walder (1999, 2) terms “a double awareness: of the colonial inheritance as it continues to operate within a specific culture, community or country; and of the changing relations between these cultures, communities and countries in the modern world.”<sup>6</sup> And, according to Walder (1999, 60), “post-colonial theory is needed because it has a subversive posture towards the canon, in celebrating the neglected or marginalised, bringing with it a particular politics, history and geography.”<sup>7</sup> In discussing a postcolonial approach to research, Ahmed (2000, 11) suggests that:

Post-colonialism is about re-thinking how colonialism operated in different times in ways that permeate all aspects of social life, in the colonised and colonising nations. It is hence about the complexity of the relationship between the past and present, between the

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘postcolonial’ is used in various ways, and my approach is to use the term as both a historical term and a hermeneutic lens, as this allows me to develop a more nuanced discussion.

<sup>7</sup> One challenge particular to looking at South African literature from a postcolonial perspective is the question of when does South Africa become postcolonial? It could be argued that the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 marked the end of British rule, while from an Afrikaner Nationalist perspective 1961, the year in which South Africa became a republic, could be viewed as the end of colonialism, and then again more recently, the first democratic elections of 1994 can mark the demise of colonial rule. As Walder (1999:2) suggests, this last view implies that only those texts produced after 1994 can then be termed postcolonial, and this can be limiting in terms of literary analysis and engagement from a postcolonial perspective.

histories of European colonization and contemporary forms of globalization ... To this extent post-coloniality allows us to investigate how colonial encounters are both determining, and yet not fully determining, of social and material existence.

And in response to this, Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003, 20) states:

Research that thinks through the postcolonial, is research that is involved in a 'race riot' at the epistemic level, overturning the understanding of 'race' and ethnicity as neutral, unitary and ahistorical categories, and demonstrating the social construction of the categories and their connections to other categories of difference.

Most importantly, as Melissa Steyn (2005, xxviii) comments, "if colonial narratives provided the social identity of whiteness, postcolonial narratives must help to redefine and complicate identities for those interpellated by discourses of whiteness, by bringing them into dialogue with 'other' identities." The texts that this project examines exhibit an acute awareness of the necessity of bringing whiteness into conversation with 'other' identities, and it is my intention to explore both the ways in which that is attempted and the degree to which the texts succeed, in their respective efforts.

## Chapter Outline

This thesis attempts to contribute to the growing field of critical whiteness studies by investigating not only the deployment of whiteness in selected literary narratives, but also the way in which South African journalists attempt to engage with new ways of narrating in order to re-define white South African identity and belonging. In Chapter Two I offer a brief survey of the field of critical whiteness studies and comment on its relevance and application to a South African literary context.

In the past decade, South African literature has witnessed an explosion of creative non-fiction addressing the issue of white identity and belonging. Interestingly, many of these 'literary' texts have been published by journalists. Rian Malan worked as a journalist on the crime beat in Johannesburg, South Africa, during the 1970s, before going into exile in the United States. He published *My Traitor's Heart*, a dark personal narrative of identity, in the early 1990s. Antjie Krog, a renowned Afrikaans poet, worked as a radio journalist covering the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1996 to 1998. She also published several pieces in the weekly newspaper the *Mail and Guardian*. Krog received international acclaim for her first English literary narrative *Country of My Skull* (1998). Kevin Bloom wrote for the magazine *Maverick* before its closure in 2009, and now contributes to the online news site *The Daily Maverick*. His book *Ways of Staying* (2009) was written as part of a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand. Finally, Jonny Steinberg reported on constitutional law and policing for *Business Day* before turning his attention to the rising number of farm murders and writing the

prize-winning creative non-fiction narrative, *Midlands* (2002). A key question that Chapter Three seeks to address is what literary genres offer these journalists in their engagement with issues of whiteness and white identity that conventional forms of journalism do not. I will also interrogate how the journalistic influences both the construction of their literary narratives and their reception, as well as how literature has shaped their journalistic endeavours. It is significant that these writers are challenging the conventions of genre, both literary and journalistic, during a period of social and political flux, and I suggest that in attempting to limn a new narrative form, they are in fact outlining new possibilities for white identities and ways of belonging.

As part of the broader project that examines the construction and performance of 'whiteness' in literary narratives by South African journalists, Chapter Four explores the deployment of 'tales of ordinary murder' as a strategy to envision and contest ways of staying and ways of living in 'this strange place'. Both Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1991) and Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying* (2009) present catalogues of murders as the authors engage with the broader themes of white South African identity and belonging. This chapter seeks to unpack the ways in which white identity is both constructed and performed in these moments of violence and, using Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'unhomely' (1992), suggest what these representations of whiteness might offer to our understanding of white South African narratives of identity. Mary West suggests that the concept of 'Be-longing' (2009, 13), with its implied nostalgia and sense of lack, characterizes a white South African literary engagement that is self-consciously obsessed with the perceived threats to white

South Africans and the apparently precarious position they occupy within the 'dark heart' of Africa. This chapter concludes by exploring whether Malan and Bloom are able to negotiate productive 'ways of staying' for white South Africans or whether their engagement with 'tales of ordinary murder' simply reinforces the notion of the 'un-belonging' of whiteness in Africa.

In the preface to *Midlands*, Jonny Steinberg's non-fiction narrative that explores farm murders in South Africa, the author states that his "intention was to record the stories of four or five murders across the country, to use breadth and variety to capture the texture of the epidemic" (Steinberg 2002, viii). However, he finds himself compelled to focus in on the story of just one particular murder, that of Peter Mitchell, "a 28-year-old white man ... shot dead on his father's farm" in the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal. Steinberg (2002, viii-ix) suggests that:

Mitchell was killed, not just figuratively, but quite literally, on the southern midlands racial frontier ... Those who murdered Mitchell did so in order to push the boundary back ... For his part, the dead man's father knew the score, and resolved to defend his land and fight to the finish ... This was a silent frontier battle, the combatants groping hungrily for the whispers and lies that drifted in from the other side.

This extract is indicative of several key themes that Steinberg returns to throughout *Midlands*, namely 'the border', 'lies and mistrust' and 'communication and

miscommunication'. Chapter Five seeks to examine the construction and performance of whiteness at these key moments, and to critique Steinberg's use of the tropes of 'mistrust' and 'miscommunication' as defining features of a post-apartheid, rural whiteness. I suggest that as a means to understanding the context for Steinberg's *Midlands* and to developing a more nuanced engagement with the theme of 'the border', Alistair Fraser's (2007) re-formulation of Derek Gregory's (2004) notion of the 'colonial present' is especially useful. I also refer to Grant Farred's (1997) engagement with the term 'settler' as well as social psychology's conception of 'perceived racial threat' and 'threat projection' (Stevens 1998, Riggs and Augoustinos 2004).

Antjie Krog's latest literary narrative, *Begging to be Black* (2009), is marketed as the third part of a retrospective trilogy comprising *Country of My Skull* (1998) and *A Change of Tongue* (2003). I suggest that this calls for a re-reading of the first published text. With the increasing engagement with 'whiteness studies' in South African literary criticism, and considering Mary West's examination of *A Change of Tongue* and expressions of white identity in her book *White Women Writing White* (2009), it is useful to explore *Country of My Skull* from this perspective. In Chapter Six I suggest that Krog's focus on and engagement with the feminine voice in *Country of My Skull* is significant in that the feminine appears to offer a potentially redemptive space through which a re-negotiation of white identity and belonging can be enacted. This is not however a straightforward position, as Krog draws on numerous women's narratives, some of which foreclose the possibility of a white identity that is integrated into a multicultural or non-racial South African society. I

also look at the concept of complicity in relation to *Country of My Skull* and consider Krog's engagement with the position of the white beneficiary.

Chapter Seven attempts to trace the evolution of Krog's preoccupation with the issues of whiteness, identity and belonging as they culminate in *Begging to be Black*. I have deliberately omitted a discussion on Krog's *A Change of Tongue*, not because the text does not offer rich material for exploration, but because much has already been said elsewhere regarding the production of whiteness within this particular narrative. My own Master's thesis examined the issues of belonging and identity in *A Change of Tongue*; while more recently, as I have already mentioned, Mary West's book, *White Women Writing White*, presents a detailed discussion of Krog's engagement with whiteness in her second literary narrative. As such, it is germane to my purposes to gesture towards the initial concerns Krog raised in *Country of My Skull* and then focus on the potential conclusions she reaches in *Begging to be Black*. This argument also constitutes a response to Stewart Mofa's article "*Begging to be Black – Liminality and Critique in Post-Apartheid South Africa*" (2010) and his concept of 'postcolonial becoming', as well as offering an interrogation of the notions of the 'interconnectedness' and 'complicity-as-folded-togetherness'<sup>8</sup> as contrapositives to the accepted tropes of whiteness in a post-apartheid/postcolonial context.

Finally, Chapter Eight suggests some possible conclusions that can be drawn from this discussion.

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<sup>8</sup> See Mark Sanders (2002) *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*.



## Chapter Two

### Writing Whiteness

*My intuitive sense was that whiteness as a distinct category had become subsumed in what struck me as a kind of 'blankness' ... whiteness had become so delegitimized by virtue of its complicity with apartheid that it had often been rendered 'blank', a taken-for-granted negative essence, a place less looked-into, a site of unredeemed racism and assumed uniformity.*

Leon de Kock 2006: 175-176

*Whiteness ... has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Thirdly, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.*

Ruth Frankenberg 1993: 1

*The intimate role that the denigration of Africa has played in the identity construction of whiteness on this continent cannot be evaded. This lies at the deepest heart of all whiteness ...*

Melissa Steyn 2005: 170

## Why 'Whiteness'?

Nadine Dolby points out that “in recent years, the study of ‘whiteness’ has emerged as an influential and effective tool for analyzing and interpreting the workings of power and privilege in numerous societies, including the US ... Australia ... and Britain” (2001, 5).<sup>9</sup> There is a tradition of engagement with the category of South African white writing (Coetzee 1988, Jolly 1996, Horrell 2004), and there is an increasing body of knowledge addressing ‘critical whiteness studies’ from a South African perspective (Wicomb 2001, Steyn 2001, de Kock 2006). In addition, critics are beginning to address the actual production of whiteness in contemporary South African literary narratives (West 2009, Horrell 2009). This thesis seeks to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by investigating not only the deployment of whiteness within literary narratives, but also the way in which South African journalists attempt to engage with new ways of narrating in order to re-define white South African identity and belonging. In order to do this, whiteness as a theoretical concept must be interrogated and its application and relevance in the South African context outlined.

A brief survey of the scholarship on whiteness reveals several key movements in the development of the academic field.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, Richard Dyer’s 1988 article “White” and Toni Morrison’s 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary*

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<sup>9</sup> Dolby points to the work of Fine *et al* (1997), Giroux (1997), Lipsitz (1998), Hage (1998) and Phoenix (1997).

<sup>10</sup> For further useful reviews of the literature on whiteness see Robyn Wiegman’s “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity” (1999), Leon de Kock’s “Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies – a South African Connection?” (2006) and Melissa E. Steyn’s “Rehabilitating a Whiteness Disgraced: Afrikaner White Talk in Post-Apartheid South Africa” (2004).

*Imagination* are two texts that most clearly herald the emergence of whiteness as an important area of academic study. Both these works argue for a move to make whiteness visible in contemporary cultural representations, and foreground the tendency to study 'the other' in terms of difference while eliding whiteness with ordinariness. Dyer (1997, 3) later contends that while it may appear that whiteness has not received academic scrutiny, "for most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general ... in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant ... and ... are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard."

Along with this focus on the representation of whiteness, as well as an interest in critically investigating white people's experience of being white,<sup>11</sup> critical inquiry then turned to exploring the invention of the white race, positing that while attributed to the seemingly biological, and therefore essentialist, fact of skin pigmentation, the white race was in fact a social and political construction dependent on historical, economic and imperialist drives. David Roediger's 1991 *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* and Theodore Allen's 1994 *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control* are two seminal works that explore the ways in which whiteness was constructed at various points in history and how that construct was then open to change over time. Roediger's (1991) work in particular is interesting in its discussion of how nineteenth-century Irish immigrants to the United States were able to move from 'black' to 'white' by accepting a socially inferior position as working-class, thus

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<sup>11</sup> See Ruth Frankenberg's 1993 *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*.

highlighting the constructed nature of racial identity and challenging essentialist notions of race.

Much research in whiteness studies has been undertaken from a sociological perspective and can be defined as “[tracing] the economic and political history behind the invention of ‘whiteness’, [challenging] the privileges given to so-called ‘whites’, and [analyzing] the cultural practices ... that perpetuate the fiction of ‘whiteness’” (Jay and Jones 2005, 100). Jay and Jones (2005, 100) view whiteness studies as part of “the general effort to create a ‘critical multiculturalism’ [which] ... analyses the inequalities of power that both motivate and result from practices of racial, ethnic, gender, class or sexual discrimination; it is antiracist, dedicated to social justice and structural change.” Margaret L. Anderson (2003, 22) comments that:

whiteness studies originates in several intellectual movements:  
feminist scholarship on the intersections of race, class and gender;  
critical legal studies; critical race theory; poststructuralist and  
postcolonial scholarship; multicultural education; and historical  
studies of the emergence of white racism and white racial identity.

There is therefore a growing number of critical ‘readers’ addressing the issue of whiteness and whiteness studies,<sup>12</sup> indicative of what Melissa Steyn (2004) refers to as a “deluge of literature” devoted to investigating the representation, invention,

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<sup>12</sup> See Delgado and Stefancic’s 1997 *Critical Whiteness Studies*, Fine et al’s 1997 *Off White: Readings on Race, Power and Society*, Hill’s 1997 *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* and Rasmussen et al’s 2001 *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*.

construction and maintenance of white identity. The result is that not only is the discursive production of whiteness interrogated, but more importantly for this study, moves have been made to particularize constructions and productions of whiteness within their local contexts (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, Bonnett 2000, Steyn 2001). In exploring the specificities of rhetorical strategies used to maintain whiteness, critics draw attention to the multiple “articulations of whiteness, seeking to specify how each is marked by the interlocking effects of geographical origin, generation, ethnicity, political orientation, gender and present day geographical location” (Frankenberg 1993, 18).

### Articulating Whiteness in a Postcolonial Context

In response to attempts to understand the localized performance of whiteness, Alfred J. Lopez (2005, 4) turns his attention to whiteness in postcolonial contexts, asking “what happens to whiteness ... after it loses its colonial privileges?.” This is an important move and highly relevant to this project because, as Steyn (2004, 145) points out, “the construction of whiteness was central not only to the processes of power and oppression established during the modern era of colonial domination, but still shapes the postcolonial world we live in.” The selection of primary texts, beginning with Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* published in 1990 and ending with Antjie Krog’s 2009 *Begging to be Black*, also allows me to chart changes in the production of whiteness over a period of almost two decades. Thus, not only can the initial effect of the loss of colonial privilege on whiteness be explored, but ways in

which that loss continues to shape whiteness, transforming it from the colonial moment to the postcolonial, can also be witnessed. Steyn (2005, xxviii) suggests that where "... colonial narratives provided the social identity of whiteness, postcolonial narratives must help to redefine and complicate identities for those interpellated by discourses of whiteness." The project explores the ways in which Malan, Bloom, Steinberg and Krog attempt to present these postcolonial narratives, and asks how and in what ways whiteness is redefined and complicated through their stories.

As cited earlier, it is postcolonialism's ability to invoke a "'race riot' at the epistemic level" (Gunaratnam 2003, 20) that is particularly appealing to this project. To engage with the concept of 'whiteness' in South Africa today is a process fraught with numerous political and social tensions, as that engagement can be perceived as further privileging and indulging a discourse already deemed undesirable. However, given the racial politics and brutal history of South Africa, it is "crucial to look at the 'racialness' of white experience" particularly as South Africa is a "social context in which white people have too often viewed themselves as nonracial or racially neutral" (Frankenberg 2004, 111).

Yet, as Lopez (2005, 3) points out, "postcolonial studies has to date produced relatively little scholarship exploring the relations between race and power, and specifically between whiteness and the consolidation and maintenance of colonial power." He cites as an example Routledge's 1995 *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* in which the word 'race' is used a total of eight times in nearly five hundred pages of selected excerpts. In order to address this gap, Lopez (2005, 4) advocates moving

“beyond representations of whiteness in Anglo-American culture to the more salient question of how the representational power of whiteness has historically operated in the service of colonial and neocolonial regimes.” Such a move would be in line with postcolonial studies’ broader project of “[seeking] to both interrogate the colonial discourses of the past and provide analyses or articulations of the diasporic, migratory condition that is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the postcolonial world” (Lopez 2005, 4).

## Criticisms of Whiteness Studies

Before turning my attention to the particularities of South African whiteness, it is important briefly to sketch those arguments critical of the deployment of whiteness studies. A central concern that has “dogged scholarship on whiteness”, according to Ruth Frankenberg (2008, 419), is that “the very process of critical engagement will in fact serve to do the opposite of what is hoped for ... recentering whiteness rather than putting it in a new place in our ... collective consciousness.” This is a very reasonable worry, and is closely linked with fears that critical whiteness studies could be misunderstood as being sympathetic to white supremacist ideologies (Wiegman 1999, 121). Furthermore, Alastair Bonnett (1997, 177) points out that what he terms the “reifying myths of whiteness” can in fact undermine the anti-racist struggle. Anti-racist discourses are often predicated on an understanding of whiteness as monolithic and stable, “as an unproblematic category (albeit with negative attributes), a category which is not subject to the constant processes of

challenge and change that have characterised the history of other 'racial' names" (Bonnett 1997, 177). Thus, the very process by which whiteness is deconstructed and decentered can in fact remove the "defining normative term of anti-racist praxis and theory" (Bonnett 1997, 181). In a South African context the critical study of whiteness is further complicated because, as Zoë Wicomb (2001, 169) notes, "whiteness, the condition once assumed by diverse European settler communities, is no longer one to be cherished. Indeed, it is no longer a nice word", and any attempt to engage with the condition of whiteness can be misinterpreted as reactionary and politically defensive. However, this response to critical whiteness studies overlooks the major irony of the field, which Mike Hill (1997a) summarizes in commenting that " 'White studies' is peculiar at the very least insofar as this work, unlike Black, Hispanic, or Asian Studies, is eager to pursue the necessary disintegration of its object." Thus, in contrast to other racial identity politics that work simultaneously to bolster ethnic and racial identification and allow for heterogeneous expressions thereof, critical whiteness studies attempts to delineate white identity and practices in order further to interrogate them and ultimately reduce whiteness's hegemonic social, cultural and political power. Whiteness as a concept or category must be deconstructed and rendered unstable, and then interrogated in order to render the concept visible, suspicious and open to scrutiny, so as to undermine the concept as an accepted, unquestioned subjectivity. However, while I agree with Mike Hill that whiteness studies "pursues the necessary disintegration of its object", it is important to distinguish between disintegration and annihilation. This project, like the work of Malan, Bloom, Steinberg and Krog that is being explored, aims to respond to Njabulo Ndebele's ((2000) 2007, 137) call to bring whiteness out from the "protection of the



global sanctity of the white skin”, not in order to destroy whiteness but rather to find a way to enable white South Africans to be ‘at home’, and to bring whiteness into dialogue and community with its many ‘others’.

### South African Whiteness: When ‘White’ is not a Nice Word

In the post-1990 era, South Africans are engaged in the mammoth task of reconstituting identities, social relations and, indeed, society itself. The old social order has been dismantled and must be rebuilt as something new; the old fabric of social relations is unravelled and must be rewoven. All South Africans face this task of re-imagining their lives as:

the collapse of a belief system can be like the end of the world. It can bring down not only the powerful but whole systems of social roles and the concepts of personal identity that go with them. Even those who are most oppressed by a belief system often fear the loss of it. People can literally cease to know who they are... (Anderson 1990, 27)

Thus, South Africans as a whole are occupied with this project of reconstructing the self. White South Africans in particular, because “being ‘white’ is replete with dissonance”, have been confronted with the challenge of renegotiating their positionality within South African society, and of “[finding] new narratives to explain who they are, [and] what they are doing in Africa” (Steyn 2005, 122). Steyn (2001,

170) argues that “the intimate role that the denigration of Africa has played in the identity construction of whiteness on this continent cannot be evaded. This lies at the deepest heart of all whiteness.”

In *Whiteness Just isn't What it Used to Be*, Melissa Steyn (2001) presents a discussion of what she terms “the master narrative of whiteness”, to show how whiteness is constructed in colonial settings, and to lay the groundwork for an in-depth analysis of white South African narratives of identity. It is useful here briefly to sketch her argument. She begins by highlighting the relational nature of race construction, suggesting that “Europeans whitened as they expanded and conquered, developing a common identity by using Africans as the main foil against which they defined themselves”, and that “for those Europeans who settled in the new territories, whiteness fixed their privilege in the colonies, often reversing the status they held in their country of origin” (Steyn 2001, 5). It therefore becomes apparent how much white colonial settlers had invested in the narrative of whiteness, and how fiercely protective they became in establishing and maintaining this construction of whiteness. Steyn (2001) discusses three central discourses that she argues colonising Europeans drew on in their creation of a master narrative of whiteness: the Cultured and the Savage; Christians and Heathens; and Natural Orders, Norms and Deviations. These discourses allowed colonial Europeans to see Europe as the cultured and cultivated centre of the world, while those areas that were colonised, particularly Africa, were framed as grotesque and savage. In their collective consciousness this justified colonial domination and exploitation of both the colonised land and its people; it also vindicated their denigration of indigenous

cultures and histories, and in some cases, their obliteration of those peoples. Steyn (2001, 12) argues that Christianity provided colonial constructions of whiteness a dualistic sociocognitive perspective in which goodness and godliness were symbolized by 'light', and evil and the devil by 'darkness'. These binary associations were extended to the point that white skin became synonymous with God, light, goodness, superiority, civilization, intelligence and rationality, whereas dark skin was rendered the opposite. Furthermore, "the greatest advantage of marking people in terms of skin colour was that it was permanent, given at birth, and could seem to be the way one was created" (Steyn 2001, 12). This idea was reinforced by scientific discourse that worked to "establish through measurement, description, and theory, a hierarchical human differentiation that could be fixed as biological", thus attempting to secure for the white race a position of superiority and simultaneously explain the black race's apparent predisposition to being dominated. Steyn (2001, 21) summarizes the significance of the development of a 'master narrative of whiteness':

The levels of meaning in the phrase "master narrative" become clearer when viewed in this analytical framework. In addition to being aligned with modernism and sexism, the term also indicates the hegemonic function of the narrative. In its ideological function the master narrative tries to arrest the continuous play of signification so that the particular positioning it favours is seen to be natural and permanent, rather than arbitrary and contingent (Hall 1994), and attempts to offer stable, monological subject positions to those it interpellates (West 1993). Providing the frame for

relationships between people of European stock and others, the master narrative both signified and legitimated domination, serving to repress other possible articulations.

The deployment of whiteness in the South African context, while drawing strongly on the master narrative of whiteness characteristic of colonial settings, has at least two distinctive attributes that render it dissimilar to other colonial contexts. Firstly, white South Africans have always remained a small minority within the country in contrast to what Steyn (2005, xxiv) refers to as other 'deep-settler' countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia where "early conquest brought about white majority rule." This has resulted in the atypical situation where, in contrast to other 'deep-settler' countries where whiteness has succeeded in masquerading as a stable, unquestioned and unconscious norm, in South African society the construction and maintenance of whiteness has always been a highly conscious and visible performance (Steyn 2004, de Kock 2006). In a country where the concept of race entangles and informs almost every aspect of daily lived experience, it is not surprising that white South Africans have always been acutely aware of their racial identity. Whiteness in South Africa has never managed to claim invisibility in the same ways as in the metropolitan centres of the United States and Britain. However, while South African whiteness has always been self-conscious and insecure, the privilege such a position accords has been taken for granted and naturalized. As Amy Ansell suggests in her exploration of post-apartheid racial ideologies, the rhetoric of non-racialism can facilitate a "denial of the continuing legacies of apartheid" thus allowing "white South Africans to claim the moral high

ground of being 'beyond race' while refusing to sacrifice the accumulated benefits of racial privileges inherited from the past" (2004, 10-11). The role of critical whiteness studies in a South African context therefore is not only to interrogate the construction of whiteness, but also to challenge the way in which "white South Africans [attempt] to re-moor their identities and guard privilege in the context of changing power relations" (Ansell 2004, 7).

The second attribute particular to the South African context is that whiteness "has been shared, reluctantly most of the time, by two major groups of European stock, each of which has always considered the other group an unworthy custodian of the entitlement" (Steyn 2001, 27) and, as such, "in South Africa, whiteness has been defined in terms of the struggle between English and Afrikaans subjectivities" (Steyn 2004). In his discussion of South African whiteness, Leon de Kock (2006, 176) contends that "whiteness as a distinct category had become subsumed in ... a kind of 'blankness' ... whiteness had become so delegitimized by virtue of its complicity with apartheid that it had often been rendered 'blank', a taken-for-granted negative essence, a place less looked-into, a site of unredeemed racism and assumed uniformity." The importance of this statement is that it signals the tendency to treat whiteness as a monolithic and stable concept, and to overlook differences between various cultural, ethnic and linguistic whitenesses. By assuming whiteness as uncontested and as "a site of unredeemed racism", the potential for change is foreclosed and the possibilities for richer cross-cultural engagements are severely limited. The way in which differences within South African whiteness have manifested is discussed in detail in Melissa Steyn's work. In particular, she notes that

while English and Afrikaans whiteness “did, in varying degrees at different times, recognize a unity in whiteness, neither wanted to be white in the same way” (2001, 26). Zoë Wicomb (2001) argues that in the colonial project that facilitated the emergence of the South African white race, a “sub-group identified themselves as ‘English’ [in] response ... to the aggressive assertion of whiteness by Afrikaners who insisted on a separate ethnic and linguistic identity bound up with a special association with the land.” Steyn (2001, 30-31) suggests that the attitudes of English whiteness were “more complex and ambivalent, and certainly more influenced by contemporary international thought as it changed over time” and also that “being ‘white’ for British settlers was having the right to maintain a European frame of reference in Africa. In many ways the British remained psychologically more alienated from the African continent than the Afrikaners.” The result of this ethnic and linguistic division within South African whiteness is that, in the wake of apartheid, English whiteness has often attempted to distance itself from the actions, policies and ideology of Afrikaans whiteness, and thus from complicity with apartheid itself. Afrikaans whiteness, on the other hand, “cannot escape the fact that the apartheid system was put in place in [its] name” (Steyn 2004). Ironically, in consequence, white English-speaking South Africans find it more difficult to deploy strategies of belonging in a post-apartheid context as they have a more tenuous grip on the narratives of what I would refer to as ‘white guilt’, ‘confession’ and ‘being of the land’. Thus, English whiteness in South Africa, when challenged and destabilised, scurries back to the international arena where whiteness is perceived as retaining more coherence, and disengages with the difficult process of renegotiating both its identity and its place in a post-apartheid South Africa. Meanwhile, Afrikaans

whiteness, as a “disgraced category”, has been forced to confront its own “rehabilitation” in order to sustain its narratives of belonging that construct South Africa as its only home (Wicomb 2001).

Michiel Heyns (2000, 44) comments on the Truth and Reconciliation process as not only providing the victims of apartheid atrocities the opportunity to speak, and to narrate themselves, but also providing “a means of reinvention for those people who inflicted the sufferings of which the victims speak. The perpetrators have their own stories, the dreadful complement to the narratives of suffering and loss.” And it is this ‘second narrative’ that Antjie Krog (1998, 56) grapples with and describes as “unfocused, splintered in intention and degrees of desperation. But it is there. And it is white. And male.” The adjective that Krog does not use at this point is ‘Afrikaans’, although the implication of the text’s dedication – “for every victim who has an Afrikaner surname on her lips” – is that Krog is dealing specifically with white Afrikaner identity within a more broadly articulated white South African identity. What becomes increasingly clear in a review of the critical commentary on the literature of the post-apartheid period is that the primary point of engagement appears to be with white Afrikaner narratives, albeit written in English, and the elision of white English-speaking South African identity within a more generic white South African identity.<sup>13</sup> This is significant because, as Njabulo Ndebele (1998, 26) suggests, white English-speaking South Africans have not begun to tell their story for “they are convinced that it is only the Afrikaner who should do so.” And yet, Ndebele (1998, 26) contends:

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<sup>13</sup> See Michiel Heyns (2000), Shaun Irlam (2004), and Jane Poyner (2008).

they have a story to tell. Its setting is in the interstice between power and indifferent or supportive agency. In that interstice, the English-speaking South African has conducted the business of his life. Now he was indignant and guilty; now he was thriving. This no-man's land ensured a fundamental lack of character. With a foreign passport in the back pocket of the trousers, now they belong – now they don't. When will they tell this story?

This call to narrative is not merely a magnanimous gesture on Ndebele's part but also shows an acute understanding of the importance of Bhabha's (1994a, 300) 'counter-narratives of nation' in enabling a society to develop a detailed and coherent story where "different features of our society will now emerge as aspects of a more complex definition of that environment" (Ndebele 1998, 27).

South African whiteness therefore exhibits an uneasy duality on multiple levels: within itself as a struggle between Englishness and Afrikaansness; in the international sphere as it attempts to remain local and yet draw on global associations of privilege; and finally as being "at once African and inevitably always already *out of Africa*" (Simoes da Silva 2007, 291, italics in the original). The discomfort of this duality is noted in comments regarding 'white writing' where Doris Lessing (1958, 700) states that "all white-African literature is the literature of exile: not from Europe, but from Africa" and J. M. Coetzee (1988, 11) famously argues that "white writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African." Two of the key concerns that become apparent in



contemporary 'white writing', and that are worthy of noting in relation to the construction of whiteness, are 'white guilt' and the 'white confessional'.

While white South Africans do have ample reason to feel guilty about their complicity with the apartheid regime – whether through active support of the Nationalist government, tacit approval of their overall policies, or simply failing to speak out against a cruel and unjust system while benefiting from the privileges that it offered – there is also a danger in focusing too closely on the performance of that guilt. As Dyer (1997, 206) points out “white liberal guilt at its most performative has the additional effect of diverting attention from the facts of white racism and oppression to how badly the Enlightened White Liberal feels about it.” And as with a sleight-of-hand, attention shifts from the benefits and privileges that white South Africans cling to, to black South Africans who will not accept that the whites are sorry. In contrast to the narrative of the “exquisite agony” of white liberal guilt is the claim of innocence that many white South Africans fall back on in their negotiations of whiteness (Dyer 1997, 206). Steyn (2001, 9) contends that “part of the privilege of being white was that one could choose not to hear, not to know.” West and van Vuuren (2007, 220) maintain that this assumed ignorance, and thus perceived innocence, is “a symptom of the insularity and normativity associated with whiteness”, and that it “constitutes a crass dismissal of the struggle for freedom in South Africa and the ways in which white people have benefited and continue to benefit from the ‘universal sanctity of whiteness’.” A second theme in the refrain of white innocence, most often sung by younger generations of white South Africans, is “that they had nothing to do with apartheid, and should therefore not be obliged to

carry the burden of white guilt” (West and van Vuuren 2007, 220). Once again this approach attempts to obscure the lived experience of white privilege that is a direct result of apartheid policies.

In his discussion “Constructions of Whiteness in European and American Anti-Racism”, Alastair Bonnett (1997, 181) highlights two tendencies within whiteness studies, namely the practice of white confession and the analysis of the historical and geographical contingency of whiteness. It is the former that manifests most clearly in a South African context. Bonnett (1997, 182) asserts that “at its crudest the confessional approach erases all questions relating to the contingent, slippery nature of whiteness. Instead, a moral narrative is offered based on the presumed value of white ‘self-disclosure’.” In post-apartheid South Africa the act of confession has been fêted, not only in the public arena of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but also in the literary world. Michiel Heyns (2000, 63) interrogates the ambivalence of confessional fiction in asking how South African writers might find “a perspective ... that is not merely abject” but will enable “literature ... to erect habitable structures on the foundation of remorse.” This gestures towards the importance of identifying the underlying function of the confessional act. J. M. Coetzee (1992, 252) suggests that confessional autobiographical writing is characterised as “distinct from the *memoir* and the *apology*, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self”, but Heyns (2000, 48) questions whether confession functions “to make the perpetrator feel more comfortable with his ‘evil deeds’, or to bring him to some understanding of their significance.” If the confessional narrative only serves to “effect a distance from an earlier, politically less enlightened or in other

ways unacceptable, version of the self" (Nuttall and Coetzee 1997, 6), then it remains restricted in its contribution to meaningful renegotiations and re-articulations of South African whiteness.

The literary narratives that this project examines attempt to negotiate these discourses of guilt and confession without trivialising the complicity of South African whiteness. At the end of the first chapter of *My Traitor's Heart*, Malan (1991, 29) asks:

What would you have me say? That I think apartheid is stupid and vicious? I do. That I am sorry? I am, I am. That I'm not like the rest of them? If you'd met me a few years ago, in a bar in London or New York, I would have told you that ... I would have passed myself off as a political exile, an enlightened sort ... You would probably have believed me. I almost believed myself, you see, but in truth I was always one of them. I am a white man born in Africa, and all else flows from there.

It is significant that whiteness thus becomes the starting point for Malan, and for Bloom, Steinberg and Krog, in their attempts to negotiate their South African identity. These writers collectively demonstrate that the only way to claim a connected and 'authentic' belonging is to find a way through whiteness, to interrogate the taken-for-granted privilege and unacknowledged complicity of a tainted identity.

In his consideration of whiteness from a post-apartheid perspective, Leon de Kock (2006, 176,187) suggests exploring whiteness in terms of its opposition to “wildness” because, he argues “‘wildness’ has acted as a lure to whites of a disestablishmentarian inclination” and that “the dialectical antagonism between whiteness and wildness ... has produced forms of subjectivity [typified] as ‘nomad’ – rebellious, wayward, inventive and ... rhizomatic.” This is a compelling line of thought that moves beyond the self-limiting narratives of ‘white guilt’ and the ‘white confessional’, and opens out novel possibilities for the formation and interrogation of white identity. South African white identity has been shaped by broader colonial discourses of whiteness, and those traces still linger in a postcolonial, post-apartheid context, which has rendered it a position always-already conspicuous, unstable, insecure and dissonant. How white South Africans renegotiate their narratives of belonging depends on how they come to understand their whiteness as no longer signifying uncontested privilege and protection, and how they attempt to forge connections with ‘other’ South Africans in ways that do not enact a sleight-of-hand that merely re-centres their own self-serving interests.

## Chapter Three

### Ways of Telling

*Because the novel differs from other accounts of reality by not being verifiable, it must carry conviction in its mode of expression. The novel's truth lies, hence, in the form. But the traditional novel appears to have become fixed in a form that is simply inadequate in a rapidly changing world that calls for new methods.*

Oscar Hemer 2011: 21

*Creative non-fiction has become in a sense 'the genre' of South African writing ... writing which makes its meanings at the unstable fault line of the literary and journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial.*

Duncan Brown 2011: 57

*I believe non-fiction writing is ... about unearthing a hidden or unacknowledged or unnoticed life.*

Antjie Krog 2011: 57

## Writing Back to *Disgrace*

Oscar Hemer's forthcoming book, *Writing Transition – Fiction and Truth in South Africa and Argentina*,<sup>14</sup> explores the question "what can fiction tell us about the world, that journalism and science cannot?" Hemer (2011, 11) contends that "obviously, *fiction's* truth – if there is one – must entail something other than the *factual* truth of journalism or science", and he goes on to state, "I was particularly interested in literary and fictional strategies that consciously transgress the genre boundaries in a deliberate attempt to achieve and communicate a deeper understanding of reality." Hemer presents a detailed examination of South African literary production of the transitional period of apartheid's demise and the emergence of the new democratic South Africa. He pays particular attention to the writing of the urban space, looking at texts by Ivan Vladislavić and debut novels by black writers such as Phaswane Mpe and Kgebeti Moele, the literary response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, focusing on Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, and the "continuing dominance of whiteness", examining J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Hemer 2011, 155). In a conversation with Ivan Vladislavić, Hemer (2011, 72) comments that "one quite strong tendency in fiction today is this aim to make it *look* like a documentary", to which Vladislavić responds:

We live in such a highly documented and reported-upon world.

Fiction's claims on being able to tell you something special about an

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<sup>14</sup> I had the opportunity to meet with Oscar Hemer, from Sweden's Malmö University, in early 2011 when he travelled to Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. After an enjoyable discussion of our respective projects, he graciously agreed to send me a copy of his manuscript for *Writing Transition*, which was with a local publisher at that time, and gave me permission to refer to it in my work.

experience or an event or *life* have been weakened or appear to have been weakened in the face of this image-laden, over-documented and written about world, so that documentaries have almost absorbed the qualities of fiction ... The Afrikaans writer Johann Rossouw ... quotes J.G. Ballard to the effect that we now live in a world that is dominated by fictions, whether in advertising or commerce or politics or television. We are living in an enormous novel, Ballard says. In this context, a conventional novel does not stand a chance. This fictionalised reality can only be opposed by the eye-witness account – the autobiographical story, the non-fiction version that pits actual experience against our invented realities.

While acknowledging the trend towards non-fiction narratives – a point I will return to shortly – Hemer suggests that the genres of non-fiction, particularly journalism, lack ‘something’. He comments on the starting point of Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*:

When reviewing her journalistic endeavour in retrospect, however, she realised that there was something missing – something that she had not been able to convey, and something which journalism alone could not disclose. Hence, she went back to the records to tell the story all over again, this time in a more personal and semi-fictional way, which defies genre classification. (Hemer 2011, 138)

In commenting on the New Journalism, but perhaps reflecting on all creative non-fiction endeavours, Tom Wolfe (1990 (1973), 49) says “it enjoys an advantage so

obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*.” Thus, while I agree with the idea that fiction may offer a means of accessing a deeper ‘truth’ than that which is superficially available in more factual discourses, I would argue that Hemer overlooks the importance of the reader knowing “this actually happened”. The importance of this element of creative non-fiction is that the reader is forced to engage with a character, his or her issues and actions, “without the option of dismissing him as a problematic fictional construct, as ... hostile readers might do with David Lurie or Petrus in J.M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”; in effect “one uses non-fiction in order to remove the escape clause for the reader” (Brown and Krog 2011, 60). It is this idea that informs my engagement with the literary narratives of South African journalists. I not only want to explore the ‘truths’ made available through imaginative, creative writing, but I want to acknowledge the ways in which the conventions of non-fiction genres such as journalism push the reader to engage with those, often uncomfortable, ‘truths’.

In a statement made at the Human Rights Commission Hearing on Racism in the Media in 2000, the ANC opened its argument with an interrogation of J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Disgrace*. In doing so, the ANC unintentionally blurred the lines between fiction and fact, literature and journalism. The issue at stake, for the ANC, was the representation of the post-apartheid black man. It argued that Coetzee “represents as brutally as he can, the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man” as conforming to General Hertzog’s description: a “faithless, immoral, uneducated,



incapacitated and primitive child.”<sup>15</sup> The ANC further argued that it is this stereotype that informs the work of white South African journalists, contributing to generally racist attitudes within the media. It is significant, but perhaps unsurprising, that Coetzee’s *Disgrace* is singled out and included in the ANC’s presentation to the Human Rights Commission. Carol Iannone (2005, 1) comments that “*Disgrace* aroused a raging controversy in South Africa when it was published in 1999, won an unprecedented second Booker Prize for its author, and became the first of his novels to achieve notable sales in his native land.” The novel has become a set work for English Studies in both high schools and universities, and it retains its currency in contemporary critical debates.<sup>16</sup> Antjie Krog (2011, 66) has commented that “*Disgrace* has ripped open more debates and conversations about South Africa and colour than any newspaper or non-fiction book ever did. So a good novel is immensely powerful.” The story centres on David Lurie, a disgraced middle-aged university professor who has lost his job over an affair with a student. In the aftermath of the scandal, Lurie retreats to his daughter Lucy’s Eastern Cape farm to reflect on his life. One evening, three black men invade Lucy’s home; they gang-rape her, shoot her dogs, loot her house, and set her father alight before stealing his car. Lurie is outraged and insists on involving the police and seeking justice. In contrast, Lucy is adamant that such responses would make it impossible for her to continue living on her farm. In order to stay in the home she loves, and in order to feel that she is part of the broader South African community, Lucy chooses to cede her land to

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<sup>15</sup> See “Statement of the ANC at the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media”, presented on 5 April 2000. Available online at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/2000/sp0405.html>

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Chapman’s 2010 article “‘To Petrus’: Coetzee, Krog, Critics”, which I will refer to later in the discussion.

her black neighbour and farm manager, Petrus, and to become, in effect, his third wife. She also chooses to have the baby that she is carrying as a result of the rape. Lucy comments that perhaps this “is the price one has to pay for staying on” (Coetzee 1999, 158). Iannone (2005, 2) suggests, in response to this assertion, that:

the reader, however, or at least any reader not terminally immersed in white guilt, is liable to be horrified. While Coetzee’s purposes in this novel are ambiguous and not fully worked out, there is no doubt that he intends to raise disturbing questions about the nature of the new South Africa and the place of white people in it. It is common knowledge that attacks by blacks on white farmers in rural South Africa have become rife under the new government. It was this very aspect of the novel that caused the ANC to condemn the book as a racist call for white South Africans to emigrate.

Iannone (2005, 3) goes on to say that “... we can see *Disgrace* as offering guilty white readers the opportunity to indulge in self-hatred and to savour the pleasure of contemplating the abasement of Western man and woman, while imagining a spiritual reward for doing so.” In a review of recent Coetzee criticism alongside Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, Michael Chapman (2010, 157) points to the “heightened sense of unease that one ... experiences in the reading to completion of [*Disgrace*].” I suggest that this unease stems from Coetzee’s tendency to narrow down the available options and crystallize the positions of both his characters and his readers. It is this fixedness or frozenness that Krog responds to in *Begging to be Black* as she searches for an interconnectedness that does not erase or override difference. Krog

dedicates *Begging to be Black* to “Petrus” and attempts to find a way through to Petrus and his story and, simultaneously, to allow the space in which Petrus might begin to step out of the static relationship with David Lurie that Coetzee depicts. In this sense, Krog is writing b(l)ack to Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, loosening the ties that fix Coetzee’s characters in their unyielding positions, and seeking ways towards becoming-other. In a similar way, both Steinberg’s *Midlands* and Bloom’s *Ways of Staying* contain traces of *Disgrace*, and both texts echo Coetzee’s concerns in interesting ways. Thus Coetzee’s novel is notable in the broader context of this project; not only is *Disgrace* considered a landmark text in post-apartheid South African literature, but the primary texts which this thesis examines appear to refer back to *Disgrace*, either overtly, as in the case of Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, or implicitly, as with Steinberg’s *Midlands* and Bloom’s *Ways of Staying*.

It is significant that, in his “Reflexive Essay” which formed part of his Masters degree in Creative Writing, Kevin Bloom discusses, at length, the parallels between his own book, *Ways of Staying*, and Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Bloom (2008, 224) comments that *Ways of Staying* is “a book written from a position of fear” and that, as such, is part of the South African literary lineage that includes Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Bloom (2008, 225) states, “I wanted somehow in *Ways of Staying* to communicate the intractable fact that while the most profound white fears have a basis in myth, they are also real fears and so cannot be buried or wished away”, and to this end he is acutely aware of the parallels between the factual narrative of Jamie Paterson’s rape in *Ways of Staying* and the fictional story of the rape of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*. Furthermore

Bloom comments that the “fiction may throw some light on the fact” in terms of making explicit the anxieties and fears of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. Bloom (2008, 228) suggests that the pervasive fear that characterizes South African whiteness, expressed in *Ways of Staying* as the sense that “privately, quietly, as a result of our own complicated guilt, we believe that we deserve to be hated, to be hurt, and to be killed”, is given form in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* when Lucy intimates that perhaps her rape is “the price one has to pay for staying on”.

## Narrating the Nation

Benedict Anderson’s well-rehearsed formulation of the nation as “an imagined community” foregrounds the constructed nature of the concept, and thereby allows for the continual re-imagining of the same. This emphasis on the re-imagining or re-telling of the nation is important as it eschews the tendency towards fixed and rigid nationalisms, while simultaneously encouraging a perception of the nation-state as always-already in a condition of change as it constantly re-imagines itself within a continually shifting global environment. Furthermore, it is the repetitive nature of this re-imagining and re-telling that works to build a coherent national narrative; as Bhabha (1994b, 297) points out “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects.”

In discussing the role of truth and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, Van Zanten Gallagher (2002, 112) notes that the country “still faces the need to construct a new national narrative ... the *idea* of being a South African still [needs] to be inhabited and enacted; it [needs] a narrative. The moral and social bankruptcy of apartheid has robbed the country of a viable story.” Several attempts have been made to forge a new national narrative that espouses inclusivity and multiculturalism. Van Zanten Gallagher (2002, 116) further argues that:

the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] process [was] designed to construct a communal narrative by weaving together numerous individual strands ... giving shape to a new South African identity through naming and reclaiming the past, rewriting history to allow new, previously silenced, voices to speak, and acknowledging the ways in which old voices had erred.

This process of “weaving together numerous individual strands” was expressed as the narrative of the “Rainbow Nation”, made popular in the media by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and attempted to offer a national story that overlooked difference in favour of the ideal of national unity. Over time this narrative has been viewed with increasing scepticism and disillusionment, and has given way to the narrative of the “African Renaissance”, which initially appeared to offer the space in which difference and diversity could be valued within the collective. Thabo Mbeki’s “I am an African” speech presented the story of an encompassing nationalism, which was formed by often competing ideologies, but was able to accommodate the varied spectrum of

cultures, ethnicities, identities and histories that existed both within the political borders of South Africa as well as those in the broader context of Africa.<sup>17</sup> However, it became increasingly clear in subsequent discourse that, while the initial formulation of the African Renaissance narrative included white, black, Indian and Coloured identities as 'African', in practice some 'Africans' remained more African than others.<sup>18</sup> Thus as South Africa moves into its third decade since the dismantling of apartheid, the country still searches for a narrative through which to describe, explain, understand and validate itself. Shaun Irlam (2004, 698) suggests that "increasingly, a new literature of separate development is emerging, in which communities once submerged in their common resistance to apartheid now finally exercise the liberty to explore their own histories and assert their own agendas." While such a formulation problematically echoes apartheid discourse, there is the potential for a productive engagement with what Bhabha (1994b, 300) refers to as 'counter-narratives of the nation', which can work to "continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries – both actual and conceptual – [and thereby] disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities."<sup>19</sup> This allows for a more nuanced, and multi-faceted, national narrative

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<sup>17</sup> Statement made by then Deputy-President Thabo Mbeki on behalf of the African National Congress, on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of the Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996, Cape Town, 8 May 1996. For a full transcript see Gitanjali Maharaj's *Between Unity and Diversity: Essays on Nation-Building in Post-apartheid South Africa* (1999).

<sup>18</sup> The outbreak of xenophobic attacks on black African immigrants and refugees in 2008 shocked the local and international community. Questions were raised such as "What does the *Africa* in South Africa stand for?" and "How foreign is foreign?". These questions remain pertinent in current debates around 'South African-ness' and identity.

<sup>19</sup> The performances of the ostensibly Afrikaans 'zef-rap-rave' trio of *Die Antwoord* provide an interesting example of the potential for a 'counter-narrative of nation' which I discuss in greater detail elsewhere (Scott, 2010). Suffice it to say here that the performance of what is perceived as a marginalized white South African identity by Yolandi Visser and Watkin Tudor Jones works not only to destabilize accepted notions of South African whiteness but also to carve out a new social space in which to interrogate narratives of whiteness and collaboratively create new stories about being white and South African.

that resists attempts to prescribe and contain individuals' and communities' efforts to narrate themselves and their place in a complex society.

In a panel discussion entitled “Reality Hunger or Escapist Pudding” at the *Mail and Guardian's* 2010 Johannesburg Literary Festival,<sup>20</sup> Leon de Kock commented that non-fiction outsells fiction in South Africa, partly because non-fiction deals with the here-and-now and is about people in the here-and-now. He also indicated that the tendency within the publishing industry to maintain the categories of fiction and non-fiction invites a dualism by which fiction is understood as creative, imaginative and aesthetic, while non-fiction is perceived as factual, objective and somehow more ‘true’. De Kock went on to suggest that this dualism can be problematic as it overlooks the continuum of truth and fiction present within every narrative, as well as the fact that all writing is an attempt to represent a particular truth. Concomitant with the notion of truth is the idea of authenticity, and De Kock argued that while the 1996 Truth and Reconciliation Commission was important in terms of opening a space for the many and varied voices of South Africa to be heard, it was the authenticity of those voices that made the process most significant. De Kock summarised his argument by commenting that South Africans are tired of being “bullshitted” and that, as readers, South Africans value the authenticity of witnessing the experience of a particular lived life. It is for this reason, De Kock argued, that books such as Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* have become landmark texts in South African literature.

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<sup>20</sup> Archival video footage courtesy of the *Mail and Guardian*. Also available at <http://mg.co.za/specialreport/mg-jhb-literary-festival-2010>.

While this project is engaged in a close reading of the selected texts, it is still important to acknowledge the expectations that readers bring to a text and the general reception of a particular text within a local and international context. Reader expectations are shaped by genre and the assumption that particular genres follow specific conventions in terms of narrative, plot and style. The interpretation and understanding of a text often begin with the recognition of the genre within which the text is situated. Barbara Foley (1986, 41) suggests that “the writer assumes that the reader will possess the ‘competence’ to know how to understand each particular text, and that the ‘tacit knowledge’ undergirding this competence is the knowledge of generic conventions shared by writer and reader alike.” As such, when a text is presented as fiction, particularly as a ‘novel’, the narrative is understood and interpreted as having been imagined and therefore not being ‘real’. This does not diminish the reader’s demand for a story that is believable and presents or reveals some ‘truth’ about humanity or the world at large, but it allows for greater subjectivity and creative licence in deeming what that ‘truth’ is and how it might be presented. In contrast, narratives which traditionally fall within the category of non-fiction, including histories, biographies and autobiographies, are expected to perform their ‘truth’ with greater objectivity and verisimilitude, and less bias. Failure to subscribe to the conventions of genre, or a deliberate attempt to subvert the readers’ expectations, can have serious repercussions as was evident with James Frey’s narrative *A Million Little Pieces*. Published in April 2003, this story of drug and alcohol abuse and rehabilitation was marketed as a memoir and received much publicity, including an invitation to Frey to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show. When it was later revealed that the story was not ‘true’ in that the events depicted did not



actually happen to Frey himself, the media uproar was such that the publisher, Random House, agreed to refund readers who felt they have been defrauded. In order to receive their refund, readers “had to sign a sworn statement confirming that they had bought the book with the belief it was a real memoir or, in other words, that they felt bad having accidentally read a novel” (Shields 2010, 43-44). Similarly, a major criticism of *Country of My Skull* was Krog’s decision to include a fabricated narrative of her having an affair. Readers and critics took umbrage at the overt blurring of fact and fiction, despite Krog’s (2002, 170-171) very self-conscious engagement in the text with the issues of ‘truth’ and the interpretation and depiction thereof:

“Hey Antjie, but this is not quite what happened at the workshop,” says Patrick.

“Yes I know, it’s a new story that I constructed from all the other information I picked up over the months ... I’m not reporting or keeping minutes. I’m telling ...”

“But then you’re not busy with the truth!”

“I am busy with the truth ... *my* truth. Of course, it’s quilted together from hundreds of stories that we’ve experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I’m telling the story to ...”

Earlier in the narrative Krog (2002, 36) admits that the word ‘truth’ makes her uncomfortable:

I hesitate at the word, I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word 'lie'. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there ... where the truth is closest.

Krog, therefore, acknowledges the difficulty of presenting a narrative that reflects the individual's struggle to navigate her way through and within any given society; for, in order accurately to reflect the situated-ness of a particular life, that narrative will always include stories of other lives. What Krog, and other writers of creative non-fiction, must continually negotiate is how to present their own 'truths' whilst still maintaining the integrity of the lives and selves of those around them. Jonny Steinberg comments that "the consequence of writing about an unsolved murder" is that the names of individuals and places must be changed in order to protect both the living and the dead. Steinberg goes on to acknowledge the ethical implications of writing within the genre of creative non-fiction. He suggests that "every journalist hurts the person about whom he writes. It is not the sort of violation that can be captured in any sane law" because by default "a book's author, together with its readership, is a vicarious and hungry animal. It intrudes greedily, from the shelter of its own invisibility" (Steinberg 2002, x). Thus while Steinberg employs strategies of concealment in order to deal with the ethical implications of capturing the lives of others on paper, Krog attempts to undermine the invisibility of the position of author and reader. In doing so, she undoes the distance a reader might otherwise claim from a problematic character. Krog's reliance on working at the blurry edges of

genre enables her to “remove the escape clause for the reader” (Brown and Krog 2011, 60).

## Writing on the Frontier

Increasingly, publishers have become caught in the binary of fiction/non-fiction, and struggle to categorize narratives that challenge, subvert or straddle genres. Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart*, Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and *Begging to be Black*, Steinberg’s *Midlands* and Bloom’s *Ways of Staying* are texts most broadly described as ‘non-fiction narratives’. The difficulty of containing these texts within particular genres is apparent even from a review of their dustcovers. Vintage, the publishers of *My Traitor’s Heart*, avoid any mention of the terms ‘memoir’ or ‘autobiography’, favouring instead phrases such as “a great swirling devil of a book” and “a witness-bearing act.” The publishers of Krog’s work describe *Country of My Skull* as “a uniquely personal narrative” and “a powerful, credible and literary document”, while *Begging to be Black* is called a “book of journeys – moral, historical, philosophical and geographical” and is “experimental and courageous”. Steinberg’s *Midlands* is compared to both Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart*, and is described as “a fine piece of investigative journalism”, while Bloom’s *Ways of Staying* is presented by Picador as “a love letter” and “a story”. It is not my intention in this project to propose how to define and categorize these texts; rather I am interested in the way the authors use this ambivalence to foreground issues and

possibilities for identity and belonging. David Shields (2010, 69), in *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, comments:

The books that most interest me sit on a frontier between genres. On one level, they confront the real world directly; on another level, they mediate and shape the world, as novels do. The writer is there as a palpable presence on the page, brooding over his society, daydreaming it into being, working his own brand of linguistic magic on it. What I want is the real world, with all its hard edges, but the real world fully imagined and fully written, not merely reported.

Antjie Krog (Brown and Krog 2011, 65) expands on this idea in a conversation with Duncan Brown when she responds to his comment about *Begging to be Black* that her “whole narrative is shot through with imaginative projections and associations, but they constantly negotiate with or mediate ‘the real’”, by saying:

I am exploring the seams, the edges ... So if I describe Kroonstad in *A Change of Tongue*, I am not busy with Kroonstad, I am trying to say something else using Kroonstad. Although Kroonstad immediately becomes a metaphor, I need you to understand that Kroonstad is a real place, so that you can explore with me this ‘realness’ ... And what is this realness? They are falling apart and people are suffering and scared and surviving in many very complex ways ... Why don’t I imagine a town and country? I think (because I have never even attempted to write fiction) to imagine a town is to make it whole, to

imagine it whole-ly and from this wholeness decide what to describe/tell. What I am saying through non-fiction is that I have problems, I cannot see this town in its entirety, but look, here are some patterns and they are saying: it is complex, wholeness is (im)possible, but here are patterns.

The imperative to write at the “frontier between genres” or at “the seams, the edges” can perhaps be better understood through Bhabha’s notion of the ‘beyond’. Bhabha (1994c, 7 italics in original) argues that “being in the ‘beyond’ ... is to inhabit an intervening space” and is “to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’, becomes a space of intervention in the here and now.” Thus by writing at the edges, at the frontiers of genre, these writers, Malan, Krog, Bloom and Steinberg, are not merely reporting their world and experiences to the reader; by ‘brooding over his/her society, daydreaming it into being’, each of them is opening a space in which change becomes possible.

The genres of autobiography, memoir, history, philosophy and investigative reportage are used by the authors under discussion in tension both with each other and with the imaginative aspects of story-telling and creative writing, and this tension often hinges on the notion of truth. Paul Eakin (2004, 124) intimates that the concept of ‘truth’, associated with these genres and often perceived as fixed and unchanging, at times can involve a greater “allegiance to remembered consciousness

and its unending succession of identity states, and allegiance to the history of one's self", than to facts which can be checked and verified. The journalists this project engages with have all chosen a more literary medium through which to examine white South African identity and national belonging, and while the genres they employ are ostensibly rooted in fact rather than fiction, the creative licence each writer takes with his or her presentation of 'the truth' challenges the reader's expectation of objectivity. This expectation stems as much from the perceived genre of the text as from the reader's perception of the writer's public persona. All of the writers, Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg, identify themselves as journalists and are identified as such by both publishers and readers.<sup>21</sup> This has interesting implications for reader expectations, as readers attach a very different set of assumptions to journalism as opposed to literature. Despite the fact that "even the simplest journalism is inadequate in giving a single fact in its complete fullness", journalistic writing is held to a higher standard of perceived truth, objectivity and verifiability than is literature (Brown and Krog 2011, 58). For many readers, there is the unconscious assumption that journalists 'say it as it is' and that they do not, or at least should not, 'mess with the truth'. However flawed or problematic such an assumption might be, it still shapes the reader's engagement with the text, and it ensures the one advantage all creative non-fiction or literary journalism has over traditional literature, referred to earlier: "the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*" (Wolfe and Johnson 1990 (1973), 49).

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<sup>21</sup> Antjie Krog presents a more complex case in that she is traditionally identified primarily as an award-winning Afrikaans poet, but for many of her English and international readers she is known through her reportage on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and her creative non-fiction narratives.

The challenges surrounding the intersection and overlap of literature and journalism are not new, but can be traced back to at least the “eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England and France [when] the newspaper and the novel overlapped considerably in both function and form” (Clark 1975, 166). Clark (1975, 175) suggests that the concomitant development of journalism and rise of the novel were not merely coincidental, but rather indicative of a particular social milieu where “both media were reacting to, at the same time that they were symptoms of, a society in the throes of social and intellectual flux.” This is noteworthy because, as Garman (2008, 209) suggests, “the two forms of print [Benedict Anderson] sees as most influential in facilitating...changing ideas were the novel and the newspaper.” This position is further supported by Barbara Foley (1986, 27) who comments that “factual and fictive discourses are not immutable essences but are historically varying types of writing, signalled by, and embodied in, changing literary conventions and generated by the changing structures of historically specific relations of production and intercourse.” Therefore, it is not only that Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg practise as journalists yet choose to produce literary texts, but that they should do so at a particular moment in South Africa’s social and political history. As Van Zanten Gallagher (2002, ix-xx) reminds us, “ages of significant social and political transition have long been recognised as seedbeds for new forms of literature...[and] the political, social and economic transformations of decolonisation have inaugurated new literary forms as the system of colonial nation-state rule crumbled.” Thus the post-apartheid period of political and social flux saw a marked increase in the publication of hybrid and genre-challenging texts. In considering this

phenomenon, Antjie Krog (2007)<sup>22</sup> speaks with a director of Knopf Publishing who acknowledges that globally “the readership of the novel was fast declining [while] the readership for non-fiction and real life stories was rapidly growing ... [possibly because] a global postmodern world could no longer be expressed through the former genres.” Krog (2007) asserts that this claim is reinforced by the work of Mark Freeman and Jens Brockmeier, leading scholars in narrative, who suggest “that the new types of conflicts, dilemmas, predicaments of the postmodern world can no longer be emplotted within the traditional genres of tragedy, Bildungsroman, adventure story, triumphalist narrative and so on.” In reference to her own writing, Antjie Krog (2007) asks, “Was I now into this unhelpful hybrid world of ‘faction’, or are we onto something yet to be named? And indeed, it suddenly seemed many South African writers were working on the borders of fact and fiction.” By way of explanation, Krog (2007) comments:

... I feel that coming from a divided, exclusive past, the imagination – or at least mine – is at a disadvantage. I find most imagined works more filled with the preoccupations, perceptions, and prejudices of the writer and his and her white, black, and coloured background than with a real imagined us, here. As I experience the new South Africa I find that my knowledge, my upbringing, and my imagination are unable to bring me to an understanding of why things seem to be experienced in a particular way. I need verification.

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<sup>22</sup> This is an online source and does not include numbered pages.



Towards the end of *Begging to be Black*, Krog (2009, 268) comments to her discussant at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Berlin that imagination, for her, has become overrated in that “our imagination is simply not capable of imagining a reality as – or with – the other.” It is for this reason that she declares, “I don’t *want* to write novels” for, in fiction, she loses “the strangeness”:

Whatever novelistic elements I may use in my non-fiction work, the strangeness is not invented. The strangeness is real, and the fact that I cannot ever really enter the psyche of somebody else, somebody black. The terror and loneliness of that inability is what I don’t want to give up on. (Krog 2009, 267)

Krog (2009, 268) goes on to explain that she stays with non-fiction in the hope that by “listening, engaging, observing, translating ... one can ... begin to sense a thinning of skin, negotiate possible small openings at places where imaginings can begin to begin.”

Shaun Irlam (2004, 700) argues that “the mission of reclaiming shattered identities and renaming ourselves has been proceeding on many fronts. And, of course, one forum among others for this work of unnamings and renamings is literature.” The importance of the literary is highlighted by Anthea Garman in her discussion of Habermas and McCarthy. She points out that in his study of the public sphere Habermas emphasizes the primary role of the literary in creating a sense of ‘publicness’ and ‘public opinion’, but as McCarthy states “the literary was more than

vehicle or means; it was also a site of changing consciousness” (Garman 2008, 207).

In offering a review of post-apartheid literature, Jane Poyner (2008, 103) states:

It is clear that the public sphere shapes and defines our private identities, but post-apartheid fiction reveals that the private can serve productively as a corrective to the public, suggesting that the “dichotomies” of public/private, political/ethical need reconceptualising. Indeed, contemporary South African novelists are usefully unsettling boundaries between private and public to reconfigure the nation’s recent past.

This process of “unsettling the boundaries between the private and public” is foregrounded in the work of Malan, Krog, Steinberg and Bloom as they challenge the perceived opposition of the literary and the journalistic, where the literary is characterised by the individually affective and the journalistic by the publicly political. During the period in English and French history in which the social focus increasingly shifted from traditional groupings and communities to the individual, both the newspaper and the novel “undertook to provide [role] models. They were in the broadest sense guides to the present, for not only did they explore contemporary society, they also guided the individual through it” (Clark 1975, 168). In a similar way, through the merging and conflating of literature and journalism, Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg are attempting not only to comment on contemporary South African society, but also to offer something akin to a map that will allow their readers to navigate the changing social terrain.

A central concern of this project is to examine not only the narratives of white South African identity in *My Traitor's Heart*, *Ways of Staying*, *Midlands*, *Country of My Skull* and *Begging to be Black*, but also the textual form in which Malan, Bloom, Steinberg and Krog choose to present their work. The issue of genre and style remains important because "to speak of narrative identity is to conceptualize narrative not merely *about* identity but rather in some profound way as a constituent part *of* identity, specifically of the extended self that is expressed in self-narrations" (Eakin 2001, 115). If we are then to look at the stories of white South Africans, it is important not only to examine the story but also the way in which it is told, focusing particularly on the medium, genre, form and style.

In discussing the intersections of literature and journalism, Richard Keeble (2007, 2) comments:

Journalistic genres constantly avoid neat categorizations and theorising, thriving on their dynamism, contradictions, paradoxes and complexities. And journalism's functions are diverse and ambiguous – being variously associated with democratic debate, education and entertainment as well as myth, fabrication, disinformation, polemic and propaganda.

Thus Keeble points to the creativity and fluidity or instability of journalistic genres, which is pertinent to this project because it allows for a more open-ended reading of

journalistic texts. As Schudson (1996, 96) observes, “Reporters make stories. Making is not faking, not lying, but neither is it a passive mechanical recording. It cannot be done without play and imagination.” Mike Maxwell (2010, 4) comments more critically on this aspect of journalism:

There is an established axiom in commercial journalism that states: “If it bleeds, it leads.” This maxim acknowledges the fact that violence sells papers ... In reporting war and crime, events are frequently sensationalised, selected and geared towards remote audiences who are often disengaged and indifferent to the implications and realities. As a result, the reportage is delivered as a form of spectacle, verging on entertainment.

One of the criticisms levelled against Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* is that Malan relies on the spectacle of violence to confront and overwhelm his readers.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, when considering the emergence of the newspaper and the novel in the nineteenth century, Clark (1975, 170) contends that “into the usually benign observations of the reporter-journalist, the novelist injected drama and suspense, exploiting the curiosity, indeed the fear about the urban environment.” The South African social and political landscape has engendered anything but “benign observations” from journalists, but in the case of both Malan and Bloom, their literary narratives, informed by their journalistic activities, rely heavily on the development of drama and suspense, and indeed the exploration of fear. Maxwell (2010, 5) further suggests that as reportage attempts to make itself more accessible

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<sup>23</sup> See Van Zanten Gallagher (2002) and Osinubi (2008).

to its audience and to rely more heavily on a “sympathetic imagination” in its readers, “reportage becomes fiction. It begins to enter the realm of literature as it seeks not only to inform, but to evoke an emotional response.” It is significant that while Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg are identified as journalists, they have all tended to produce feature articles that offer social commentary and aim to generate an emotionally-led response from their readers. While reporting on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission for SABC radio, Antjie Krog was invited by the *Mail and Guardian* weekly newspaper to write a series of articles detailing her experience of the Commission.<sup>24</sup> It is out of these articles that *Country of My Skull* emerged. What is interesting is that, in this instance, there is no overt change in style between Krog’s published journalism and the literary narrative of *Country of My Skull*; much that appears in the *Mail and Guardian* articles is included verbatim in the narrative text. Thus in Krog’s case the shift from the journalistic to the literary does not occur at the level of style, but rather in the organization of the material and development of an overarching narrative within *Country of My Skull*. Both Rian Malan and Jonny Steinberg have published collections of their journalism which appeared in publications as diverse as *The Spectator*, *Maverick*, *Sunday Independent*, *Fair Lady* and *Business Day*. In contrast to the case of Krog, these collections make far greater use of journalistic conventions, as opposed to the literary styles Malan and Steinberg deploy in their literary narrative texts. That said, Rian Malan (2009a, x)

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<sup>24</sup> Krog wrote the following articles, appearing in the *Mail and Guardian*, as part of a series by leading South African authors “celebrating the second birthday of our democracy and exploring the nuances of a changing society”: “Pockets of Humanity”, 24 May 1996; “Truth Trickle Becomes a Flood”, 1 November 1996; “Overwhelming Trauma of the Truth”, 24 December 1996; “The Parable of the Bicycle”, 7 February 1997; “Unto the Third or Fourth Generation”, 13 June 1997.

introduces his collection of writings, *Resident Alien*, with this caveat: “Nobody can write fast enough to tell a true story.” Malan (2009a, x) goes on to explain:

In South Africa, it’s like a law of nature: there’s no such thing as a true story here. The facts might be correct, but the truth they embody is always a lie to someone else. My truths strike some people as racist heresies. Nadine Gordimer’s strike me as distortions calculated to appeal to gormless liberals on the far side of the planet. A lot of South Africans can’t read either of us, so their truth is something else entirely.

## The Literary/Journalistic

In *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe describes what he identifies as the decline of the novel and the emergence of a journalism that “reads like a novel” in 1960s America.

He comments:

[The New Journalists] were moving beyond the conventional limits of journalism, but not merely in terms of technique. The kind of reporting they were doing struck them as far more ambitious, too. It was more intense, more detailed, and certainly more time-consuming than anything that newspaper or magazine reporters, including investigative reporters, were accustomed to. They developed the habit of staying with the people they were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. They had to gather all

the material the conventional journalist was after – and then keep going. It seemed all-important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. (Wolfe and Johnson 1990 (1973), 35)

While I would hesitate to uncritically confer the title of ‘new journalists’ upon Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg, I think Wolfe’s discussion of the ‘New Journalism’ does appear to offer some insight into what these South African journalists are engaged in and how they are presenting their material. The writers that this project examines all present narratives which move beyond mere reporting, and cross into the realm of literature by virtue of the fact that they offer their readers something else, “the subjective or emotional life of the characters.” What is more, Krog, Malan, Bloom and Steinberg not only present their readers with richly detailed narratives that reveal the inner lives of others but, more importantly, these writers create a sense of intimacy with their readers as they document their own subjective and emotional responses to the worlds which they describe. This is significant as it forces the reader to travel with the writer-character as he or she works through the challenges of being a South African in South Africa at this particular moment in time.

Wolfe identifies several devices that are used in 'New Journalism' to move beyond mere reporting, and it is these same devices that can be seen in the work of Krog, Malan, Steinberg and Bloom. The four devices listed by Wolfe (1990 (1973), 46-47) are scene-by-scene construction, recording dialogue in full, use of shifts in point of view, and the "the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of travelling, eating ... and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene." Each of these devices is used to give a text a richer texture and more depth. One of the techniques Rian Malan uses to set the scene in *My Traitor's Heart* is to 'show' the reader photographs. He repeatedly implores the reader to "look at this photograph" and proceeds to describe the scene in the imaginary snapshot:

You want to know my true position in the revolution? Look at this photograph, which comes from *Die Vaderland*, an Afrikaans daily. Those are my outstretched arms, and those are my cheekbones, jutting out over the layout artist's crop line ... That snarling white traffic cop with the whip in his hand is trying to get at this black teenager here in the left-hand corner, and that's me in the middle, with arms akimbo and spiral-bound notebook between my teeth, trying to keep them apart. Trying to make them stop it. That was my position – in the middle, skewered by the paradox. (Malan 1991, 94)

It is a complex yet effective strategy. By drawing on the visual imagination of his reader, Malan is able to make his reader complicit in the action of his narrative. He simultaneously constructs the scene through his description of the photograph and



eradicates the distance between that scene and his reader by interpellating his reader into the text. Malan uses the strategy of shifting points-of-view to similar effect. At various points in his narrative, he shifts from the first-person to the third-person, and uses the first-person plural as well as the second-person voice at times. Towards the end of Part Two of *My Traitor's Heart*, Malan uses shifts in point of view to build the chapter to a climax. In a brutal catalogue of violence and murder, he uses the distanced narrative voice of the third person to describe various events and almost immediately slips into the first-person voice to comment on his own response to the injustices and degradation of the apartheid system. However, it is his use of the first-person plural perspective that is the most challenging to his reader. Malan (1991, 330-332) says:

Let's open my bulging files of tales of ordinary murder ... We are in Pretoria ... And here comes a Boer now, strolling down the sidewalk, calmly shooting every black person he passes ... We are in Beaufort West in the Karoo, listening to bangs, thuds and screams from inside a black man's humble shack ... We're in a forest in the homeland Venda, watching an African father hack off his living daughter's arms ... We're in a stronghold of the South African Police, discussing the security situation with a Boer colonel ... We're on a farm in Bonnievale, witnessing subhuman behaviour ... We're in Pietermaritzburg, staring at something the police have seized: a trunk full of human body parts ...

By using first-person plural narration, Malan not only refuses his reader the space to step away from the horror of the story, but forces him or her to become complicit in his own powerlessness at witnessing that horror. And because the reader is aware that what he or she is reading is non-fiction, there is no escape from the brutal reality that Malan presents.

In commenting on her own creative non-fiction work, Antjie Krog (2011, 58) says that she relies on three devices: a literary form or 'the story' involving a beginning, climax and conclusion; imaginative language able to "capture the in-capture-able at the very moment it stretches into the poetic"; and the pronoun 'I' "which immediately creates space, allowing for an individual take on facts, a deeper reading and interpretation of the non-fictional 'reality'." Both Bloom and Steinberg make similar use of the first-person voice. Bloom (2008, 220,222) comments that in order to avoid rewriting "one of the most entrenched and mechanical of South African plots", he used three literary devices, which included admitting his inability to "transcend what was essentially an immutable South African narrative"; writing in a fragmentary and suggestive style that "let the interplay between the fragments serve as the primary site of latent meaning"; and finally, using the prologue and the interludes between chapters to present a highly personal narrative in which the 'I' is foregrounded. It is this third device that is perhaps most effective in addressing what Bloom (2008, 220) terms "early-onset reader alienation", in which the reader is able to distance him- or herself from the narrative. Bloom, Malan and Krog present narratives from which it is very difficult for the reader to escape. Their use of the first-person perspective hooks the reader into the narrative, and makes possible an

emotional involvement on the part of the reader. The reader, therefore, is able to mirror the negotiation of the issues of identity and belonging as they unfurl in the text. It is interesting that while Steinberg also makes extensive use of the first-person voice, he does so to foreground his journalistic process and the issues of writing a controversial story that is still unfolding. The result is that the reader is constantly reminded of Steinberg's position as a journalist, and this detracts from the reader's emotional investment in Steinberg's narrative. I will discuss this issue in some detail in Chapter Five.

Tom Wolfe (1990 (1973), 50) comments that "there is a tremendous future for a sort of novel that will be called the journalistic novel or perhaps documentary novel, novels of intense social realism based upon the same painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism." In South Africa, as Duncan Brown has suggested in one of the epigraphs to this chapter, "creative non-fiction has become in a sense '*the genre*' of South African writing ... writing which makes its meanings at the unstable fault line of the literary and journalistic, the imaginative and the reportorial." Thus Malan, Bloom, Steinberg and Krog can all be said to be writing within the ambivalent interstices of genre in order to tease out their own, and their country's, truths. And it is in the interstitial spaces opened by the imagination that these authors can begin to limn new possibilities for living, staying and being white in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Chapter Four

### **“Tales of Ordinary Murder”: Intersections of ‘Whiteness’, Violence and Belonging in Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* and Kevin Bloom’s *Ways of Staying*.**

*Am I upsetting you, my friend? Good. Do you want to argue? Do you want to tell me about the evil of apartheid? Do you want to talk about democracy and the allied civil and human rights that fall under the umbra of its name? Okay. Let’s open my bulging files of tales of ordinary murder. You choose your weapons and I’ll choose mine, and we’ll annihilate the certainties in one another’s brains.*

Rian Malan 1990: 330

*So the concerned South African citizen, I’m thinking, sometimes requires what the poet John Keats called “negative capability”: the ability to sustain paradoxes, to live in uncertainty “without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”*

Kevin Bloom 2009: 96

## Ways of Staying / Ways of Living / (Ways of Dying)

In his attempt to find “a way to live in this strange country”, to find an alternative way of being “white” to that formulated by the apartheid state, Rian Malan (1991, 343) bludgeons his reader with tale after tale of extraordinary violence in *My Traitor’s Heart*. Osinubi (2008, 115) argues that Malan’s is in fact an “abusive narrative” in which “he deliberately, and systematically, performs violence on his readers. Thus when they continue to read in spite of adjurations and warnings, they enter into a contract of abuse.” Van Zanten Gallagher (2002, 150) is even more critical:

Despite reaching the conclusion that his text is actually about his own failings, Malan nonetheless includes hundreds of pages recounting tales of murder in South Africa. What purpose does this “litany of bloodshed” serve? Why would testimony regarding “the facts” about the ways that South Africans kill each other resolve the paradox of Malan’s own confused identity? It would have been possible, after having recognised and named his diseased soul near the end of composing the text, for Malan to have excised some of the preceding matter, but he doesn’t.

I would suggest that it is in fact the inclusion of this “litany of bloodshed” that enables Malan, if not to resolve, then to at least engage with the “paradox of [his] own confused identity.” As such, it is where these “tales of ordinary murder” intersect with yearnings for national belonging and the paradoxes of ‘whiteness’ that

the most interesting and potentially productive articulations of white narratives of identity can be found. Nevertheless, there are limitations to such an approach, as indicated in Van Zanten Gallagher and Osinubi's criticisms. Thus, as part of the broader project that examines the construction and performance of 'whiteness' in literary narratives by South African journalists, this chapter explores the deployment of 'tales of ordinary murder' as a strategy to envision and contest ways of staying and ways of living in 'this strange place'.

Both Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1991) and Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying* (2009a) present catalogues of murders and acts of violence as the authors engage with the broader themes of white South African identity and belonging. This chapter seeks to unpack the ways in which white identity is both constructed and performed in these moments of violence and, using Homi Bhabha's (1992) notion of the 'unhomely', to suggest what these representations of whiteness might offer to our understanding of white South African narratives of identity. Mary West (2009, 13) suggests that the concept of 'Be-longing', with its implied nostalgia and sense of lack, characterizes a white South African literary engagement that is self-consciously obsessed with the perceived threats to white South Africans and the apparently precarious position they occupy within the 'dark heart' of Africa. This chapter concludes by exploring whether Malan and Bloom are able to negotiate productive 'ways of staying' for white South Africans or whether their engagement with 'tales of ordinary murder' simply reinforces the notion of the 'un-belonging' of whiteness in Africa.

Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying*, a creative non-fiction narrative written as part of an MA in Creative Writing at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research in Johannesburg, was published in 2009. As Ashlee Polatinsky (2010, 102) notes:

Readers have been eager to encounter the ways in which this book reflects and narrates the brutalities and dilemmas of the present moment in this place. Not least, they have wanted to know how the book treats the issue promised address by its title: that is, the question of how to stay here *despite*, or in the wake of, the stories of violent crime, of daily uncertainty and suspense, and of inequity that give the text – and this place – much of its texture.

Bloom's primary narrative, documenting murders, assaults, rape, xenophobia and political upheavals in South Africa during the period 2007 to 2008, and informed by his investigative journalism, is framed by his personal experience of the murders of his and his fiancée's cousins. Bloom opts for a relatively structured narrative approach with titled chapters that deal with discrete incidents, beginning with inner-city renewal politics, and moving through stories of the David Rattray murder, housebreaking and assault, the work of a black American image-consultant with township children, the 2007 ANC national conference in Polokwane, and ending with the 2008 xenophobic attacks and the rape of Johannesburg schoolgirl Jamie Paterson. Alternating with each of these chapters, which focus on an 'other's' experience of violence or uncertainty, are short titled pieces tracking the aftermath,

for both Bloom and his extended family, of the high profile murders of fashion designer Richard Bloom and actor Brett Goldin.

Although published almost twenty years apart, Bloom's *Ways of Staying* and Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* converge and diverge in interesting ways, and as such appear to establish a dialogue across time that is potentially useful to explore. Where Bloom's text is controlled and moderate in tone, Malan's rages with a desperation that is both gripping and disturbing. Critics argue that Malan's jeremiad stance has not been supported by history, and that the visions of apocalypse heralded in *My Traitor's Heart* have not manifested. However, given the uncertainty and suspense that characterize Bloom's text, the 'perpetual sense of inevitability'<sup>25</sup> identified by Polatinsky (2010), it could also be argued that as a country South Africa remains in the interregnum, and Malan could yet be vindicated. As such, and given the increasing critical academic attention received by Malan,<sup>26</sup> it seems prudent to examine these two texts and their very specific engagement with violence and belonging, in order to explore potential possibilities for white South African narratives of identity.

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<sup>25</sup> Polatinsky (2010: 102) suggests that in *Ways of Staying* the reader's primary subject position is often that of "victimhood-in-prospect", and that the narrative reflects the unabated suspense of living with the expectation of violence.

<sup>26</sup> See Osinubi's (2008) "Abusive Narratives: Antjie Krog, Rian Malan and the Transmission of Violence", Simoes Da Silva's (2007) "On Your Knees, White Man: African (un) Belongings in Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* - Partial Answers", Visser's (2008) "How to Live? Guilt and Goodness in Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*", and Van Zanten Gallagher's (2002) *Truth and Reconciliation: The Confessional Mode in South African Literature*.



## The Suspense of (un)Belonging

In *White Women Writing White*, Mary West (2009, 26) suggests that “white middle-class South Africans are still fiercely protecting their unselfconscious entitlement to a sense of home (belonging).” Malan (1991, 183) interrogates this sense of entitlement to “feeling safe” through the character of Debbie Good, a white Zululand farmer’s wife, who:

is only thirty-something, but she is already talking about the good old days ... She remembers walking home from high-school parties carrying a lantern and being not at all afraid. She remembers hot summer nights when you could sleep with your doors and windows open and be bothered by nothing but mosquitoes. In those days, the Zulus were loyal and faithful and obedient, and whites honoured and loved them in the way they might have loved a good dog ... But now ... Debbie can’t put her finger on it, but she knows something has changed.

Malan conveys both the unconscious sense of entitlement to home, security and belonging and an almost palpable bewilderment that that which Debbie Good felt entitled to has somehow been taken away. This passage is rendered disturbingly ironic later in the text as the Malan describes how Debbie Good is attacked in her bed by a hammer-wielding Zulu man. It is, however, the conflation of entitlement, home and belonging in Mary West’s observation that is significant to my argument, because as Steyn (2007, 422) suggests, “Whiteness in the new South Africa is

characterised by a sense of vulnerability, by the belief that the spaces of whiteness are being infiltrated by strangers ... by the profound feelings of displacement ... victimization, withdrawal, and desire to escape ....” Malan foregrounds the experience of vulnerability through his descriptions of the Hammerman attacks on Zululand farmers, referred to above. He comments that “so many whites have already left the country because ... they were afraid of being butchered in bed”, and goes on to describe the attack on the Goods:

One night you go to bed around ten. You hear the old red setter barking outside, but you don't bother to get up; you doze off again, so you don't hear the mosquito screen being peeled back, and you don't hear someone climbing quietly into your house. You don't hear him coming down the passage on his bare feet, and you don't hear him easing open the bedroom door. All you remember, really, is the split second of terror when you wake up ... then the hammer smashes your temple, and then next thing you know you've woken up in a surreal horror movie. Blood is dripping all over the telephone, the children are screaming, and your husband is tottering around in circles ... You're trying to phone the doctor, but you can't remember how to dial. (Malan 1991, 185-186)

The use of the second-person narration allows the reader no escape from the terror embedded in the scene. Malan ensures that the reader not only observes the vulnerability of the Good family, and the “spaces of whiteness ... being infiltrated by strangers”, but actually experiences the suspense, the vulnerability and the

helplessness. It is a disturbing passage and one in which Malan not only portrays violence, but also enacts violence on his reader. In contrast, Kevin Bloom recreates the sensations of vulnerability and displacement through a more measured, journalistic tone that makes use of the third person, and the creation of suspense. Thus, his descriptions of the home-invasion and shooting of the Solomon family, and the home-invasion and rape of school girl Jamie Paterson, convey the vulnerability and helplessness of both scenarios, but do not, initially, involve the reader in the visceral experience. However, Bloom's use of suspense and his deliberate breaks in each narrative do have the effect of building a sense of anxiety in the reader. Polatinsky (2010, 106) comments that "the text is characterised throughout by interruption, by the interleaving of stories, and by delay designed to keep us stretched between what we dread to know and what we now need to read, in thrall as we are to the familiar yet singular horror of the narratives." And this reflects the anxiety that many South Africans negotiate on a day-to-day basis, where the threat of violence looms constantly. Bloom's overall narrative, therefore, does reinforce the anxiety experienced as characteristic of living in South Africa. Thus, vulnerability, displacement, victimization and the desire to escape are states of being that appear directly to contradict the perceived safety, rootedness and stability generally coupled with the concept of home and its concomitant sense of belonging. However, West offers a useful formulation of the notion of belonging in which she complicates its traditional positive associations. In reference to Margaret Atwood's discussion of national symbolic motifs, where Atwood identifies 'The Frontier', 'The Island' and 'Survival' as key characterising tropes of American, British and Canadian literary

production respectively, West (2009, 13) adds a “peculiarly white South African category” when she suggests that:

‘Be-longing’ (the very word containing a sense of Lacanian lack and deferral of any possible fulfilment of desire) is the national obsession in literature produced in South African by white writers ... ‘Be-longing’ manifests itself in a heightened sense of insecurity, even physical threat. As J.M. Coetzee’s 1980s book title so aptly demonstrates, in the present continuous, white South Africans are ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ and the ‘barbarians’, in the white South African psyche, are *still* just over the hill, just beyond the horizon, just on the other side of the high-security six-foot suburban vibracrete wall.

No longer does ‘belonging’ hold a sense of security, wellbeing and comfort, but rather ‘Be-longing’<sup>27</sup> captures the instability, suspense and alienation of a white South African identity that is never fully able to situate itself in a post-apartheid context. As Melissa Steyn (1999, 270) so aptly phrases it: “Africa belonged to us, but did we belong to Africa?”

The differing ways in which Malan and Bloom attempt to tackle this question are heralded at the beginning of each of their respective books. For Malan (1991, 13,17,15), the issue of belonging and the right to belong is deeply entangled with his

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<sup>27</sup> In my discussion of Krog’s *Begging to be Black* in Chapter Seven I refer to Aimee Carrillo-Rowe’s (2005) formulation of “Be Longing”, a concept which she uses to explore ways of becoming-other through tolerating the indeterminacy of the in-between space that lies between the self and the other.

Afrikaner heritage. Thus he opens his narrative with “I am a Malan, descendant of Jacques Malan, a Huguenot who fled the France of Louis XIV to escape being put to the sword for his Protestant faith”; and he goes on to detail his ancestral lineage through Dawid Malan, who fled the Cape to be with his black slave woman but resurfaced twenty-seven years later as a “race-hating white savage”, to Daniel Francois Malan, leader of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party in 1948. For Malan (1991, 343) the issue is to find “a way to live in this strange country – for an alternative, if one existed, to the law of Dawid Malan” and, thus, how to live as a white South African. Bloom, in contrast, appears to eschew the issues of heritage, lineage, and even race, because for him belonging in South Africa rests on having “rights to the South African story, to qualify to tell it” (Polatinsky 2010, 107). And because, as will be discussed later, experience of violence is perceived to qualify one to access the South African narrative, to belong, Bloom begins his text with his own personal experience of violence, that of his cousin’s murder and its aftermath (2009a, 1). However, Bloom’s inclusion of an opening epigraph by Njabulo Ndebele complicates this assertion regarding violence as a qualification for belonging through narrative. Bloom (2009a) quotes Ndebele:

Yes, they have a story to tell. Its setting is in the interstice between power and indifferent or supportive agency. In that interstice, the English-speaking South African has conducted the business of his life. Now he was indignant and guilty; now he was thriving. This no-man’s land ensured a fundamental lack of character. With a foreign

passport in the back pocket of the trousers, now they belong – now they do not. When will they tell this story?

I have already referred to this particular quotation from Njabulo Ndebele in Chapter Two, and I asserted that Ndebele called on English-speaking South Africans to tell their stories in order to acknowledge their own complicity and to contribute to the emergence of a more complex and nuanced national narrative. While Ndebele's comment, in the context of his original article, is critical of the lack of engagement by white English-speaking South Africans, it is interesting that Bloom appropriates this particular quotation to raise the notion of un-belonging and suggest that national belonging can be found through narrative because his doing so foreshadows a more sympathetic reading, by Bloom, of whiteness in contemporary South Africa. As such, Bloom flags his concern with the stories various South Africans tell in order to make sense of a violent and uncertain context, and to explain to themselves how they are able to remain within that context.

As Simoes da Silva (2007, 291) notes "it takes a great deal of work for the White person to be able to call Africa home", and a significant portion of that work is enacted through the narratives of identity that white South Africans construct, perform, reinforce and challenge. In her sociological work exploring what she terms 'white talk', Steyn (2007, 423) observes that "it is now a tactic of whiteness to protest 'I am also an African' in order to claim belonging in a nation state that is more likely to be defined by African nationalism." This tactic is made explicit when, in his memoir *Pale Native: Memories of a Renegade Reporter*, Max du Preez (2003,

2,3,5) professes “Is History ... saying I don’t belong? ... My soul is African ... African/Afrikaner. I am both ... I am a native of this land, but unlike most other natives, I am pale.” At this point it is important to highlight the difference in tone and approach taken by Rian Malan to the same question of how to claim belonging within a post-apartheid state. “In truth”, says Malan (1991, 29), “I was always one of them [an Afrikaner]. I am a white man born in Africa, and all else flows from there.” Thus Malan acknowledges that, despite his yearning to belong, to feel at home in the country of his birth, his ‘whiteness’ perpetually complicates his claim to call Africa home, echoing Bhabha’s (1994c, 179) conclusion that there is “no necessary or eternal belongingness.” The way in which whiteness complicates notions of belonging and identity is poignantly captured when Malan (1991, 166-167) comments:

It was hip to call yourself a white African and even to assume an African first name. East African *kikois* were in, as were car-tyre sandals, African music, African jewellery, African political leaders ... All this struck me as a rite of sympathetic magic, performed in the hope that it would somehow make its practitioners less white, less complicit. It was silly, and yet it went much deeper than mere affectation. It was harder than ever to be white and conscious, now that things were coming to a head and blacks were being slaughtered in the townships. Many young whites genuinely yearned to shed their whiteness and the unbearable freight of bullshit and guilt that came with it.

Polatinsky (2010, 107) suggests that Bloom's *Ways of Staying* offers white South Africans an alternative framing for their narratives of identity: "To be here in suspense, which is, at least in part, to be here in the perpetual wake of crimes committed and in perpetual anticipation of those to come is, *Ways of Staying* argues in several ways, to have rights to the South African story, to qualify to tell it." The key to the complex question of belonging, for Bloom, is "to be here in suspense", to be prepared to tolerate the "perpetual anticipation", to be prepared to stay on after the fact of violence. This is firmly reinforced in the last short titled section "You guys don't get to say that" when Bloom (2009a, 209) recounts his uncle's interaction with South African expats in Australia who are bemoaning the state of the country they left behind:

On the tenth tee Tony had had enough. "Hang on a minute there, fellers," he said. "You guys don't get to say that, not in front of me. The country was very good to you all ... it put you on this golf course where you're standing now." A story uncharacteristic of my uncle. I lay down my fork. My applause is vigorous, heartfelt.

The expats in this vignette do not meet the dual qualifiers that would allow them access to the South African narrative; they have not stayed in South Africa, and thus have not been prepared to tolerate the suspense, and it is implied that they have not experienced a violent act, which Tony has with the murder of his son. Thus Bloom, Polatinsky infers, focuses on the experience and the expectation of violence, rather than race, ethnicity or cultural heritage, as the marker for belonging within a post-



apartheid context as “there are few who live in this country who do not experience consistently and as part of their dailyness, the sense of feeling threatened which is related to living with abnormal levels of crime ” (Polatinsky 2010, 104). While such a formulation might appeal to white South Africans attempting to re-script their narratives of identity and national belonging, it is also rendered problematic because experiences and expectations of violence are not homogeneous amongst all South Africans and, despite his attempts to elaborate on black South Africans’ experiences of violence, Bloom fails to accomplish this. His position is particularly significant in the light of Njabulo Ndebele’s call to whites to move out from the protection of the global sanctity of whiteness and take on the vulnerability of the black skin in order to belong fully within contemporary South Africa. While I discuss Ndebele’s formulation of the global sanctity of whiteness in relation to Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black* in Chapter Seven, it is important to note here that living with the expectation of violence is not the same as living with the experience of violence. And as the narratives in *Ways of Staying* suggest, those white South Africans who do experience violence do not necessarily experience the ‘vulnerability of the black skin’ because they have access to protective measures out of reach of most black South Africans.

### Taking the Measure of Your Dwelling

It is important to point out that for white South Africans the fear, suspense and inevitability of violence, particularly black violence, is not a new condition predicated

on the post-apartheid context, but has characterised whiteness from the first arrival of the colonial settlers in southern Africa. As Steyn (1999, 267-268) suggests:

Deep-seated feelings of alienation, personal threat, and fear of being overrun were held in tension with an intense competition for resources and an absolute belief in entitlement to dominate people with whom one had daily contact in one's home, on one's farm. The issue of one's 'whiteness' was greatly magnified in such psychological circumstances. The Africa my imagination inherited through recycled colonial narratives inspired great fear, and even pessimism.

Thus, fear and perceived threat from the 'other' were intrinsic conditions of whiteness at the southern tip of Africa from the beginning. However, these conditions were held at bay in the early colony and the apartheid state by the mechanisms of oppression and discrimination: white South Africans came to believe they were *entitled* to feel safe and 'at home' in a country in which the majority of the population were denied the most basic human rights. This entitlement was constantly held in tension with the expectation of the inevitable:

Even for the 'progressive' 'whites' there lay further North the wilder, untamed, 'real' Africa, where 'whites' were murdered when Uhuru eventually, and judging from precedents, inevitably, arrived. ... The bogey of black takeover was the spectre of loss of a selfhood that was premised upon the domination of others. (Steyn 1999, 270)

Both Bloom and Malan highlight this latent white fear. Malan (1991, 291-292) says:

We feared the worst ... Anyone who doubted the menacing nature of Africa was sent to watch *Africa Addio*, a documentary ... about the things that happened in Africa in the early sixties, after the European powers set their colonies free ... what we saw was this: beaches strewn with corpses in Zanzibar, piles of human hands in the Congo, Alps of dead people in Rwanda, Himalayas of them in Burundi.

Malan suggests that the events of postcolonial Africa shaped white South Africans' expectations and anxieties regarding black rule. In a comment that is eerily prescient, and ironic, Malan states that:

Whites were clinging to power because they were apprehensive about blacks' intentions toward them ... Most whites were so afraid of Africans that they never went anywhere near the townships ... They crossed the road when they saw Africans coming, or locked the doors of their cars. They were so scared they wouldn't even attend professional soccer matches in the secure heart of white Johannesburg because they knew blacks would be present in large numbers.

Similar discourses of fear and trepidation persist, and despite its overall success, were brought into sharp relief during the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup.<sup>28</sup> It is noteworthy that Malan's observation of whites' being "apprehensive of blacks' intentions towards them" resurfaces in *Ways of Staying* when Bloom (2009a, 201) asks rape survivor Jamie Paterson, "Why are people so shocked by *your* story?", to which she responds, "as if the answer is self-evident":

Well, if you're white, it's your deepest fear, isn't it? That black South Africans will rise up and take revenge for the injustices they had to suffer. You know, I remember in grade three a girl in my class coming up to me and saying, "Jamie, when Mandela dies, the black people are going to come and kill us" ... it's almost as if you're resented. Just for being white. And I sort of understand it. Maybe I'd feel the same. It's like, your parents and grandparents suffered while white people stood around and watched.

The result, as Grant Farred (1997, 73) indicates, is that:

South Africa, for centuries the province of white dominance, now presents itself as an 'unhomely' space, a country rapidly becoming inhospitable to, if not uninhabitable by, its white occupants ...  
[resulting from] post-apartheid South Africa's inability to provide

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<sup>28</sup> There is a certain irony that in 2010 rugby supporters, many of whom were white, were compelled to travel into the heart of the historic black township of Soweto in order to watch the Super 14 Rugby semi-final and final. The rugby supporters were welcomed by the local communities and many of the white fans expressed sincere surprise at how positive their first experience of Soweto was. This incredulity suggests the pervasiveness of the fear and distrust of the 'other', and speaks to a deeper cultural 'illiteracy' which I shall elaborate on later in this chapter.

physical and mental sanctuary for a community accustomed to such protections by virtue of its race.

Farred's reference to Homi Bhabha's concept, the 'unhomely', is apposite to my discussion of Malan's and Bloom's engagements with violence, belonging and the negotiation of white identity. "The unhomely moment", states Bhabha (1992, 141), "creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself ... 'taking the measure of your dwelling' in a state of 'incredulous terror'." Both Malan and Bloom come to their respective projects at the juncture of attempting to make sense of the 'unhomely moment'; both writers have been caught in this 'state of incredulous terror' as they survey their country and seek to understand their place and their role within the changing political milieu. White South Africans are particularly susceptible to being repeatedly confronted by 'unhomely moments', due to their "unselfconscious entitlement to a sense of home (belonging)" (West 2009, 26), and their general unwillingness to relinquish the privilege and protection associated with 'whiteness'.<sup>29</sup> Malan (1991, 189) suggests that in the "unhomely moment" white South Africans are forced to "examine their lives, and the structure of their society, and when [they] do so, they see that they cannot escape complicity." Furthermore, he argues that it was only those "whites who surrendered their claims to class privilege [who] gained something infinitely more precious in return: relief from the guilt and complicity that preyed on their minds like a

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<sup>29</sup> I have already discussed the idea that, in *Ways of Staying*, Kevin Bloom is 'writing back' to J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. I suggest that one reason white readers are uncomfortable with Coetzee's novel is that he makes overt the notion that the price of belonging is the experience of violence. Bloom offers a corollary to this in his suggestion that whiteness in South Africa is characterized by anxiety, the state of being in perpetual suspense, as white South Africans, wanting to belong, wait for the inevitable act of violence that will constitute their penance, and therefore their redemption and access to the South African narrative.

nightmare” (Malan 1991, 168). Complicity is a complex notion, and Mark Sanders (2002) provides a very useful discussion of the white South African intellectual and complicities in the apartheid and post-apartheid contexts. I elaborate on Sanders’s argument in Chapter Seven in relation to Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, but it is helpful to touch on it here in response to Bloom and Malan’s work. Sanders (2002, 3) develops the notion of narrow and broad complicities as a way of working through the problem of “the little perpetrators”, or those who may not have actively supported apartheid, but who benefited from the unjust system. Malan foregrounds the inescapability of complicity for most white South Africans, but he focuses on complicity in the narrow sense and, by seeing it as a result of “the unhomely moment”, links it very strongly to guilt and despair. In contrast, Sanders (2002, 11) is suggesting that the ‘incredulous terror’ of the ‘unhomely moment’ can in fact give rise to the experience of a more productive, broader sense of complicity in which the “folded-together-ness of being, of human being, of self and other” is acknowledged. Neither Bloom nor Malan provides a space within their texts for the white reader to acknowledge her complicity in benefiting from and supporting apartheid *and* move into the greater complicity-as-folded-together-ness, which Sanders argues is a requirement for an inclusive national community.

Both Malan and Bloom use ‘tales of ordinary murder’ to seek out the ‘unhomely moment’ which Bhabha (1992, 144) argues “relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence”, and to find ways to re-script the narrative of white identity as it is performed at that juncture. It is important to acknowledge along with Bhabha (1992, 141) that “to be unhomed is

not to be homeless” for this allows for a productive space of potential for white South Africans. Malan (1991, 342) ends his catalogue of murders with the story of Neil and Creina Alcock, a white South African couple in Msinga who “spent two decades living among Africans, like Africans, trying to undo some of the harm done by apartheid ... they were the only whites in the country who lived beyond all suspicion of complicity”, who possibly lived within Sanders’ broader complicity-as-folded-together-ness. And Malan suggests that in constantly, and consistently, facing the ‘unhomely moments’ of life in Msinga, the Alcocks were able to find a way to belong and be ‘homed’, despite, or perhaps because of, the hardships and terrors they faced. However, this is not an uncomplicated formulation. Malan (1991, 414) devotes the entire third, and last, section of his narrative to the Alcocks and their lives, and Neil’s death, in Msinga, and argues that, “after Msinga, I felt as though I’d turned into a dark star, capable of obliterating all the tiny pinpricks of hope in the South African firmament.” The ironies of the Alcocks’ story, Neil’s death at the hands of the community he was attempting to help, Creina’s struggles to stay on and continue the work they had started together, become too much for Malan to comprehend, and so he finds himself “back where I began, a white man in the white suburbs of white South Africa, bobbing up and down on the cross of my ambiguities and pondering the only meaningful choice that is mine to make: to stay here or go away” (1991, 421), which is the very question that Bloom continues to engage with almost twenty years later. I would suggest that Malan and Bloom engage with narratives of violence because, not only does “*an experience or expectation of woundedness because of living here*” become a curious qualification for citizenship of the national narrative” (Polatinsky 2010, 107, my italics), but it is the ‘unhomely

moment', the point at which 'you find yourself taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of incredulous terror', that these authors identify as offering the most fertile space to white South Africans, and their attempts to engage with new negotiations of whiteness, and thus also, South Africanness.

## A State of Incredulous Terror

In Goodwin and Schiff's *Heart of Whiteness* (1995, 27), a white respondent comments:

Apartheid has not failed. It has succeeded tremendously well in building two worlds, in keeping the white and black ... worlds apart. Black people always had to move into the white world, so they knew how the white world worked. But white people never had to move into the black world, so they know nothing about the black world.

Malan repeatedly gestures towards his experience of 'two worlds' in the apartheid state, and to his lack of knowledge and understanding of the 'black world'.

Furthermore, he suggests that:

Whites don't know blacks, or what their rise portends. To most whites, blacks are inscrutable; they can't talk to them, don't understand them, and struggle to see them in three dimensions.



Blacks are merely black; they are blank screens onto which whites project their own fears and preconceptions. (Malan 1991, 189)

In terms of the re-negotiation of white narratives of identity in a post-apartheid South Africa, this inherited, but often wilful, cultural illiteracy is a hugely limiting factor. White South Africans struggle to learn the 'other', always assuming difference, always surprised by commonality. And while the "[whites are] all waiting for the night of the long knives", Malan (1991, 186, 275) offers this observation: "I began to understand something quite important about South Africa: My fear of blacks was obscuring my understanding of the fear blacks felt for my white skin."<sup>30</sup> This echoes Melissa Steyn's (1999, 271-272) argument regarding the 'invisibility' of white violence in South Africa:

There was no need for privately organised violence [such as the Ku Klux Klan in the US]. It was rigorously institutionalised by the [apartheid] state ... It was natural that 'natives' should be kept in their places, obey different laws ... Oblivious to our own violence, 'whites' were nonetheless acutely aware of 'black' violence.

Malan (1991, 123 - 137) foregrounds the horror of white violence through the vivid description of the brutalization of Dennis Moeshweshwe at the hands of Augie de

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<sup>30</sup> Malan suggests that whiteness in South Africa is characterized by a wilful cultural ignorance, and that the mechanisms of colonialism and apartheid have ensured that the majority of white South Africans struggle to relate to their black compatriots in any meaningful way. These ideas resurface in Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*, which I will explore in detail in the next chapter, as he reveals the difficulties of traversing the cultural and physical borders within the farming districts of KwaZulu-Natal. Steinberg echoes the sentiment that for many white South Africans, their black countrymen remain "blank screens onto which they project their fears", and he highlights the misunderstandings and mistrust that emerge from an inherent cultural illiteracy.

Koker and his friends. What Malan is able to render so disturbingly is the underlying banality of that weekend afternoon and the incomprehensible senselessness of the attack on Dennis. Interestingly, Malan makes use of a similar technique to that used by Bloom, in that the horror of the narrative builds slowly, over the course of almost fifteen pages, and is broken by Malan's account of his investigation of the story. This narrative is followed immediately by the story of the death of thirteen-year-old Moses Mope at the hands of the South African Police while on his way to a church meeting. Malan (1991, 148) describes how the young policeman "was steadying himself against the wall with one hand, holding on to the neighbour's fence with the other and trampling something underfoot – a screaming child." These depictions of whiteness do not find their counterpart in Bloom's text, where there are no victims of white violence, although the victims of black violence are both white and black. In order to explore the xenophobia which erupted in May 2008, Bloom (2009a, 140) traces the narrative of Tony and Claudia Muderhwa, refugees from the DRC:

In May 2006 Claudia fell pregnant. It was also around this time that the couple began to overhear – in taxis, in buses, in the hospital where Claudia went for her check-ups – a word that suggested their presence in South Africa was not wanted. It was a word, they knew, that parodied the sound of a foreign African language to local ears. *amaKwerekwere* – the people who say, 'kwere-kwere'.

Bloom's engagement with the xenophobic attacks of 2008 not only raises questions regarding South Africans' perception and reception of foreigners, but more

pertinently for a white audience, Bloom (2009a, 161,15) asks “how foreign is foreign? Is ‘white’ foreign?”, which echoes an earlier sentiment, “if your starting point is that some people are African and others not, you will end up with words such as ‘white settler’...[and] ‘*maboeroe*’, ‘*magoo*’ and ‘white trash’.” Thus, the question circles back to that of belonging: who can lay claim to the national narrative, and who is excluded and on what basis? It is significant, however, that Bloom uses the narratives of xenophobia and the violence that stems from those – violence which is directed at, and experienced by, black Africans, and not white South Africans – to highlight the white perceptions of threat. This is a problematic strategy as it unconsciously secures South African whiteness within the protection of the ‘global sanctity of whiteness’ as discussed earlier. It should also be noted that in Bloom’s narratives of xenophobia, white South Africans are positioned as potential saviours. Tony and Claudia Muderhwa are ‘saved’ from living in a storeroom at a police station in the aftermath of the xenophobic attacks by a white South African Jewish woman, Dana Druion, who invites them and another refugee couple to live in a room underneath her house. When asked why she stepped outside her tight-knit religious community to become involved in the lives of four strangers, Dana responds, “My response to the xenophobia was dictated by the fact that I’m a Jew ... A short time ago, Jews were in the same position. Nobody wanted them ... That’s the first thing. The second thing is that I missed apartheid” (Bloom 2009a, 194-195). Dana goes on to comment, “In the 1976 riots I was fourteen. I remember being vaguely aware that there was injustice and trauma, but I was never fully aware ... I think it’s always concerned me that I never played my role” (Bloom 2009a, 195). There is something disquieting about this exchange. A superficial reading reveals a

kindly white South African woman reaching out to assist two black couples in need. However, a more critical reading shows the complexity of whiteness in South African today. The phrasing “I missed apartheid” implies an experience that passed one by, that one ‘missed out on’, and contains an element of nostalgia. It also confines apartheid to a particular period and does not acknowledge the residual social and economic privilege retained by many white South Africans. While this particular white South African woman is reaching out and becoming involved in ways in which many white South Africans avoid, Bloom complicates this scenario by asserting that these actions allow her to finally “play her role”. The incongruities of this situation are finally acknowledged when the police station storeroom, “where the supplies and donations were kept”, in which the two refugee couples stayed after the xenophobic attacks, is subtly juxtaposed with the couples’ new accommodation, “a room underneath the main house, a room filled with PC towers and monitors and electrical appliances. There are two mattresses on the floor between folded piles of clothing” (Bloom 2009a, 195-196).

## To Set Forth into the Unknown

While neither Malan nor Bloom is adequately able to find a way into a renewed sense of belonging for white South Africans, both writers do attempt to suggest how white South Africans might begin to engage with their longing to be in this place, to be part of this place. Bloom (2009a, 167) proposes that while the expectation or experience of violence may present an appealing strategy for alienated and isolated

white South Africans, it does come at a cost, which is pointed out by an American writer on her return to the States:

She was not prepared for what it meant to be white in South Africa ... which was to be reminded, at every possible opportunity, that she was not safe, and that she must be afraid. And she was not prepared for how seductive that fear would become, how omnipresent it would be ... [she] realised that this is what white people do to each other – they cultivate each other’s fear. It’s very violent.

Bloom (2009a, 7) acknowledges that, after his cousin’s murder, “there has been something new and uncomfortable about the way I live in my country”, and he identifies the difference as his feeling “threatened ... not settled”. During his interrogation of South Africans’ ways of staying and ways of leaving in the aftermath of violence, Bloom (2009a, 57) suggests that some, like the Solomons, stay because despite the threat of violence, they “have never lived in, or visited, a community in the world quite as selfless”, and more importantly, they have the access and means to private security “staffed by elite former soldiers.” For Tony and Claudia Muderhwa staying in South Africa, where “you can’t even speak. Even if they spit on you, you must keep quiet”, is still better than the horrors they would face back home in the DRC (Bloom 2009a, 197). While for the Paterson family, emigrating to the United Kingdom is the only option, despite the social and emotional upheaval that such a move causes. In the face of these various responses to violence, loss of

security, safety and belonging, Bloom (2009a, 192-193) turns his attention to the paradox of Manny Cabaleira's bar, the Radium Beer Hall:

The west window looks out onto Louis Botha Avenue, a street that seethes with traffic and commerce and life, a scene that reminds you, viscerally and unflinchingly, that you are in Africa ... it is in Manny's collection of framed newspaper posters ... that the singularity of the place is truly located ... after a few pints a narrative emerges ... uniquely and wholly and uncannily South African. It is always a narrative that points to the things that divide us, and beneath that, always, to the intractable irony that is where we unite ... For Radium is not an integrated bar. Each night the black patrons occupy their stools near the door and on the street, and the white patrons congregate further in ... But each night there is a meeting in the middle ... and for a couple of minutes the heaviness of three-and-a-half centuries of history lifts and the visions of Mandela and Tutu seem not so far-fetched.

And it is, ironically, from this space, that Bloom (2009a, 193) offers the most articulate response to his own questions of identity and belonging:

Where better than home for a person to confront the enigma of identity? Are there bars in Australia where the 'I' and the 'other' are packed in together so tight? Would a pub in Newcastle or New York

offer an opportunity to perceive so clearly the markers and symbols  
that make up a South African self?

Bloom appears to suggest that in order to find a way of staying in South Africa, one must be prepared to tolerate the suspense, uncertainty and perpetual anticipation of perceived threat, and so enter into those spaces where the 'I' and the 'other' are packed together tight. Because it is in these spaces that one might confront and unpack the enigma of identity, and thereby find ways to articulate one's own narrative of belonging. In answer to his own question, "to stay here or go away", Malan suggest that "there's something to be said for living on the edge, in a country where rival kingdoms of consciousness overlap and interact in strange and intoxicating ways...This is where I come from, and this is where I will stay." Malan's (1991, 422) conclusions pre-empt Bloom's assessment in his view that white South Africans can only find ways to belong in Africa when they can tolerate the suspense and the uncertainty of the unknown: "the place where we are going will clearly be very different from the whites-only moonbase where I was born. Strange terrors and ecstasies await us in Africa, but that is the choice we face: either we take up arms and fight, or we open the door to Africa and set forth into the unknown."

Despite Malan's and Bloom's attempts to identify under what conditions and in what ways white South Africans might negotiate a sense of belonging within the post-apartheid national narrative, their conclusions remain limited by the pervasive anxiety inherent in both *My Traitor's Heart* and *Ways of Staying*. By focusing on the intersections of violence and whiteness, both writers perpetuate the theme of "Be-

longing” identified by Mary West as “manifesting a heightened sense of insecurity, even physical threat”, and thus reinforce the (un)belonging of whiteness in southern Africa. However, there are traces of potential in both narratives, and, as I will argue later in this thesis, these traces take form in a narrative such as Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black*. As already mentioned, Bloom points to the Radium Beer Hall as the space in which a person can “confront the enigma of identity”, and suggests that, despite it not being an integrated bar, there exists a “meeting in the middle ... and for a couple of minutes the heaviness of three-and-a-half centuries of history lifts.” It is this trace of the “in-between” that finds clearer expression in Krog’s work. Similarly, Malan gestures towards Bhabha’s notion of the ‘beyond’ when he suggests that white South Africans need to find a way to move into the uncertainty of the unknown. Bhabha (1994c, 7) explains that:

Being in the ‘beyond’, then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’, becomes a space of intervention in the here and now.

As I will argue in Chapter Seven, Krog extends the idea of the ‘in-between’ and the ‘beyond’ to explore the interstitial spaces in which belonging, without the qualification of violence, becomes possible.



## Chapter Five

### **“The Young White Man Had it Coming”: Fear and Mistrust in Jonny Steinberg’s *Midlands*.**

*So the horror of Mitchell’s neighbours was starkly, inevitably political. The body before them was inscribed with the signs of the time, a time in which whites had lost institutional power and black men had become brave enough to walk onto a farm and kill its proprietor.*

Jonny Steinberg 2002: 6

## At the Beginning of a Deadly Endgame

In his article, “Bulletproof Settlers: The Politics of Offence in the New South Africa”, Grant Farred (1997) discusses the politics of the slogan “One settler, One bullet” and its impact on what he perceives as the resilient and pervasive condition of white confidence and sense of entitlement. Published in 1997, Farred’s article suggests that “white South Africa has demonstrated a self-assuredness modulated just slightly by the new democratic political arrangement”, and he goes on to argue that “white South Africans have the privilege of not being offended by so vituperative a slogan because they have little or no collective memory of violence being done to them” (67, 73). They perceive themselves as being firmly positioned within what Njabulo Ndebele ((2000) 2007, 137) refers to as “the global sanctity of the white body.” While Farred’s engagement with the use of the term ‘settler’ remains pertinent to this discussion, and will be returned to later in this chapter, his argument for the resilience of white South African confidence is increasingly challenged by subsequent events, most notably the variations of the “One settler, One bullet” slogan, including Julius Malema’s reprise of the struggle song containing the phrase “Kill the boer”, Zimbabwe’s aggressive land redistribution policy, and the increase of what became known as “farm murders”, violent attacks on white farmers that “occupy a strange and ambiguous space; they tamper with the boundary between acquisitive crime and racial hatred” (Steinberg 2002, vii). It is these ‘farm murders’ that Jonny Steinberg sets out to explore, and that led to the publication of his first non-fiction narrative, *Midlands* (2002).

In the preface to *Midlands*, Steinberg (2002, viii) states that his “intention was to record the stories of four or five murders across the country, to use breadth and variety to capture the texture of the epidemic.” However, he finds himself compelled to focus in on the story of just one particular murder, that of Peter Mitchell, “a 28-year-old white man ... shot dead on his father’s farm” in the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal. Steinberg (2002, viii-ix) suggests that:

Mitchell was killed, not just figuratively, but quite literally, on the southern midlands racial frontier ... Those who murdered Mitchell did so in order to push the boundary back ... For his part, the dead man’s father knew the score, and resolved to defend his land and fight to the finish ... I initially thought I was to write about an event from the recent past, but it soon became clear that much of the story lay in the immediate future ... This was a silent frontier battle, the combatants groping hungrily for the whispers and lies that drifted in from the other side. It was clear from the start that Peter Mitchell would not be the only one to die on that border, that I had arrived at the beginning of a deadly endgame. And I knew that the story of his and subsequent deaths would illuminate a great deal about the early days of post-apartheid South Africa.

This extract is indicative of several key themes that Steinberg returns to throughout *Midlands*, namely ‘the border’, ‘lies and mistrust’ and ‘communication and miscommunication’. This chapter seeks to examine the construction and performance of whiteness within these key moments, and to critique Steinberg’s use

of the tropes of 'mistrust' and 'miscommunication' as defining features of a post-apartheid, rural whiteness. The framing of the murder as occurring on the 'racial frontier' of the southern midlands is reminiscent of colonial frontier battles, as colonists attempted to push into the interior of southern Africa and encountered resistance from indigenous communities and peoples. As such it is useful to introduce Derek Gregory's (2004) concept of the 'colonial present' as applied by Alistair Fraser (2007). Gregory's book, *The Colonial Present*, examines the United States' engagement with Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan, the concepts of war, terror and violence, and the similarities between the discursive strategies of nineteenth-century colonial Britain and France and present day America, in order to identify a 'colonial present' in which particular 'colonial-style' relations, characterised by "violence, dispossession, occupation and subjugation", endure within a modern setting (Fraser 2007, 836). Fraser (2007, 835), in his discussion of South African land reform, makes use of Gregory's concept, and shows how the 'colonial present' remains a feature of rural South Africa and how it affects land reform outcomes. I would suggest that as a means to understanding the context for Steinberg's *Midlands* and to developing a more nuanced engagement with the theme of 'the border', Fraser's re-formulation of the notion of the 'colonial present' is especially useful. I will also return to Farred's (1997) engagement with the term 'settler' as well as social psychology's conception of 'perceived racial threat' and 'threat projection' (Stevens 1998, Riggs and Augoustinos 2004).

Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*, winner of the 2003 *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award for non-fiction writing, consists of three parts, each attempting to explore the Mitchell

murder from a different perspective, beginning with the white farming community, the black communities of Izita and Langeni, and ending with the black tenants on Arthur Mitchell's farm. Steinberg's text is characterised by a measured tone, and his role as an investigative journalist is foregrounded; the reader is privy to Steinberg's private responses to witnesses, his doubts, and his ethical and practical journalistic dilemmas. However, it is his position as a *white* journalist that presents the greatest challenge to his successful investigation into the story of Peter Mitchell's murder. I will return to this line of argument later in my discussion, but suffice to say at this point that Steinberg's whiteness renders him simultaneously both insider and outsider: he is allowed access to the white community, and when "introduced by the Farm Watch, [he is] immediately a friend, and the words come pouring out"; but the black community remains closed as "no white person has set foot on that land, except as a landlord, a policeman or a soldier. How does a white stranger stroll in with a notebook and ask all in the vicinity to open their souls?" (Steinberg 2002, 54, 106). Steinberg's (2002, 109) only recourse is to "understand Izita and Langeni at secondhand, through people whose black skins were the passport to the knowledge [he] was seeking." However it is important to bear in mind that, while Steinberg's text necessarily privileges whiteness to some degree, his act of scrutinising this particular white community and their deployment of whiteness resulted in his becoming "*persona non grata* in their world" (Lehman 2010, 39).

## A Landscape of Mistrust

Before turning my attention to a more detailed discussion of the concepts of the 'colonial present' and the use of the term 'settler', I want to make overt the linkages between land and identity, in order to examine Steinberg's consideration of 'the border' as a significant theme in *Midlands*. In his article, "Middle Class Suburban Neighbourhoods or 'African Kraals'? The Impact of Informal Settlements and Vagrants on Post-Apartheid White Identity", Richard Ballard (2004, 66) draws on psychoanalytical notions of spatiality in order to show how people "imagine or infer 'zones' which are in some way extensions of the body", and argues that:

People's homes can to a greater or lesser extent become reflections of themselves and – given limitless resources – are a fundamental reflection of an individual's self perception. Regulation of boundaries is therefore crucial to a secure a sense of self and individuality. Conversely when control of the boundaries of the home slips from the control of its occupant, they are no longer secure in their sense of individuality.

The boundary markers of the land, the farm fences, not only establish the border between the farmer's property and the 'traditional lands', but also symbolize, for both the white and black communities, the margin between the 'us and them'. Steinberg (2002, 16) describes how Colin Waugh, the local Farm Watch director, enacts this dynamic:

Colin cleared his throat. "We were talking about Arthur Mitchell, about his career in the military...The interesting thing about the Mitchell case is that Arthur bought Normandale to protect his flank."

"His flank?"

"Yes, his flank. His farm is a border territory. Beyond it is the opposition."

It took me a moment to understand what he was saying ... It is from the 'traditional lands' ... that white farmers recruit their labour, and it is from there that people come in the night to steal white-owned cattle. Whites whose farms abut the 'traditional lands' refer to their properties as 'border farms' ... Colin's discourse is littered with references to 'the opposition'. Sometimes, he was talking of the loose network of thieves, politicians and businessmen whom he believed were behind the Mitchell murder ... But mostly 'the opposition' for Colin, was the traditional lands in their entirety and all their inhabitants. He has blurred the distinction between racial difference and a military frontier.

Thus the farm border, the boundary between white private property and black 'traditional lands', becomes a site of challenge to white identity, and its accompanying sense of entitlement. And the raids made across that border, the theft of livestock and produce, poaching, and cutting of the fences are viewed by the white community as not only attacks on their property, but as undermining their sense of identity and belonging. This culminates in the murder of Peter Mitchell: "So

the horror of Mitchell's neighbours was starkly, inevitable political. The body before them was inscribed with the signs of the time, a time in which whites had lost institutional power and black men had become brave enough to walk onto a farm and kill its proprietor" (Steinberg 2002, 6). Thus the defiance of 'the border', the marker separating private property from communal, white lives from black lives, is perceived by the white farming community as not only an attack on their land but, more significantly, literally an attack on their whiteness.

The 'land' is a site of conflict, both in terms of historical and contemporary ownership, and perhaps more importantly in terms of what it represents and what value it holds. In a passage I will quote at length later, Steinberg (2002, 57) contrasts the white settlers' perception of a landscape that was "wild and harsh, but ... empty", and therefore free to be claimed, with the cultural history of the amaZwezwé who insist that they occupied that land long before the original settlers arrived in the 1820s. It is this point of conflict that underpins and informs Steinberg's depiction of the 'land' in *Midlands*, and Steinberg alerts the reader to the complexities of this particular landscape before the narrative even begins. The jacket cover of the 2002 edition of *Midlands* highlights both the contradictions of the text and the ominous role the landscape will play in the narrative, with a dark and foreboding image of a mist-engulfed farm road bordered by a rustic barbed-wire fence. The title *Midlands*, with its usual connotations of lush, rolling green hills and picturesque farmsteads, is dramatically contrasted with the ominous image situated above it. The drama foretold by the book's cover is made explicit in Steinberg's (2002, 3) opening paragraph:



The Mitchell property lies on the slopes of one of the most beautiful valleys I have ever seen. It is in the heart of the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, Alan Paton country, and it is true that "... from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest scenes of Africa." Later I will tell you more about that landscape, and of how it changed during the course of my investigation; a spectacular backdrop of giant shapes and colours when I first saw it, a myriad dramas of human anger and violence when I left. But on my first journey out of that valley, what struck me was the peculiar position of the Mitchells' farmhouse. It offered only a miserly view of the visual feat beyond its doorstep. Instead, it faced the harsh bushveld on the slopes ...

Later, Steinberg (2002, 7) describes his experience of driving along the farm road to the place where Peter Mitchell was shot: "The vegetation on either side is thick and claustrophobic, the clearing through which we drive a narrow tunnel ... You see nothing of the beautiful valley from the Mitchells' dirt track." Steinberg (2002, 7) interrupts his narrative at this point to comment reflexively, "Sitting at my desk months later, I read over what I have written and the scenery is ominous in a kitsch and obvious way, as if this place was designed for a murder." However, Steinberg finds that he cannot "remember the bush differently" and wonders if his impressions would have been "lighter and less suggestive" had he travelled through the area at another time and for another purpose. What becomes apparent at this point is the central role the motif of the 'land' will play in Steinberg's text, as well as the

potential for very varied readings of that landscape. Later in the narrative, Steinberg (2002, 69) describes driving with a local white farmer, Jude Fowler, through the pine plantations and commenting that the landscape, carved with rows of trees as far as the eye can see, is beautiful. Fowler responds, “Do you think so? ... No, they are very ugly ... That land has been ruined by trees.” Steinberg (2002, 70) observes:

I do not realize it at the time, but this is a classic exchange, repeated in many time and places, between a rural native and a visitor from the city. The visitor takes in the landscape as scenery, as a pleasing arrangement of colours and shapes. The native sees history, human history. It will take me months in the Alanview and Sarahdale districts before I begin to see the deeds of people written into the landscape.

The themes of mistrust, miscommunication and misunderstanding are embedded in the depictions of the local landscape and the inhabitants’ relationship to it. This is made overt in the closing lines of the first chapter when Arthur Mitchell’s Khoi-San tracker and bodyguard Matthew comments, “They want the bush back. Like it was before the whites arrived” (Steinberg 2002, 10). It is thus implied that the ‘bush’, and therefore the ‘land’, belongs to and is part of the local black communities, not only through virtue of ownership but by some older and more enduring mechanism of connection. It is also implied that it might be possible to dislodge the ‘unnatural’ presence of the white farmers. The chapter’s opening image of the Mitchells’ farmhouse defiantly situated with its back to the ‘land’ is therefore rendered

unstable, and the farmhouse becomes a foreign body that must be removed to restore the integrity of the 'land'. Thus in the short first chapter, Steinberg establishes the land as a site of conflict, and as the location of a deep-seated mistrust, a mistrust that stems from colonial discourses of fear that constitute the 'land' as threatening, untamed, and representative of an 'Africa' that is 'other' and thus unknown and unknowable.

I would like to return now to Fraser's application of the 'colonial present'. "South Africa", says Fraser (2007, 835), "is conventionally viewed as a 'postcolonial' place; in contrast to that view, I call attention to the 'colonial present' in South Africa." He goes on to identify two characteristics of the colonial present in South Africa with regard to land reform: firstly, white farmers continue to maintain a "near monopoly on technical and entrepreneurial skills needed for commercial agriculture"; and secondly, the role of traditional leaders, already complex in a post-apartheid environment, remains prominent in the land reform processes (Fraser 2007, 840-841). The fact that Fraser is operating from a social geography framework should not detract from the broader applicability of this concept, especially as the two characteristics of the 'colonial present' in South Africa that Fraser identifies are clearly connected to Steinberg's project. The white farmers in Steinberg's narrative are not only in a position of relative social and economic power, in that they own and run large tracts of land for commercial gain, but they are also disconnected from the black communities that provide their labour, and more importantly, from the traditional and cultural values that are entrenched within those communities. In many ways the white farmers in *Midlands* are revealed as clinging to very colonial

attitudes within the postcolonial moment. In a later chapter, I discuss the notion of 'postcolonial becoming' as a means of moving towards the 'other' and establishing a conversation with the 'other'. I suggest that the concept of 'postcolonial becoming' enacts Melissa Steyn's (2005, xxviii) claim that "if colonial narratives provided the social identity of whiteness, postcolonial narratives must help to redefine and complicate identities for those interpellated by discourses of whiteness, by bringing them into dialogue with 'other' identities." What is pertinent to my argument here, however, is the notion that colonial attitudes of expansion and conquest resist any move towards 'postcolonial becoming'. It is significant that early colonial expansion was driven, not only by avarice, but by fear of the 'other' and fear of *becoming* 'other'. In attempting to examine the construction and deployment of whiteness in Steinberg's *Midlands*, I find the concept of the 'colonial present' proves particularly useful because it allows for a space in which the past continually interrupts the present. Steinberg enacts this disruption quite literally at several points in his text when he interrupts his own narrative of present-day events with detailed explanations of the past. One illustration of this in *Midlands* occurs in chapter five where Steinberg (2002, 54, 55-58) details his interaction with Jude Fowler, "a leading figure in the Alanview farming community":

Fowler and I are sitting in his living room ... "Peter's murder was political. There is absolutely no doubt about it." Fowler pauses at the end of each sentence to take another bite of his sandwich.

"We get the sense that it is organised pressure. Where there is a border between a commercial farming district and a black area, and

the black area is controlled by the ANC, there is organised pressure. Each farm is slowly squeezed. Stock theft, vandalism, stolen fences, encroachment of black cattle ...”

... “So crime here has nothing to do with poverty, with unemployment, with land hunger. It’s all politics?”

“It has nothing to do with poverty. It is all about savagery. The Zulus are a savage nation ...”

“Where did this savagery come from? Is it recent? Has something in the recent past aggravated it?”

Fowler thinks hard. He takes each question extremely seriously and answers with earnestness. “The savagery has always been there, from long ago, from before the whites arrived in Africa. It was just suppressed by the apartheid regime ...”

... “Yesterday I met Chief Zwanini, chief of the amaZwezwwe,” I say.

“He showed me a map of the Alanview district drawn up in 1924. He claimed it shows that his people occupied much of the area that is now white farmland. This savagery – is it perhaps animated by a sense that there has been much injustice?”

“Chief Zwanini is talking crap. Go ahead and read Allen Gardiner’s diaries. He passed through this area in the 1830s. He did not see a living soul ...”

... This is the way white farmers across the district understand the past. A group of hardy pioneers came out from England in the mid-nineteenth century ... The land they found in the Natal interior was wild and harsh, but it was empty ... So they took the land, and by the

sweat of their labour they made a success of it ... this is the legacy of the white pioneers.

And the Zulus? If their only role in this story was to provide menial labour, it was because they lacked initiative ... If the whites had never arrived, they would still be subsistence producers living in mud huts ...

It is at this point that Steinberg interrupts his narrative in order to provide a richer historical account as a backdrop to this preceding conversation. Steinberg (2002, 58-64, 63) details the arrival of the Voortrekkers to the midlands area in 1837, the aftermath of the social and political upheaval of the *mfecane*, and the arrival of the British in the 1840s, and suggests that:

... the social landscape that is the backdrop to our tale – a white landlord and his black tenants – was shaped at this time and in this way, and if whites have forgotten that their forebears acquired their land by force, you will soon see that there isn't a single black person in the Sarahdale district who does not have memories of dispossession seared on his consciousness.

Steinberg (2002, 65) concludes this 'interruption' by commenting that "so much happened in the intervening century, and yet so much stayed the same. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the past returned after decades of slumber." This is significant because, as Steinberg (2002, 65) points out, "it would be misleading to think of 1994 as a blank slate, a new beginning." In order to understand the complex

and complicated interactions across the physical and racial 'border', and the ways in which individuals in Steinberg's narrative negotiate their identities and their place within the present, we have carefully to examine the ways in which the colonial past continues to interject in the current moment. And while Steinberg documents the disjunction between the postcolonial moment and the colonial attitudes that persist, creating a 'colonial present', he does not adequately engage with what alternatives might be possible, partly because he fixes the relationship to the poles of white landlord/farmer and black tenant/labourer, instead of opening a space in which 'postcolonial becoming' might, at the very least, be imagined.

## Pushing Back the Frontier

Sarah Nuttall (2006, 245) says, "It is most often in terms of the 'settler' that white identity in postcolonial African contexts has been given context and meaning. The notion of the settler, which always also implies a native, carries with it in its originary sense a master-slave dialectic based on land." Furthermore, Grant Farred (1997, 70) suggests that in the slogan "One settler, One bullet", it is the use of the word 'settler' that whites find most disturbing. He offers a careful elaboration of this idea which is worth quoting at length:

The ideological impact of "One settler, One bullet" – which is nothing less than a rhetorical call for the abolition of whiteness in South Africa – is too resounding an appeal to be discounted ... "One settler, One bullet" is a highly public articulation aimed specifically at

disrupting the psyches of white South Africans ... To name white South Africans “settlers” is to mark them as aliens when they present themselves as unproblematic nationals. By designating white South Africans as settlers, their black counterparts are invalidating more than three centuries of white residency in the subcontinent ... [White South Africans] have perpetually rendered themselves as “foreign”, “othered” by their history of invasion and illegitimate control of the indigenous peoples and their resources. “One settler, One bullet” is an interrogation and invalidation of the authenticity of whites’ identities as South Africans ... The phrase “One settler, One bullet” is a strategic disenfranchisement of white South Africans ... To call white people “settlers” is to deny their right to lay claim to any kind of South African-ness. (Farred 1997, 72)

Farred articulates a contentious but enduring attitude that continually resurfaces in current debates around South African white identity and whiteness, and one that Antjie Krog highlights in *A Change of Tongue*. Krog describes a conversation between herself and former colleagues where the issue of white South African identity and belonging is debated. One colleague, Mamukwa, states emphatically that Krog can never become black, “she will always be a ... kangaroo! Her people have been living here for generations, surviving, but when we see her, we know she is a kangaroo from elsewhere” (Krog 2003, 274). By likening Krog to a kangaroo, Mamukwa is undermining her claims to belong in South Africa, as a South African, and is thus marking her as alien, foreign and other. Krog’s (2003, 275) response is to muse, “I would have preferred something like ... well, like a eucalyptus tree. From elsewhere,



granted. But impossible to imagine the South African landscape without it.”

Steinberg (2002, 10) captures this dislocation of white identity and its claim to belonging in the exchange with Matthew, the Khoi-San bodyguard and tracker hired by Arthur Mitchell, to which I have already alluded:

“Who is the enemy here?” I ask Matthew.

“The enemy?”

“Who is Mitchell afraid of?”

“The people waiting for him in the bush.”

“Who are they?”

“The ones who killed his son. The ones who want to kill him.”

“Why do they want to kill him?”

... Matthew adjusts his rifle again and looks me in the eye for the first time. His reply is surprising fluent and confident.

“They want the bush back. Like it was before the whites arrived.”

While Krog suggests the possibility of becoming part of the South African setting, of being like a eucalyptus, alien yet recognised as part of the landscape, Steinberg gestures towards a more disturbing possibility: that white South Africans can make no claims upon the land and must in fact be erased. Thus in two seemingly simple sentences, the weight of more than three centuries of colonial past comes crashing into the present, and all the complexities of contemporary race relations are distilled into a single comment: “They want the bush back. Like it was before the whites arrived.” This is the broader context of antagonism – where land ownership and belonging are disputed through skirmishes across the physical and racial borders –

which Steinberg's *Midlands* sets out to explore. And while Steinberg is able to identify and document the complexities of the South African context, he stops short of suggesting alternative possibilities, which tends to exacerbate the reader's sense of frustration with the text. In an interview with Jonny Steinberg, Daniel Lehman (2010, 39) suggests that Steinberg "[puts] the reader in the position to understand how one can be alienated from both sides. The frustration we feel as readers when we want to know more is the frustration of the book. We see this inevitable collision taking place between two sides, and that mirrors our overall frustration at the seemingly inevitable violence."

The concept of perceived racial threat is particularly apt in understanding how some white South Africans may perceive their historically secure position of privilege as threatened by a black majority, and retain fear-based preconceptions that their personal safety is at risk. I have already shown in my discussion of Kevin Bloom and Rian Malan's work in Chapter Four how the discourses of fear and perceived threat inform and shape South African whiteness. Both authors present white South Africans as existing in a state of constant anxiety and anticipation, where "deep-seated feelings of alienation, personal threat, and fear of being overrun were held in tension with an intense competition for resources and an absolute belief in entitlement to dominate people with whom one had daily contact" (Steyn 1999, 268). It is therefore useful to incorporate social psychology's use of the concepts 'perceived racial threat' and 'threat projection' as outlined by Stevens (1998), and Riggs and Augoustinos (2004), respectively. In his article, "'Racialised' Discourses: Understanding Perceptions of Threat in Post-Apartheid South Africa", Garth Stevens

(1998) draws on Ashmore and Del Boca's conception of perceived racial threat in order to examine the racialised discourses of a Western Cape Coloured community. Stevens argues that the emergence of the fear-threat syndrome called perceived racial threat depends upon social groups finding themselves in competition with one another for seemingly limited political, social and economic resources. Riggs and Augoustinos (2004) show how some white Australians may attempt to construct indigenous people as threats in order to manage their own subjective investments in whiteness. They suggest that through the projection of threat onto indigenous people, the process of colonization, and its concomitant acts of invasion and dispossession, are "retrospectively attributed to indigenous people as always already being a threat" (Riggs and Augoustinos 2004). This practice of projection allows whiteness to remain an "unspoken category. And it is the 'threat' of whiteness being exposed as a site of unfair advantage that reinforces notions that Indigenous claims to land and compensation are therefore threats to white nationhood" (Riggs and Augoustinos 2004). What is significant in these arguments is firstly that threat is *perceived* and not necessarily *actual*, although certain acts may be interpreted as more threatening from the perspective of perceived racial threat, and secondly that whiteness projects threat in the interest of protecting both privilege and property. However, in a South African context where levels of violence are high, perceived racial threat taints interactions between white and black South Africans and exacerbates misunderstandings. Thus the complexity of the South African situation is such that actual experiences of violence and violent crime are numerous, but perhaps more damaging to the South African psyche is the alienation and dislocation that stem from attitudes of perceived racial threat and threat projection. As Kevin

Bloom (2009a, 167) points out, “this is what white people do to each other – they cultivate each other’s fear. It’s very violent.”

Riggs and Augoustinos’s (2004) suggestion that threat is projected onto the ‘other’ as a strategy to safeguard white privilege illuminates Steinberg’s preoccupation with the various configurations of mistrust that he depicts in *Midlands*. In the first chapter, Steinberg (2002, 9) highlights the manner in which racial difference shapes the degree of trust within relationships:

... Mitchell takes a call on his cellphone ... He starts wandering away as he listens to his phone, motions me to come with him, Matthew to stay. He does not trust his brown bodyguard to overhear conversations about the hunt for his son’s killers. The white journalist he can trust; he wants me to know that I am on the inside.

Steinberg here foregrounds the irony of a situation, and indeed a country, in which those individuals occupying the most intimate roles in white lives are always-already mistrusted by virtue of their darker skin colour. This disturbing irony, which complicates relationships between black and white, is reinforced in the following exchange:

I remember the worker in the green overalls gently pushing Mitchell’s hand from his jeep’s ignition, and I comment that his relationship with that particular worker appears to be a special one.

“Yes, it is,” Mitchell replies. “He is the only one who did not leave when Peter was killed. He stuck it out because it was the right thing to do ...”

“Yet there is clearly a bond between you.”

Mitchell frowns and stares at the remains of the roast on his plate.

“There are bonds and there are bonds. Blood is thicker than water. I dare not turn my back on him for a moment.” (Steinberg 2002, 100-101)

Thus, despite the relationship between Mitchell and the green-overalled worker being a special one, and despite the worker’s demonstration of loyalty – “he is the only one who did not leave when Peter was killed” – Mitchell is still deeply mistrustful of this man. And yet, though he is the ‘outsider’, Steinberg is always-already ‘on the inside’ because he is white. As noted above, suspicion and mistrust are themes that Steinberg foregrounds from the opening pages of the narrative, and that are always-already inextricably linked to the ‘land’. While I have suggested that the relationship of mistrust and the ‘land’ reveals deep-seated white anxieties regarding ‘Africa’ as an unknown, unknowable and ultimately inhospitable place, I would like to focus briefly on Steinberg’s preoccupation with the depiction of trust and mistrust in the context of *Midlands*. According to *Collins Concise English Dictionary*, to ‘mistrust’ is to have doubts or suspicions about something or someone, while to ‘distrust’ is to regard something or someone as untrustworthy or dishonest. This is an important distinction as it reveals how it is possible for Arthur Mitchell to regard the ‘worker in the green overall’ as honest and loyal, but still be

mistrustful of him. Mistrust is thus an articulation of deep-seated doubts and suspicions that often go uninterrogated. Steinberg returns to the trope of mistrust repeatedly, and while he documents specific instances where blacks mistrust whites, for example the black residents of Izita and Langeni assert that “whites can’t be trusted” (2002, 20), he most often uses ‘mistrust’ as a characteristic of whiteness, and as characterising whites’ relationships with blacks. It is therefore useful to understand this deployment of ‘mistrust’ through the notion of projected threat, particularly as Steinberg contextualises instances of blacks’ mistrust of whites as an expected result of colonialism’s historical legacy. That mistrust is a characteristic of whiteness’s interactions with black identity is further reinforced by the moments of unwarranted expression of trust between whites. Steinberg (2002, 195) describes his interview with the young white policeman, Will Sullivan:

I was convinced he had grown suspicious and fled ... But he returned ... clutching a police-issue file as thick as a dictionary, and to my astonishment, he put it in front of me and told me to take my time. It was all there; the names of the witnesses, their statements, the investigating officer’s notes. As I read, I marvelled at how the colour of my skin had shaped the trajectory of my entire investigation ... here I was, a stranger pawing through the pages of other people’s fates. That I was white was enough for Sullivan to trust me implicitly with the lives of black witnesses.

Steinberg, therefore, depicts a whiteness that is distinguished by its fear of the unknown and its willingness to project that fear as perceived threat onto the

available 'other', with the underlying motivation being the protection of historic white privilege. This fear of the unknown 'other' and the mistrust it engenders underpins the two key incidents of misunderstanding which Steinberg identifies in his narrative as driving the events both before and after Peter Mitchell's murder. It is worth examining these in detail to understand how mistrust and misunderstanding are used as defining characteristics of whiteness within *Midlands*

## Two Conversations/Miscommunications

Steinberg describes two conversations that take place between white farmer landowners and black tenants, and suggests that perhaps the reasons for the murder of Peter Mitchell can best be understood in light of the misunderstanding which occurs within and around these conversations. The first conversation is between Lourie Steyn, Arthur Mitchell's predecessor, and the farm tenants. After years of struggle Steyn "finally threw in the towel and left his farm for good"; he announced to his tenants, "I am leaving now, and I will not be back. I want you to look after my farm" (Steinberg 2002, 219). Steinberg (2002, 220) focuses on the multivalence of the term "look after" and suggests that "*look after*, here, is a leisurely description of proprietorship. And that is precisely how the tenants understood Steyn when he told them to look after his farm. 'It is yours,' they read between the lines. 'Take it and enjoy it.'" This conversation positions Mitchell as an interloper, and undermines his claims to ownership of the land he has purchased from Steyn. This further complicates Mitchell's uneasy relationship with his tenants, and this is strikingly

revealed through his conversations with them regarding 'the rules'. Mitchell describes his first meeting with the tenants:

"We met on the side of the road. I brought a police sergeant with me to act as a translator. I speak Zulu but I am not fluent and the matters we had to discuss were very important. I wanted no misunderstanding. I told them what my rules were. I wanted to turn Normandale into a game farm and told them it was out of bounds. Their cattle could not graze there. I told them that Langeni, all 100 hectares of Langeni, was theirs ... I thought the families were getting a good deal.

"I had a few other rules, about what happens at Langeni itself. I told them they could build new huts, but only with my permission ... I did not want outsiders coming onto the land ... I told them I wanted a guarantee of this, so I asked them to draw up a list of the names of the people who lived at Langeni. I did not think that was unreasonable. It is my land. I am entitled to keep an eye on who goes in and out." (Steinberg 2002, 20)

Steinberg points out that "everything Mitchell said can only be understood against the backdrop of the preceding battle between Steyn and his tenants, a battle the tenants erroneously believed they had won." But, Steinberg argues, it is Mitchell's initial actions of policing his new land, 'pushing back the frontier' that the tenants had believed they had already won, that imbues the conversation he subsequently has with the black tenants with misunderstanding. Despite Mitchell's claim to want



to avoid any misunderstanding, Steinberg (2002, 224) shows how Mitchell misreads the relationship with his tenants:

I can imagine Mitchell with his firmness and his civility, the head of each tenant family standing before him next to the district road ... He brings to the proceedings what he takes to be a businesslike and formal air. He speaks with the authority of a landlord ... He wants no ambiguity. He wants everything crystal clear.

On the other side, from the audience's vantage point, things do not quite look that way. The short man with the thick red neck and the bulging belly ... gathers the tenants together and addresses them in clipped tones. He is clutching a piece of paper and he reads from it. Few people understand his rapid English. They listen to his tone, they observe the way his mouth and cheeks move. The upper parts of his face remain immobile and expressionless. His eyes are cold. Then the Zulu policeman translates what [he] has said, and the people gasp in anger.

Steinberg shows this misunderstanding occurring not only at the level of face-to-face interaction, but as symptomatic of a deep cultural illiteracy, the inability of the white farmers to fully understand and appreciate the ways in which, for the black tenants, cattle and land are deeply intertwined with issues of identity and belonging.

Steinberg (2002, 232) comments, "For Steyn, cattle were a 'perk', a little extra the paternalist allows out of the goodness of his heart. For his tenants, they were the symbol and guarantee of their identities. It is impossible that Steyn never absorbed

this during his 30 years in the district.” This lack of cultural awareness is perpetuated by Mitchell when he reiterates the ‘district rule’ that each tenant family may only have five head of cattle. Steinberg (2002, 233) points out that while Mitchell may have had no intention to enforce this rule arbitrarily and would have been willing to “negotiate in the give-and-take of a daily relationship ... given the fastidiousness with which Mitchell had been policing his farms, it is unlikely that his tenants understood him thus.” Steinberg here highlights several complexities of contemporary South African interactions. Much of the communication taking place between Steyn, Mitchell and the black tenants is unspoken, the language of action and reaction; but what is significant is how the unspoken shapes and inflects the context in which verbal conversations must be understood. Steyn and Mitchell are shown up as ignorant of the more nuanced aspects of the conversations they engage in with the black tenants, as well as insensitive to the cultural mores which are of great significance to the tenants. Ironically, both Steyn and Mitchell believe themselves to be knowledgeable of local traditions and customs and skilled at communicating with their tenants. And yet, “the Mitchell situation was about unspoken rules,” says Steinberg (2002, 52). He comments that “there are a host of unwritten rules. Stealing from a white landlord is often a form of punishment, a signal sent across the racial frontier that the white boss has gone too far ... the bizarre thing, though, is that white farmers have absolutely no idea that these rules exist” (Steinberg 2002, 50-51).

## 'Your Imagination Is Not Big Enough!'

While Steinberg is attempting to comment on the ways in which entrenched patterns of mistrust and miscommunication have contributed to the escalation of this particular 'frontier' war, there are several points at which his narrative fails. Despite his acknowledgement that "the tenants could not be a blank screen onto which white farmers projected their darkest thoughts about Africa", in many ways the depiction of black characters in the text is never fully developed (Steinberg 2002, 109). An example of this is the character of Paul Mlambo, "the man who the whites swore was chasing them off their farms" (Steinberg 2002, 152). In preparation for an interview with Mlambo, Steinberg reviews his notes, "recalling the various things white farmers had said about Mlambo ... It struck me that none of the comments I read had anything to say about Mlambo as a human being ... The Paul Mlambo in my notebooks was a cipher" (2002, 154). Everything that Steinberg (2002, 155) comes to know about Paul Mlambo he gathers through conversations with others, because in the actual interview "Mlambo put on the most astonishing performance." Steinberg (2002, 155) says of Mlambo:

He sized me up and became whatever he imagined I would expect him to be. I am not only talking about the words he chose. It is usually possible to learn something about anyone, no matter how reserved and cautious his discourse. Body language, mannerisms, a fleeting facial expression, the way one's interlocutor looks one in the eye. Mlambo revealed nothing at all. He was entirely blank.

In trying to separate the myth from the man, Steinberg reveals the dissonance between the white farmers' understanding of Paul Mlambo and his actual role within the local black community. Steinberg is able to ask "How did the white men who gave me my first impression of Mlambo get things so utterly wrong?" but fails to provide a richly detailed corrective. Thus Paul Mlambo remains a hollow descriptor, denied the nuanced interior life of a fully developed character. Steinberg's (2002, 171) inability to discover and document the interior life of the character of Paul Mlambo becomes symbolic of the general inability of the white community in *Midlands* to connect with and understand their black neighbours:

... the world on the other side of the Izita border remained utterly alien to white farmers ... To interpret this information one received from the other side, one needs to know something of the texture of daily life. One needs to experience the laughter, the anger, the sense of right and wrong that animates it. This is not something that passes between the border of Sarahdale and Izita. The information that is surreptitiously bought is the proverbial message in a bottle. It comes from nowhere. There is no way to make sense of it.

It is ironic that the black character with whom Steinberg has the most interesting interactions, and who is depicted in the most nuanced ways, is in fact a narrative construct. Steinberg (2002, xi) alerts his reader in the "Preface" that in order to render two key interviewees not merely anonymous, but invisible, he "took a fairly

innocuous character in the book, whom I have called Elias Sithole; I altered his personal history to the extent that he became unidentifiable. And then I filled him up with the discourse of the two people who refused to appear in the book.” Steinberg (2002, 114) describes how he was introduced to Elias as an Izita resident, and remembers an exchange with the older man twelve years earlier at a Trade Union meeting in Johannesburg:

After the meeting, a National Union of Mineworkers shop steward called Elias, a man I knew vaguely and greeted politely each week, approached me. He put his hand on my shoulder, as an older man does with a child.

“Duma said today that you are special because you are white.

He is wrong. You must not let his words go to your heart.”

There was no malice in his voice. He simply had something on his mind and felt that I should hear it. He bore no grudge. On the contrary, he smiled at me affectionately.

Steinberg thus establishes the relationship between himself and Elias as having a history, and as one of mutual respect and affection. The reader, despite having been warned that the character of Elias is a construct, expects to learn more from Steinberg’s interactions with Elias because of the implied relationship. And Steinberg does not disappoint. He devotes almost fifteen pages to the conversation that takes place around the dinner table in Elias’s Izita home, and then another ten to his meeting with Elias at a Pietermaritzburg pub. It is the latter meeting that I wish to explore further here.

This second conversation with Elias, whom Steinberg (2002, 235) has described as “a wise and judicious man, with an instinctive distaste for the biblical morality of murder and revenge”, dominates the penultimate chapter of *Midlands*, and Steinberg uses this narrative to draw together the issues, contradictions and concerns of the preceding chapters. The underlying question is whether Arthur Mitchell’s actions caused the death of his son, and Steinberg repeatedly circles back to Mitchell’s presentation of his ‘rules’ to the tenants of Langeni. Initially Elias proposes that “what Mitchell got wrong was the question of style, of approach. He should have gone down to Langeni with a crate of beer, black people’s beer. He should have invited the heads of the families to drink with him, asked them something about their lives ...”, and while Steinberg does not confront Elias at this point, he “silently scorns Elias’s idyllic fantasy of what was possible between white farmers and black tenants on the Sarahdale/Izita border” (2002, 236). Eventually though, Steinberg (2002, 245) challenges Elias, saying, “there is a struggle for land out there. It has been going on for over a century. When people deliberately allow their cattle onto your field ... to disrupt your farming, you do not come to an agreement with them over a beer.” While Elias concedes this point, he argues that the problem lies with the white farmer’s resolve to remain within the ‘colonial present’, to perpetuate a colonial mindset and to ignore the changed milieu of the postcolonial moment:

Mitchell’s problem is that he approached the matter as if we are still living under apartheid. He pretended to himself that he could think

up some rules, march onto the tenants' land, shout them out, go home and then everything would be all right. He was a fool to think that. He dug his son's grave. (Steinberg 2002, 245)

Steinberg is able to stage the irresolvable conflicts inherent in the situation that led to Peter Mitchell's murder through his own confrontation with Elias, thus drawing attention to a whiteness that clings to the 'colonial present', that is shaped by a deep-seated mistrust of the 'other' and that experiences an ambivalent relationship to the 'land'.

While Elias is a composite of two people whom Steinberg did interview and interact with, the process of creatively constructing the character of Elias Sithole allows Steinberg a degree of licence that he might not otherwise have had in the framing and presentation of the conversations. This allows him creatively to flesh out both the character of Elias and the conversations he has with him, resulting in a more nuanced and complex representation. Steinberg's depictions of his interaction with Elias bring into relief two additional difficulties within the text, namely the complexity that Steinberg's own whiteness brings to the narrative and the question of limited access to the black community which is reflected in the problematic representations of black characters. Steinberg stages the most remarkable interrogation of whiteness in the context of his second conversation with Elias. Elias has concluded that Mitchell's son has been killed as a result of and in response to a historically-informed 'border' war, fought between the white farmers and the black tenants, and he comments that Mitchell "is white. He has money. He can set up a

farm in a quieter district”, to which Steinberg responds that if that were to happen, the ‘border’ would simply recede until the next farmer was forced to leave with the result that “soon the peasants own the whole countryside and the whites barricade themselves into the cities” (2002, 248). This echoes the white anxieties flagged earlier in the narrative that “they want the bush back. Like it was before the whites arrived” (Steinberg 2002, 10). However, the most scathing and insightful criticism comes from the mouth of Elias, who says to Steinberg:

The problem is that your imagination is not big enough to put you in somebody else’s shoes. You come to the midlands to write about the murder of a white farmer. The farming community opens their arms to you because they want the world to know about their outrage. And you write their book for them. Yes, you go to the other side, with your informers and your old friends from Cosatu. And you try to do the blacks justice. But no matter what you say, your book is still about the white man being chased off the land ...

Several important issues are raised in this quotation. It is interesting that Steinberg here foreshadows Antjie Krog’s argument against writing fiction. Krog (2009, 268 and 2007, online) comments that the “imagination is simply not capable of imagining a reality as – or with – the other” and that “coming from a divided, exclusive past, the imagination – or at least mine – is at a disadvantage.” Steinberg makes this disadvantage overt as he foregrounds his investigative process and allows the reader to be privy to his difficulties in gaining access to the black communities of Izita and



Langeni. The reader is constantly reminded of the actuality of his narrative through Steinberg's interjections, and thus of his attempts to remain objective and present an unbiased documentary of the events. Thus Steinberg is aware of his inability as a white South African fully to imagine himself into a black life, and he therefore works within a non-fiction narrative in an attempt to present his story as accurately and fairly as possible. However, this approach creates an inescapable quandary:

Steinberg is unable to imagine the black perspective because his "imagination is not big enough", but he cannot gain unmediated access to the black communities because he is white, and "how does a white man stroll in with a notebook and ask all in the vicinity to open their souls", thus he is forced to "understand Izita and Langeni at secondhand" (Steinberg 2002, 106). Steinberg (2002, 109) acknowledges that "there was a universe of meaning just beyond my fingertips, and if I failed to get inside it I would have no hope of understanding this murder", and the reader is constantly aware of this meaning that is just beyond reach, which contributes to the sense of frustration that I referred to earlier. More importantly though, while Steinberg avers that "the tenants could not be a blank screen onto which white farmers projected their darkest thoughts about Africa", the black communities' point of view is never as richly detailed and fully fleshed out as that of the white farmers', and the narrative continues to revolve around "the white man being chased off the land."

## The Ethics of Writing White

The second, and related, issue that is highlighted by this particular exchange between Steinberg and Elias is that of Steinberg's anxiety regarding his own whiteness. Steinberg (2002, 249-250) comments:

Elias's soliloquy seduces me. I feel exhilarated as he sweeps across history ... He seduces me and I hate myself for it. When I rose to Mitchell's defence, I did so as a journalist. I wanted my subject to work for his prejudices. But a part of me listened to myself defending Mitchell, and as I heard my voice, I knew it was for real. I was not a journalist, but a white man, like Mitchell, and I was in his corner. I needed Elias to lose his argument because he scared me. And as he dug in his heels, and spoke to me as a racist, I slipped out of this primordial whiteness, became a journalist again, listened to my subject sweep across time, was excited in the most abstract and unsatisfying of ways, as if I was observing a foreign country, and would send a dispatch home, to be read by other disinterested observers.

I have indicated earlier in my argument that Steinberg (2002, 195 and 14) is aware of the ways in which his own whiteness has "shaped the trajectory of [his] entire investigation", from his interview with the young white detective, Will Sullivan, for whom the fact that Steinberg "was white was enough for [him] to trust [Steinberg] implicitly with the lives of black witnesses", to the white farmers of the district,

“none of [whom]...had thought not to trust [Steinberg]”, of whom Steinberg comments, “the murder victim and I were both white, and the killers were black; it was assumed that I would write a sympathetic account.” Steinberg’s anxiety stems both from his concerns regarding the journalistic ethics of his project and his own feared complicity with the whiteness of the farmers. In an interview with David Lehman (2010, 37) titled “Counting the Cost of Non-Fiction”, Steinberg states:

One thing that has been at the back of my mind is the relation between a good book and an ethical book. I wouldn’t put it so sharply as to say that to the extent my books are good, they are also unethical. But it is nonetheless something worth exploring. If my books have any insight into South Africa, it is in part because they explore the power that I as a white person have over my subjects and the power they try to exert over me as black people. I think my books trade on an extremely unequal racial relationship.

Thus the question of the ethics of narration hangs over Steinberg’s book. As Steinberg acknowledges, this is a question of who has the authority to tell a particular story and who has the power to determine the direction of the narrative. The difficulties Steinberg faced in gaining access to the black communities limit the way in which those communities can be represented and understood, and Steinberg admits, “I only really got a whiff of the murderers’ world” (Lehman 2010, 39). This is problematic because it allows a space in which preconceived ideas and stereotypes surrounding black identity can persist without the threat of interrogation and being

unravelling. It is thus ironic that after the book was published, Steinberg comments, “the white farming community in the district thought I’d taken the side of the black people, and I became *persona non grata* in their world” (Lehman 2010, 39). Thus there are in fact two ethical issues at play in Steinberg’s book. The first I have already outlined as the difficulty of a white journalist speaking for a black community he has not been able to fully enter; and the second centres on the white community’s perception of having been betrayed. In the preface to *Midlands* Steinberg speaks to the issues of ethical journalism and storytelling when he discusses his reasons for concealing the identities of the characters in his narrative. Steinberg (2002, ix) comments that “any journalist who endeavours to conceal, must, if he is honest, admit to a defeat of sorts. A book that claims the status of a historical or documentary record surely loses some of its authority when the names scattered across that record are fictitious.” But he also acknowledges “that every journalist hurts the person about whom he writes” because there is always a disjunction between the motivation of the subject to share his story and the journalist to record and publish that story (Steinberg 2002, x). It is within this space that the perceived betrayal occurs. Steinberg (2002, x-xi) observes:

Mitchell cooperated with me because he believed, initially, that this book might bring him justice. I, on the other hand, approached him because I believed that his son’s murder said something of extraordinary value about life on post-apartheid South Africa’s racial frontier ... My task was not to protect Mitchell from his readership ... On the contrary, I was on the readers’ side. My purpose was to tell a

grander story, one that happened to implicate, and to reach into the life of, a man who had agreed to talk to me.

Thus Steinberg foregrounds the ethical issues involved in constructing his narrative from the outset, but it is only in the penultimate chapter of the book that the issue of his own complicity in whiteness slips out onto the page. Steinberg (2002, 249) realises in the conversation with Elias discussed above, “I was not a journalist, but a white man, like Mitchell, and I was in his corner. I needed Elias to lose his argument because he scared me.” This is a complex moment in the narrative because the measured, objective tone that has characterised the preceding chapters gives way to something that is more visceral. Throughout the book, Steinberg has distanced himself from his white informants, and has resisted their attempts to draw him into a relationship of white solidarity. In response to Arthur Mitchell’s self-righteous claim that he has chosen to work within the framework of the law in his search for justice, as opposed to enacting revenge as he sees fit, Steinberg (2002, 90) comments:

When he stops speaking, I keep my head down and write. I slow down to a snail’s pace. The scratching of pen against paper is the only sound in the room. I want to make a point. I am telling Mitchell that he is always on the record when I am around. I feel great sympathy for his grief and his loss. I have told him that, and that the murder of his son was a terrible evil. But I do not want to get too close. I do not want him to believe that he can share dark secrets with me.

However, it is Steinberg's anxiety that perhaps he already harbours those same dark secrets within his own white heart, that he is "not a journalist, but a white man, like Mitchell", which finally slips out onto the page during his conversation with Elias. Steinberg never addresses this issue of complicity directly, and thus it never finds resolution in the narrative. What Steinberg (2002, 174) does point to, though, is the resilient nature of white ignorance, and he suggests that the "white farmers were constitutionally incapable of grasping [the] possibility" that they might be in any way culpable for the tragic unfolding of events around them.

### He Had Started at the Beginning of the Story...

Steinberg's narrative draws to a close as Arthur Mitchell sells his farms to the wealthy, liberal Anton Benfield. Steinberg (2002, 255) comments:

Everyone wants to write a redemptive story. Leading your reader into the heart of darkness is a pretty bleak vocation. So if the problem begins and ends with one man, the rest of the world is inoculated against evil. Everything is fixable. And then Anton Benfield arrives on the scene. The escape route beckons.

The possibility of locating all that is undesirable about whiteness within one man in a particular, relatively isolated, community is appealing to both Steinberg and his readers. In this way, the whiteness that Steinberg has delineated as filled with

suspicion and clinging resolutely to a colonial mindset of 'us/them' can be ascribed to rural white farmers who still believed themselves to be at war, and thus can be viewed as an anomaly. Steinberg seems to suggest that perhaps the liberal white man from the city can reveal a more redemptive whiteness, one that is not as uncomfortable to identify with as that which Arthur Mitchell offers. However, this possibility is almost immediately undercut as Steinberg brings his narrative full circle and retraces his first journey through the midlands on his way to interview the new owner of the Mitchell farm. He describes his conflicting interpretations of the landscape:

There were two, maybe three countrysides beyond the bubble of my car, and they all clamoured for attention. The first was the scene I had witnessed a year before, a tourist's scene ... It was stupendously beautiful, and I realised for the first time why it was so moving. The secret lay in the sudden play between confinement and expansiveness ... Everything about the countryside that invoked the spiritual in city people was there, exaggerated and overbearing ...

Another countryside began to intrude. It was hazy and ephemeral at first, but it sprang unmistakably from the knowledge I had absorbed during the past year. The roadside was almost entirely deserted for the duration of my drive ... And yet the anger of those who had grown up in that district was there. The emptiness echoed with the people who trod that road every day, and in the silence I saw their ghosts ... The social history in my head mingled with the

landscape outside, invaded it, came to own it, and soon all I could see was an ancient and silent battle. (Steinberg 2002, 257)

Thus no alternative is offered to the foreboding landscape of the book's cover, and the 'land' remains weighted with the mistrust and misunderstanding of its colonial past. Similarly, despite the intimation that the relationship between the white landlord and the black tenants can change – Benfield is described as having “some imagination when it comes to dealing with the blacks ... He reckons he can accommodate” – the stage is set for the colonial present to remain the status quo and for whiteness to persist in its current vein of suspicion and isolated disregard (Steinberg 2002, 255). Steinberg concludes his narrative with his meeting and brief conversation with Benfield's two reticent adult sons. One brother refers to Steinberg's book and asks why Peter Mitchell was killed, to which Steinberg responds, “You'd think that's the one question I should be able to answer. But it's a long, difficult story. I guess the short answer is what everyone says. It was one of the tenants at Langeni.” When Steinberg asks the younger Benfield if he has had any contact with the tenants, the man replies, “Ja. They came to us and asked if they could build a road through our farm. We said no.” Steinberg (2002, 259) ends his narrative thus, “I started to say something and then stopped. I wanted to tell him that he has just begun to answer his own question; he had started at the beginning of the story about the young white man who was killed.” This dark prophesy reinforces the readers' “overall frustration at the seemingly inevitable violence” that is written into the landscape and that plays itself out as a timeless ‘frontier war’. While *Midlands* does tell us “something ... about life on post-apartheid South Africa's



racial frontier”, Steinberg’s loyalty to the principles of investigative non-fiction storytelling ultimately limits the narrative in ways that are unsatisfying and troublesome. Whiteness, while interrogated and revealed as riddled with fear and mistrust, is never offered a means of moving out of the colonial present and into a space of postcolonial becoming, and is thus trapped in a relentless ‘frontier war’ with an ‘other’ who remains unknown and threatening.

## Chapter Six

### The Silence and Sound of 'Woman' as 'Truth': Re-reading Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*

*That is precisely why I say that maybe writers in South Africa should shut up for a while. That one has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction. Words come more easily for writers, perhaps. So let the domain rather belong to those who literally paid blood for every faltering word they utter before the Truth Commission.*

Antjie Krog 1998: 237

## Heart to Heart

While her partisanship is mostly excusable, this book [*Country of My Skull*] has other flaws: published last year in South Africa, it lacks analysis of the TRC's October 1998 report and recommendations. More troubling are Krog's somewhat muddled meditations on the slippery nature of truth and narrative and her implication that small falsehoods are permissible – even necessary – for the discernment of a larger truth. While *Country of My Skull* shows evidence of an enduring racial divide, its ultimate hopefulness counterpoints Rian Malan's powerfully pessimistic *My Traitor's Heart* (1990). In both books Afrikaner authors, members of the tribe that instituted apartheid, seek a place in their tortured, beloved country.

This 1999 *Publishers Weekly* review of Antjie Krog's first literary narrative published in English is indicative of several key concerns that resurface repeatedly in response to the book: the narrative is incomplete; the form is unfamiliar and unsettling; and Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* (1991) is called forth in comparison, particularly on an international stage. Some of the issues surrounding narrative closure, specifically the inclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, have been dealt with to a degree with the addition of the "Epilogue" in the second and subsequent editions of the book. However, I suggest that resisting closure is a key strategy within the text and one that contributes to the unsettling reading experience. The notion of 'being unsettled' is an important one, and the apparent lack of narrative closure compounds the "more troubling" experience of "Krog's

somewhat muddled meditations on the slippery nature of truth.” The hybrid nature of the text, with its use of journalism, political analysis, poetry, verbatim testimony and fictional narrative, presents both reader and publisher with a book that remains difficult to categorise and challenging to read. In this way, the form of the text foregrounds the concerns of the content and ensures that readers confront the difficulties of the narrative not only in what they read but also in how they read. Nevertheless, a glance at the back cover of the second edition of Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* (2002) reveals the range of positive responses to the text. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu states that “it is a beautiful and powerful book”, while Carol Lazar of *The Star* describes the text as “written with meticulous honesty and true literary brilliance.” The *Daily Telegraph* says that “no one will tell us more about the struggle for the Afrikaner’s soul; for this book, like the events it reveals, is an act of redemption.” However, it is the idea that *Country of My Skull* – and Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* – address “the struggle for the Afrikaner’s soul” as they “seek a place in their tortured, beloved land” that I wish to explore now in greater detail.

I have already considered Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* in some detail in Chapter Four, but I think it is necessary briefly to discuss the ways in which Malan’s narrative has been set in conversation with Krog’s *Country of My Skull*. The books, published almost a decade apart, converge and diverge in interesting ways, and critical response to the texts has been equally varied. The *Times Literary Supplement* wrote of Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart* (1991):

Has there ever been a better moment to remind ourselves of the South African situation, which is fear and hatred, racial fear and racial hatred? ... This is ... a magnificent book, an explosion of truth-telling at a time when we are being given so much half-informed and over-optimistic simplification. Malan belongs in a line of Afrikaner breast-beating.

Donald Woods, writing for the *Sunday Times*, suggests that Malan's book "reminds us of the scale of challenge that will face all South Africans in the post-apartheid era, and that the new South Africa, in its formative years, will be as dangerous as it will be exciting." It is noteworthy that *Country of My Skull* is presented as a 'counterpoint' to *My Traitor's Heart*, and that both critics and reviewers insist on examining the texts in relation to each other. For example, Sarah Ruden (1999, 174) in her discussion of Krog's *Country of My Skull* suggests that while "Krog [has] extended the abuses of apartheid ... by manipulating other lives like inanimate materials in an abstract design", Malan's *My Traitor's Heart* succeeds through his detailed research and narration that avoids appropriating apartheid victim testimony. Van Zanten Gallagher (2002, 150), as quoted earlier in this thesis, is critical of Malan's insistent use of narratives of violence when "it would have been possible, after having recognised and named his diseased soul near the end of composing the text, ... to have excised some of the preceding matter." In contrast, she comments, "the genius of *Country of My Skull* ... lies in the way that Krog goes beyond presenting the disturbing docudrama of the hearings to unveil her own internal drama." Meanwhile Osinubi (2008, 123) suggests that both "Krog and Malan

present abusive narratives: they submit victims, readers, and themselves to forms of abuse by using other people's stories and by exploiting narrative conventions." The tendency to compare these two texts is pervasive, and interestingly Krog (2002, 32) prefigures this connection when, in *Country of My Skull*, while describing the process of constructing reports for radio, she comments, "we are told that the writer Rian Malan has complained that he doesn't want to mix 'breakfast and blood' in the mornings. This is just the encouragement we need." Mark Gevisser (1998, 26) captures the dynamic between these two books in his review of Krog's text when he suggests that *Country of My Skull* offers "a riposte so eloquent, so personal and profound, so original, so rigorous, that [it] is nothing less than the *My Traitor's Heart* of this decade."

With the publication of *Country of My Skull*, Krog achieved international acclaim and, more importantly, became recognised by English-speaking South Africans as both a journalist and literary author. This is significant, because while prior to this Krog was well-known as an established and awarding-winning Afrikaans poet, her work had limited currency amongst English South Africans. Anthea Garman (2009, 171) offers a detailed discussion of Krog's accumulation of meta-capital<sup>31</sup> over the 40-year span of her career, and suggests that it is with *Country of My Skull* that Krog both secures her place as a journalist and broadens her readership to include English-speaking

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<sup>31</sup> Drawing on the media theories of Bourdieu (1983) and Couldry (2003), Anthea Garman discusses meta-capital as symbolic cultural power gained through legitimization and consecration within the media that can be transferred within, and across, social fields. Garman (2009: 197) suggests that through her dual position as both the subject of news and a journalist who 'makes the news', Antjie Krog is set "apart from other writers who enter the public domain" and is "[marked]... as a person who has acquired 'media meta-capital' and uses it".

South Africans. With the subsequent publication of *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to be Black* (2009), reference is made back to *Country of My Skull* as the framing narrative. Critics and reviewers repeatedly allude, or refer directly, to *Country of My Skull* when discussing Krog's later works, and given that her latest book, *Begging to be Black*, has been marketed as the third part of a trilogy, it seems necessary to revisit *Country of My Skull* in order to assess the way in which the narrative concerns first raised in that book are brought to a conclusion in *Begging to be Black*.

### She Says Not a Word...

*Country of My Skull* has elicited an overwhelming response from critics and academics both in South Africa and abroad. I do not have the scope in this chapter to engage in detail with the many and varied arguments put forward, but I would like to turn my attention to just two of those articles. Carli Coetzee's (2001) "'They Never Wept, the Men of my Race': Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and the White South African Signature" and Georgina Horrell's (2004) "A Whiter Shade of Pale: White Femininity as Guilty Masquerade in 'New' (White) South African Women's Writing" are two articles that raise pertinent points that are relevant to my larger argument about the renegotiation of whiteness. Coetzee (2001, 685) examines the duality of the addressee in Krog's book and suggests that by "calling to her Afrikaans-speaking audience to witness her distancing herself from them" as she addresses the black women of the dedication, Krog attempts to imagine not only possibilities for a new

country, but also new forms of interaction and engagement between black and white South Africans. In discussing the ways in which the works of Gillian Slovo, Elleke Boehmer and Sarah Penny both “conceal and display a crisis in identity and subjectivity for whites”, Horrell (2004, 765) uses the concept of femininity as masquerade to explore the “inscriptions of whiteness, guilt and culpability” within this body of work. Horrell (2004, 767) suggests that while the “novels of Elleke Boehmer and Sarah Penny ... evoke questions of white feminine identity, its excess and its breaches ... the tortured white writings of Antjie Krog gesture towards a stripping of masquerade and reveal whiteness coloured a bloody red.”

Horrell’s argument appears to position Krog’s *Country of My Skull* as a positive counterpoint to the more limiting performances of whiteness presented by the work of Slovo, Boehmer and Penny. While Horrell (2004, 775) seems to suggest that Krog’s resistance to employing femininity as “guilty masquerade”, and that her “appalled recognition of her particular and unavoidable complicity with the men named as perpetrators” results in a text that negotiates the themes of guilt, shame and power more effectively, she complicates this assertion with the inclusion of Krog’s comments made during a BBC radio interview. Horrell (2004, 775) refers to an interview in March 2004, in which Krog:

spoke in halting, tortured tones of the apparent impossibility for whites ... to locate a place from which to critique or comment on events ... [and] that this position of ontological tenuousness is such that it renders the white would-be critic unfit even as supporting



voice in public debate: that a white voice serves only to 'taint' the argument with which it engages. Better, she suggests, to remain silent ... the public white woman's voice is not fit, it would seem, to be heard.

Horrell has, perhaps unknowingly, exposed a complex and peculiar tension that exists within *Country of My Skull*; the powerful use of 'woman' as a restorative and redemptive metaphor is surreptitiously undercut by the objectifying, and silencing, depictions of white women. It is noteworthy that while Krog includes descriptions of the three most 'public white women' who visit South Africa during the 1990s – Queen Elizabeth II, Hilary Clinton and Queen Margarethe of Denmark – all are denied a voice. Queen Elizabeth II is described as “[looking] like anybody’s auntie from P.E., complete with a clasp bag from John Orrs and *skoentjies* from Stuttafords” (Krog 2002, 7). And although “She speeches”, Krog (2002, 8) observes that “it sounds like something one would find at any small-town women’s society meeting” but “it is delivered in the Accent that has intimidated half the earth for centuries.” While Krog’s initial account of Queen Elizabeth II may appear humanising, this is undercut by her more critical response evident in the exchange with the taxi driver on their way to a cocktail party aboard the *Britannia* (Krog 2002, 8). The driver asks, “So what did [the Queen] say in Parliament?” To which Krog replies, “Nothing ....” And so the Queen, despite her speech, is rendered voiceless and silent. The descriptions of the visits by Queen Margarethe of Denmark and Hilary Clinton appear later in the narrative and are set back-to-back. On her visit to the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture in Woodstock, Cape Town, Queen Margarethe “wears a dark-

blue hat upon which a white-linen butterfly has settled. She approves everything smilingly. She says not a word ...Victims tell their gruesome stories while they stumble in pain. She approves everything smilingly. Queen Margarethe says not a word” (Krog 2002, 159). Again, Krog’s depiction of this ‘public white woman’ is not overtly critical , but the use of repetition here has the effect of giving the Danish Queen a hollow, mechanical quality, which is made even more unsettling by the descriptions of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, who “speaks [and] tells jokes.” Krog’s depiction of Hilary Clinton is equally unsettling. During the chaos of a press conference, Krog (2002, 159) says:

... my eye falls on the shoes, ankles and shiny, shapeless legs of  
Hillary Clinton here right in front of me. And at once I’m overcome  
by a deep depression.

I do not want to hear what she is saying. Even if she is the First  
Lady of the Mightiest Nation ... I don’t want to know.

Pumps, I think they’re called. Golden pumps with little golden  
buckles on the heels. From the shoes bulge her feet, up into the  
hosiery that disappears in the straight pink skirt. Armoured. And she  
has to be, because questions are raining down, the spotlight bright  
on her face. She daren’t show an inch of human being.

By focusing on her “shiny, shapeless legs” and “feet that bulge from her shoes”, Krog simultaneously dismembers Hilary Clinton, making her somehow alien, and implies that beneath this very public exterior is a fragile humanity which Clinton “daren’t show.” But the reader is never allowed access to Clinton’s humanity because Krog

does not “want to hear what she is saying. Even if she is the First Lady of the Mightiest Nation ... I don’t want to know.” Thus once again the ‘public white woman’s’ voice is rendered unfit to be heard. I will return to Krog’s use of ‘woman’ as metaphor and the complexities inherent therein a little later in this chapter.

In her discussion of *Country of My Skull* and the narrative’s dual addressee through which “the author ... seems to be calling her historic [*sic*] reading public, her Afrikaans readers, to witness her addressing a black woman”, Carli Coetzee (2001, 688) suggests that “the images and the signature indicate that this text can be seen as divided against itself, doubling up on itself.” Here again, the complex, and often apparently contradictory tendencies in *Country of My Skull* are foregrounded. An important strand within Coetzee’s (2001, 692) argument is to explore how white South Africans might negotiate a legitimate space in a post-apartheid South Africa, and she suggests that Krog’s “text exhibits a high degree of self-doubt and an acute awareness that a new identity for white South Africans may only be possible provisionally, at certain moments.” Thus Coetzee has identified in Krog’s text, not an ambivalence as such, but rather a willingness to remain unsettled, a refusal to submit to neat narrative closures, and a desire repeatedly to interrogate accepted positionings.

The broader concerns of my thesis involve finding ways in which to make whiteness and its complicities visible, and therefore to interrogate performances of whiteness within a post-apartheid South African context. Carli Coetzee (2001, 695) suggests that “what is perhaps most valuable about Krog’s book is her attempt to speak about

whiteness, but not simply *to whites* ....” Coetzee (2001, 695) also comments that “white speech, in the sense that I want to employ it, is speech that is constructed around a yearning – not the yearning in any simple way to *be black*, but the yearning to qualify for a black audience.” Thus, in both this thesis and in Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, the goal is not to examine whiteness hermetically, within the nebulous cloud of whiteness itself, but rather to situate the conversation within the context of many conversations, and to allow the messiness of such an interrogation to be demonstrated. Furthermore, in identifying “the yearning [not] in any simple way to *be black*, [but] to qualify for a black audience”, Coetzee anticipates the trajectory of Krog’s literary project, and highlights the way in which concerns raised in *Country of My Skull* are returned to in *Begging to be Black*. I will elaborate on this connection in Chapter Seven.

## Beneficiaries and Complicities

Schaffer and Smith (2006, 1577) suggest that one of the main criticisms of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that “those positioned neither as victims nor as perpetrators are not called to recognise the benefits to them of structural violence, through which power, privilege, and ‘corporeal vulnerability’ are unevenly distributed”, and therefore “... those who benefited from the everyday policies and practices of the apartheid regime were neither identified as complicit in perpetuating systemic violence nor called to account.” It is in response to this

oversight that Schaffer and Smith examine the role of the beneficiary in relation to the Truth Commission and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*. They conclude that:

by taking seriously the necessity of marking the beneficiary subject position in contexts of radical suffering and harm, Krog's capacious memoir stages a sustained and nuanced dialogue about the responsibilities that those who benefit from white privilege of the Afrikaner past bear as new South African citizen subjects. (Schaffer and Smith 2006, 1581)

It is thus implied that in order to claim any measure of belonging in the reconstituted South African nation, white South Africans must come to terms with their complicity in the past and their responsibilities to the future. However, as *Country of My Skull* suggests, this is not a straightforward process, due to the fact that:

the beneficiary position is a complex and uncomfortable place in which to be situated because it cannot be identified with one moment of human rights abuse which can be claimed, confessed and forgiven. It suggests that one's entire life, as a white South African, is built upon the denigration and oppression of others which has been centuries in the making. (Garman 2009, 185)

Hence, the position of the complicit beneficiary is one of perpetual in-between-ness: never fully able to confess and, consequently, never fully able to atone. However, in her negotiation of the beneficiary position within *Country of My Skull*, Krog is able to

demonstrate how it might be possible for the Afrikaner to acknowledge his or her complicity and thereby find a way through to belonging. That there exists the potential for redemption and restoration for the Afrikaner is reinforced by Njabulo Ndebele (1998, 24) who suggests that “the future of Afrikaner culture may lie in its rediscovery of social morality. Fortunately, this process has begun. In fact, there may be an informal truth and reconciliation process under way among Afrikaners.”

Conversely, Ndebele (1998, 27, 26) argues that “English-speaking South Africans have yet to acknowledge their willing compliance ... in the oppression of black people” and “are blissfully unaware that they should appear before the TRC. They are convinced that it is only the Afrikaner who should do so.” This highlights the crisis of white English-speaking South Africans: set “in the interstice between power and indifferent or supportive agency”, they remain stuck in the purgatorial in-between (Ndebele 1998, 26).

Michiel Heyns (2000) and Georgina Horrell (2009) examine the tendency, in post-apartheid literature, towards confessional narratives, both fictive and autobiographical. In his article, “The Whole Country’s Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing”, Heyns (2000, 42) attempts to address “the question of whether and in what sense confessional fiction ‘comes to terms’ with white South African culpability.” He concludes that “the problem for the white South African writer is how to find a perspective on South Africa that is not merely abject”, and he suggests that works such as Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf* are written in a mode that, “with its surprising element of comedy and farce, will liberate ... writers from the past” (Heyns 2000, 63). However, Heyns overlooks,

perhaps deliberately, any distinction between English and Afrikaans South African writing, preferring to develop his argument under the umbrella term of “white South African writing”, and it is to this that Georgina Horrell (2009) responds in her article, “White Lies, White Truth: Confession and Childhood in White South African Women’s Narratives.” Horrell suggests that because the writers considered by Heyns are first and foremost Afrikaans writers, the ways in which English-speaking South Africans might ‘come to terms’ with their own complicity and culpability remains unexamined. As a corrective, Horrell (2009, 60) interrogates the strategies used in a selection of fictional and non-fictional texts by English-speaking white South African women to “construct a moment of confession and reparation.” She argues that although no Truth and Reconciliation Commission amnesty applications came from white English-speaking women, “they undeniably benefited from a society regulated by Apartheid” (Horrell 2009, 61). It is the negotiation of this position of the beneficiary, and the complicity that it entails, that Horrell seeks to explore in her article. I refer here to Heyns and Horrell because their arguments bring to light the often overlooked positions of ‘English’ and ‘woman’ in discussions regarding the beneficiary and complicity. While I have already suggested that Krog’s *Country of My Skull* attempts to negotiate the notion of the beneficiary with regard to Afrikaner identity, the depiction of ‘Englishness’, and the representation of women, in relation to complicity and occupying the position of the beneficiary in the narrative, requires further interrogation.

The contention surrounding the English-speaking South African’s complicity in apartheid surfaces repeatedly in the texts this project is examining. In Jonny

Steinberg's *Midlands*, the main protagonist, Arthur Mitchell, protests that, as an English South African, South Africa's apartheid legacy has nothing to do with him, and everything to do with the Afrikaner. Interestingly, Mitchell sees himself, as a farmer, not only "battling against generations of Zulu madness ... [but] also ... two generations of Afrikaner madness" (Steinberg 2002, 93). This echoes the sentiment Krog (2002, 97) identifies when she comments, "I do a radio profile on each of the five [Vlakplaas security team] ... Half an hour after the first profile is broadcast, the phone rings. Listeners are outraged ... Not just Afrikaans listeners. 'Don't pretend it's whites. It's the work of Afrikaners and Nationalists'." These attitudes, seemingly prevalent amongst white English-speaking South Africans, are problematic because they close off the processes of reconciliation and refuse to acknowledge any complicity in the apartheid past. Krog (2002, 95) quotes a psychiatrist, Dr Kaliski: "Some individuals are targeted as the scapegoats for past atrocities. And that allows other citizens to deny any complicity." This reinforces Ndebele's argument that English-speaking white South Africans exculpate themselves with the notion that responsibility for apartheid lies solely with the Afrikaner. Krog's dedication at the beginning of *Country of My Skull* can be interpreted as perpetuating this attitude,<sup>32</sup> as the book is dedicated to "every victim who had an *Afrikaner* surname on her lips" (my italics). Thus the English-speaking white South African is able to deny his or her complicity in an unjust system, and is able to overlook and leave unacknowledged his or her position as a beneficiary of that system.

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<sup>32</sup> Krog is also very careful not to speak on behalf of others, as is evident in her engagement with the testimonies in *Country of My Skull*. It is therefore possible that Krog's dedication can also be interpreted as reflecting her belief that she does not have *the right* to apologize on behalf of English-speakers.



Krog's representation of white women in *Country of My Skull* with regard to complicity and the role of the beneficiary is complex and, at times, problematic. In a narrative in which the victims, and those speaking for the victims, are defined as black and female – “she is sitting behind the microphone, dressed in beret or *kopdoek*” – and the perpetrators, and amnesty-seekers, are mostly white and male (and by implication, Afrikaans), the white South African woman remains a peripheral character (Krog 2002, 56). When she does appear, the white woman is depicted as insubstantial and almost callously indifferent to the story unfolding around her:

While Dirk Coetzee tells of how Griffiths Mxenge was stabbed, how the knife was twisted in behind his ribs ... how his throat was cut and his intestines jerked out, his security men sit behind him ... One of them is Klein Dirk. His blonde girlfriend is with him today. She is wearing a little black foliage of a dress with thin straps. As Coetzee is relating the details, to gasps of horror from the audience, she is busy lacquering her nails. Her left hand is splayed on Klein Dirk's thigh – he holds the bottle while she applies neat layers of dark Cutex to her nails. (Krog 2002, 62)

The blonde girlfriend of Klein Dirk appears completely disengaged and oblivious to the horror Dirk Coetzee's testimony; she believed herself to be safely ensconced in her cocoon of whiteness, and able to attend to the most trivial of activities. She remains a blank screen of detached whiteness.

One of the few white women in Krog's *Country of My Skull* to be afforded the opportunity to speak is Beth Savage, a victim of the King William's Town Golf Club attack; but her testimony becomes trite and superficial as it is juxtaposed with that of Elsie Gishi, who survived a Boxing Day attack by white security forces. The two women's testimonies stand alone in the shortest chapter in *Country of My Skull*, titled "Two Women: Let us hear it in another language", and thus are set in direct conversation with one another. The chapter begins with Elsie Gishi's testimony:

When I came home, I saw there were many white men, they kicked my door, they kicked it and they went in. I am sure I nearly died that day ... Around 4pm I thought we were all dead already, it was just dark and there was smoke ... We were tramping over bodies, there were lots of them. Some of these children were put on fire. When they put me in the van, this van was already full of people. I was taken to Tygerberg ...

I am still sick ... my feet were rotten and my hands were all rotten, I have holes, I can't sleep well. Sometimes when I try to sleep, it feels like something is evaporating from my head until I take these pills, then I get better. All this is caused by these bullets that I have in my body. (Krog 2002, 79-80)

Elsie Gishi's testimony conveys the chaos and confusion of the attack as those who tried to flee in the midst of the shooting, the fire and the smoke, "were tramping over bodies." While she was taken to Tygerberg hospital, it was in a van, "already full of people", and it becomes obvious that the medical care she received was

inadequate as she is “still sick” and her hands and feet “were rotten”. The hopelessness expressed by Elsie Gishi’s testimony suggests the ways in which the attack has irrevocably changed her life and damaged her body.

In contrast, Beth Savage gives her testimony of the attack at the King William’s Town Golf Club:

It was our Christmas party ... I suddenly became aware of something that sounded like firecrackers ... I saw a man there with a balaclava on his head ... with an AK-47, and my immediate reactions was, “Oh my goodness, this is a terrorist attack!” After that I blacked out and I don’t remember anything else until I was on the helicopter being flown to Bloemfontein ... to an ICU.

... I spent a month in ICU. It was quite traumatic, I had to learn to walk again ... I had open-heart surgery ... I’ve got some very ugly scarring up the middle and I have a damaged thumb from the shrapnel. I’ve still got shrapnel in my body, but all it means is that the bells ring when I go through the airport, and that makes life exciting ... But all in all ... through the trauma of it all, I honestly feel richer ... (Krog 2002, 80-81)

The juxtaposition of these testimonies does several things. It questions whether all victims are really equal as it reveals the gross disparities between most black and white South Africans in terms of access to medical attention and care – Elsie Gishi is taken to hospital in a van, already full of people, while Beth Savage is flown to an ICU

via helicopter – and the long term consequences thereof, as Gishi laments that “These bullets in me feel like steel thorns ... I am still sick ... I have holes, I can’t sleep well” in contrast to Savage who says, “through the trauma of it all, I honestly feel richer. I think it’s been a really enriching experience for me ....” Krog also interrogates the material and social privilege inherent in whiteness in South Africa. Beth Savage was financially secure enough to attend Christmas parties at golf clubs and for air travel to be an expected part of her lifestyle. Her mindset was also so habituated to the expectation of safety, that the experience of setting off the airport alarms due to the shrapnel still embedded in her body is framed as something “that makes life exciting” rather than as a cause for anxiety and fear. Finally, in this short chapter, Krog alludes to the way in which Njabulo Ndebele’s ‘universal sanctity of the white body’ is played out and secured, and while I explore Ndebele’s concept in greater detail later in Chapter Seven in relation to Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, it is useful to gesture towards it now. Beth Savage comments, “while I was in hospital I was really quite touched that members of the ANC did come to visit me, just popped in to see how I was doing. I thought that was very touching, and of course Bloemfontein, and really the whole world, sent out messages, and in fact I was quite spoiled” (Krog 2002, 81). That Beth Savage takes for granted her protected position within the global community of whiteness is revealed in her choice of words, “I was really quite touched” and “I was quite spoiled” which seem out of place as a response to the experience of a violent attack. It is also significant that “the whole world” reaches out to this particular white woman when it is perceived that the sanctity of whiteness has in some way been violated. In contrast, Elsie Gishi is shown to be very much alone and without support.

I mentioned earlier that Krog's depiction of white women in relation to complicity and the position of the beneficiary is complex and, at times, problematic. I have also discussed the way in which white women tend to be rendered voiceless within *Country of My Skull*. A sympathetic reading of Krog's positioning of the testimonies of Elsie Gishi and Beth Savage highlights the disparities between black and white South Africans, and foregrounds the ways in which white privilege and the position of the beneficiary remain largely uninterrogated within society. However, this reading is complicated by what Krog has chosen *not* to include in this particular chapter. In Beth Savage's Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony, after describing the attack she goes on to say, "... what I would like, what I would really, really like is, I would like to meet that man that threw that grenade in an attitude of forgiveness and hope that he could forgive me too for whatever reason."<sup>33</sup> Georgina Horrell (2004, 774) makes reference to this extract from Beth Savage's testimony and suggests that:

Savage's desire is for reconciliation – she is willing to submit her individual status as 'wronged' to the broader demands of society's imperative for collective penitence. Furthermore, her public appearance at the hearing for 'victims', potentially her act of self-affirmation, or assertion of her right to justice, is undermined by her final acknowledgement of shared white guilt.

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<sup>33</sup> "Truth and Reconciliation Commission Human Rights Violation Submissions – Questions and Answers" transcript. 17 April 1996 (Case EC0051/96). Website: <http://111.doj.gov.za/trc/trccom.htm>

Thus, in her testimony Savage is able to acknowledge her own complicity in a system of oppression based on race, and to see herself as a beneficiary of that system. It is therefore interesting that Krog refuses to allow Beth Savage the space to do so in the narrative of *Country of My Skull*. The result is that Beth Savage, as a white South African woman, is depicted as shallow and limited, and she is silenced at the very moment in which she attempts step out from the bulwark of whiteness. This is problematic because it surreptitiously undermines Krog's larger project of seeking ways in which to situate whiteness in conversation with its compatriot others.

In *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, Mark Sanders offers a carefully nuanced argument that productively complicates the notion of 'complicity'. He begins with an examination of the way in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report discusses complicity, specifically with regard to various corporate and institutional sectors, and suggests that "the commission's investigation and findings on these institutional sectors are grounded in a juridical notion of complicity whereby agents in these sectors were usually not the principal perpetrators of the violations investigated but were accomplices or accessories after the fact" (Sanders 2002, 2). Furthermore Sanders (2002, 3) quotes the Truth Commission report when he comments that:

drawing the attention of the public to the deeds of the exceptional perpetrator led to a "failure to recognise the 'little perpetrator' in each of us"; whereas " it is only by recognising the potential for evil

in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated.”

Sanders (2002, 4) goes on to argue that the public performances of confession during the amnesty hearings and the special ‘institutional’ hearings provided a platform for the ‘exceptional’ perpetrator, guilty of exceptional human rights abuses or neglect, to acknowledge and accept responsibility. However, this space of public confession was not accessible to the ordinary white South African, the ‘little perpetrator’, part of that “vast majority of the white community who, although they might not have been actively involved and even if many deny it, were witness to what happened, benefited from it and who were in that way, complicit” (Slovo 2003, 20). Nevertheless, Sanders (2002, 4) suggests that although the public staging of confession may be, for the most part, unavailable, “the projection of complicity through an owning of the ‘little perpetrator’ is ... the ethico-political response available to anyone.” Thus it is possible to “[affirm] one’s complicity in order to claim responsibility for what is done in one’s name without simply distancing oneself from the deed” (Sanders 2002, 4).

The second aspect of Sanders’ argument draws a distinction between a narrow complicity and a broader one. Using the example of Emile Zola’s 1898 “J’accuse”, “an open letter to the President of France on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish artillery officer falsely accused and convicted of treason”, Sanders (2002, 5) suggests that “for Zola to want not to be complicit in racism is, at least tacitly, to accept and affirm a larger complicity – etymologically, a folded-together-ness (*com-plic-ity*) – in

human-being (or the being of being human).” Thus, ‘complicity’ is framed as not merely a shamed and shameful state of being, but as having the potential to affirm, encourage and expand one’s connectedness and sense of belonging. Sanders (2002, 11) submits that:

Complicity, in this convergence of act and responsibility, is thus at one with the basic folded-together-ness of being, of human-being, of self and other. Such foldedness is the condition of possibility of all particular affiliations, loyalties, and commitments. In the absence of an *acknowledgement* of complicity in a wider sense of foldedness with the other, whether welcomed or not, there would have been no opposition to apartheid.

The nature of the apartheid system was such that it refused complicity as folded-together-ness, and denied the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus in order to restore the dignity and humanity of those repeatedly denigrated and tyrannized, the perpetrator must become human again too. It is this sentiment that is expressed by Cynthia Ngewu, mother of Christopher Piet, one of the Gugulethu Seven, who says, “This thing called reconciliation ... if it means this perpetrator, this man who killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all” (Krog 2002, 109). This an extraordinary statement, which speaks to the idea of the individual as situated within a community. The community, or the nation, cannot heal and move towards wholeness when certain individuals are



excluded or left behind, for the exclusion of some results in the humanity of all being diminished. Sanders argues that only by acknowledging one's complicity, in both the narrow and broad senses of the word, can one become fully human and fully integrated into a humane society. While Krog exposes the unwillingness of many white South Africans, particularly those in political positions, to recognize the full extent of their complicity in the apartheid system, she also draws attention to those individuals, black and white, who realise that the only way to move out of the past is to acknowledge their responsibility for what they have or have not done. Krog (2002, 121-122) describes how:

Just before midnight, six black youths walk into the Truth Commission's offices in Cape Town. They insist on filling out the forms and taking the oath. Their application simply says: Amnesty for Apathy. They had been having a normal Saturday evening jol in a shebeen when they started talking about the amnesty deadline and how millions of people had simply turned a blind eye to what was happening ... "And that's when we decided to ask for amnesty because we had done nothing ... so here we stand as a small group representative of millions of apathetic people who didn't do the right thing."

This is significant because "with applications like this, the amnesty process has ... become the only forum when South Africans can say: We may not have committed a human rights abuse, but we want to say that what we did – or didn't do – was wrong and that we're sorry" (Krog 2002, 122). Krog's concern with complicity, particularly

the broader complicity as ‘folded-togetherness’, resurfaces in *Begging to be Black*, and I will return to this line of argument in Chapter Seven.

## Opening up the Silence

While I have discussed Krog’s multivalent use of genre in greater detail earlier in this project, I would like to comment briefly on how her poetic, resistant style creates narrative openings in which slippery contradictions and tensions can reside. Janet Wolff (1990, 9) posits that:

... there is nothing inherently feminist in experimental ... writing ...  
Nevertheless it seems reasonable to suppose that new forms of cultural expression, by virtue of the fact that their very existence challenges and dislocates dominant narratives and discourses, provide the space for different voices to speak and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experience.

Thus by resisting dominant forms and discourse, Krog not only enables the silenced and unheard voices of ordinary people to enter the public domain, but she also challenges the reader to negotiate the difficult ‘in-between-ness’ of complicity and belonging in a rapidly changing social setting. Schaffer and Smith (2006, 1579) suggest that as “no one way of absorbing, understanding, and reporting this moment can hope to capture the challenge of finding a place”, Krog’s use of a “multiplication of genres, voices, positions, and modes of address” is most appropriate to the task of

understanding a country in transition and the role of the Truth Commission in that change.

I gesture towards Krog's 'experimental' use of genre here because her tendency to "challenge and dislocate dominant narratives and discourse" is significant when considering her use of 'woman' as metaphor, particularly as a metaphor for truth. Garman (2009, 189) argues that "Krog seems to be saying that the truth is to be found in the female experience, in the body of experience, in the words that each woman uses to give voice to her experience and that official, recorded and sanitised truth in documents is to be treated warily." Thus, 'truth' becomes embodied by 'woman'. When one examines Krog's use of the feminine as metaphor, this elision of truth and woman is relatively unproblematic as Krog appears to be drawing on those aspects of the feminine that are generally perceived as positive, such as nurturance, forbearance, patience, emotional largesse and humility. Where the narrative begins to fissure and become unstable is in those moments of juxtaposition between depictions of 'woman' as metaphor and representations of female characters, particularly white women. And it is the objectifying gaze, to which these women characters are subjected, that renders this contradiction most interesting. Janet Wolff (1990, 133) reminds us that "the female body is seen as psychically and socially produced and inscribed. At the same time, it is experienced by women." This is relevant to the rather complex and intricate web of connection that surfaces in *Country of My Skull* between the 'feminine', the body, truth, metaphor, complicity and violence. It is this network of connection that I am attempting to uncover, and the background of the Truth Commission hearings, and Krog's engagement with both

her own lived experience and that of others, provides a dynamic context for such a discussion because “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive – dangerous and in danger” (Russo 1986, 217).

## Truth Has Become Woman

Focused and clear, the first narrative cut into the country. It cut through class, language, persuasion – penetrating even the most frigid earhole of stone. And it continues. Somewhere, in some dusty community, from week to week, the tale keeps on being plaited.

She is sitting behind a microphone, dressed in beret or *kopdoek* and her Sunday best. Everybody recognises her. Truth has become Woman. Her voice, distorted behind her rough hand, has undermined Man as the source of truth. And yet. Nobody knows her. (Krog 2002, 56)

After six months or so, at last the second narrative breaks into relief from its background of silence – unfocused, splintered in intention and degrees of desperation. But it is there. And it is white. And male. (Krog 2002, 56)

In many ways our understanding of apartheid South Africa has been defined by binary oppositions: black/white, English/Afrikaans, male/female, victim/perpetrator,

truth/falsehood. And Krog's juxtaposition of the above two descriptions brings those binaries into sharp relief. The first narrative, the stories told by victims, is female and, it is implied by the description "dressed in beret or *kopdoek*" and "her rough hand", black; while the second narrative, the perpetrators' stories, is white and male. However, the description of the first narrative is cracked with ambivalence and contradiction. The initial forcefulness of the image of a narrative that is "focused and clear" as it "cut into the country", "penetrating even the most frigid earhole" is complicated by the feminine activity of "plaiting" the tale together, and the suggestion that the narrative is "distorted." This ambiguity is deepened as "everybody recognises her ... And yet. Nobody knows her." This ambivalence implies an unknown, unfamiliar space between the accepted binary positions, and in stating that "Truth has become Woman ... [and] has undermined Man as the source of truth", Krog implies that it is in that alien space between what is recognizable that new connections might be forged. It is significant that 'Truth', that which 'would set one free', is depicted as one of the most marginal, and historically powerless, characters within the South African landscape: a woman, but more specifically a black, working-class woman. And it is when that most marginal of voices is heard – "the voice of an ordinary cleaning woman is the headline of the one o'clock news" – that Krog (2002, 32) implies that there is hope for a fundamental change in the social order.

The potentially redemptive possibility presented by this suturing of 'truth' and 'woman' is unsettled somewhat later in the narrative. Chapter 16 of *Country of My Skull* is titled "Truth is a Woman" and comprises mainly testimony heard during the

Special Women's Hearings. One possible reading of this chapter is that it speaks of the resilience of women, and their unacknowledged endurance of unspeakable horrors at the hands of both the apartheid government as well as their own communities and comrades. Women's capacity for patience, kindness and forbearance is highlighted by the vignette describing Deborah Matshoba's conversation with the white prison wardress, Maryna Harmse, who is distraught at the thought of her boyfriend leaving for the border war. Deborah says of Maryna, "she cried and she opened up and we talked", and Krog (2002, 186) comments, "the Truth Commission venue is silent. No one wants to interrupt this story of the power of women to care, endlessly. The moment surpasses all horror and abuse." The determination of these marginalised voices to be heard is also confirmed by the portrayal of the women's hearing in Mdantsane where "it's raining ... like it hasn't rained in years ... But right from the start it's very clear: the women of Mdantsane ... have come to tell their stories" (Krog 2002, 188). Not even a power failure deters the women, despite the fact that "nothing works – not the lights, not the microphones, not the equipment in the interpreters' booths" and "no one organises food. No one can say when the power will be sorted out" (Krog 2002, 189). The women share with one another – peppermints, water, Kleenex tissues – and "by half past two the singing stops. The joking stops. Everyone sits down. The women of Mdantsane sit – their arms folded resolutely across their chests. Frantic calls are made from Commission cellphones", and finally a generator is organised and the hearing resumes (Krog 2002, 189). At the end of a long day, "the women of Mdantsane slowly get up. They fold their blankets, they smile, they congratulate each other ... no rain, no power failure, no men could silence their stories today" (Krog 2002, 190).

A more critical reading of this chapter reveals the cracks and fissures within the use of the feminine as a redemptive metaphor. The moments that foreground the resilience and fortitude of women, these marginalised voices, are juxtaposed with images and stories that unsettle and complicate a redemptive reading. The most striking irony is that the chapter titled “Truth is a Woman”, which deals with testimony from the women’s hearings, begins with the testimony of a man. Mark Sanders (2002, 198) highlights the fact that while many women testified before the Truth Commission, the majority did so on behalf of a male relative who was a victim of human rights abuse. The Special Women’s Hearings were an attempt to create a space for those women who suffered as victims in their own right, to speak. As Sheila Masote comments, “I don’t seem to have an identity that belongs to me. I’m either Zeph Mothopeng’s daughter or Mike Masote’s wife. But I feel I am me. That is why I am here” (Krog 2002, 187). However, despite the earlier claim that the voice of ‘Truth’ as ‘Woman’ “undermines Man as the source of truth”, the reality is that very often it is the women’s testimonies that are discredited or undermined. This is depicted in the story of Rita Mazibuko, who testified to being detained, raped and tortured by ANC cadres after being accused of being a spy. The rendering of Rita “in her brown dress, beige cardigan and neatly knotted *kopdoek*” is unsettlingly similar to the earlier description of ‘Truth’ as ‘Woman’, “dressed in beret or *kopdoek* and her Sunday best”, but the outcome for Rita is nowhere near as restorative (Krog 2002, 183, 56). Krog comments, “It is a strange testimony.” And the redemptive potential hoped for when the marginal voices began to speak seems to slip away as Rita Mazibuko concludes her testimony:

When she leaves the witness table, she pulls her cardigan closed and folds her arms protectively over her body. As if she already knows that a mighty provincial Premier is going to discredit her evidence repeatedly in public and threaten to take her to court. As if she knows no one will stand up for her. The Truth Commission does not utter a single word in Mazibuko's defence. (Krog 2002, 184)

Just as the opening of this chapter, which is ostensibly a space from which those women testifying at the Special Women's Hearings can be acknowledged and heard, is incongruous with the inclusion of the testimony of a man, so too is the conclusion unsettling with its discussion of the term 'meid' or maid. Again, multiple readings are possible. The portrayal of the callous white woman who responds that "Maids don't feel like other people about their children. They like to be rid of them", to the question of whether her live-in domestic servant does not miss her own children, is a scathing indictment of white attitudes towards blacks and reinforces the sentiment expressed earlier in the narrative that "whites...have never been able to fathom the essence of humanity" (Krog 2002, 190, 161). This reveals whiteness as disconnected and as unable to move out of itself to be with and become the 'other'. However, Krog (2002, 190) also interrogates the associations with the Afrikaans word 'meid' or maid, and quotes a white farmer:

If I see a black woman crying, then I remember two Afrikaans expressions from my youth: "to cry like a *meid*" and "to be as scared as a *meid*." What do I do with this? The most despicable behaviour,



cowardice and loss of control, we have equated with the actions of a black woman. Now the Commission just reinforces this stereotype.

The inclusion of these discussions at this point in the narrative renders the preceding chapter unstable, as it juxtaposes the potentially redemptive qualities of the feminine as metaphor with a very uncomfortable depiction of the reality of South African prejudices. This calls into question whether the metaphor of “Truth has become Woman...dressed in beret or *kopdoek* and her Sunday best” and the triumph of making a space for “the voice of an ordinary cleaning woman” on the lunchtime news are ever really able to undermine the patriarchal and racist binaries of the past.

### To Learn the Deepest Sound of Each Other’s Kidneys in the Night

The 1998 edition of *Country of My Skull* concludes before the submission of the final report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The book closes with Krog (1998, 278) reflecting on the role of the Commission, which “against a flood crashing with the weight of a brutalising past on to new usurping politics ... has kept alive the idea of a common humanity. Painstakingly it has chiselled a way beyond racism and made space for all of our voices.” Krog (1998, 278-279) ends her narrative with a poem, addressed to both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the black woman of her dedication. She says:

because of you  
this country no longer lies

between us but within

(....)

...by a thousand stories

I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed for ever. I want to say:

forgive me

forgive me

forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please

take me

with you.

The narrative thus ends with a plea, and the uncertainty of whether or not that plea will be heeded.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the second and subsequent editions of *Country of My Skull* include an Epilogue in which Krog discusses the submission and reception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report. Perhaps more important though are the other issues that emerge in that final, additional chapter, which foreground Krog's later concerns of 'transformation', 'complicity as folded-together-ness' and 'becoming' addressed in *A Change of Tongue* and *Begging to be Black*.

I have suggested that in her interrogation of complicity and the position of the white beneficiary in *Country of My Skull*, Krog tends to represent white women in ways

that can be read as objectifying and silencing. And this is problematic not only in itself, but also in the way that it unsettles the potentially redemptive metaphor of 'Truth as woman', and closes down spaces of latent possibility for change and transformation. The addition of the Epilogue allows the narrative to crack open once more as Krog (2002, 280) describes an art installation by Judith Mason:

I suddenly find myself in a room – completely empty except for an ordinary wire coat hanger suspended in the middle. From it hangs a dress made of blue plastic – shopping bag plastic. Thin pretty shoulder straps holding up a blue embroidered bodice – from the soft pleated empire line the skirt flows out light and carefree as if swaying in soft morning breezes. It is so exquisite – this twirling blue delicately rustling dress, that I have to bend over, kneel, sit. Choke. It is for her!

MK Commander Phila Ndwandwe. This dress is for her. The blue plastic panties she made in detention to keep her dignity in the face of the men who kept her naked – the plastic of shame and humiliation, has been transformed into this haunting blue salute of beauty.

The reader first encounters Phila Ndwandwe as a nameless victim described by an amnesty-applicant:

“She was brave this one, hell she was brave,” says the grave indicator, the perpetrator, and whistles softly through his teeth. “She simply would not talk.”

Next photo: the earth holding a bundle of bones. Delicately they are chiselled loose ... A vertebra ... the thin flattened collarbone ... The skull has a bullet hole right on top ... Ribs ... Breastbone that once held heart ... Around the pelvis is a blue plastic bag. “Oh yes,” the grave indicator remembers. “We kept her naked and after ten days she made herself these panties.” He sniggers: “God ... she was brave.” (Krog 2002, 128)

The blue plastic bag, transformed into a utilitarian pair of panties, is initially a symbol of defiance in the face of dehumanising oppression. The female body, in this instance, is reduced to broken fragments of bone in the dirt, seen in a photograph. In many ways, this particular scene embodies the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Through testimony and photographs, the body of Phila Ndwandwe is uncovered, and this becomes a metaphor for the truth which the Commission seeks to reveal. It is therefore significant that Krog begins her Epilogue with the description of the blue plastic bag dress. The dress is described as very feminine, with “thin, pretty shoulder straps”, an “embroidered bodice” and a skirt that “flows out light and carefree as if swaying in soft morning breezes.” Everything that is ugly, cruel and degrading in the image of a woman forced to make herself panties from a blue plastic bag in order to claim her dignity is simultaneously acknowledged and transcended in the image of the “twirling blue delicately rustling dress” made in tribute to women like Phila Ndwandwe. Metaphorically, this

reinscription of the blue plastic bag, into something beautiful and life-affirming, gestures towards the hope that it may be possible, through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to transcend the brutality and ugliness of apartheid.

Finally, Krog concludes the second and subsequent editions of *Country of My Skull* with the questions that she will return to in *Begging to be Black*. She asks, “How do we become released into understanding, into becoming whole among others? How do we *make* whole? How close can the nose curve to tenderness; the cheek to forgiveness? How do we sound the same breath? Sounding with one another?” (Krog 2002, 293). Krog (2002, 293) alludes to the answers in saying, “We have to learn the deepest sound of each other’s kidneys in the night. We *have* to become each other, or for ever lose the spine of being.” It is this ‘complicity-as-folded-togetherness’, this ‘becoming’, that Krog seeks to explore and map out in *Begging to be Black*.

## Chapter Seven

### **“The World’s Magic Spaces of Becoming”: Whiteness and the ‘Inbetween’ in Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black***

*We are all familiar with the global sanctity of the white body. Wherever the white body is violated in the world, severe retribution follows somehow for the perpetrators if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body. This leads me to think that if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. It will have to come out from under the umbrella and repudiate it. Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies.*

Njabulo Ndebele 2000: 137

*I want to be this embedded in my world. I want to speak black.*

Antjie Krog 2009: 268

## An Attempt to Share an Onto-epistemology of Becoming

In his discussion set out in “Iph’indlela: Finding a Way Through Confusion”, which attempts to explore how South Africans might ‘find their way through’ the uncertainty of the present and outline possibilities for the future, Njabulo Ndebele ((2000) 2007) raises several issues that are pertinent to this project, and that recur in Antjie Krog’s oeuvre of literary narratives.<sup>34</sup> Most important is the idea that the white body must “share in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies” in order to be at home in South Africa. This chapter examines Antjie Krog’s *Begging to be Black* (2009), which follows on from *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Country of My Skull* (1998), as Krog unpacks what it means to be a white South African in a post-apartheid, postcolonial context. Using Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s formulation of a politics of relation as well as Griffiths and Prozesky’s engagement with Heidegger’s concept of ‘dwelling’, I explore the ways in which the concerns raised in Krog’s earlier literary narratives are expanded upon in *Begging to be Black*, and I question whether and in what ways Krog has come closer to limning a productive space of engagement for white South African identities.

Stewart Motha (2010, 1) describes Krog’s *Begging to be Black* as:

A mytho-poetic narrative in which a world is imagined where King  
Moshoeshoe, missionaries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Antjie Krog and her

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<sup>34</sup> Krog makes direct reference to Ndebele’s formulation of the “global sanctity of the white body” in each of her texts, *Country of my Skull* (2002:288), *A Change of Tongue* (2003:118/274) and *Begging to be Black* (2009:100).

friends and colleagues, ANC cadres, the Deleuzian philosopher Paul Patton, Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the ANC Youth League, are placed in the same narrative space where they might intermingle. And this is done to respond to a crisis of the present – the difficulties South Africans face in grappling with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and the fact that there is a process of un-homing and re-homing that Krog feels white South Africans in particular need to think more deeply about.

He suggests that Krog's latest project is an example of what he terms 'postcolonial becoming'. Motha (2010, 2) argues that rather than lament the perceived failings of Fanon-inspired claims to colonial sovereignty, the imperative should be to "move beyond 'anticolonial longing' towards postcolonial becoming as the condition for grappling with the challenges of divided polities still emerging from colonial violence." Furthermore, he proposes that postcolonial becoming can best be enacted and understood through an engagement with the liminal:

In listening to stories in order to become Krog opens a liminal space. Liminality is the space of a movement, contact with an outside, un-homing and re-homing at the same time. The liminal space is hazardous, the site of risk, exposure – but also opening the possibility of sharing, being-with, refusing the safety of clear positions and certain outcomes. Stories, the mytho-poetic, seem to enable this liminality. (Motha 2010, 14)



Motha (2010, 3) offers a detailed discussion of Krog's *Begging to be Black*, and compares her approach with that of Magobe Ramose's philosophical engagement with the concept of 'ubuntu', suggesting that the key difference between the two is "between anticolonial longing (Ramose's project) and postcolonial becoming (Krog's project)." Motha (2010, 2) goes on to propose that "what Krog is attempting is an epistemic move towards another ontology of being. She is seeking to de-centre herself and a colonizer's way of seeing, knowing, and being. She does not seek to deny or hypostatize difference. Her approach has risks and contradictions." Thus, an example of the deployment of the concept of postcolonial becoming is seen in Krog's project of becoming-black; however, as Motha (2010, 4) is quick to point out, "it is not an identity that is being sought. Rather it is an attempt to share an onto-epistemology of becoming. *Begging to be Black* explores the possibility of white people becoming otherwise in post-apartheid South Africa." This harks back to Carli Coetzee's (2001, 695) observation, regarding Krog's *Country of My Skull*, that Krog is not "yearning in any simple way to *be* black, [but] to qualify for a black audience."

### Making Meaning in the 'Inbetween'

One of the characteristics of Krog's literary narratives is the way in which she blurs generic boundaries as a means not only to challenge her reader's expectations and interpretations, but also to mirror the issues that she is grappling with – most often change, transformation and seeking ways to overcome the paralyzing dichotomies bequeathed by apartheid society. In response to the overwhelming truths of oppression, suffering, survival and reconciliation brought to light by the South

African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull* emerged as a complex negotiation of fact, imagination, poetry, journalism, literature, and personal memoir. Krog extended her engagement with the concepts of change and transformation, as well as exploring white South African identity, in *A Change of Tongue*.<sup>35</sup> This text is bolder in its experimentation with genre, as Krog mixes first- and third-person voice, past and present, prose poems, memoir, journalism, fiction and fact. While *Begging to be Black* continues in this style, as Krog combines historic biographical accounts of King Moshoeshoe with personal letters to her mother, and diary entries with court transcripts and philosophical discussions, the tone and use of language in this text are significantly different from those of Krog's earlier literary narratives. Where the language and tone in *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue* are in many ways lyrical and poetic, the tone of *Begging to be Black* is academic and the language is pared down. It is as though in stripping down the language, Krog is able to outline the structure of her thesis of becoming-black more clearly than in her earlier narratives. It is also possible that by working through the poetic in *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue*, Krog has found the language through which to engage with these slippery issues in a more nuanced way in *Begging to be Black*.

*Begging to be Black* is part murder mystery, part historical biography, part travel narrative and part personal journal. And the structure of the narrative(s) comments on the issues of white identity and belonging as powerfully as does the content. The

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<sup>35</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter One, I have already commented on *A Change of Tongue* at length elsewhere (see Scott: 2006), as has Mary West (2009) in her book, *White Women Writing White*. It seems unnecessary to repeat those discussions here.

structure and organization of the narrative strands mirror the to-and-fro of conversation, and become more intertwined and complex as the narrative progresses. *Begging to be Black* consists of four stories, each set in a different location and timeframe. The overall narrative is organised into three parts. “Part One” is entitled “The Long Conversation: First Perceptions and un-Hearings”, and begins with Krog’s account of her unwilling involvement in the murder of a prominent gang leader who was gunned down in Kroonstad in 1992. Krog was unknowingly drawn into the events when she was handed a red T-shirt used in the murder and gave the killers – one of whom, Reggie, was a friend and comrade – a lift to a nearby township. This story, set in the small South African town of Kroonstad during the transition from apartheid to democracy, is strikingly juxtaposed with the historical narrative of the relationship between the Basotho king Moshoeshe I and the French missionary Eugène Casalis, beginning in 1833. Krog documents Moshoeshe’s attempts to preserve the integrity of his people and his kingdom in the face of the encroaching white settlers. Moshoeshe attempts to expand his understanding of whiteness through his interaction with Casalis and to find ways of accommodating the changes heralded by the arrival of more and more white foreigners in the first half of the nineteenth century. By contrasting these two narratives, locations and timeframes, Krog is able to comment on the issue of complicity, in both its narrow and broad sense. I will return to this line of argument a little later in this chapter. “Part One” of *Begging to be Black* ends with Krog’s arrival in Berlin at the start of a nine-month fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. Not only does Krog (2009, 88) make an overt shift in location and timeframe, but she very literally steps into the present tense: “When I woke up, it was into a delirious

autumn light. I got up and stepped into the present tense: I am in Berlin.” The Berlin narrative traces both Krog’s experiences of the German metropolis, and her academic engagement and conversations with her Australian philosopher-discussant. The fourth, and final, narrative trajectory is introduced in “Part Two: Understandings, Assumed Understandings, Non-understandings”. Krog describes her visit to Lesotho and her interactions with her guide, Cape Town student Bonnini, who grew up in the village which Krog visits. The Lesotho narrative is also written in the present tense and, as such, appears to act as a counterweight to both the temporal distance of the story of King Moshoeshoe I, and to the spatial distance of the Berlin narrative. “Part Two” of *Begging to be Black* is bookended by the historical biography of King Moshoeshoe I, and the overall narrative moves between historical and temporal locations, from Lesotho and Berlin in the twenty-first century to the Basotho kingdom of the early nineteenth century. Krog only returns to the murder story once in this section of the narrative, and she focuses on the murder trial. In many ways, the structure of “Part Three: The Long Conversation – Whose Context?” is an interesting inversion of “Part Two”. The narrative in “Part Three” begins and ends in Berlin, and again moves between the stories of King Moshoeshoe, and Krog’s visits to Lesotho and Berlin. Again, Krog only returns to the murder narrative once, and this time to explore the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Hearing of those men convicted of the murder. The final component of Krog’s overall narrative is the inclusion of a series of “Conversations” that take place in Berlin, between Krog and a philosopher, who in many ways should be “[disqualified] as a possible discourse partner” for he is “white, male, teaching Western philosophy in Australia”(Krog 2009, 92). In “Part One” and “Part Two” of *Begging to be Black*, these

“Conversations” are situated within the Berlin chapters, and are thus spatially and temporally coherent. However, in “Part Three”, the final two “Conversations” are removed from their original Berlin context and are inserted into the narratives of Krog’s visit to Lesotho and her final instalment of the murder story, highlighting the complex and entangled process of seeking a way of being in a post-apartheid context.

I have discussed the narrative structure of *Begging to be Black* in far greater depth than I have any of the other texts that this project examines, partly because Krog’s organization here is the most sophisticated and coherent, and partly because she has used the form of her overall narrative to reflect and comment on the issues that she is engaging with. In reviewing the structure of *Ways of Staying*, Kevin Bloom (2008, 222) says:

What I was in fact doing, at first subconsciously and later with more intent and self-assurance, was attempting to ‘open pathways for the reader’. My aim throughout the book was to let the interplay between the fragments serve as the primary sites of latent meaning. I would try, even before I was fully aware of my objective, to write each chunk of text between the asterisks as a self-contained piece; where those pieces met, where the asterisk divided the end of one fragment from the beginning of another, would be where the meaning would be located.

Krog's strength, in all her narratives, has been her ability to let "the interplay between the fragments serve as the primary sites of latent meaning", and in *Begging to be Black* this narrative strategy mirrors Krog's engagement with the 'in-between', in that it is the existence of the space 'in-between' that allows for connection. I will elaborate on this idea shortly, but first I would like turn my attention to some of the criticisms of Krog's text.

In *Writing Transition: Fiction and Truth in South Africa and Argentina*, Oscar Hemer (2011, 138) discusses Krog's *Country of My Skull* at length as "the book about the TRC." In a section titled "PS on Essentialism", he also examines Krog's *Begging to be Black* and suggests that it is "an inventive, cleverly composed and exceptionally well-written book, more consistent and clarified than the somewhat straggling *A Change of Tongue*" (Hemer 2011, 196). However, Hemer (2011, 196) goes on to take issue with what he sees as Krog's "insistent self-centeredness" and her unexamined slippage into essentialism. He calls attention to Krog's observations of her connection to German culture while in Berlin, and argues that "Krog makes all these poignant observations, yet it is as if she does not fully realize their implications. It never crosses her mind that the longing for belonging – for *inter-connectedness* – is the receiving part, so to speak, of the suggestive power that shaped the ethos of both German and Afrikaner nationalism" (Hemer 2011, 197). Furthermore, Hemer (2011, 198) suggests that Krog, in fact, "resigns herself to exactly the kind of culturalism that she allegedly was intent on bridging" and that "after ten years of interrogation, she arrives at a conclusion that somehow rocks the foundation of her whole enterprise." The conclusion that Hemer is referring to is Krog's (2009, 268)

submission that “in a country where we have come from different civilizations, then lived apart in unequal and distorted relationships that formed generations of us, our imagination is simply not capable of imagining a reality as – or with – the other.” This claim echoes the accusation of Elias Sithole in Jonny Steinberg’s (2002, 249) *Midlands* that Steinberg’s “imagination is not big enough to put [him] in somebody else’s shoes.” However, I am not convinced by Hemer’s argument that in *Begging to be Black* Krog undermines “the foundation of her whole enterprise.” My understanding is that Krog is attempting to point to the ways in which white South Africans might begin to engage with a narrative of inter-connectedness, despite their crippled imaginations, and that they must therefore be willing to tolerate the strangeness of the post-apartheid context. When asked by her discussant why she does not want to write novels, in which “you can explore the inner psyche of characters; you can imagine, for example, being black”, Krog (2009, 267) responds that she does not want to give up “the strangeness. Whatever novelistic elements I may use in my non-fiction work, the strangeness is not invented. The strangeness is real, and the fact that I cannot ever really enter the psyche of somebody else, somebody black. The terror and the loneliness of that inability is what I don’t want to give up on.” Hemer (2011, 198) refers to this exchange and comments, “I am completely at a loss with the argument here.” I surmise that Hemer has overlooked the fact that non-fiction constantly reminds the reader of its own actuality, and thereby refuses the reader any escape. By not giving up “the strangeness”, Krog is forcing her readers to both confront and tolerate the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of the South African experience.

## To Learn Another's Heartbeat

My concern in this chapter is to expand on Motha's formulation of postcolonial becoming in relation to Krog's work, and to explore more fully the notion of liminality and what it has to offer a project of becoming-other. Motha (2010, 18,13,14) concludes that "the space of postcolonial becoming opened by Krog is a liminal space" and that "liminality, exposure at the margins, being in-between – all these terms explain the kind of understanding that Krog is trying to reach by exploring the possibility of 'becoming black'", in order to do "what South African writer Njabulo Ndebele had called for – to move away from the 'international sanctity of the white body and share the vulnerability of the black body'." In order to engage more fully with Motha's notion of postcolonial becoming, I turn my attention to Griffiths and Prozesky's (2010) application of Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling' in their discussion of white South African emigration and pre- and post-apartheid experiences of home and identity, as well as Aimee Carrillo Rowe's (2005) discussion of a politics of relation and differential belonging.

"We explore why many whites think they have to choose between being white and being South African," say Griffiths and Prozesky (2010, 24), thereby highlighting a pervasive but under-acknowledged concern within the literary narratives that I examine. A recurring theme is the sense of unease experienced by many white South Africans in a post-apartheid context, and how this results in a feeling of un-belonging. In *Begging to be Black*, Krog addresses this directly as she searches for a way to become-other, to connect simultaneously with other and self and place.



Griffiths and Prozesky (2010, 37) identify the underlying cause of this sense of unease, and un-belonging, as stemming from what they term “the artificial, distorted dwelling born out of the colonial endeavour”:

Though white South Africans under apartheid lived on the African continent, they did not live in ‘Africa’, because ‘Africa’ signified for them everything that is ‘other’ to what the system of apartheid wanted to create. The fall of apartheid has swept away the home in which white South Africans thought they dwelt. The resulting existential homelessness, a product of the artificial, distorted dwelling born out of the colonial endeavour and reaching its peak under apartheid, is a strongly motivating factor for many South Africans who leave the country.

This ‘existential homelessness’ manifests in the work of Rian Malan, Kevin Bloom and Jonny Steinberg as perceived threat and a pervasive fear on the part of white South Africans towards both the black ‘other’ and the physical landscape of an ‘unknowable’ Africa. Griffiths and Prozesky elaborate on Heidegger’s concept of ‘dwelling’ as “rooted in the evocation of a tangible relationship with the earth upon which one lives ... relating to that land as a homeland, a dwelling place. To dwell is to be cared for in the dwelling place, and to care for the things of the dwelling place” (Griffiths and Prozesky 2010, 30). It is thus a false sense of ‘dwelling’ that white South Africans experienced during apartheid and continue to cling to day, as it did not entail “living authentically, fully, and meaningfully within the interrelational space of what Heidegger calls the fourfold – made up of sky, earth, mortals and

divinities ....” This notion of an ‘interrelational space’ is echoed in Motha’s (2010, 10) comment that “abiding by community in African culture – the interconnectedness that Krog refers to – requires that the three dimensions of living, the living dead, and the yet to be born are taken to be the critical ethical concern”, which in turn echoes Krog’s (2009, 253) description of her Mosotho guide’s exasperated response to her question regarding the burial rites of the king:

He turns and faces me squarely with an extraordinary intensity, his black eyes flaming, addressing me directly in English: “This” – his gesture includes all the graves, the horizon and the sky – “is us. This is our inside. This is our outside. It breathes upon us. All is us.”

Griffiths and Prozesky (2010, 36) argue that white South Africans were never able to dwell in South Africa authentically under apartheid, due to the disconnection and dislocation inherent in the segregationist policies, and they were never able to become fully human, as the very foundation of white identity became the denial of another’s humanity, with the result “that after the adjustments brought about by the 1994 elections, white South Africans found themselves in a condition perhaps best described as angst-ridden and existentially *homeless*, for they were now strangers in their own land” (Griffiths and Prozesky 2010, 31). Krog’s project in *Begging to be Black* is to seek out ways in which white South Africans might reconnect with, and re-integrate into, a common humanity, and so find their way to being at home on the southern tip of Africa.

Krog stages the contrast between what she sees as an African perspective of connection and collectiveness, and the isolation of the Western individual through her interaction with her poetry student and guide to Lesotho, Bonnini, who is presented as successfully negotiating and straddling the apparent divide between African and Western world views as she moves to and from her childhood village of Semonkong and her urban home in Cape Town as a university student. It is through the Lesotho narrative that Krog addresses the questions with which she concluded *Country of My Skull*. As I discussed in Chapter Six, she ends the “Epilogue” of *Country of My Skull* asking “How do we become released into understanding, into becoming whole among others? How do we *make* whole? How close can the nose curve to tenderness; the cheek to forgiveness? How do we sound the same breath? Sounding with one another?”, and suggests that one does so by “[learning] the deepest sound of each other’s kidneys in the night” (Krog 2002, 293). Krog (2009, 150) returns to this visceral image in *Begging to be Black* as she remembers:

... a friend telling me her grandmother had died a month before. She formulated the loss in an exceptional way: “It’s hard for me ... my grandmother raised me. We shared the same bed ... You know, I knew my grandmother so well,” she shook her head slowly, “so well ... I knew her heartbeat.”

... I still think about this formulation in astonishment. I absolutely do not know anybody’s heartbeat. Not even the man I have shared a bed with for more than thirty years. I know him well, yes; I know from his eyes, from his mouth, from his body language

everything he cannot tell me, but I will never say that I know his heartbeat. The only heartbeat I know is my own.

Later, Krog is invited to visit at the home of Bonnini's mother. She describes how "after a suitable time [she is] offered pap, *maroho* and a glass of water from the water bucket." Krog (2009, 181) comments:

Everything on this plate or in this glass has been gathered or processed with great trouble, plus the knowledge of how bodyness will pick and shred and stir and taste and give itself ... At the same time, it feels as if the gesture is not about food, also not about *giving* at all, but about sharing a physical generosity. It is as if the skin containing my body has become porous, as if I am dissolving into a delicate balance with this woman and her daughter, their offered food and all the places it comes from.

... the meal is shared within the context of a deep trust that whatever is shared now, with me, is not only worth sharing, but confirms what has always been known here: being part of. Not of some thought-out or yet-to-come imagined space, but part of something that *is*, calibrating heartbeats.

While Krog is attempting to demonstrate the possibility of a way-of-being that is connected to, and dependent on, the 'other' at an almost visceral level, she comes close to exoticising and essentialising this dynamic. However, she also seems to be aware of this danger, and thus throughout the Lesotho narrative she repeatedly

questions how, and in what ways, it might be possible to forge an identity predicated on connection with others. At one point in the narrative Krog and Bonnini discuss the ways in which the latter's experience of community, connectedness and self has been forced to change as she moves between Semonkong and Cape Town. Bonnini comments that in Lesotho she has "lots and lots of roots into a wide community" and says that she had expected to be able to "pull out all these various roots, go to Cape Town and replant them there into a more empowered and widespread community" (Krog 2009, 215). She is shocked to find that this is not the case. She is also surprised to realize that after being in Cape Town and "rearranging the lay of my roots and decreasing my dependence on them", her sense of self within that ordinary community has changed (Krog 2009, 216). Bonnini reveals that "where I needed no privacy before, because there was no private person ... I suddenly needed a private space" (Krog 2009, 217). Krog tries to introduce the metaphor of root systems,<sup>36</sup> suggesting that there are two kinds, "a taproot, with one dominant primary root going deep down, and a diffuse root, which is fibrous, which branches out in all directions and anchors the plant", and implies that the taproot is analogous to Western perspectives of community and connection, while the diffuse, rhizomatic root resembles an African approach to social life. Krog (2009, 217) suggests that Bonnini faces the continual challenge of leading a double life, split between two diverse contexts, and that in living in Cape Town she has had to adapt to modernity. Bonnini refutes this, claiming that she has made adaptations that allow her to exist within both spaces and find connection within both communities. She takes issue with Krog's suggestion that she has been forced to adapt to modernity, saying "you

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<sup>36</sup> Krog has most likely drawn this image from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, on whose work her Australian interlocutor in the narrative, Paul Patton, has written extensively.

imply that I have a sense of self that is pre-modern, primitive. Maybe *your* single-rootedness is the thing that is primitive; your inability to imagine yourself consisting of others is a crude form of life” (Krog 2009, 217). Thus the idea is put forward that it is possible to *develop* towards connection, and that Western and African notions of community and of self-being-with-other are not diametrically opposed, but are rather on a continuum, and it is therefore imaginable that Krog, and by implication her readers, may move towards ‘becoming-other’.

Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s (2005, 15) article “Be Longing: Towards a Feminist Politics of Relation” offers a useful interrogation of the concept of belonging<sup>37</sup> in order to map out new possibilities for theorising collective subjectivity. Read alongside Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, Rowe’s argument provides valuable insights as to how the project of becoming-black might be made more tangible. Carrillo Rowe (2005, 17) argues that:

The command to longing is one that you, reader, ‘be’ something that you are (not), but may not think of ‘yourself’ as, because you (especially the Western reader) have been hailed as a subject through countless articulations of ‘Individuality’. It is signalling toward a process that places oneself at the edge of one’s self and leaning and tipping towards the ‘others’ to whom you belong, or

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<sup>37</sup> In Chapter Four I discuss Mary West’s (2009:13) formulation of the notion of “be-longing” as manifesting the instability, suspense and alienation of the white South African identity. Carrillo Rowe proposes a far more positive engagement with the concept of “be longing”, and by tying her formulation to Krog’s *Begging to be Black*, I hope to suggest the ways in which Krog’s latest narrative opens possibilities for a white South African identity that is fully enmeshed with the broader South African community.

with whom you long to be – or those who are ‘you’ ... There has to be an inclination or an inkling from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other ...

For white South Africans the challenge is to think themselves out of whiteness; which is to understand themselves as part of a community of others, and to see how they are interconnected with others. Apartheid was most successful in articulating an ‘individuality’ that was not only separate, but that denied and criminalised the self’s longing for the other, thus obscuring the multiple webs of community connections. Carrillo Rowe’s formulation of ‘Be longing’ provides a useful point from which to think oneself out of whiteness, as this involves a “process that places oneself at the edge of one’s self and leaning and tipping towards the ‘others’ to whom you belong.” What is significant in this formulation is that she is not calling for an either/or dichotomy, but rather for a politics of relation which:

is not striving toward absolute alterity to the self, but rather to tip the concept of ‘subjectivity’ away from ‘individuality’ and in the direction of the inclination toward the other so that ‘being’ is constituted not first through the ‘Self’, but through its own longings to be with. Belonging precedes being. Thus, not ‘intersubjectivity’, as in a subject exists and then let’s think about the spaces between subjects, but rather that something called ‘subjectivity’ may be thought as an *effect* of belonging – of the affective, passionate, and political ties that bind us to others. Thus there is no separation

between longing – to be with – and being. (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 17-18)

This finds expression in Krog's project during a conversation with her discussant in Berlin. The philosopher asks:

"But are you saying: because you lived in this apartheid bubble which tried to keep itself whites-only and Western, that this has stunted your own changing and becoming?"

"Yes. So, I am not necessarily interested in African philosophy versus Western philosophy, but rather in what kind of self I should grow into in order to live a caring, useful and informed life – a 'good life' – within my country in southern Africa."

"Are you talking about a kind of entanglement?"

"No. It's not about mingling, or the entanglement of roots, but how one root can become or link to another."

"A synapse."

I smile. "Perhaps that is the word." (Krog 2009, 95)

The image of the synapse enables us to think not of the 'space' between subjects, but rather the potential for connection between subjects, and thus the self's longing or leaning towards the other. This echoes back to Stewart Motha's concern with 'liminality' in *Begging to be Black*, and allows for an understanding of the 'liminal' not as in-between space, but rather as potential 'becoming'. Carrillo Rowe (2005, 27) sums this up by saying:



The space of radical in-between-ness evoked by the hyphen between 'becoming' and 'other' (dis)places subjectivity within the process of 'becoming' in the direction of 'otherness'. Belonging is about where you long to belong...It is a concept that permits us to imagine life beyond our own skin because what is foregrounded is a space of 'yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants'.

Just as 'becoming-other' is not fixed, but rather perpetually fluid, so too is Carrillo Rowe's formulation of Belonging. She argues for what she terms a differential belonging which "allows us to move among different modes of belonging without feeling trapped or bound by any one in particular. The point is not to be correct, consistent, or comfortable ... And as we move among these sites, the contradictions and crises that arise are most instructive of our belonging" (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 33).

### Searching for a Way out of Whiteness

I would like to return now to Njabulo Ndebele's comments regarding the 'global sanctity of the white body'. In describing the callous, and often depraved, manner in which white South Africans were permitted – by apartheid culture – to treat their fellow black countrymen, Ndebele ((2000) 2007, 130) suggests that "suddenly, 'the heart of darkness' is no longer the exclusive preserve of 'blackness'; it seems to have become the very condition of 'whiteness' at the southern corner of the African continent." Part of Ndebele's project, and certainly a large part of Krog's endeavour,

is to chart the ways in which 'whiteness' might be transformed, brought back into community, and thereby regain its humanity, and thus restore the humanity of those whom whiteness has debased. Such a transformation can only begin when those "caught in the culture of whiteness of their own making" start to engage "with the ethical and moral implications of being situated at the interface between inherited, problematic privilege, on the one hand and, on the other, the blinding sterility at the centre of the 'heart of whiteness'" (Ndebele (2000) 2007, 130-131). Ndebele ((2000) 2007, 136-137) proposes three ways in which 'whiteness' can begin to transform. Firstly, in order to achieve "a new sense of cultural rootedness", white identities must become open to "absorbing new cultural experiences" and should be prepared to "make greater adjustments to black needs than the other way around." Secondly, the tendency towards 'white flight' must be resisted and 'whiteness' must embrace its "responsibility towards the only history that can promise [it] salvation." And thirdly, South African whiteness must come out from under the umbrella of "protectiveness assured by international whiteness" and "share in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies." In doing so, South African whiteness can "declare that it is home now", and by the "restoration of dignity to the black body" can begin to "reclaim its humanity".

Krog first attempts to engage with Ndebele's formulation of the 'global sanctity of the white body' through the depiction of a conversation between 'Antjie' and Mamogele and Eddy, former colleagues from Kroonstad, in the "Epilogue" added to the second and subsequent editions of *Country of My Skull* (2002, 288):

“... race is the only thing about yourself you cannot change. I can change my perspective, my words, my thinking, my body language, but not my skin. So if you have a problem with me because I am white, I am trapped ...”

“It is not the white skin you should deny – it is white-ness. It is a mindset, an outlook. You should recognize that what you are, has also been informed by blackness.”

“I have never denied that! ... What I know of humane-ness, of being human among others, I have learn from black people ... I am what black has made me. But that is not written on my forehead – unfortunately.”

“No, what is written on your forehead is the global sanctity of the white body. It doesn’t matter where you are, what you do, the white western world will look after you and protect you. Only after you have removed yourself from under that big umbrella of whiteness and live the black life of risk, will you become us.”

“You talk shit, Eddy,” says Mamogele. “She can never become black...”

I sit with my mouth full of teeth.

... “But I want to belong ...” I want to say, but do not ...

This extract presages several key issues – whiteness as a paradigm or worldview, interconnectedness and collective subjectivity, and finding belonging through becoming-black – that Krog returns to in *Begging to be Black* and, I would suggest, grapples with more effectively than in her earlier texts. I use the plural ‘texts’

because a second version of the above conversation appears in *A Change of Tongue*. Mary West (2009, 88-94) offers a detailed discussion of this debate, particularly as it appears in *A Change of Tongue*. She suggests that Krog's revisiting of the same debate in two consecutive books is indicative of both the difficulty of negotiating the complexities of white identity and the importance of the cycle of introspection, reaching-out, reconciliation, and negotiation in rebuilding a sense of community and nationhood in a post-apartheid context. West (2009, 83-88) also comments on a reference to the 'universal sanctity of the white body' that appears earlier in *A Change of Tongue* when Sheridan, a former colleague, quotes Njabulo Ndebele at length to 'Antjie' during a heated debate around change and transformation, or the lack thereof. However, despite Krog's willingness to engage with whiteness, West (2009, 90) is critical that "she may be exhibiting a very real reticence, which comes across as defensiveness, in negotiating whiteness as a distinct and persisting racial category." I am not convinced that this is the case. I would argue that Krog's engagement with the issues of whiteness, interconnectedness and belonging is better elaborated and more nuanced in *Begging to be Black*, than in her earlier narratives. And viewed retrospectively, the reticence that West identifies can be better understood as an unwillingness to remain within accepted structures and categories, and thus as a searching for the in-between, interstitial, liminal spaces where multiple connections and understandings become possible. West (2009, 93), in fact, gestures towards this tendency when she discusses the concluding lines of the two versions of the above-mentioned debate. West points out that at the end of both versions Krog is stifling an appeal to 'belong', and to have 'belonging' conferred upon her, and "in both versions she walks off with Mamogele/Mamukwa, together

but apart.” In *Country of My Skull* the conversation ends as the two women “walk slowly back to the hotel – window shopping. The past bleeding softly between us”, while in *A Change of Tongue* the women walk with “the future already unfolding in different ways between us” (Krog 2002, 289; Krog 2003, 275). West (2009, 93) focuses on Krog’s move from past to future as that which lies between, and suggests that the stifled appeal to belong “remains unsaid and unanswered, unsayable and unanswerable, and perhaps exemplifies a growing white South African sense of ‘unhomeliness’.” In light of Motha’s comments regarding the liminal, I suggest that it is the ‘between’ rather than what lies within it that offers the most potential, for it is the existence of a ‘between us’ that facilitates connection. Thus the ‘between’ becomes a central concern in *Begging to be Black* and can be seen as a more nuanced articulation of the issues Krog attempted to grapple with in her earlier narratives.

It is significant that while Krog returns to Ndebele’s formulation of ‘the universal sanctity of the white body’ in *Begging to be Black*, she frames this engagement very differently from the earlier instances. Krog has moved beyond the stifled appeal to belong and is able to trace the potential of ‘becoming’, as in becoming-black and becoming-other. It is through the series of “Conversations” with the Australian philosopher in Berlin that Krog comes to acknowledge that, unlike J.M. Coetzee’s David Lurie in *Disgrace*, who muses, “we live too close to Petrus. It is like sharing a house with strangers ...”, she does not “want to flee or retreat into whiteness; [she] wants to change towards what [she is] becoming aware of” and she realizes that through listening “to stories, to others” she might begin to understand the

vulnerability of the black body, share in that, and move out from the “umbrella of the international sanctity of the white body” (Krog 2009, 100). By referring to *Disgrace*, Krog makes an implicit association between the rape of Lucy Lurie in Coetzee’s narrative and Njabulo Ndebele’s argument that only by taking on the vulnerability of the black body can white South Africans find themselves ‘at home’. Krog (2009, 93-94) traces the “line of flight”, the movement from a known identity towards transformation, towards becoming-other, by questioning how “to be part of the country I was born in ... and live as a full and at-ease component of the South African psyche” whereby she might understand the embedded context of ‘blackness’. She asks, “how do I ‘flee’ towards black ... if I have never cared to know what black means?” (Krog 2009, 94). In answer, Krog (2009, 101) suggests going back to *Disgrace* and exploring Petrus’s side of the story, for stories “leave space for variety. Stories are boundary crossings, making it possible to move ... no single line holds things together, because the spaces contain contradictions in which one variety is as valid as the other.” However, Krog (2009, 101) also concurs with Coetzee’s David Lurie who states that while Petrus “doubtless has a story to tell”, he would not want to hear it “reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa.” Thus Krog acknowledges the need for whiteness to begin to understand ‘Africa’, not through a Western paradigm, but from within ‘African-ness’ itself. Njabulo Ndebele ((2000) 2007, 136) argues that whiteness in South Africa must be prepared to connect with ‘blackness’ on the latter’s own terms, and that an openness to absorbing new cultural experiences is “an essential condition for achieving a new sense of cultural rootedness. That is why every white South African should be proud to speak, read,

and write at least one African language, and be ashamed if they are not able to.”

Obviously, both Krog and Ndebele are concerned with more than simply bi- or multi-lingualism; they are interested in cultural literacy, that which makes it possible for individuals to connect and form ways of maintaining those connections within a fluid and enabling community. Krog makes this link between ‘language’ and outlook overt in her final “Conversation” with the philosopher. In discussing the ways in which her imagination has failed her, she states:

I simply do not know enough about blackness, or birdness, or mountainness, or even Englishness for that matter, to imagine it in terms other than my exact self or the exotic opposite of myself. A famous Afrikaans poet Eugène Marais visited some Bushman researchers<sup>38</sup> during the nineteenth century and said afterwards: The Bushmen could speak lion, they could speak blue crane, they could speak wind. I want to be this embedded in my world. I want to speak black. (Krog 2009, 268)

## Finding a Way into Folded-Togetherness

In *Country of My Skull* Krog flags the beneficiary status of South African whiteness and the unacknowledged historical privilege attached to white identity. She also gestures towards the complicity of white South Africans in sustaining the apartheid regime. I have discussed this notion of complicity in the previous chapter with

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<sup>38</sup> Here Krog possibly refers to W.H.I. Bleek and his wife.

reference to Mark Sanders' detailed discussion of broad and narrow complicities, especially in relation to the intellectual and apartheid. Sanders proposes a broad complicity that has the potential to involve and include victim, perpetrator and beneficiary in a new relationship, what he calls 'complicity-as-folded-togetherness'. While *Country of My Skull* is not able to successfully delineate a way for whiteness to move beyond a narrow complicity, I argue that, in *Begging to be Black*, Krog is able simultaneously to outline whiteness as privileged and disconnected, and limn the ways in which it is possible to move towards interconnectedness or 'complicity-as-folded-togetherness': she does so through the juxtaposition of the murder narrative set in Kroonstad in the early 1990s with the historical biography of King Moshoeshoe I. Towards the end of *Begging to be Black*, Krog (2009, 269) comments, "blackness released me from my white capsule...it taught me how to become other than myself. And through the life of a remarkable king I have learnt that there where one feels one has failed morally and hurt indiscriminately, also there grace and forgiveness from black people will be."

For Krog, privilege is about more than material well-being; it extends to the freedom to make particular choices in one's life. Krog grapples with this issue through the narrative strand of the murder of the gang leader identified as "the Wheetie" and the subsequent trial. Krog only becomes aware of the murder the following day, but by then she has been implicated as an accomplice, having unwittingly given the murderers a lift to a nearby township. It is in this context that Krog (2009, 46) interrogates the difficulties of making moral choices in a society shaped by an immoral past:



But isn't respect for life something basic? Isn't it the oldest principle, the first major decision a society takes? But, because of our fractured past, we as South Africans have never formed a coherent enough whole to decide what kind of principles we agree on. It was okay to kill blacks, but not whites. It was okay to steal from whites, but not from blacks. How do we change that into: It is wrong to kill or steal?

Furthermore, Krog (2009, 46) asks, "To what extent is my position not moral at all, but simply privileged middle class? Am I against murder because I can afford to be?" By questioning the easy conflation of morality and middle class privilege, Krog is able to examine the choices that whiteness allows her. She comments that her husband calls her "The Great Moral Denouncer, who judges every decision taken by the family as white-privileged, exploitative, unfair", pointing out that it is "because *he* is working hard, and is civilized to rich clients, [that] his wife can *afford* to put his cars, fax machine, phone, house and life at the disposal of the oppressed" (Krog 2009, 4-5). Thus Krog suggests that her whiteness secures not only her material privilege, but also allows her to occupy a particular moral standpoint from which she can oppose apartheid through supporting the ANC. This is, however, a complex dynamic, as Krog (2009, 4) acknowledges: "It is not always easy to work out how to *live* a righteous life. That apartheid is wrong is relatively obvious, but how to live *against* apartheid is the harder question." In moving through the narrative of the murder, Krog seems to suggest that it is not enough to stand as "The Great Moral Denouncer", or even to

allow one's access to material privilege to be used to further a cause. At the end of the court case, Krog (2009, 171) comments, "I really have nothing more to say about this event. Except that every small fibre of the sort of non-racial life that I was trying to create in Kroonstad in order to open up some space to live humanely in this inhumane land, had been destroyed by this murder." Hence, she concludes that any attempt to discard the privilege of whiteness, however sincere, remains fragile and superficial without an understanding of, and move towards, interconnectedness. In response to Krog's disillusionment after the murder trial, her husband says:

With heart and soul you went to dig this life out of the townships.  
Under the cover of causes you went and wormed your way into  
places of which you understood neither the undercurrents nor the  
codes. You wanted to live like that, and you worked us into a poor  
working-class suburb, worked us into the Mission Church, worked  
the children out of their schools in the town; ultimately you worked  
yourself out of a job, you worked us out of friends, so that day by  
day we became like strangers in the town where we were born – full  
of contempt for whites, while you had to bend over backwards to be  
accepted in a community that actually saw you as nothing more than  
a convenient curiosity. And there was also something seductive  
about it – look what an exciting life we have here on the platteland.  
And something missionary – look how good we are. (Krog 2009, 172-  
173)

Krog thus displays an acute awareness that whiteness, while characterised by privilege, is also debilitated by its history of disconnection, and that until whiteness is able to incline itself towards becoming-other, it will remain dislocated, isolated and unhomed within southern Africa.

Just as Krog highlights the disconnection inherent in whiteness through the murder narrative, she is able, through the story of King Moshoeshoe I, to explore the ways in which it may be possible to be part of a wide and encompassing community. Krog wants to belong, to feel herself at home within the broader community of Kroonstad, but she suggests that her attempts to engage with, and become part of, the black community there fail because she is unable to step out from the narrowness of an isolated whiteness; she is unable to move from complicity in its narrow sense to complicity as folded-togetherness. Through the historical narrative of the Basotho king and his relationship with the French missionaries, Eugène Casalis and Thomas Arbousset, in the early nineteenth century, Krog is able simultaneously to reveal the contrast between Western individualism and African collectivity, and suggest a template for complicity as folded-togetherness based on Moshoeshoe's engagement with a rapidly changing world.

Both Moshoeshoe and Casalis are described as carefully considering how to present themselves to the other at their first meeting. Casalis, who had travelled from France to Cape Town and then on to the Eastern Cape, trusted that God would guide the missionaries as they trekked into the southern African interior. The news that an African monarch had sent out a call asking for missionaries was interpreted as divine

intervention and a clear directive as to the course Casalis and his companions should follow. For Casalis then, “seeing Moshoeshoe was ... not only seeing an African king, but seeing the face of God’s plan” and “because Moshoeshoe had chosen them, providing a purpose to their young, feverish lives, it was obvious that to convert him, the king, would be tantamount to adding the most valuable diamond to God’s crown” (Krog 2009, 21). Thus Casalis chose to arrive before the king without the usual gifts of mirrors, beads and trinkets that so often characterised the first contact between whites and blacks in southern Africa. Moshoeshoe too chose to challenge the new arrivals’ perceptions; he “waited cross-legged on a mat in the open, with his people in a half-circle behind him ... how much more unkingly could he make himself for Westerners?” (Krog 2009, 20). Moshoeshoe had chosen to invite the missionaries into his kingdom, not out of simple curiosity or benign interest, but as part of his larger diplomatic initiative that aimed at securing his land for his people. It is through the relationship between these two men, the young Casalis and King Moshoeshoe, that Krog contrasts the individualist and collectivist world views.

Krog compares a dream Casalis has on board the ship to the Cape with a dream of Mohlomi, Moshoeshoe’s mentor. Casalis dreams of being taken up into the heavens by the prophet Daniel, and when he, Casalis, desires to enter that place “whose extent appeared immeasurable and whose splendor was greater than that of a thousand suns”, he is shown “in a savage country a peaceful cottage ... a church where hundreds of eager natives were assembled, and schools where a great number of children were being taught to sing the praises of God” (Krog 2009, 53).

The prophet Daniel tells Casalis, “*That first* ... then, I will return for you, for a place is

reserved for you in the place of your Redeemer ...” (Krog 2009, 53) Krog (2009, 54) comments that Casalis’s dream:

... can be read against three idealised worlds that are identified by Jean and John Comaroff as lying close to the heart of European missionaries: a capitalist age where he (intelligent but coming from a poor background) was free to aspire to greater heights; an idyllic countryside where peasants under his tutorship would work hard but happily; and a sovereign empire where the divine authority of God was his only instructive.

As Krog notes, there are striking similarities but also important differences between Casalis’s dream and that of Mohlomi. During his initiation, Mohlomi dreams of the roof of his hut opening and a great eagle coming in, picking him up and flying with him to the top of a tall mountain range, where he finds himself surrounded by his ancestors. The ancestors tell him, “you will be a king; you should rule our people well [with peace] and study medicines, so that they may not be troubled by illness while you are around”, and they promise him their protection “if he became such a ruler” (Krog 2009, 53-54). Krog (2009, 55) suggests that Mohlomi’s dream reveals “three idealised concepts close to the heart of African philosophy”:

a communal system based on the ‘wholeness of life’, signalled in rituals; an idyllic cosmos where hurricanes, comets and birds are interconnected in one another’s being-ness; and an unbroken

connection with the realm of the living dead, through which the ancestors sent clear instructions.

Krog (2009, 55) argues that “these two dreams express two profoundly different approaches to living a worthy life on earth”, and these approaches can be seen in the actions of this narrative’s main protagonists.<sup>39</sup>

In narrating the story of King Moshoeshoe, Krog describes two incidents that perhaps most aptly encapsulate the notion of complicity as folded-togetherness. In response to repeated attacks by neighbouring warring tribes, Moshoeshoe moved his people to Thaba-Bosiu. The move took place at night and involved traversing difficult terrain. Krog (2009, 26) says, “the upheavals of the Lifaqane had driven some people to cannibalism. A group of cannibals, who lived in the area, grabbed the king’s grandfather Peete, killed him and ate him.” The men were soon caught, and the Basotho expected to see their king have the cannibals executed. However, it is at this key moment that Moshoeshoe responds in a way that can only be described as extraordinary:

He pointed out that the bodies of the cannibals now contained the body of his grandfather, and that to kill them would be to dishonour Peete’s grave. He therefore requested that the traditional funeral

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<sup>39</sup> I have already referred to Oscar Hemer’s criticism of what he views as Krog’s unexamined slippage into essentialism in *Begging to be Black*, and I have commented that in her discussion of her interaction with her poetry student, Bonnini, in Lesotho, Krog comes dangerously close to exoticising and essentialising that encounter. Once again, in her discussion of these two dream sequences, Krog runs the risk of presenting a worryingly essentialised argument. I would suggest that she is aware of this, and that this is one of the challenges she is attempting to overcome in her search for postcolonial becoming and a way of tolerating the uncertainty of the ‘in-between’.

and grave rites be performed on them, which involved the contents of cattle intestines being smeared on their bodies. He gave them cattle, ordered them to stop eating people, and allowed them to live near the royal household. (Krog 2009, 26)

Moshoeshoe demonstrates, literally, the “folded-together-ness ... in human being (or the being of being human)” by incorporating those who have offended in order to restore the humanity and dignity, not only of those who have debased themselves through cannibalism, but also those whom they have harmed (Sanders 2002, 5). This echoes the sentiment expressed by Cynthia Ngewu in *Country of My Skull*, quoted earlier: “This thing called reconciliation ... if it means this perpetrator, this man who killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all” (Krog 2002, 109). Thus, Moshoeshoe highlights the fact that each person’s humanity is tied to the humanity of all those around him/her, and that one can only be human, be complicit in folded-togetherness, when one works to secure and respect the humanity of others. Krog (2009, 59) argues that at the time of Moshoeshoe and Casalis’s first meeting, the Basotho already had an understanding of whites as “part of a class of people who lack respect for other human beings.” Moshoeshoe hails Casalis as *lekhoa*, ‘white person’. However, Krog (2009, 59) suggests that the word chosen by Moshoeshoe “does not necessarily identify white people as a contrasting group, or The Other, but indicates a group that itself regards the rest of humanity as The Other”; as such Moshoeshoe was “not contrasting blackness to whiteness, but accommodating a new kind of relationship that was closing in on the Basotho.”

Tragically, as Krog (2009, 133;29) observes, Moshoeshoe was not able to withstand the onslaught of whiteness as “during [his] fifty-year rule, the Basotho would be systematically robbed of their land” and “the impressive range of measures he introduced to create a humane space for people to live their lives” would be undone. Krog uses the anecdote of Moshoeshoe’s appropriation of the story of King Solomon and the two women’s dispute over a child to comment on his acute understanding of the disconnectedness of whiteness. A group of white settlers approached the king “determined to force him this time to agree to a border; a line of demarcation traced between themselves and him, to ensure the exclusive possession of the territory they had invaded.” Moshoeshoe’s response was to tell them – to tell back to them – the story of the two women who asked King Solomon to judge who was the legitimate mother of a particular child (Krog 2009, 130). King Solomon suggests cutting the child in half, to which the real mother cries that she would rather lose the child entirely, while the pretend mother agrees to have the child divided into two. Moshoeshoe says to the settlers, “you, my friends, who are strangers, you think it quite natural that my ground be cut. I, who am born here, I feel my soul revolt at the thought. No; I will not cut it! Better lose it altogether” (Krog 2009, 131). Krog (2009, 131) comments that while Moshoeshoe could have chosen from a number of approaches to deal with the white settlers’ request, he “chose to tell them *their* story – to give them, as it were, their own story back – as if he realised that those in front of him were incapable of understanding anybody else’s story.” This is then the legacy of whiteness that white South Africans must choose to overcome if they wish to move into complicity as folded-togetherness and find a way to be at home in



southern Africa. Referring back to Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Krog (2009, 101) suggests that only by listening "to stories, to others" is it possible to begin this move towards interconnectedness, to begin to hear and understand Petrus's story, told from within his own paradigm.

## The Vulnerability of Being In and Beyond this World

In a letter, written upon her arrival in Berlin and addressed to *Liewe Ma*, Krog (2009, 89) remarks, "Disbelief! Total disbelief about where I am. Up until now, every visit to Europe has simply confirmed alienation, an irrefutable Africanness and, above all else, my Third World-ness. Until now." Krog (2009, 89,91) observes that she feels "sheltered. Unreachable. Safe. Inconspicuous. Looked after. Words [she has] not used for a long time", and says, "I can't remember when last I felt so safe, cared for and WANTED despite being white." This sense of being 'at home' is problematic for Krog (2009, 199) and with three months left of her stay, she asks:

Do I want to go back? Can I go back to Africa, rotten to the core as I have become? Not only is my skin whiter than it has ever been before, but my mind is white. A white mind? What is that? To enjoy a punctual bus, regular trains, safe surroundings, is that white? Not to be confronted by poverty, is that white? To listen to classical music and read European literature, is that white? To be moved as I have never been moved by anything in my life, bodily moved, by the poetry of Paul Celan, does that make me white?

There is a poignant irony that the very 'at home-ness' that Krog experiences in Berlin exacerbates and magnifies the burden of homelessness and dislocation that she experiences in South Africa. Krog (2009, 200) refers to the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus who "described the European man (*Homo europaeus*) as the pinnacle of humanity, with his qualities of being versatile, shrewd and inventive" and says, "This is not what I am, nor what I necessarily want to be. I am trying to become others, plural, interconnected-towards-caringness." In the final pages of *Begging to be Black*, Krog suggests that her whiteness, her sense of coherence and connection with Europe, does not necessarily preclude her from being at home in Africa. Krog (2009, 274) asks what it makes her, that she recognizes a German poem that even the German-speaking couple walking past her may not know, and concludes, "It makes me broad, I think, stretching my arms in the fragrance of blossoms, grass and sun; it makes me broad." It is this broadness, this willingness and able-ness to accommodate multitudes, that Krog has learnt from the Basotho king, and that will enable her to return home, to be at home, in South Africa.

Krog (2009, 274-275) ends *Begging to be Black* with the image of the sphinx. On her last day in Berlin, she walks her familiar route through the city and stops at the bridge over the Herthasee, which is guarded by four sphinxes, a "figure from Africa ... named by the Greeks as 'sphinx', meaning 'strangler'." She wonders, "is she simply a hybrid, doomed to sit at all crossings, guarding all transits, for ever trapped between two stages? She knows the world and the secret world, but is of neither, and this has a price." With the sphinx's human head and torso and enormous lion paws, "she can nourish and protect, but ... despite the hybridical aptness of her body and mind, her

paws will always betray her into clumsiness.” However, as Krog observes the mythical creature, she realizes that despite the apparent awkwardness of this hybrid being, this liminal form, she does in fact offer a glimpse into the possibilities for becoming-other. Stewart Motha (2010, 8) suggests that, “the liminal space between a colonial order and a postcolonial future can only be grasped through the beings that occupy it ... Liminality is a lived condition which presents itself in the everyday existence of ordinary and extraordinary people”, which echoes Homi Bhabha’s (1994c, 1) formulation of the ‘beyond’ as the space in which “we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outsides, inclusion and exclusion.” It is these ideas of being in the inbetween, and tolerating the uncertainty of an unknown, and possibly unknowable, space, that Krog expresses when she concludes:

For me, she is not a hybrid, or a product of rape. She is what she is.  
Not split, not guarding dichotomies, but presenting beingness as  
multiple intactness, not with the singular self, but with a bodily akin-  
ness to the vulnerability of being in and beyond this world.

## Chapter Eight

### Moving towards conclusion(s)...

*Skin itself is hence located in the third space; the skin is both marker of racial otherness and the site of hybridity.*

Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey 2001: 14

*This is seriously weird; the skin is white, but the voice is African.*

Rian Malan 2009: 333

*Because race is the only thing about yourself you cannot change. I can change my perspective, my words, my thinking, my body language, but not my skin. So if you have a problem with me because I am white, I am trapped. There is no room for change...*

Antjie Krog 2002: 288

## Mutants and Hybrids...

Rian Malan (1991, 339) concludes *My Traitor's Heart* with the story of Neil and Creina Alcock, who move to the rural area of Msinga in northern KwaZulu-Natal, with dreams and plans of introducing sustainable farming methods to the local Zulu people and, in a small way, undoing some of the damage caused by apartheid. In a later article titled, "Those Fabulous Alcock Boys", Malan (2009b, 322) comments that while those dreams appear to have failed in many ways, Neil left a legacy in his sons, Rauri and GG, when he promised that while he could not afford to send them to university, he would "prepare [them] for life in Africa." The Alcock boys grew up in the same way as their Zulu peers, "in a mud hut, with no running water, no electricity, no TV ... hunting small game ... because they were hungry, like everyone else ... And they learned the Zulu language" (Malan 2009b, 322). Malan (2009b, 323) observes that the Alcock boys spoke Zulu so fluently that when Zulu men and women spoke with the boys over the telephone "they refused to believe that the person on the far end of the line was white." Neil Alcock bequeathed to his sons not only the mastery of an important local language, but a cultural literacy that few, if any, white South Africans possessed. As adults Rauri and GG moved between the white and black worlds of South Africa with ease. GG left Msinga in the early 1990s and moved to Johannesburg where he was soon involved in various business ventures in places like Soweto, places that other white South Africans were too afraid to step into. Rauri remained in Msinga and continued to work with the land and agricultural projects started by his father. Both GG and Rauri had spent a lifetime 'becoming-other', and they were deeply connected to a vast network of

community. While their familiarity with the Zulu language was formidable, it was their intimate understanding of the 'other' that best equipped them in traversing the boundaries of white and black South Africa. Both men grew up knowing the answer to the question Antjie Krog (2002, 293) poses at the end of *Country of My Skull*, "How do we become released into understanding, into becoming whole among others? ... We have to become each other." It is easy to romanticize and sanitize the Alcocks' story, but this runs the risk of obscuring the harsh realities of their engagement with the worlds in which they live. Malan (2009b, 323, 328) acknowledges that, as boys, the Alcocks "learned the Zulu warrior code – hammer anyone who messes with you", and that while white liberals "admire the results of [Rauri's] land reform work, [they] tend to be disconcerted by his methods." These are men who "have their own moral universe that they almost chopped out of the rock they grew up in ... It is very hard-core but there is no black and white about it" (Malan 2009b, 328). The Alcock brothers, while still marked by their white skin, have nonetheless found a way to move out of 'whiteness' and into the 'folded-togetherness' of community. Malan (2009b, 333) comments that instead of the apocalypse he foretold in *My Traitor's Heart*, South Africa is potentially becoming home to 'mutants' and 'hybrids':

The Model C schoolgirls who congregate at my local shopping centre are mutants ... They are black, but their English accents are entirely Rosebank, and as far as I can tell, their interests are as vacuously suburban as mine at that age. The Alcock boys are of course mutating in the opposite direction.

It is hard to say where all this mutation is leading, although the trend seems generally promising. A century hence, historians might look back and identify the Alcock boys as primitive incarnations of a new African life-form. On the other hand, there might not be a posterity at all, so let's just say Neil Alcock's experiment has produced hybrids whose world is infinitely more interesting and optimistic than the gloomy one I inhabit.

The story of the Alcock brothers foregrounds several issues that are pertinent to the broader concerns of this project, namely that it is possible to move beyond whiteness; that white skin, however, remains a significant marker of identity; and that positions of hybridity offer interesting potential for 'becoming-other'.

### To Be in the 'Inbetween'

In her eight-point definition, Ruth Frankenberg (2008, 416) describes whiteness as "a location of structural advantage"; a "standpoint"; "a site of elaboration of a range of cultural practices and identities"; as "often renamed or displaced within ethnic or class naming"; as "a matter of contestation"; "as a site of privilege"; as "a product of history"; and as real in its "material and discursive effects." This is a useful contribution to the field of critical whiteness studies as it focuses on the often uninterrogated privileges and structural advantages accorded to the position of 'white', and it disengages whiteness from rigidly essential notions of race and skin colour. This understanding allows whiteness as a construct and a subject position to

be exposed, examined and, ultimately, destabilised. It becomes evident in the story of the Alcock brothers that their upbringing constantly challenged the accepted ways of 'being white', and forced both men to negotiate more complex and nuanced subject positions as white South Africans. However, Frankenberg's definition obscures the reality, particularly in South Africa, of skin as a marker of identity and position, and of the impossibility of stepping outside of one's skin. While this does not necessarily detract from the value of Frankenberg's argument, it does call for a more complicated engagement with the concept of whiteness in a South African context.

The national conversation regarding whiteness and white identity has clearly moved from the realm of academia into the public sphere, as evidenced by the enormous response generated by Eusebius McKaiser's article "Confronting Whiteness", published in the *Mail and Guardian* in July 2011. In his piece, McKaiser (2011)<sup>40</sup> outlines the argument put forward by philosopher Samantha Vice, who suggests that "whites should feel shame and regret, and make amends for being unjust beneficiaries of whiteness. They should also withdraw from the political space and live 'in humility and silence'." The reaction to this article was so overwhelming that the *Mail and Guardian* initiated a series titled "The Whiteness Debate"<sup>41</sup> in which leading academics, writers and journalists contributed to the discussion of white identity in post-apartheid South Africa. The themes that recur in many of these articles have also emerged in this thesis and include the question of belonging, the inherited privileges of whiteness, and the cultural illiteracy of whites.

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<sup>40</sup> This is an online source and does not include numbered pages.

<sup>41</sup> See "The Whiteness Debate", *Mail and Guardian Online*, <http://mg.co.za/specialreport/on-whiteness>.



A close reading of the literary narratives of Rian Malan (*My Traitor's Heart*), Kevin Bloom (*Ways of Staying*), Jonny Steinberg (*Midlands*) and Antjie Krog (*Country of My Skull* and *Begging to be Black*) reveals whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa to be a multifaceted and often contradictory construct and position. South African whiteness appears strongly characterised by a deep-seated anxiety that stems from a perpetual sense 'un-belonging' because, as Simoes da Silva (2007, 291) points out, "it takes a great deal of work for the White person to be able to call Africa home." Both Bloom and Malan depict whiteness as existing in a permanent state of anticipation of the violence that must inevitably come. Bloom even suggests that access to the national narrative, and thus a sense of belonging, can only be achieved through the experience of violence or, at the very least, choosing to remain despite the inevitability of that violence. Steinberg conveys this sense of anxiety through his depiction of the land in *Midlands*. The white farmers in his narrative experience an uneasy relationship with the surrounding landscape which, despite its verdant beauty, is presented as ominous and threatening. The land becomes a constant reminder of the 'un-belonging' of whiteness in Africa. In Krog's two narratives this sense of anxiety is complicated by the notion of complicity. Whiteness in *Country of My Skull* and *Begging to be Black* is shaped by its complicity in the oppression and dehumanization of its black compatriots, and Krog suggests that only by embracing a broader complicity-as-folded-togetherness can the humanity of both white and black South Africans be restored.

As quoted earlier in this project, "Apartheid ... succeeded tremendously well in building two worlds, in keeping the white and black ... worlds apart" (Goodwin and

Schiff 1995, 57). Even today, almost two decades after the official demise of apartheid, many South Africans find themselves fixed in the seemingly unyielding binary of black/white. In Steinberg's *Midlands*, the apparent border between black and white identity, and land, is seen as a hostile frontier. In this sense, whiteness is characterised by its inability to move beyond the constraints of its colonial legacy and thus finds itself trapped in what can be termed the 'colonial present'. Whiteness is also depicted as damaged by a pervasive cultural illiteracy. In the literary narratives of Bloom, Malan and Steinberg reference is made to whiteness's inability, and at times blatant refusal, to understand or interact with any 'other'. As Malan (1991, 189) comments, "to most whites, blacks are inscrutable; they can't talk to them, don't understand them, and struggle to see them in three dimensions." This cultural illiteracy engenders feelings of mistrust and suspicion of the 'other' which in turn feeds into the pervasive anxiety experienced by many white South Africans. Krog also grapples with the issue of cultural illiteracy in *Country of My Skull* and *Begging to be Black*, but she does so from the perspective of connection and community. She observes that the Bushman people were seen as being so embedded in their world that they "could speak lion, they could speak blue crane, they could speak wind", and Krog responds that she "want[s] to speak black" (Krog 2009, 268). Thus Krog indicates that one way of overcoming apartheid's legacy of cultural illiteracy is to learn to be connected and embedded in the broader South African national community, and she suggests that one does so by learning to 'become-other'.

The second and subsequent editions of Krog's *Country of My Skull* conclude with both the questions and the answers that Krog returns to almost a decade later in *Begging to be Black*. She asks, "How does one find the past tense of the word hate? ... How do we *make* whole?", and then answers, "We have to hear each other's scalp and smell each other's blood and baled belonging. We have to learn the deepest sound of each other's kidneys in the night" (Krog 2002, 293). In *Begging to be Black*, Krog is searching for a way through the inflexible binaries of the past to a space in which complicity-as-folded-togetherness becomes possible. Stewart Motha (2010) introduces the idea of 'postcolonial becoming' and I suggest that this approach, with its emphasis on the 'liminal', is very useful in understanding Krog's project. With its juxtaposition of historical and temporal locations, *Begging to be Black* is a complex narrative that seeks to make meaning in the 'inbetween', in much the same way as Kevin Bloom's *Ways of Staying*. As I have already noted, Bloom (2009a, 222) comments of his text that he is attempting to "let the interplay between the fragments serve as the primary sites of latent meaning." Krog suggests in *Begging to be Black* that it appears possible, by embracing the uncertainty of the 'liminal', to understand the 'inbetween' as a space of potential in which the process of 'becoming-other' may begin; and that through 'becoming-other' whiteness might move out of its historical isolation and into community where 'being-with' and 'folded-togetherness' are possible. It can be argued that Krog's concern with the potential of the 'inbetween' in *Begging to be Black* is foreshadowed in *Country of My Skull* through the apparent ambivalence in her depiction of women, implying an unfamiliar and possibly as-yet-unknown space between accepted binary positions. It is interesting that although the notion of a 'liminal' space surfaces in the work of

Bloom, Malan and Steinberg, it is not experienced as a moment of possibility. Bloom and Malan gesture towards the 'inbetween', but it remains fraught with fear and uncertainty reinforcing the 'un-belonging' of whiteness in Africa rather than becoming a space of potential transformation. In Steinberg's narrative, the border remains a point of conflict rather than connection, and Steinberg himself seems unable to move beyond his descriptions of the fixed binaries he encounters, and is thus unable to open a space for 'becoming'.

While it is noteworthy that Krog, Bloom, Malan and Steinberg all engage thematically with the concepts of the 'inbetween' and liminality, it is perhaps more significant that they foreground these issues through their generic choices. The form and structure of each narrative therefore has as much bearing on its meaning as the content. By working at the interstice of literature and journalism, these authors are able to use generic instability to raise issues of identity and belonging in the South African context. They are very often writing at a time of political and social flux, and by writing at the unstable boundaries of literature and journalism these authors not only mirror the volatility of their social setting but also endeavor to find new narrative forms through which to address the complexities of white South African identity. By working between genres, Krog, Bloom, Malan and Steinberg are attempting to develop what Homi Bhabha (1994b, 300) refers to as "counter-narratives of nation", which challenge the often essentialist boundaries of the nation and destabilize uninterrogated national identities. This strategy of writing at the blurry edges of genre forces the reader to become more actively engaged in the narrative. The use of literary devices, such as the first-person point of view, helps to

create an emotional authenticity within the narratives. This allows the reader to journey with the author-character as he or she negotiates the challenging social terrain of the South African experience. However, the fact that these narratives are non-fiction, that they actually happened, removes what Brown and Krog (2011, 60) refer to as the “escape clause” for the reader, making it impossible for the reader to dismiss the issues raised. Thus the space ‘inbetween’ genres becomes a space of potential engagement and possible change, and Krog, for example, uses the narrative ambiguities of writing in the ‘inbetween’ in order to illustrate the possibilities of living in the ‘inbetween’. In discussing her generic choices, Krog (2007, 268) comments that “by listening, engaging, observing, translating...one can...begin to sense a thinning of skin, negotiate possible small openings and places where imaginings can begin to begin.”

## To Skin us into Being

I have referred to Njabulo Ndebele’s formulation of “the global sanctity of the white body” several times in this project, and I would like to return to it once more here.

Ndebele ((2000) 2007, 137) argues:

The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body. This leads me to think that if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. It will have to

come out from under the umbrella and repudiate it. Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies.

It is noteworthy that in the current discourse of critical whiteness studies, whiteness is understood in abstract and theoretical terms that disconnect the experience of whiteness from the body, and more specifically, the skin. This move away from skin can be understood as an attempt to move away from the essentialised, eighteenth-century interpretation of race, and in fact human-ness, as determined by skin colour. While this approach has been useful in allowing scholars and theorists to interrogate whiteness in ways that destabilize and decentre the structural advantages associated with the position of being white, it overlooks the visceral experience of living in a body marked by skin colour. Ndebele's argument is interesting in that he allows for a slippage between the 'white body' and whiteness. For him, whiteness is both a theoretical position and a bodily experience. And significantly, the privileges and structural advantages of South African whiteness can only be challenged and dismantled through the experience of bodily vulnerability, of sharing a 'folded-togetherness' with the black 'other'.

The experience of 'folded-togetherness' and the process of 'becoming-other' require a 'liminal' space, an interface that allows for the simultaneity of self and other. I suggest that 'skin' offers this liminality and thus the space for potential becoming. There is however a danger in drawing on the idea of skin when discussing the social identity of whiteness, for as Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001, 4) observe:

... we often (wrongly) assume we can know an other through the sight of the skin and through its marking. In other words, not only is skin assumed to be a sign of the subject's interiority (for example, what it means to be white or Black, ill or well), but the skin is also assumed to reflect the truth of the other and to give us access to the other's being.

Thus the skin is always already both significant and insignificant, for the body is always marked, and thus read and interpreted, by the skin, and yet those readings and interpretations are based on an arbitrary biological phenomenon which has no bearing on the functioning of the rest of the body. Furthermore, Claudia Benthien (2002, 1) comments, "In the twentieth century, at the latest, skin ... became the central metaphor of separateness. It is only at this boundary that subjects can encounter each other." There is thus a duality in the theorising of skin, in that it is both the marker of separateness and the point of potential contact. This duality is in fact helpful in thinking through how one might move out of whiteness and towards 'becoming-other', as it draws attention to the 'inbetween-ness' of skin. As I have indicated in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, "skin itself is hence located in the third space; the skin is both marker of racial otherness and the site of hybridity" (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 14). In his landmark text, *The Skin Ego*, Didier Anzieu (1989, 17) suggests, "the skin is both permeable and impermeable, superficial and profound, truthful and misleading ... solid and fragile ... In all the different dimensions of this necessarily incomplete list, it has a 'halfway', intermediate,

transitional status.” Finally, as Sarah Ahmed (1998, 57) argues, “the skin, then, is both the locus of the subject and that unstable space in which the subject can become an-other.” The instability and liminality of skin offer a space in which South African identities can become fluid rather than fixed, and in which whiteness can begin to move out from under the umbrella of its global sanctity and into ‘folded-togetherness’ with its many ‘others’. By working at the borders of literature and journalism, Krog, Bloom, Malan and Steinberg are seeking those points of intersection and interpenetration that create narrative instability and fluidity, in order simultaneously to reveal the inherent anxiety and possibility of the ‘inbetween’. For it is only by embracing the uncertainty of the ‘inbetween’, and the vulnerability of the bodily experience of ‘being-here’ and ‘being-with’, that whiteness can fully realize a belonging that “places oneself at the edge of one’s self and leaning and tipping towards the ‘others’ to whom [one] belongs” (Carrillo Rowe 2005, 17).



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