‘A Thinning of Skin’: writing on and against whiteness

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Vron Ware, Open University, Dept Sociology, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

vron.ware@open.ac.uk
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Abstract
This essay considers how women’s life-writing has offered a situated mode of resistance to dominant racial regimes in the US and South Africa. Based on a reading of diverse texts, it employs concepts such as entanglement, disentanglement, estrangement and dislocation as keys to understand the relationship between blackness and whiteness, not in abstract, theoretical terms but as a complex configuration of meanings arising from and within specific circumstances. The essay examines the technique of self-disclosure in life-writing against racism as a means to illustrate the tentacles of power and privilege on many levels, and suggests a way of reading and interpreting self-narratives as a means to work through the psychological, material and symbolic processes entailed in the struggle for change. South African writer Antjie Krog’s work frames this enquiry since her life-project is both ontological, expressed as a search for a different kind of self, and epistemological, in the sense that this it explores the possibility of a different way of knowing. This task requires a deep reckoning with aspects of the past, her own as well as the catastrophic legacies of European colonial expansion and apartheid.

Keywords: life writing, anti-racism, autobiography, feminism, becoming, segregation, apartheid

I wrote it because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person; I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me. I was in dialogue with myself as I wrote, as well as with my home town and my childhood and history and the future, and the past. Writing is both horizontal and vertical exploration. It has to true itself with facts but also with feelings and symbols, and memories that are never quite facts but sometimes closer to the ‘truth’ than is any fact. (Smith 1963, 3)
In her book ‘Begging to Be Black’ South African poet and author Antjie Krog weaves together a series of encounters, memories and stories that address the ‘long conversation between black and white’ in her country. (2009). One of the disparate narrative threads is a detailed account of her time in Berlin on a year’s fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies. It begins when she walks into the apartment after the long journey from Cape Town. Falling asleep on the sofa, she woke to a beautiful autumn light streaming into the room, and that phenomenon, combined with the smell of coffee, made her feel as though her throat would ‘burst with light and happiness’. However, ‘what comes pouring out, unexpectedly, are harsh choking sounds of relief.’ (89)

Interspersing her observations between journal format and letters to her mother, one day she wrote that she had just returned from the supermarket after finding rhubarb yogurt on the shelf. ‘Yes, Dr Oetkers Onken Joghurt mit Rhabarber-Vanille-Geschmack – Gutes aus Milch!’ This mundane discovery was just one sign of the texture and taste of everyday life in western Europe. In another letter she told her mother, ‘

Do you know that pedestrians here actually wait for the green man to flash, even when there is not a single car on the horizon? Is this the meaning of a law-abiding citizen? I find myself in petrifying angst at traffic lights: if I wait, I feel completely illogical; if I cross while it is red (and there are no cars), I feel the eyes of the Germans bore into my back: Go on, you Third World scoundrel, that is why you and your ilk are in such a moral quagmire.(120)

As the days pass, marked by reflections on what is strange and unfamiliar in her surroundings in contrast to her native land, she invites her readers to listen to her inner dialogue that constitutes just one layer of her book:
I can’t remember when I last felt so safe, cared for and WANTED despite being white. I know we live a highly privileged life in South Africa, but I hadn’t realised how harsh my life in reality had become. It is not because I can walk alone through Hasensprung at one o’clock in the morning without the slightest notion of fear, but because one is shielded from people who are poor, hungry and cold…The poor mark the most breathtaking vistas and the most desolate horizons in South Africa. Here, where I live in Berlin, the poor is a theory. (91)

This is no mere travel diary of a foreigner abroad, however. The reason for her sojourn in Berlin is to take time to daydream, to develop her understanding of certain moral and philosophical concepts rooted in South African history, and this project demands that she move to an entirely different environment in order to be able to think. Her dialogue with a professor at the university provides another strand of the book, one that both outlines and explores her intellectual preoccupations as an author. Early on she tells him, ‘In order to understand something I have to write it; while writing – writingly, as it were – I find myself dissolving into, becoming towards what I am trying to understand.’ (92) As the discussion develops, her interlocutor attempts to summarise her position, introducing her to Deleuze’s theory of transformation, and elaborating on the concept of ‘becoming’ in more abstract terms. ‘One moves from an established known identity by transforming oneself,’ he tells her. ‘But transformation always moves in a particular direction and writing is often the best way to trace these directions.’

The dialogue that follows reveals the predicament with which Krog has wrestled, both since, and long before, the end of apartheid. The reconstructed exchange between professor and student is a format that allows her to articulate her life project in conversational terms:

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?

Her second question follows on from this, framing a quest for alternatives to the Western paradigms that ‘insist liberal values are the only possible framework for a modern state.’ At one point the professor suggests: ‘But you are saying: because you lived in this apartheid bubble which tried to keep itself whites-only and Western, this has stunted your own changing and becoming?’

In reply, Krog says simply: ‘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’ (95). For her this is not a personal mission to investigate the origins of clearly defined terms such as ‘blackness’ and its opposite, ‘whiteness’, and their entanglement, nor is it a quest for alternative knowledge that can only be attained outside the fraught conditions of daily life in her native land. She frames her project as one that is both ontological, expressed as a search for a different kind of self, and epistemological, in the sense that this is about a different way of knowing. This task requires a deep reckoning with aspects of the past, her own as well as the catastrophic legacies of European colonial expansion and apartheid. In order to do this she creates a ‘mytho-poetic narrative’, one in which an eclectic cast of characters can take part: ‘King Moshoeshoe, missionaries from the 19th century, Antjie Krog and her friends and colleagues, ANC cadres, the Deleuzian philosopher Paul Patton, Krog’s husband J., Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the ANC Youth League’ (Motha 2010, 290).

Searching for a figure of speech that transcends the problems of separateness and incommensurability, Krog refuses the notion of mingling, entangling and other forms of mixture, turning instead to a more organic image of a root that ‘can become or link to another’ (95). This metaphor of growing-towards (an impulse of interconnectedness) is an appropriate starting place for this essay. While a focus on the subterranean highlights the work of writing the self as a transformative undertaking that has multiple dimensions, the
commitment to cultural change indicates the importance of attending to the relationship between history, memory and subjective interpretation.

II
The focus here is on the way in which women’s life writing can unlock, challenge and document the ways in which racial difference and racial hierarchy are both lived and resisted in any particular time and place. Although I am drawn to the articulation of gendered subjectivities, I am less concerned with whether this counts as feminist or not. In particular, this essay will consider how the autobiographical perspectives of those identified as white can communicate not just a sense of the past (of where one is starting from), but also how one might consciously become, and transform oneself into, something other than what one was. These questions suggest a way of reading and interpreting self-narratives that might illuminate the workings of racial power, privilege and subordination because they bring to light the psychological, material and symbolic processes entailed in the struggle for change.

Confining this enterprise to examples produced by women identified as white allows us to investigate the grounds for being ‘disloyal to civilisation’, a gendered political orientation originally proposed by Lillian Smith in 1962 (Smith 1962; Rich 1978) The first might be the principle of estrangement, not just a result of a physical journey that provokes a sense of dislocation, but an orientation to the world guided by a sense of alienation, and a yearning to be different, from what seems to be normal or expected. Secondly, I discuss a body of work that illuminates the process of disentanglement, of extracting the self from complicity in hateful institutions, dubious identifications and an uncritical relationship to everyday life. And third, as we read women’s autobiographical writing as journeys of self-discovery, we can also discern ways in which transformation of the gendered self through writing opens up moral and political dilemmas embedded in the desire for radical change.

Although this essay examines a variety of authors writing within distinct historical and geographical contexts, there is no suggestion that racism remains the same across time and place. Retracing the significance of the autobiographical voice in feminist theory and politics, this essay focuses on
women’s life-writing as a situated mode of resistance to the dominant racial regime, whether Jim Crow segregation, colonialism, apartheid or its aftermath. The selection of authors is not intended to sketch out a chronological survey or to tie discrete modes of writing together as if they constituted a literary genre of their own. Instead the connection between these diverse texts is provided by the analytical approach suggested above: a desire to understand the relationship between blackness and whiteness, not as abstract, theoretical terms but as a complex configuration of meanings arising from and within specific circumstances; the technique of self-disclosure as means to animate the tentacles of power and privilege; the effects of narrating personal and political struggles to forge new subjectivities based on solidarity with those who are positioned differently by virtue of their birth, their heritage and their skin.

III

In an essay entitled, ‘The Female Stranger: marginality and modes of writing’, cultural theorist Janet Wolff emphasised the salience of psychological journeys made in the course of a lifetime, offering a critique of the artificial separation so often made between the academic and the personal. ‘The narrative constructed from personal memory, from fragments of memoir, and from apparently isolated moments, competes on equal terms with other narratives, including those formulated in macro–sociological or abstract terms’ (1995, 17). Acknowledging that there was an established tradition of sociological thought that recognised the value of distance and objectivity in the social observer, Wolff explored the creative possibilities of estrangement (and marginality), particularly when it allowed women writers to articulate a sense of distance from what they had previously found familiar or taken for granted. The standpoint of the female outsider, whether a stranger or simply a foreigner, offered original ways of knowing, either about places left behind or the new worlds encountered through some kind of travel.

Although Wolff examined writings by women who had made their escape from one geographical location to another, the process of travel that enabled new insights was not necessarily a result of migration. ‘But for the woman who has left home,’ she wrote, ‘it seems to be the case that displacement
(determinitalization) can be quite strikingly productive’. (9) New concepts of place, or a different sense of relationships between places, could emerge as a result of an individual moving away from familiar surroundings. Secondly, travel could play a significant role in changing one’s sense of self as well as one’s angle of vision. Documenting these changes, she suggested, may take the form of ‘re-writing the self, discarding the life-long habits and practices of a constraining social education and discovering new forms of self-expression (9). For this reason, she suggested, ‘the narrative of the fragment and the memoir, motivated as it is by those who have reclaimed their ‘buried selves’, often in the process of a journey, is one worth telling.’(17)

Wolff’s essay on the creative uses of dislocation for women writers, either forced or obliged to leave home, speaks powerfully to another feminist intervention on the importance of knowing where one was writing from. In 1984 the poet Adrienne Rich published ‘Notes towards a politics of location’ that was to provoke new directions in feminist discourse, directing attention to the impact of geography, and of geopolitics, on feminists’ social formations (1986). Like Krog, Rich was born under an apartheid system, albeit in the U.S., which meant that her place of birth already marked her existence as a product of a particular social order. Even as she took her first breath, she wrote, her body was claimed as white by Jim Crow America before it was identified as female. (Rich 1986, 215) Above all, her work was directed towards revolutionary change that was global in scope. Rich urged her readers to make connections between different kinds of struggle, avoiding the pitfalls of thinking that the world revolved around them, their priorities or their country. In doing so, she warned of the problems of writing in the first person: ‘Whatever circumscribes or mutilates our feelings makes it more difficult to act, keep our actions reactive, repetitive: abstract thinking, narrow tribal loyalties, every kind of self-righteousness, the arrogance of believing ourselves at the centre.’ (223) There were no guarantees that writing from a personal perspective automatically allowed a repudiation of the constraints of upbringing, socialisation and self-interest.

In another essay ‘Memoirs and Micrologies’, Wolff assessed feminist autobiographical method in the light of the growth of cultural studies and cultural history during the 1980s and early 90s, expressing reservations about the
use of the personal voice for its own sake. ‘Self-reflection need not be politically radical, ethically correct or analytically illuminating,’ she wrote. ‘It can be simply self-indulgent, embarrassing and irrelevant.’ (1995, 50-1, emphasis in original)

She approached the interplay between the personal and the political (or the autobiographical and the critical) through a consideration of why Walter Benjamin had become so popular, tracking the way in which some feminist historians and anthropologists had successfully used ‘autobiographical interruption’ to transform conventional methods of ethnography and cultural analysis. But it could not simply be assumed that ‘the memoiristic provides guaranteed access to knowledge,’ she insisted, ‘because we still have to address the question of typicality’. Where Rich directs attention to social and geographical formation, here Wolff suggests the importance of historical awareness in the course of interpreting experience: ‘So where the personal is valuable in laying bare the structures and prejudices of cultural work, it does not necessarily provide the route to better cultural history, unless we can be persuaded that this particular experience is somehow typical or indicative of a moment’ (50-51, emphasis in original).

This brief discussion of the gendered politics of location and dislocation reflects the intense and long-standing interest in autobiography within feminist discourse. While this is largely due to ‘the promise of an exploration or revelation of a “self”’, there has been greater attention to questions of fragmentation, fictionalisation and the sheer unreliability of subjective recall (Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 2000, 4). At the same time, the study of autobiography ‘makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary’ (1). To this list I would add the now, the then and the yet to come, reiterating the importance of memory-work in both recovering and re-establishing a historical record of trauma, suffering and struggle (174-5).

IV

We turn now to notable examples of feminists using autobiographical or auto-ethnographic methods to address the particular ways in which racialised and
gendered identities were shaped in the experience of growing up in the US. An early example of this type of intervention was the volume *Yours in Struggle*, a collaboration between three women who described themselves as ‘white Christian-raised Southerner, Afro-American and Ashkenazi Jew’ (Bulkin, Pratt, Smith 1984.) The brief introduction, written collectively, reveals the mode of thinking about identity, difference and separation that characterised feminist politics during that decade. The authors explained that ‘we are all lesbians who have worked together politically and respect each other’s work.’ This book happened, they continue, ‘because we were able to talk to each other in the first place, despite our very different identities and backgrounds. Each of us speaks only for herself, and we do not necessarily agree with each other. Yet we believe our cooperation on this book indicates concrete possibilities for coalition work.’ (7)

Minnie Bruce Pratt’s account of her upbringing, unhappy marriage and process of coming out as a lesbian is described in her essay, ‘Identity: Skin Blood Heart’ which soon became an exemplary self-narration of a white lesbian caught up in a web of patriarchal, homophobic and racist oppression. Her account begins in the streets of Washington DC where she lived at the time of writing, situating her contemporary self in the maelstrom of US racial politics in both intimate and unavoidable ways.

…‘when I walk out in my neighbourhood, each speaking to another person has become fraught, for me, with the history of race and sex and class; as I walk I have a constant interior discussion with myself, questioning how I acknowledge the presence of another, what I know or don’t know about them, and what it means how they acknowledge me. It is an exhausting process, this moving from the experience of the “Unknowing majority” (as Maya Angelou called it) into consciousness. It would be a lie to say the process is comforting. (12)

Pratt is at pains to explain the conditions under which she began her journey to break free from ‘the narrow circle of the self’ (18). There are powerful descriptions of pivotal moments where she felt utterly confused, compromised
or constrained, either in her relationship with her father or when living as a mother, wife and teacher in a military town. Inevitably she loses custody of her two sons, aged six and seven, when she leaves her husband for another woman, an extraordinary passage that expresses the astonishing pain she experienced as a result (27). Retracing the steps that she took to break with her past illustrates the role that life-writing can play in the self-conscious process of transformation. ‘How do we begin to change,’ she asks, ‘and then keep going, and act on this in the world? How do we want to be different from what we have been? (19, italics in original) For her it was the ‘falling in love with and becoming sexual with another woman’ that propelled her to jump ‘outside herself’ and through this new identity she came to understand, in ‘a complicated way’ the connections with racism and anti-semitism (19).

Pratt’s method of self-disclosure entailed recounting her dreams and habitual fears of the consequences of speaking out whenever it meant criticising the social norms that surrounded her during her upbringing. It meant openly assessing the behaviour of her parents, particularly her father with whom she had been close. Writing about him from a distance meant betrayal as well as disentanglement, taking responsibility for denouncing the values with which she had been raised as well as venting her anger.

In a passage towards the end of the essay she described two nightmares that gave shape to the psychological anguish produced by her break with family and culture. In the first she was left with a sense of rage and helplessness that forced her to acknowledge her ‘responsibility for what the men of my culture have done, in my name’ (53). In the dream her father had brought her an object, a box, which remained after he had gone. ‘Why should I be left with this?’ she asked herself. ‘I’d done my best for years to try to reject it: I wanted no part of what was in it’. The visual and affective aspects of the sequence allowed Pratt to interpret what it might mean, providing a literary device to admit the psychic costs of betraying the culture of white supremacy:

And yet it is mine: I am my father’s daughter in the present, living in a world he and my folks helped to create. A month after I dreamed this, he died.; I honor the grief of his life by striving to change much of what he
believed in: and my own grief by acknowledging that I saw him caught in the grip of racial, sexual, cultural fears that I am still trying to understand in myself (53).

In the second nightmare Pratt experienced being shot in the head by a young white man who was driving a tractor. The unmistakable rural setting of white southern culture and the fact that he could have been ‘any of the boys I went to high school with’ made the encounter all the more shocking: ‘he looked at me: he knew who I was, not just by my family, but by what kind of person I was, and he knew I was no longer on his side…(53, italics in original). The fact that he could identify her as a ‘race traitor’, despite both being classified as white, summoned the terrors of violent punishment that were in store for women who declared ‘not in my name’.

V

The distinctive work of lesbian feminist writers published in the late 20th century, among whom Pratt is just one example, can also be read alongside a tradition of Southern autobiography. In a literary review of what he calls ‘the white southern racial conversion narrative’ Fred Hobson notes that ‘The outburst of white southern autobiography driven by racial guilt, beginning shortly before mid-century, would continue for three decades, indeed still continues to a great degree’ (Hobson 1999, 15). Attributing this phenomenon to the emerging ‘southern party of guilt’, Hobson identifies the ‘religious impulse’ as the factor that spurred a new generation of whites to take social action against southern racial divisions. In the 1940s, Lillian Smith, who was born in the Deep South in 1897, became the first American writer to embark on a psychological analysis of white racism. Her novel, Strange Fruit, was published in 1944 and it became a best-seller, establishing her reputation as a controversial author. Her investigation into the mental and social structures of segregation, Killers of the Dream, was published in 1949 and later reissued with a new prologue during the civil rights movement (Smith 1963; Ware 2004).

Smith attracted controversy not merely because of her denunciation of the South’s economic, political and social institutions and her views of the
dehumanizing effects of segregation. She was also concerned to investigate the connections between racism and sexuality that lay at the heart of the culture, both in terms of her own experience as a woman but also as a way of comprehending the psychology of white supremacy. In a letter written a decade later she admitted that she wrote *Killers of the Dream* to give herself insight. ‘I realized the symbolic significance of darkness, body openings…I also stressed the inter-relationship between body image and Puritanism’ (Gladney 1993, 167). Her explorations into this analytical territory took her right back to her own childhood as she explained in the extract that begins this essay, ‘I wrote it because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person’. Her motives were not, of course, as narrow as this comment suggests; the very first paragraph of her book evokes the terror of growing up in a community vibrating with the ominous rhythms of self destruction.

Even its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud. To them, it was a vague thing weaving in and out of their play like a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the whole household sleeps - fleeting mystery, vague menace to which each responds in his own way’ (Smith 1963, 15).

As an essayist, novelist and outspoken activist against racial segregation, Smith is a significant figure in this discussion and her legacy is hard to compress. Deeply anti-fascist and anti-militarist, Smith was strongly against communism as well. This contrived to limit her appeal to socialist feminists in the 1980s, in spite of Rich’s exhortation to go back to the past in order to address the ‘sexual, racial and economic tangle’ that stunted feminist politics. However, subsequent critics have traced Smith’s antipathy to communism to her experience of travel outside the US as a young woman. Jay Garcia notes that during this time, Smith ‘became keenly aware of the portable nature of white supremacy and the everyday life of empire’ (61). He cites as evidence an extract from an autobiographical sketch entitled, ‘A Skeleton Chronology of the Big Experiences of My Life: 1922 – 1925’: ‘China took my mind in its 3000-year-old grasp and shook it hard until it sloughed off a great deal of Western custom and habit and [I] began for the first
time in my life to think critically, to question’ (Smith nd). Smith attributed one particular incident to her epiphany. It occurred when she witnessed a British policeman lashing a ‘Chinese coolie’ in broad daylight. ‘My mind tore wide open,’ she wrote. ‘It has never closed up since.’ (Garcia 61)

This brief discussion indicates the value of assessing Smith’s work in the broader context of global anti-colonial struggles taking place in the period between the outbreak of war in 1939 and her death in 1966. Her lifelong interest in Gandhi and Tagore, explored in depth by Garcia, suggests that her autobiographical insights into southern culture, the politics of her location, can be read as part of a worldly exchange. It is possible, for example, that Smith’s advocacy of disloyalty to civilization was influenced by Virginia Woolf’s formulation of ‘unreal loyalties’ (Gladney, 51, 137). As Garcia observes, ‘Smith’s humanism involved moral decision making and a distinctive style and artistic cadence, with the “human” serving as a salient moral category, a form of cultural address, and a horizon of social transformation’ (2008, 59).

VI

Although there is no evidence that Smith was in dialogue with anti-apartheid activists, her analysis of segregation, and of white supremacy in particular, had profound resonance in South Africa. We turn now to a more recent generation of autobiographical writing in the context of apartheid and its aftermath. In a collection entitled Senses of Culture, published in 2000, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl Ann Michael suggested that life writing had become more of a cultural activity than a literary convention.

Memoir, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism, all different kinds of autobiographical acts or cultural occasions in which narrators take up models of identity that have become widely available, have pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century’ (Nuttall and Michael 2000, 298).

They offered an analysis of the way that so many South African writers, their opinions, identities and subjectivities suppressed for decades under apartheid
rule, had begun to tell ‘stories of the self in public’ as a means to create a new pluralist cultural space. (317)

Almost a decade later, Nuttall elaborated on the concept of entanglement, defining the term as a condition of being ‘twisted together or entwined, involved with’, but one that was especially useful since it ‘works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication’ (Nuttall 2009, 1). In an essay entitled ‘Secrets and Lies’, she turned to the representation of whiteness in ‘autobiographical acts’ and other self narratives in order to explore processes not just of entanglement but also its opposite, disentanglement. By this she referred to the process of extracting the self from whiteness ‘in its official fictions and material trajectories, its privileges and access to power, now in an emerging context of black political power in South Africa’ (59).

Nuttall argues that the question of selfhood in first-person narratives offers a way of undoing the foreclosures of race, of keeping race open as a practice in the making. ‘In tracing subjectivity through first person narratives, that is, a way can be found of avoiding the ossification of racial scripts, or maintaining economies of meaning based on “absolute figures” of whites and blacks’ (59). Understanding whiteness as a locus of power and privilege relies on two strata of analysis. The first attempts to unravel the scopic economy of looking and watching while the second seeks to expose the web of deceit, secrecy and fabrication on which whiteness has come to rely. The process of watching the self, writes Nuttall, emerges not least through the self-conscious process of a certain mode of autobiographical writing itself. While her whole book is concerned with the cultural politics of the post-apartheid period, she begins her discussion with a consideration of Ruth First’s prison memoir, compiled in the 1960s (First 1965). She does this in the belief that this particular text provides ‘an important template and historical reference point for the 1980s and beyond’ (60).

First was one of South Africa’s best known activists and intellectuals during the war against apartheid. Born in 1925, she was imprisoned for her political beliefs and activities and then exiled from South Africa in 1964, along with her husband, the prominent South African communist Joe Slovo and their children. Writing in 1969, she explained how her life was dedicated ‘to the
liberation of Africa for I count myself an African, and there is no cause I hold
dearer’. She was killed by a parcel bomb in 1982 while in Maputo. Nuttall
analyses her memoir written in detention in the 1960s, noting that it is ‘an acute
account of the self under mental and physical duress’ (60). It is also, she
continues, ‘a striking examination of “political whiteness”, a term she uses in the
text and an identity she assumes and gives content to at the height of apartheid’s
brutal rule.’

In First’s memoir, the concept of political whiteness becomes evident
through this language of watching, expressed through a degree of self-
consciousness underlined by frequent qualifying clauses, such as, ‘I told myself’.
Nuttall writes, ‘First engages in watching the self as a white self within a
conscious political process of trying to become someone else.’ The penalties of
disavowing the privilege and power endowed to those born with white skins
threatened to place the white anti-apartheid activist into a schizophrenic
position. Here she refers to the work of Fanon who identified the importance of
looking and watching as a form of ‘racial scopophilia: sets of racially coded
solicited and unsolicited looks, caught in the tension of demand and desire, and
also a site of splitting’ (61).

The gender dynamic of making whiteness ‘political’ can also be linked to a
broader feminist analysis of ‘the gaze’. Nuttall points out that, while the work of
Berger, Irigaray and others has explored the way that women ‘watch themselves
being looked at’, First was concerned to invert this visual objectification, pointing
out as a matter of principle how others might see her as a white woman. She also
applied this way of seeing to her descriptions of anyone whose whiteness was
linked to their position of relative power. In one example cited by Nuttall she
wrote about her work for the Johannesburg city council researching ‘the number
of supervisors for (white) children in (white) parks’ (62). The use of devices such
as the simple brackets to refuse the notion that the structure of white supremacy
rests on anything other than violence, brings to mind the use of the capital W by

While First was writing as an adult, her daughter Gillian Slovo’s
autobiography, published in 1997, reveals what it was like for a child to be raised
with a profound consciousness that whiteness was entirely constructed, and that
to be white was to assume a fake identity. Slovo’s memoir, *Every Secret Thing: My family, my country*, also discussed by Nuttall, provides a fascinating comparison with feminist life-writing produced in the US. Where feminists like Pratt and Segrest were forced to reckon with their location in the deeply segregationist South, unpeeling layers of socialisation in the course of their activism (a task in which life-writing played a major part), Slovo was in a position to recall the effects of not being permitted to think of herself as white, despite being seen as white by others. Nuttall explains:

Her childhood…was marked by a sense of exclusion. One of her fears was that she would be ‘found out’, would reveal the secret of who she was – to other whites. The secret, that is, that she was not ‘white like them’ or in the sense that they were, that she was, as she writes, ‘passing for white’; an imposter (62).

Comparing the texts provided by mother and daughter produced at different stages of the struggle to dismantle apartheid becomes even richer when placed alongside the memoir of Joe Slovo who was both married to First and the father of Gillian. Although it is difficult to do justice to Nuttall’s discussion of these three self-narratives within one family in the context of South African literary conventions, it is worth noting the difference that gender seems to make in terms of formulating a political distance from white identity. In Joe Slovo’s book, *Unfinished Autobiography*, there is an ‘overarching, theological commitment to the political struggle’ which makes the question of identity almost redundant (64). There is a sense in which ‘Slovo appears to abolish the question of the white self and notions of selfhood embedded in looking and watching’. Both he and First spent a large part of their lives in hiding because of their military activities, but this produced different modes of relating to the self that was being hidden (or kept under surveillance). While First accentuated her self-consciousness in her writing, for Joe Slovo, ‘a working-class Lithuanian Jewish refugee’, the practice of concealing the self meant ‘discarding or disavowing certain forms of self-consciousness’ (65). Avoiding the simplistic notion that the discrepancy between the two strategies was due solely to the predispositions of gender,
Nuttall speculates that it was likely also to have been the result of specific political and class histories.

Placing these situated accounts together makes it possible to glimpse the configurations of class, gender and whiteness that emerged within a particular segment of political life and culture, one in which activists ‘believed powerfully in, and acted upon, a political credo in which race would be erased’ (65). They form an important chapter of the literary and cultural history of South Africa, and offer a way of reading the past that is able to animate those struggles by revealing the psychological costs as well as the penalties of disavowing whiteness. Turning to more recent examples of the use of self-narrative to avoid ‘the ossification of racial scripts’, Nuttall discusses a hugely significant and successful example of early post apartheid autobiographical writing, provided by Antjie Krog, whose work we encountered at the start of this essay.

VII

Krog’s documentation of the early days of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull*, was an international best seller (Krog 1999). The text, published in 1998, comprises several distinct genres, from biographical writing through the recording of testimony before the TRC to the autobiography of Krog herself, although this is sometimes fictionalised; ‘at other times it is written in the style of personal journalism; at certain moments it moves into poetry’ (Nuttall 2009, 65). Krog’s exploration of powerful emotional and psychological reactions to the Truth Commission’s work is compiled almost as a journey; her book is dedicated to ‘every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips’. As Nuttall points out, she knows that her language, Afrikaans, ‘carries violence as a voice’ but she turns to the rhythms and sounds of Afrikaans almost as a litany when she confronts her visceral hatred of Afrikaner men like Dirk Coetzee, leader of the Vlakplaas hit squad, whose crimes were laid bare by the commission. In spite of her unequivocal disloyalty to the civilization founded on the principles of apartheid, her desire to recognise and record the evil they stood for is tempered by a curiosity to know what motivated their ruthless behaviour. Thus she introduces ‘an ethnic specificity into her engagement with her whiteness’, making it seem as though, sometimes, it is as if whiteness hardly
exists for her (66). As Nuttall observes, it was her Afrikaner identity that ‘shapes her most profound responses’ (67). This is an important point, she argued, in a context where ‘the process of living certain identities turns not only around self-identification but around the continual identification of the self by others’.

One of the main themes of the book is the bleak possibility that the country would not be able to move beyond hatred and resentment. In the face of devastating evidence provide by the testimonies, Krog writes openly of her intermittent longing for an essence of Afrikanerhood that is wholesome, non-racist, forgiven, knowing in her heart that this is not possible. This reluctant yearning comes from a growing despair that the TRC was simply not equipped to deal with the twin issues of reparation and reconciliation.

And suddenly it is as if an undertow is taking me out...out...and out. And behind me sinks the country of my skull like a sheet in the dark – and I hear a thin song, hooves, hedges of venom, fever and destruction fermenting and hissing underwater. I shrink and prickle. Against. Against my blood and the heritage thereof. Will I forever be them – recognising them as I do daily in my nostrils? Yes. And what we have done will never be undone. It doesn’t matter what we do. What de Klerk does. Until the third and fourth generation (197).

This agonised recognition that there would be no absolution, no catharsis and only a partial reconciliation, underscored the message that there would also be no place for a habitable, forgiven version of white ethnicity, whether Afrikaner or English. She recalls an earlier interview with Tutu where he tells her that if you don’t know the past you will never understand today’s politics. Then she describes an incident where a friend, who had emigrated, visited her in her office. The friend took a phone call, and told her: “It’s your child. He says he’s writing a song about Joe Mamasela and he needs a word to rhyme with “Vlakplaas”.’ She lowers the phone. ‘Who is Joe Mamasela?’

A massive sigh breaks through my chest. For the first time in months – I breathe.
The absolution one had given up on, the hope for a catharsis, the ideal of reconciliation, the dream of a powerful reparation policy...Maybe this is all that is important - that I and my child know Vlakplaas and Mamasela. That we know what happened there (198-9).

I suggest that Krog’s method here provides an example of what Wolff might recognise as ‘autobiographical interruption’, discussed earlier. Although working as a radio reporter, there was no possibility of remaining impartial or objective in the face of the testimonies she was recording. Her subjective reflections provide an ‘oblique gaze’ on the material being gathered through the TRC, while the format of memoir, sometimes fictionalized, supplies her cultural and social analysis with an immediacy it might not have had (Wolff, 48).

Krog’s second book, *A Change of Tongue*, took the form of a series of auto-ethnographic essays in which she engaged once again with issues of identity and belonging, grounded in her own formation as an ethnic Afrikaner, a writer, and a South African citizen committed to bearing witness to the crimes and atrocities committed in her lifetime, and in her name. Where *Country of My Skull* mixed reportage, testimony, poetry, fiction, memoir and history, Krog’s palette in the second book became even more chaotic as she explored multiple layers of memory work in the context of a society under transformation. The title ‘a change of tongue’ refers not just to the aftermath of revolution but also to the linguistic concept of Transformational Grammar. Her epigraph states that ‘Some rules, according to Noam Chomsky, are transformational: that is, they change one structure into another according to such prescribed conventions as moving, inserting, deleting, and replacing items....’

Once again, by weaving her subjective experience into an disparate mix of material, she draws readers into the heart of the political struggle to re-make South Africa. At one point in the compilation of the book the hard drive of Krog’s computer was wiped out by a virus. Devastated by the news that she had lost everything: ‘poems, lectures, essays, creative pieces spanning nearly ten years, the chapters on poetry in African languages, the half-finished Afrikaans translation of Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, a recent play in pentameters...’ she suffered a mild stroke. As she recovered her health, and the young technician
began to fax her some recovered fragments of her hard drive, she started to piece together her own thoughts by re-reading the testimonies she collected while covering the TRC. These retrieved pieces were not completely intact as they contained elements of code that were unreadable. Krog reproduces the text in all its undecipherability, with the effect that the spoken words of the women and men giving their testimony retain their power to shock in a way that might become muted in a conventional page of text. She also makes a profound point about language itself. As Motha explains: ‘Language is one contested and complex site of becoming. The Constitution guarantees 11 languages, but English is in the ascendant’ (288-9).

Towards the end of *Begging to Be Black*, Krog engages in a final conversation with the professor with whom she has been in dialogue for several months. He asks, unexpectedly, whether she is writing a novel. This provides an opportunity for Krog to articulate her thoughts on the limits of the imagination, saying, shockingly, that she considers it ‘overrated’. In reply to another question about whether literature has failed her, she is forced to confront her own limits as a writer: ‘I think I am saying 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’ (268).

As a result of her conversations, the fruits of her daydreaming not just in a foreign land but one struggling to come to terms with its own past, she tells him she was no longer worried about not being able to imagine what it might mean to be black, a likely prerequisite for writing fiction set in South Africa. Pressed to continue, she adds that to imagine black, at this stage, is to ‘insult black’. That is the reason why she stays with non-fiction, ‘listening, engaging, observing, translating, until one can hopefully begin to sense a thinning of skin, negotiate possible small openings at places where imaginings can begin to begin’ (268).

VIII
Commenting on Krog’s project in *Begging to be Black*, Motha draws attention to the question that underpins her work: ‘What mode of becoming…might secure a postcolonial future? (Motha 2010) He interprets her quest for what he calls
‘being-becoming’ as a more general epistemic and ontological problem that lies at the heart of all transformative politics. In doing so, he emphasizes the radical possibilities of listening to stories in order to become. By such a process, he suggests, Krog opens ‘a liminal space’ (300). He defines liminality as:

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 (300).

Attempting a more thorough critique of Krog’s epistemological project than is possible here, Motha’s definition of this liminal space of being-becoming evokes the territory to which I have been drawn in my own meditation on life-writing as a means to free the self. Where I began with a focus on estrangement, entanglement, disentanglement and dislocation, I end with a simple sense of movement. Writing, writingly, as Krog puts it, is itself a journey that entails a ‘thinning of skin, a ‘dissolving into’, whether as a process of transformation or ‘being-with’. ‘A movement for change, lives in feelings, actions and words,’ wrote Adrienne Rich, while for Lillian Smith, being disloyal to civilization meant opening a dialogue with oneself. Writing as exploration ‘has to true itself with facts but also with feelings and symbols, and memories that are never quite facts but sometimes closer to the "truth" than is any fact’.

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