

NEGOTIATING FEMININITY, ETHNICITY AND HISTORY:

REPRESENTATIONS OF RUTH FIRST

IN SOUTH AFRICAN STRUGGLE NARRATIVES

Deborah Rochelle Klein

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*In memory of my mother,  
Rosabella Singer Klein, an accomplished woman*

*Hare Krsna Hare Krsna Krsna Krsna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*

## *Abstract*

An exploration of South African historiography through the prism of representations of activist writer Ruth First (1925-1982) forms the focus of this thesis. Ignored in South African canonical histories during the apartheid era, Ruth First is frequently portrayed as an icon of the struggle in current accounts about the past.

The dissertation is ordered by five central discussions: gender, political activism, Jewishness, maternal behaviour and the role of the individual in the community. With reference to her non-fiction writing, autobiographical accounts by her daughters and her contemporaries, photographic exhibitions and transcriptions of amnesty hearings to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (amongst other works), I trace Ruth First's presentation of identity through communications of dress, posture and language. I examine too the production of her image across time in South African culture.

Imprisoned under the infamous Ninety-Day law in 1963, Ruth First subsequently wrote a memoir titled 117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under South African Ninety-Day Detention Law (1965), which became known as a classic of the genre. Caught between her commitments to racial equality and a life of social privilege, between the demands of motherhood and her sociological research work in Africa, between performances of a white femininity and the suppressed ramifications of a difficult ethnic past, Ruth First shuttles between unsatisfactory subject positions. I

propose here that Ruth First strains against the representative mantle which she is made to wear in post-apartheid tributes to the past, and which she herself sometimes donned as a lifetime member of the South African Communist Party, and later the African National Congress.

As the daughter of poor Yiddish-speaking Jews from Lithuania, I propose that Ruth First is marked by a history of dislocation, immigration and revolutionary activity which she refused to acknowledge. I undertake my own historiographical exercise through which I re-situate Ruth First within an alternate heritage of Jewish activist women. An understanding of the historiographical process as a series of continuous adjustments of the past to politicized positions in the present underlies my examination.

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## SECTION ONE



## *Introduction*

Near the end of her prison memoir 117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under South African Ninety-Day Detention Law<sup>1</sup> (1965), Ruth First recalls her joy at being able to obtain books after more than three months of deprivation. Banned from access to any printed matter or writing tools while detained for resisting the apartheid<sup>2</sup> regime, Ruth First benefited from a successful court application brought by another detainee, Cape Town advocate Albie Sachs, in the second week of November 1963.<sup>3</sup> The books would arrive one at a time, “all titles subject to approval by Pretoria,” a euphemism for the headquarters of the infamous Security Branch (138).<sup>4</sup> On receiving Night Has a Thousand Eyes (1953), an Englishwoman’s personal account of the Norwegian Resistance during World War II, Ruth First writes that for the first time in her life, she was “afraid of a book” (1965: 142). Intended to break the monotony of her incarceration, the chronicle by Helen Astrup and B.L. Jacot<sup>5</sup> becomes instead an extension of the monitoring gaze of Ruth First’s captors, “the thousand eyes” of the title penetrating the bounds of its narrative to become resident in her cell as “the eery presence” of the security policemen and women who watched her constantly.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as 117 Days.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Apartheid’ refers to the official policy of ‘separateness’ between races advocated by the National Party (NP). It was officially instituted when the NP came to power in the all-white elections of 1948, and dismantled by a process of negotiation begun in the later 1980s with then banned political parties. The first democratic elections in South Africa were held in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Sachs successfully petitioned the Cape Supreme Court to allow political detainees the right to receive a moderate supply of writing and reading material while in detention (Sachs 1966: 154–159; First 1965: 138–139). The Court’s ruling in his favour was applied erratically by the prison system to both Sachs and others, and was later overturned.

<sup>4</sup> The Security Branch was also widely known as the Special Branch.

### *Questioning popular representations*

Spying and surveillance, as well as fear of books and writing, were distinguishing characteristics of the apartheid regime. During routine searches of the private libraries of ‘politicals,’ as intellectuals active against the government were colloquially called, police personnel would frequently confiscate anything with the words “ ‘black’ or ‘red’ in the title” as contraband literature (First 1965: 134). The publication abroad of Ruth First’s initial book South West Africa (1963), in contravention of legal orders banning her from writing, instantly fueled official fears of what in apartheid terminology constituted ‘*die Swart Gevaar*’ (“the Black Peril”), or the threat of African nationalist aspirations and ‘*die Rooi Gevaar*’ (“the Red Peril”), or the dangers of communist ideologies. An incisive exposé of the apartheid government’s economic exploitation of the territory, South West Africa was a devastating addition to the state’s long litany of objections against Ruth First. Only a few months after its publication, Ruth First was arrested in Johannesburg and jailed under the infamous Ninety-Day law on Friday, 9 August 1963.<sup>6</sup> Before her release on Monday, 2 December 1963, she spent one hundred and seventeen days in solitary confinement in a Johannesburg police station and a Pretoria prison.

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth First refers to the work as “a thriller The Night has a Thousand Eyes” (1965: 142). The authorship of the memoir is complex: it was written by British wartime journalist B. L. Jacot, based on interviews with Astrup and her diaries.

<sup>6</sup> Technically Section 17 of the General Law Amendment Act, No. 37 of 1963, the Ninety-Day law provided for the detention without trial of anyone suspected of political crimes for up to ninety consecutive days. After ninety days had passed, the detainee was subject to immediate re-arrest. In this way, anyone accused of subverting the state could be detained and interrogated indefinitely without appearing before a court of law.

Eighteen and a half years later, Ruth First was killed in Maputo, Mozambique when she opened a parcel bomb sent to her by the South Africa Security Branch.<sup>7</sup> The circumstances of her murder on 17 August 1982 enhanced her literary and historical value as a martyr of the struggle, a portrayal which pervades the many re-inscriptions of history that followed the release of Nelson Mandela from Robben Island in February 1990, and the first democratic elections held on 27 April 1994. In the aftermath of the apartheid era,<sup>8</sup> a proliferation of local autobiographical writing inundated bookstores in South Africa's major cities due to the lifting of repressive legislation and a concurrent mood of retrospection which swept the country. In these works, as well as the popular press and the writing of respected academics internationally (Barbara Harlow) and locally (J. U. Jacobs and Donald Pincock), Ruth First is acknowledged as an exemplary activist, who acted upon her political commitment to resist governmental policies beyond the jurisdiction of the law. She is also frequently presented as a spokesperson for the suffering of others, a role which she herself chose to assume in 117 Days.

Jacobs portrays Ruth First as part of a unique group of white freedom fighters, whose participation in the discourse of activism, interrogation and physical endangerment results in their transformation into 'true' representatives of black majority struggle, their

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<sup>7</sup> Two years after Ruth First's death, The Star, a mainstream English commercial daily, published a speculative article claiming that Joe Slovo had "engineered his estranged wife's killing on ideological grounds" (14 July, 1984). The article was part of a disinformation campaign instigated by Craig Williamson, an apartheid 'superspy' who has since confessed to involvement in Ruth First's murder (Braude 1996: 49).

<sup>8</sup> Although apartheid ended officially on 27 April 1994, when the African National Congress was elected to power through the country's first democratic elections, the Nationalist government's policy of 'Peace and Reconciliation' began in 1990, with the unbanning of the ANC and the release of most political prisoners.

suffering with and 'for' blacks transformed into badges of authenticity (1991c). Jacobs suggest that racial differences, operative before imprisonment, are radically transfigured through initiation by a common anguish. In a similar vein, Harlow positions Ruth First as part of an international group of "[w]riters, martyrs, revolutionaries" whose commonalities within that discourse supercede their differences (1996: 7). While I am indebted to Jacobs and Harlow for expanding my thinking on how Ruth First has come to mean in contemporary culture, I argue instead that moments of cross-racial solidarity, often rendered as epiphanies after shared trauma, are shown to be exceptions rather than the rule in the pervasive articulations of difference amongst South African revolutionary women. I suggest that depictions of Ruth First as representative of the nation and its revolutionary past - while relevant to an understanding of South African history and Ruth First's important role within it - ignore other, more fraught representations of self that may be read from her memoir, her journalism and her non-fiction writing. I propose here that Ruth First strains against the representative mantle which she has been made to wear and which she sometimes donned herself as the epitome of a revolutionary who, through courage and imprisonment, superceded the bounds of her race and class to become a symbol of non-racialism<sup>9</sup> and the anti-apartheid struggle.

The dissertation is divided into three sections. The Introduction and Chapter One, which comprise the first section, contain an overview of my argument, and an outline of Ruth

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<sup>9</sup> During the 1980s, 'non-racialism' was the term used to convey a policy of economic and social equality amongst people of all races, one which stood in sharp contrast to the segregation endemic to everyday South African life. During the 1950s and 1960s, the term 'multi-racialism' was more commonly used.

First's life and writing in the context of events and political trends prevalent in twentieth-century South Africa. In the second section, consisting of Chapters Two and Three, I examine the autobiographical genre in terms of its function as a vehicle for expressions of selfhood and group narrative, concentrating on close readings of *117 Days* and other memoirs by anti-apartheid activists, as well as the autobiographical works produced by two of Ruth First's three daughters, Gillian and Shawn Slovo. In the third section, composed of Chapters Four and Five, I examine Ruth First's Jewishness and its (de)construction by group and individual narratives, historicizing particular representations of and elisions within Jewish womanhood to (re)construct for Ruth First a matrilineage of Jewish revolutionary women.

*The constitutive power of the gaze*

In an allusion to the invasive power of the institutional gaze, Ruth First terms "the thousand eyes" from which she could not hide as "the force of telepathy" (1965: 142). Michel Foucault defines "the gaze" as "the eye that knows and decides, the eye that governs" (1963: 89). The eye of the observer is the subject from whose position the 'I' of the object is categorized and defined. "[A]lways receptive to the deviant," the sovereign eye of the doctor, the prison warden and the natural scientist functions, Foucault proposes, as the conduit of power through which the patient, the criminal and the colonized specimen are contained on the margins of social space (89). In *117 Days*, Ruth First reveals an acute awareness that her images of self were often produced by the multi-faceted gaze of others. She records that the alternately hostile and seductive stares of her jailers influenced how she conceived of herself, even as she sought to challenge them through memories of a revolutionary past.

During an intense period of self-chastisement following her agreement to make a statement to the police after a surprise re-arrest, Ruth First muses that her “weakness” was her “extreme susceptibility to acceptance and fear of rejection and criticism” (1965: 129). Conscious, too, of the inquisitive gaze of the reader, Ruth First initially shied away from it in the aftermath of her release. In his preface to the 1982 edition of 117 Days, Ruth First’s friend and editor Ronald Segal<sup>10</sup> remarks upon the uncomfortable labour of writing to which Ruth First submitted herself, despite an inner “reluctance” to bare her experiences to “promiscuous view” (1982: 6). Likening autobiographical writing to physical nakedness, and the reader’s gaze to an act of sexual prying, Segal’s words invoke the Foucauldian gaze and its impact on acts of gendered self-inscription. Predicated upon the author’s body in the text of 117 Days, the location of political martyrdom shifts, in Segal’s preface, to Ruth First’s psyche,<sup>11</sup> which he positions in a similar pose of vulnerability.

As Foucault (1977) suggests, the body itself is a site on which ideology, masquerading as indelible truth, is inscribed. Discipline of the body is enacted not only within institutions such as the hospital, the sanitarium and the prison, but also within the self through the internalization of the controlling gaze. Sandra Bartky argues convincingly that the female body is restrained differently to that of the male due to its objectification within culture. Bound through dictates of gesture, size and ornamentation, femininity becomes “an

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<sup>10</sup> Segal was a lifelong friend of Ruth First and the editor of both South West Africa and The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’État.

<sup>11</sup> I use the term ‘psyche’ here to denote the experiencing consciousness of the individual, which cannot be readily seen by others, but has the capacity to reflect deeply both on its own nature and on the external environment.

artifice, an achievement” (1988: 64). With reference to the theories of Foucault and Bartky, I consider that in 117 Days and in local memoirs by other women politicals, the ubiquitous experience of physical constraint in prison is inevitably refracted through the lens of conflicting expectations about femininity, which differed substantially across race and class in the early 1960s.

I suggest here that conceptions of womanhood for most black South African women during this period were inextricably connected with the trope of the mother, whereas white Westernized women had begun to conceive of mothering and femininity increasingly independently.<sup>12</sup> By this statement, I do not imply that there are no “overlapping meanings and common cultural influences among black and white women in the twentieth century,” a flaw in what Cheryl Walker (1995: 417) calls “the ‘difference’ theme” in debates around the political significance of motherhood (419). Nor do I subscribe to “the ‘collusion with patriarchy’ theme,” which delineates motherhood as an oppressive social institution while ignoring women’s own experience and agency as mothers. Rather, following Walker, I approach motherhood as a “multi-layered” term which traverses “at least three different terrains”: practice, discourse and social identity (424). The practice of motherhood involves physical and emotional care, as well as activities related to “the transmission of the particular society’s or sub-group’s

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<sup>12</sup> Heidi Hartmann argues that in rural or third-world societies in which “children are needed for their present or future labour,” women’s sexuality “will tend to be directed towards reproduction and childrearing” (1981: 37, 28n). However, in the suburbs of predominantly white first-world cities, children are perceived increasingly as “superfluous” to economic well-being, and may even be seen as a hindrance to its attainment or maintenance. In these urban social settings, Hartmann suggests, “women’s sexuality for other than reproductive purposes is encouraged.” Seeming liberation from the bondage of motherhood does not free women from the constraints of patriarchy, however. Citing the example of “the Cosmo girl,” a modern ideal of glamorous womanhood inaugurated by the launch of Cosmopolitan Magazine in the USA in 1965 by Helen Gurley Brown, Hartmann suggests that she is released “from childrearing only to find herself turning all her energies towards attracting and satisfying men.”

values, including those to do with gender and kinship relations” (425); the discourse of motherhood encompasses various tropes which inform practice; and social identity implicates women as agents whose own constructions of self are often bound up with their roles as mothers (426). Motherhood, as practice, discourse and identity, is intimately linked with the positioning of the female body within culture. At the same time, I propose that women are not entirely bound by these ideological dictates, but find ways to creatively resist and sometimes transform both the physical deprivations of prison, banning<sup>13</sup> and harassment, and the patriarchal expectations to which they are subjected and which they frequently reproduce.

*The Foucauldian body: inscribing artifice*

The interment of the brain and genitals of Sarah Bartmann (also known as Saartje Baartman), a nineteenth-century Khoekhoe-!Xan<sup>14</sup> woman, in a display case in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris exemplifies the institutional gaze and its power to paradoxically both contain and fragment the bodies of the Other. While a young domestic worker on the Cape farm of Peter Cezar, Bartmann either agreed to sail to Europe, apparently in search of fame and fortune, or was somehow coerced into leaving. Advertised abroad as the ‘Hottentot Venus,’ Bartmann’s body became a source of exotic curiosity to the European viewer. Even after she died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-seven in 1815,

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<sup>13</sup> Banned people were usually restricted from meeting with other banned people, and sometimes from meeting with more than one person at a time.

<sup>14</sup> In 1928, Leonhard Schultze coined the term ‘Khoisan’ to collectively denote the indigenous herders and hunter-gathers of Southern Africa. Initially adapted to ‘Khoe-San’ in the post-apartheid era, Schultze’s term has been the focus of “considerable debate around the choice of terminology used to describe the Cape’s indigenous hunter-gathers and herders” (Mountain 2003: 24). According to one authority, after “consultation with leaders of the Griqua people – descendants of the early Khoekhoen – and various academics, the collective noun ‘Khoekhoen’ ” is currently considered the appropriate term by which to refer to the indigenous herders of the Cape (‘Khoekhoe’ is the adjective). ‘San,’ or the phonetically spelled !Xan, is the Nama word used to describe hunter-gathers. Its use and application is also under interrogation.

Bartmann's dismembered body was still subject to the prying gaze of scientists such as Georges Cuvier and Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, who published a joint paper about the 'Bushman race' under the title 'Histoire Naturelle des Mammiferes' or 'Natural History of Mammals' (Mountain 2003: 76).

A memorial ceremony for Bartmann held in Cape Town in 2002 dramatized some of the political issues surrounding nation-building in the post-apartheid era. For many, the international struggle waged for seven years by the Khoekhoe-!Xan to obtain Bartmann's disjointed body parts symbolizes the straining of a people to reconstitute itself after the assaults of colonialism and apartheid. After two centuries of humiliation, Bartmann is emblematically restored to dignity through her role as "an icon of South Africa's indigenous people" (Mountain 2003: 78). "One cannot write nowadays," says ex-guerilla fighter David Dirkse, the voice behind Zoë Wicomb's novel David's Story (2001), "without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself" (1).

Wicomb's tongue-in-cheek observation highlights the growth of new historical sensitivities to past exploitation of black women, while at the same time, it alerts us to an accompanying danger of triteness or tokenism. In her Afterword to David's Story, Dorothy Driver suggests that the re-insertion or re-modulation of women's voices within group narratives about the past sometimes finds expression through the counterpointing of "the woman's own authority" with her "submission" to patriarchal and colonial concerns (2001: 228). In the forthcoming chapters, I suggest that the cultural process of iconization is as much about the silencing of the voices of celebrated women as it is about allowing them to be heard. At the same time, I argue that the power of the gaze to

suppress is not entirely hegemonic. It may, at times, be successfully answered by the ability of the individual to transform identity through the acts of enunciation and inscription. Specifically, my interest in reading 117 Days and other narratives of political struggle lies in exploring how and why particular identities are inscribed, and in whether “the exchange of speech or writing [can] be the occasion for a disruption of the social ontology of positionality,” as Judith Butler suggests (1995: 440).

Butler proposes that positions from which a subject speaks are always unanchored and unstable, subject to relocation through “the exchange” produced by talking and listening. She marks the site of identity, after Jacques Derrida, as “ ‘difference,’ ” as simultaneously the space of “cultural specificity” and an elision of its confines (441). Following Butler, I choose to read “identity as site, as effect, as dynamic, as simultaneously formed and formative” rather than as a pre-existing essence which is fixed conceptually (446). Instead of creating for Ruth First an identity homogenized by communal struggle, I suggest rather a series of selves produced by ‘negotiating’ the constraints within and between specific ideological constructs, namely ‘femininity,’ ‘ethnicity’ and political activism, as they appear in both Ruth First’s writing and other texts across time, or within ‘history.’ I shall now explain what I mean by these terms.

#### *Exposition of the title*

By ‘negotiating,’ I refer firstly to the navigation of awkward spaces of apparent conflict within and between narratives regarding positioning of the subject. ‘Negotiating’ intimates process, the possibility of unlocking a new ideological territory in which the ever-shifting nature of identity can be acknowledged and/or created, and thus allowed to

fall into patterns previously deemed disarray. The transformative potential of writing lies coiled here, amid the textual tension present in autobiographical and historical narratives which strain to produce closed identities of their subjects amidst the demands of frequently incompatible ideologies. Secondly, 'negotiating' alludes to the political and personal compromises frequently expected from South Africans previously oppressed by the apartheid regime through the process of national reconciliation formalized by the amnesty hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In the context of these hearings, which began in April 1996 and were concluded in May 2001, 'negotiating' also refers to the creation of startling new narratives about the past, prompted by the unexpected change in political circumstance. The testimony presented at intermittent periods between 8 September 1998 and 4 March 1999 by two former Security policemen, Craig Michael Williamson and Roger Howard Leslie Raven constitute two such narratives. Personally involved in arranging Ruth First's murder, both men were granted full amnesty in 2000 for their admitted involvement in her death.

Constructs of 'ethnicity,' 'femininity' and 'history' are pivotal to an understanding of how the identities of Ruth First and other women activists are portrayed within specific localities over time. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. designate analytical discussions that are confined solely by an examination of "race, class and gender" as "regnant clichés of our critical discourse" (1992: 625). While recognizing the validity of these constructs, Appiah and Gates call for " 'post-essentialist' conceptions of notions of identity" that take into account nationalisms, religion and local histories as important factors that not only complicate subject positioning, but also unlock areas of discourse hitherto repressed. Appiah and Gates' proposal is particularly relevant in

contemporary as well as apartheid South Africas, for both are social milieus highly stratified by racial conceptions. The polarization of black and white across what was formally known during the apartheid era as ‘the colour bar’ was, and to some extent still is, the defining discourse of that territory.<sup>15</sup>

During colonial and apartheid rule, to be ‘African’ meant to belong to the group designated ‘Bantu language-speakers,’ an appellation which elided the variegatedness of ethnicities and culture amongst isiXhosa, isiZulu, isiNdebele, seSotho, seTswana, siSwati, sePedi, tshiVenda and xiTonga speakers.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, being African is a particularly contested term in South Africa, a place where narratives of belonging, exclusion and exile have devastatingly directed its history. In the opinion of Zakes Mda, “Africans are those who recognize and identify themselves as Africans, whether they are indigenous to Africa or are of ancestries that are aboriginal in other continents and came to Africa through diverse human migrations” (Nuttall and Michaels 2000a: 107). While acknowledging the pertinence of Mda’s definition, I use the term ‘African’ in its antediluvian sense for the purposes of this dissertation. I do this in order to differentiate between the more generic term ‘black,’ which I understand here to denote all people formerly designated ‘non-white’ by apartheid legislation, while nevertheless acknowledging blackness as a complex and contested term.

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<sup>15</sup> The ‘colour bar’ is an apartheid term which refers to economic and social segregation of the population based on racial variables. The state grouped citizens classed as ‘non-whites’ or ‘Non-Europeans’ according to corporeal characteristics under labels which implied increasing degrees of distance from whiteness: ‘Indians,’ ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Africans,’ respectively.

The prefix ‘non’ preceding the noun ‘whites’ indicates, on a lexical level, the negation of identity imposed on black South Africans in their positioning vis-à-vis white hegemony. The typography of these terms, especially regarding norms of capitalization, varies considerably from text to text.

<sup>16</sup> As M. J. Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Oxford, and Nobantu Rasbotsa point out, it is important to bear in mind that cultural variations as well as

While an exploration of racial polarization is essential to any examination of identity inscription which is locally rendered, at the same time it is necessary to recognise its limitations. As Butler suggests, “the dyadic frame” by which “a dominant subject projects and a subordinated Other is projected upon” cannot “account for the myriad racialized identities that are neither white nor black, nor constituted simply in a dyadic relation to one other race” (1995: 439). In this dissertation, I question the homogeneity implied by master narratives of both whiteness and blackness by focusing on articulations of ethnicity which are founded upon perceptions of shared communal history, religious affiliation, nationality and culture, as well as race. Race thus becomes only one of the factors that comprise ethnicity, albeit a factor which carries substantial weight. Ethnicity, in this sense, is an understanding of group identity which allows a shuttling back and forth within the continuum of race, dependent upon the subject positioning a group is made to assume within particular texts. The placement of ethnic groups is never static: often they cannot comfortably be situated within the linear scale of whiteness or blackness underlying most Western cultures, but nervously occupy a hitherto undefined wasteland.

In past centuries, Jewish ethnicity has been prominent as a particularly nomadic occupant of the racial wasteland, not only in Western legal and social systems, but in South African ones, too. Often conflated with the Jewish religion, perceptions of Jewish ethnicity<sup>17</sup> and its placement on the black-white racial continuum in this country have fluctuated widely

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similarities occur also within each linguistic community, including amongst English- and Afrikaans-speakers, for “linguistic grouping alone does not define culture” (2003: 7).

at least since the late nineteenth century. Claudia Braude views “Jewish fears of racial in-betweenness” (2001: xi) as one of the underlying concerns of Jewry and Jewish writing of the twentieth century. Certainly, the pervasiveness of this construct and its anxious expression is borne out in the autobiographical writing of many of Ruth First’s Jewish political contemporaries, including Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography (1995), the posthumous memoir of her husband Joe Slovo. I suggest that the ethnically-generated fears which Braude discusses had a bearing on Ruth First and the way she chose to present herself. While Ruth First’s adept command of the English language and her tailored dress portrayed an image of conclusive belonging to the white middle classes, in actuality she was the daughter of Jewish working-class refugees from a north-western part of the Russian Empire known as the Pale of the Settlement, who came to South Africa speaking only Yiddish, a cultural vernacular written phonetically in Hebrew letters, and with little financial means. (The territory was colloquially called ‘the Pale’ in evocation of its marginal status at the edge of Russian geography and culture). Yet when she is treated by prison authorities in 117 Days as “any white South African Madam” (1965: 37), the relocation of petty domestic apartheid within the prison milieu is the only irony to which Ruth First refers: her own ethnic and class background is submerged by the dichotomization of ‘black’ and ‘white’ realities. In How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America (1998), Karen Brodtkin suggests that continuing shifts in legal and social classifications of Jews in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century resulted in the precarious assignation of Jews “to the white race” (1). Her proposal that those in power “created an off-white race for Jews to

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<sup>17</sup> References to Jewishness in this dissertation denote its ethnic dimensions as separate from the religion Judaism.

inhabit” has particular relevance in a South African context, as I discuss in Chapter Four. I propose here that Ruth First’s identity was indelibly stamped by a culture from which she had been alienated since childhood, a marking discerned most clearly in her memoir and non-fiction writing through its thorough circumvention.

Constructs of gender within diverse localities complicate further the intricacies of ethnic identities. Toril Moi defines femininity as “set[s] of culturally defined characteristics” as opposed to “femaleness,” which is largely “a matter of biology” (1986: 204). In the autobiographical writing of South African women, paradigms of femininity control inscriptions of self and others to a large degree, in spite of the writer’s adherence to political ideologies which may ostensibly resist those very paradigms. What I explore in the following pages are not only representations of Ruth First as gendered signifier within revised histories, but just as importantly, the ways in which she chooses to write herself. Olive Schreiner: A Biography (1980), co-authored by Ruth First and British feminist Ann Scott, suggests a case in point. Ruth First and Scott present Schreiner (1855-1920), a famous South African novelist and political thinker, as a woman who was deeply frustrated by “the way in which conventional feminine stereotypes confined and imprisoned women,” despite her attempts to overcome them (1980: 25). Ruth First and Scott’s approach to Schreiner’s “reputation [. . .] during her lifetime and afterwards” and to “her own view of herself” as struggled for in spite of the ideological limitations of her historical era has in turn influenced my examination of representations of Ruth First in 117 Days and elsewhere.

Michael Green proposes that history *per se* is “perhaps the most insidious of master narratives needing to be interrogated” (1997: 2). A recognition of the multiplicity of histories, rather than a single hegemonic history, goes some way towards addressing the constructiveness of narratives about the past. It is the inscription of history that I view as subjective rather than the external events themselves. In her discussion of the patriarchal gaze, Bartky suggests that individuals are not “wholly constituted by the power-knowledge regime Foucault describes,” and that “periodic refusals of control [. . .], just as much as the imposition of control, mark the course of human history” (1988: 82). As part of my exploration of and contribution towards the process of history-making or historiography in which Ruth First participated not only as historical figure, but also as historical writer and agent, I propose alternate readings of the past. Searching for a fitting historical context in which to place Ruth First’s “periodic refusals of control,” I found myself directed not so much to the stories of black revolutionary women, either local or international, which, following other critics, I had originally thought would provide an ideological sisterhood in which Ruth First could be meaningfully located, but to the lives of Jewish female activists. As I read autobiographies of and interviews with this group of revolutionaries, I became increasingly convinced that Ruth First’s political heritage had its roots in the *shtetls*, or villages of the Pale of the Settlement, rather than in the townships of South Africa or the revolutionary landscapes of Northern Ireland, El Salvador and Palestine (Harlow 1995, 1996b). At the same time, Ruth First’s integral connection with a specific South African context emanates clearly, for me, through her autobiographical, journalistic and non-fictional writing, even though, like other committed communists of the 1960s, Ruth First conceived of herself as a member of a future socialist utopia in which people considered themselves citizens of the world rather

than of nations. The aspects of identity she attempts both to articulate and to disguise through her texts comprise a heterogeneous self (or selves), fractured by her marginal position as a woman within patriarchies and by the consideration that neither was she unequivocally 'white' due to her Jewish ethnicity, nor was she completely part of the black majority for whose rights she so passionately fought, but whose worldview she could not fully imagine.

In her comparative study of colonial writers Olive Schreiner, Isak Dinesen and their relationship to Africa, Africans and what she terms their "restless confinement in the category 'woman' " (1995: 4), Susan R. Horton chooses to make no distinction between "literary productions, biography, letters, and even landscape," perceiving all as interlinked sites at which positionality is constantly navigated (35). Similarly, in this dissertation I read as contiguous texts all narratives which represent Ruth First, whether primarily or peripherally, and despite variations in genre and media. Thus, although I concentrate my analysis on prison memoirs by Ruth First and other anti-apartheid activists, I allude also to such diverse texts as testimony recounted to the TRC, film documentaries, interviews, crime fiction and retrospective photographic exhibitions of the Jewish community. These are the "struggle narratives" of the title, whether they engage explicitly with political activism, with what Sachs might term a willingness to endure a direct "confrontation with apartheid power" (1990: 200), or whether they configure struggle more obliquely in diverse resistances to familial, social or ethnic constructs.

*Elisions of communism, Black Consciousness and Western feminisms*

For over twenty-five years, feminist criticism has addressed critical lacunae surrounding articulations of gender difference within oppressions of race and class.<sup>18</sup> These silences frequently permeate autobiographical inscriptions of identity in the texts of Jewish and black women activists, who are frequently influenced by communist and Black Consciousness ideologies respectively. Straining to negotiate the disjuncture between theory and its application in the realm of gender, these texts will often gloss over incongruencies at points of conflict, as I discuss in greater depth in the forthcoming chapters.

Throughout the communist era,<sup>19</sup> the notion of emancipation through industrialization was prominent. So-called women's issues such as domestic labour, child care and motherhood were subsumed within and considered to be automatically resolved by the progress of socialism, a political philosophy which (broadly speaking) espoused that state

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<sup>18</sup> Since the late 1970s, black women writers have frequently spoken against the simple addition of oppressions to explain the experience of black womanhood. Notable amongst them is Alice Walker, whose term 'womanist' has come to define, for many, an approach to black female identity which affirms it as an organic part of black culture, rather than the adoption of feminism, a so-called 'white' invention. In a compilation of her poetry titled *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1984), Walker describes womanism as an approach to the world which allows black women the strength and the freedom to transgress the boundaries of conventional society, through "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour" (xi). While I recognise that blackness and femaleness are qualitative differences that cannot be measured merely by the simple additions of oppressions, I have found that an analysis of the limitations of, and resistance to, categories of race and gender is helpful in approximating how the subject positionings of women of diverse ethnicities come to be inscribed. Walker's definition also excludes class as a marker of difference within culture, and does not allow for a conception of race outside of the black-white dichotomy, which, given Ruth First's Jewishness, limits its usefulness to this discussion.

<sup>19</sup> I refer here to the set of philosophical theories with worldwide application which (debatedly) formed the foundation of the political structure of the Soviet Union from its establishment in 1917 to its formal dissolution in 1991. Communism in the Soviet Union, and subsequently in South Africa, was greatly influenced by the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883), a Jewish German intellectual. Marxism constructs communism as the stage of history which succeeds capitalism, heralding the abolition of private ownership as the means of industrial production, together with the eradication of the exploitation of the worker. Especially in the early stages of communism as a political movement (specifically in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s and later in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s), followers assumed that changes in the socio-political structure of a country would automatically lead to the emancipation of humanity and the development of the individual creativity and aptitudes (Sandle 1999: 13). In Chapter One,

control of labour was the main answer to the equitable distribution of wealth amongst the general population. Unwilling to address issues in terms of how they affected the lives of individual women, the Soviet state tended to perceive women rather as a homogeneous class, as an untapped labour pool, “as a resource, as a vital instrument for the realization of economic goals” (Sandle 1999: 244). While in the Soviet Union women were conscripted en masse for work in factories, in the South African political context of racially-slanted capitalism, blue-collar workers were generally drawn from the black or poor white communities. Although South-African communists generally took the lead from the Soviet Union in matters of ideology and its application (especially prior to 1953, the year of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s demise), the fact that domestic labour in general was borne by black women freed white communist women, like Ruth First and her contemporaries, to assume leadership roles in trade union and revolutionary movements. Black communist women leaders like Josie Mpama were rare, mostly due to the huge burden of labour placed on these women both inside and outside the home, the racial divide, and possibly their pervasive lack of literacy in the face of the reported exclusive intellectualism of the dominant communist group (Hirson 1995: x; Turok 2003: 170), namely the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA).

Although the ideal of gender equality was present in communism, as a political system it did not address sufficiently how the labour of childraising was to be borne by the female worker in everyday life (neither did it engage deeply with conceptions of fatherhood and

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I will explore in greater depth the particular articulations of communist ideology within the struggle for freedom against apartheid.

the complexities arising from them).<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the communist ideologies proposed by the CPSA, which became the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953, Black Consciousness generally subsumed the political and personal aspirations of women under the trope of motherhood, rather than that of the empowered worker. Formulated by Steve Biko and other revolutionary thinkers in the early 1970s, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) sought to affirm a specifically ‘black’ experience of the world. It challenged the dismissal of black culture as inferior and underdeveloped by whites by placing an emphasis on the glories of a pre-colonial history. Leaders encouraged black people to assert themselves in the face of white authority, but did not place sufficient value upon redressing the oppressions of women within both black communal and apartheid structures, as Mamphela Ramphela explores in her memoir Mamphela Ramphela: A Life (1995).<sup>21</sup> Within both political movements, the CPSA-SACP to which Ruth First held a lifetime membership, and the BCM, the lack of sensitivity to and acknowledgement of the difficulties inherent in the convergence of motherhood and activism leads to an ambivalent rendition of gender within struggle autobiographical works.

Just as traditional communist and Black Consciousness philosophies often ignore the debilitating implications of gender bias, so too have Western feminist ideologies tended to elide disjunctures of race, topographical locality and class between women. As Caren Kaplan suggests, “the term global feminism has been co-opted in many cases into part of

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<sup>20</sup> The Bolsheviks passed a number of laws facilitating the emancipation of women in 1918, such as the right to full citizenship, to retain their own surnames after marriage, to divorce, and to travel freely without their spouses. Subsequent attempts after 1918 to extend emancipation resulted in considerable governmental resistance, however (Sandle 1999: 83).

<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to Ramphela’s memoir as A Life.

a neo-imperialist project that constructs Western agendas and subjects for women in non-Western locations” (1992: 116). Disparities in location occur not only globally, amongst those living in the first and third worlds, but also amid women situated within the same country. The experiences of women living in peripheral (usually rural) areas frequently diverge strikingly from those situated in central (usually urban) areas. At least during her South African years, Ruth First subscribed to the ideology of “internationalism” (Kasrils 1993: 282), which minimized ethnic, national and gender differences in order to foster the creation of a world community of communist revolutionaries. Although Ruth First behaved in a way that challenged patriarchal assumptions about the role of women, her relationship to feminism as a theoretical ideal was decidedly cautious. Towards the end of her life, however, she would consider more seriously the importance of the specific situation of women within revolutionary movements.

A discussion of Ruth First’s subject position draws attention to my own. Like Ruth First, I am a middle-class woman of Jewish ethnicity who grew up in Johannesburg during the apartheid era. As the granddaughter of both maternal and paternal Litvak<sup>22</sup> Yiddish-speaking immigrants who arrived in the country before the outbreak of World War I, I am a member of the generation which followed Ruth First’s and inherited a similar cultural past. Therefore, my reading of Ruth First will be consistently coloured by this background, which manifests, in part, through identification with Ruth First’s position as an outsider to mainstream culture, and also with her resistance to that marginalization. Like Ruth First, I have found it challenging to imagine myself into other ethnic subject positions without trying to appropriate them. I am particularly cautious to avoid

participating in what Kaplan calls the “colonial discourse” of “Western autobiographical criticism” (1992: 116), one which is not automatically remedied by “Western feminist autobiographical criticism” when approaching the writing of black women. Although the subject positions of both black and Jewish women are marginal within white society, they are constituted differently, mainly due to Jewish women’s precarious position within whiteness, and black women’s unequivocal position outside it.

*Positionality, authority and the making of history*

Kaplan’s inquiries into the possibilities of “reading and writing strategies that historicize and deconstruct mythologies of nationalism and individualism” (1992: 112) are relevant here. As Green proposes, the writing of history involves the adjustment of the past to a politicized position of the present. Green suggests questions of positionality and authority constitute a “fundamental problem of historicism: how does one represent the past (or the future, or, indeed, even the present) without simply appropriating it to one’s own position?” (1997: 6). Both Green and Kaplan suggest modes of literary transparency as methods of managing the power politics of location and subject. Kaplan recommends “revealing the power dynamics embedded in literary production, distribution and reception” of texts as a reply to the “construction of ‘master’ genres,” the formal requirements of which do not allow the space for the articulation of the experience of those marginalized by mainstream Western culture, such as women, blacks and Jews (1992: 119). Yet oppression and appropriation can (and do) occur within minorities themselves, through the emulation and reformulation of master narratives. Kaplan’s

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<sup>22</sup> Litvak refers to Jewish people who were born in the Baltic provinces of Latvia and Lithuania.

conception of an “out-law genre,” contiguous with Green’s imagining of a “resistant form” (1997: 6), recognizes the necessity of a search for what Green describes as “a critical model as much as an aesthetic mode that can, at one and the same time, recognise the inevitable constructiveness of its subject within its own productive processes.” Kaplan’s and Green’s demand for an open-ended critical process of self-questioning is a rigorous one, against which I have attempted to check my own appropriations of historical subjecthood, which are complicated by frequent experiences of involuntary inclusion within white constructs of power as well as by what Braude calls “the Jewish condition of living on the borderline, of being caught between two worlds” (xix).

Following Green, I approach portrayals of identity through questioning master narratives of gender, race and class hierarchies that are inscribed within both canonical histories of South Africa, and counter-canonical ones. By canonical histories, I mean those presented by a particular community or government at a certain point in time as the truth about the past, present or future. For example, in the era when 117 Days was published, the official view of history both in South Africa and the West was that the “Cape was discovered by the Portugese, Bartholomew Dias in 1486, followed in 1497 by Vasco da Gama who discovered Natal and the route to India,” as a popular travelogue of the period proposes (Gordon-Brown 1961: 9).<sup>23</sup> A counter-canonical history is one which questions and subverts authorized inscriptions of history. For instance, in the speech she delivered to the Anti-Apartheid Movement Conference in London in 1968, Ruth First presents South Africa’s past as “one of organized violence applied against the majority of the people,”

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<sup>23</sup> During the spate of historiographical activity which followed the 1994 elections, both Dias and da Gama’s names were written out of some history books. For instance, neither appears in South Africa: A

beginning with colonialism, a series of “military conquest[s] over three centuries,” and continuing with apartheid, “the institutionalised violence of a political system which entrenches a minority in power against the will and the interests of a majority who outnumber them four to one” (qtd. in Pinnock 1997: 105).

At the time of publication, both Ruth First’s South West Africa and 117 Days were instantly banned in South Africa because they were counter-canonical narratives which directly challenged official ideology. In 117 Days, Ruth First debunks the contemporary myth of the “Sunny South Africa” of “airline travel posters” by evoking it ironically against the backdrop of “the gangs of African convicts” within the walls of Pretoria Central Prison (1965: 63). It is their labour, she points out, which produces the manicured lawns and gleaming swimming pools in which the warders and their girlfriends sport on weekends. With the shifting of time and political regimes, the relation between canonical and revolutionary literatures is often inverted. Hence 117 Days, considered a subversive narrative in apartheid South Africa, became prescribed reading for Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) troops in Britain and elsewhere during the 1970s (Kasrils 1993: 115), and today is available in any public library in South Africa. Daily encountering the temporality of the canonical, I have developed perspectives on the past which are, of necessity, multi-lensed and distrustful of closure.

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Modern History (2000), an eight-hundred-and-seven page compendium by Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders.

Carol Boyce Davies suggests that in autobiographical works the “larger historical context” may often “conceal the individual woman’s story” (1991: 111). Occasionally, the woman autobiographer may also obscure a portion of the historical context of her story as a (sometimes unconscious) strategy to conceal controversial identities. In part, then, this dissertation is an exploration of Ruth First’s own inscriptions of and silences about her multi-faceted identities as they function within both South African and Eastern European Jewish histories. Marked by an ethnic history of immigration, and “the historically specific processes of dislocation and conflict” (Campbell 2002: 160) which accompany it, Ruth First’s biography is deeply resonant of a past she refused to acknowledge.

#### *Hiding the self within history*

The full title of Ruth First’s prison memoir 117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under South African Ninety-Day Detention Law (1965) implies a generic experience of detention: it is “an account,” no different, it appears, than those of the multitude of other detainees whom she knew would neither speak (because they were dead, mutilated or afraid) nor be heard. Technically, 117 Days is a narrative concerned with the recounting of a specific event, rather than an entire life. The citing of numerical figures and legal nomenclature suggests an objectivity of perception, which hints, on the one hand, at the aloofness of the regime towards those it objectified and, on the other, at Ruth First’s striving towards presenting a uniformity of suffering across the bounds of the individual subject. Sandra Michelle Young suggests that social pressure to subsume personal experience beneath constructs of group identity has led many anti-apartheid South African autobiographers to “declare that they are representative of a history larger

than that of the individual author” (1996: 10). Drawing attention to the paucity of personal pronouns in the title of Ruth First’s memoir and in those of black female autobiographers like Emma Mashinini and Caesarina Kona Makhoere, Young suggests that grammatical choices by these women are indicative of their “anxiety” about speaking authentically in a country fraught by political and racial polarities (11). Caught in a nexus of fierce resentments and loyalties, these women’s attempts to channel self-expression through ‘acceptable’ gender constructs often result in tautly articulated texts.

The process of history-making seems to complicate anxieties about speaking the individual self. In official accounts of the past, women often serve as signifiers for attributes and ideals of nationhood. Traditionally inscribed into group memory by men, women who are autobiographers face the challenge of negotiating the unconventional role of speaker within patriarchal cultures. The result is often an ambivalent complicity with and resistance to ideological constraints imposed by both culturally-specific patriarchies and the various liberation movements to which these women autobiographers belonged. For example, in both her memoir and her journalistic writing, Ruth First consistently attempts to elide disparities between her own subject position and those of black and/or working-class women, an approach deeply influenced by the ideal of a world citizenry current amongst communists of that period. In an era when the concept of nationhood in South Africa was undergoing a similarly dramatic transformation, Jacobs suggests that in prison memoirs such as 117 Days and The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs<sup>24</sup> (1966), the autobiographical self is more representative than subjective: the personal experience of the individual becomes the story of an entire community, the sign(ature) of

the author on the title page corresponding to "a collective implied authorship" (1991c: 4). I propose instead that both Sachs and Ruth First stand outside the black collective even as they strive to portray it. In contrast to Ruth First's aspirations towards a representational stance, her black contemporaries like Mashinini, Makhoere, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela<sup>25</sup> and Ellen Kuzwayo write openly of their difference from white women, situating their narratives to a great extent upon solidarities of race, a central tenet of the BCM.

Just as Ruth First (somewhat problematically) attempted to tell the stories of those activists and victims of apartheid who were silenced by illiteracy, poverty, and internment in 117 Days and her journalistic writing, so too do I endeavour to retrace for Ruth First a matriarchal history of Jewish revolutionary women. I do not wish to claim here "any easy notion of Jewish community cohesion, classlessness or cultural superiority" which Shula Marks says underwrites the " 'triumphalist narratives' " of Jewish economic and social success in South Africa (2004: 900), and which, post-apartheid, have been evoked to explain the overwhelming percentage of Jewish participation in revolutionary activities. Rather, my intention is to address the specificities of that historical situation, which led to the rise of both a conservative Zionism and a

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<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Jail Diary.

<sup>25</sup> After her divorce from Nelson Mandela in 1996, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela chose to be addressed as Madikizela-Mandela (Madikizela is her maiden name). However, as most of my references to Madikizela-Mandela here refer to the period when she was known (and acknowledged herself) as Nelson Mandela's wife, I have chosen to retain her former title.

Banned in South Africa until 1990, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela's autobiography Part of My Soul was published in 1985 in England, under the name 'Winnie Mandela.' Although most whites address Nomzamo Winnie Mandela as "Winnie," colleague Bishop Manas Buthelezi implies Nomzamo Winnie Mandela's predilection for her African first name by dedicating his tribute which prefaces the main text of Part of My Soul to "Nomzamo Winnie Mandela." More explicitly, fellow activist Norma Kitson writes in her own autobiography Where Sixpence Lives that "Nomzamo [is] the name she prefers to her 'white' name" (1986: 195). In her autobiography, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela writes of her father's insistence on what she terms "that terrible name 'Winnifred,' which subsequently became 'Winnie' " (49), reluctantly resigning herself to it only because she is "internationally known under that name" (50). To avoid confusion, I refer to Nomzamo Winnie Mandela by both her Christian and Xhosa names in this dissertation.

radical socialism amongst Jewish immigrants to South Africa in their search for a vision of “ ‘a new Jew,’ who would be a subject rather than a resigned recipient of history,” as James T. Campbell suggests (2002: 104). As well as challenging canonical histories extolling the victory of “Jewish education and Zionism” (Marks 2004: 901), I aspire to rise to Marks’ challenge to address “the changing role of women” in South African Jewish history, a subject she observes “merits far more attention than the handful of lines” it is usually accorded in current historical writing. I therefore examine the influence of the historical pressures which were brought to bear on Jewish women from the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century on Ruth First’s inscription of identities. In the process, I undertake a historiographical exercise through which I re-situate Ruth First within an alternate heritage of Jewish activist women, one which is almost completely submerged in historical writing of her era. One of the reasons for this disregard arises directly from attempts by this traditionally persecuted community from Eastern Europe to assimilate itself within whiteness in the context of apartheid South Africa. Another reason is the pervasive privileging of the historical experiences of men over those of women. I address, too, Ruth First’s refusal to situate herself within a heritage which, in many ways, facilitated the production of her substantial contributions to revolutionary thought and politics.

### *Reconfiguring the heroic*

Following her first encounter with the Gestapo, Astrup writes:

I imagined half a dozen eyes were riveted on to my back. These arrogant and all-powerful men tramping over my beautiful carpets had done something to my confidence. Everyone cannot be a hero born and I was very badly scared. I did not want my nails pulled out like the *vaktmester’s* [Jewish caretaker’s] (21).

Thwarting readers' expectations of conventional bravery by openly admitting her fears of physical suffering, Astrup articulates them in terms of domestic disruption. Like Ruth First, who is afraid of the very presence of Night Has a Thousand Eyes in her cell, Astrup acknowledges the power of the institutional gaze to reconfigure her identity. Disclaiming the traditional role of the (usually male) hero of the Bildungsroman *à la* James Joyce, who reveals his destiny for greatness by performing epic acts from a young age, Astrup nevertheless proceeds to relate feats of increasing bravery as a secret agent for the Norwegian Resistance. Ruth First, as reader, and Astrup, as writer, have much in common. Both women were actively involved in fighting repressive regimes based on ideologies of racial superiority; both occupied materially and racially privileged (but simultaneously ambiguous) positions within their respective societies (Astrup was an affluent foreigner trapped in Nazi-occupied Norway); and both wrote about their experiences in memoirs which have since become historical documents. A dedicated mother who is proud of her housekeeping skills, Astrup suggests the possibility of a new kind of hero. Her admission that she was not "a hero born" implies that heroes are made, not only through material circumstance, but also perhaps through autobiographical and historical narratives.

In 117 Days, Ruth First, too, discloses an awareness that heroism is not an ontological essence, but arises from textual production. While undergoing solitary confinement in Pretoria Central Prison, Ruth First composes "a plot for a novel" (1965: 71). The characters, she writes, were herself and her "friends, all cast in the heroic mould." Unlike Astrup, however, Ruth First admits to feeling a distinct responsibility to personify a political ideal, and mentally rehearses that task. When she reaches the part of her story at

which her heroes face imprisonment, however, Ruth First admits that she “faltered,” unable to imagine a future beyond the dismal silence of her cell. Proposing that the generic demarcation between novel and history is a blurred one at best, Green observes that both kinds of narratives are invented ones, inscribed in terms of an ideological perspective from the present. Standing at the cross-roads between fiction and non-fiction, Ruth First’s inability to progress along the first path (her novel within her memoir) is contingent on the outcome of the second (historical circumstance and its inscription).

In summary, this dissertation is ordered by five central discussions, or themes: namely, gender, political activism, Jewishness, maternal behaviour and the role of the individual in the community. My primary focus here is to address images of First in both her own writings and the literary productions of others. At times, I compare portrayals of First with those of other activists in order to elucidate particular social and historical contexts as they intersect with constructs of femininity and ethnicity. In choosing texts for comparison, I selected first and foremost autobiographical works by South African political women of her generation and social group. I read others for points of similarity and contrast and for the ways in which they resonate with the five central discussions noted above.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Some worthwhile struggle memoirs which I am unable to discuss in detail or at all here include Lionel Forman and Solly Sachs’ The South African Treason Trial (1957), Helen Joseph’s If This Be Treason (1963) and Tomorrow’s Sun: A Smuggled Journal from South Africa (1966), Bloke Modisane’s Blame Me on History (1963), Nelson Mandela’s No Easy Walk to Freedom (1965), Lewis Nkosi’s Home and Exile, and Other Selections (1965), Albie Sachs’ Stephanie on Trial (1968) and The Soft Vengeance of a Freedom Fighter (1990), Godfrey Moloi’s My Life (1987), Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s No Child’s Play: In Prison Under Apartheid (1988), Sindiwe Magona’s To My Children’s Children (1990), Govan Mbeki’s Learning from Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki (1991), Phyllis Ntantala’s A Life’s Mosaic (1993), Maggie Resha’s Mangoana O Tsoara Thipa Ka Bohaleng: My Life in the Struggle (1992), Pauline

By comparing representations of Ruth First's identity in 117 Days with both counter-narratives and canonical accounts, I also address some of the conflicting ideologies bound up with the telling of the past. Through investigating the correlation between inscriptions of Jewish womanhood and revolutionary activity, I suggest possibilities of further representations of Ruth First hitherto occluded. Naomi Shepherd<sup>27</sup> suggests that in the last century and a half, the main impetus for Jewish women becoming activists was their desire to escape Jewish patriarchal culture (1993). I test many of Shepherd's conclusions, which she exemplifies by depictions of Russian, Northern European and North American Jewish political women, in the South African context. In so doing, I show that the phenomenon of Ruth First's activism and achievement was not a fortuitous aberration born only of genius or of deprivation shared with the normally inaccessible Other, but rather a product of the particular ideological environment in which she was raised, by parents schooled in socialist activism, within a Jewish immigrant family from the Pale of the Settlement who had arrived in South Africa at a time in history when heightened class conflict, refracted through the lens of race, appeared to promise the opportunity for mass revolution. While predictions of the violent overthrow of the government were replaced by a negotiated dismantling of the apartheid system, seismic shifts in perceptions of gender and ethnic identity transpired within the country, opening up a site where historiographical projects such as this one could be written.

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Podbrey's White Girl in Search of a Party (1993), Adam Low's film Voices From the Island (1994) and Rusty Bernstein's Memory Against Forgetting (1999).

<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to Veronica Belling, librarian-in-charge at the Jewish Studies Library at UCT, for directing my attention to Shepherd's analysis.



## ***Ruth First: A World***

### *Seeking truth(s)*

On 8 November 1963, Ruth First made a statement to the Security Branch: “I told the detectives sitting like birds of prey over me the bare outlines of this story, stringing it out for as long as they showed patience to listen,” she writes (1965: 119). Flanked by Major Swanepoel, Lieutenants Viktor and Van der Merwe, and watched from behind by Captain Van Zyl and Warrant Officer Nel, Ruth First plans to speak “in evasion and half-statement,” vowing mentally never to divulge the “trails to information the Security Branch so wanted” (115). Rather, she would reveal information that was already public knowledge, facts which might “placate” the police, but would not take them further in their investigation. Shying away from the speaking of ‘truths’ that would assist in the arrest or conviction of other political suspects, Ruth First strives instead to spin stories as decoys, hoping to lure the hovering “birds” away from their quarry.

Following the convention of an official working group in December 1995 to “establish a complete picture of the causes, nature and extent of the gross human rights violations” committed between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994 (Krog 1998: vi), the seeking of truth in the context of personal narrative, and attempts to understand and redefine what is meant by the term ‘truth,’ became a matter of national scrutiny in South Africa. Dr. Alex Boraine, the deputy chairperson of the TRC, describes four “official” ways in which the Commission approached

truth: “we distinguish between factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth, social truth, and healing or restorative truth. My story attempts to reflect all four of these, but I readily acknowledge that this is not the whole truth” (2000: 1). Like Boraine, writers such as Wicomb in David’s Story and Antjie Krog in Country of My Skull (1998), a memoir about the author’s personal journey during her reportage of the TRC for national radio, explore both the complexity and evasiveness of truth in the contexts of personal and public histories.

Written thirty years earlier, at the height of the apartheid era, such explorations into the ontology of truth are largely submerged in 117 Days. The text tends to conflate factual, personal and social truth: it is only in addressing her own healing or restorative truth later in the text that Ruth First’s subjective voice comes to the fore. In recounting her staged confession, Ruth First delineates two factual truths: the story she tells the detectives, which she describes as selective truth, and her own knowledge of events, the ‘real’ truth. In between lies a third truth told to the reader, interleaved with confidences about Ruth First’s state of mind and her intentions, but curtailed, in certain instances, by the contraction of names to initials and disclaimers about sources. (Ruth First has a good reason to be hesitant about revealing too much information, as when 117 Days was published many activists inside the country were still in danger of persecution). But it is not only empirical information which remains hidden in the narrative: another truth remains to be told, a fourth story occluded at the interstices of group narrative and personal experience, of a self frequently straining against the image she strives to present.

Brandon Hamber (2002) suggests that what Boraine terms “healing or restorative truth” is brought about by the telling of stories of state harassment in a sympathetic public space, where the production of truth emerges as a need parallel to that for justice. According to Hamber, the voicing of truths which were previously concealed due to social and political pressures is “what the survivors (including those who were ambivalent about other achievements of the TRC) felt was most useful about the process” (2002: 64). Yet even within a forum specifically designed to validate the personal stories of survivors, such accounts by women remain, arguably, largely unspoken. For instance, in her survey of women’s testimony during the first five weeks of the TRC, Fiona Ross notes that while fifty-eight per cent of the survivors testifying were women (1996: 6), only four percent spoke about themselves (7, table two).

Although the creation of a safe space by the TRC for women to voice their stories and for them to be heard may not have been entirely achieved, its very aspiration was not part of the political world in which Ruth First produced 117 Days. Written mostly in London in 1964, Ruth First’s memoir includes an official account of her life as recounted to the police, a linear progression of empirically verifiable events told over six pages, from her birth in Johannesburg on 4 May 1925, to her university years and her later involvement in several groundbreaking political events (1965: 116-121). Towards the end of her mini-narrative, however, Ruth First’s voice falters as she describes a series of meetings at Rivonia in the early months of 1963. With “alarming unexpectedness” (122), her story peters out. She finds that, like the plot of her earlier unfinished novel, she cannot devise a fitting conclusion.

This chapter addresses mainly factual and social truth. I focus on the inscription of factual truth by discussing in greater depth key occurrences which Ruth First mentions only in passing. I also discuss additional events which are important to her story. Furthermore, I extend the narrow timeline of her official account to include her childhood and young adulthood, as well as the years of her exile from March 1964 to her death in August 1982. By discussing some of the sociological and historical trends prominent in twentieth-century South Africa from the perspective of different ethnic groups, I engage with social truths which led to the creation of a particular political situation and its resistance. My intention in this chapter is to connect the autobiographical self to the world of sequential happenings, to embellish upon what Ruth First calls “the bare outlines of this story,” which, though contrived, nevertheless provides a significant point of orientation from which the reader may approach 117 Days.<sup>1</sup>

### *Ruth First's early years*

A thirty-eight year old woman at the time of her arrest, Ruth First spent her childhood in a home characterized by the oxymoronic confluence of communist ideology with white privilege. Both her parents, Tilly and Julius First, became members of the CPSA when it was founded in Cape

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<sup>1</sup> The Ruth First Papers deposited by the Ruth First Memorial Trust at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London constitute a significant collection of chiefly “background materials collected by her but written by others,” according to archivist David Parker in private correspondence with myself in July 2003. It would no doubt have been an interesting and fruitful exercise to have written this chapter using this collection of papers as my primary source. Unfortunately, however, the Institute of Commonwealth Studies had not yet produced a microfilm or digital reproduction of the documents at the time of writing, and therefore I had very limited access to them. These papers remain an important source for future study. According to Parker, only one folder (RF/1/15/1/15) contained “significant materials” written by Ruth First herself. These include a draft of her 9 August 1978 speech on women, which I discuss in some depth in Chapter Five.

Town on 30 July 1921.<sup>2</sup> By 1924, the CPSA was strongly affiliated with Communist International (Comintern), a Soviet organization based in Moscow which centralized revolutionary political parties worldwide. In Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950 (1969), a previously banned work now considered a historical classic, longtime Jewish anti-apartheid activists and communists Jack Simons and Ray Alexander<sup>3</sup> write that the CPSA “affirmed the principle of mass action,” educating workers about their rights to unite against the government or their employers (257). Furthermore, the Party “undertook to organize workers irrespective of colour, craft or sex in communist groups and soviets to obtain control of production, seize political power, and defend their conquests by force” (257). All communist parties were also “expected to give practical aid to colonial liberation movements and to demand independence for colonial peoples” (256). Despite its anti-colonial and anti-racist aspirations, however, the CPSA’s relationship with the black proletariat was initially tentative and volatile due to the entrenchment of racial divisions in the South African context, especially amongst the working classes.

Although ethnically Jewish, her parents replaced Judaism with communism before Ruth First was born. Their home in east Johannesburg<sup>4</sup> was comfortable by middle-class standards, with

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<sup>2</sup> With an initial membership of three hundred, the CPSA resulted from the merging of several South African trade unions and socialist organizations, many of which were Jewish, including the Jewish Socialist Society of Cape Town and the Jewish Socialist Society (*Poalei Zion*) of Johannesburg.

<sup>3</sup> While this work is officially published under the authorship of “Jack and Ray Simons,” Ray Alexander refers to herself by her own name within its pages (1969: 458, 465, 485, 520, 535, 554, and 594) and elsewhere (2004: 117). Thus, while I reference all quotations from the book as “Simons and Simons,” I refer to Alexander by her own name in the rest of my discussion.

<sup>4</sup> At certain times during Ruth First’s childhood when money was tight, the family moved into small apartments in Yeoville and elsewhere, while renting out their home at 17 Latona Street, Kensington (Pinnock 1993: 9).

servant quarters in the back and a white nursemaid from London. In an interview with Pinnock in 1988, Tilly First emphasized that “we didn’t have coloured people in the house – whites were better educated” (1997a: 6). At the same time, the Firsts would religiously take Ruth and her younger brother Ronald (‘Ronnie’) to the Town Hall to hear communist speakers in order to make the children “conscious” (7). As in other homes in which social ambitions and political ideologies were sometimes incompatibly resolved,<sup>5</sup> a commitment to leftist politics for the Firsts did not preclude an underlying subscription to at least some conventional white South African values.

*South Africa 1910-1925: consolidation of white power*

By the year of Ruth First’s birth, race and gender discrimination in the territory now known as the Republic of South Africa had been rife at least since seventeenth-century European settlement of the Cape. The Union of South Africa was constituted in 1910 as a British protectorate following the South African War (1899-1902), during which an estimated 27 927 Boers and 14 154 blacks perished, many in British concentration camps. African, so-called coloured,<sup>6</sup> Khoekhoe, !Xan and Griqua peoples were not represented at the National Convention

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<sup>5</sup> In Slovo: *The Unfinished Autobiography*, Joe Slovo comments on a similar ideological dichotomy which informed his “leaning towards left socialist politics” while he was a teenager (1995: 22). Differently inflected to the contradictions found in the First household mainly due to variations in social class, Joe Slovo’s initial experiences of socialism were complicated by Jewish ethnic loyalties. Living for some years amongst poor primarily Jewish working-class immigrants who inhabited a boarding-house run by a Mrs. Sher, Joe Slovo observes what he terms the “bizarre and paradoxical” socialist affiliations shared by most of the residents, who “tended to combine a passionate devotion to the Soviet Union with Zionism and a vicious racism towards the majority of the South African population.” It was only some years later that Joe Slovo managed to shed what he describes as his “discomfort” with members of other races (22).

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘coloured’ is a highly contested one, fraught with implications of homogenizing ethnic difference. Although the term is, as Mountain suggests, “an anachronism” (2003: 64), no alternative one has been devised to

of 1908-1909 when “the future of South Africa was decided by an exclusively white assembly to their own advantage,” according to Schreiner biographer Karel Schoeman (1992: 212). Olive Schreiner and her brother Will were amongst the few whites who protested the exclusion of black South Africans from the political process. Unification resulted in the disenfranchisement of all ‘Non-Europeans,’ except in the Cape Colony, where blacks had been accorded the right to limited franchise for almost fifty years based on qualifications of land ownership and minimum income.<sup>7</sup> Political exclusion and the growing experience of daily discrimination led to a nationwide congress of African leaders initiated by Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a Zulu lawyer trained at Columbia and Oxford universities. At Bloemfontein from 8 to 12 January 1912, tribal chiefs, overseas-educated black graduates and others voted unanimously for the formation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), with writer Sol Plaatje as its first secretary-general.<sup>8</sup> The SANNC became the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923.

Laws restricting the movement of indigenous peoples had been enforced as early as 1809, when the Hottentot pass law was introduced in the Cape by the British. All Khoekhoe, !Xan and

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date which is unilaterally accepted as describing “those people in the Cape who are not Bantu-speaking and who do not have a distinct European ancestry along both patrilineal and matrilineal lines.” Therefore, I have prefaced the term ‘coloured’ with ‘so-called’ in order to indicate both the tentativeness and the insufficiency of that designation.

<sup>7</sup> When the British granted self-government to the Cape in March 1853, all male subjects of the Crown who earned fifty pounds or more per year, or who occupied land and buildings worth twenty-five pounds or more were granted the vote, regardless of race (Roux 1964: 53; Davenport and Saunders 2000: 104). The Africans who met these qualifications belonged mainly to the small Christian African élite educated in the Eastern Cape mission schools (Sisulu 2003: 31). Amongst the “tiny minority of non-white voters,” more came from the so-called coloured communities than the African communities (First and Scott 1980: 257).

<sup>8</sup> When Plaatje went to Britain as a member of a delegation to protest against the Natives Land Act of 1913, which restricted the country’s four million Africans to less than eight per cent of the land (the remaining ninety-two percent was designated exclusively for occupation by the country’s one and a half million whites), Olive Schreiner, who was a committed pacifist at the time, refused to meet with him on the grounds that he supported the enlistment of black men for military service (First and Scott 1980: 305).

Griqua persons who did not have documentation to show that they were under the employ of a white master were designated vagrants, subject to arrest and almost certain forced labour (Roux 1964:27-28).<sup>9</sup> In the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, vagrancy and pass laws pertaining to Africans were also enforced, their stipulations varying in severity and application from town to town (114). Viewed not only as a form of inconvenience and bondage, but also as a source of humiliation, black South Africans resisted pass laws throughout the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> One of the first acts of public pass-burning took place in 1908 in Johannesburg in response to the infamous 'Black Act' of 1906, whereby all male and female 'Asiatics' (specifically Indian and Chinese citizens) over the age of eight years were required to carry passes at all times (104-105).<sup>11</sup> *Satyagrahis*, devotees of Mahatma Gandhi who followed his path of passive resistance, and admirers of Chinese activist Leung Quin refused to comply. Many were imprisoned and sentenced to hard labour. When the Free State Provincial Council ruled in 1913 that African women would be required to produce passes on demand, the women embarked on a protracted campaign of passive resistance. Although the compulsory carrying of

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<sup>9</sup> This law was abolished by Ordinance 50 of 1828, when so-called coloured people were granted the right to own land and to demand a contract of labour. In 1838, all slaves at the Cape were freed. In 1842, all blacks within the boundaries of the Cape Colony were technically granted the same rights as whites, until a series of later laws eroded them. Discriminatory social and economic practices were always a *de facto* part of the Cape life, however.

<sup>10</sup> The SANNC organized the first recorded campaign of passive resistance against passes in the Transvaal during March and April of 1919. Seven hundred blacks were arrested. Violence occurred on several occasions: white civilians randomly attacked black people on the streets of Johannesburg; police manhandled pass offenders in the cells of Marshall Square, the prison in which Ruth First was later held; and a crowd of black demonstrators attacked police escorting prisoners from the court-house to the cells (Roux 1964: 120-121).

<sup>11</sup> In his semi-autobiographical novel *All Under Heaven* (2004), Darryl Accone addresses the continued ambivalent legal and social status in South Africa of the members of the Chinese immigrant community, who "once were classified 'non-white' and now are deemed not to have been 'previously disadvantaged' " (back cover). Another significant discussion on Chinese in-betweenness may be found in Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man's *Colour, Confusion and Concessions: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* (1996).

passes<sup>12</sup> by African women was finally enforced nationally in 1963, a few activists such as Annie Silinga continued to defy the law and courted daily harassment and frequent arrest.

### *Formation of a black élite*

Before the institution in 1953 of the Bantu Education system, which aimed to indoctrinate black children with the values of the apartheid system through qualitatively inferior textbooks and instruction,<sup>13</sup> only a minority of African men and women had access to Western education through élite schools such as Tigerkloof, Inanda, Zonnebloem and Lovedale, generally run by Christian missionaries (Daymond et al 2003: 26-27). Twentieth-century leaders such as Florence Nolwandle Jabavu, Ellen Kuzwayo, Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, Charlotte Manye Maxeke, Govan Mbeki, Albertina Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe, Adelaide Tambo and Oliver Tambo were educated in mission schools. Although the ideology of domesticity, “deeply imbricated with class and racial hierarchies” was at the heart of mission education for girls, in many cases colonial schools provided skills which empowered African women to challenge conventional power hierarchies in later years, as Daymond et al propose (2003: 25).

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<sup>12</sup> Pass books were officially termed ‘reference books’ from 1952.

<sup>13</sup> In his opening debate to Parliament about the soon-to-be-ratified Bantu Education Act (1953), Minister of Native Affairs Dr. Verwoerd claimed that “ ‘correct education’ ” for ‘Natives’ is one which reduces their “ ‘expectations in life’ ” (qtd. in Suzman 1993: 35). Verwoerd’s infamous rhetorical question in the same debate, namely, “ ‘What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it [sic] cannot use it in practice?’ ” encapsulates for many the ideology underpinning all apartheid policies on black education.

During the late nineteenth century, a number of young black middle-class men and women attended American universities under the auspices of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; later generations would graduate locally from the Native University College of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape. Although admitted to the so-called 'liberal' universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand in the 1920s, black students and staff were later barred from attending these 'open universities' by the Separate Universities Education Bill of 1957.<sup>14</sup> The University of Cape Town (UCT) and Wits formed Academic Freedom Committees to protest the Bill, affirming their right to admit students and staff solely on academic merit, regardless of race or religion (Beinart et al 1974: 5). Protest took the form of deputations to the Minister of Education, Arts and Sciences, the installation of a bronze plaque<sup>15</sup> in the Jagger Library of UCT and at Wits. All-night vigils, with flaming torches symbolizing the principle of "Academic Freedom," were held on the steps of Jameson Hall at UCT, attended at least once by ANC president Albert Luthuli (Shain et al 2001: 74). The freedoms declared by the Academic Freedom Committee were powerless to prevent Ruth First's arrest in the library of Wits five years later, however. Despite the genuine

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<sup>14</sup> 'Open universities' meant that black students were given "academic, but not social, equality with other students," according to Roux (1964: 375). Black students and staff members were allowed to join cultural societies, but not to attend student dances or participate in sporting events.

<sup>15</sup> The plaque "recorded the removal of academic freedom in the year 1960 and left a blank space for the insertion of the date when freedom is restored" (Beinart et al 1974: 11). The inscription of the plaque in Latin, which could not be understood by the vast majority of those whose freedom it was defending, reveals an allegiance to a Eurocentric conception of culture which was later rejected by the BCM. A plaque written in English which declares the dedication of Wits to non-racism was unveiled in April 1961. This declaration did not appear in any of the indigenous vernaculars, which, for some, also marks its exclusionary nature. Demographic information regarding the enrolment of students at the time indicates that English was the mother-tongue of most students at Wits, where the ratio of black to white students bore an inverse relationship to the population of the county. Out of 22 000 students registered at the then nine South African residential universities in 1957, only "1 300 of these were African" (vii).

efforts of liberal institutions to protest against apartheid, by 1974 the practical result of such an endeavour was seen by most as “a succession of defeats and disappointments” (Beinart et al 46).

### *Women, class and colour*

As the voices of both black and white women were excluded from official debates at the time of the Union, a Women’s Enfranchisement League was formed in 1907 to promote their full participation in national politics. Perceived by some women’s rights activists and leftist intellectuals at the time “as the genius of the suffrage movement in South Africa” (First and Scott 1980: 261), Olive Schreiner was elected vice-president. To Schreiner’s bitter disappointment, however, the League soon advocated the granting of the vote to women on the same terms as men, which implied the replication of the current situation of racial segregation. In 1930, all white women over the age of twenty-one were duly granted the vote, mainly because their enfranchisement meant halving the efficacy of the African and so-called coloured vote, which was instantly reduced from 9.3 per cent to 4.4 per cent of the total electorate<sup>16</sup> (Tatz in Simons and Simons 1969: 661, n31). African, so-called coloured, Indian and Chinese women were consistently denied the right to vote until the democratic elections of 1994.

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<sup>16</sup> By the Women’s Enfranchisement Act of 1930, the number of white voters rose instantly from 410 728 in 1929 to 850 182 in 1931 (Tatz in Simons and Simons 1969: 661, n31). A series of irregular voting amendments, such as the Franchise Laws Amendment Act of 1931, legislated the waiving of property and income tests for white males in the Cape and Natal. Together with the raising of income qualifications for Africans in the following years, the total percentage of black voters was subsequently further reduced from 3.1 per cent to 1.4 per cent of the total electorate (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 326).

From the 1920s onwards, communists attained limited success in organizing Afrikaner workers in the railway, mine and garment industries, much to the dismay of nationalists who accurately perceived the establishment of trade unions as a threat to *volkseenheid*, or cultural unity. A case in point was the militancy of members of the Transvaal branch of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, eighty-percent of who were poverty-stricken Afrikaner women from the rural areas. Under the influential leadership of Solly Sachs, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, members staged a number of victorious strikes on the Reef. Leftist historian and activist Professor Edward Roux reported that police acted brutally against "the garment girls" during a demonstration in Germiston in 1932, thus disturbing their Nationalist loyalties (1964: 263). Generally, the vast majority of the white working class was firmly in favour of the colour bar due to the economic and social privileges they received. In *Rebels' Daughters* (1957), his autobiographical history of the garment industry in South Africa, Sachs points out that by the early 1940s, Afrikaner garment worker affiliation had shifted from racial to class signifiers, but admits that "most of the six thousand white workers" in that city were "never completely free from race prejudice," which also extended to himself as a Jew and an immigrant (24).<sup>17</sup>

### *Immigrant Jewry: assimilation and activism*

Although Jews were officially classified as part of the dominant white community at the time of the Union, immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia were frequently perceived "as members of the despised black out-group," according to South African academic Marcia Leveson (1996:

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<sup>17</sup> Banned from trade union activity in May 1952, Sachs chose to go into exile in England in 1953, where he took up a research fellowship at the University of Manchester.

24). From the 1880 to 1910, an estimated 40 000 Jews arrived in the country in several waves (Shimoni 2003: 2). Jewish immigration was practically halted for four years following the Immigration Restriction Act of 1902, which limited entry into the country of those who were unable to sign their names in a European language. At that time, most Jews who sought to immigrate to South Africa spoke mainly Yiddish, which they transcribed in Hebrew letters. Implicitly defined as 'Asiatics' by the Bill, Jews once more gained free access to the country after lobbyists, led by Jewish parliamentarian Morris Alexander, secured the recognition of Yiddish as a European language. Despite the fact that both communities were discriminated against by the same act, the local Jewish community chose to disassociate themselves from the cause of Indian immigration, according to South African born Israeli critic, Gideon Shimoni (2003: 7). Actively distancing themselves from members of darker race groups, Jewish communal leaders sought to secure their foothold into public and official perceptions of whiteness. Amongst supporters of the Jewish community was Olive Schreiner, whose 'A Letter on the Jew' in defence of the Jewish race was delivered by her husband Samuel Cron Cronwright-Schreiner at a meeting of the Jewish Territorial Society held in Cape Town on 1 July 1906.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Schreiner's letter appeared the following day in Cape Times of 2 July 1906. Leveson suggests that despite Schreiner's ostensible defence of the Jewish community, antisemitic perceptions underlie her construction of Jewish ethnicity (1996: 62-63). Leveson interprets Schreiner's reference to physical characteristics of the Russian Jewish immigrants as "broken, crushed and dwarfed," together with Schreiner's sentiment that "these people needed but a little space, a little chance, to develop into some far higher form" (Schreiner 1906: 10) as indicative of the influence on Schreiner's worldview of eugenicist philosophy popular at the time, whereby Jews were thought to be a less evolved species of human being (Leveson 1996: 62-63). For me, however, Schreiner's representations of Jews as an inferior race (amid a host of praise for Jewish achievement and morality) is somewhat mitigated by her intention to convince a hostile public of the desirability of Jewish entry into the country in terms of the current ideologies of the day. In Ruth First and Scott's biography of Schreiner, the latter's statements in defence of the Jews are taken at face

Several historians have remarked upon the high proportion of Jewish activist leaders in the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Milton Shain and Sally Frankental cite the following statistics: “More than half of the twenty-three whites involved in the Treason Trial of the 1950s and all five whites<sup>19</sup> apprehended in the ‘Rivonia Arrests’ of 1963 were Jewish,” out of a community which at the time comprised 3.1 percent of the white population (1999: 59).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Glenn Frankel notes that twenty-three out of the sixty active leaders of the Johannesburg district of the CPSA in February 1946 were Jewish, including its chairman, Michael Harmel (1999: 56). Mark Israel and Simon Adams (2000) explain the disproportionate number of Jews in revolutionary organizations such as the CPSA and the African Resistance Movement<sup>21</sup> (ARM) as a direct product of the well-developed tradition of socialist activism prevalent amongst Jews in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, they ascribe the Jewish ethnicity of many leaders like Karl Marx (1818-1883), Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), Rosa Luxemburg (1870-1919) and Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) to the socialist aspirations of their childhood communities (2000: 147).

While acknowledging European Jewish socialist heritage as an important factor influencing the involvement of Jews in the South African struggle, Campbell qualifies “the ‘tradition’ that

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value (1980: 254-5), although earlier Ruth First and Scott propose that Schreiner’s characterization of a rich Jewish moneylender in *From Man to Man* is “a disappointingly racist stereotype” (174).

<sup>19</sup> All were Jewish men: Rusty Bernstein, Hilliard Feinstein, Denis Goldberg, Arthur Goldreich and Bob Hepple.

<sup>20</sup> According to the official Census of 1951, Jews comprised 4.1 per cent of the white population in that year (Gordon-Brown 1961: 77). By 1991, the proportion of Jews had decreased to “approximately 2 per cent” (Shain and Frankental 1999: 66, 2n).

<sup>21</sup> According to Immanuel Suttner, the “African Resistance Movement (ARM) was a short-lived attempt, mainly by whites, to use sabotage to undermine apartheid. ARM originated as the National Committee of Liberation (NCL) and assumed the name ARM after the Rivonia Trial” (1997: 500, 2n). In his memoir *Bandiet: Seven Years in a South African Prison* (1974), Hugh Lewin describes the NCL as “ideologically imprecise,” noting that the “orientation was, broadly, socialist, ranging from some members who were dissident communists through to those

immigrant leftists carried” as “both particularist and notoriously sectarian” (2002: 113). Campbell attributes the fact that ethnic (if not religious Jews) “represented at least 40 per cent of South Africa’s white left” (98) to social phenomena rooted in specific historical circumstances: poverty and persecution in Eastern Europe, the “steady erosion of both communal and parental authority” both in the *shtetl* and as a result of transmigration, alienation between first and second generation immigrants, and loneliness stemming from cultural dislocation (105). Emphasizing that the majority of South African Jews were acquiescent to the regime, Campbell delineates the rise of a fervent South African Zionism, with its accent on the racial sovereignty of Jewish nationhood, as a counterpoint to the minority of leftist elements in that community. Ruth First and Joe Slovo were members of this minority group of committed socialists, many (but not all) of whom “regarded Zionism as a form of bourgeois nationalism” (109).

#### *The 1930s: increasing discrimination and strategic alliances*

In 1926, the only black person in the CPSA was T. W. Thibedi (Roux 1964: 203). Later, however, convinced that communism supplied at least some answers for a better life for all, more black leaders such as J.B. Marks, a teacher, and Moses Kotane, a worker,<sup>22</sup> joined the CPSA. Despite mounting pressure exerted both from within the ANC by black nationalists and from without by anti-left governmental policies, Edwin Mofutsanyana, Albert Nzula, Johannes Nkosi

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of us who had been members of the Liberal Party and who had become disenchanted with the Liberals’ insistence on passive non-violent protest” (16).

<sup>22</sup> Kotane was born in a rural family and worked initially as a herdsboy, and then as a domestic servant, waiter, miner and baker. While traversing the country from one job to another, he taught himself to read and write. In 1932, he spent a year in Moscow at the Lenin school, learning communist philosophy. He returned to South Africa in 1933 as Party secretary and editor (Simons and Simons 1969: 492-493).

and Gana Makabeni also joined the Party via black trade unions. They were appointed to leadership positions and successfully “Africanized” the Party by writing articles in isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho and seTswana, organizing branches in country districts, and developing stronger links with grassroots workers (Simons and Simons 1969: 414). At the Seventh Annual Conference of the CPSA held in Johannesburg in January 1929, twenty of the thirty delegates were from the black community (217). According to Roux, “the only African woman who played any part in the communist movement at the time” was Josie Mpama from Potchefstroom (1964: 216). Also known as Josie Palmer, Mpama led protests against location permits throughout the 1930s.

In 1935, Parliament passed the Native Representation Act, which resulted in the loss of limited franchise for Africans.<sup>23</sup> Instead of being able to vote directly, Africans in the Cape would elect three white Members of Parliament (MPs), who were designated as Native Representatives.<sup>24</sup> In

1936, Parliament ratified the Native Trust and Land Act, which eradicated the last remaining

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<sup>23</sup> Initially, the Coloured Persons Rights Bill, which aimed at disenfranchising so-called Cape coloured people by placing them on a separate roll, was proposed together with the Native Representation Bill. Subsequently, however, the Coloured Persons Rights Bill was dropped and limited franchise for so-called coloureds remained until the Nationalists abolished it in stages between 1952 and 1956.

<sup>24</sup> The three white Native Representatives in Parliament (from Cape Western, Cape Eastern and the Transkei) formed a tiny minority in the assembly, which at the time consisted of one hundred and fifty members “elected by whites and a sprinkling of Coloured” (Simons and Simons 1969: 495). Chiefs, local councils, urban advisory boards and elections committees in all provinces would be entitled to elect four white senators (one for the Transvaal and Orange Free State, one for Natal, two for the Cape Province) by a system of block voting. A Native Representative Council was also created, consisting of six white officials and sixteen Africans (four nominated, twelve elected) in

rights of Africans in the Cape province to buy lands outside the Native Reserves, which were usually arid and arbitrary areas of the country allocated by the Natives Land Act of 1913 as the exclusive dwelling place of the African communities. In exchange, the amount of land ceded to the Native Reserves would ostensibly be increased by fifty percent;<sup>25</sup> thus, twelve percent of the land was allocated to almost seventy percent of the population.<sup>26</sup> Influx control laws instituted between 1927 and 1932 severely limited the freedom of blacks to live in urban areas, creating an artificial pool of cheap labour for white farmers and the big mining houses. In December 1935, disgruntled black and so-called coloured workers joined together to form the National Liberation League (NLL) in association with the CPSA under Zainunissa ('Cissie') Gool<sup>27</sup> in Cape Town. Gool toured Natal and the Transvaal in 1939, preaching a version of Gandhi's *satyagraha* amongst the Indian community, which was also suffering due to racially-based restrictions regarding land ownership and trading licenses.

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order to deliberate over grievances and make recommendations to the government. The Council itself had no power to pass or veto legislation.

<sup>25</sup> Most of the land promised in this act was never transferred to black ownership. According to Helen Suzman, by as late as 1991, two million hectares of land were still outstanding (1993: 44).

<sup>26</sup> According to Roux, in 1948 the population of South Africa was eleven and a half million people, of which "approximately 65 per cent. are Africans (Bantu), 22 per cent. Europeans (of whom about two-thirds are Afrikaners), 10 per cent. Cape Coloured and 3 per cent. Indian. The non-Europeans thus form 78 per cent. of the total population" (1964: 354). Davenport and Saunders cite similar figures (2000: 428, table 1).

<sup>27</sup> Gool was the daughter of Dr Abdul Abdurahman, a prominent leader of the small so-called coloured professional middle-class and a long-standing member of the Cape Town City Council. According to Roux, Abdurahman was closely associated politically with the SAP and white liberalism, and would have been elected to the post of Mayor of Cape Town eventually "had he not been Coloured" (1964: 357). Together with Abdurahman, Gool protested the denial of the vote to African, so-called coloured and Indian women at a meeting held in Cape Town on 27 April 1931 (Simons and Simons 1969: 486). Praised for her "rare [ . . . ] beauty" and considered a highly "cultured woman," Gool shocked white liberals and so-called coloured conservatives at the meeting by declaring: " 'I am slowly going Red [ . . . ] I fear that I shall be blacklisted as a revolutionary' " (486-487). Gool, her sister Dr. Waradia Abdurahman and their mother Mrs. Nellie Abdurahman, in conjunction with Gool's husband Dr A. H. Gool, his brother Dr Goolam Gool, and his sisters Minnie and Janub Gool eventually steered the leadership of the so-called

Jews, too, were subject to discriminatory legislation in this era, although it was not nearly as far-reaching or as overt as that imposed on officially designated 'Non-European' communities. Legislation such as the Immigration Quota Bill of 1930<sup>28</sup> and the pro-Nazi sympathies exhibited by prominent politicians such as future Prime Ministers Dr D. F. Malan, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd and John Vorster increased the distance between Jews and the rest of the white population. Paramilitary organizations such as the Greyshirts (formed in 1933) and the *Ossewabrandwag* (formed in 1939) mushroomed throughout the country "chanting anti-Semitic slogans or denouncing 'foreign influences' " (Simons and Simons 1969: 466). Throughout the 1930s, the CPSA presented communism as the ideological antithesis of fascism, but failed to rally significant support from other parties, partially as a result of internal dissention. From 1932 to 1948, the communist movement in South Africa was divided between the followers of Stalin and those of Leon Trotsky, who was forced into exile from the Soviet Union in 1929. As well as maintaining certain philosophical differences,<sup>29</sup> Trotskyists regarded Stalin's Cult of Personality, or "the semi-deification of Stalin" (Sandle 1999: 256), with its accompanying institutionalization of coercion, to be untenable.<sup>30</sup> Locally, Trotskyists were in the minority amongst communist

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coloured community in the Western Cape into a more radical position in South African politics than the family patriarch Abdurahman envisaged.

<sup>28</sup> Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Palestine were the only countries designated as "non-scheduled," or subject to quota restrictions (Shain 1994: 137). Lithuania and Latvia were the countries of birth of the vast majority of Jewish immigrants. The Levantine characteristics of Jews, Greeks and Arabs are often similarly perceived.

<sup>29</sup> Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution emphasized the need for a worldwide socialist system to be created in order for the socialist state to exist successfully. As opposed to Stalin, whose theory of 'socialism in one country' accentuated national self-sufficiency, Trotsky maintained that because the economic development of a nation was influenced by the laws of the world market, it was impossible for it to exist in isolation. Therefore, Trotsky thought it essential for socialism to take root throughout the globe, leading to the establishment of an international network of cooperative socialist states.

<sup>30</sup> From December 1929, Stalin effectively assumed the position of the dictator of the USSR. Although the Party apparatus ran the day-to-day workings of government, Stalin manipulated it effectively by instituting a culture of

supporters. In 1934, the small group of Trotskyists in Cape Town split into the Spartacist Club, which cultivated intellectuals, and the Lenin Club, which favoured street-corner meetings and eventually became the Fourth International of South Africa (Roux 1964: 312).<sup>31</sup> Ruth First herself was Trotskyist in orientation, yet remained her entire life a member of the CPSA-SACP as an increasingly critical voice from within.<sup>32</sup>

### *The 1940s: war and shifting alliances*

In an interview, Jewish trade-unionist and journalist Pauline Podbrey reminisces that, in her opinion, “there was no other home for any person with a conscience except the Communist Party” during the 1940s<sup>33</sup> (Suttner 1997: 56): all other official political parties accepted some form of white domination, while membership in the ANC was the preserve of Africans only until 1969.<sup>34</sup> Street battles often broke out between neo-Nazis and young communists on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall in the years preceding South Africa’s declaration of war against

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fear through his control of the secret police and his appointment of key supporters to important positions. Many poets, writers, artists and sculptors were intimidated or enticed to produce work which glorified him. As a result, the physical image of Stalin dominated the landscape of the USSR until his death some twenty-four years later. Between 1936 and 1938, Stalin ordered mass purges, arrests and executions of people from all sections of society who were suspected of being ‘enemies of the people.’ Public show trials of prominent former leaders also took place. Millions were sent to labour camps, usually never to be heard of again.

<sup>31</sup> Roux observes that although the Trotskyists were the only Left organization to unequivocally oppose the war throughout its five-and-a-half year duration, they remained immune to official harassment in the form of newspaper bannings and imprisonments, because the government regarded “the movement as too insignificant to be worth suppressing” (1964: 313).

<sup>32</sup> At the TRC Amnesty Hearing for Williamson and Raven on 28 September 1998, Gillian Slovo confirmed that Ruth First “never left the Communist Party” due to “what it might mean if she had left and the publicity that would accrue.” But ultimately, in her daughter’s opinion, Ruth First’s “hopes were for a democracy in South Africa. That is what she used her intellect and her pen and her tongue to argue for.”

<sup>33</sup> Bitterly disillusioned after the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime became known, Podbrey and her husband H.A. Naidoo resigned from the Communist Party in 1954.

<sup>34</sup> At the time of Ruth First’s imprisonment, “no whites, Asians or mixed-race members were allowed” in the ANC (Frankel 1999: 42) as the majority of members felt that Africans must assume leadership of their own people and

Germany and her allies in September 1939 (Joe Slovo 1995: 18). Following the signing of a non-aggression pact between German Führer Adolf Hitler and Stalin, however, the CPSA abruptly adjusted its policy towards fascism, focusing instead on challenging the military recruitment of 'Non-Europeans.' The anti-conscription campaigning of several CPSA members, including Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, Dr. Max Joffe and Louis Joffe, resulted in their internment.<sup>35</sup> When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, however, the CPSA began to sanction recruitment as part of the fight against international racism. Pro-war propaganda was combined with a campaign for the repeal of pass laws, as well as for equal pay and skills training for soldiers of all races.<sup>36</sup> During the war, African soldiers were not allowed to bear arms but instead were allocated menial tasks like driving, cooking and stretcher-bearing.<sup>37</sup> Members of the Springbok Legion, an anti-racist serviceman's union formed in September 1941, also began to protest the treatment of African soldiers by publishing Fighting Talk, a monthly journal in English and Afrikaans which exposed right-wing nationalist agendas.<sup>38</sup> Ruth First became editor of Fighting Talk in March 1955, a voluntary position which also involved organizing finances and

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control their own destiny. According to Ray Alexander, it was only in the June of 1985 that the ANC decided to open membership of the National Executive Committee (NEC) to all races (Suttner 1997: 40).

<sup>35</sup> Dadoo was sentenced to four months imprisonment in January 1941 for publishing a leaflet exposing the great disparity in rates of pay between black and white soldiers. The Jewish Joffe brothers spent months in a labour camp for incitement against South Africa's participation in the conflict. Following a reversal in the CPSA's stance towards the war effort, the Joffe brothers were released in September 1941.

<sup>36</sup> According to the 11 April 1942 edition of Inkululeko (Freedom), the CPSA's fortnightly newspaper, the pay for a white private with a wife and child was 12s. 3d. per day, for a so-called coloured or Indian 7s., and for an African 2s. 3d. (cited in Simons and Simons 1969: 536).

<sup>37</sup> When some African stretcher bearers were buried in a mass grave along with white soldiers in Sidi Rezegh, Egypt, the South African Army issued official orders demanding that the corpses be unearthed and reburied in separate graves (Frankel 1999: 33).

<sup>38</sup> The first edition was published in January 1942 as a four-page pamphlet. All three thousand copies printed were sold out within one week.

circulation. In addition to news items, Fighting Talk published short stories by new writers and reviews of avant-garde books and theatre.

During the war, a young guard of black nationalists within the ANC - including Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki (a journalist and political organizer from Port Elizabeth), Anton Lembede, a lawyer, and Walter Sisulu<sup>39</sup> - called for the direct challenge of white rule through a programme of non-collaboration and boycotts, and a return to “traditional African values adjusted to the conditions of an industrial society” (Simons and Simons 1969: 546). With Lembede as president, they formed the ANC Youth League in 1943, which challenged the ANC’s old guard, led by Dr. Alfred Bitini Xuma,<sup>40</sup> a medical doctor. In her biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, Elinor Sisulu mentions that Albertina was the only woman present amongst

two hundred candidates at the inaugural conference of the ANC Youth League in April 1944 (2003: 102). Attending the gathering as the companion of Walter Sisulu, Albertina Thethiwe served only “in a supportive capacity, and did not consider becoming a member herself, as the Youth League was very much a young men’s organization.” Ellen Kuzwayo was one of the few

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<sup>39</sup> Unlike the others, Sisulu was self-educated. He worked at various menial jobs in mines, in factories and even as a domestic worker, while at the same time gleaning a comprehensive knowledge of history and politics from conversations with a variety of acquaintances, from his own extensive reading, and from night schools such as those run in Johannesburg in 1933 by the Bantu Men’s Social Centre in Eloff Street Extension and the Swedish Mission School (Sisulu 2003: 68).

<sup>40</sup> Xuma had been elected President-General of the ANC in 1940. “[C]ritical of white liberal paternalism” (Sisulu 2003: 92), Xuma initially supported the formation of the Youth League in order to revitalize the ANC, which, during the 1930s and early 1940s, was perceived by many as “a black gentlemen’s club for middle-class professionals and traditional chieftains” (Frankel 1999: 33). After the drafting of the Youth League’s manifesto and constitution, however, Xuma accused Sisulu and other leaders of usurping the authority of the ANC’s National Executive (Sisulu 2003: 100). For the next five years, the ANC was divided on the one hand between Xuma’s cautious, and at times

women to join the Youth League during the 1940s (Kuzwayo 1985: 139; Sisulu 2003: 102). In her autobiography Call Me Woman (1985), Kuzwayo writes: “I wish I could explain why there seemed to be no outstanding women in the ranks of the ANC movement at that time” (139). One reason for the apparent lack of qualified women leaders was an underlying paternalism within the organization. Prior to 1943, women could not hold full membership in the ANC (Sisulu 2003: 97). Initially the ANC Women’s League, formed under Dr. Xuma’s wife, Madie Hall, an African-American social worker and educator, “did not have a separate programme” from the ANC itself (125). Women’s League Members focused their energies on catering and fundraising. Relegated to the margins through their location in the realm of the domestic, women were discriminated against both institutionally and ideologically. As Driver (1988) suggests, black women leaders themselves sometimes endorsed black patriarchal views even as they strove to break free from them.

During the war years, Africanists like Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu generally perceived communism with skepticism (Callinicos 2000: 94; Frankel 1999: 37): like feminism, it was yet another imported European ideology, redundant on African soil, on which they considered race to be more important than class, and both to be more significant than gender. At the same time, Africanists frowned upon tribalism (a belief that black people were divided along lines of ethnicity and language) as a false philosophy which weakened black unity. Perceiving communism as a threat to black self-determination, both Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu

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conciliatory approach towards the regime, and the Youth League’s militancy and increasing cooperation with the communists, on the other (Simons and Simons 1969: 546).

admit to participating in attacks on communist meetings. They would rush the stage, tear down posters, heckle the speaker and seize the microphone. However, as the years progressed, the attitude of many ANC leaders towards the communists softened, eventually leading to close co-operation in some cases.<sup>41</sup> The CPSA's adult education classes and social welfare projects, operative during the late 1920s and revived during the early 1940s, attracted the black proletariat. While the ideology of Marxism did not appeal to all ANC leaders, many grew to respect the communists for their commitment to the black working classes, for their organized strategy, and, above all, for the material resources they were able to provide, such as cars, telephones, newspapers and printing presses.

Following her election to the Johannesburg District of the Party in 1946, Ruth First developed a close working relationship with Nelson Mandela and Moses Kotane, then General Secretary of the CPSA, and with communist leader Ismail Meer, with whom she became involved romantically. Walter Sisulu, who would secretly join the Communist Party during the 1950s (Frankel 1999: 21), was impressed by the oratory of "formidable" communist women such as Josie Mpama and Ruth First (Sisulu 2003: 135). During a meeting at the Sisulu house circa 1945, Mpama successfully challenged the Youth Leaguers about their negative attitude towards the CPSA, while nearly a decade later, Ruth First won the favour of the audience by recounting the

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<sup>41</sup> Walter Sisulu became convinced of socialist logic and directly supported the communists from the 1950s onwards. Nelson Mandela, who always conceived of the ANC as the primary revolutionary organization, sought to reconcile African nationalist and communist interests for reasons of pragmatism rather than ideology, while Oliver Tambo tolerated interactions with the CPSA and the SACP, but personally felt that communism would become increasingly redundant as the struggle progressed (Sampson 1999: 272). Govan Mbeki, who became convinced of the validity of Marxist theory during the early 1950s, clashed bitterly with Nelson Mandela and others on Robben Island in 1977 over whether the Communist Party should be regarded as a dominant force in the struggle (290-293).

glories of the Eastern Bloc<sup>42</sup> at the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), a Youth League stronghold.<sup>43</sup> Between May and August 1954, Ruth First visited East Germany, Russia and China as an official delegate at the World Peace Council Conference, a meeting of more than five hundred international participants held in East Berlin. Twenty-nine years old at the time, Ruth First was already a veteran of left-wing politics.

### *Ruth First's education and career beginnings*

At the age of fourteen, Ruth First joined the Junior Left Book Club, a CPSA-affiliated youth group which encouraged discussions about international issues. After obtaining her primary education at the Jewish Government School in Doornfontein, she matriculated from Jeppe Girls' High School in 1941 and enrolled at Wits for a Bachelor of Arts degree. Even at university, political life was an integral part of social life, filled with "student societies, debates, mock trials, general meetings, and the hundred and one issues of war-time and post-war Johannesburg that returning ex-service students make so alive" (First 1965: 116). Ruth First and Meer helped to found the Federation of Progressive Students and she became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL). After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Studies in 1946, Ruth First traveled to London with Harold Wolpe, another Jewish member of the YCL, as official delegates of the inaugural conference of the World Federation of Democratic Youth

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<sup>42</sup> The Eastern Bloc comprised the USSR and a group of socialist states which had emerged in Eastern Europe and China by 1949. Although capitalist Western states perceived these countries as a monolithic opposition force, ideological tensions existed amongst Eastern Bloc members, most particularly between the USSR and China (Sandle 1999: 277).

<sup>43</sup> Ruth First's initial attempts in the mid-1940s to convince the members of the BMSC about the merits of Marxism were "firmly rebuffed," however (Callinicos 2000: 94).

(WFDY), a communist-affiliated organization. Ruth First and Wolpe then flew to Czechoslovakia, where they attended a conference of the International Union of Students, and later toured France, Italy, Hungary and Yugoslavia, meeting with partisan leaders of the Popular Front, a mass revolutionary movement.

On her return to South Africa, Ruth First started a job as a social worker for the Social Welfare Department of the Johannesburg City Council. Work which failed to address the true needs of the impoverished black majority (and her own for intellectual challenge and excitement), it either “bored or disgusted” her (1965: 117). The African miners’ strike of 1946 forced her to make a decision, at the age of twenty-one, that would launch her career of political journalism: furious at the way the strike “was dealt with as though it was a red insurrection and not a claim by poverty-stricken migrant workers for a minimum wage,” she submitted her resignation and began to print strike leaflets in lodging rooms she shared with a girl-friend. Once the strike was over, Ruth First began to work as a writer on the Guardian, a weekly newspaper with a communist orientation. In June 1947, Ruth First was appointed Johannesburg editor for the Guardian, a position which she held until its forced closure in March 1963.<sup>44</sup> Between 1950 and 1963, the Guardian changed its name six times, usually as the result of bannings. In May 1952, it became the Clarion, and

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<sup>44</sup> The Guardian was founded in Cape Town in February 1937 by members of the Left Book Club, who established the newspaper in order to articulate the fight for workers’ rights. Most of the editorial and administrative staff worked on a volunteer basis, although branch editors were paid. The Guardian opened its Johannesburg office in August 1941.

shortly afterwards People's World<sup>45</sup> and then Advance. When Advance was banned in October 1954, the publishers brought it out as New Age, which continued until it was proscribed in November 1962. The final incarnation of the Guardian was Spark.

Ruth First's writing was consistently aimed at exposing the injustices of apartheid. Her prolific work includes numerous articles, amongst them a report in the Guardian (5 October 1950) titled 'Africans Turned off the Land,' about the detrimental effects of the government's policies of land appropriation, 'Pretoria Conquered by the Women!,' an account in New Age (3 November, 1955) of the multi-racial<sup>46</sup> Women's March to the Union buildings, and an exposé of the collusion between Bethal potato farmers and police in a special New Age pamphlet called Exposure! The Farm Labour Scandal (July 1959). By 1962, she was publishing thinly veiled statements in support of a limited armed struggle: "there comes a time when talk is not enough," Ruth First wrote in an editorial of Fighting Talk (June 1962: 4). Emphasizing the necessity of "deeds" and "action," she concludes: "In the end of ends, it is not the government of this country which will crush the people; but the people who will crush the government. Whatever little we can contribute to that end, we will do, willingly." During the late 1940s and the 1950s, however, the CPSA and its allies were still dedicated to instigating transformation through non-violent resistance.

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<sup>45</sup> This name change was made for technical reasons when staff discovered that a publication called the Clarion already existed.

### *Civil disobedience*

Disillusioned at the lack of tangible change following the end of the Second World War, the ANC Youth League departed from the ANC's policy of operating strictly within the law by proposing a Programme of Action, which stipulated a campaign of mass mobilization through methods of civil disobedience. Although Xuma and his followers initially resisted the Programme of Action, the succession of Malan's conservative *Herenigde Nasionale Party* (HNP) to power in 1948 convinced them to adopt it unanimously. In 1949, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo were drafted onto the ANC's National Executive Committee. Ironically, the rise of the HNP (soon known simply as the NP) to power solidified the inclusion of Jews in the white ruling class. Shain notes that after the Second World War "South Africa experienced a rapid decline in antisemitism," which he attributes to the growth of a new Afrikaner middle-class who appreciated the entrepreneurial spirit that Jews were seen to embody (1994: 151). Nevertheless, the underpinnings of antisemitic ideologies remained pervasive throughout both English and Afrikaans white cultures and frequently surfaced in the discourse of prison warders during the early 1960s.

The Suppression of Communism Act (1950) was merely one of a series of discriminatory laws passed by the Nationalists after their succession to power.<sup>47</sup> The Act made provision for

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<sup>46</sup> In this dissertation, I use the term 'multi-racial' in the same way activists used it during the struggle period: to signify the striving for the equal integration and participation of all ethnic groups in governmental and social processes. At the same time, I acknowledge that the goal itself is seldom (if ever) achieved.

<sup>47</sup> Other laws included the Unemployment Insurance Amendment Act of 1949, which deprived the majority of African workers of benefits offered to white workers; the Railways and Harbours Amendment Act of 1949, which enforced racial segregation on public transport; the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, which prohibited matrimonial unions across the colour bar; the Population Registration Act of 1950, which divided the population

imprisonment for up to ten years for holding membership in the CPSA, for the restriction of members' movements, and for their immediate resignation from place of work at the discretion of the Governor-General. The Central Committee of the CPSA decided to disband itself voluntarily before the Act was ratified on 22 June 1950 (Roux 1964: 380; Simons and Simons 1969: 608). Sam Kahn, a Jewish lawyer from Cape Town who was elected in 1947 as the Native Representative for Cape Eastern and the only communist MP at the time, read a declaration of dissolution in the House of Assembly. In possession of CPSA membership lists seized during the 1946 miners' strike, the government liquidator officially listed Ruth, Tilly and Julius First, along with Joe Slovo, as declared communists.<sup>48</sup> Kahn was expelled from his seat in the House of Assembly in May 1952 due to his political affiliations.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in the general election for Native Representatives that year, Ray Alexander won the seat for Cape Western by an overwhelming majority, but was barred from entering the Houses of Parliament by detectives (Roux 1964: 383; Simons and Simons 1969: 594).

Despite some internal opposition within the ANC, changed political circumstances resulted in even closer collaboration between the two resistance movements. On 26 June 1950 (later called Freedom Day), leaders of the newly disbanded CPSA, the SAIC and the African Political Organization (APO), a predominantly so-called coloured group based in the western Cape,

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into separate groups according to pigmentation and ancestry; and the Group Areas Act of 1950, which legislated the segregation of residential and business areas according to official racial group (Simons and Simons 1969: 604).

<sup>48</sup> To be 'listed' in the context of apartheid South Africa meant that one was under suspicion of being a subversive agent and that one's activities were subject to surveillance by police.

<sup>49</sup> Kahn appears to have been somewhat of a maverick, a quality not uncommon in South African communists of this era. When the government withheld his passport, Kahn decided to sail overseas anyway and gained entry to Britain with his family in February 1954 on identity documents which he had manufactured himself (Roux 1964: 379). On Kahn's return to South Africa, the government passed the Departure from the Union Regulation Act of 1955, which made leaving the country without a passport a punishable crime.

joined the ANC in the calling of a general strike. Exactly two years later, the ANC and the SAIC launched the Defiance Campaign of passive resistance against unjust laws, with full support of the ex-CPSA leadership.<sup>50</sup> One outcome of multi-racial interaction was the establishment of the Congress of Democrats (COD), dedicated to working for equal rights for all South Africans, regardless of race (Benson 1966: 160). Mary Benson explains that the whites-only membership policy of the COD was the result of resistance by the majority of ANC leaders to the formation of “a united, non-racial organization,” believing instead “that at this stage each race could better work among its own community” (1966: 106). In March 1955, the ANC, together with the COD, the SAIC, the multi-racial SA Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the recently formed SA Coloured People’s Organization (SACPO) combined forces as the Congress Alliance, a national association of anti-apartheid groups. While ANC leaders like Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo encouraged forming coalitions with members of all races, others, like Robert Sobukwe, held different views. Disillusioned by what he perceived to be the infiltration of communists into the ANC, Sobukwe broke away from the Movement to form the Pan African Congress (PAC) in 1959. A photograph of a young, sophisticated Sobukwe clenching his fist in playful conversation hints at his fiercely independent vision for black equality in Jurgen Schadeberg’s visual biography The Fifties People of South Africa (1987: 226).

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<sup>50</sup> During the following six months, an estimated 8 000 volunteers (the vast majority black) in cities and towns throughout the country were arrested and detained for periods averaging from one to three weeks for peaceful protest, which included using entrances or railway carriages marked whites-only and breaking curfews (Sampson 1999: 69). Many black men refused to carry passes.

In Mandela: The Authorised Biography (1999), journalist and historian Anthony Sampson<sup>51</sup> records that some liberal MPs, including J.D. Rheinallt Jones (a segregationist) and William Ballinger (a trade unionist), as well as members of the Institute of Race Relations and representatives of the UP, asked the ANC to abandon the Defiance Campaign (70).<sup>52</sup> Nelson Mandela and other leaders refused, disillusioned with what they considered to be the paternalism and hypocrisy of white liberals, members of the middle and upper classes who were in favour of granting blacks limited rights, but usually not at the expense of their own privileged economic and social positions.<sup>53</sup> When the government passed the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Laws Amendment Act in December 1952, which provided for severe penalties for civil disobedience, such as flogging and three year's imprisonment, ANC leaders chose to halt the campaign. Nevertheless, the ANC counted the Defiance Campaign as a national success, both in terms of membership growth and the positive psychological influence it cast on the black population (Sampson 1999: 74). Amongst white radicals, however, the campaign's termination generally had a dispiriting effect (Pinnock 1993: 49).

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<sup>51</sup> A contemporary of future Drum magazine publisher Jim Bailey at Oxford University, Sampson became editor of Drum in 1951. He later returned to England, where he continued to work as a journalist and wrote books on contemporary history.

<sup>52</sup> When UP leaders asked the ANC to abandon resisting the government and to support them in the upcoming whites-only elections, ANC members requested in turn that the UP undertake a repeal of the pass laws should they win. When the UP refused, negotiations foundered. Not all liberal institutions were unsupportive, however. To the surprise of Nelson Mandela, the Rand Daily Mail newspaper, considered by most to be the flagship of the white liberal press at the time, gave the campaign what he considered fair coverage and a generous amount of copy space (Sampson 1999: 70).

<sup>53</sup> In his article 'Black Souls in White Skins?' (1970), one of a series published under a regular column titled 'I Write What I Like,' Biko defines white liberals as those who "always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so" (20). Under the pseudonym of Frank Talk, Biko criticizes white liberals for ignoring their ambivalent subject positioning, writing: "It is rather like expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master's son to remove all the conditions leading to the former's enslavement" (20-21).

Shortly after the dissolution of the Defiance Campaign, members of the Springbok Legion started the Torch Commando. In Cape Town and Johannesburg, crowds of up to 20 000 people demonstrated peacefully, bearing aloft flaming torches to draw attention to the erosion of democratic values (Roux 1964: 386).<sup>54</sup> Some went on to support the Liberal Party (formed in 1953 by writer Alan Paton) and its policies of non-violent protest and qualified multi-racial franchise. Jewish liberal Helen Suzman, who would later become one of the longest-standing MPs in the country, had just begun to serve her first term in Parliament under the United Party (UP) banner.<sup>55</sup> In her autobiography, Suzman recalls only three other women in Parliament at that time: Bertha Solomon and Sannie van Niekerk, also of the UP, and Margaret Ballinger, a Native Representative for the Cape. Sharing an office with Solomon, a Jewish women's rights champion, and van Niekerk, whom she describes as "a confirmed right-winger" (1993: 27), Suzman turned to Ballinger as a "role model" (28).<sup>56</sup> During this period, the UP was strongly supported by the majority of Springbok Legion members, but a few ex-servicemen, like Williams, joined the Communist Party reconstituted in secret. The SACP was formed clandestinely in 1953 primarily by the Transvaal Central Committee of the old CPSA, which

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<sup>54</sup> In an interview with Mark Gevisser in 1998, Nelson Mandela spoke about the disillusionment of war veterans as a factor which motivated their participation in anti-apartheid activity: " 'Many of them found it ironic that they should have gone out to fight the greatest racist philosophies in the world, Nazism and fascism, and then [had to] come back to their country and [discover that they] lived in the same conditions' " (21).

<sup>55</sup> Suzman was elected MP for Houghton, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Johannesburg "with quite a large number of Jews on the voters' roll" (Suzman 1993: 20). By 1959, the liberal wing of the UP had become increasingly dissatisfied with the UP's policies, especially those relating to restrictions imposed on the allocation of land to blacks. In August 1959, eleven UP MPs, including Suzman, left the UP in order to form the Progressive Party. They attracted a large amount of funding from mine-magnate Harry Oppenheimer, who had previously served as an UP MP before he left politics to pursue business interests.

<sup>56</sup> Ballinger's habit of presenting excellent speeches which were "crisp, well-prepared, full of relevant facts" was a standard Suzman was soon to set for herself (1993: 28). Ballinger and Walter Stanford, also a Native Representative, were the only Liberal Party MPs at the time.

included both Ruth First and Joe Slovo, as well as older members such as Harmel, Kotane, Dadoo, Marks and Bram Fischer (Pinnock 1993: 50-51).<sup>57</sup>

*The 1950s: communist Camelot, jazz culture and institutionalized segregation*

For the majority of whites, the 1950s were years of political complacency and upward mobility. Although active against the regime, Ruth First and Joe Slovo were swept up in the tide of social buoyancy. Married in 1949, Ruth First and Joe Slovo had three daughters within four years: Shawn (1950), Gillian (1952) and Robyn (1953). Joe Slovo was already a practising advocate, while Ruth First had embarked on a promising journalistic career. In her autobiography Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country (1997),<sup>58</sup> Gillian Slovo refers to the 1950s as “my parents’ Camelot years” (1997: 35). Ruth First and Joe Slovo’s house at 7 Mendelssohn Road, Roosevelt Park in the exclusive north-east of Johannesburg became the ideal setting for what seemed to some to be a radical fairytale. As a contemporary King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, Joe Slovo and Ruth First hosted legendary ‘mixed race’ parties (Joe Slovo 1995: 102; Gillian Slovo 1997: 34-34), attended by artists, singers, sportspeople and revolutionary luminaries from the townships such Nelson and Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and Walter and Albertina Sisulu, as well as daring communists from white suburbia like Hilda and Lionel Bernstein<sup>59</sup> (known to everyone by the nickname ‘Rusty’ due to his shock of red hair), Molly and

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<sup>57</sup> Between 1952 and 1962, six underground conferences took place in the Johannesburg area, attended by delegates from all the major urban centres of South Africa. Two of these conferences were held at the Anglo-Union Furniture Factory, the business premises of Julius First, who endeared himself to the participants by doggedly patrolling the grounds (Joe Slovo 1995: 84).

<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Every Secret Thing.

<sup>59</sup> Hilda Bernstein (née Watts) married Rusty Bernstein in 1941, but continued to use her own surname periodically, an accepted practice amongst South African communists. Hilda Bernstein’s use of her own surname is not as

Bram Fischer,<sup>60</sup> Harold Wolpe, a Jewish attorney, and Albie Sachs. The banning of the CPSA and continued police harassment did not impinge on air of exhilaration surrounding communist Camelot, at least initially: rather, these measures were seen as the desperate death throes of an old regime making way for a new order. Abroad, communism seemed to be successful replacing outdated, corrupt regimes. On 1 October 1954, Molly Fischer and Ruth First attended the fifth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution in the People's Republic of China. In a report about her visit for Fighting Talk of September 1954 titled 'These are Mighty Years,' Ruth First writes exuberantly about the "literally countless" signs of blossoming culture and literacy to be observed everywhere (8).<sup>61</sup>

Though on the surface white communists seemed exhilarated, Hilda Bernstein hints at the schism inherent in the subject position of the white activist in her memoir The World That Was Ours: The Story of the Rivonia Trial<sup>62</sup> (1989): "We had the large house and garden brilliant with

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consistent as Ruth First's, however, and seems to have diminished with the passing of years. During the early years of her marriage, she wrote several articles under her own name. She also campaigned for (and won) a seat on the Johannesburg City Council under the name Watts, perhaps as much for political reasons (Watts has an Anglo-Saxon resonance, unlike Bernstein) as an assertion of her independent identity. In all of her non-fiction books, published between 1967 and 2002, however, she refers to herself as Hilda Bernstein. In the dissertation, I have followed Hilda Bernstein's precedent of using her married name.

<sup>60</sup> Married in 1936, both Molly and Bram Fischer, an advocate, came from Afrikaner aristocracy. Molly (née Susanna Johanna Krige) was cousin to the wife of Prime Minister Smuts, while Bram Fischer's father had been Judge-President of the Free State, and his grandfather a former Prime Minister. Both Fischers were life-long Party stalwarts. In 1944, Molly Fischer became one of the Communist Party's candidates for the Johannesburg City Council. Older than Ruth First, she was arrested for the first time in 1960 at the age of fifty-two.

The Fischer home at 12 Beaumont Street, Oaklands, one of the leafy suburbs of northern Johannesburg, was seen by many to evince a Camelot-like atmosphere similar to the First and Slovo abode: according to Frankel, their Sunday afternoon gatherings, characterized by a constant flow of multi-racial guests who gathered around their swimming pool, were legendary (1999: 85).

<sup>61</sup> In the same article, Ruth First recounts a visit to an ideal prison, at which the wide open gate led "into the courtyard" filled with "delicate pink lotus blossoms." A tour of the prison revealed model prisoners industriously engaged in manufacturing high-quality calico and printing school textbooks. "I didn't see a single armed guard, no one rattled any large keys [ . . . ] I had to pinch myself several times to convince myself I was not dreaming," she records euphorically (1954c: 10).

<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as The World That Was Ours.

flowers and fruits, but were outcasts from most of white society whose principles we rejected completely, even though we lived and moved among them. Could there have been another way? We were not permitted by law to live in the location” (19). Though shunned by neighbours in white suburbia, Hilda Bernstein expresses no desire to live in a landscape where “the streets are unnamed, only the houses are numbered” (18). Her recourse to the law in order to explain the sumptuousness of her living conditions may be read as symptomatic of what Shawn Slovo describes as “this terrible guilt” (Bernstein 1994: 457). Jacklyn Cock indicates that “guilt” on the part of the employer and “fear” on the part of the domestic worker largely defines their relationship (1980: 19), an observation which rings true in the context of the First household. Recounting the dismissal without notice of one of Ruth First’s domestic workers by Tilly First while her mother was in solitary confinement, Gillian Slovo writes that the “impoverished, and now unemployed, black woman” ironically sought “protection” from the police in order to collect her belongings from their home (1997: 79).

Schisms and ideological inconsistencies also surfaced frequently within the CPSA itself. During the 1930s, internal dissent threatened to disintegrate the Party and resulted in the loss of much of its hard-won black following (Lodge 1993: xi). Replicating the strategy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which periodically ‘cleansed’ the organization “of persons it felt to be ‘unsuitable’ ” (Sandle 1999: 257),<sup>63</sup> members whom CPSA party officials suspected of being ideologically deviant were placed under surveillance and risked expulsion. Simons and Simons write that many able and loyal leaders were ousted in 1931 due to the ideological fanaticism of

hard-line *apparatchiki*, or unbending adherents of the Party apparatus, like Douglas Wolton, his wife Molly (née Selikowitz), and Lazar Bach.<sup>64</sup> Both Molly Wolton and Bach were Jewish Lithuanian immigrants. Roux, who joined the CPSA in 1923 as a biology student in Johannesburg (and later became Professor of Botany at Wits), left the Party in 1936 due to disillusionment. Jewish Parliamentarian Hyman Basner, an anti-segregation activist and a member of the CPSA from 1933 to 1939, resigned for similar reasons (Lodge 1993: xi). In the opinion of Jewish activist Rowley Arenstein, “from 1939 to 1950” the Party leadership again assumed a “democratic outlook” (Pinnock 1993: 51), but subsequently reverted to becoming somewhat guarded and dictatorial:

The leadership tells you basically what to do, and if you don't listen to the leadership you're an enemy of the people. It didn't come out straight away, but that was the tendency ... People who were sort of lesser people in the Party were quite scared of people like Ruth [First] and others (qtd. in Pinnock 1993: 52, ellipses in original).

The mood of internal suspicion which re-emerged in the 1950s was one of the inevitable results of the culture of concealment demanded by changed political circumstances. While Arenstein perceived Ruth First as frequently unapproachable, an assessment he shared with writer and sociologist AnnMarie Wolpe and others (Wolpe 1994: 65), behind closed doors Ruth First would vigorously question Party ideology and its practical application in the South African context (Gillian Slovo 1997: 120). Her journalism, however, was yet to reflect this. When show trials instigated by Soviet secret police mushroomed throughout Eastern Europe to denounce Popular Front Marshal Josip Broz Tito, who had strongly resisted Stalin's interference in Yugoslavia in

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<sup>63</sup> The most severe purges in the USSR occurred between 1929 and 1933.

June 1948, articles in The Guardian mirrored official perceptions. It was only after the shocking public revelations of the Stalinist atrocities at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in 1956 that New Age began to publish critical reports.<sup>65</sup>

As opposed to the cushioned ease of white suburbia, the culture of jazz, with its emphasis on nightlife, snappy diction and a devil-may-care attitude, pervaded the black townships of the 1950s. In 1951, a young British entrepreneur called Jim Bailey launched Drum, a magazine targeted at young urban blacks.<sup>66</sup> Driver suggests that at least two contradictory ideologies were constructed and reproduced in Drum of the 1950s: the belief in “a modern form of romantic love,” which promoted domesticity within the nuclear family (1996a: 233), and the philosophy of jazz, nominally a type of music and imaginistically a type of freedom which hinted at (but did not always result in) a re-negotiation of stereotypes of race and gender for both men and women.

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<sup>64</sup> Those expelled include veteran Party members Bill Andrews, Alex la Guma, Fanny Klenerman, Solly Sachs and Sam Malkinson, a leader who had been extremely successful in rallying recruits in the townships of Bloemfontein.

<sup>65</sup> At the TRC Amnesty Hearing concerning the applications of Williamson and Raven, Gillian Slovo gave evidence on 28 September 1998 that once in exile, Ruth First “was far too critical of the Communist Party to ever want to be a member [of the Central Committee] or for them to want her to be. “[V]ery critical of the Soviet Union and the way it was organized,” Ruth First’s outspokenness was not well received by other members. “I remember my father once telling me that if it wasn’t for his position in the South African Communist Party, my mother might have been expelled because she spoke out against things she didn’t like in a way that was not generally accepted,” Gillian Slovo revealed.

<sup>66</sup> In its first year, Drum was aimed at the rural black market, but then changed its focus to the more lucrative urban population. In 1955, Bailey started a Sunday newspaper called the Golden City Post. Both of Bailey’s publications were “guardedly sympathetic to ANC politics” (Choonoo 1997: 253). During the 1950s, Drum and the Golden City Post filled a gap in the market between the captive commercial black press and radical newspapers such as the Guardian and its various incarnations. Les Switzer observes that in terms of readership, “the Guardian was unquestionably the most successful newspaper in the history of the alternative press before the 1980s” (1997: 281). In 1958, the circulation of New Age was about 30 000, with a readership of not less than 100 000. Inkundla ya Bantu (People’s Forum), a periodical dedicated solely to furthering the aims of the ANC, was published in isiXhosa and isiZulu between April 1938 and November 1951, but its circulation figure of 7000 at its height (October 1946) was a fraction of the Guardian’s. Inkundla ya Bantu had few rivals except for “a few vocal newsletters that represented Africanist perspectives within Congress during the 1950s,” which included the Voice of Africa, the

Jazz culture offered an escape from the humdrum routine of the domestic realm. In Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography,<sup>67</sup> Mashinini admits that she was attracted to her first husband, Roger, “because he was handsome and he used to dress well” (1989: 10). They married in 1947, but after five years of sharing the burden of full-time work outside the home, while simultaneously fulfilling the traditional feminine role of cooking, cleaning and washing alone, Mashinini writes of her deep “disappointment” in her marriage (11). Years after leaving Roger and becoming a prominent trade union leader,<sup>68</sup> Mashinini records her disillusionment with jazz culture. Perceiving it to be the preserve of men, Mashinini writes that any so-called freedoms were purchased at the cost of financial accountability and domestic responsibility. The oppressions of apartheid, perpetuated in the work situation through the mistreatment of workers, resurface for Mashinini as spousal abuse in the home. Strikes establishes the connection between the two oppressions, suggesting that “our men” overspent on clothes as a way of maintaining their “dignity” in the face of persistent racial discrimination (11).

In the distorted world of apartheid South Africa, out of living conditions so starkly disparate, came professionals of similar status and caliber. Ruth First was a well-known, if controversial, investigative journalist; Nomzamo Winnie Mandela was “the first black medical social worker in the country” (Mandela 1984: 68). Joe Slovo practiced as an advocate, with rooms in the

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Africanist and the African Lodestar, all three of which were produced in Orlando Township, Johannesburg (Switzer and Ukpanah 1997: 243, n1). Govan Mbeki was Inkundla ya Bantu's political editor between 1938 and 1944.

<sup>67</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Strikes.

<sup>68</sup> By the end of 1975, Mashinini had left both her first husband and her job at Henochsberg's clothing company in Johannesburg to revive a union for black shopworkers. In November 1981, she was detained without trial for six months in Pretoria Central Prison and Jeppe Street Police Station as the result of her effective grassroots leadership of black workers.

prestigious Johannesburg Bar; Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo were both attorneys-at-law, a profession inaccessible to most blacks, although racial disparity was marked by the location of their offices “in a shabby building across the street from the Magistrates’ Court” in downtown Johannesburg (Tambo 1965: xii). Ultimately, however, the worlds of black and white activists were inexorably inscribed by apartheid law: if the points of intersection between these worlds were intensely meaningful for an élite political few, then the angles of divergence were far more numerous and significant for the bulk of ordinary South Africans. In the townships on the barren outskirts of white cities, the Mandelas and Tambos were fêted in their communities as heroes of the struggle, while in verdant suburbia, whites treated the perceived traitors in their midst with “a silence harsher than words” (Bernstein 1989: 47). While driving around Orlando township with Nelson Mandela and her treason-trialist husband Paul Joseph, Indian activist Adelaide Joseph recalls that “[e]very road and street we turned into, people were shouting ‘Mandela, Mandela.’ They knew that car and they knew that man. That was in 1960” (qtd in Winnie Mandela 1984: 62). Hilda Bernstein, however, remembers that late at night, the stillness of her house would be broken by the “sudden penetrating ring of the phone” which ushered in the secret voices which “swore and threatened” (40). In her autobiography The Long Way Home (1994), AnnMarie Wolpe discloses that she and Ruth First also received anonymous threats over the telephone. “Ruth once told me that the way she dealt with hate calls was to say to the caller, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t hear what you are saying. Would you mind repeating what you have said? Talk a bit louder,’” Wolpe writes (223). Ruth First makes no reference to hate calls in 117 Days. Although sometimes able to ignore her enemies, Ruth First was extremely sensitive to the opinions of her

comrades. Confessing that if her “friends” believed she had betrayed them while in solitary confinement, this “abandonment” she “would not be able to face” (1965: 130), Ruth First most fears estrangement from this small group of multi-racial activists.

*Voices of protest: the Freedom Charter, FEDSAW and the Black Sash*

Seven years before she was detained, Ruth First assisted Rusty Bernstein, Yusuf Cachalia, Walter Sisulu and others in compiling the Freedom Charter from suggestions received from ordinary people, some written on torn scraps of paper, others transcribed by field interviewers (Frankel 1999: 60). On 25 June 1955, leaders presented the document to the Congress of the People, a multi-racial gathering of three thousand delegates at Kliptown, forty kilometres outside of Johannesburg. In Side By Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph (1986),<sup>69</sup> Joseph records that at least another two thousand spectators gathered outside the enclosure.<sup>70</sup> Although Joseph was present at the two-day event, Ruth First was absent due to a banning order restricting her from attending public meetings (Pinnock 1993: 54-55).<sup>71</sup> Shortly before Joseph stood on the podium to address the crowd, the police arrived with a warrant to investigate a charge of high treason, and proceeded to harass the delegates by searching and photographing them. The conference proceeded nevertheless and unanimously adopted the Freedom Charter.

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<sup>69</sup> The title of Joseph’s autobiography is a partial quotation from the concluding paragraph of the Freedom Charter, which reads: “These freedoms we will fight for, side by side, throughout our lives until we have won our liberty” (Joseph 1986: 246). Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Side By Side.

<sup>70</sup> Jewish activist Ben Turok, who was also present at Kliptown, quotes substantially higher figures than Joseph (and most other historians of the era). According to him, “3 700 delegates, including 320 Indians, 230 coloureds and 112 whites” attended the gathering, while “about 10 000 observers and bystanders” gathered outside (2003: 60).

A year earlier, women leaders of the CPSA, trade unions and the ANC Women's League arranged for the First National Conference on Women at the Trades Hall in Johannesburg. Interpreters of isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho and Afrikaans were employed to accommodate the more than one hundred and fifty women delegates from all over the country (Joseph 1986: 4), who discussed and subsequently adopted a declaration of shared goals known as the Women's Charter "for the purpose of uniting women in common action for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities," in ways that incorporated the struggle for national liberation and strove to work in conjunction with men rather than in isolation from them (FEDSAW 1954: 239). Inspired by both Olive Schreiner's Woman and Labour (1911) and the dedication of Ray Alexander and Hilda Bernstein, Joseph became intimately involved with the multi-racial Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) which was subsequently formed on 17 April 1954 (Joseph 1986: 4). Elected to its National Executive Committee, Joseph writes of her surprise and joy at being able to serve as "a member of a mixed committee headed by a black woman [Josie Mpama]" rather than as "a white woman doing things for black people," as she felt had been the case previously (1986: 5). Ruth First was not directly involved in the women's movement, choosing instead to focus her energies on youth and student activism (Frankel 1999: 42).

Shortly after the formation of FEDSAW, a white women's organization called the Black Sash held a three-day vigil at the Union Buildings to protest against the removal of all so-called

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<sup>71</sup> According to Frankel, Joe Slovo, Bram Fischer and Hilda and Rusty Bernstein, who were also banned, watched the proceedings secretly from a close of trees some metres away (1999: 60).

coloured voters from the common voters' roll. Joining the group of about one hundred women, Joseph recalls spending "two very cold June nights sleeping on mattresses on the grass" (1986: 9). Although unsuccessful, the Black Sash's protest inspired members of FEDSAW to organize their own demonstration on 27 October 1955.<sup>72</sup> Nearly two thousand women from all over the Transvaal caught trains to the Union buildings, each carrying her own letter of protest against passes, Bantu Education and poverty. Written by Joseph, the letter was copied through the night by the young men of the Indian Youth Congress (11-12).<sup>73</sup> Four women leaders, each representing a major ethnic community, carried the piles of protests to the closed doors of the ministers' offices: "Lilian Ngoyi, the African, Rahima Moosa, the Indian, Sophie Williams, the coloured and I, the white," records Joseph, starkly enunciating the extraordinary coming together of women usually divided by law, history and subject position (12). Joseph soon developed a lifelong friendship with Ngoyi, who was a garment worker and a fiery political orator, despite frictions over race that sometimes surfaced between them.<sup>74</sup>

A year later, on 9 August 1956, twenty thousand (predominantly black) women gathered below the terraced gardens of the Union Buildings, calmly ascending the steps leading to the

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<sup>72</sup> In *Side by Side*, Joseph juxtaposes the exclusion of black women from the Black Sash protest against FEDSAW's more inclusive approach by recalling the words of ANC Women's League veteran Margaret Gazo at the first FEDSAW Congress of Mothers held in August 1955: "[T]he white women did not invite us to join their protest,' she said, 'but we must go to the Union Buildings ourselves to protest against the laws which oppress us and we shall invite the white women to join us' " (10). Women of the Black Sash and the Liberal Party were duly invited, but only a few attended. Nevertheless, Joseph acknowledges the constructive role of liberal women who did not identify with the radical struggle for freedom, yet were still willing to contribute in other ways (16).

<sup>73</sup> These men also catered for the women at several FEDSAW conferences so that domestic chores would not prevent woman from participating.

amphitheatre. Occupying a space usually reserved for dramas extolling the virtues of Western patriarchy, the women enacted rather than spoke their resistance, silently raising their clenched fists in the Congress salute. After thirty minutes of quiet, they sang the protest song '*Nkosi Sikelele Afrika*' ("God, Give Strength to Africa"), which would become the South African national anthem after 1994 (2). More militant voices followed, foretelling of violent consequences if they were not heard: " '*Wathint' a bafazi, wa unthint' imbolodo uzo kufa*' ('You have struck a rock, you have tampered with the women, you shall be destroyed!')," they warned Prime Minister Hans Strijdom (2). Joseph reports that queues of tired African men paid an unusual tribute to the returning women in "their green blouses and skirts" by allowing them to board homebound buses first (19).

### *The Treason Trial*

In December 1956, Ruth First, Joe Slovo, Joseph, Ngoyi, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and one hundred and fifty other Congress Alliance members were arrested and charged with conspiring to overthrow the government as part of a communist plot. Twenty women in total were detained (Magubane and Lazar 1993: 41), six of them white (Joseph 1986: 56).<sup>75</sup> Suspects were confined to the Johannesburg Central Prison, colloquially called "the Fort" because it

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<sup>74</sup> Joseph reports that when she and Ngoyi were taken to separate sections of Pretoria Central Prison after they were both arrested in March 1960, "Lillian burst out bitterly, 'You are better off with your pink skin!'," a remark which was to haunt Joseph for the rest of her life (1985: 84).

<sup>75</sup> The majority of female trialists were black activists and members of both the ANC and FEDSAW. Amongst them were Lilian Ngoyi and Bertha Mashaba from the Transvaal, Frances Baard from Cape Town, and Dorothy Nyembe from Natal, as well as Annie Silinga and Christina Jasson (Magubane and Lazar 1993: 54-55). Four out of the six white women trialists, namely Ruth First, Sonia Bunting (née Isaacman), Jackie Arenstein and Yetta Barenblatt, were Jewish. (The other two white women trialists were Joseph and Dorothy Shanley). Of the entire group of

served as a fortress during the South African War (Benson 1966: 189, 259). Situated opposite the Florence Nightingale clinic in Hillbrow and a short drive southwards from Marshall Square Police Station,<sup>76</sup> a communal cell was home to Ruth First and the five other white women suspects for more than two weeks before they were charged. As in all South African prisons, ‘non-whites’ were separated from whites, and men from women. In *Side by Side*, Joseph recalls the “large” and “light” communal cell as being “fairly comfortably” appointed, furnished with beds and “a couple of chairs, even a cupboard,” in stark contrast to the facilities provided for African women (1986: 55). Chancing upon “our black sisters” on a rare occasion when they were left unattended, Joseph describes them “sitting on the stone floor in dark iron sheds,” with “only mats to sleep on and no other furniture.”

Juxtaposed against the prosecution’s charge of “creating hostility between the black and white races of South Africa,” Joe Slovo evokes a picture of the accused sitting “shoulder to shoulder in alphabetical order” in the military drill hall in Johannesburg, a perfect mirror for him of the multi-racial aspirations of the Congress Alliance (1995: 94). While Joe Slovo’s text constructs inter-racial association as natural and effortless, other white activists like Rusty Bernstein felt that the pressure of the trial was needed in order to facilitate interactions.<sup>77</sup> Dianne Stewart writes that Ngoyi also admitted to being uncomfortable around whites when she initially became

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trialists, one hundred and five were African, twenty-three were white, twenty-one were Indian and seven were so-called coloured (Ministry of Education 2004: 174).

<sup>76</sup> Ruth First was detained here initially before being moved to the Fort.

<sup>77</sup> In an interview with Joshua Lazerson in 1987, Rusty Bernstein reflects that before the Treason Trial, blacks and whites “did socialize but we were rather terribly nervous of each other because we were all conscious of the fact that we were doing something odd” (Lazerson 1994: 190).

involved with the Congress Movement in the early 1950s, but later came to embrace the idea of “a multi-racial society where we can live in peace” as a projection of a possible future (1996: 24).

On 30 January 1958, sixty-four defendants were released and the remaining ninety-two accused, including Joe Slovo and Ruth First, were charged with high treason. On 13 October of the same year, the court acquitted the defendants, but later re-indicted thirty of the accused. The trial, now held in the Old Synagogue (a deconsecrated place of worship) in Pretoria, dragged on for another two and a half years. Joseph and Ngoyi, respectively National Secretary and National President of FEDSAW, were the only remaining women defendants (Winnie Mandela 1985: 63), while Jewish identical twins Joseph and Leon Levy were the only remaining whites on trial (Joe Slovo 1995: 139). On 29 March 1961, Judges Franz Rumpff, Simon Bekker and Alexander Kennedy declared all the accused not guilty of conspiracy to overthrow the government by violent means and ordered their immediate release. Although declared innocent, the trial adversely affected the health, family lives and financial situations of the defendants. Many were jobless and had poor prospects of securing future employment (Joseph 1985: 101).

#### *The 1960s: Sharpeville, bannings, sabotage and Rivonia*

On 21 March 1960, over 10 000 black demonstrators surrounded Sharpeville Police Station outside the conservative Transvaal town of Vereeniging, demanding to be arrested for violating pass laws. Police opened fire indiscriminately, and Sharpeville instantly became an international

symbol of apartheid brutality.<sup>78</sup> The government declared a State of Emergency in an attempt to contain widespread riots and banned the ANC and the PAC on 9 April. Many activists went into hiding, including Nelson Mandela and Ruth First, who fled to Swaziland with her children disguised in a red wig and sunglasses. In his recent memoir Nothing but the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics (2003), Jewish communist Ben Turok writes that Ruth First visited him during this period at the home of Ralph Sepal in Observatory, Johannesburg (105). Together with SACP leaders Kotane and Harmel, Turok encouraged Ruth First to stay "as a member of the leadership core," but she declined, largely because, in his opinion, "she had evidently been badly shaken by the arrests and felt the need to be with her children."<sup>79</sup> In 117 Days (120), Ruth First makes no mention of her mental state during this period, merely remarking that unknown to the police, she spent the second half of the Emergency in hiding in Johannesburg (and did not return to Swaziland, as Turok suggests). In Every Secret Thing, Gillian Slovo reveals that Ruth First stayed with a white professional couple called the Turgels under the pseudonym of Ruth Gordon (1997: 190). Initially, Donald Turgel could not identify the "strange dark-haired woman" he found chatting with his wife in the kitchen, but later came to know her more personally.

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<sup>78</sup> Police killed sixty-nine and wounded one hundred and seventy-nine unarmed protestors (Roux 1964: 406). According to Kasrils, "[m]any had been shot in the back as they fled" (1993: 22).

<sup>79</sup> Turok's wife, Mary Butcher, also assumed a disguise and initially stayed with Rabbi Ben Isaacson in Krugersdorp with her three sons (Turok 2003: 111). Later she resided with friends in Yeoville. Turok and Butcher appear on the cover of Every Secret Thing in a photograph depicting one of Ruth First and Joe Slovo's famous dinner parties. Of his friendship with First and Slovo, Turok observes: "[A]s the trial proceeded and I made Johannesburg my home, I found that Joe enjoyed a certain elitist lifestyle that caused resentment among the lesser mortals in the movement. He and Ruth First moved in a select circle and were somewhat insensitive to the effect this had on their relationship with rank-and-file members. The dinner parties at their well-appointed home were rather exclusive and there came a time when Mary and I declined invitations to their parties" (79).

During and after the State of Emergency was lifted on the 31 August 1960, SACP and ANC leaders debated forming a military wing, especially after the government passed the General Law Amendment Act, No. 39 of 1961, which made provision for a twelve-day detention period without trial. Although she was under a banning order restricting her from leaving the precincts of Johannesburg and from talking to other banned people (Pinnock 1995: 37), Ruth First remained Nelson Mandela's "usual go-between" with the Press (Sampson 1999: 148). By Ruth First's arrangement, Brian Widlake of the British Independent Television News (ITV) network conducted Nelson Mandela's first television interview on 31 May 1961, the day South Africa was declared a republic as the result of a whites-only referendum.<sup>80</sup> Shortly thereafter, Ruth First brought Stanley Uys of the Johannesburg Sunday Times to meet with Nelson Mandela in Hillbrow and, together with Mary Benson, arranged a meeting with Patrick O' Donovan of the British Observer and Robert Oakeshott of the Financial Times in a flat in Yeoville. In June 1961, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) or 'Spear of the Nation' was created in secret, despite reservations from Luthuli, Kotane and the *satyagrahis*. A combined initiative of the ANC and the SACP, MK immediately attracted support and funding from new African states and the Eastern Bloc (77). MK, with Nelson Mandela as commander-in-chief and Joe Slovo as his second-in-command, would function separately from the ANC, which would continue with its policy of peaceful protest. Nelson Mandela went into hiding, pretending at times to be a student, at others a houseboy or a gardener in the employ of white friends in Johannesburg's northern suburbs. From

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<sup>80</sup> Nelson Mandela was filmed near the Zoo Lake at Wits professor Julius Lewin's house. He stood against a brick wall, which he thought "an appropriate symbol" of the impasse the ANC had reached with the government (Sampson 1999: 148). In the interview, Nelson Mandela suggested violence as an alternative to government repression, thereby attracting the criticism of the ANC's Executive, which was still debating the matter.

October 1961, Nelson Mandela stayed at Lilliesleaf farm in Rivonia, outside Johannesburg, which Arthur and Hazel Goldreich leased to provide a secure meeting place for the underground leadership. Later, he toured the country, addressing clandestine meetings.

On 16 December 1961, MK performed its first acts of sabotage, detonating explosions in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Durban. In early 1962, Nelson Mandela escaped over the border of Bechuanaland, then a British protectorate (now Botswana), in order to liaise with other African leaders,<sup>81</sup> but was soon recalled to South Africa by the MK High Command. Assuming the disguise of a chauffeur in a white coat, Nelson Mandela drove communist theatre director Cecil Williams from Bechuanaland to Lilliesleaf in Williams' new flamboyant Austin Westminster on 24 July. Anxious to refute rumours that he had become a PAC member whilst out of the country, Nelson Mandela drove with Williams to Luthuli's home in Groutville, Natal. As they attempted to return to Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela and Williams were stopped by police near Howick on 5 August. Both men were arrested. Nelson Mandela was subsequently convicted of planning a strike and leaving the country illegally. In his autobiography, Joe Slovo refers to Williams as "a close friend," whom Ruth and he "especially admired [for] the way he [Williams] coped with awkward consequences (both in society generally and more especially in our movement) of his life as a homosexual" (128).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Nelson Mandela met with President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and then addressed the Pan-African Freedom Conference in Addis Ababa, which was organized by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie.

<sup>82</sup> In a newspaper article about the script he wrote for a film about Williams' life titled The Man Who Drove with Mandela (1998), Mark Gevisser proposes that Williams unconsciously sought to free himself from the oppression he experienced as a homosexual man in a heterosexual society through his involvement in the liberation movement (Gevisser 1998: 21).

Whilst Nelson Mandela was abroad, Ruth First continued to edit Fighting Talk and the local edition of Spark. She also began work on her first book, South West Africa, an in-depth investigation into the South African government's betrayal of the League of Nations' mandate to facilitate self-rule in the territory. Two more bans served on her in February 1963 (effective 1 April) aimed to end her career in journalism. Together with the other editors of Spark (Brian Bunting, Fred Carneson, Govan Mbeki and Dr M.P. Naicker), Ruth First was prevented from entering any press room or publication house. Writing, interviewing, typing, typesetting, editing and even fundraising were deemed illegal activities (Spark March 28, 1963: 2). In 117 Days, Ruth First writes that she started a librarianship course in "an attempt to train for a new profession" (11). Although the course served primarily as a cover for surreptitious political activity, Ruth First was serious enough about it to feel anxious about missing her exams while in prison, and to consider applying to rewrite them once she was released.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, Ruth First continued to meet illegally with other banned leaders at Rivonia. Frustrated with the lack of effect sabotage seemed to have on government policy, leaders began to formulate Operation Mayibuye, a strategy of country-wide guerilla warfare, from April 1963 onwards (Joe Slovo 1995: 146).

Concealed in a dry-cleaner's van, Security Branch policemen raided Lilliesleaf on 11 July 1963. The discovery of two hundred and fifty incriminating documents at Rivonia, "many relating to

the manufacture of explosives” (Benson 1966: 252), led to widespread arrests. Nelson Mandela was brought from Robben Island to face charges for acts of sabotage and the intent to create violent revolution. Rusty Bernstein, Denis Goldberg, Arthur Goldreich, Bob Hepple, James Kantor, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, Walter Sisulu and Harold Wolpe were Nelson Mandela’s co-accused.<sup>84</sup> Though intimately involved with the activities at Rivonia, Ruth First was not amongst the thirteen defendants. “You’re deep in it,” Swanepoel would accuse her a few months later, “[...] You could have been charged in the Rivonia case. But we didn’t want a woman in that case” (First 1965: 122). Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu used the court as a forum to protest against the oppression of black South Africans. In June 1964, the judge pronounced his verdict: all defendants present, except Rusty Bernstein,<sup>85</sup> were found guilty of high treason and sentenced to life imprisonment. In her Foreword to the 1973 edition of Nelson Mandela’s No Easy Walk to Freedom, Ruth First figures the Rivonia Trial as a marker not only of the end of non-violence and the dawning of “underground resistance” in the liberation movement, but also of increased collusion with the government by the “white settler states” surrounding South Africa, such as Angola, Mozambique and Rhodesia (1989: ix).

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<sup>83</sup> In a series of letters written in early 1964 to Joe Slovo in London, Ruth First initially expresses her concern about writing her exams (Gillian Slovo 1997: 100), but shortly thereafter expresses relief at her decision “ ‘not to swot’ ” (102).

<sup>84</sup> Bob Hepple did not stand trial. He made a statement to the prosecution and then fled the country. James Kantor was released before sentencing occurred. Goldberg and Wolpe escaped from Marshall Square and went into exile.

<sup>85</sup> Bernstein was acquitted, but rearrested on different charges. While out on bail, he and Hilda escaped from South Africa via Lobatsi, which was situated three miles from the South African border in Bechuanaland.

The two-month interlude between the arrests at Rivonia and Ruth First's detention in solitary confinement was a tense, lonely time for her. Joe Slovo had left the country under orders from MK, while most of Ruth First's friends were either in jail, banned, under house arrest (legally confined to the grounds of their own homes within certain hours) or in exile, while "most non-banned people avoided her" (Gillian Slovo 1997: 72). Ruth First attended the Johannesburg film society's weekly screenings alone, until she was befriended by theatre director and playwright Barney Simon, who was fascinated by "the intensity in her face and the starkness of her loneliness," by what he viewed as "Ruth's vulnerability" regarding her inevitable arrest (72).

*Ninety-Days: the shifting letters of the law*

The two stiff men walked up.  
'We are from the police.'  
'Yes, I know.'  
'Come with us, please. Colonel Klindt wants to see you.'  
'Am I under arrest?'  
'Yes.'  
'What law?'  
'Ninety Days,' they said. (First 1965: 11)

On the cover page of the 1988 edition of 117 Days, the numerals '117' form bold verticals in a visual configuration of prison bars. The imposing capitals inscribing "DAYS" are rotated 180 degrees, so that they lie vertically on the page. The font creates a small, barred window<sup>86</sup> above a photograph of Ruth First's face, cupped between her hands. The wording of the title instantly informs the reader of the exact amount of time the author spent behind bars, and the number

weighs heavily. There is no escaping the leaden facts of confinement, laid out in stark geometrics: black font against a white pane. The title itself and its arrangement on the cover convey the intertwining of the prison experience with that of counting time, of “trying to measure the hours, the days and the weeks” (9). In Jail Diary, Sachs recounts that in prison he invented a formula to link meaning to the forward progression of time: “Everything,” he writes, “is divided into significant fractions, for these are the dimensions of my world” (53). Detained less than two months after Ruth First on 1 October 1963, Sachs partitions the day by mealtimes, and the months by periods of ten, then fourteen days, each section of time passed accruing greater and greater significance in his mind.<sup>87</sup> The numbering of days conveys not only the experience of waiting, but also that of survival, of the ultimate triumph of personal will over official repression.

One hundred and seventeen days, like the one hundred and sixty-eight days spent by Sachs in jail, exceeds the ninety days initially quoted by the policeman and the subtitle of 117 Days. Albertina Sisulu was the first woman to be detained under the Ninety-Day clause on 20 June 1963.<sup>88</sup> Ruth First’s detention followed less than two months later. Although frequently cited as the first white woman to be detained without any secure prospect of a trial (Shawn Slovo 1988:

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<sup>86</sup> The barred window of the cover page may be viewed as a graphic replica of the casement in Ruth First’s cell, “high in the wall above the head of the bedstead, triple thick,” which she refers to as “a closing, not an opening” (1965: 9).

<sup>87</sup> In the preface to his memoir, Sachs reveals that he had originally named his manuscript 168 Days, but changed it once he discovered that Ruth First’s forthcoming memoir was similarly titled (7).

<sup>88</sup> Police detained Albertina Sisulu and arrested her seventeen-year-old son Max. Walter Sisulu was in hiding at the time, having jumped bail a year earlier after being sentenced to six years’ imprisonment for incitement to strike. According to Benson, the four younger children in the family had to be left in the care of a fourteen-year-old cousin for several weeks (1966: 246).

ix), Ruth First's position was not in fact unprecedented. As a later American edition of 117 Days indicates, English missionary Hannah Stanton was detained under Emergency regulations in Pretoria Central Prison three years prior to Ruth First, on 30 March 1960 (1965a: 170).<sup>89</sup> Stanton spent only three weeks in solitary confinement, however, while Ruth First spent her entire period in jail alone. Although she had once before been an occupant of the women's cells at Marshall Square Police Station seven years earlier, at the start of the Treason Trial, Ruth First discovers that "the geography of the station was still bewildering" (First 1965: 13). Disorientated by the series of murky, deserted "corridors and courtyards" through which she passes on the way to her dirty cell, Ruth First would soon feel as if she no longer belonged in the outside world. Overcome with a sense of dislocation from her own humanity, she writes of "being closed inside a matchbox" (9).<sup>90</sup>

After nine days of isolation, a wardress<sup>91</sup> summonses Ruth First: " 'They want you' " (50). Repeatedly figured as an object of her male captors' desires, Ruth First draws attention here and elsewhere to the seemingly casual way in which the wardresses replicate the underlying ideology

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<sup>89</sup> Deported from South Africa on 21 May 1960, Stanton published a memoir the following year titled Go Well, Stay Well: South Africa 1956-1960.

<sup>90</sup> From the outside looking in, Marshall Square Police Station was a Victorian-style red-brown double-story building, bordered by Marshall, Sauer, Main and Maclaren Streets in central Johannesburg. The headquarters of the city police for seventy years, Marshall Square was a famous landmark from the time it was built in 1899 to its demolition in 1969. The cells in the basement like the one Ruth First occupied were reserved for those criminals regarded as most dangerous to society. Many were tiny and had no windows. Marshall Square grew increasingly shabby in later years, prompting a move in 1968 to the newly-built glass and steel seven-story skyscraper in Commissioner Street, a kilometre away. Named John Vorster Square after the then Prime Minister amid great pomp and ceremony, it became the site of a continued tradition of torture, interrogation and human rights violations. An underground parking lot was subsequently built beneath the land on which Marshall Square once stood.

<sup>91</sup> Throughout her memoir, Ruth First refers to the female warders as wardresses, a term by which they were officially known when she was detained. In 117 Days, Ruth First writes that "[a]ll the wardresses were 'police

of patriarchal dominance. Entering a small, drab room, Ruth First finds Sergeant Smit and his partner, Warrant Officer Nel, who reads out the conditions of the Ninety-Day law from the

Government Gazette:

*“Any commissioned officer ... may ... without warrant arrest ... any person whom he suspects upon reasonable grounds of having committed or intending or having intended to commit any offence under the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950 (Act No. 44 of 1950), or under the last-mentioned Act as applied by the Unlawful Organizations Act, 1960 (Act No. 34 of 1960), or the offence of sabotage, or who in his opinion is in possession of any information relating to the commission of any such offence or the intention to commit any such offence, and detain such person or cause him to be detained in custody for interrogation in connexion [sic] with the commission of or intention to commit such offence, at any place he may think fit, until such person has in the opinion of the Commissioner of the South African Police replied satisfactorily to all questions at the said interrogation, but no such person shall be so detained for more than ninety days on any particular occasion when he is so arrested.” (51).*

Ruth First’s italics highlight the startlingly repressive and far-reaching powers bestowed upon the South African police. At this point, she predicates her endurance of the prison on the final words of the clause, unaware that the phrase “on any particular occasion” was a loophole that would allow for the immediate re-arrest of the detainee after the ninety day period had expired.

Fearing the detention of her family members as retaliation for her refusal to talk, Ruth First agonizes over whether her mother would be able to withstand “the grime and filth of a cell” (55).

Ruth First’s fears were not unfounded. For three weeks, the police detained her brother Ronnie, who was not politically involved. After almost two months of incarceration, the Security Branch inexplicably moved Ruth First to Pretoria Central Prison for twenty-eight days. Their sudden

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widows’ ” whose “husbands had died or been killed in the service. They had inherited their police station jobs as compensation” (32).

lack of interest in interrogating her, combined with the arrival of formal clothes in a parcel sent by her mother, led Ruth First to believe she would be charged in the Rivonia trial (81). Instead, she was taken back to Marshall Square with her “smart navy-blue frock and matching coat with a red silk lining” for what she conceived of as her final six days of detention. Repeatedly interrogated for ninety days in solitary confinement without revealing any information, Ruth First was discharged on 7 November 1963. Suitcase in hand, she walked onto the pavement outside. As she approached a public telephone booth to call a friend or relative to collect her, Ruth First was promptly re-arrested.

#### *Interrogation, attempted suicide and release*

The institution of the Ninety-Day clause brought about the final stage in the erosion of the colonial legal tradition of *habeas corpus*, “a writ requiring the investigation of the legitimacy of a person’s detention, by which his or her release may be secured” (Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases 1997: 177). Another infamous ruling in connection with detention without trial came to be known as the Sobukwe Clause (1963), which provided for the continued confinement of persons “convicted of certain offences of a political nature” who had already completed their jail sentences, at the discretion of the Minister of Justice (Horrell 1978: 468).<sup>92</sup> In 1965, Parliament passed a law allowing for detention without trial for one hundred and eighty

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Sobukwe was the only person ever detained under this clause. His original three-year jail sentence imposed after Sharpeville was extended annually for six years by the Minister of Justice who had “empowered himself to extend the operation of the clause in individual cases” (Horrell 1978: 469). Sobukwe was released in 1969 and placed under house arrest until his death in 1978.

days, simply ratifying *de jure* what had already been practised *de facto* by the invocation and re-invocation of the Ninety-Day clause.

Shocked, disoriented and despairing after her re-arrest, Ruth First agreed to make a statement. Although she stopped short of revealing any information which could incriminate her comrades, she felt she had betrayed them simply by speaking to the police. “Those were macho times,” writes Gillian Slovo, “those who talked at all were ostracised” (1997: 90). Interrogated intensively for three days, Ruth First attempted suicide a week later by swallowing a phial of sleeping pills inadvertently left in her cell. Inexplicably released twenty-seven days after her re-arrest, Ruth First suggests three plausible reasons for her discharge: the police did not have enough evidence to prosecute her successfully, and therefore released her in the hope of later catching her in an act which would attract a long prison term; they had lost hope that she would reveal anything of value; and that they feared that she was on the verge of another nervous breakdown which may have embarrassed the government both locally and internationally (1965: 144).

In the days following her return home, Ruth First suffered from a severe depression (90 Days 1966). While the narrative of 117 Days ends on the day of Ruth First’s release, foreclosing any discussion of her post-detention experience, Gillian Slovo remarks that her mother’s “collapse went further than she’d anticipated” (1997: 101): still banned from associating with her colleagues, and separated not only from her husband but from her three daughters who were

away with friends during the December summer holidays, Ruth First's sense of isolation continued beyond her confinement in prison. Shawn Slovo vividly depicts Ruth First's traumatized state of mind in her fictionalized autobiographical script, A World Apart (1988), which recreates the events surrounding Ruth First's detention from the perspective of Molly Roth, a pseudonym for the writer as a thirteen-year-old girl. Diana Roth, a journalist and political activist, represents Ruth First. Towards the end of the film, Molly returns home from school to find her mother secluded in a darkened room. Subsequent scenes show a confused Diana shouting out when her daughter enters the room with a breakfast tray. Gradually, however, Diana recovers her health and begins to look "a little stronger, less pale," according to Shawn's stage directions (104).

In the closing paragraphs of 117 Days, Ruth First lists the state's tactics for silencing opposition from political whites, whom she describes as those "errants who would not go into the *laager*"<sup>93</sup> of whites against Africans" (144): interrogation until a "cracking-point" was reached, long terms of imprisonment for those who were "unbreakable," and physical removal through exile. After a struggle with what she termed her "'overdeveloped and oversize conscience'" in a letter to Joe Slovo on 30 December 1963, Ruth First chose the final option (qtd. in Gillian Slovo 1997: 101). Unable to obtain passports (which would allow them to return to the country), Ruth First and her three children left South Africa via a one-way exit permit in March 1964 and joined Joe Slovo in

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<sup>93</sup> In South African history, the Afrikaans word *laager* denotes a closed configuration of ox-wagons in which the Boers would arrange their camps at night for protection during the period of the Great Trek (1836-1838), when they made inroads into the indigenous interior of the country. In a figurative sense, *laager* implies "the intransigent

London. While Ruth First did not remain in South Africa long enough to be re-arrested again, many SACP members who stayed behind were indeed detained repeatedly and prosecuted successfully under the Suppression of Communism Act and other laws.<sup>94</sup> Activists who were not affiliated with the SACP also suffered state harassment. For instance, Baruch Hirson, a Jewish physicist with Trotskyist<sup>95</sup> leanings, was prosecuted under the Sabotage Act in 1964 and imprisoned for nine years. Never a member of any communist organization, Helen Joseph was the first person in South Africa to be placed under house arrest on 13 October 1962. She spent nine consecutive living under these restrictions.<sup>96</sup> When Benson was placed under house arrest in February 1966, she decided to go into exile rather than to contend with what Joseph calls “[l]earning to live a half life” (1986: 133).<sup>97</sup>

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defensiveness of Afrikaners in their dealings with the outside world during the apartheid era” (*Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases* 1997: 223).

<sup>94</sup> For example, Stephanie Kemp, a white SACP member, was detained, tortured, and later convicted in 1965 to two years in prison. Bram Fischer and Jewish photographer Eli Weinberg were charged with eight others in September 1964 for being members of the banned Communist Party. Weinberg was convicted and imprisoned in 1965, while his wife Violet, a declared communist, was placed under house arrest. Fischer, who went into hiding during his trial, was subsequently charged under the Sabotage Act of 1964 and sentenced to life imprisonment in May 1966. The fate of Albie Sachs was similar to that of his comrades who remained in South Africa: re-arrested in 1966, Sachs was subjected to sleep deprivation for forty hours by the same interrogators who had badgered him during his previous prison term in 1963. Held without charge in the prison hospital of the Roeland Street jail for three months, Sachs later fled the country with Kemp, who subsequently married him in London.

<sup>95</sup> As opposed to the Stalinist orientation of most of those in the SACP, the Trotskyist school of socialism with its emphasis on internationalism attracted Hirson. In his autobiography *Revolutions in My Life* (1995), Hirson criticizes the SACP for its accommodation of nationalism, “with its attachment to land and its appeal to clannishness, [it] was the negation of internationalism: the most precious heritage that Jews brought with them” (94-95). On his release, Hirson went into exile in London and worked professionally as a writer and historian.

<sup>96</sup> In *Side by Side*, Joseph specifies the terms of her house arrest order: “No longer could I leave my house after 6.30 p.m. or at any time during the weekend, or leave the magisterial area of Johannesburg, or be in any black area, or factory, or communicate with any banned or listed person. [...] Over and above all these prohibitions, I was compelled to report to the Central Johannesburg Police Station every day between midday and two o’clock” (122).

<sup>97</sup> In fact, Benson’s freedom was already severely compromised. Most of her books had been banned, and she was prohibited from practicing as a writer. “Even keeping a diary was a subversive act,” she notes wryly in her autobiography *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (1989: 209).

By 1973, Ruth First had been in exile for ten years. The Camelot years of the 1950s were merely a memory. The bannings and detentions of the 1960s, together with official and social silences about the history of the liberation struggle, had produced a new kind of grassroots activist, whose resistance to apartheid was based less on political theory and non-violence and more on direct confrontation with and reversals of racial hierarchies. These shifts in the strategy and the mood of resistance between decades are epitomized, for me, by two photographs. The first appears in Women of South Africa: Their Fight for Freedom (1993), a compendium of photographs by veteran photographer of Drum and the Rand Daily Mail newspaper, Peter Magubane,<sup>98</sup> with text by Carol Lazar. It is a picture of Ntsiki Biko (110-111), elegantly clad in widow's weeds as she strides out of a courthouse during the inquest into Steve Biko's death in detention on 12 September 1977. Wrinkling her nose in disgust, Ntsiki Biko's countenance mirrors her conviction that justice will not be served by a state court and communicates the philosophy of blatant confrontation with apartheid structures propagated by the Black Consciousness Movement. Alongside Ntsiki Biko's image, I place a photograph of another woman, just as stylishly dressed, who is leaving another courthouse, the Old Synagogue in Pretoria. Ruth First discreetly gives the thumbs-up sign, her smile confident of victory even though the verdict has not yet been given. In this photograph, which appears on the front page of the final issue of Spark (28 March 1963), and again in Joe Slovo's biography (first insert, n. pag.), Ruth First epitomizes the buoyant mood of white anti-apartheid leaders in the late 1950s. From one perspective, the images of Ntsiki Biko and Ruth First, placed side by side, form a concise visual history of different eras of the struggle; from another, the pictures succinctly communicate the

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<sup>98</sup> Magubane himself was the survivor of a total of five-hundred and eighty-six days in solitary confinement.

juxtaposed subject positioning of white and black women in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Life in exile: geographical, domestic and historical relocations*

Due to their professional vocations and the “astonishing generosity of Ruth’s parents, Julius and Tilly” (Joe Slovo 1995: 110), Ruth First and Joe Slovo had been financially buoyant during their South African years, but in exile faced cultural divides and anxieties over money. The ANC “paid our mortgage, Joe’s food, clothes and travel costs. For the rest Ruth was the family breadwinner,” Gillian Slovo writes (1997: 109). Although she never returned to South Africa, Ruth First continued to oppose the apartheid system through her public speaking, her journalism, her teaching and her personal example. During the thirteen years Ruth First spent in England, “hers was increasingly the domestic role,” with “no servants to help and Tilly too old to take over” (112). Ruth First resented these extra burdens and found assuming both economic and domestic roles hard work. Struggling to find a permanent job because of her revolutionary affiliations, Ruth First was eventually offered a lectureship in sociology at Durham University in 1972.

In 1977, Ruth First took a leave of absence from Durham in order to assume a post as the Director of Research of the Centre of African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in

Maputo. In her testimony to the TRC in Pretoria, Bridget O’Laughlin,<sup>99</sup> injured by the same bomb which killed Ruth First, recalled her colleague’s immense energy and organizational ability:

In those years in Mozambique we didn't have, we began with very little equipment or anything, there was a building and we didn't even have paper. So Ruth both [sic] did the recruitment, she got funding for it, she lectured, she negotiated our right to do research, which was quite a sensitive area within Mozambique at that time, she did the books in the beginning. You know she did everything. (TRC Amnesty Hearings 22 Feb. 1999)

Until her death, Ruth First wrote copiously on third-world socio-political problems by analyzing the links between colonial expansion, commercial commandeering of native economies and inter-racial violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to numerous articles, she published five books: The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d’État (1970), The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid [with Jonathan Steele and Isabel Gurney] (1972), Libya: The Elusive Revolution (1974), Olive Schreiner: A Biography [with Ann Scott] (1980) and Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant (1983). Ruth First also edited Govan Mbeki’s South Africa: The Peasants’ Revolt (1964), and aided in the compilation of other autobiographies of political struggle, including Nelson Mandela’s No Easy Walk to Freedom (1965) and Oginga Odinga’s Not Yet Uhuru (1967). When her memoir was published in 1965, Ruth First was asked to adapt it for a fifty-five minute British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary called 90 Days (1966). Apart from writing the script for 90 Days, Ruth First re-enacted her prison experience on British national television.

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<sup>99</sup> Pallo Jordan, an ANC colleague of Ruth First’s and Aquino da Bragança, who was then Director of the Centre for African Studies, were also present when the parcel bomb exploded. Jordan, da Bragança and O’Laughlin all survived, but sustained injuries.

### *Conclusion*

“When they left me in my own house at last I was convinced that it was not the end, that they would come again,” reads the last sentence of 117 Days (144). For a text committed to recounting present realities, its last words curiously point forward to expectations of a future which includes revisiting the past. Alluding to the ever-present threat of harassment and incarceration, Ruth First leaves the account of her prison experience open-ended, drawing attention to its lingering effect on her perception of the world, and to her tentative place within it. Although she was never to return to South Africa, Ruth First continued to function as a prominent signifier of anti-apartheid struggle, both within the country and abroad. “We Say Goodbye but We’ll Be Back,” the headlines of the final edition of Spark (March 28, 1963: 1) optimistically promise readers, not anticipating Ruth First’s assassination by a bomb concealed in a letter which she would open at Eduardo Mondlane University nineteen years later. Although Spark was not resurrected, its promise “to be yet bigger and brighter” once “we re-appear in a free South Africa” (March 28, 1963: 1) aptly describes the representation of Ruth First’s image in a country which is still grappling to come to terms with its multiple pasts while attempting to meet present demands produced by the political freedom that she so determinedly envisioned.



## *Chapter One*

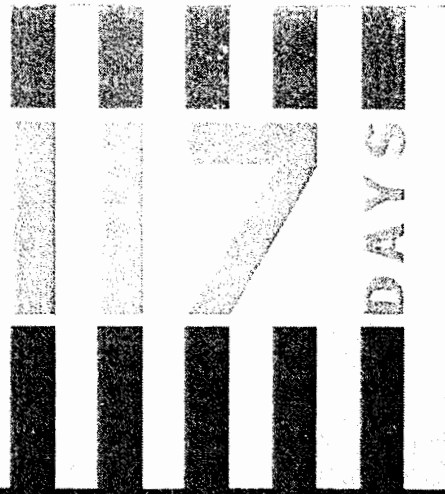
### *Figures and Photographs*



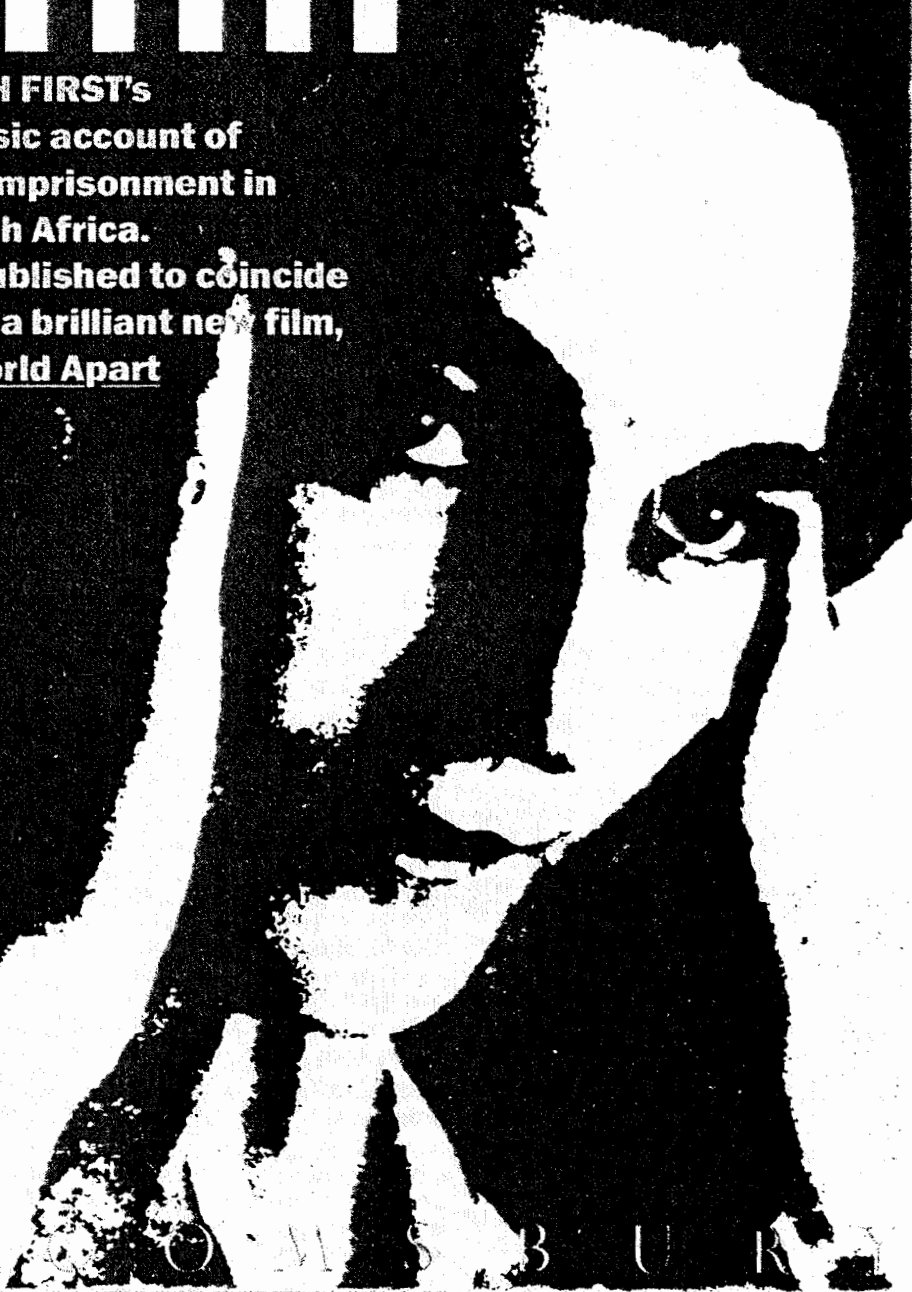
ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE, P.A.C. LEADER



Fig. 1



**RUTH FIRST's**  
**classic account of**  
**her imprisonment in**  
**South Africa.**  
**Republished to coincide**  
**with a brilliant new film,**  
**A World Apart**



365  
450  
968  
FIRS

B L O O M S B U R Y

Fig. 2



Fig. 3



*Left: Slovo and Ruth First leaving court during the Treason Trial.*

Fig. 4

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



GILLIAN SLOVO

EVERY SECRET THING

*my family, my country*

Fig. 5

'A luminous achievement' *Observer*

Vorster Murders "SPARK"

WE SAY

SPARK

New Series, Vol. 1 No. 22

PRICE 5c

March 28, 1963

# GOODBYE BUT WE'LL BE BACK

VORSTER HAS STRANGLERD "SPARK" AND THIS IS THE LAST ISSUE OF "THE PAPER" AS YOU OUR READERS HAVE GOT TO KNOW IT EACH WEEK. Three sets of bannings, two of which take effect on April 1, have made it absolutely impossible for us to continue. A full statement is inside on page 2.

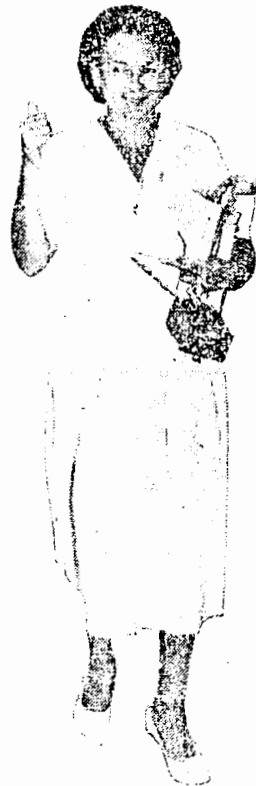
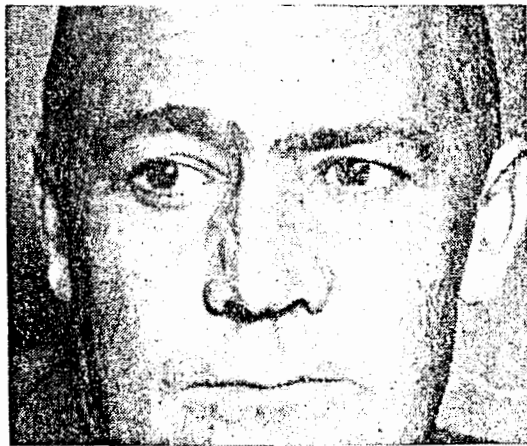
So now we say goodbye. We have tried everything, believe us, but this is the end of the road. We hope that others can to some extent fill the gap, until the day comes when we re-appear in a free South Africa. Then we promise to be yet bigger and brighter, and to come out not weekly, but every day.

- Thank you for your magnificent support during all this time.
- Thank you to the five great journalists who have helped us make our mark in South Africa and through the world. Goodbye, until we meet again. **WE'LL BE BACK!**

★ FRED CARNESON ★



★ GOVAN MBEKI ★



★ RUTH FIRST ★



★ M. P. NAICKER ★ →



★ BRIAN BUNTING ★

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## SECTION TWO



## *Dissonance and the Autobiographical Text*

Of the role of the TRC “in assisting individuals to pick up the pieces of their lives,” Dr. Alex Boraine concludes that the “great strength of the story-telling” at hearings “was that not only was the silence broken, but a process had begun” (2000: 356). In one sense, the “silence” to which Boraine refers was “broken” more than three decades earlier by Ruth First’s “story-telling” in 117 Days. Through a series of interposed sections, Ruth First presents the suffering and the courage of other detainees and their families, often from their point of view. Like the testimony of survivors and perpetrators of apartheid crimes to the TRC, Ruth First’s interspersed chronicles are also “limited”<sup>1</sup> in their capacity to represent and reconstitute the past, but nevertheless successful in portraying “pieces” of others’ disrupted “lives.” In this chapter, I suggest that while Ruth First begins “a process” of rewriting history by interleaving her narrative with those of others, at the same time she disperses “pieces” of herself in the stories she seeks to reconstruct or “pick up.”

The material circumstances surrounding the writing of 117 Days should not be underestimated. Ruth First wrote in a highly polarized environment with a clear political goal, “that the narrative would help focus world attention on the plight of the growing number of [apartheid] victims” (Joe Slovo 1988: 5). Discerning knowledge as a physical burden, Ruth First writes in 117 Days: “I knew so much that I was heavy with it” (1965: 115). The publication of 117 Days and the screening of 90 Days were more than mere diplomatic embarrassments for the regime, for they added ideological weight to calls for sanctions and economic disinvestment (Harlow 1996: 122).

Speaking out, even in exile, carried material consequences, amongst them increased physical danger to self and family members. The social costs of self-revelation for Ruth First were also substantial. In Every Secret Thing, Gillian Slovo comments that “once the book was published, instead of applauding her courage, some of her closest comrades judged her for her weakness” (90).

In her reading of David’s Story, Driver suggests that genuine post-apartheid truth (like autobiography) cannot be “black and white”: it must “coexist with nuance” (2001: 251). Nuance requires a rich ideological loam in which it can take root and blossom, the sort which cannot usually be found in the interrogation room, the prison cell, or the political office. Although frequently situated in one of these environments, Ruth First succeeds in planting seeds of varied identities within the text of 117 Days beneath what appears to be, on one level, a tightly sequential plot which strives towards the representative. Yet the unusual typographical appearance of Ruth First’s text indicates a plot layered to accommodate nuance. A studied avoidance of what Yvonne Vera describes as “a monologic centredness” in the presentation of prison life, Ruth First’s inclusion of the italicized sections is made problematic at times by her unique subject position within the apartheid prison (1995: 215).

#### *Unconventional typography marks disruption*

Reading 117 Days demands continual oscillation between the standard font of the main text, in which Ruth First narrates her own story, and the italicized print of the fragmentary interspersed segments, which describe events in the lives of her contemporaries. Each italicized section

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<sup>1</sup> This term is Boraine’s. While recognizing the Commission’s many contributions, Boraine writes that the TRC “acknowledged frankly and frequently that reconciliation cannot be achieved by a single commission in a limited period with limited resources” (2000: 356).

denotes an abrupt shift in point of view and voice<sup>2</sup> from the preceding, overtly autobiographical text, which is denoted by regular typed font. Contrary to the usual expectations of the memoir reader, the text graphically reveals itself to be polyphonous rather than monologic.<sup>3</sup> Sudden interruptions in narrative voice within the same text make for a jarring reading experience. Bewildered by these textual confusions, the reader experiences a sense of disorientation, mirroring, in a small way, the prisoner's overwhelming sense of misalignment with her immediate environment. Confronted with the protagonist's incessantly questioning and fast-paced mind for the first eleven page of the book, the reader then encounters a sudden switch to a secondary narrative which does not divulge the identity of the narrator (or narrators). 117 Days is a demanding text, requiring that its reader decipher a variety of refrains from within its quick-paced tempo.

As author, Ruth First conducts a polyphony which also exhibits visual dimensions. As if glancing over pages in a scrapbook, the reader encounters information from various sources, including torn-out newspaper articles, smuggled prison letters, court transcripts and even private conversations (most of which were inaccessible to Ruth First at the time of her incarceration). The insertion of italicized sections in the main body of text occurs once in the first, second, third and fourth chapters, and twice in the last. The inclusion of the italicized sections allows for at least a three-fold disruption: the interruption of the monologic voice of the narrator, the disarrangement of the rules of the prison, whereby detainees are denied access

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'point of view' here analogously with 'prism,' 'perspective' or 'angle of vision' through which the presentation of a story is mediated. Point of view implies not only "optical-photographic connotations" but also "cognitive, emotive and ideological" orientations, as distinct from 'voice,' which indicates the verbalization of a story not necessarily the narrator's own (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 71).

<sup>3</sup> I understand a polyphonous text to be one in which the speaking self reveals itself to be multiple, that is, made up of several voices, as opposed to a more traditional monologic narrative, in which the speaking self is represented as singular and unitary.

to information about others, and the almost continual displacement of time and place within the plot.

A plot with a definite beginning, middle and end proposes a linear pattern of experience concurrent with implications of coherence and closure. On an initial reading of 117 Days, it seems that such story will indeed be told. The narrative begins with Ruth First's arrest in August 1963 and ends with her release in December of the same year. Marshall Square Police Station is the site of both her initial detention and her emancipation, while Ruth First's opening words imply an identity rooted in measurable time: "For the first fifty-six days of my detention in solitary [. . .]," she begins (1965: 9). Expectations of a resolved text, however, are foreclosed by the rest of the sentence, which ends with a graphic repositioning of the body in external space and internal perception: "I changed from a mainly vertical to a mainly horizontal creature." Similarly, the infinite expanse of subjective duration implicit in Ruth First's conviction "that it was not the end, that they would come again" at the conclusion of 117 Days subverts the numeric objectivity promised at its outset. A plot which strives to contain experience according to verifiable dates within specific locations elides the suspension of time that takes place in the consciousness of the detainee. In order to accommodate subjective realities, therefore, linearity must be destabilized to some degree. Concealed within references to objective time lies a circuitous inner examination of self, a looking inwards precipitated by a crisis in identity resulting from sustained solitary confinement and interrogation. Vera suggests that the unconventional typographical appearance of 117 Days signifies "a resisting text," challenging the marginalization of self produced by interaction with the dual "phallogentric trajectory" of language and the traditional Western autobiographical genre, which automatically designates the

position of object to the female 'I' (209). Through the insertion of other narratives, 117 Days defies the narrow confinement of the self to a continuous 'I' not destabilized by inconsistencies.

*Withstanding a collective implied authorship*

Arguing that the self acquires a radical new identity in prison as a consequence of mental and physical assault, J. U. Jacobs reads the interposed sections of 117 Days to indicate the formation of a new self representative of the collective majority of South Africans. Concluding that "[d]etention and interrogation lead to depersonalisation, and depersonalisation eventually [leads] to recognition of communal experience," Jacobs proposes a causal relationship between interrogation and depersonalization, and depersonalization and the formulation of a group identity (1991c: 4). While there is much evidence in Ruth First's narrative to support Jacobs' first premise (that interrogation leads to depersonalization), I cannot find significant substantiation for his second premise (that the formulation of a group identity is a function of her depersonalization). As David Schalkwyk cautions, the ideological implications behind the mobilization of communality require critical viewing (2000: 283).

An individual self oriented *a priori* towards the collective (but not subsumed by it) emerges from Ruth First's narrative, in contrast to a communal self reconstituted after interrogation, as Jacobs suggests. On arrest, Ruth First maintains a silence in the face of questions, a silence which continues, complicatedly, to permeate her text. One function of silence is to protect the self and others from further prosecution and harassment from the state, a commitment present not only in retrospect but from the very moment of detention. At the same time, Ruth First writes her recovery from emotional collapse through the language of personal triumph rather than that of group solidarity. Representing healing as a regaining of her old self rather than a

"radical redefinition of self" with freshly expanded boundaries (Jacobs 1991c: 10), Ruth First writes: "I had been reeling towards a precipice and I had stopped myself at the edge. It had not been too late to beat them back. I had undermined my own resistance, yet I had not after all succumbed. In the depth of my agony I had won" (1965: 137-138). Ruth First's insistent use of the first person pronoun is telling: she attributes her success at withstanding interrogation to her strength of will as a solitary individual.

Aware of her physical whiteness as a mark which sets her apart from the other prisoners, Ruth First articulates her difference from the moment she is escorted through the " 'Europeans Only' " entrance at Marshall Square (13). Knowing she has been spared physical assault as a direct result of her subject position as a middle-class white woman, Ruth First straightforwardly states that initially "torture was reserved for Africans alone" (135). Establishing contact with others in a similar predicament, however, is complicatedly fraught with anxiety. Locked in the bathhouse at Pretoria Central Prison, Ruth First is the one who initiates contact with a group of black women prisoners. Communion is restricted to a series of looks and gestures: "Several of them would generally catch sight of me staring at them through the grille of the bathroom and point me out to the others," Ruth First writes (67). Alone in the cold sterility of the bathhouse, deprived not only of the physical companionship of the other women who "relaxed in their own company and talked and laughed together," but also of a feeling that she belonged with them, Ruth First evokes a poignant picture of exclusion.

In stark contrast to her strained encounters with the black women prisoners, Ruth First converses quickly and easily with AnnMarie Wolpe and Hazel Goldreich when she chances upon them at Marshall Square. Ruth First's exchanges in cell corridors and prison yards with

her old acquaintances from a similar Jewish immigrant background are contiguous with former social interactions at dinner parties and protest meetings. Overhearing AnnMarie Wolpe's "high fastidious" intonation resonating through a prison corridor after three days in solitary confinement, Ruth First feels elated (20). AnnMarie Wolpe's voice conveys not only a much-desired familiarity, but also functions in the text as a strident emblem of English middle-class education. AnnMarie Wolpe's speech contrasts sharply against that of the working-class wardresses, whom Ruth First is soon to identify primarily by voice: "Raucous. Shrill. Pained. Competent" (30). Figuring AnnMarie Wolpe as a reflection and a reinforcement of her own subjecthood within culture, Ruth First reduces the wardress to a messenger whom she instructs to deliver cotton-wool to her friend, who has announced that she "was due to menstruate" (20). AnnMarie Wolpe's candid use of a medical term for a bodily function that was almost certainly alluded to in coded euphemisms by the wardress becomes an assertion of class dominance.<sup>4</sup> Of the same incident, AnnMarie Wolpe writes:

She [Ruth First] begins to talk in what I can only describe as a stage whisper and comments, laughingly, on my imperious request to the wardress. She says how good it is to hear my voice, and how pleased she is that I am her neighbour. I certainly don't share her delight (1994: 197).

Catching a glimpse of AnnMarie Wolpe's body, "haggard and drawn, perched on her high bed," through the cell doors, Ruth First evokes a mirror image of her own physical placement and predicament (First 1965: 20). AnnMarie Wolpe, on the other hand, feels dislocated from "Ruth

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<sup>4</sup>Later, at Pretoria Central Prison, Ruth First similarly elicits the wardresses' "prudery" about bodily functions as part of a strategy to attain practical advantages (First 1965: 29). Refusing to use the dreaded 'po,' an enamel sanitary bucket, Ruth First convinces the wardress to let her out of her cell twice a day so that she could go to the toilet. Of the incident, Ruth First writes: "She [the wardress] pressed me for a reason but I persisted stubbornly without giving a reason and, afraid perhaps that I was reticent about divulging some intimate detail of my personal hygiene, she conceded" (61).

Slovo's voice," which reflects perceptions and emotions contrary to her own (Wolpe 1994: 197).<sup>5</sup>

Textually, Ruth First resists her outsider status in prison by including the stories of others within her own testimony of solitary confinement. However, the delineation of these sections as separate through the use of italics indicates the limitations of her strategy. If the reader chooses to eliminate the italicized inserts, the main flow of the narrative registers as a cohesive whole, while the voices of others appear both fragmentary in themselves and fragmenting of the text. While Ruth First relaxes the parameters of her story in order to allow other voices to speak from within it, in my view her narrating self is not one "that has reconstituted itself in the idiom of prison," as Jacobs proposes (1991c: 11). It is precisely because Ruth First was unable to participate in "the idiom of the prison" that, as narrator, she gathers around her protagonist self a community of diverse resisting voices. Inscribing the experiences of ethnic others into an imaginary discourse of a community more ideal than real, Ruth First unconvincingly fends off what Harlow sees as the "solipsistic self-scrutiny" of an introspective individual self (1992: 148). Ruth First's personal voice is congruent with the autobiographical genre, its hankering to accommodate a polyphony of voices indicative of a desire for communion with diversely placed others which can never be attained. For although Ruth First strives to place the apartheid prison system and the Ninety-Day detention law at the centre of her narrative, constructions of her own changing and unfolding identities, however muted or concealed, threaten to disrupt any attempts at closed historical representation.

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<sup>5</sup> In response to Ruth First's pleasure in hearing what she terms the " 'fantastic news' " that AnnMarie Wolpe's husband Harold escaped with three other men, AnnMarie Wolpe writes: "I do not feel at all communicative, and I do not trust myself not to burst into loud sobbing" (1994: 197).

*Autobiographical act, autobiographical pact*

Suggesting that writing mediates “the space between ‘self’ and ‘life’,” between subjective perceptions of selfhood and external reality, Shari Benstock highlights its location at a precarious juncture where competing versions of ‘truth’ vie with one another (1988: 11). While a morally encoded matrix which directs reading lies embedded in all narratives, whether classified as fiction or non-fiction, how readers perceive autobiography as genre decides their approach to constructions of authenticity regarding the authorial self. While autobiography is narrative, a process of worded communication which represents “a succession of events” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 2), autobiographical events consist of the author’s memories of life experiences, rather than fantastical figments of imagination. Happenings in fictional works are generally acknowledged as invented, while events generally precede their narration in non-fictional narratives. Judith Lütge Coullie (1991: 14) divides the autobiographical genre into three interrelated components, following James Olney: ‘autos’ addresses the association of the author with the narrator (the speaking self) and the protagonist (the experiencing self) of a life-story, ‘bios’ refers to the ‘life’ that is doubly mediated through “culture and language” and again by textual devices, and finally, ‘graphe’, or writing, is the “imposition of structure” (17) on the transcription of life experience. If writing necessarily involves “the imposition of structure,” then a close inquiry into the textual organization of 117 Days may assist in uncovering what Coullie terms the “interpretative framework [. . .] built into the narrative.”

Paul John Eakin suggests that both the unconscious and conscious minds collude in “the autobiographical act,” the recollection of the past in the present as part of a “lifelong process of identity formation” (1992: 52n). Attempts to delineate what constitutes fact as opposed to fiction frequently reflect a struggle between individual and communal perceptions of reality. As a genre,

autobiography can be seen to slide back and forth along the continuum between the so-called 'truth' and imagination. Eakin suggests that autobiography, not unlike fiction, is an act of invention: instead of plot and character, a life and a self (or selves) are devised. Technically, 117 Days is a memoir, a literary form "closely related to autobiography," but which does not meet all the requirements of that genre. According to Philippe Lejeune, the memoir falls short of autobiography because it fails to present an analysis of the development of the individual's personality (1989: 4). However, Lejeune suggests that the memoir, like the diary and the essay, can be considered autobiography as long as its subject is "primarily individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative" (5). In this sense, 117 Days is autobiography, the story of a woman who both inscribed and was inscribed by events and ideologies of international significance.

Drawing attention to the ever-deferred nature of the process of identity formation, Eakin proposes that the recollection of the past is an act of self-creation which is never completed. Remembering is not a "value-neutral" act (Eakin 1992: 67). Neither is the past an ordered repository of objective discrete moments: the individual subjectively structures experience as it occurs. The past cannot reside in a location extrinsic to the self, but rather occupies the internal spaces of the unconscious<sup>6</sup> and memory. Autobiography, however, is not interchangeable with fiction: to conflate them would be to elide important differences. Through his notion of "the autobiographical pact," whereby the shared name of author, narrator and protagonist correspond with the signature on the title page, Lejeune elucidates the distinction between the two genres

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<sup>6</sup> I refer to the 'unconscious' here as that region of the mind which "contains impulses and desires which are too threatening to be allowed into consciousness" (Statt 1998: 134). Much of the following analysis is based on the Freudian concept of the personality, which, roughly speaking, is composed of the pleasure-seeking id (part of the unconscious), the superego, or the conscience, and the ego, or consciousness. The ego attempts to satisfy the conflicting demands of both the id and the superego through engaging with physical and social realities.

(1989: 3). In autobiography, the real name of the author functions as a textual sign denoting a “sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his [sic] own life,” while in fiction, the persona of the author is disengaged from those of the narrator and protagonist (Eakin 1989: ix).

While some writers have sought to disturb the autobiographical convention by deliberately creating unreliable narrators (and through this subversion of textual norms have drawn attention to the constructedness of the autobiographical text), Eakin suggests that, in general, the reader does not approach autobiography in the same way as she approaches fiction, but instead interprets the signed intentionality of the author on the title page as an undertaking to communicate a factually authentic version of the past. This intentionality is at work in 117 Days, too, in which the political and personal success of Ruth First’s enterprise rests on the equation of authorial signature with the combined constructs of narrator and protagonist. The expectation of the reader of autobiography is thus poised towards an objectively verifiable world in which the author’s relationship towards her text is posited as one of factual authenticity before the reading process begins.

While the conflation on the title page of the name of author, narrator and protagonist signifies the author’s undertaking to present a referential world of the past, both within the textual world of the self-referential narrative [narrator = protagonist] and without it [real author = narrator and protagonist], the promise of a single coherent identity cannot be kept. Rather what occurs in an autobiographical text is that different aspects of self dwell beneath an identical signifier: the sign of the author on the title page. Functioning as an official carrier of that which is authentic and real, with its illusionary assurance of not only a truthful but a fully resolved version of the past, the signature continuously replicates itself within the narrative itself as the

uninterrupted 'I' (Lejeune 1989: 35 ). Dwelling beneath an identical signifier within the text, the constructs of author, narrator and protagonist assume diverse and sometimes conflicting characteristics and attitudes. Nevertheless, the invocation of the autobiographical pact is a powerful one, encouraging the reader to believe in the mirage of consistent character across time.

### *Narrative actors and levels*

Methodically unmasking the association of the author with narrator in fictional texts, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes between the author as “the [extra-textual] agent responsible for the production of the narrative and for its communication” and the narrator as a fictional construct who transmits the narrative to a “fictional narratee” (1983: 3-4). To the extent that autobiography is an act of self-invention, Rimmon-Kenan’s distinction is relevant to 117 Days, in which marking the difference between author and narrator would undermine the perceived reliability of Ruth First’s narrative. Benstock suggests that another reason for overlaying narrator with author is “to seal up or cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations and blind spots” (1988: 21). While Ruth First reveals inner doubts about herself at times, an autobiographical choice which serves to greatly enrich her text, many inconsistencies of self remain unarticulated. 117 Days has as many or more silences as articulated introspective moments. These silences, or “blind spots,” lie within the no-(wo)man’s land between the author and the narrator, the space of the implied author. The implied author and its textual counterpart, the implied reader, are “substitute agents” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 86) who represent the real author and the real reader within the narrative. Rimmon-Kenan points out that “implied authors are often far superior in intelligence and moral standards to the actual men and women who are real authors” (87). Imposing a theoretical

hierarchy of narrative levels on 117 Days allows the reader access to the camouflaged site of the implied author, which is felt by the reader as “the source of norms embodied in the work” (86).

Following Gerard Genette, Rimmon-Kenan names the time plane of “the events themselves” as the “diegetic” or story level (1983: 91). The textual space where narration occurs must be situated one level ‘above’ the plane of the events themselves, and is therefore called the “extradiegetic level.” The inserted story fragments occur at “a level ‘below’ ” the standard plane of diegesis, and hence constitute “second degree” or hypodiegetic” narratives (91-92), which are both proleptic and analeptic: in other words, they constitute advance narration of later events and delayed narration of past events. While extradiegetic digressions are not uncommon in the main text of 117 Days,<sup>7</sup> the italicized sections facilitate far greater changes in voice and perspective. Functioning partly as a ‘bird’s-eye-view’ of external events, these sections communicate information unknown to the protagonist (but not the narrator), such as experiences of other detainees. The detailed reading of the interpolated sections which follows is one way of exploring some of the techniques Ruth First employs in the production and silencing of her own identities. At pertinent points, I compare First’s narrations with those of her contemporaries AnnMarie Wolpe and Norma Kitson.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, during a diegetic-level report of a discussion with detective Nel concerning her brother Ronnie’s arrest (First 1965: 83), the narrator inserts an extradiegetic comment in parenthesis: “(As it happened, my brother was released after three weeks in detention).”

*The interpolated sections*

*Chapter One*

The first interposed section of 117 Days appears in the opening chapter, 'The Cell,' and is composed of two separate italicized narratives joined by a bridging paragraph (20-24). The first sub-section tells of the escape from Marshall Square of activists Mosie Moolla, Abdullah Jassat, Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe thirty-six hours after Ruth First's arrest; the second reports on the trial and sentencing of a young Afrikaans policeman, Johannes Arnoldus Greeff, who helped the detained men to flee.<sup>8</sup> The bridging paragraph graphically depicts nineteen-year-old Greeff as "a new prisoner" entering the men's exercise yard at Marshall Square (23). Within the first sub-section, unidentified extradiegetic narrators describe the escape of the men in a series of four fragmentary texts. Two genres are interspersed here: the thriller, in the first and third fragments, and journalistic reportage, in the second and fourth. The first fragment dramatically describes the jailbreak, while the second fragment emerges as a seemingly unmediated collage of newspaper headlines and snippets from radio broadcasts which document the state's manhunt for the escapees. The third fragment narrates Goldreich and Harold Wolpe's underground journey into Swaziland. The fourth fragment commences with a newspaper headline announcing the two men's destination in Bechuanaland.

" 'Jail Break,' would be the headline the following day in the Daily Mail. I've seen too many American movies," writes AnnMarie Wolpe of her husband's escape almost thirty years after 117 Days was published (1994: 168). AnnMarie Wolpe's "B-grade" movies find textual equivalents in the cheap paperback thrillers Ruth First calls to mind in two of her narrative fragments describing the same event (151). Unlike Ruth First's succinct account, however, the

escape of Harold Wolpe concerns the bulk of AnnMarie Wolpe's narrative, a textual weighting which hints at the investment of her identity within his. Six central chapters of The Long Way Home are told from her husband's perspective: 'Marshall Square,' 'Plans Revisited,' 'Freedom,' 'Days of Freedom,' 'The Long Wait' and 'The New Prison.' Yet it is not only this structural anomaly that positions AnnMarie Wolpe as bystander to her own narrative. While she does not disguise her identity as narrator,<sup>9</sup> AnnMarie Wolpe nevertheless occupies the margin of her husband's story, seeing, through his eyes, a life which barely includes her. Even when she assumes the dual positions of both protagonist and narrator, AnnMarie Wolpe locates herself around a resentful examination of her partner's political actions:

We women did what we had to do, and accepted our husbands' actions. We might have felt panic, unease, disquiet and fear, but what could we do? Nothing, short of separating from them and going out on our own. In a way, even this option was not open to us. Our voices were not heard [. . .]. As we were not part of any organisation, we did not have the right to speak out (82).

As opposed to Ruth First's experiencing and speaking selves, which, though non-unitary, firmly occupy the core of her own narrative, AnnMarie Wolpe tends to slip into the periphery of her text. Figuring herself as a helpless woman, AnnMarie Wolpe describes feeling trapped in a world in which, for her, the political eradicates the personal.

### *Chapter Two*

The interpolated section in 'On Living in a Police Station' describes a second escape attempt from Marshall Square. Unlike Wolpe et al., however, police immediately catch Dennis Brutus, "an impassioned poet" and activist against "colour-bar South African sport" (First 1965: 49). As

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Wolpe and Goldreich successfully fled the country. Moolla and Jassat were re-arrested and jailed.

<sup>9</sup> AnnMarie Wolpe declares herself as narrator in the opening sentence of her chapter 'Freedom?' which reads as follows: "As soon as he came back into the cell after seeing me, Harold took up his position on the bench next to the window to watch for the arrival of the [getaway] car" (emphasis added: 177).

if cut from a real newspaper and then pasted into Ruth First's personal narrative, a line from an interview concludes the first news report, in which an officer at The Grays describes his colleague as a " 'deadly accurate shot' " (48). A second headline, which shouts 'Four Nations Involved in Row Over Brutus,' complete with mimetic shift in typography, continues the illusion of objective reportage. For me, Ruth First's frequent assumption of the voice of a detached journalist (not only in the italicized sections, but throughout her text), speaks of concerns that her narrative will be apprehended seriously. In the opening paragraphs of 117 Days, for instance, Ruth First makes repeated references to the quantifiable world of external reality through the evocation of specific numerical figures, writing that her days were spent in "four" main physical positions, amid walls painted black "two-thirds of the way up" (9-10). Ruth First even provides the exact dimension of the cell "eight feet by six," and divulges, too, her method of calculation (pacing combined with crawling under the bed with her shoe as a measure), lest the reader think she was merely speculating, an act which would place her again within the 'feminine' world of unverifiable imagination (10).

Ironically, it is Ruth First's status as a (white) woman which affords her some level of protection while in prison. "You can count your lucky stars that we still have respect for women in our country," Swanepoel dubiously reassures Ruth First during his tirade following her abortive statement at The Grays (122). In her autobiography Where Sixpence Lives (1986), Jewish activist Norma Kitson<sup>10</sup> confirms that by the time she was arrested on 22 July 1964, Swanepoel had already gained a reputation as "the Beast" amongst prisoners, and was widely implicated in the murder in detention of the new owner of the Guardian, Babla Saloojee (158).<sup>11</sup> Ruth First

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<sup>10</sup> Norma Kitson joined the Congress of Democrats in 1952 and the technical unit of the CPSA underground in 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth First, too, writes that, unknown to her until after her release, Saloojee had apparently "hurled himself to his death from the window of the very room" in which she was being questioned" (First 1965: 119).

minimizes the physical threat Swanepoel poses, recording only his words that “you Communists [. . .] have to be put against a wall and squeezed, pushed and squeezed, into a corner. Then they change and talk” (123). While her main text disclaims fear, Ruth First’s alarm at Swanepoel’s physical, perhaps sexualized, threats find expression in the violent image of her own corporeal sundering: “The bombardment from Swanepoel split my bamboozlement wide open and dropped from my head like a broken husk” (123).

AnnMarie Wolpe and Kitson more openly express fears of physical violence than does Ruth First, possibly due to their experience of greater personal threat. “I fear torture,” AnnMarie Wolpe writes explicitly of an encounter in the interrogation room during which “Swanepoel shakes the chair” in which she sat, while his partner has his hands “poised” around her “throat” (1994: 189-190). Kitson, who, like Ruth First, was interrogated by Lieutenants van der Merwe and Viktor, discovers that brute force is quick to replace the policemen’s amiable façade. Van der Merwe gave her “a sudden swipe across the face,” Kitson records (1986: 158), while Viktor, who impressed her initially by quoting “from Byron and from Shakespeare” (156), viciously beat her, as later did Swanepoel (161). Refusing to reveal information about her activities or those of her husband David, a member of the MK High Command, Kitson was released after twenty-eight days in detention. Ruth First indirectly corroborates the experiences of AnnMarie Wolpe and Kitson by observing that in early 1964, “Stephanie Kemp, the twenty-three-year-old physiotherapist, had her head banged on the floor - the first white woman in South Africa to be

physically assaulted by the Security Branch” while in detention (1965: 140-141).<sup>12</sup> By enclosing her account of Kemp’s ordeal in parenthesis, however, Ruth First’s narrating self marks typologically the experiencing self’s distance from physical danger.

### *Chapter Three*

Widening the composition of her interposed narratives to include personal correspondence in Chapter Three, ‘Isolation in a Vacuum,’ Ruth First reproduces intimate letters written from Y., in prison, to his wife W., outside, in the first sub-section of this segment (76-79). The second sub-section reports the chaining of Dennis Goldberg after repeated escape attempts, his wife Ésmé’s discovery of his blood-stained trousers and her subsequent arrest (79-80), while the third sub-section narrates the start of the Rivonia Trial on 9 October 1963 (80): all events of which Ruth First “knew nothing” while incarcerated (81).

While the identities of Y. and W. remain veiled in *117 Days*, it is highly likely that Y. and W. are in fact Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, who escaped from South Africa in August 1964 via Lobatsi on the border of Bechuanaland (1989: 92-93).<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the factual tone of some of the

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<sup>12</sup> In the Postscript to *Jail Diary*, Sachs writes: “Stephanie, of an old South African family and twenty-three years old, was also beaten and had her hair pulled out and her face battered. Then she too made a statement. [. . .] Stephanie is a physiotherapist, beautiful, girlish and vulnerable, the very image of White South African womanhood, whose protection is claimed to be at the heart of official policy. If such respectable people can be assaulted then no one is safe in the hands of the South African police” (1966: 282).

<sup>13</sup> The excerpt from Y.’s letter which Ruth First reproduces is almost identical to one which appears in Rusty Bernstein’s memoir *Memory against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics 1938 – 1964* (1999). It is clear that Ruth First had access to his personal reminiscences, which Bernstein himself published only three decades later. Rusty Bernstein writes: “It may sound odd, but I am longing to be brought to trial, just to bring uncertainty to an end and also to save us from the prospect of another ninety days like these; the prospect fills me with such depression that I cannot bear to contemplate it. I am very fluttery internally, for no special reason, and feel as though I am as old as Father Time, and shaky as a leaf...I know I am pretty close to the end of my nervous tether. I am at my worst at breakfast and for a few hours thereafter, then pick up during the day. The prospect is really bleak – unless I am charged, which is what I hope for. Just to be able to talk to people!” (1999: 92-93). Ruth First quotes Y. as follows: “I know I am pretty close to the end of my nervous tether. I am at my worst at breakfast and a few hours thereafter, then pick up during the day. The prospect is really bleak – unless I am charged, which is what I hope for. Just to be able to talk to people! The prospect of another ninety days fills me with such awful depression

previous italicized sections, Y.'s fragmentary narrative details intensely personal musings about his precarious situation. Appearing as a stream-of-consciousness flow of thoughts, the disconnected beginning of Y.'s account, "...about myself here" immediately introduces an introspective monologue (ellipses in original: 76). Like Ruth First, Y. also exercises in a "dreary enclosed yard" with restricted sunlight (77), worries about the effect of his imprisonment on his children and, above all, longs for a trial if only "to be able to talk to people" (78). If, as Vera postulates, Ruth First's insertion of the voices of others is a literary strategy of silencing, of "deflecting attention from herself" (1995: 215), then the corollary may also hold true, that Ruth First substitutes the voices of others to talk for her when she cannot, that the experiences of others serve as echoes to enhance what has or will occur in the main narrative.

In this sense, Y. may function as a receptacle for unspeakable aspects of self that cannot be housed under the declared autobiographical 'I.' While Y. declares that some days he is "so utterly broken and beaten" that it takes all his "strength" just "to stand up" (78), Ruth First admits to very little personal weakness in 117 Days. At this point in the plot, Ruth First is able to conceive of her imprisonment as a "jail endurance test" (66), entailing both physical and mental exigencies. Y., however, is humbled by incarceration, admitting that he is "very fluttery internally" and feels "as old as Father Time" (78). While Ruth First juxtaposes her resolve with Y.'s frailty here, later his nervous condition will seem to parallel her own. Y.'s narrative prefigures Ruth First's own emotional breakdown.

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and fear that I cannot bear to contemplate it. Am very fluttery internally, for no special reason, and feel as though I am as old as Father Time, and shaky as a leaf..." (1965: 78).

#### *Chapter Four*

A “news poster” (89) which Ruth First espies from a dirty cell window on “the edge of the Marshall Street pavement” provides an entry-point into the interposed section of Chapter Four, ‘Putting on the Pressure’ (89-102). As protagonist, Ruth First has no way of deciphering the words which appear tantalizingly before her:

DEAD  
MAN  
BANNED  
\*

The announcement, with its capitalized words on separate lines, forms a virtual headstone for Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle, an ANC activist and one of a small number of “dedicated, full-time African (as well as Coloured and Indian) hawkers” who sold the Guardian in the black townships during the 1940s and 1950s (Switzer 1997: 286). The asterisk marks the unknowingness to which Ruth First is forced to submit. Ruth First’s inclusion in her narrative of Ngudle’s story, a methodical account of systematic torture and legal disregard, challenges his gagging through the brutal destruction of his body. Although cultural constructions of gender, race and class threaten to alienate Ruth First from the subject position of Ngudle, who was detained by police less than a month after she herself had been arrested, it is on the level of the body and its specific connection to community and place that Ruth First introduces him to the reader.

In contrast to the presentation of herself at the beginning of 117 Days as an amorphous “horizontal creature” (9), dislocated from name, birth location and family connections, the narrator pays careful attention to Ngudle’s genealogical details. In keeping with African tradition, Ruth First accords Ngudle respect by explaining the significance of each of his three

names. She also deferentially refers to his mother, Mrs. Maria Ngudle, by her married title, and explicitly notes her place of residence as Middledrift, Transkei in one of the customary ways black South Africans confer dignity on another: by honouring the dwelling-place of an individual. Just as popular poets recite *izibongo*, or praise poems, glorifying the ancestry of celebrated individuals in the public domain, so too does the narrator, in a much more modest way, situate Maria Ngudle's past within the history and landscape of a specific community (Gunner 1995: 189). In her memoir No Child's Play: in Prison under Apartheid (1988),<sup>14</sup> Caesarina Kona Makhoere similarly inverts the hierarchy of the prison by conferring a title, a full name, and a dwelling place on her fellow prisoners, while she refers to politicians or those in authority by nicknames or their first names only. Arrested on 25 October 1976, Makhoere was detained for six months before she was sentenced to serve five years at Kroonstad prison for political crimes. When a new detainee would arrive, Makhoere writes, she would propagate her nominological formula of respect amongst the other prisoners: " 'Come, come Ausi Joyce, here is somebody, she looks like so-and-so of such-and-such place'," she would say (32). While consciously affirming a community of like others, Makhoere and the other prisoners rename the wardresses with derogatory nicknames, like Mbomvana (the red one, in allusion to her ruddy white complexion) and "one we called Yita" (63), purporting to have forgotten their "real" names (61). They confer the lowest status upon a potential spy who remains anonymous in the text: "I forget her name," writes Makhoere, "maybe I have a reason for forgetting her name" (115).

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<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as No Child's Play.

Through affirming the interconnectedness of person and place, Ruth First asserts Ngudle's rightful ontology in a country where pass laws and forced removals insist otherwise. A theme that runs through much of black struggle literature is at work here: '*Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang*,' a seSotho saying meaning that "a person is a person because of other people" (Schalkwyk 1994: 32). Ruth First seems to alienate herself from the cultural imperative her text endorses at times, however. Despite her introduction of others by their specific body-based coordinates, she delays mentioning her own full name and birth place until the last chapter, when they are necessary to further the plot. " 'Heloise Ruth Slovo née First,'" she reads from the cover of a thick file produced by Swanepoel, as if the names belong to a stranger, and not herself (115). Indicative perhaps of her role as an investigative journalist, Ruth First's apparently objective stance resists the unmasking of self even within an exposé of the Ninety-Day law in which she plays the central protagonist. While in the main narrative Ruth First must assume, by turns, the dual subject positions of interviewer (as narrator) and interviewee (as protagonist), the interposed sections allow for her investigative posture to twist outwards towards the experience of the Other, deflecting what is sometimes an uncomfortable inward gaze.

The longest interpolated narrative of 117 Days (94-102), the Ngudle segment represents, on one level, a probable destiny for Ruth First had she been born black and male. Ruth First reconstructs events according to the exact dates when they occurred, again invoking verifiable time<sup>15</sup> as a signifier of factual authenticity: 19 August, the date of Looksmart's arrest (90); 5 September, the

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<sup>15</sup> In her analysis of women's testimony to the TRC, Fiona Ross comments that one woman, Mrs. Miya, used "chronological time" as one of the "hangers on which to place her experience" (1996: 16), perhaps as much to imbue her own voice with authenticity as to mark the disruption wrought by her son's death in a world that she has rendered "relatively ordered and predictable" (18).

date he was found dead in his cell; 15 September, official notification of both his arrest and death to Mrs. Ngudle; 16 September, the day of the burial; 20 September, a rail warrant arrives for Mrs. Ngudle to attend his funeral; Monday (no date), 10.30 am, the court assembles (91); 26 November, the inquest resumes (94). Ruth First's insertion of courtroom transcripts into her narrative reinforces the illusion of a non-fictional reality. Frequently silent about her research methods and sources throughout *117 Days*, Ruth First often reports direct speech without any reference to its speaker. Inscribed as separate from the narrator's language by typographical markings, these lines are ascribed to no one, their origin permanently deferred.<sup>16</sup> Ruth First's reticence to disclose sources therefore works against the legitimizing impetus, keeping the line between fiction and non-fiction persistently indistinct, but simultaneously reinforces the culture of political secrecy that she produces elsewhere.

Noting that all the characters in Ruth First's italicized segments are men, Vera proposes that Ruth First imagines herself occupying "male bodies" (1995: 215) because she "cannot see herself as a legitimate source of discourse – she is culturally excluded" by her gender (197). While male protagonists in the interpolated sections may function as masculine alter-egos embedded within *117 Days*, it is important to remember that Ruth First's agency is still at work here, carefully shaping these characters' brief presentations of self. Textual control turns slippery at the sites of the interspersed segments, where the narrator's deferral of her own voice does not always function as an abnegation of control. Indeed, assuming the voices of black male (and female) voices was an important part of Ruth First's vocation as a literate white journalist, even as she deliberately sought to step aside to allow them to speak.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Ruth First quotes an unidentified voice uttering doubts about the nature of Ngudle's death: " 'We don't know if this was murder or suicide. It is very strange that so much darkness is hanging over the whole affair' " (91).

In 'Africans Turned off the Land: Fifty Families Living in the Open,' an article she penned for the Guardian of 5 October, 1950, for instance, Ruth First appears to allow other voices to enter her narrative, as in 117 Days: "Let a spokesman of the Mpatsi people tell part of this tale in his own way," she writes self-consciously (qtd. in Pinnock 1997: 39). Yet the "spokesman's" succinct recollection of historical events and dates is at odds with Ruth First's concluding statement that "[t]hese are an unsophisticated people, bewildered by the turn of events, confused by new laws imposed upon them, knowing little of court actions." Ruth First's appropriation of the Mpatsi spokesman's voice is no doubt motivated by her desire to assist those whom she perceives as "unaided and unprotected" (40), but it is nevertheless an act of control, one which fixes the group identity of the Mpatsi through the limits of the colonial gaze.

It is in the role of an investigative journalist that Ruth First reconstructs Ngudle's prison experience through a series of dramatic interviews with family members and fellow detainees. Sent from prison to prison in search of her son's body, Mrs. Maria Ngudle eventually returns home empty-handed. Soon thereafter, the Security Branch kidnap Looksmart's widow, Beauty Ngudle, and force her to sign a statement revoking her legal rights. Agency is plainly removed from the Ngudle women, but not from their men. Looksmart's brother, Washington, intervenes and agrees to be represented by advocate Vernon Berrange. An official inquest into the cause of Ngudle's death takes place in the "privileged" arena of the courtroom, where statements "by the banned" can be legitimately heard and transcribed (92). Questions can now be posed, and answers must be given. Juxtaposing points of view quicken the progression towards the revelation of truth in an investigation which seems to prefigure the amnesty hearings of the TRC. Testimonies of torture by witnesses Isaac Tlale and Zephaniah Mothopeng challenge the blatant denials of high-ranking policemen Detective-Sergeant Ferreira and Major Frederick van Niekerk.

The persistent inquiries of Berrange both mimic and overturn the process of police interrogation. As the police are forced to testify on the witness stand together with their victims, the hierarchy of prison is temporarily suspended: the words of torturer and tortured are placed in equal, if oxymoronic, relationship to one another. So, too, by usurping the stance of her inquisitor within this interposed section, does Ruth First, as narrator, subvert the subject positioning imposed upon her protagonist in the main narrative. Through the voice of Berrange, Ruth First is able to interrogate her interrogators, not in the unregulated space of the private “interview room” (50), de-legitimized by its facilitation of violence, but in the legal space of the court, an officially sanctioned environment in which acts of injustice may be witnessed, criminals exposed and judgment passed. Although the court eventually ruled their evidence “inadmissible,” this interpolated text applauds Ngudle and Tlale for respectively resisting and revealing torture of Ninety-Day detainees by the Security Branch (102). Through its rendition in public reportage, suffering is divorced from the disappeared body and transmuted into triumph.

### *Chapter Five*

Two separate interpolated sections surface in the final chapter of *117 Days*, ‘No Place for You.’ The initial section contains first-person accounts of solitary confinement by Ninety-Dayers James April and John Marinus Ferus (109-112). April records the descent into madness of a fellow detainee, William Tsotso, his narrative establishing a relationship of “similarity and contrast” between Tsotso’s state and those of characters on other narrative levels (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 92). Tsotso’s advanced stage of insanity prefigures the mental instability which both April and Ruth First later manifest. April’s narrative ends with symptoms of emotional disturbance: “I burst very easily into laughter, my mind seemed befuddled,” he says (First 1965: 111), while Ruth First later undergoes a nervous breakdown in prison (132). But at this stage in

the plot, Ruth First presents herself as emotionally buoyant, “gaily” inviting Viktor to visit her at “home” in prison, as if he were a welcome guest rather than an interrogator, and rejoicing over the “thrill” she received on hearing of Hazel Goldreich’s release (89). Towards the end of 117 Days, however, Ruth First presents overconfidence as a symptom of her increasingly precarious mental condition, writing: “It was madness for me to think I could protect myself in a session like this, in any session with them” (122).

Like April’s rendition of Tsotso’s insanity, Ferus’ account enters into dialogue with the main narrative. On one level, Ferus’ release and immediate re-arrest functions in the text as a *mise en abyme*, or a miniature version in the text, of Ruth First’s own experience.<sup>17</sup> On re-arrest at the end of his initial Ninety-Days, Ferus confesses: “I flung myself on the mat and started to cry bitterly...The thought of another ninety days was too much” (ellipses in original: 112). The main narrative resumes abruptly at an equivalent juncture in Ruth First’s jail experience. As opposed to Ferus, Ruth First positions herself sitting on “the edge of the bed, still in my navy outfit,” frozen in “the same position” for most of the day (112-113). The picture of dignified lamentation which Ruth First produces forms a stark contrast against the contiguous image of Ferus’ prostrate, contorted body. As protagonist, Ruth First divests threatening emotions into her body, a process which she alludes to as “a tight pincer-feeling [which] was growing in my stomach” (113). As narrator, Ruth First follows a similar strategy, diverting incompatible feelings onto a male Other. While Ruth First judges as a failure her aspiration “to keep a tight hold on my emotions and let no sound escape me” (112), admitting at one point that she quietly “shook with sobs” (113), for many readers her actions are congruent with what Joe Slovo calls Ruth First’s

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<sup>17</sup> Rimmon-Kenan describes the *mise en abyme* as “the equivalent in narrative fiction of something like Matisse’s famous painting of a room in which a miniature version of the same paintings hangs on one of the walls” (1983: 93).

“signal bravery, all the more moving because Ruth showed no awareness of the courage with which she faced her tormentors” (1988: 8).

It is in the second interposed segment of Chapter Five, the final one of 117 Days, that the ‘I’ of the main narrative surfaces surprisingly as the overt speaking voice (138-139). Opening immediately with a direct declaration of her own identity by her use of the first-person pronoun, Ruth First begins: “I had been re-detained for the second term on 7 November” (emphasis added: 138). Reporting on the successful outcome of Albie Sachs’ November 1963 court application for detainees to be allowed to receive reading and writing material, Ruth First again draws upon the actions of a male protagonist as part of her complicated “negotiation of subjectivity and personhood” (Vera: 192). While the interspersed narratives represent the impulse to marginalize the gendered self, at the same time they function as fluid spaces in which Ruth First permits herself to voice aspects of identity that elude the strictures of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact. The interspersed accounts of Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich, Mosie Moolla, Abdullah Jassat, Dennis Brutus, Y. (Rusty Bernstein), the Rivonia trialists, Looksmart Ngudle, James April and John Marinus Ferus also clearly signal a self-conscious striving for a multi-racial polyphony. Yet it is the individual ‘I’ which bursts forth into the last segment, revealing Ruth First’s carefully constructed communality in the interspersed sections to be as permeable as the papier-mâché of torn-off headlines and fragmentary reports of which they are ostensibly composed.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have sought to link Ruth First’s inscription of diverse speaking voices in the interposed sections to her attempts to subvert the experiencing self as the focus of the main

narrative. In describing the often oblique ways in which women gave testimony to the TRC, Fiona Ross notes of Mrs. Zokwe, a witness who describes her child's death: "Her story is elliptical; it uses repetition and pause, gesture and silence" to communicate layered experience (1996: 16). So too do the silences and unfinished stories in Ruth First's text speak those truths which are neither "black" nor "white," produced as much from the sepia of old photographs and the unsteady lettering of yellowing newsprint bearing Ruth First's byline as from the bold font of new millennium autobiographies. The complexities of narrative structure, like Mrs. Zokwe's silences, function somewhat like the Freudian unconscious, which stores socially unacceptable desires and provides ways for incompatible aspects of self to find expression. By applying Rimmon-Kenan's narratology of fiction to the autobiographical genre, I have engaged with an array of displaced selves eclipsed, partially or fully, by the assumption of the masculine speaking voice and by the text's conscious evocation of the markers of 'objective' reality, primarily external time, the print media and the law.

Ruth First seems to undermine the implications of Lejeune's autobiographical pact in two interrelated ways: firstly, through the unconventional typographical appearance of the book, and secondly, through inclusion of other biographies within her own narrative. I propose here that despite her interpolation of the stories of others, Ruth First nevertheless assumes ownership of 117 Days. Ruth First's seemingly marginal stance in the interspersed sections must be qualified by her position of textual controller as writer and editor: Ruth First chooses when to enter the narrative overtly, and decides at what moment to exit it. Control over voice therefore lies at the core of 117 Days. While 117 Days is a decentred text in terms of narration and also in terms of the selfhood it renders, it is possible to interpret the generic hodgepodge it produces as a statement of Ruth First's various identities as journalist, archivist, investigator, and

ethnographer. Leaving her indelible mark on the interpolated narratives as their selector, Ruth First becomes a *bricoleuse*, a collage artist, a sort of Joycean scissors-and-paste woman. In this way, the expectations set into motion by Lejeune's autobiographical pact are still in place: the interposed texts cannot be divorced from its originator, the author of the memoir, Ruth First.

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## *Community and Reflection in the Prison-House*

In a letter sent to Joe Slovo from Swaziland, Ruth First writes of a flawed female body – her own: “My introspection gets more and more involved as I go in for my favourite pastime of undermining me and my character and seeing my faults [. . .]. It’s a form of masochism I suffer from; one of my afflictions, like heavy eyebrows and a mole on my nose” (Joe Slovo 1988: 5). Ruth First parallels her perceived physical “afflictions” with more metaphysical ones, writing: “I know at heart if direction, application and talent aren’t there, it’s all my own undoing.” Instead of the expected colloquialism “it’s all my own doing,” Ruth First replies with a Freudian slip, communicating perhaps desires to negate the self, or “undo” it. Reflected in the mirror of her mind, Ruth First’s face metamorphoses to a portrait of imperfections. Like some Cubist painters of the early twentieth century, who strove to capture their subjective memories of a particular countenance on canvas rather than a photograph-like image, Ruth First inscribes her self-portrait with gendered subjectivities. In prison, the presence of real and imagined others contributes to the distorted image Ruth First sometimes holds of herself. Their scrutiny objectifies the prisoner, reflecting back at her a series of fragmented identities which she is challenged to accept as her own.

### *Manichean allegories and identity formation*

Of concern to me in this chapter is how 117 Days and other South African prison memoirs construct the body as a source of both oppression and agency within the context of the prison-house. A sensitivity to the ways in which the body is positioned in culture requires an

exploration of what constitutes the communal in prison. Although most prison texts seek to construct a natural communality amongst prisoners, communality neither “comes easily,” nor is it “free from ideological considerations,” as Schalkwyk suggests (2000: 283). Polarizing the world into an uncritical ‘us’ and ‘them’ is one result of what Frantz Fanon terms the “Manichean world” of the colonial mind. In his analysis of revolution in Algeria (published contemporaneously with 117 Days), Fanon portrays the “Manichean world” as one produced by dichotomies of absolute good and evil which define discourse between “settler” and “native” (1963: 41). Apprehending South Africa under apartheid as the apogee of the colonial experience, Abdul JanMohamed further suggests that the territory is a particularly fertile environment for the working of “Manichean allegor[ies]” or the ideologically constructed dichotomies of “white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object” (1983: 4). As a microcosm of the state, the apartheid prison is an ideal location for diseased perceptions of the Other to fester. At the same time, although prison writers frequently evoke Manichean allegories when inscribing interactions with their captors, these associations oftentimes cannot remain within the strict bounds of polar opposites. The “need for human contact” in a “world devoid, in all senses, of humanity” must lead to more intimate and complexly rendered relationships, both between captor and prisoner and amongst the prisoners themselves, as Schalkwyk points out (2000: 281).

Amongst a plethora of prison writing which can be read against 117 Days, I have selected four local autobiographical texts for the variety of perspectives they produce regarding the positioning of the body in space and in culture. The four works are Breyten Breytenbach’s The True

Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (1984),<sup>1</sup> Mashinini's Strikes, Ramphele's A Life<sup>2</sup> and Sachs' Jail Diary. Breytenbach is a revered Afrikaner poet, while Sachs is a Jewish professional. Tried for clandestine activities linked to an obscure anti-apartheid organization called Okhela,<sup>3</sup> Breytenbach was convicted in 1975 under the Terrorism Act to nine years in prison. Both men were (and perhaps still are) considered controversial by the ethnic communities of their birth. Mashinini and Ramphele represent different generations of black women activists (Mashinini was fifty-one years old at the time of her arrest, while Ramphele was twenty-nine), a factor which affects their conceptions of themselves both within history and within community. Furthermore, Ramphele was a qualified medical doctor, while Mashinini, although highly skilled as a trade unionist, had little formal education. Arrested on 6 August 1976 under the preventive detention clause of Section Ten of the Terrorism Act, Ramphele spent the first ten days of her four-and-a-half month detention in solitary confinement in the new King William's Town Prison. These four texts serve to explicate Ruth First's complex subject position as a thirty-eight-year-old Jewish professional woman in a society highly polarized by dichotomies of race. A Life and True Confessions, in particular, explore the tensions that arise between community and self in a political milieu seemingly underwritten by irreconcilable dichotomies.

The prison-house of the chapter title refers, in part, to patriarchal and racist productions of identity in apartheid South Africa. If ideology is enforced upon and perpetuated through the body, then the convergence of often conflicting paradigms of thought within the physical

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to Breytenbach's memoir as True Confessions.

<sup>2</sup> Ramphele's memoir was brought out by Feminist Press in 1996 as Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader. With an added foreword by Johnnetta B. Cole, this edition was aimed at North American readers. In 'The Braided Voice: Mamphela Ramphele's A Life' (1998), Meg Samuelson explores the ideological shifts implicit in the positioning of the different editions of Ramphele's book vis-à-vis diverse readerships and locations.

barricades of the apartheid jail results in contortions of body and mind. Jacques Lacan proposes that the complete synthesis of identity is in itself a mythical concept. Through his theory of the “mirror stage” of psychic development, Lacan suggests that the child’s apprehension of herself is restrained and retrained through the image reflected back at her by society, resulting in a fissured adult identity (Wilden 1968b: xiii). Applying Lacan’s theories to women’s autobiographical writing, Shari Benstock suggests that if the mind is structured like language, then the inscription of the self through autobiographical writing will enact a similar splitting between the conscious societal self, the *je*, and the suppressed id urges, carried within the irrepressible *moi*.

Introjection<sup>4</sup> of and resistance to debilitating ideologies find residence in the bodies of political prisoners, as I will discuss with reference to the writings of Steve Biko, Fanon, and JanMohamed (on race), Michel Foucault (on class), Sandra Lee Bartky and Benstock (on gender) and Jacques Lacan (on identity). My analysis in this chapter is informed throughout by the meticulous study of Sandra Michelle Young on negotiations of gendered subjectivities in the apartheid prison (1996). On interpreting the texts of South African autobiographers in terms of the theories of Foucault and Lacan, I have found Fanon’s analysis of colonialism a necessary counter-balance to what could easily become a reading slanted solely toward Western conceptions of discrete selfhood.

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<sup>3</sup> Disguised as a foreigner named Monsieur Galaska, Breytenbach had come to South Africa to recruit two people to establish a trade union office abroad, potentially as a front for more radical activity. He was detained at Jan Smuts airport in Johannesburg in August 1975 and released from Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town in December 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Through the psychological process of introjection, “the subject transposes objects and their inherent qualities from the ‘outside’ to the ‘inside’ of himself [sic]” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 229).

*A feminist reading of Foucault's theory of discipline*

In his structural analysis of social mechanisms of restraint, Foucault evokes the architectural design for a model prison devised by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. Called the Panopticon, the Benthamite prison serves as a model to explicate the culture of surveillance produced by the technologies and so-called democratic ideologies of the modern state (Foucault 1977: 195-200). The encompassing gaze facilitated by the structure of the Panopticon, by which all prisoners are made simultaneously visible to their observer through a manipulation of space, glass and light, denotes the invasiveness of contemporary Western culture, through which controlling practices find overt forms in institutions such as the mental clinic, the hospital and the prison. Foucault writes that “the soul is the prison of the body,” chiasmatically evoking a traditional dictum to expose the manipulations facilitated by the construction of a soul/body dichotomy: punishment, ostensibly meant for rehabilitating the soul, invariably leads to the discipline of the body (30). With reference to Foucault, Young exposes the “heightened sophistication of a criminological jurisprudence,” as a shallow veneer, its collaborative “use of ‘technicians’ in the developing fields of the human sciences, from doctors and warders to chaplains and psychologists,” a humanitarian mask underneath which a discourse of unequal power relations consistently festers (1996: 83). Just as the monitoring gaze is “internalized by the inmate” of a disciplinary institution, who is trained to behave as if she were continuously watched, so the modern state trains its citizens to become “isolated and self-policing subjects” (Bartky 1988: 62). Reading Foucault’s assumption of a universal imprisoned body as a perpetuation of the silence surrounding difference and subjugation in the experience of the female subject, Bartky further explores the disciplinary undertones of social practices designed to tame the female subject and render her “docile” (62-64).

Bartky extends Foucault's analysis of the institutional gaze to the monitoring of women's bodies and minds, suggesting that the "heightened self-consciousness" that arises in the mind of the institutionalized subject is also one of the ways in which various patriarchies control the female in society. Women are educated to regulate themselves in standards of femininity (64). Distinguishing between femaleness, which is a genetic condition, and femininity, which is "an artifice, [considered to be] an achievement," Butler views gender itself as an enactment or performance of identity rather than an ontological essence bound within the binary frame of male and female sexes (1990: 136). As Robert Morrell points out, masculinity is also "a collective gender identity and not a natural attribute," and moreover, it is "fluid," multiplicitous and subject to flux according to time, place and circumstance (1998: 607). The "socially constructed nature" of diverse masculinities as well as femininities have been largely elided in South African history before 1990 (605), Morrell suggests, and he offers ways of redressing these critical lacunae. As my emphasis in this dissertation is on feminine autobiographical and political selves, however, I have chosen not to problematize representations of masculinities here.

Both Butler and Bartky suggest that the "effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body" and through the ritualized "repetition of acts" (Butler 1990: 141). Three categories of disciplinary practice are designed to "produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine," Bartky argues. She codifies them as practices which "aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration," those which "create a specific repertoire of gestures, postures and movements," and finally "those that are directed towards the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (1988: 64). While acknowledging that the practices of femininities enforce contortions of body and mind on the female subject, Bartky refuses to

accept Foucault's implication that the subject is almost "wholly constituted by the power-knowledge regime" (82). Surmising that collusion with practices of femininity is acquiescence, Bartky cites resistance as an available option for women, declaring that "the rebellion is put down every time a woman picks up her eyebrow tweezers or embarks upon a new diet." Interestingly, however, political women prisoners sometimes read and enact adherence to practices of decorating or depilating their bodies as articulations of defiance, not compliance. If "[h]istorically the forms and occasions of resistance are manifold," as Bartky notes, then it is also possible that women may appropriate the very practices intended to control them by reconfiguring them as (complicated) signifiers of freedom.

*Fractured reflections: Lacan's "mirror stage"*

Regulating her body through the panoptical gaze, the female subject is caught within a discourse of artifice: to 'achieve' femininity, she must control and decorate her body in specific ways. Strung across often conflicting socially (and juridically) constructed axes, diverse subject positions cannot be reconciled in terms of culturally available paradigms. Representing the self textually is therefore rendered problematic when the diverse grids along which the gendered self is placed and places itself are socially configured as contentious categories. Bluntly put, the acknowledgement of one position, say that of 'the loving mother,' threatens to negate another position, for example that of 'the political activist.' Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalytical theories, Benstock suggests that an inevitable irreconcilability of subject positions results in an identity that is internally fissured.

According to Lacan's conception of the "mirror stage" in psychic development, infants between the ages of six to eighteen months establish their identity as separate from the mother through

acts of self-recognition (Wilden 1968b: xiii). In contrast to the pre-mirror stage, when the child perceives herself as a *corps morcelé*, “an image of the ‘body in bits and pieces,’ or as put together like a mismatched jigsaw puzzle” (Wilden 1968a: 174), in the mirror stage the child attains a certain awareness of corporeal unity through the identification of her own image in a looking-glass. At the moment of recognition of an image at once exterior to (yet simultaneously of) the child, she experiences a sensation which Lacan terms *jouissance* (1968: 11), translated variously as “jubilation” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 251), “enjoyment” or “pleasure” (Wilden in Lacan 1968: 29n). The child’s physicality is rendered visible from the viewpoint of the other. The moment of recognition is partial and disjointed, however, because the wholeness implied by the mirror image is contingent upon the conformation of the self to the norms of society. According to Lacan, a split in the child’s self transpires through the concurrent processes of language acquisition (learning to speak and to understand verbal communication) and acculturation (initiation into the norms of the dominant culture). Ellie Ragland-Sullivan suggests that these processes occur primarily via the “voice (an aural image)” and “the gaze (a visual image),” which together communicate the rules of culture to the child, who internalizes them (1986: xvi). Thus, the child’s encounter with the image in the looking-glass is met with “sorrow” as well as “joy (*jouissance*),” because the unity implied by that image is by definition “alien, borrowed, and false” (Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 134).

Incoherence between the inner image of self and the Symbolic or “social order of symbols, rules and language” to which we learn to conform results in fractured identities (Lacan 1968: 16). The Lacanian Symbolic cannot be a globally uniform one, however, but must vary according to particularities of gender, culture and location. The goal of the Symbolic is to maintain power relationships through the structuring of human interaction and perception according to

logocentric paradigms. Benstock sketches an intriguing analogy between the split in identity that occurs through the child's internalization of the Symbolic and the textual discrepancies that occur in autobiographical works, despite attempts to write a unitary self. For Benstock, Georges Gusdorf's definition of autobiography as a conscious act of reconstituting the "special unity and identity of the self across time" communicates underlying expectations of individual and communal repression<sup>5</sup> (1988: 14–15). Through the pressure to conform to an artificially consistent ideal of selfhood, the subject, "who both 'is' [consciously] and 'is not' [unconsciously] the reflected image" (15), is forced to shore itself up continually against its own dissonant selves. If language acquisition and identity formation are concurrent processes, then language may be seen to function as an effective defense against the unconscious, which houses unacceptable aspects of self. At the same time, because the process of self-symbolization (which involves defining and ascribing value to conceptions of subjecthood) necessarily involves language, the use of words to bolster the Lacanian *je*, or the conscious "speaking subject" (Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 43), will simultaneously result in leaked messages from the *moi*, or the receptacle of multiple, discordant selves within the unconscious.<sup>6</sup> As the manifold rogue elements of self make periodic incursions into the socially acceptable image projected and reflected by the subject, the defense mechanism is thwarted. Hence, language betrays the image it has been used to construct.

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'repression' here refers to the eradication from the conscious mind of unsettling thoughts and feelings which threaten to disrupt socially acceptable conceptions of self, and their subsequent concealment within the unconscious.

<sup>6</sup> Benstock appears to have transposed the original meanings of the *moi* and the *je* as Lacan and Ragland-Sullivan present them: Benstock designates the *je* as "discordant" and "multiple," and the *moi* as essentially defensive, structured by the law of language as defined by the Symbolic (16). However, both Lacan and Ragland-Sullivan describe these terms antithetically: the *je* is the conscious speaking self which strives for coherence, whereas the *moi* is the location of multiple, incongruous aspects of self, situated unconsciously. Ragland-Sullivan clearly delineates the difference between the *je* and *moi* as follows: "the subject of reality reconstruction or subjective perception – the *moi* – is elusive, kaleidoscopic, and evanescent, whereas the subject of meaning and speech – the *je* – seeks to "translate" the *moi* while adhering to cultural stipulations" (44).

The conflicting roles through which Ruth First names her identity at different times in 117 Days, such as “Mrs. Slovo” (107), “a nice girl” (128) or “any South African Madam” (37), may therefore be read, on one level, as ways of deflecting the threat of *moi* elements in the text. For me, the vacillation of narrator and protagonist back and forth between irreconcilable *je* positions is not simply an attempt at escape from the demands of interrogation, but also enact her striving to accommodate those very rogue elements (such as a desire for power over her environment and erotic feelings outside her marriage) which cannot be reconciled through the sites of gendered subjecthood allowed her. Skittering endlessly back and forth between subject positions, the *moi* finds expression primarily in textual disruption.

*Internalizing the gaze: 117 Days and Strikes*

Articulated in her letter to Joe Slovo, the scrutiny to which Ruth First subjects her physical appearance continues within the prison, where she engages in disciplinary practices that Bartky suggests are designed to enhance the body as “an ornamented surface.” Ruth First’s personal belongings on her arrival at Marshall Square include “an eyebrow tweezer” and “a hand mirror,” which are immediately confiscated by the wardress (First 1965: 17). When she complains to the Station Commandant, Ruth First regains possession of the “prohibited” tools necessary to adjust her body to meet the sanitized standards of the modern ‘male gaze.’ Painstakingly, Ruth First describes her daily routine of plucking her “eyebrows,” then the hair from her legs, “one hair at a time,” with her “small set of tweezers” (73). When she was allowed outside in the sun, Ruth First admits pulling “out the strands of grey hair” growing at her temples. Suggesting to women that their bodies are “deficient,” advertising in contemporary patriarchal culture admonishes women for having what is termed “excess hair,” which is figured as a symptom of masculinity (Bartky 1988: 62). As apparently unnatural protrusions on the regimentally smooth surface of the

gendered body, hair must be removed at an often considerable cost in terms of time, pain and money. The ordinary state of their bodies deemed socially unacceptable, women are cajoled into buying depilatory products such chemical creams, waxes, razors and lasers in order to attain an artificially produced feminine ideal which they have internalized. Signs of age, the grey hairs, are also removed or disguised to produce an image of a youthful body. When faced with patriarchal constructs of femininity, Ruth First seems to suspend her habitual interrogative stance vis-à-vis accepted ideologies and adheres to them apparently unquestioningly. In this sense, Ruth First is comparable to a certain group of orthodox Marxist women critics whom Bartky evokes, intelligent women who reject “the traditional sexual division of labor” into separate gendered spheres, yet still reproduce “conventional standards of feminine body display” (1988: 78).

In their respective studies of commercial magazines aimed at the black market, both Driver (1996a) and Eve Bertelsen (1998) suggest that Western consumerism casts a consistent influence on the construction of local femininities. In her analysis of Drum magazine and its portrayal of gender during the 1950s, Driver writes that “[a]dvertisements for skin-lightening creams, hair-straightening lotions and competitions around the three ‘vital statistics’ defined the modern African woman’s body as an idealized European or American look-alike” (1996a: 234). The “terrible struggles” with her own body that Mashinini writes about reflect an internalization of cultural fabrications of genetic inadequacy, constructed through projections of racist ideologies and white gender ideals by the media (1989: 9). The irresolute fact of Mashinini’s black female body, which can never be lightened or straightened enough to ‘pass for white,’ renders the dream of assimilation<sup>7</sup> into the white world of privilege unattainable. Initially Mashinini accepts the

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<sup>7</sup> In the dissertation, I take the term assimilation to mean “a process of seeking integration in a larger society and increasingly taking one’s ideas and customs from it” (Rubin 1995: xiv).

projections of colonial ideology, and figures her body as the enemy, perceiving her blackness as a hindrance to material affluence and social respectability. Just as the settler aims to ‘civilize’ the ‘native,’ so too, as a young woman, does Mashinini feel she must tame her physical form and mold it to the colonizer’s image.

Looking back on old photographs of herself wearing a wig, the negatives of which were “lightened for us, to make us look as much like white people as possible,” Mashinini remembers her silent misery: “Even then, looking at my face, I don’t think that wig made me too happy” (1989: 9). Manifest in the form of fake hair, the colonial lie of black inferiority is worn on Mashinini’s head as an emblem of her subscription to ideologies of white beauty. In a footnote at the bottom of the page, Mashinini proleptically lists the harmful, physical effects of hydroquinin, the active chemical in skin lightening creams. A contrast between Mashinini’s past self, who did not challenge the ideological context in which she operated, and Mashinini’s present black worker activist identity is thus embedded textually. In *A Life*, Ramphele similarly attributes the shedding of her wig as well as her Anglicized “ ‘slave name’,” Aletta, to the influence of the BCM and Biko (1995: 57).

While Ruth First’s hand mirror in *117 Days* signifies her adherence to disciplinary practices of femininity, a lack of mirrors in *Strikes* highlights Mashinini’s dependence on the community for affirmation. On her return home from jail in May 1982, Mashinini writes of an inability to recognize her own reflection:

The first time I had caught sight of myself in a mirror after all that time I had been [sic] shocked. I was a different person altogether. I am a very big person by stature, a fat person, though not tall. But now I was so thin and small, and my complexion had gone so fair from being in the shade for all that time, that I couldn’t believe my eyes that this was

me. It shook me a lot. I thought it was my sister that was in that bathroom with me, my sister who is very fair (1989: 106).

Detained in November 1981 in Johannesburg, Mashinini articulates the dislocation wrought by solitary confinement through her inability to identify her own image in the looking glass. Prevented from exposing her skin to the sun while in jail, Mashinini conveys the disjuncture between her pre-incarceration identity and her post-prison self by displacing<sup>8</sup> the menace of whiteness onto an alter ego, the form of a fairer sister. Confined initially at Jeppe Police Station, and later (like Ruth First) at Pretoria Central Prison, Mashinini writes of a craving to see another person of her own racial background with whom she can identify. Undergoing a kind of *jouissance* when she saw a black policewoman, Mashinini records her elation in recognizing another like herself: “oh my God, I was so glad to see a black person, even a black police person. I was so sick of seeing those white people [. . .] it was making me ill” (1989: 73). Revulsion at the behaviour of white people is experienced corporeally. For Mashinini, whiteness temporarily becomes a disease, which she has ‘caught’ while in prison.

On occupying the cell, Mashinini recalls feeling stripped “bare” (61). Denied the concessions given Ruth First, Mashinini is forced to relinquish all her personal possessions, which exacerbates her sense of alienation both from self and community. Predicating a cohesive sense of selfhood in part on the outline of her physical body reflected in the glass, she observes: “It’s odd what happens when you don’t see yourself in a mirror for such a long time. You don’t recognise yourself. You think, who am I?” (87). Aloneness quickly turns into self-negation. While Ruth First’s fastidiousness in grooming herself is symptomatic of what she terms her

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<sup>8</sup> I have used the term ‘displacement’ here in its psychoanalytic sense, as “the unconscious shifting of feeling from its real object to another where it is less threatening to the ego,” or the part of the personality that interfaces with the external reality (Statt 1998: 40).

“long loneliness” (1965: 73), the lack of the reflecting gaze of others results in an absencing of Mashinini from her own consciousness. Later, after she was released and she had received emotional support from colleagues, family and friends, Mashinini is able to re-conceive of herself as an effectual person with a designated place in the world: “I was still at the head of my union,” she affirms at the end of Chapter Ten (99). Outside the prison walls, the mirror is restored through the gaze of communal others, those perceived as like or similar to oneself. Beneath such a gaze, Mashinini feels entitled to ‘know’ herself again through its reflection.

*Distorted reflections in True Confessions and Jail Diary*

Like Mashinini, Breytenbach figures whiteness in metaphors of disease. Referring to his pale skin as “albino” in his memoir’s title, he compares his whiteness to a hereditary disorder which manifests when an ethnically black person is born without pigmentation. Thus, Breytenbach inverts the apartheid perception of blackness as deviation from the white ‘norm.’ Presenting his body as abnormally light, symptomatic of the psychic sickness he views as congenital to the Afrikaans culture of his birth, Breytenbach’s self is a doubly split one, a misfit in both black communities and white racist culture. Just as Bram Fischer’s illustrious heritage served to highlight the perceived heinousness of his defection for many members of his ethnic community, so too did Breytenbach’s placement in a prominent Afrikaner family.<sup>9</sup> Through the dual acts of betrayal and confession, Breytenbach produces his own identity to Mr. Investigator, his fictional reader-interrogator. “Mr. I,” as Breytenbach at one point intimately addresses the generalized

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<sup>9</sup> Both Breytenbach’s brothers were actively involved with the government: the eldest, Jan, was a brigadier-general in charge of the country’s “crack anti-guerilla special unit,” while the second brother, Cloete, was a journalist with what Breytenbach describes as “decidedly fascist sympathies” (1984: 68). “‘For the sake of Afrikaans literature,’” Breytenbach was granted a special dispensation from the minister to continue writing while in prison, with certain restrictions (159).

interrogator of his text, suggests the complete conflation of self in the hostile, controlling Other (1984: 140).

In True Confessions, Breytenbach likens the process of inscribing the self to creating what he terms “your own mirror,” producing “hair by hair and pore by pore your own face” (1984: 155). Referring to himself by the second-person pronoun, Breytenbach’s grammar conveys immediately a splitting of self. Lacking a “common mirror” in the form of a genuine community of peers, Breytenbach implies, leads to an erosion of identity. A dramatic enactment of violently fissured identity follows shortly in his text through his account of the attempted suicide of a Jewish ex-security guard in a neighbouring cell, who uses mirror fragments to slash his own stomach and wrists (156). While under interrogation, Breytenbach’s skin begins to peel, a visceral performance of his inseparability from and rejection of his own ethnicity. As if allergic to his own body, Breytenbach describes his skin flaking “over the shoulders,” blistering in his “moustache” and between his “eyes” (1984: 152). The painful separation of layers of skin serves as a metaphor for both Breytenbach’s recoil from what he perceives as the “tragically flawed culture” (161) of his birth, and the damage wrought by his prolonged exposure under the burning eyes of “Mr. Investalligator” (152). Breytenbach’s use of multiple names for his narratee-interrogator, as well as for himself (“Dick,” “Antoine,” “Hervé,” “Jan Blom,” “Christian Jean-Marc Galaska,” “the Professor” and “Mr. Bird”), suggest a self which both fractures the pretensions of the apartheid prison system and is also fractured by his entanglement within it, as Schalkwyk suggests (1994: 31).

In Jail Diary, Sachs also scrutinizes his “physical self” in the privacy of the cell:

Looking at my physical self I always find an entertaining pastime. My measurements and assessments are objective, the conclusions I arrive at not of the slightest importance. The probing of my moral and emotional self [. . .] is a more disturbing process (1966: 42).

While Sachs’ declaration of objectivity regarding his “physical self” must be laid open to question, his reading of his reflected bodily image differs vastly from Ruth First’s and Breytenbach’s deliberations: seemingly able here to separate his “moral and emotional selves” from the image in the “spotted shaving mirror,” Sachs does not imbue his features with the personal epistemology that marks Ruth First’s reading of her own face. Gazing at his reflection, Sachs sees an “interesting, mobile face,” neither “beautiful, as some women have declared,” nor “ugly, as others have implied” (41). Sachs purports neither to believe nor internalize value judgments placed on his appearance by nameless female lovers, but instead configures them as both a source of amusement and self-affirmation. After repeated interrogations and prolonged isolation, however, the “entertaining pastime” of contemplating himself deteriorates to the point where, like Mashinini, Sachs feels alienated from his reflection. “I am a mirror bent in on itself,” he writes near the end of his memoir (252). Sachs’ analogy indicates the nullification of self wrought by his own mind as well as by his interrogators via a relentless process of double investigation. The bent mirror hints at a splintered ‘I,’ shattered by the pressure of too much gazing. Or else, if the glass of Sachs’ figurative mirror is able to bend surrealistically, without breaking, then the ‘I’ may be imagined as a dual set of reflective surfaces, between which no referential self - a vacuum, a lack - is rebounded. The moments of *jouissance* Sachs experiences when contemplating his face from the viewpoint of the feminine Other in the shaving mirror at Maitland Police Station disintegrate beneath the interrogatory gaze.

Recording his periodic attempts to escape his imprisoned body, Sachs retreats into mental flights of fantasy, which are often either erotic or politically utopian. In a chapter entitled 'Body and Soul,' Sachs writes: "Often when I lie on my bed I feel as though my soul is separating from my body" (252). Sachs describes his mind/soul floating to the ceiling where "it coalesces and embodies itself into a shape," usually "that of an owl that stares at me, calmly, patiently, and without emotion." Initially, Sachs' mind/soul seems immune to any assaults which the exposed, temporal and feeling body is forced to endure. When his body begins to convulse sporadically in what he sees as "revenge" for his mind's abandonment of it, Sachs' finds his ability to escape suffering is thwarted, however. Waging war within himself through his subscription to the mind/body dichotomy of traditional Western thought, Sachs frequently finds himself overcome by an urge to smash his head on the cement floor while showering after exercise time. Forced to confront the corporeal, he graphically imagines his "cranium splitting wide apart," his "brain and thoughts bursting out like pomegranate pips" (253). Sachs' visceral image poignantly underlines the inadequacy of the mind/body dichotomy as a way of managing the pain of deprivation and loneliness. From its lofty vantage point in the ceiling, Sachs' mind/soul must return to his body, from which it cannot escape except through the destruction of the physical.

Sachs' subscription to the mind/body opposition relates to his approach to whiteness as philosophical "conflict" (102) as opposed to Breytenbach's conception of it as innate contamination. Aligning his "white skin" with the regime, Sachs allies his soul with his independent political convictions. Devoting a chapter of Jail Diary to a discussion of the "many problems that beset a White person who joins in the non-White emancipatory movement," Sachs attributes difficulties not to genetic guilt, but to subject positioning, acknowledging that his struggle against apartheid is complicated by the material benefits he gains by it. Configuring

himself as “a lever to prise out better conditions for all,” Sachs appeals retrospectively to the “other political prisoners” with whom he could not speak while in prison (101). While interred at Wynberg Police Station, Sachs arranged for the “non-White” politicals to share in his extra food, to benefit from the extra minutes added to his exercise period, and from his fixed lights-off time.<sup>10</sup> Admitting openly that a revulsion to physical violence as well as “moral difficulties” prevent him from engaging directly in armed struggle (104), Sachs situates himself as a potential “propagandist on the side of the Africans” (105).

A decade later, Biko would criticize the liberal stance taken by Sachs and others in his regular monthly column for the SASO (South African Students’ Organization) newsletter. In ‘Black Souls in White Skins?’ (1970), for instance, Biko links accepting privileges as inextricable from collusion, advising white liberals to “leave blacks to take care of their own business” because they cannot “escape being part of the oppressor camp” (23). Sachs nevertheless searches for his own place within the struggle, attempting to use whiteness as a bridge to improve conditions for all. Thirty years later, Sachs enacts crossing the bridge of a racially fraught past to a democratically inclusive present by running from Caledon Square Police Station, the place of his original detention, to the sea. Although his body had been shattered by a car bomb six years earlier, Sachs feels overcome with joy at the simultaneity of celebrating both self and nation, affirmed by the rapturous cheers of multiracial luminaries and black hotel workers shouting, “‘Viva, comrade Albie, viva’ ” (1990: 205).

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<sup>10</sup> While prisons were segregated by race under apartheid, cells at police stations held both “whites” and “non-whites.” Due to their special status, detainees were ultimately under the jurisdiction of the Security Branch and not the criminal prison system, and thus they were sometimes held under irregular conditions in order to conceal their whereabouts. Ruth First, for instance, spent twenty-eight days at Pretoria Central Prison, then a criminal facility for black women serving terms of six months or longer.

As Sachs and Ruth First demonstrate through a reading of their lifeworks, crossing communal barriers is a precarious endeavour invariably approached with difficulty. At a public commemoration held for Ruth First ten years after her death, then ANC President Nelson Mandela depicts her retrospectively as a woman who from the outset “readily crossed the racial barrier that so few whites were, or still are, able to cross” (1992). Yet in *117 Days*, Ruth First clearly communicates the social chasm separating her from other black prisoners, as will be discussed below. Declining to complicate her whiteness in her memoir, Ruth First appears to perceive her skin colour here neither as aberration nor as a source of guilt implicating her in racism, but rather as a fact which can be used to highlight the ironies of the apartheid system: “like any white South African madam,” she comments wryly, “I sat in bed each morning, and Africans did the cleaning for the ‘missus’ ” (1965: 37).

#### *Ambivalent domesticities in 117 Days and Strikes*

Observing in *117 Days* that “prisons are judged by their state of cleanliness” rather than their effectiveness as places of reform or rehabilitation (70), Ruth First marks the equation of domestic order with moral virtue at Pretoria Central, where the grass edges were trimmed “to nail-scissor-clipped neatness” (63) and even the drains were polished (68). By figuring a pair of nail-scissors as a gardening tool, Ruth First implicates pettiness as a characteristic of generic master-slave relationships. Conventionally associated with aspirations of a benign domesticity, cleanliness and neatness function here as oppressive devices which control the prisoner. Recording the psychological effects of living in an excessively clean environment, Ruth First views herself as “buoyant and refractory” in the sooty gloom of Marshall Square, but becomes “increasingly subdued” in the glare of Pretoria Central’s “bright shiny steel” (71). Ostensibly

kept clean for whites like herself, the barren environment starkly emphasizes Ruth First's separation from the black prisoners who are forced to clean her cell.

Also detained at Pretoria Central, Mashinini similarly experiences the extreme cleanliness of her bare cell as oppressively sterile. Earlier "a matter of pride among us" (Mashinini 1989: 10), cleanliness now becomes a sign of an alien whiteness. Like Ruth First, who compares her incarceration to the experience of quarantine, "like being sealed in a sterile tank of glass" (1965: 71), Mashinini too feels cast out from human society. Confined to her room, she cannot even see out of her small window, which, like a wound, seems to be sealed with "Elastoplast" (1989: 61). Repulsed by the filth of her new "huge cell" when she is moved to Jeppe Police Station in Johannesburg, Mashinini ironically wishes to return to the sterility of Pretoria Central, to "my very small, clean cell" (71). Requesting cleaning supplies, Mashinini scrubs the walls, floors and the toilet, reconfiguring cleanliness through her own agency as a source of self-affirmation rather than alienation. Instead of their previous conception of her as a generic "Kaffir" (74), Mashinini imagines the prison authorities "taking an interest in this particular lady criminal who was so concerned about being tidy in her room" (80). Although she rejects the standard working-class designation foisted upon blacks, Mashinini finds that the warders immediately undercut her new subject position as "a lady," reminding her that she "was not in the Carlton Hotel" when she requests hot water. Ironically evoking the whites-only five-star establishment in central Johannesburg to which Mashinini could be admitted only as a cleaner or cook, the warders clearly communicate that she has again flouted her ontological position as servant in the master-slave dialectic of apartheid. As if wishing to flush herself free of the contaminating ideology in which she is forced to participate, Mashinini recounts how "again and again I'd pour disinfectant" into "my toilet [which] was now nice and clean."

Enacting one pole of Manichean allegories with Mashinini, the prison staff at Pretoria Central performed its opposite two decades earlier with Ruth First. Perceiving her to be a genuine “lady criminal,” the Matron assigns Ruth First to “the posh front room of the house” (1965: 62). The Matron’s office, decorated with “an irritable-looking Pekingese” dog and “a bed of snapdragons” outside the window, manifests in the text as another space of domesticated apartheid, while a caged bird “on a pedestal” functions as a *mise en abyme* of Ruth First’s current situation (60). Continuing the parody of domesticity, the neat “row of wardresses” who escort Ruth First upstairs present her with various household articles, including a “gleaming white table-cloth” (61). Discovering that her “posh front room” offers an excellent view of the prison grounds - that is, if she stood “on tiptoe on the iron bedstead” and then hung from the window bars - Ruth First is soon to conceive of it as “my cage” (62). But for now, she writes: “I remained alone in my prison eyrie,” depicting herself as a silent bird of prey which resists the submission implied by the tamed one in the Matron’s office.

Turning her gaze towards the interior of the prison building through the peephole in her door, Ruth First makes out a figure of an unknown “African woman” in a neighbouring cell (62). Unable to see her face, Ruth First cannot elicit any information about her from the silent wardresses who relentlessly survey the woman day and night. Designated as object in the ideological system of the prison, the unknown woman, her head “bare and lowered” in surrender, cannot assume the power to gaze or to articulate her difference (First 1965: 62). The ominous disappearance of the woman from view on the fifth day of her confinement mirrors Ruth First’s failure, despite all her efforts, to adjust her position within master-slave dialectic. Ruth First cannot establish intimacy with the Other. All attempts at contact are foreclosed by her subject position as white ‘missus.’

*An apartheid fairytale*

Manichean allegories of race, as well as Marxist analyses of labour, converge oddly with tropes from traditional Western fairytales in Ruth First's representation of Pretoria Central. On initial view, Ruth First perceives the institution as part of an alien topography, with "fake castellations and imitation towers" (60). Wryly noting the aspirations of fantasy communicated by the "prison architecture," Ruth First marks it as a contested space, alerting the reader to the artificial realities which will be replicated within its walls. As a communist princess locked in the tower of state repression, Ruth First acutely observes the exploitation of the working masses by the capitalist ruling classes: "All week gangs of African convicts laboured in preparation for the week-ends, sweeping, hosing, planting, weeding" for the benefit of the warders and their girlfriends, who "sunbathed and swam, dived and splashed, lazed and flirted" (63). Just as verbs of toil, which characterize the convicts' activities, jostle with verbs of leisure, so too do descriptions of their emaciated physical bearing as "animated stick figures" wearing "dirty off-white singlets and shorts" jar against those of the "bronzed muscled" warders, whose "girl-friends wore bikinis and carried Italian straw bags."

First's Prince Charming, or so he seems initially, arrives to rescue Ruth First from her tower cloister. Lieutenant Johannes Jacobus Viktor, the "fairer of the two men" who escort Ruth First back to Johannesburg, pleasantly converses with her, "unlike the drive to Pretoria when Nel and Van Rensburg had ignored me," Ruth First notes petulantly (86). Of her initial meeting with her "saviour-detective" (87), Ruth First writes: "between Viktor and me there was an atmosphere of bristling animosity. He was provocative; I was waspish. And felt all the better for it" (88). The proliferation of sexually aggressive imagery in these lines suggests not only Ruth First's attraction to Viktor, but the sense of restored agency that results from the exchange. Inviting her

to assume her familiar role of the gracious, elegant hostess, Viktor asks Ruth First to recommend a good brandy during the drive to Johannesburg. Appearing a chivalrous suitor on their next meeting in an interview room at Marshall Square, Viktor returns a bottle of perfume to Ruth First that had fallen out of her handbag in his car (102). The bottle of perfume represents perhaps Ruth First's lost identity as a feminine object of desire, a subject position which she was forced to relinquish as a prisoner. By restoring the perfume, Viktor symbolically enacts the return of a misplaced part of herself. Ultimately, however, the perfume is not only an affirmation of female sexuality, but also what Ruth First terms "a piece of bait" (102), part of an orchestrated seduction which almost led her to betray her own values as an activist.

Later, after she ventured a statement, Ruth First omits to put on make-up for the first time in detention, an omission symptomatic, perhaps, of her difficulty at meeting her own gaze in the mirror (124). Decorating the body, or what Ruth First terms applying feminine "armour," becomes redundant following the exposure of her "vulnerable centre" (127). Highlighting the "horrible dependency that the interrogated can begin to feel upon his or her interrogators," Schalkwyk notes that the "self-loathing" Ruth First comes to feel is "characteristic" of others who found themselves in similar predicaments, such as white activist Hugh Lewin (2000: 281). Ruth First's initial attraction to Viktor ends in disappointment: no longer her "saviour-detective," he is revealed to be a "treacherous" villain "laden with calculating charm and flattery thick" (First 1965: 141).

#### *Wardresses, prisoners and the female grotesque*

If Viktor plays villain-prince to Ruth First's contemporary Cinderella in 117 Days, then a pair of senior wardresses becomes "the two ugly sisters" who banish her from the metaphorical ball of

social participation (30). Dismissing the junior wardresses as semi-literate and empty-headed, preoccupied with frivolous occupations like “primping their hair and chattering” about “boyfriends,” Ruth First simultaneously figures the more senior educated matrons as “intellectual prison viragos” (69), or “loud-voiced, ill-tempered, scolding” women (Webster’s Universal Dictionary 1968: 1672).<sup>11</sup> The matrons are female grotesques, mutated by their appropriation of masculine discourse. Ramphele, too, figures one of her female warders<sup>12</sup> in similar terms as “an old unhappy woman who spoke with such a deep voice one would swear that it was a male voice” (1995: 113). Nicknamed “*Hodoshe*, a Xhosa word for a large green fly” by the common law prisoners because she “neglected herself and was smelly and unpleasant,” the woman warder is further de-sexed through her lack of attractiveness to men. In contrast to *Hodoshe*, Ramphele figures herself as ‘*Iramram*,’ meaning “the delicate one, in reference to my small physical frame” (99). *Iramram* was one of the praise names bestowed upon Ramphele by the village women of Zinyoka in the Eastern Cape in honour of her work as a doctor. Ramphele’s petite body, weighing “no more than fifty kilograms” when she was released, but “healthy because of yoga exercises” and the dispensation to buy her own food, stands out starkly in the reader’s mind in comparison with the gross physicality of *Hodoshe* (114). Despite her imprisonment, Ramphele emerges triumphant against the monstrous figure of the female warder through her conformity with conventionally feminine dimensions of bodily size.

Unlike Ramphele, who in A Life firmly relegates the female grotesque to the domain of the Other, Vera suggests that Ruth First unconsciously apprehends herself in terms of this archetype

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<sup>11</sup> The prefix of *virago* means “man” in Latin. The word implies ferocity and belligerency, qualities which confer abnormality when transferred across the line of gender in modern Western culture.

<sup>12</sup> Detained a decade after Ruth First and writing three decades after 117 Days was published. Ramphele refers to the wardresses as women “warders” (1995: 112), terminology which perhaps reflects the influence of feminism, by the late 1970s, on the prison system itself.

at certain places in 117 Days (1995: 193). Projecting her distorted self-image onto the walls of the “brick and bar monster that is Marshall Square” from its inner courtyard during exercise time, Ruth First portrays the prison building as a gigantic female beast whose “corset of iron trellis” barely restrains its hideous body (1965: 42). The pattern or “lace” of plumbing pipes running the length of each wall of the quadrangle hints at the stifling constructs of femininity through which the body is disciplined. Symbolic also of the viragos who inhabit it, Ruth First represents the building as the antithesis of the traditional conception of home, a safe shelter imbued with a nurturing feminine presence. Instead, she figures Pretoria Central as a nightmarish construction which consumes all who enter it.

Conceptions of the female grotesque as a devouring monster who encroaches on the body space of others permeate Mashinini’s narrative, too. Trained to take up less physical space than men, women in contemporary culture face social punishment when seen to appropriate more room than they are thought to deserve (Bartky 1988: 66-67). As Vera points out, Mashinini’s experience of prison radiates from her female body outwards (1995: 229), her heavy body weight a source of ridicule for her interrogators: “ ‘You’re fat, Kaffir *meid* [girl], ” a policeman accuses Mashinini on the first day of her detention at John Vorster Square (1989: 54). Later, another policeman named Whitehead would ironically tell her “not to worry” that she was “fat” because by the time she was discharged from prison, she “would be the size of a marble” (76). The violence of Whitehead’s metaphor compresses Mashinini’s physical form into an inanimate object, an insignificant plaything to be hurled about amongst boys in a playground. Later, alone in her cell, Mashinini reproduces Whitehead’s monstrous conception of her own body by imagining that as she slept, her weight was “squeezing the life out of my own grandchildren,” whose photograph she had hidden beneath the blankets (85).

If one of the attributes of femininity is a particular body size, as Bartky posits (1988: 64), then transgressing the socially constructed continuum of acceptable weight automatically carries the mark of deviancy, regardless of whether the transgressor is the prisoner or the wardress who guards her. In *Where Sixpence Lives*, for instance, Kitson evokes the ‘abnormal’ physical dimensions of a Newlands Police Station matron in order to designate her as an outsider in the discourse of the ordinary. Although a prisoner, the petite and slim appearance of Kitson conveys social acceptability, while that of the wardress, a “big, thick, square-looking woman with short straight black hair,” communicates social deviancy (1986: 152). Squares and straight lines delineate the matron’s large body, as if mimicking a generic male form. Her use of a *sjambok*, a leather whip widely used by police in crowd control, completes the matron’s portrayal as a serious aberrant in a world constrained by gender norms. In *No Child’s Play*, Makhoere evokes a similar stereotype, a hefty white wardress nicknamed Mbomvana who “could pass for a rugby scrum-half” (15). Mbomvana’s spinster status reinforces her designation as a female grotesque.

### *Peepholes and averted gazes*

The interpolation of the male gaze within the disciplinary practices of the prison colludes with and complicates the objectification of the female prisoner. Of the warders who could view her from a hidden vantage point in the corridor at Pretoria Central, Mashinini writes:

I would just see two eyes piercing at me. All I could see was their eyes. It was very, very frightful. I couldn’t get used to it. I thought, it’s like an animal, to see those two eyes, and I’m in a cage. It was frightening (1989: 64).

The eyes “piercing at” Mashinini invade her body, metaphorically penetrating her awake or asleep, as Young suggests through her invocation of visual intrusion as “injury” (1996: 133). It is not clear who is “like an animal”: Mashinini, or the Other with predatory eyes, glaring at her

from the dark. The “penny-sized peephole” in the middle of Ruth First’s cell door similarly symbolizes a culture of visual intrusion in *117 Days* (First 1965: 29). By day, Ruth First is subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of the wardresses, and by night, the male warders, who “sidled up to the peephole to see for themselves.” She imagines what would be seen from the other side of the door: her body, in an arrangement of different poses: “Sitting up or lying down. Laughing or crying. Facing the wall or turned away from it. Alive or dead.” Ruth First attributes these poses to a generic “the prisoner,” thus conveying her sense of objectification. Purporting to protect the prisoner’s chastity, the wardresses also facilitate and replicate the prurience of the male warders. “If men warders wanted to see women prisoners, they said, they should ask the wardress to unlock the door and see for herself if it was ‘safe’ for a man to look,” writes Ruth First. “Only then should the officer be invited to make his inspection.” Railing against the contrived virtue and proprietary prurience with which she is alternately treated, Ruth First criticizes the wardresses’ spurious modesty as much as the officer’s disrespect for her privacy. The language of courtship (the woman must be appropriately dressed, the man must be “invited” inside) is inappropriate in the realm of the prison, in which the prisoner is safe neither from prying looks nor from grosser forms of invasive behaviour.

While the pair of eyes which Mashinini sees as ubiquitous to her experience of the cell may belong to warders of either gender, they can nevertheless be read as emblematic of what Bartky suggests is the “panoptical male connoisseur [which] resides within the consciousness of most women” (1988: 71). At the same time, Bartky marks out a resisting space for women in their experiences of the gaze. Mashinini’s text in particular situates the location for rebellion in the body. Anxious that she has never seen a woman handcuffed before, or wearing “bangles” as a white policewoman mockingly suggests, (1989: 65), Mashinini nevertheless raises her bound

hands in the streets of Pretoria as a brazen gesture of defiance. Contesting the label of monstrosity implied by the averted gaze of the other women prisoners, Mashinini intentionally makes eye contact with “passers-by” in the street (66). Although everybody, “[b]lack, white and all that” stare at her, she notes that only the “black people” express sympathy by murmuring condolences. While she cannot avoid entrapment in the Manichean allegory of the normal and the grotesque, Mashinini nevertheless continues to contest the ideological designations of the prison. Inverting the power hierarchy of the observed and the observer, mediated through what Driver calls “the voice of Black Consciousness” (1991: 346), Mashinini replaces the embarrassment she feels at being escorted to the toilet during interrogation with a tenuous self-assurance, forcing herself to “see that it was the white women warders who should feel humiliated,” and not herself (1989: 74). Like those in *117 Days*, the white women warders Mashinini mentions function as custodians of the gaze, designated to watch when men cannot.

As opposed to Mashinini, who avoids speaking with her white captors, Ruth First uses her articulateness to resist objectification by both male and female prison staff. “Open the door. Don’t spy at me through that hole,” Ruth First would challenge them (1965: 29). Undermining the hierarchy of the gaze by reversing the intended purpose of the peephole, Ruth First discovers that it provided a view from inside out, as well as from outside in. Using the “spyhole” proves to be only a temporary solution, however, for catching the prisoner in the act of looking provided yet another opportunity for the authorities to shame her: “ ‘Back from the door!’ the wardress would cry.” Confessing to feeling “humiliated every time I was detected standing on tiptoe trying to look out,” Ruth First observes that her discomfort lay in the exposure of the limited parameters of her own “ability to exist in isolation.” In his memoir, Sachs, too, emphasizes the importance of keeping his own thoughts hidden: above all, the

“police must never be allowed to see into my mind,” he writes, as an explanation of why he did not inscribe a word about his life as a prisoner while in detention, even though he had access to writing materials during part of that period (1966: 244). While periodically shamed into backing away from the peephole, Ruth First’s demand to see as well as to be seen asserts a subjecthood which contests the imposition of (non)identity perpetuated by apartheid prison ideology. Young submits that this subjecthood is further asserted through the fact of the published text of 117 Days: Ruth First’s inscription of the gaze, unbound from constraints of time and space due to its transmutation into print, frames the wardresses as “objects of a much more potent look” than their ephemeral attempts to constitute her positioning (1996: 143).

#### *Allegories of the bestial and the inanimate*

According to Fanon, the “logical conclusion” of a Manicheism which splits the world into the clean and the soiled, into subject and object, is that it “dehumanises the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal” (1963: 42). Metaphors of animals and inanimate objects, describing both prisoner and warder, abound in the prison memoirs I have chosen to discuss here. In 117 Days, for instance, Ruth First’s record of the epithets that the night-shift wardresses would hurl at the African women prisoners resonates acutely with Fanon’s observation about the dehumanization of the Other: “ ‘*swart slange,*’ ‘*kaffer-meide,*’ ‘*swartgat,*’ ‘*aap,*’ and ‘*swartgoed*’ [black snakes, kaffir-girls, black holes, apes, and black rubbish]” (70).<sup>13</sup> Treated like a caged creature fed “horrible food” at uneven intervals, Mashinini confesses that after fourteen days in solitary confinement, “I was just a lump” (1989: 63). Suffering physical deprivation, Mashinini constructs the collapse of her self-esteem in somatic terms. Although she received much better

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<sup>13</sup> In Jail Diary, Sachs records that the Station Commander at Wynberg Police Station would even address his “Coloured constable” as “you rubbish” (1966: 128). In True Confessions, Breytenbach invokes the figure of a

treatment than her black counterparts, Ruth First too finds herself ensnared in the dehumanizing allegory of the prison in at least two points: at the beginning of her memoir, when she expresses a dread of becoming “one of those colourless insects that slither under a world of flat, grey stones, away from the sky and the sunlight, the grass and people” (1965: 9), and after twenty-eight days in Pretoria Central, when she describes herself as a zoological curiosity, sealed “in a defunct aquarium,” a redundant space where “people came to look at me every now and then and left a ration of food” (71).<sup>14</sup> Forced to be on display, she represents herself in this last image as the powerless object of the gaze. At the same time, Ruth First’s assumption of inconsequentiality also serves as a metaphor of camouflage, facilitating her survival in a hostile environment. Ruth First’s alienation caused by lack of contact with the world outside may be read in terms of, but not equated with, the ‘native’ Other. For Ruth First, who feels “colourless” or invisible at times, is not situated in blackness. Just as Breytenbach’s representation of himself as an albino terrorist delineates a lack of belonging to either racial group, so the absence of colour Ruth First attributes to herself may signify an anxiety that she belongs nowhere except in the anxious scuttling between incompatible subject positions.

Constant surveillance by hostile others results in distortions of Sachs’ body image, too. On his initial detention at Maitland Police Station, Sachs writes that “[g]ravity keeps me to the floor, otherwise I would float around like a spaceman” (1966: 14). Conceiving of his body as unnaturally light, Sachs corporeal imaginings are situated in diametrical opposition to Mashinini’s hallucinations of crushing physical weight. Both images, however, are symptomatic

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monkey “groping behind a mirror for its own image” to describe a rare moment of contact between himself and another prisoner (1985: 141).

<sup>14</sup> I have already discussed Ramphele’s allusion to the warder nicknamed *Hodoshe* in *A Life* (1995: 113). Expressing her disgust a few pages later at the thought of the “paws” of the Security Police touching her “personal effects,” Ramphele continues the analogy of the oppressor as bestial (119-120).

of the objectification of the prisoner in the “tiny alien world” of the cell (13). Not wholly caught by the Manichean allegories which saturate his surroundings, Sachs renegotiates the limitations of his physical self in ways that are liberating as well as confining. At one point, he imagines his “body gliding down [the toilet] bowl and out” to freedom beyond the prison walls (14). Unlike Ruth First, who embarked on a hunger strike, or Mashinini and Kitson, who ceased to eat for certain periods while confined, Sachs carefully tends to the needs of his body through a regulated regime of exercise, eating and sleeping. Acknowledging that proper care of “my body was essential to the maintenance of my self-esteem,” Sachs sees a healthy physicality as a tool to wield against the oppressor (167). Ramphele, too, ensures she remains “healthy” by practicing yoga and making use of a dispensation which allowed her to buy her own food (1995: 114).

"At first, I used to semi-consciously identify myself with the mat in the cell. I felt depersonalized and anonymous," Sachs records of solitary confinement (1966: 166). Describing himself evolving, on receipt of books and writing materials, “from something as inanimate as a mat into something that lives, but merely at an animal level,” Sachs’ hyperbolic simile draws attention to the power of his mind to create its environment. At one point, he portrays his imprisonment as a subterranean world, with himself as a sea creature floating within it:

The whole period of detention often seems like a journey into a different physical dimension, an existence in a strange element, a rapid evolutionary reversion to primitive submarine life. Perhaps it is having read Moby Dick that has made me so sea-conscious (186).

Acutely aware that conditions of minimal external stimulation result in “apathy” and the dissolution of cerebral sharpness and memory, Sachs attributes the prison with triggering a process of physical devolution. Yet Sachs’ speaking self’s intricate use of metaphor and rich, descriptive language undercuts his experiencing self’s claim of lost mental faculty. As a

“primitive submarine” creature, Sachs’ experiencing self lacks awareness about the nature of his environment, while at the same time his speaking self draws attention to its lucid apprehension. Sachs experiments with the Manichean allegories of apartheid ideology by dislodging them from their set moorings. By inscribing himself as a “mat,” an “animal” or a “submarine” creature, and then disclaiming these identities through the act of writing itself, Sachs subverts the conventional opposition between prisoner and citizen, between the inhuman and the human, which imbricates all interactions in the apartheid prison.

### *Aliens and nice girls*

Alluding to the inability of current cultural constructs to properly assign a stable or legitimate position for black women, Ramphele states that if “you are a black woman you are matter out of space” (du Plessis 1996: 6). Existing in a metaphorical outer space in apartheid society, black women, as culturally unclassifiable aliens, occupy only erratically the location of ‘native’ designated the black male on the Manichean continuum. This aporia, however, is obscured by BC ideology. Refusing to accept (or to complicate) blackness in prison as “the negative or other of white,” Makhoere, Mashinini and Ramphele cultivate a view of blackness in this context as a defiance of whiteness (Driver 1991: 346) through a strategy of non-compliance which Makhoere terms “Dis for disregard” (1988: 52). Usually viewing white wardresses or warders as unequivocal enemies, these women detainees seek liaisons instead with black prisoners, and occasionally with black prison staff. Assurances from a black policewoman in Strikes encourage Mashinini to eat again, while “a helpful-looking black woman warder” in A Life became Ramphele’s link “with the outside world” (1995: 112). Communitarity is thus strengthened through emphasis on racial unity and non-engagement with the white world of state control.

Thus, the voices of black women memoirists frequently participate in the communal through claiming their opposition to locations of whiteness.

Seeking to identify with those situated at the opposite polarity, Ruth First's presence in jail disturbs the neat dialectics of the Manichean paradigm. Aware of the bewilderment her subject position as a middle-class white woman leader in a black mass movement seems to cause her interrogators, Ruth First initially revels in their discomfort by alternately undermining and evoking traditional expectations of white womanhood. Denying that she possessed any "woman's intuition" (1965: 60) when van Rensburg tries to prod her into guessing the location of her father, Ruth First earlier assumes the role of an indignant wife when Swanepoel and van Zyl demand information about the money for the Movement that Joe Slovo had apparently sent her from Dar-es-Salaam: " 'Good, it's about time', " she replies, " 'And why shouldn't he support us [herself and the children]?' " (54). Highlighting the distance between her own identity and that of a traditional wife earlier in her text, when she evokes the appellation of 'Mrs.Slovo' in connection with Nel's dour bureaucracy, First is dexterous at playing social parts (53). Over time, however, Ruth First finds solace in her dialogue with her interrogators, even if it is a combative one. Attesting "again and again to the necessity of the communal," the individual voice, although articulating dissent, cannot help but seek a place for herself in the culture of the prison (Schalkwyk 2000: 280).

Originally resisting the gender roles white culture subscribes for her, Ruth First later invokes them consciously as a refuge from cross-examination:

I pretended a confused grasp of situations and the law; I kept repeating the same sentence with an illogical disregard for the context of the discussion [. . .] I decided to play the fluffy-minded frightened girl in a spot, given to inconsequential comment, with an inflexible inability to concentrate and grasp the essence of a problem (128).

When Viktor and van der Merwe respond by calling her “a nice girl,” Ruth First is inwardly relieved, although at the same time professes to find her own attempts “utterly unconvincing.” By turns a “nice girl” and a ‘political,’ Ruth First’s inner dialogue lays bare the impossibility of situating herself unequivocally in a stark dialectical relationship vis-à-vis her interrogators. Earlier, on admission to Pretoria Central, Ruth First mimics the performance of femininity for the benefit of the wardresses who await her arrival. Poking fun at her own attempt to “impress” them, she writes: “I minced in my high heels and thrust my bosom out firmly in my charcoal suit” (61), emphasizing her distinction from the identically uniformed “row of wardresses in khaki skirts, starched pink shirts and khaki forage caps perched on stiff lacquered hair” which “ranged itself about” her (61). Through posture and appearance, Ruth First announces her aloofness also from the pair of white criminal prisoners, “subdued creatures with drab hair and timid movements” (67). Reproducing the gestures and body contours of a fabricated femininity here for the gaze of other women, Ruth First loosens them from their source as controlling practices of patriarchy. Markings of gendered conduct transmute into signifiers of class instead. Ruth First’s conspicuous performance inadvertently underscores her distance too from the group of “African women” prisoners uniformly clad in “coffee-brown wrap-around overalls and bright red *doeks*” whose company she craves but could not attain (66). A lonely figure in a stylish charcoal suit hovering on the margins of apparently homogeneous groupings, Ruth First flounders in her attempts to find community in prison.

## *Conclusion*

117 Days, A Life, Jail Diary, Strikes and True Confessions produce subjects fractured simultaneously by the objectification of the gaze and separation from like others. Breytenbach's peeling skin attests to his internalization of both extremities of an incompatible self-Other dialectic, while Sach's wise owl identity and floating images of self suggest unattainable desires to escape entrapment in the same polarized constructs. Mashinini's perception of her physical frame as alternately massive and invisible renders poignantly the confusing inscription of Manichean allegories, convoluted further by unwritten practices of femininity, in a highly dichotomized environment. Ramphele's inversion of designations of normality and grotesqueness, mediated through representations of her physical delicacy, lays bare the pervasiveness and power of disciplines of femininity even within the prison. And Ruth First's assumption of various conventional feminine roles, such as the "fluffy-minded frightened girl in a spot," the "nice girl" and the "white South African Madam," marks the inextricable link between the monitoring gaze, the need for social acceptance, and the performance of gender, not least for her humorous rendition of these roles and her self-conscious awareness of their contrivance.

As I have discussed, the splitting of selves in prison, refracted through the complex prisms of race, gender and subjectivity, gives rise to diverse perceptions of the body in community, culture and landscape. One of the implications of this diversity is isolation, not only within the prison-house but also from what the activist perceives to be his or her own community situated outside the prison walls. An experience of remoteness from so-called like others after release from prison often leads to the fracturing of previously constructed idylls of coherent and unified social groups. Although disillusionment frequently results in self-destruction or denial, it may also be

the impetus for the ex-detainee to examine his or her own revolutionary community critically in ways that may well improve it. For Ruth First, at least, this seems to be the case. Unlike Lopez Raimundo, a Spanish freedom fighter whom she interviewed in Peking in August 1954, Ruth First was not unilaterally “welcomed, cheered, photographed and feted [sic]” by leftists when she was exiled to London almost a decade later (Ruth First 1954d: 6). Although she was still in demand as “a fiery public speaker” (Gillian Slovo 1997: 90), Ruth First was ostracized in some circles (90, 109). A juxtaposition of her writing about Communist-favoured countries during her Camelot years with that inscribed in exile conveys for me the maturing of her political perceptions, expedited perhaps through the isolation wrought by prison and its aftermath.

For instance, reporting for Fighting Talk from the Soviet Union two months before meeting Raimundo, Ruth First perceives her own “tremendous vitality” and “buoyant confidence” reflected in the faces of “people everywhere” (1954b: 2), despite the fact that most ordinary Russians were severely demoralized after enduring years of war, famine, terror and mass killings. But Ruth First is unflinchingly buoyant (to borrow her own term), designating the ruined city of Stalingrad “the dream of all architects and townplanners” as she tours Russia with an official guide, breathing in what she describes as “a blossoming of culture, everywhere” (3). Situating post-Stalinist Russia at the bright end of a Manichean allegory of cold-war utopias and dystopias, Ruth First can find no fault in a landscape where the people “look as though they can do anything. They know they can and they say so too!” (1954b: 2). Writing about Africa almost twenty years later, however, Ruth First allows herself to see splinters within politically constructed realities, commenting that African political solidarity is but “a skin-deep connexion [sic]” (1970: 7). She reflects, for a moment, on the cohesive, ordered picture military regimes would have her perceive – “the uniforms, the starch, the saluting aides-de-camp, the parade-

ground precision” – yet observes that “the decisiveness of purpose” leaders hope to project is merely a mirage (9). The posturing of “military formations,” she writes, “camouflage a regimented sterility of ideas and social policy.” Just as she had once gazed scrutinizing at her face in the mirror and acknowledged her bodily flaws, so too does Ruth First later allow herself to see the nuances and imperfections in political regimes not normally subject to criticism by hard-line communists. Her long-cherished ideal of communal solidarity disrupted by the intense gaze of the apartheid prison, Ruth First allows herself to speak as a dissident, to look beyond and beneath “skin-deep connexion[s].”

## SECTION THREE



## *Unearthing Basement Histories: Confronting Formulations of Feminine Achievement*

*Rewriting history: Looking Back*

From April 1998 to 2002, a photographic exhibition titled Looking Back: Jews in the Struggle for Democracy and Human Rights in South Africa<sup>1</sup> was on display in the foyer of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. Initiated by Albie Sachs, the exhibition proposes a revision of a South African Jewish history from the standpoint of the post-apartheid present. Sworn in as a Justice of the Constitutional Court in 1995 after twenty-four years of exile in London and Maputo, Sachs compiled the exhibition together with a group of academics and artists including Milton Shain, Adrienne Folb, Jon Berndt, Jon Weinberg, Barry Feinberg and André Odendaal. Looking Back has been displayed, with some adjustments, in at least two other settings. Exhibited in May 2001 by the American Jewish Committee in Washington DC, Looking Back was also installed by Justice Goldstone at the newly established South African Jewish Museum in Gardens, Cape Town on 15 August of the same year. Situated in what is colloquially known as 'Museum Mile,' the South African Jewish Museum is adjacent to the Holocaust Centre, and near the South African Museum and National Gallery: its physical proximity to institutions of established culture lends it legitimacy as a bearer of so-called historical truth. A comprehensive catalogue produced for the American exhibition and on sale at the local South African Jewish Museum enhances the canonical implications of the visual narrative. Through its affiliation with the authority implied by the printed word, the Looking

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this exhibition as Looking Back.

Back catalogue functions as a portable archive of the past told through the lens of current ideologies about the present.

In May 1998, I chanced upon Looking Back on my way to the Jewish Studies Library. Stopping to examine the exhibition more closely, I discerned three black and white images of Ruth First interspersed amongst those of other activists. From Ruth First's identical attire and similarities in setting and light quality, it became apparent that two of the photographs were taken on the same day (see figs. 7 and 8). Both capture scenes outside the Old Synagogue in Pretoria during the Treason Trial: in the first print Ruth First stands beside Joe Slovo, who is talking with Archbishop Ambrose Reeves (Shain et al 2001: 128), while in the second picture, she appears to be in conversation with a black trialist or supporter, who has his back to the camera (131, top).<sup>2</sup> In the third photograph, taken at a 'Free Mandela' rally in Trafalgar Square (circa 1964), Ruth First addresses the crowd from behind a microphone to the far left of the stage (inside back cover, top). Dwarfed beneath gigantic posters of Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, Ruth First seems to have successfully transplanted her fashionable clothes, dark glasses and disciplined body language abroad (see fig. 9). A wreath laying on dusty African earth forms the focal point of a fourth photograph (170). In the foreground, Ruth First's daughters Robyn, Shawn and Gillian Slovo, and her husband Joe Slovo encircle a newly dug grave in front of a large crowd of local mourners (see fig. 10). Tilly First appears on the periphery of the scene, a hooded figure seated to the far right. Interpolated within a visual chronicle of struggle history from a Jewish perspective lies a linear outline of Ruth First's story: her Jewish ethnicity, her political involvement, her exile and her death. Through graphic historiography, Ruth First, as historical body, has been re-incorporated into the

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<sup>2</sup> All references here to photographs in Looking Back pertain to the catalogue of the same name published by the Kaplan Centre.

bastion of an ethnic and religious heritage from which she appeared to wish to disconnect herself, so silent was she about it.

The multiple inclusion of her likeness in Looking Back automatically conveys a perception that Ruth First's life was exemplary. Thus woven into a peculiarly post-apartheid version of a South African Jewish retrospective, Ruth First's personal past converts to group narrative. This chapter seeks firstly to examine the constructedness of official histories through the prism of representations of Ruth First, and secondly, to chart points of divergence and confluence with selected autobiographical narratives. In Novel Histories, Green proposes that the past is constructed from a point of subjectivity in the present, an ideological location which is frequently disguised by a collage of 'official' documentation. As discussed previously, one way of interrogating assumptions behind reproductions of particular readings of the past is to focus on what Green terms "questions of positionality and authority" (1997: 2). In this chapter, I will inquire into the underlying ideologies behind representations of history that both embrace and exclude revolutionary women as historical actors. Usually denied authoritative voice due to traditional configurations of gender through which women are controlled and silenced, revolutionary female autobiographers must become expert in negotiating a space within culture from which to speak themselves. Just as Mashinini periodically transformed the physical demarcations of her prison cell into a virtual garden through her innovative use of discarded fruit juice boxes (Mashinini 1989: 77; Young 1996: 143-144), or as Ruth First configured her room in Pretoria Central into a private eyrie from which she scrutinized the world below (First 1965: 62), or as Ramphele chose to perceive her period of solitary confinement in King William's Town Prison as a spiritual retreat rather than as a punishment (Ramphele 1995: 115), so too may the prison of patriarchal constraints imposed on women be made to facilitate the enunciation of individualities usually repressed

by accepted culture. Reinventing social constructs to allow for the expression of idiosyncratic voice is usually a delicate procedure, however, requiring guile and tact. Women writers frequently feel that they must convince readers of their adherence to accepted norms of femininity even as they attempt to flex the confining bars of those structures in order to speak authentically.

As I draw attention here to some similarities between Ruth First's performance of femininities and those of black activist women, I am aware of the danger of engaging in what Pumla Dineo Gqola and others call "rainbowism," a new South African practice of eliding historical and ethnic difference under the banner of a global multiculturalism (2001: 11). I wish therefore to clarify some of the very real distinctions between the historical placement of black and Jewish ethnicities on what Brodtkin terms the "white-black racial binary" which underlies American society, and to some extent, our own (1998: 18). Drawing attention to the "distressingly stable" construction of that "ethnoracial map" (24), Brodtkin posits that black ethnicity consistently occupies one extremity of the racial binary, as opposed to Jewish ethnicity, which is the result of a constant negotiation between two socially constructed poles. Although made to occupy the site of extreme difference in Western culture, black ethnicity is also a negotiated construct, and therefore it seems plausible, at least to me, that productions of femininities amongst differently positioned minorities can be heard to reverberate and resound with one another.

Articulated with distinctive inflections amongst ethnicities, tropes of femininity consistently communicate shifting cultural values across time, while simultaneously constraining the women who must perform them. Communicated by the slogan 'Black is Beautiful,' the emancipation wrought through Black Consciousness came at a price for black women, just as

political freedom for Jewish women, although differently experienced and inflected, frequently meant their containment in disciplinary practices of mainstream white culture. Declaring blackness a positive identity and not simply a deficiency of whiteness in a paper written for a student leadership training course, Biko asserts that if “one’s aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is non-white” (1971: 48). The prefix “non” in “non-white” denotes the negation of identity wrought by subservience to an alien culture, one which may be applied also in the context of local Jewish ambitions to ‘pass’ for white. Like Braude’s evocation of “Jewish fears of racial in-betweenness” (2001: xi), Brodtkin conveys her own unease with “aspiring to blond-people whiteness” (1999: 18), while simultaneously implying through her “romanticization” of African Americans her conceptual distance from them (19). Envisaging Jewish identity instead as “off-white,” Brodtkin conveys its approximation, but not its attainment, of whiteness. Like Sarah Barcant, the lawyer-heroine of Gillian Slovo’s novel Red Dust (2000), who masks her feelings of estrangement from both blacks and whites with her “provocative manner” (and an enviable collection of designer shoes), Ruth First expertly performs mainstream femininities on the beige dustlands of its margins (83).

While Biko wrote that black identity should be reinforced through group “solidarity” (1971: 52) and actions of “defiance” against repressive political and economic systems (49), his statements did not explore how these concepts would manifest in the lives of black women. Consciously casting off the indoctrination of apartheid, black women were not relieved of the pressure to appear attractive and available to black men. Female BCM activists were expected to follow the trends of “fashion,” determined ironically by white capitalists: “hotpants became my speciality,” Ramphele writes, describing them as “exceedingly short pants which fitted snugly around one’s body, hovering tantalisingly around the limits of

modesty” (Ramphela 1995: 58). Kimberley Yates suggests that an ideology which largely addresses the needs of “the black man” (Biko 1971: 49) elides the doubled subjugation of the black woman under both racism and patriarchy (Yates 1997: 22). While struggling to assert her own gendered identity within the context of the new ideology, Ramphela nevertheless overtly champions the BCM, from which she says she “benefited enormously” (1995: 65). “Ours was not a feminist cause,” Ramphela muses in retrospect, but nevertheless asserts the solidarity of the women as “a force to be reckoned with at annual SASO meetings” (66). Ramphela does not reject feminism per se, however; rather, it was not a part of the world view of her experiencing self at the time. She writes that “feminism was a later development in my political consciousness” (66).

The challenges and restrictions regarding their configuration as female Other that South African women must confront differ according to various factors such as ethnicity, location and generation. Because South Africa is a place of diverse cultures simultaneously existing, and because these cultures were (and still are) accorded vastly different values under the impositions of colonialism and apartheid, the ways in which activist women attempt to reformulate some of the social constructs that have been the source of their oppression are differently realized and inscribed. As the title of this chapter suggests, an investigation of Ruth First’s relationship to the Jewish community of her birth, as well as an exploration of the constructions of femininity produced within that community, constitute two ‘basement histories’ that I will search for and strive to (re)construct.

#### *Jewish identity: Marxism, literacy and lullabies*

In his well-known essay ‘Who is a Jew?’ (1968), Isaac Deutscher grapples to find a conclusive definition of that designation. Loath to circumscribe Jewishness in terms of

ethnicity because of its uncomfortable proximity to conceptions of “racial ties or ‘bonds of blood’ ” which he associates with Nazi philosophy, Deutscher finds he can determine “what makes a Jew” neither through affiliations with Israeli nationalism nor through the religion of Judaism (1968: 51). Politically, Deutscher positions himself as an “unrepentant Marxist, an atheist, an internationalist” (56), but acknowledges that the frequent status of Jews as outsider in terms of ethnicity, if not vocation, compels them to assume the place of “alien” within history (57). Deutscher concludes that he experiences his own Jewishness through his identification with a marginalized Jewish past, and in his participation in creating “a better future for the whole of mankind [sic]” (59).

In the course of this chapter, I will read Deutscher’s definition of the ideal Jew as one who is willing to assume historical agency from the margins of society against recent placements of Ruth First’s image within a particularly Jewish past. At the same time, I regard other aspects of identity that Deutscher appears to reject, namely racial, religious and nationalistic identifications, as equally valid designations of Jewishness. Also pertinent to the examination of representations of Jewish ethnicity in a South African context is Johnny Clegg’s understanding of Jewish identity, expressed in an interview with Immanuel Suttner as “a manifestation of a Jewish culture,” secularized through Diaspora (1997: 97). Clegg theorizes that “the dynamic interaction between an insider/outsider world view” produces Jewishness (97). Shifts in representations of Jewish identity over time indicate both its relativity and its susceptibility to pressures of location as well as to constructions of history, factors which bear significantly upon Ruth First’s inscription of and assignment within South African pasts and potential futures.

It is worth exploring the cultural pressures urged upon rebellious Jewish women in Eastern Europe during the late nineteenth century for the influence they cast on Ruth First's conception of her own identity, and those of other South African Jewish women activists. For however much she chose to ignore it, Ruth First's particular ethnic history circumscribed not only archetypes of ideal womanhood, but also models for rebellion against them. A community of political Jewish women stretching back into the past, exceeding the strict bounds of her maternal line, may be seen to shape a metaphorical matriarchy in which Ruth First assumes a coherent place.

Born in the Pale, where most Jews were confined by law between the first partition of Poland in 1722 until the end of the Czarist regime in February 1917 (Shepherd 1993: 7), both Joe Slovo and the older Firsts came from cultures steeped in socialist theory and organized labour action. Together with the burgeoning of rational philosophies and scientific approaches to the universe which characterized the *Aufklärung* of eighteenth-century Germany, came the *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment Movement, which progressed in several phases from the 1770s until the 1890s (Feiner and Sorkin 2001: 1). Amongst the varieties of Enlightenment movements sweeping through Europe, Scandinavia and Russia, the *Haskalah* influenced Jews "in significant numbers" to adopt what were then considered to be "left-wing political ideas" such as the belief in the importance of the individual and the demystification of religious systems (Israel and Adams 2000: 147). While often constrained by patriarchy at work and at home, Jewish working-class women nevertheless acquired a sense of their own value as wage-earners,<sup>3</sup> and were perfectly situated outside the home for exposure to revolutionary literature.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Shepherd, "women in the Jewish working class formed a quarter of the entire work force" in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe (1993: 6).

A haunting Yiddish lullaby which Joe Slovo learnt from his mother Chaya called '*Rosinkes und Mandlen*' ("Raisins and Almonds") aptly conveys the subject position of most Jewish women in the Pale. Singing to his second wife Helena Dolny's daughter Kyla nearly forty years after leaving his childhood village of Obelej, in Lithuania, Slovo muses that the song captures "every poor mother's dream, that the children will escape from poverty" and attain riches, symbolized by the raisins and almonds of the title (Suttner 1997: 237). Sometimes the poor mother is figured as an abandoned widow, huddling " 'in the synagogue in a very small corner' " (238). Through repetition, the lullaby becomes a mantra, an invocation for a more prosperous life, spoken from the margins, the "corner," of the gendered world of the ghetto, which itself is situated on the periphery of the larger gentile community. Careworn by drudgery in the ghettos of the Pale, Jewish women frequently associated communism with freedom from patriarchal oppression, racial hatred and economic suffering, hopes which dovetailed well with dreams of a better life cherished by most immigrants to the New World (or the Third). In the world of Ruth First's grandmothers, communist aspirations intertwine with desires for social advancement, to be borne out later in distant countries and generations in ways which frequently were not theoretically coherent.

In the Pale, socialist theory was usually paired with the attainment of literacy, a vital ingredient in the achievement of a better life. With the establishment of Workers' Circles, or early trade unions in the 1880s, Jewish culture became ideologically dislodged from Judaism, and literacy amongst women actively promoted.<sup>4</sup> Popular night schools which taught Marxism along with the Russian alphabet proved an effective model of reaching the proletariat, one which the CPSA duplicated intermittently throughout the first half of the twentieth century in South Africa. Organized by mainly middle-class male and female leaders

of the Marxist Jewish intelligentsia, Workers' Circles attracted Jewish factory workers, many of whom were "unmarried girls of poor families who were forced to seek work" (Shepherd 1993: 5). In his Afterword to his comprehensive compendium of fascinating monographs titled Cutting Through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Jewish Activists (1997), Suttner suggests that historically a "Marxist world view provided welcome relief from the wearying residual prejudices inherent in categories like Jew and Gentile," due to its location of "all racism, including anti-Semitism, in economic conditions" rather than "as inevitable and metaphysically or biologically decreed" (601). By 1897, Workers' Circles had merged and developed into the Bund, the General Jewish Workers' Union, which was characterized by both its anti-Zionist stance and its antipathy towards Jewish capitalism (Israel and Adams 2000: 147). A third of the members of the Bund were women, both novices and organizers. While Jewish female political activists frequently rejected their religious roots and often their ties of kinship, some were observant of Judaism and worked from within the Jewish community, like Bertha Pappenheim, one of the founder's of the Jewish women's feminist movement in Germany. After the coup d' état of October 1917 led by Lenin, the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Party took power from the more moderate Mensheviks, the majority faction at the time.<sup>5</sup> The Bolsheviks ruled against the existence of "a separate Jewish workers' movement," which led to the dissolution of the Bund in March 1921 (Israel and Adams: 147). Many South African Bundists subsequently joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which welcomed Jewish female members (like Tilly First) from its inception.

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<sup>4</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, a third of Jewish urban adolescent girls, and a quarter of those from rural communities, had acquired some degree of literacy in Russian, while only a tiny percentage of their mothers (women over forty) could claim to be able to read the language (Shepherd 1993: 4-5).

<sup>5</sup> The Bolsheviks favoured extreme political measures such as violent revolution, which was followed by a centralized system of state control over the masses, oxymoronicly termed the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Amongst communists of her mother's generation and her own, Ruth First was not unique in disowning her Jewish ethnicity. In line with pressures from the Soviet Union to reject sectarian interests in favour of a united working class, most communists defined themselves as 'internationalists,' even in the face of South Africa's growing isolation from the world community. As Ray Alexander would insist: "I didn't think of myself as Jewish. Because I just felt that I belong to the world. I'm internationalist" (Suttner 1997: 44). Yet desires to attain freedom from persecution, as articulated through aspirations for literacy in a foreign culture, persisted. In her memoir White Girl in Search of a Party (1993), Podbrey recounts her humiliation at her inability to respond verbally to the jibes of peers at Berea Road Junior School in Durban, as an eleven-year-old Yiddish immigrant from Kurkl (Kovna), Lithuania. Resorting to lashing out in a "dumb rage," Podbrey vows to address power imbalances by gaining proficiency in English, and later becomes a journalist (10). Joining the CPSA as a young adult, Podbrey initially attributes the silence in the Party regarding Jewish identity to its apparent inconsequentiality, remarking that "[n]obody ever discussed their Jewishness [. . .] it was quite irrelevant to the politics of the day," but later suggests that Jews elided their ethnicity in order to avoid both antisemitism and what would have been seen as a "concession to nationalism," and its culmination, Zionism (Suttner 1997: 52). In Looking Back, a black and white photograph of smiling young members of the Young Communist League in Johannesburg seems in retrospect like an advertisement for internationalism (45). Holding aloft gigantic national flags of the major countries of the world, the members represent a new world order. Joe Slovo waves the flag of the USSR (see fig. 11).

During her South African years, Ruth First elided her ethnicity into an internationalism which she conceived as permeating the globe both geographically and historically. For instance, writing in the August 1954 edition of Fighting Talk of her visit to the Soviet Union, Ruth

First extols the virtues of Moscow as “now the Port of five seas,” and of Stalingrad as a modern version of “Old Athens” (3). In ‘European Diary,’ which appeared a month earlier, Ruth First reports exuberantly from East Berlin on the vast number of international celebrities attending the World Peace Council Meeting. From a photograph in the October 14 1954 edition of Advance, a smiling Ruth First and Albie Sachs appear next to Spanish freedom fighter Lopez Raimundo in Peking (see fig. 12). Written into a narrative of socialist world victory, Ruth First’s likeness and voice appear disconnected from her ethnicity. Observing images of Ruth First in Looking Back, the viewer may perhaps question whether her ethnic heritage contributed to the making of what has now become canonical South African history, as at no point in 117 Days or in any of her non-fiction writing does Ruth First identify herself as Jewish. I propose that if functioning within a particular culture means imbibing its norms to some degree, as discussed in connection with the theories of Lacan and Ragland-Sullivan in Chapter Three, then Ruth First’s historical situation as a daughter of Jewish Litvak immigrants may have had a strong bearing on her subsequent role as a political activist.

### *Communism, Jews and antisemitism*

Amongst the poor Yiddish-speaking children who arrived at the Cape Town docks from Lithuania at the turn of the last century were Matilda (Tilly) Leveton and Julius First. Later to become Ruth First’s parents, Tilly, who arrived in 1901, and Julius, who arrived in 1907, were amongst the 40 000 Jews who fled the Baltic provinces between 1881 to 1910 as a result of enforced conscription, economic upheaval and regular *pogroms*, or “organized, officially tolerated, attack[s]” (Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases 1997: 330). Both the Leveton and First families went to Johannesburg to start a new life. According to Leveson, by 1904 twelve per cent of the white population of Johannesburg was Jewish, which led to the city being known in some circles as “ ‘Jewburg’ or ‘Jewhannesburg’ ” (1996: 16).

Prior to immigration, both Julius First and Tilly Leveton's fathers had been tailors (Pinnock 1997a: 5). In Lithuania, Tilly First's mother kept a household cow, presumably to supply milk (Gillian Slovo 1997: 33).

Joe Slovo, or Yoshke (a diminutive of Yossel) Mashel as he was then known, arrived in South Africa two decades later, in 1936, with his mother and his eldest sister Sonia. In contrast to Ruth First's carefully sealed over depictions of family history in 117 Days, Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography begins with Joe's personal pilgrimage in December 1981 to the once flourishing ghetto community of his birth. Published in 1995, when "One City, Many Cultures" was the official slogan of the Cape Town municipality, Joe's exploration of his own ethnicity in the context of a liberated South Africa becomes a historically relevant act.<sup>6</sup> Interspersed with fond memories of his childhood is a remembrance of "religious persecution" (Joe Slovo 1995: 9), emblemized by the tall spires of a Catholic Church which Joe had erased from the landscape of his mind. Fleeing the oppressions of Obeleis when Joe was two years old, his father Wulfus went abroad in search of a better life for his family. Like the stereotypical 'Wandering Jew,' Wulfus seemed to be doomed to a peripatetic existence. Sailing for Argentina in 1928, Wulfus found himself unemployed in the recession of 1929 and promptly departed for South Africa. Eventually he saved enough money to bring out his wife and children (13) by "selling fruit from various pavement open sites" in Johannesburg (17) or "doing bread delivery rounds from about 4 am each day except Sunday" (19). In his autobiography, Joe writes that he first recalled seeing his father at the age of ten.

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the mood of national reconciliation in the present facilitates the telling of a past of family disruption and ideological disillusionment in A Life of One's Own (2002), Hilda Bernstein's highly personal rendition of the intertwined stories of her father Simeon and sister Olga and their disappointing experiences of communism in the USSR.

In contrast to their prosperous lifestyle of later years, economic circumstances forced Tilly First, Julius First and Joe Slovo to find work “in their early teens” (Gillian Slovo 1997: 33). Tilly First worked as an assistant in a shoe store, and was employed in a shop which sold furniture on hire purchase to miners in 1922 (Braude 1994: 265). By the 1930s, however, her circumstances had changed. Julius First now ran his own prospering furniture factory, and the family was “comfortably off,” as a one-time member of the CPSA named George Sachs would later write to Nadine Gordimer, scorchingly designating the Firsts as “a bitter pair [...] sour, bitchy about everyone and scornful of their bourgeois friends who were beginning to embrace left wing ideas” (Roberts 2005: 246). During the same period, Joe Slovo and his family were still struggling to make ends meet. Singing ‘*Rosinkes und Mandlen*’ to her children at bedtime, Joe Slovo’s mother Chaya expressed perhaps her own veiled desire to escape the imprisonment of daily life. Recalling that his mother would work “from 5 am until 8 pm in the fruit shop” to support the family, Joe Slovo pictures her in a “seemingly continuous state of pregnancy” and exhaustion (1995: 16). After their mother’s death in childbirth in 1938, Joe Slovo’s older sister Sonia left school to become a shop assistant, while his younger sister Reina was sent to the Johannesburg Jewish orphanage. For two years, Wulfus Slovo struggled to support his twelve-year-old son, but economic stringencies forced Joe Slovo to leave school at the age of fourteen to become a “dispatch clerk” for a Jewish-owned business (19).

In contrast to their parents, Ruth First and her brother Ronnie were born in South Africa. Whereas neither Tilly nor Julius nor Joe had been able to obtain a high school matriculation, Ruth First was highly literate and graduated from Wits University. Ruth First’s sharp tongue, which had evolved in part as a defense against her deprived immigrant past, would sometimes leave even Gordimer speechless when the two met at dinner parties during the

1950s (Roberts 2005: 246). But Gordimer kept her feelings against “horrid Ruth” private, praising her in a posthumous preface (1989) to Olive Schreiner: A Biography as a “fine writer” (3) with the ability to engage superbly in “disinterested collaboration and scholarship” (4). In his memoir, Joe Slovo notes the class differences that existed in early 1948 between his “small clique, all of us workers” and “ ‘university intellectuals’ (including Ruth),” shortly before he began his relationship with his future wife (48). While at that time viewing intellectuals as “inferior revolutionary material,” Joe Slovo himself was actually in the process of entering the middle class as the recipient of a university entrance and a five-year scholarship to study law from the Discharged Soldiers Demobilisation Committee and Wits authorities. Some of his long-time associates interpreted his change in circumstances as a class betrayal, subsequently accusing Joe Slovo of winning arguments through “the exploitation of ‘intellectual’ tricks” rather than commonsense and logical “reasoning.”

Although a point of sensitivity amongst leftist Jews, class differences were irrelevant to the Security Branch’s configuration of the enemy, which was frequently a simple equation of Jewishness with communist affiliations. In Where Sixpence Lives, Kitson records that while beating her and pulling her hair in 1964, Lieutenant Viktor, who had been so courteous to Ruth First, screamed, “ ‘You bloody Jewish Red muck, [. . .] You filth, you’re all the same – traitors’ ” (158), his words conveying the conflation of Jewish ethnicity, communism and treachery. Similarly, in interviews with Fran Lisa Buntman in 1994, former detainee Raymond Suttner reflects that when he was detained for the first time in June 1975, “being Jewish was as much a crime as being a communist. They [the police] were very obsessed with my being Jewish, absolutely obsessed” (Suttner 1997: 507). In one of the third-person accounts which interpolates 117 Days, a detective berates John Marinus Ferus, one of the “earliest Ninety-Day detainees,” for being “ ‘misled by the Communists and the Jews’ ”

(1965: 111). The only reference to Jews in 117 Days, this account signifies Ruth First's relegation of her Jewish identity to a distanced textual space. If, as Sachs submits in Jail Diary, "three-quarters of the police" at that time shared the Wynberg Police Station Commander's hatred of "a Jew, a Communist and an agitator" (163), and if, as both Ruth First and Sachs suggest, the police station is a microcosm of South African society, then South Africa is clearly a terrain where antisemitism articulates with apartheid.

The 1930s, years in which Ruth First grew from girlhood to young womanhood, were marked by what Shain terms "programmatically antisemitism" in South Africa and abroad (1994: 150). In 1925, the year of Ruth First's birth, the League of Gentiles was formed in order to boycott Jewish traders and to protect white women from seduction by lecherous Jewish men (121). As I discuss in Chapter One, indigenous antisemitic groups formed after the rise of the Nazis to power would regularly hold public demonstrations, which in all likelihood Ruth First saw firsthand on one of her regular outings with Tilly First to the City Hall.<sup>7</sup> Following the Immigration Quota Act of 1930, xenophobic concerns found another outlet in the Aliens Act of 1937, which restricted the right to assume a new surname (Leveson 1996: 24). At the time, Jewish immigrants to foreign countries frequently changed their alien-sounding surnames to ones which were familiar to the local culture. For instance, Hilda Bernstein's father Simeon Schwartz anglicized his first name to Samuel and his surname to "the eminently English Watts" when he immigrated to England in 1900 (Bernstein 2002: 15). Similarly, in his memoir Boerejood (2004), journalist Julian Roup observes that when his Jewish paternal grandfather arrived in Cape Town from Lithuania in 1899, "his name was Karabelnik, but he adopted the name Kramer here" (2004: 153). Karabelnik's two brothers, who immigrated to America, made comparable name changes. Legislating personal nomenclatures was an

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<sup>7</sup> Working for the Johannesburg ice rink at the time, Podbrey felt inspired to fight the Greyshirts, even though she noticed "no girls in their ranks" (Podbrey 1993: 48).

effective way of preventing the ethnic Other from blending into whiteness, as Leveson suggests (1996: 24).

While the political agenda of systematized antisemitism in South Africa was “shortlived” in hindsight, it was naturally perceived as threatening by the Jewish community at the time (Shain 1994: 150). Although officially accepted as members of the white race when the NP came to power in 1948, the designation of Jews within whiteness remained by no means uncontested in South Africa, as elsewhere. As I discuss in Chapter One, continuing shifts in legal and social classifications in the United States have sometimes assigned Jews “to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit” (Brodkin 1998: 1). The unstable proximity of Jews to whiteness results in the formation of highly charged and fluctuating ethnoracial identities amongst and between generations, both in a local context and abroad.

As the first portrait in the initial sequence of photographs in Joe Slovo’s autobiography, Chaya Slovo presides silently over a visual history documenting the search for and ultimately the attainment of “a better life” (see fig. 13). The insert ends with photographs of Gillian and Robyn Slovo as children surrounded by pigeons at Trafalgar Square in March 1964 (see fig. 14), and Joe Slovo demonstrating with Yusuf Dadoo in London in 1963 (see fig. 15). The picture sequence suggests a series of journeys, the physical passage from Obelei in the Pale to London in (arguably) the centre of Western civilization indicative too of metaphorical transitions from persecution to freedom, from margin to centre. Involvement in revolutionary politics reads as a mere sub-plot in this particular section of the Slovo family album, subservient to the overriding narrative of achieving economic security and stability. Chaya Slovo’s aspirations, encoded in ‘*Rosinkes und Mandlen*,’ are ultimately met by her son, who

became an advocate, and by her daughter-in-law, who insisted on a profession and a creative space of her own beyond the confines of family and community.

*Settlers, Bolsheviks, smouse and Hoggenheimers*

Almost three centuries before Chaya Slovo landed at the docks with her two children, Jewish aspirations and questions of identity had already quietly infiltrated the making of South African histories. Amongst the employees of the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) who accompanied Jan van Riebeeck when he landed on the shore of Table Bay in 1652 in order to establish a victualling station for ships on the way to the East were a small number of ethnic Jews (Leveson 1996: 14). It appears that the vast majority were coerced converts to Christianity, as employees of the DEIC were required to belong to the Dutch Reformed Church. From the earliest stages of the conquest of Southern Africa, Jews as an ethnic group occupied an ambivalent space on the map of racial segregation: ostensibly on the side of the colonizer, in actuality they themselves could be perceived as a culturally and spiritually colonized community. By submerging their religious and ethnic identities in exchange for (limited) freedom from persecution and economic advantage, however, converted Jews concurrently became entangled in the philosophies of imperialism, racism and religious conversion collectively imposed on the local Khoekhoe, !Xan and Griqua peoples, in what marks the modern beginnings of a series of contested claims for historical authority and land. In the decades following the end of the DEIC rule at the end of the eighteenth century, a smattering of self-declared Jews arrived from England or Holland and settled primarily in Cape Town (Shain 1994: 9). A group of seventeen arrived with the 1820 settlers, who made their homes in the Eastern Cape. Identifying with the transplanted culture of the English colonists, the Jewish minority “were generally tolerated, not being regarded as a specific out-group, but as a sub-group of a dominant white caste” (Leveson 1996: 14).

Unlike the integrated Anglo-German community, which had settled in the interior throughout the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century were regarded by the local white population as “fundamentally alien” (Leveson 1996: 15). Prepared to accept lower wages than the locals for unskilled labour, they constituted a threat to the poor white section of the population,<sup>8</sup> and were frequently categorized as Bolsheviks,<sup>9</sup> even within their own community. Joe Slovo recalls that although most of the children at the Jewish government school in Doornfontein “came from East European immigrant homes,” he was taunted as the “ ‘Bald Bolshie’,” partly in reference to his newly shaven scalp, shorn for “delousing” purposes on arrival in the country (1995: 14). In twentieth-century South Africa, the Bolshevik has frequently been considered synonymous with the pejorative ‘*kaffirboetie*,’ who is commonly seen as a betrayer of his or her own culture because he or she has chosen to befriend the racial Other (Leveson 1996: 20).

Naïve newcomers or ‘greeners’ usually became traders who eked out a borderline living on the margins of the white or black populations. While running a disparagingly termed “*kaffireater* (eating house for blacks near the gold mines)” or a concession store was common (16), Wulfus Slovo became a hawker in Johannesburg. Hawkers who traveled through the outlying country areas peddling household wares to Boer farmers were generally known as *smouse*. In his memoir Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (1997), J.M. Coetzee writes that when his family moved to the small country town of Worcester in the Western Cape in 1950, he learnt that “with Jews one has to tread carefully. For the Jews are everywhere, the

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<sup>8</sup> According to Karel Schoeman, during the South African War, Olive Schreiner’s brother Theo Schreiner “specified the existence of a class of ‘poor whites’ or ‘*bijwoners*’ ” who, in his opinion, were “ ‘improvident, uneducated, careless, and live[d] from hand to mouth, one hardly knows how’ ” (43). In 1932, the American Carnegie Commission published a report on its investigation into the poor white question in South Africa, and concluded that 17.5% of whites fell into this category (Harrison 1981: 72). In an attempt to mitigate the plight of the poor whites, the Job Reservation Acts of 1924 legislated a system of preferential employment for whites in the public sector, especially the railways. This occurred at the expense of black workers, 15 000 of whom were replaced by whites between 1924 and 1933 (82).

Jews are taking over the country” (21). Apocryphal stories told by his mother, and her brothers, Norman and Lance, about their childhood on a farm mythologize the mercenary nature of the Jews: amongst the colonial allegories of land ownership as the source of freedom and identity “flit the figures of Jews, comic, sly, but also cunning and heartless, like jackals” (22), cheating types or *boereverneukers* who convince farmers to produce worthless harvests of ostrich feathers so that their farms could be bought for a low cost.

With the discovery of gold in the 1880s and the rise of the Randlords, who made quick fortunes by investing in the mines, came an increase in popular perceptions of South African Jews as a threat to the economic well-being of the country. By 1903, D.C. Boonzaaier’s ‘Hoggenheimer,’ a cartoon about a conniving Jewish magnate character, appeared regularly in a Cape Town daily, the South African News (Leveson 1996: 18-19; Shain 1994: 62).<sup>10</sup> The cartoon was subsequently published in other local periodicals until the outbreak of World War II. Whether as dirt poor Bolsheviks, conniving *smouse* or rich Hoggenheimers, figures of Jews surfaced in local literature as subversive figures, adept at either exploiting the capitalist economy, or at undermining it through revolutionary ideologies (Shain 2002: 82-84). Imported Western stereotypes of the Jew as the Judas-betrayer, as well as Shylock stereotypes,<sup>11</sup> were frequently interwoven with local white imaginings of antisemitic images

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<sup>9</sup> By the 1930s, the term ‘Bolshevik’ had become generalized to denote a poor communist from Russia or Eastern Europe.

<sup>10</sup> Shain comments that “the loud-mouthed Hoggenheimer” was the creation of English playwright Owen Hall in his West End musical comedy ‘The Girl from Kays,’ which toured South Africa shortly after the South African War (1994: 62). The name Hoggenheimer subsequently became associated with the Oppenheimer dynasty and some perceived it to be “a corruption of ‘Hohenheimer’ (Home on High),” the name of the mansion occupied by Jewish millionaire Lionel Phillips in 1893. At that time, Phillips was one of the directors of Corner House, Johannesburg’s most prosperous mining house (Leveson 1996: 18-19).

<sup>11</sup> In his article ‘South African Jews and Apartheid’ (2000), Franklin Hugh Adler describes the precarious position that the Jew has occupied throughout Western history as the marginalized place of “Christian Europe’s ‘eternal other’ ” (27). Embedded in Western scriptural culture, perceptions of Jews as the killers of Jesus were transplanted to the colonies, together with widespread images of Jews as avaricious usurers. The negative character of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, comes from William Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (1605). The plot hinges on the terms of the debt incurred by Antonio, a Venetian merchant, who borrows money from Shylock by promising to repay him with a pound of flesh if he cannot meet the terms of the loan.

that Ruth First must have encountered in her daily life, but chose not to address, at least in her writing.

At least in the autobiographical works of black South Africans discussed here, depictions of Jews as separate from the general white population are infrequent, and relate almost entirely to Jewish men, following the trend established by European writers from the nineteenth century onwards (Leveson 1996: 13). When Jewish ethnicity is evoked, it functions as a distinguishing marker within the text. Either philosemitic or antisemitic, portrayals of Jews are seldom neutral. In *Strikes*, for example, Mashinini evokes both the Bolshevik *kaffirboetie* and the Hoggenheimer figure in connection with male Jews. Her engagement with Jewish women is minimal and obliquely connected to the latter image. Evoking the *kaffirboetie* trope in a positive light, Mashinini mentions that her “first real experience of friendship between blacks and whites” was with Jewish trade unionist leaders Morris Kagan and Ray Altman (1989: 31). She attributes her closer relationship with Kagan to his class position as a blue collar worker, as opposed to Altman, “who was a very educated man.” As an immigrant Jew from Latvia,<sup>12</sup> who arrived in South Africa at the age of twenty, Kagan worked as a bus conductor and a shop assistant before he became a full-time union official. “All my admiration goes to Morris Kagan, who struggled with me,” Mashinini writes, crediting Kagan with giving her the “university education” she had always desired by training her in the principles of socialism and labour negotiation (32). Since Mashinini constitutes the racial Other of the *kaffirboetie* trope (and is therefore implicated in its derogatory connotations), her subject position destabilizes its conventional negative articulation. Allegories of race eventually impinge even on this relationship, however. Present at his bedside on the day he died in 1983, Mashinini recalls Kagan treating her as a daughter, but writes of her

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<sup>12</sup> Kagan was an associate of Ray Alexander in Riga, where they were both involved in revolutionary activity.

“disappointment” later on, when his family excluded her from the ceremony commemorating the unveiling of his tombstone, held a year after the funeral in accordance with Jewish tradition. Mashinini nevertheless publishes her own memorial to Kagan in her text: “But, well, Morris rests in peace. I honour him” (33).

Adjacent to her mutually appreciative rapport with Kagan, Mashinini places an account of a fraught relationship with a former employer, an urbane Hoggenheimer type called Mr. Herman. Before meeting Kagan and launching the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA), Mashinini worked for nineteen and a half years at a clothing factory owned and run by the Jewish Herman family, whom Mashinini describes as “a dynasty” (30). Mr. Herman was distant and formal until he discovered Mashinini in the empty factory during a lunch-break, filling out applications for her daughter Molly to attend the University of Turfloop.<sup>13</sup> Instead of chastising her for breaching company policy by remaining indoors, Mr. Herman offered to assist Mashinini. Initially “very grateful” when Mr. Herman’s wife approaches “a group of wealthy Jewish women, the Jewish Women’s Community at Temple Emmanuel”<sup>14</sup> to obtain a bursary for her daughter, Mashinini later perceives Mr. Herman’s altruism as motivated by his desire to control the factory’s labour force through her position as supervisor and shop steward (28). On Mashinini’s resignation, the Hermans offer to promote her secretly to the position of manageress, and to pay her almost double her previous salary as undeclared “extra money inside the envelope” (29). When Mashinini refuses their offer, she is immediately dismissed.

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<sup>13</sup> An informal name for the University of the North.

<sup>14</sup> At the time, Temple Emmanuel was the centre of the Reform Jewish community in the Northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

In Part of My Soul, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela recounts a brief incident which links economic exploitation to Jewishness, too. Early in their marriage, she and Nelson Mandela were walking in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, when they were accosted by a black man desperate to make a few pennies by selling clothes for the store owner, whom she describes as an exploitative “old Jewish chap” (1985: 67). In the same breath, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela pays tribute to “great women like Hilda Bernstein, Ruth First” (66): “When I was with them, I felt I was with Nelson,” she writes. Conflating Hilda Bernstein and Ruth First with her husband, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela confers masculine agency on two of her comrades, whom she figures temporarily as authoritative male relative, rather than as sisters. Interestingly, in this text, the stereotype of a small-time Shylock exists simultaneously with representations of Jews as intimate members of the family, the *kaffirboetie* loathed by right-wing whites (even though Nomzamo Winnie Mandela and some of Nelson Mandela’s black comrades may not have conceived of Jewish women such as Hilda Bernstein and Ruth First as Jews *per se*, the *kaffirboetie* trope would nevertheless be projected by hostile outsiders).

#### *Desiring another’s voice*

The effects of occupying marginal positions within mainstream culture, whether as Kaffir or *kaffirboetie*, penetrate deeply into the Other’s perception of herself, as Ngũgĩ wa’ Thiong’o writes of his own early dislocation from the Gĩkũyũ culture into which he was born. For Ngũgĩ, reading and writing English at school while speaking his mother tongue at home resulted in a “disassociation [sic], divorce or alienation” not only from “the immediate environment” of his childhood, namely his parents, his culture and his history, but ultimately from his own identity (1986: 17). Observing of “the colonial child” that “[h]e was being made to stand outside himself to look at himself,” Ngũgĩ encrypts his alienation from his Gĩkũyũ identity by referring to himself in the third person. Otherness is thus inscribed not

only on the body, but on the voice of the colonized. Explicitly through punishment for speaking in the vernacular at school, and more implicitly through language and fictional stereotypes, the colonized self eventually looks upon the culture of his birth as “naturally inferior,” and the “land of his childhood,” Africa, as evolutionarily primitive, “still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night as far as the development of self-conscious history was concerned” (18).

In a different context, Leveson writes that “the importance of language as a measure of control and power cannot be overestimated,” for a central signifier of Otherness lies in the inability to properly express oneself both grammatically and phonetically in the language of the dominant culture (43: 2001). Although, unlike Ngũgĩ, Tilly First and Joe Slovo were not inhabitants of a colonized land but immigrants following in the footsteps of the colonizer, as children they encountered a resistant mainstream culture which designated their own as marginal. Thus, they experienced a comparable estrangement from the countries, language and even the families of their birth. According to Gillian Slovo, although her grandmother kept a picture above her bed of her own mother, “a gentle fair-haired, blue-eyed beauty” whose appearance conformed to Anglo-Saxon norms of femininity, Tilly First “used to insist she had forgotten what her mother was like” due to her lost comprehension of “her mother tongue of Yiddish” (1997: 33). Tilly First’s act of forgetting can be read as an unconscious desire to disconnect from the norms of her despised immigrant culture. As a “major marker of the Jew’s condition of Otherness” in South African theatre and fiction of the first half of the twentieth century, the speaking of Yiddish frequently signaled “the user’s disempowerment,” evoking “in audience or reader both contempt and hilarity” (Leveson 1996: 43).

Although English was the language of the First household by the time she was born, Ruth First was exposed to Yiddish through her father<sup>15</sup> and other relatives, and would almost certainly have understood it to some degree. Yet in her writing and on film, Ruth First reveals nothing to suggest she had ever heard it. Like his mother-in-law, Joe Slovo discloses an extraordinary inability to remember Yiddish, one which he attributes as the main reason for his estrangement from his father: Wulfus “could never express himself in English and, since I quickly lost my capacity to use Yiddish, the communication between us became more and more restricted,” Joe writes in his autobiography (1995: 19). After they had acculturated into the social hierarchies created by South African colonial society, both Tilly First and Joe Slovo figure dislocation from parental figures in terms of alienation from the language of their birth. Acculturation here may be understood as a series of adjustments adopted by a minority culture in response to the characteristics of the surrounding majority. While acculturation may be seen as one phase of assimilation, it also may be read as a separate process, suggesting a “limited adaption” to majority norms, as opposed to assimilation, which implies relinquishing one’s own identity and “fully entering another nation or ideological framework” (Rubin 1995: xiv).<sup>16</sup> The effects of colonization, in the case of Ngũgĩ, of acculturation, in the case of Joe Slovo, or assimilation, in the case of Tilly First, filter through from one generation to the next in a variety of disguised forms.

The family’s discomfort with their ethnic heritage, compounded by their overt political involvement, results in a daughter’s conscious sense of herself as alien by the start of her

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<sup>15</sup> In *Every Secret Thing*, for example, Gillian Slovo recalls that her grandfather’s telephonic warnings to friends of pre-dawn police raids were encapsulated by two Yiddish words: “‘*Ze zuchen*,’ he said. They are looking” (51).

<sup>16</sup> The use of the terms ‘acculturation’ and ‘assimilation,’ as well as the viability of the processes they denote are currently under debate in Jewish intellectual circles. While Frankental and Shain propose that functioning effectively within and contributing meaningfully towards the majority culture while at the same time maintaining their “distinctive identity” is a real and desirable possibility for modern South African Jewry (1993: 12), Barry Rubin criticizes acculturation as “a fragile, relatively recent notion,” resting on the implicitly

final year of primary school. Divorced from what she perceives to be the “immutable childish paradise” of her school friends, Gillian Slovo admits that she “continued passing for white” (60). Like the assimilated Kenyan boy of Ngũgĩ’s childhood, Gillian Slovo invests her identity in “pretending” to be like white schoolchildren, whose conception of history “started in the seventeenth century with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and ended in a white victory over the savage hordes.” Yet Gillian Slovo has been taught another history of Africa, one which Nomzamo Winnie Mandela’s father, a teacher in government service, would relate in his classroom: “these white people invaded our country and stole the land of our grandfathers” (Winnie Mandela 1985: 48). While feigning acquiescence to dominant histories, Gillian Slovo finds that she cannot unlearn the alternate versions of the past she has been taught elsewhere.

#### *Accommodation, apathy and activism*

The apartheid precept of ‘separate development,’ which cast each ethnic group as a mythically self-contained entity, encouraged acculturation rather than assimilation amongst its off-white satellite groups. While what was and is termed ‘the South African Jewish community’ cannot be “a monolithic entity,” the official positions taken by representative Jewish communal bodies must be searched for when presenting the role of Jews in apartheid history (Shain and Frankental 1999: 61). Two communal bodies were predominant: the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the Rabbinate. Leaders in the community founded the Jewish Board of Deputies in 1912 in order “to watch and take action in all matters affecting the Jews in the southern portion of the continent of Africa” (The Jews of South Africa: n. pag.). Effectively, the Jewish Board of Deputies seeks to represent Jews on matters related to politics, the government and the wider gentile community, while the Rabbinate is a body of

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unattainable “idea of pluralism amongst members of the same society” in his book Assimilation and its Discontents (1995: xiv).

male Jewish clergymen who have jurisdiction over religious matters, including the laws of *kashrut* (dietary regulations), marriage and divorce. Jewish communists generally viewed the Rabbinate<sup>17</sup> as redundant and the Jewish Board of Deputies as an institution “dominated by big business” (Joe Slovo 1995: 41), and therefore complicit with the regime in order to protect its economic interests. Believing that “the nation-state was a bourgeois contrivance to manipulate the proletariat,” Jewish communists pledged allegiance to “international working-class solidarity” (Robertson 1993: 439) over sectarian interests such as ethnicity and religion, and were subsequently isolated from the mainstream community.

Shain and Frankental conclude that during the apartheid era, both Jewish representative bodies issued general moral platitudes, but steered clear of open condemnation of the government, in part because of the fear of antisemitism, and in part because, like “all other whites, Jews were the beneficiaries of a colonial order built on racial exploitation and inequality” (1999: 63). Leveson, too, suggests that in general “the Jewish community in South Africa was predominantly conservative” (1996: 20), opting for what Frankental and Shain (1993: 5) term “apathy,” what I have understood to mean a lack of voiced concern for abuses of human rights. When the NP instituted its policy of Grand Apartheid in 1950, left-wing Jews, already constrained by the banning of the CPSA, were faced with four options, according to Frankental and Shain: “exile, going underground, emigrating, or joining the legal, centre-left parliamentary opposition. All options were exercised although the majority chose the last,” that is, a form of accommodation, or moderate protest within socially accepted boundaries in exchange for peaceful co-existence (1993: 7). Jews who were outspoken against the prevailing regime, such as members of Jews for Justice in Cape Town

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<sup>17</sup> While many conservative rabbis viewed apartheid policy as favourable to the preservation of their religious constituencies, a few religious leaders, like Rabbi L I Rabinowitz (Orthodox Chief Rabbi from 1945-1961) and others affiliated with Reform Judaism, chose to take a consistent public stand against apartheid (Suttner 1997: 614-615).

and Jews for Social Justice in Johannesburg (small protest groups that formed part of the mass democratic movement of the 1980s), were generally met with hostility by mainstream Jewish organizations (Suttner 1997: 610).

Ascribing her inability to recite *kaddish* (a prayer for the dead) at Joe Slovo's multi-denominational funeral in January 1995 to "great and possibly irrational feelings of resentment towards the Jewish community in South Africa," Shawn Slovo recalls that communal leaders shunned rather than embraced her and her sisters when Ruth First was detained (Suttner 1997: 452). In an interview with Buntman in London in March 1995, Shawn Slovo juxtaposes the reactions of black South Africans, who watched A World Apart and felt pity for her namesake Molly Roth because nobody seemed to be "taking care of the children," against her own experience of social isolation as a child. Attributing Tilly First's nervous breakdown while Ruth First was in prison to a lack of assistance from the community in which they lived, Shawn Slovo comments that "the history" of Jews ought to have made them "more sensitive and supportive." Shawn Slovo's resentment can be placed at the crux between two conflicting histories, a place of transition which risks becoming a blind spot in both Jewish and white historical memory. To illustrate the readmission of her father, after 1990, into the fold of practicing Jews from which he had been alienated for decades, Shawn Slovo refers to the white South Africans who "now leaped across airport concourses to shake his hand," people who she feels "would not have been seen dead acknowledging him a few years ago" (450). While portrayed as a hero in post-apartheid South Africa, Ruth First was similarly considered *persona non grata* in the Jewish community of her birth before apartheid was dismantled. The discrepancy between past and present realities, elucidated through Shawn Slovo's account of casual public encounters over time, implies the exchange of one version of truth for another, of one chronicle for its corollary.

Looking Back and a series of photographs titled The Jews of South Africa, which was displayed on the walls of the Kaplan Centre from 1988 until 1998, constitute two such contrasting chronicles. Read together, they chart a communal shift from a cautious accommodation of apartheid to an open celebration of its demise.

*The Jews of South Africa: an immigrant success story*

Although telling a history which bears little resemblance to Looking Back, The Jews of South Africa<sup>18</sup> is similarly composed of pictures with sub-titles, and includes copies of printed documents such as congregation records, Yiddish newspapers, and posters for amateur plays. The photographs appear in a space authorized specifically for the preservation of Jewish culture, which imbues them with an authenticity peculiar to museums, memorials and monuments. As Patricia Davidson proposes, institutions such as “museums anchor official memory,” through a process involving “both remembering and forgetting, inclusion and exclusion” (1998: 145). Neither Ruth First nor any of her political contemporaries appear amongst these images of a past which has since been rendered obsolete from the post-apartheid present. Dismantled to make way for Looking Back, The Jews of South Africa is currently relegated to the basement of the building. Now a marginalized history, The Jews of South Africa is relevant here not only because it serves as an example of how the past is read in terms of the present, but also because it displays many communal ideologies prevalent during the years of Ruth First’s youth and activism.

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<sup>18</sup> The exhibition was originally commissioned in 1983 by Beth Hatefutsoth, the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel. Copies of some of the photographs appear in the catalogue of the original exhibition in Israel, published under the same name. Specific photographs which I mention here all derive from the catalogue. According to Belling in a personal conversation with me on 10 October 2004, many more photographs were hung on the walls of the Kaplan Centre than appear in the catalogue. The collection housed in the Photo-Archives of Beth Hatefutsoth exceeds 1 500 photographs (The Jews of South Africa: n. pag.).

From pictures of gold-mining entrepreneurs and agricultural merchants of the mid-nineteenth century to the then contemporary depictions of a Hebrew day school class and a religious radio station of the early 1980s, The Jews of South Africa narrates an archetypal tale of immigration and integration. With an emphasis on scenes from bourgeois and petit-bourgeois life, prints of family portraits, schoolroom photographs and wedding scenes depict the Jewish community as culturally and religiously separate from, but simultaneously flourishing within, the apartheid system. Unlike the camaraderie between Jewish activists and those of other ethnic backgrounds which Looking Back strives to portray, equal relationships between Jews and members of other religious or cultural communities are difficult to find. Black South Africans are depicted peripherally either as labourers on Jewish-owned farms and in Jewish businesses or as beneficiaries of Jewish philanthropy. A photograph titled ‘Thrashing corn on the Snipelisky’s farm near Kinross, circa 1930’ (see fig. 16), which features a row of impoverished black labourers dressed in tatters with a black boss-boy standing over them, stick in hand, would not be out of place in Ruth First’s pamphlet on the exploitation of farm workers (The Jews of South Africa: n. pag.). ‘Opening of the Kensington creche [sic] for colored children. Cape Town, 1942’ (n. pag.), in which white Jewish women in fur-trimmed coats and ostrich feathers smile benevolently behind a group of barefoot so-called coloured children, speaks loudly of class differences as they are inscribed through race in the South African context (see fig. 17).

As opposed to the story of sacrifice for human rights, which is one of the major themes of Looking Back, The Jews of South Africa tells an insular tale of self-preservation. Pictures of horrific mutilation (Albie Sachs is pictured with a severed arm, minutes after the car bomb attack in Maputo in 1988 [Shain et al, 2001: back bottom cover]) and violent death (the Sharpeville shootings of 1960 [71]) in the latter exhibition form a sharp contrast against

images of carefree Jewish schoolchildren and kosher bakeries in the former. The theme of sacrifice operates in The Jews of South Africa, too, but here it is based on ideologies of capitalism and Zionism, rather than on those of socialism and non-racialism. A photograph (n. pag.) taken at the entrance to the Sheba gold mine in Barberton in 1886 portrays rugged-looking white miners with staffs standing against a rock face, together with a black tribesman (as helper or guide), vividly conveying an underlying accommodation of, if not active support for, colonial ideologies of economic exploitation (see fig. 18). Amongst the miners is Lionel Phillips, whom the catalogue describes as “one of the Jewish goldmining magnates.” On the page facing the sepia print of Phillips and the miners is a portrait of Benjamin Norden (see fig. 19), the prosperous-looking founder of “the Tikvat Israel congregation in Cape Town,” in 1841 (n. pag.). Viewed together, the photographs link the accumulation of wealth with the establishment of stable religious communal life.

Whereas the public gatherings featured in Looking Back, such as the United Democratic Front (UDF)<sup>19</sup> rallies (88-89) and fundraiser (92, top) of the 1980s, participate in the mass protest for equal rights (see figs. 20 and 21), the communal assemblies presented in The Jews of South Africa narrative speak of different concerns: a procession in Cape Town in 1922 commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland (n. pag.); a Midnight vigil at the Old Synagogue in Pretoria in 1948 honours the declaration of the State of Israel (n. pag.); and a public protest in Durban for “Prisoners of Zion” in 1979 (n. pag.) defends the rights of Russian Jews to immigrate to the Holy Land (see figs. 22, 23 and 24). In the photograph commemorating the declaration of the State of Israel, women pack the upper gallery of the Old Synagogue in Pretoria in the tradition of Orthodox Judaism, while the men jostle for space in the hall below (see fig. 23). Ten years after the

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<sup>19</sup> The UDF was a front organization for the ANC formed in the early 1980s.

Midnight vigil, the Old Synagogue would serve a vastly altered function as the venue for the Treason Trial, where ‘Non-White’ trialists and witnesses would occupy the seats once reserved for Jewish women. In Side by Side, Helen Joseph describes the Old Synagogue as “a rather ornate structure, long since given up by the Jewish community. It was now standing empty, it was central, spacious, it had a gallery – it would do for us!” (66).

The Jews of South Africa catalogue depicts women as quiescent onlookers and helpmates, watching events from the upstairs balcony of history. The lone likeness of Yiddish actress Sarah Sylvia on a poster advertising a forthcoming play designates her as an anomaly in an exhibition in which portraits of women seldom appear outside of groupings with others. On the occasions when women are depicted separately from men, they appear still within communal clusters (see figs. 24 and 25): as mother with children (‘Caroline Baumann and her daughters,’ Bloemfontein circa 1860 [n. pag.]), or as part of philanthropic women’s organizations such as Bnoth Zion (“Daughters of Zion”). A photograph of a fête in 1906 (see fig. 26) and another of a garden party, circa 1980 (see fig. 27), serve to exemplify these women as the supporters and nurturers of great men whose individual portraits attest to their central role in this history: ‘Barney Barnato, a well known diamond magnate in Kimberly, c. 1870’ (n. pag.), ‘Sir David Harris, a soldier, Member of Parliament’ (n. pag.), circa 1890 and ‘Morris Alexander, one of the founders of the Jewish Board of Deputies’ (n. pag.), circa 1923 (see figs 28, 29 and 30). A certificate testifying to the contribution of a Miss M. Lipinski as a founding member of the Durban Jewish Club appears on one of the pages of the catalogue (see fig. 31), but Miss Lipinski’s individuality, already obscured by the absence of her visage from the gallery of famous men, is further occluded by the subtitle, which addresses her as “Mrs. M. Lipinski, one of the club’s founders, May 1932” (emphasis added:

n. pag.). The text cannot allow an independent feminine identity, and therefore collapses Miss Lipinski into a typographical marriage.

Portraits of Ruth First are absent from The Jews of South Africa, together with those of an entire lineage of revolutionary Jewish women such as Ray Alexander, Hilda Bernstein, Norma Kitson, Pauline Podbrey and others. Ignored in the first exhibition only to emerge as heroes in the second, many of these women were married to prominent activists whose images are similarly rendered. Joe Slovo and Rusty Bernstein figure more times in Looking Back than do both Ruth First and Hilda Bernstein, although Jack Simons' image appears less than half the frequency of Ray Alexander's.<sup>20</sup> David and Norma Kitson's absence from the exhibition may have less to do with the fact that David Kitson was not technically Jewish<sup>21</sup> than with political tensions within the Movement.<sup>22</sup> A Member of Parliament for the Castle district in Cape Town from 1908 to 1929 as well as an outstanding Jewish communal leader, Morris Alexander appears in both exhibitions (The Jews of South Africa: n. pag.; Looking Back 49), his liberalism and community affiliations bridging the divide between the histories (see figs. 30 and 32).

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<sup>20</sup> Joe Slovo appears nine times (44, 50, 94, 128, 129, 129, 141, 162, 170), once as a cartoon (94). Rusty Bernstein appears twice in captioned photographs (141, 178). Jack Simons also appears twice (173, 174).

<sup>21</sup> According to rabbinical law, Jewish ethnicity is transferred from the body of the mother to that of her child. Thus even though David Kitson's father was Jewish, he was not considered Jewish because his mother was a gentile.

<sup>22</sup> Norma Kitson inadvertently makes an appearance in a photograph depicting the Human Rights Day demonstration of December 1952 (2001: 121), in which she is mistakenly identified as Beata Lipman, a Jewish activist and the compiler of a book of interviews on female grassroots resistance titled We Make Freedom: Women in South Africa (1984). The same photograph was reproduced in Norma Kitson's book nearly twenty years earlier, where she identifies the woman to the right of Walter Sisulu as herself (1986: 92).

Although absent from the first exhibition, Morris Alexander's first wife, Ruth Schechter,<sup>23</sup> surfaces in the second (47). A close friend and disciple of Olive Schreiner, Schechter was prominent in South African literary circles in the 1920s and was also a champion of the rights of women and so-called coloured people (see fig. 33). What may be seen as Schechter's liberalism separates her from Ruth First, although Schechter's Jewish ethnicity, immigrant heritage, literary talent, attraction to Schreiner as a literary figure, and attempts to resist patriarchies are factors which align her with many of Ruth First's subject positions. Excised from the Jewish community of Cape Town's "collective memory" when she divorced Morris Alexander to marry Ben Farrington, an Irish Protestant intellectual, Schechter's inclusion in the Looking Back exhibition is largely due to the efforts of Baruch Hirson to re-instate her in a reformulated South African history (Hirson 2001: xviii).<sup>24</sup>

### *Re-dressing historical silences*

In contrast to The Jews of South Africa, Looking Back portrays women in general as both full-time workers and leaders. Portraits abound of independent Jewish female leaders (see figs. 34, 35 and 36) such as Fanny Klenerman<sup>25</sup> of the Women Workers Union (41), Bertha Solomon, "lawyer, parliamentarian, champion of women's suffrage" (52) and Ellen Hellmann, "prominent liberal [. . .] and president of the South African Institute of Race

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<sup>23</sup> Ruth Schechter Alexander, like Ray Alexander Simons, is variously designated. (Although the two women share a name, they are not related). First and Scott refer to Schechter as "Ruth Alexander" (1980: 267, 313, 322). Schechter herself also published reviews under that name. In other instances, both surnames are combined, which eliminates any ambiguity, while at the same time appears politically correct. However, for the purposes of the dissertation, I have found it simpler to refer to Schechter by her own surname, not least since Schechter divorced Morris Alexander in 1933, and married Ben Farrington in 1935.

<sup>24</sup> Hirson has sought to resurrect not just Schechter but also the group of socialist intellectuals to which she belonged, which were prominent in Cape Town in the era between the World Wars. Citing the absence of definite "political affiliation" as the reason these thinkers "get bare mention or are overlooked" (1992: 47), Hirson has sought to right one of the wrongs of leftist history by reinscribing those who have been omitted in a series of articles about Schechter, and a book titled The Cape Town Intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her Circle, 1907-1934 (2001).

<sup>25</sup> According to Taffy Adler, Klenerman ran English classes for Yiddish speakers in the Yidisher Arbeter Klub or Jewish Workers Club (JWC), which was founded in 1929. She later became an organizer for the Women Workers' General Union, the Sweetmakers' Union and the Waitresses' Union (1979: 81). In 1966, Klenerman

Relations (1954-1956)” (53). Nadine Gordimer, then “Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1991” (67) reads poetry from behind a microphone (see fig. 37), while later photographs highlight Ina Perlman (93), director of Operation Hunger, a country-wide feeding programme (see fig. 38), and Rica Hodgson (137, 165), a listed communist and reporter at New Age. Described by Stanton in her memoir as “beautifully dressed, gay and lively, complete with nail varnish” (1961: 230), Rica Hodgson cuts a fashionable figure in her tight-fitting skirts which resonates with Ruth First’s slightly more elegant one (see figs. 39 and 40). The inside flaps of the catalogue construct in four photographs (two on each flap, one beneath the other) a non-verbal dialogue of inter-racial co-operation and unity which highlights the role of women (see figs. 41-44). The topmost photograph on the front flap shows Ray Alexander on her return from exile in Zambia in 1990 embracing Francis Baard (Cape President of FEDSAW and of the Cape ANC Women’s League, who was detained during the 1960 Emergency). Ray Alexander’s husband, Jack Simons stands in the background. Beneath Baard and Alexander’s embrace, a second photograph depicts Nelson Mandela with a smiling Helen Suzman outside his home in Soweto during the same period. Inside the back flap, Ruth First addresses the crowd at a ‘Free Mandela’ rally at Trafalgar Square circa 1964, while in last photograph, a crowd of predominately Afrikaner women garment workers march through central Johannesburg to protest the banning of their leader, Solly Sachs, in 1952.

Like the narrative which unfolds from its inner flaps, the rest of Looking Back constructs a multiracial sorority of women (amongst other sub-plots), exemplified in miniature by the photograph of nine executive members of FEDSAW (see figs. 45-46) taken in August 1961 at a national conference in Port Elizabeth (77).<sup>26</sup> A single photograph of Hilda Bernstein, captioned as “Hilda Watts” (see fig. 47)

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employed Helen Joseph at her bookshop, Vanguard Booksellers in Johannesburg, when Joseph’s banning orders made it impossible for her to continue with union work (Joseph 1986: 141).

<sup>26</sup> In Looking Back, only two of the women are identified: Esmé Goldberg and Violet Weinberg (detained in 1965, and later repeatedly banned and exiled). The same photograph appears in Side by Side (n. pag.), in which Joseph identifies the other women present, and the organizations which they represent. The missing names, except for a single “unknown,” are Philippa Levy, Francis Baard, Mrs. Naidoo, Lilian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia, and Ruth Matserane. Joseph notes that she herself is absent from the picture due to banning orders which prevented her from attending the conference.

appears as part of a group portrait of the Johannesburg District Committee of the CPSA<sup>27</sup> in 1945 (19). Hilda Watts was elected by white voters to the Johannesburg City Council in 1943, “the only communist ever to achieve this,” according to Joseph (1986: 3). Ray Alexander appears no less than seven times in her capacity as activist (eight counting the reprint of her reunion with Beard).<sup>28</sup> Like Ruth First’s, Ray Alexander’s role as a mother is not emphasized, for nowhere does she appear with her children or in a domestic setting. Instead, the narrative of Ray Alexander’s life emerges amidst the central themes which order the exhibition: ‘Immigrant Activism,’ ‘Challenging Racism,’ ‘Confronting Apartheid,’ ‘Defiance and Resistance,’ ‘Legal Activism,’ ‘Exile,’ and finally ‘Celebrating Change.’ These seven photographs constitute a visual biography of Ray Alexander’s activist career, from her life as a single woman immigrant in the 1930s, to her return from exile in the 1990s. The presence of Ray Alexander’s sister Dora Nash in the initial two and final prints signifies continuity, an implicit family history of revolutionary commitment honed by “political debates at home” in Varklian, Latvia (Suttner 1997: 30).

Pictures of Ruth First, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela and Florence Matomela, a trade-union activist and ANC Women’s League leader, are particularly striking for how these women convey meaning through posture and dress. Resplendent in a traditional Xhosa outfit, Matomela is captured addressing the inaugural meeting of FEDSAW in 1954 (76). Both Matomela and Nomzamo Winnie Mandela reject the silencing implicit in their subject positions as African and female through the ways they choose to clothe themselves, visibly disrupting expectations of compliance to a Western patriarchal culture. In *Side by Side*, Joseph describes the impression made by Matomela’s appearance at the first meeting of FEDSAW as follows: Matomela “strode to the platform to speak, Xhosa skirt swirling about her, beads jangling and headscarf piled above her head in Xhosa fashion” (119). Refusing to

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<sup>27</sup> The caption describes the group anachronistically as members of the SACP, which was only formed in 1953.

<sup>28</sup> The first two photographs, one at a multiracial gathering (2001: 27), another at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town (29), show Ray Alexander amongst groups of activist friends in the early 1930s. The third print is a close-up of Ray Alexander in consultation with officials of the FCWU in the 1940s (36-37). Seated on a podium with women of other ethnicities at the launch of the Women’s Federation of South Africa, Ray Alexander’s place in history seems to be indelibly inscribed (77). The narrative of her life continues, interspersed amongst the intersecting stories of other activists. Campaigning with supporters, Ray Alexander is a candidate for ‘Native Representative’ in 1950 (45). The final photographs are of Ray Alexander embracing

heed the three-minute limit for speakers at the meeting, Matomela voices her lack of compliance to the rules of white cultural systems by folding her arms and saying, “ ‘I am a defier! I shall speak as long as I like’,” according to Joseph (see fig. 48). Matomela does not articulate her defiance of boundaries from the context of Western feminism, but rather from her “traditional role as custodian mother of her cultural values” (Mtuzze 1990: 137).

Like Matomela, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela disturbs the invisibility imposed upon her through dress and gesture. Of her first impression of Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, Anne Benjamin, editor of Part of My Soul,<sup>29</sup> records:

She had none of the outward signs of authority, but I sensed a very compelling personality. She wore a long, black and green African dress, and had a scarf draped around her head according to the Xhosa tradition [. . .]. Her features were aristocratic: high cheek-bones and very big, dark, inquisitive eyes (1985b: 13).

Acutely aware of the effect of her appearance in her own community, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela reflects in her memoir: “[W]e women all pitched up in our traditional dresses, it inspired people, it evoked militancy” (87). When she was banned from wearing African garments during the Rivonia Trial, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela chose to dress in Western clothes in the ANC colours of black, green and gold, which similarly incited the crowds. A photograph of Nomzamo Winnie Mandela by Peter Magubane in Part of My Soul (photograph 12, n. pag.) depicts her smiling beneath a fashionable hat, holding the attention of both a posse of Security policemen and a group of black onlookers (see fig. 49). In Side by Side, Joseph describes Nomzamo Winnie Mandela and her daughter Zindzi Mandela’s arrival in Brandfort in terms reminiscent more of a fashion debut than those depicting a legal banishment. Instead of hiding from the public eye in this small country town in the heart of conservative Afrikaner farmland, mother and daughter “walked very tall, their heads high,” “elegant in high boots” and “polo-necked sweaters” as “Brandfort stared in amazement” (1985: 208). Pictured

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Francis Baard at Johannesburg International Airport (173), and with her husband Simons and Dora Nash at one of the rolling public parks in Northern Johannesburg (174).

<sup>29</sup> Writing of the role of Ann Benjamin as interviewer and editor and that of Mary Benson as adapter and reviser of Part of My Soul, Boyce Davies suggests that while their presence renders Mandela’s autobiography a “hybrid” text, a “collaborative life story” rather than a pure autobiography (1992: 9), at the same time Benjamin’s and Benson’s interventions “ensure that the woman’s story is not as muted as it often is” (1991: 114).

with friend Anne Pogrund in Looking Back during her exile in Brandfort between 1977 and 1985 (see fig. 50), Nomzamo Winnie Mandela appears looking relaxed in casual, Western clothes (69).

Together with some of her black contemporaries, Ruth First expertly employed dress as a mode of defiance. In both photographs at the Treason Trial shown in Looking Back, Ruth First presents a picture of composed femininity. I use 'composed' in three senses here: as a signifier firstly of the fabricated nature of femininity as a construct, secondly of the control over that construct which Ruth First exerts through the projection of her physical image, and thirdly of the role of the photographer in the production of that image. At the Treason Trial, the photographer skillfully captures Ruth First's recurrent public stance of placing her body at an angle to her conversant, with arms drawn discreetly inward towards her waist (see figs. 7 and 8). Dressed in an immaculate light suit, with a pair of spotless white gloves neatly draped over one arm and a double string of pearls around her neck, Ruth First presents herself as an attractive object to the viewer, but simultaneously remains aloof by employing distancing mechanisms such as restrained hand gestures and dark glasses.

In a photograph which appeared in the Sunday Times of 15 March 1964 (see fig. 51), Ruth First displays a similar combination of allurement and aloofness (Joe Slovo 1995: first insert, n. pag.). Mounting the steps of a Sabena airplane which will take her into exile together with Gillian (aged twelve) and Robyn (aged ten), Ruth First turns back towards the observer and smiles over her shoulder, while shielding the rest of her body from his gaze. Her expression invites engagement, while her body is subtly in flight, escaping towards the entrance of the aircraft. While her dark glasses are absent and her elegantly fashionable handbag is somewhat bigger than the Treason Trial version, the communication of composed femininity remains. In Joe Slovo's posthumous autobiography, this photograph forms part of a visual narrative documenting the transition of his family from harassment at home (in Lithuania and South Africa) to freedom abroad. Ruth First's retrospective glance seems to gaze back over the preceding snapshots of family holidays and multiracial socializing, expressing concern for her children's future, for comrades now jailed or in hiding.

## *Conclusion*

The same image, when placed in different textual contexts, acquires altered meanings. Eighteen years after her death, a copy of the Sunday Times photograph of Ruth First going into exile (cited above) appeared in Elle South Africa, a glossy fashion magazine (see fig. 52). Under the heading “Elle Salutes the Style Icons of 2000,” Ruth First’s image occupies the same editorial space as that of three professional fashion experts (November 2000: 39).<sup>30</sup> One might argue that Ruth First’s political activism redefines and expands the notion of femininity, or alternatively, that Ruth First’s activism, in this context, is subsumed by what Bartky would term the “achievement” of femininity (1988: 64). Lauded in a popular women’s magazine for her skill in reproducing the constructs of a patriarchal culture, Ruth First’s body becomes part of another alternative history in which political accomplishment is simply an addendum to the attainment of a feminine corporeal image. When viewing Ruth First’s image from the pages of Elle, it is easy to imagine that she is casting a backwards glance over a bygone South Africa filled with apt fashion moments in which dramatic political events function merely as backdrops to showcase her sense of style. Literate in an unspoken language which was (sometimes) passed from mother to daughter, Ruth First expertly manipulates her physical image in order to exploit patriarchal codes for political expediency. Subverting gendered expectations to assert herself visually in a culture which resists hearing her voice, Ruth First strives to redress power balances, even as her image acquires a currency outside her control - or beyond her wildest political imaginings.

The wide-eyed glance of Nomzamo Winnie Mandela staring out plaintively from beneath a stylish, two-toned headscarf on the cover of Part of My Soul (see fig. 53) generates similar iconic value, at once historical and ahistorical (see fig. 52). Evocative of yearnings for an idyllic African past, for the return of her warrior husband from his island prison, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela’s youthful portrait of feminine purity by Magubane becomes disturbingly ironic when viewed from the post-apartheid

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<sup>30</sup> The three other women depicted in the article are Lucilla Booyzen, “director of SA Fashion Week,” Sue Ferrier “Elle’s late, great fashion director,” and Karen Roos, “fashion and decor expert.” “Ruth First, the late political activist,” is the subtitle beneath her picture. No other text appears.

present.<sup>31</sup> While evocations of cultural traditions were politically affirmative acts for black women during the struggle years, public affirmations of Jewish ethnicity, whether religious or Zionist, had no value in such a forum. Except for the small openly Jewish activist groups which blossomed during the mid-1980s, as featured in Looking Back (104-111), Jewish ethnicity was largely associated with insularity and accommodation of apartheid, as depicted throughout The Jews of South Africa. In 117 Days, Ruth First presents a self truncated from her ethnic history, wrought by Tilly First's drive towards assimilation into whiteness, and also by Ruth First's own ideological positionings as an internationalist. Driving through the streets of Windhoek in "the conspicuous salmon-pink American car of the Herero Councillors" (First 1963: 13), Ruth First's historical vision is focused not on the struggles of Jewish women in the Pale, but instead on a meticulous inscription of the intricate interactions between global and economic collusions which was to become South West Africa.

In this chapter, I have surveyed the ways in which women are (mis)rendered in both Looking Back and The Jews of South Africa. Just as the "figures" of Jews "flit" through the historicized landscape of J.M. Coetzee's childhood, so they emerge in various forms within the police station, within traditional Western literature and within black South African autobiographies, casting flickering silhouettes across the mainstream cultures portrayed in these environments, textual or otherwise. My goal here has been to halt for a moment these fleeting stereotypes, to explore how a concurrent appropriation of and rebellion against them have marked productions of Jewish identity. I have attempted to show, also, that just as these figures make a significant contribution to our reading of Ruth First, so too do Ruth First's representations of identity owe an allegiance to these figures, which she expresses most coherently in the silencing of her own adumbrated ethnic self.

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<sup>31</sup> Since the late 1980s, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela has been implicated in a number of violent crimes, including the kidnapping, assault and disappearance of youths Lolo Sono and Sibuniso Tshabalala. She has faced charges for the murder of fourteen-year-old Stompie Seipei, who was abducted with three friends from The Methodist Mission House in Orlando by members of the Mandela United Football Club, a group of boys and young men who lived with her. Dr Abu-Baker Asvat, who examined Seipei before he died, was mysteriously murdered a month later in his surgery. On 25 April 2003, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela was sentenced to five years in prison (of which she served eight months) on forty-three counts of fraud and twenty-five counts of theft in a Pretoria Court (Bezdrob 2003: 267).

## *Chapter Four*

### *Figures and Photographs*





Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

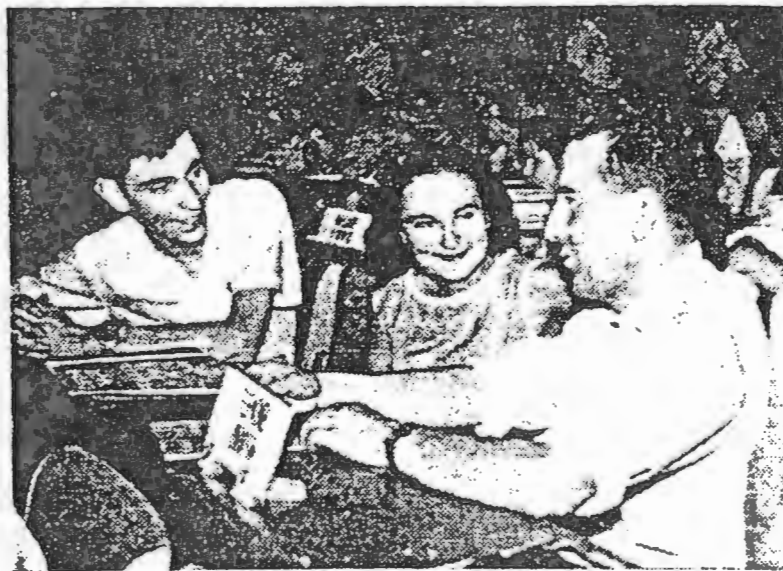


Fig. 12

Albert Sachs and Ruth First. South African delegates at the Peking Council meeting of the World Federation of Democratic Youth, talk to Lopez Rainuudo.

ADVANCE, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1954



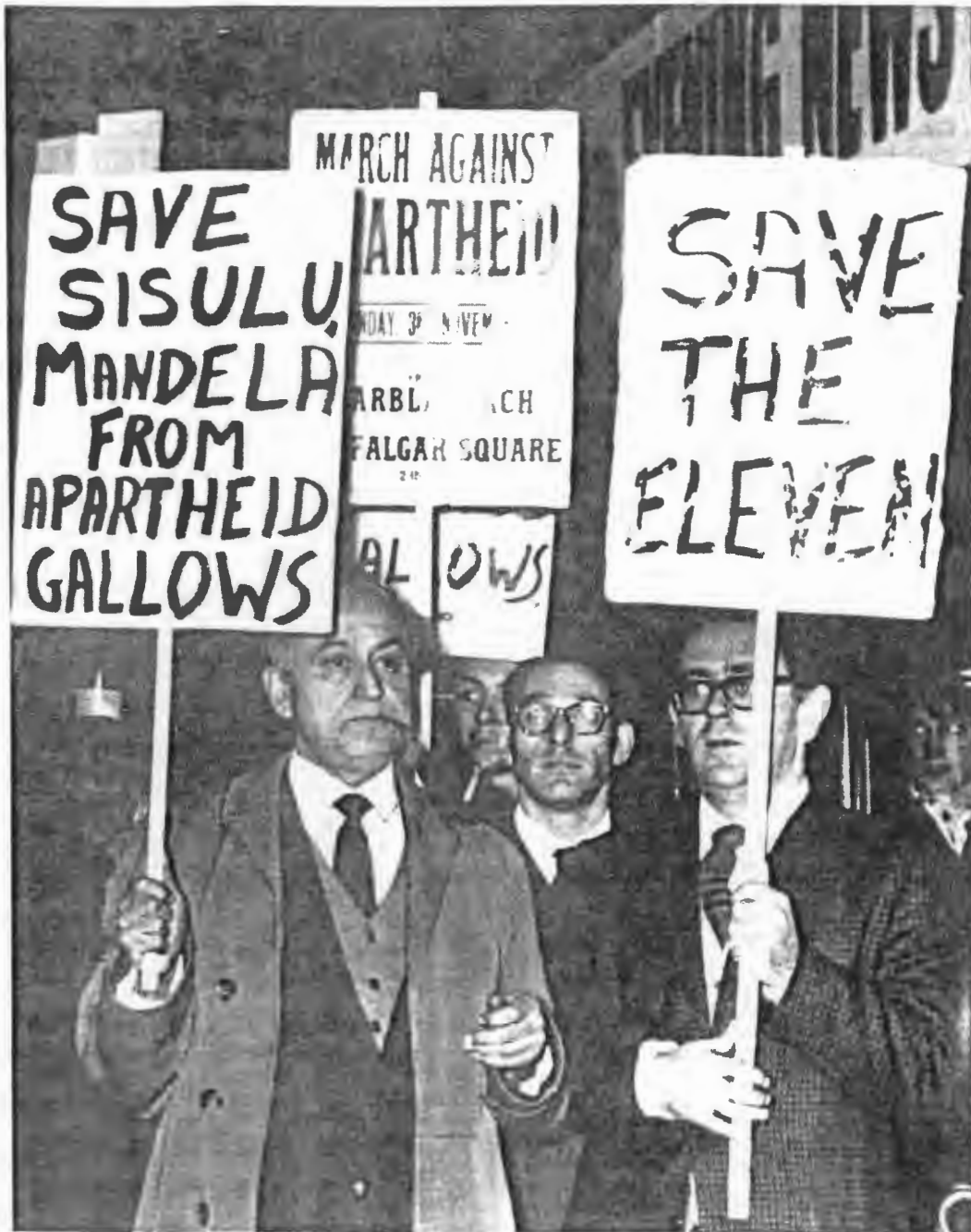
Fig. 13

*Joe Slovo's mother Chaya. She died a few years after arriving in South Africa.*

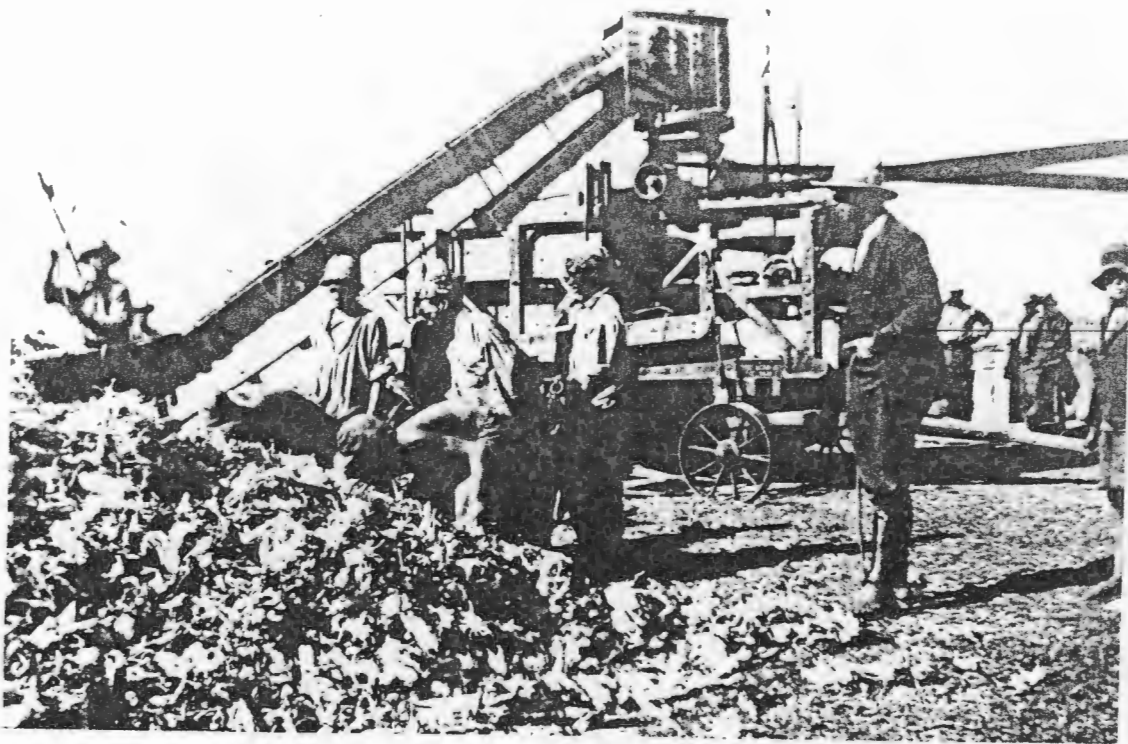


Fig. 14

Fig. 15



*Yusuf Dadoo (left) and Slovo (right) protest against the Rivonia Trial, London 1963.*



קילוף תירס  
בחוות משפחת סניפליסקי ליד קינרוס,  
1930 בערך.  
Threshing corn  
on the Snipelisky's farm,  
near Kinross, c1930.

Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

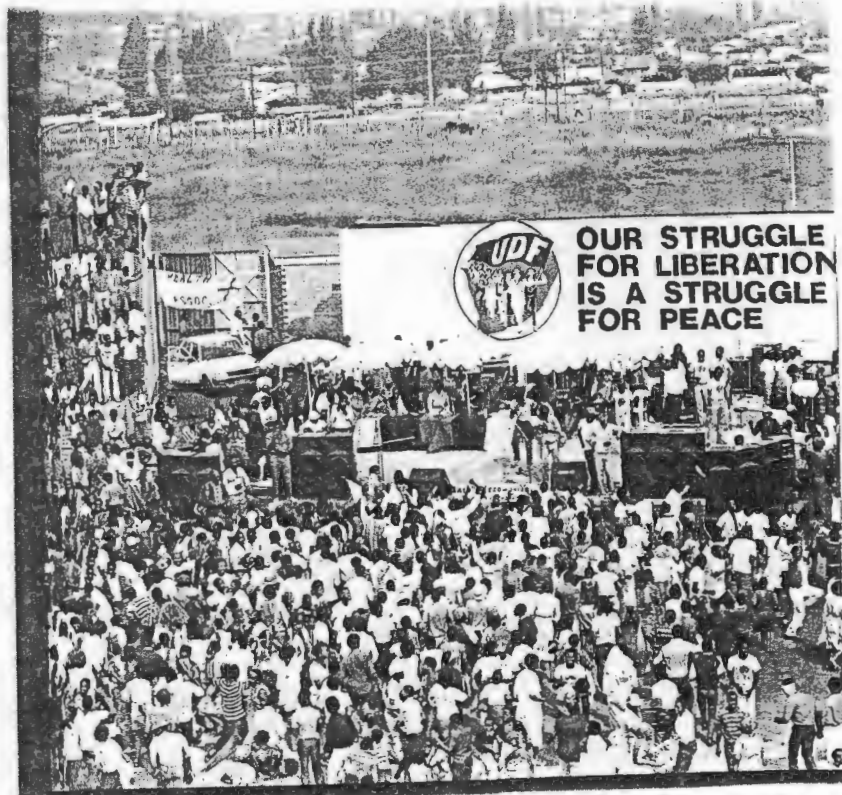


Fig. 20





Fig. 21

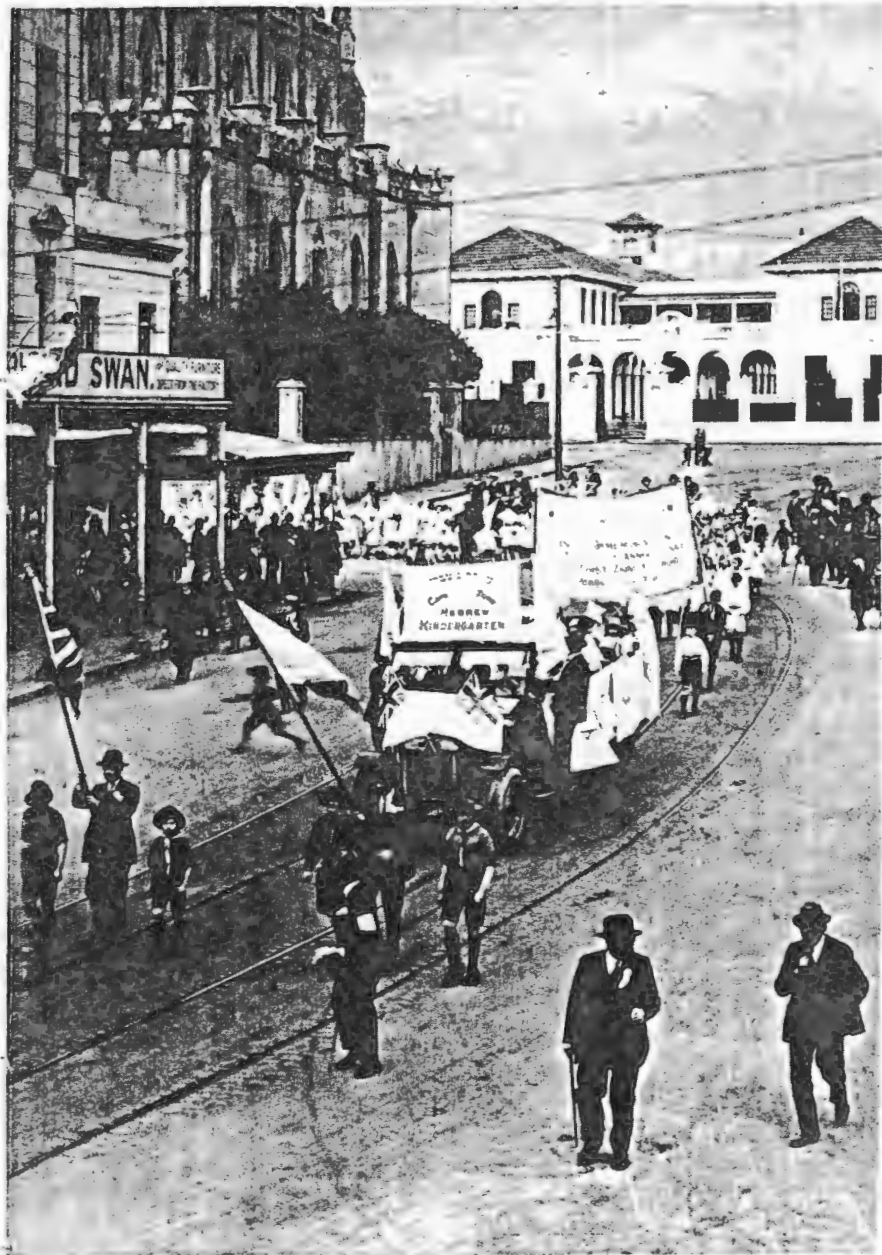


Fig. 22

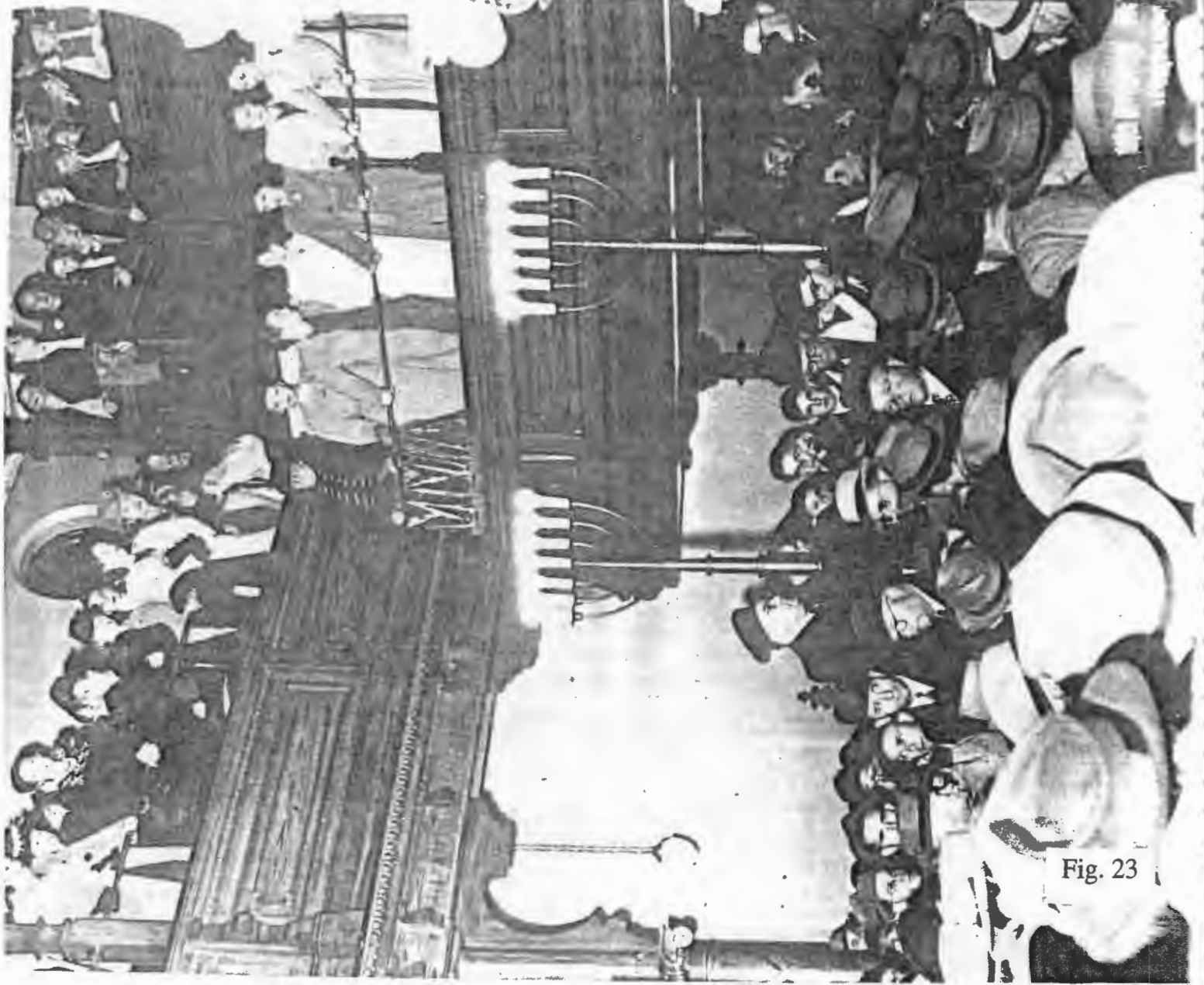


Fig. 23



Fig. 24

"תפילת הצוה"   
 שערכה בית הכנסת הישן   
 בפרטוריה   
 לכבוד הכרת מדינת ישראל,   
 1948.   
 Midnight service   
 at the Old Synagogue   
 in Pretoria,   
 in honor of the declaration   
 of the State of Israel,   
 1948.



Fig. 25



Fig. 27

Fig. 26



Fig. 28

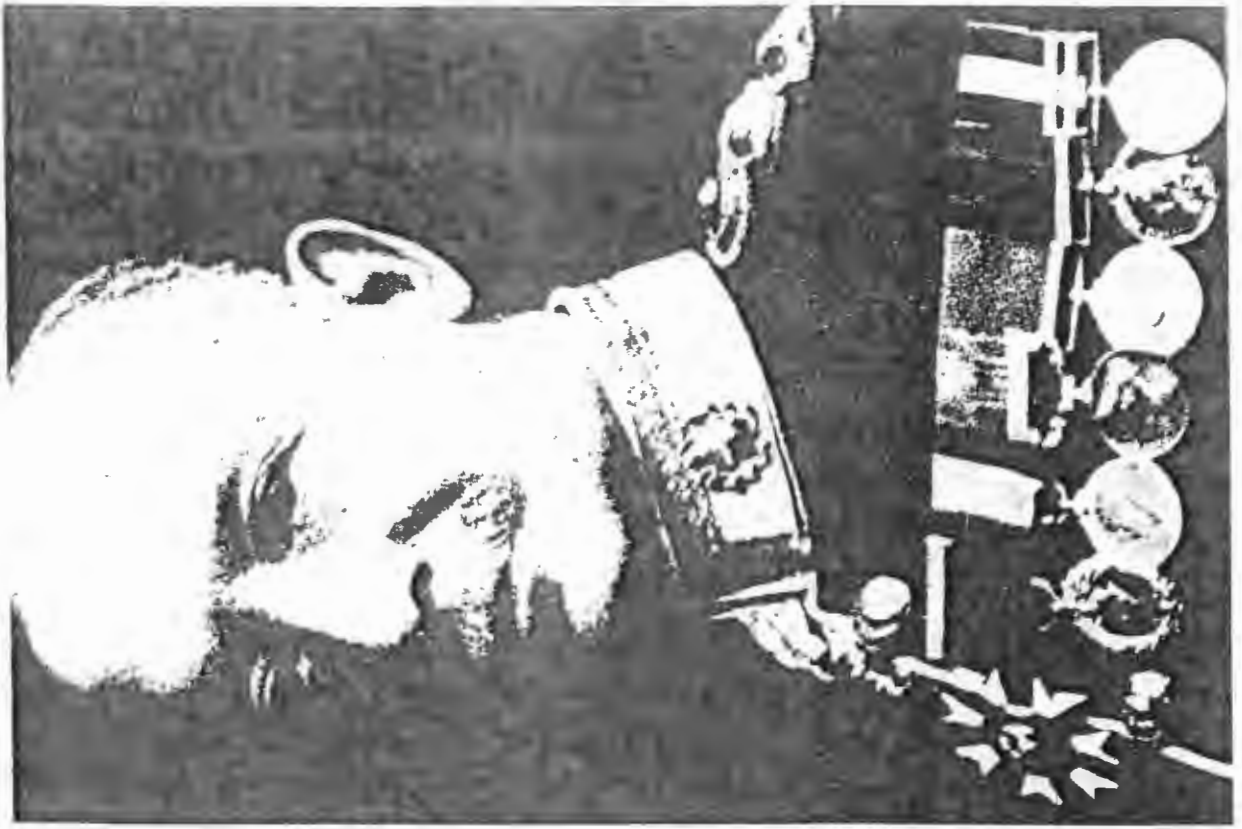
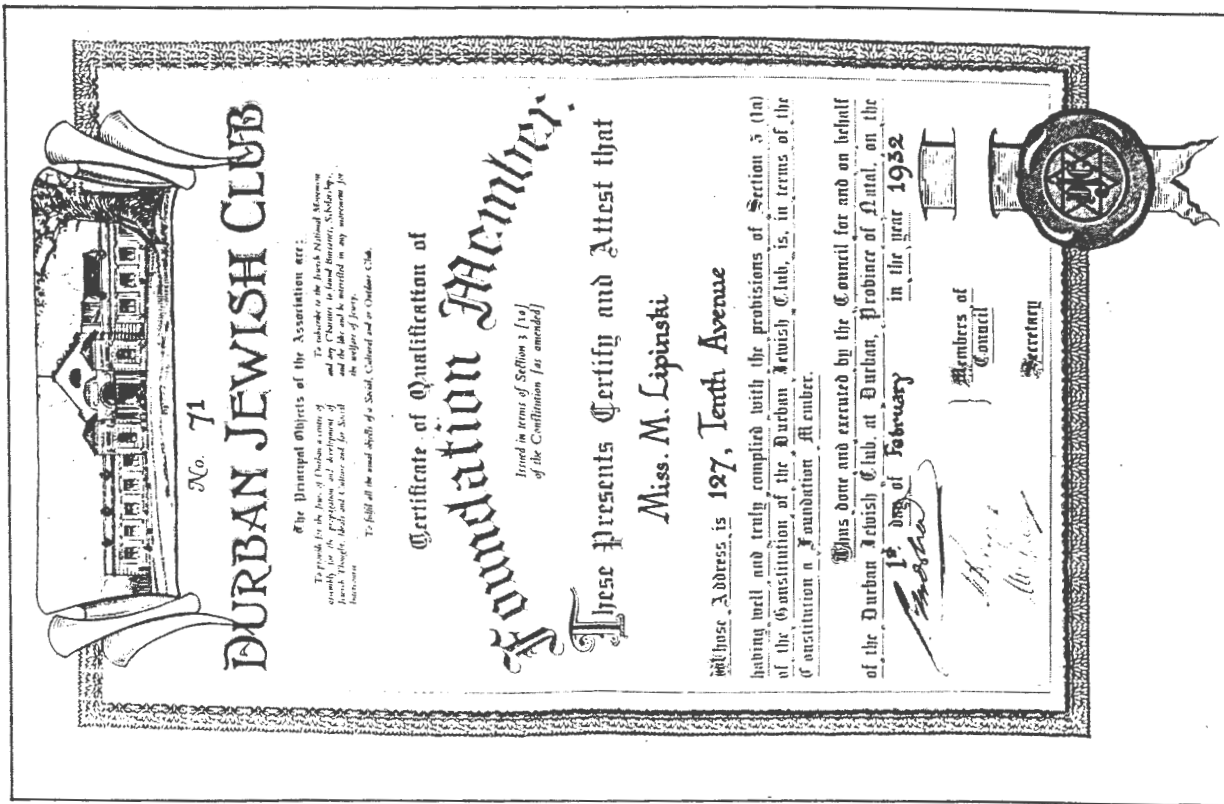


Fig. 29



Fig. 30



מימין: תעודת הוקרה מטעם המועדון היהודי בדורבן לנכדת מ. ליפנסקי, ממייסדות המועדון, מאי 1932.  
Right: Certificate of tribute awarded by the Durban Jewish Club to Mrs. M. Lipinski, one of the club's founders, May 1932.

Fig. 31

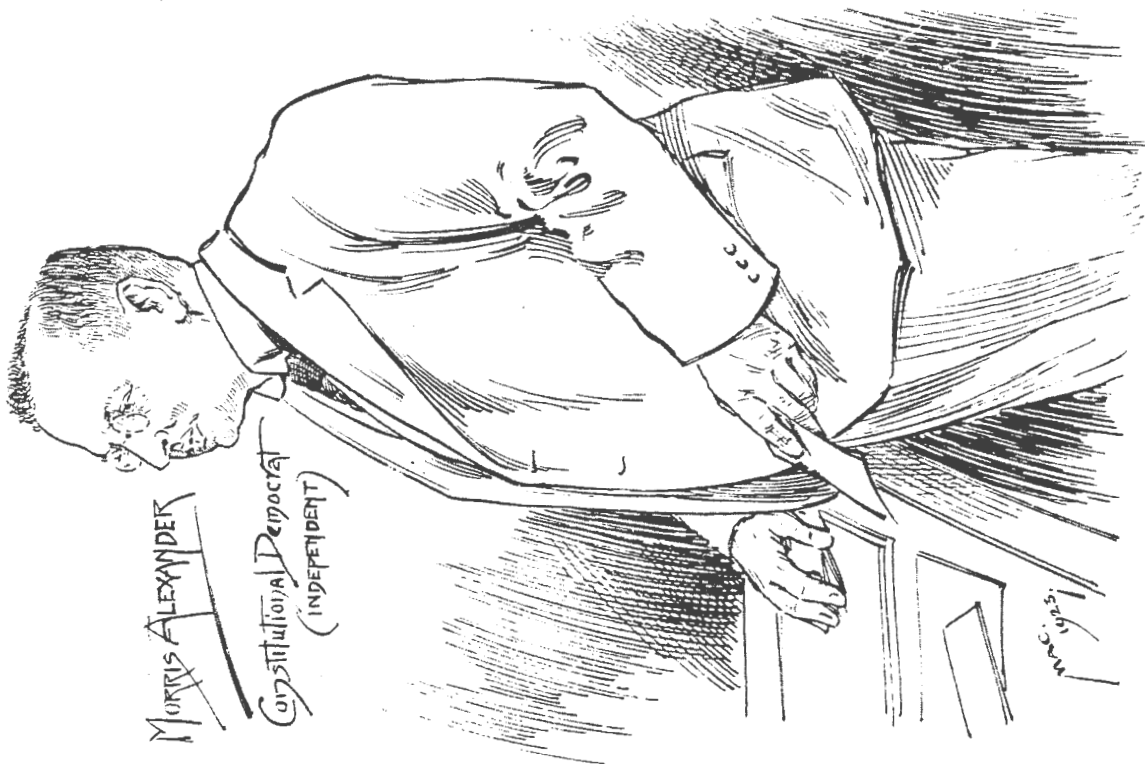


Fig. 32



Fig. 33

Fig. 34



Fig. 35





Fig. 37



Fig. 36

Fig. 38





Fig. 39



Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43



Fig. 44



Executive members of the Federation of South African Women. R to L: Philippa Levy (COD), Francis Beard, ANCWL (PE), Mrs Naidoo (Transvaal Indian Congress), Unknown, Lilian Ngoyi (National President of ANCWL and FSAW), Amina Kachalia (Transvaal Indian Congress), Violet Weinberg (COD), Ruth Matserane (ANCWL), Esme Goldberg (COD). H.J. was National Secretary but could not attend the National Conference in August 1961 at Port Elizabeth because of banning orders.



Fig. 45

Fig. 47



Fig. 48

Fig. 49



Fig. 50

# ELLE SALUTES THE STYLE ICONS OF 2000



Lucilla Booyzen, director of SA Fashion Week



Sue Ferrier, ELLE's late, great fashion director



Karen Roos, fashion and decor expert



Ruth First, the late political activist

39

Fig. 52

*Credit: Sunday Times*



Fig. 51

# WINNIE MANDELA



*Part of My Soul  
Went with Him*



## Accomplished Women: Activism, Domesticity and Motherhood

An accomplished woman, who can find? -  
Far beyond rubies is her value.<sup>1</sup>  
Proverbs 31.10-13, line 1.

Traditionally recited before partaking of the Sabbath evening meal in orthodox Jewish homes, the opening verse of the prayer ‘*Aishes Chayil*,’ or ‘An Accomplished Woman’ quoted above proposes femininity as a rare accomplishment (see fig. 54). Composed of twenty-two verses from Proverbs which list and glorify the qualities of a good wife, ‘*Aishes Chayil*’ presents an enduring cultural formulation for female identity. The title of Naomi Shepherd’s A Price below Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals<sup>2</sup> is an inversion of the opening phrase of the prayer. It hints at the discordance between tacit expectations, religious or otherwise, imposed on these women, and the personal conceptions of womanhood to which they aspired. Calling into question the yardsticks with which husbands and sons (and sometimes also other women) measure feminine achievement, Shepherd destabilizes cultural values that so often crystallize into canonical histories as so-called ‘truths.’ Quite exceptionally for an orthodox religious text, The Complete ArtScroll Siddur (1985) includes a woman’s capacity to fight as worthy of communal praise. In a footnote to this edition of the Jewish daily prayer book, conceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> Various translations of these verses exist, each offering slightly different interpretations of the original Hebrew. In the dissertation, I quote from The Complete ArtScroll Siddur (1985), a recognized standard work edited by Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz. In this first verse, however, I have substituted the translation “rubies” instead of the “pearls” quoted in The Complete ArtScroll Siddur for the Hebrew word *pninim* (389) in order to highlight connections with Shepherd’s title. Both “rubies” and “pearls” are valid translations for *pninim*. The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth of Nations (1962), for instance, gives the following translation: “A woman of worth who can find? For her price is far above rubies” (168). Yet a third meaning is given by The Book of Prayer: According to the Custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews (1947): “A virtuous woman whoso finds – Far above corals is her worth” (179). The main inference of all translations is that an accomplished woman is comparable to (semi-)precious gems.

<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as A Price below Rubies.

accomplishment, denoted by the Hebrew word *chayil*, translate to mean “organized military force, strength, wealth, skill, general competence, or devoutness” (389n).

In this chapter, I examine some ways in which collective formulations of feminine achievement articulate historically and contemporaneously with representations of activism and motherhood amongst women of Jewish ethnicity. Reading texts by Ruth First, her daughters and contemporaries, I focus particularly on exploring inscriptions of motherhood and daughterhood as they take shape against the backdrop of political commitment. Conflicting and conflicted sites which chart the subject positions political women choose (or are made to assume) within South African culture, these representations frequently evince tensions within and between generations. Exploring configurations by black women memoirists of the extended family, perceived historical and contemporary communities, and the mother-daughter relationship functions as a counterpoint against which to plot Ruth First’s often contrasting conceptions of her own domestic and social roles. This final chapter is also an attempt to reconstitute the beginnings of a lineage of women whose ideas and actions provide the often unacknowledged context for Ruth First’s revolutionary impulse in South Africa. Like Shepherd’s undertaking to re-inscribe European and American revolutionary women into a Jewish history, or Debra L. Shultz’s desire to make visible the participation of Jewish women in the Civil Right’s movement in the American South,<sup>3</sup> I attempt here to highlight the fraught local terrain of Jewish ethnicity and its complex intersections within domestic and political realms.

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<sup>3</sup> Schultz’s book is [Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement](#) (2001).

*Praise songs and whispered asides: celebrated and disregarded ancestries*

She arises while it is yet nighttime,  
and gives food to her household and a ration to her maidens  
Proverbs 31.10-13, line 6

According to '*Aishes Chayil*,' an accomplished woman is hardworking, waking early with "enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility" (389n) to assure the smooth running of "her household." The accomplished woman is a leader within the domestic realm. She designates tasks to and rewards for relatives and maidservants according to the status of each within the hierarchy of the home. The communal I portrayed by '*Aishes Chayil*' is not the "individual I" of Anglo-American feminism, whom Driver observes "sees the family as a trap for women," but closer in fact to the construction of what she terms "a strong, courageous and resourceful mother" frequently produced in local autobiographies by black women such as Ellen Kuzwayo and Nomzamo Winnie Mandela (1988: 162). Suggesting that the denial of a mother's "tender loving care" results in children who grow up to be either lazy or criminal, Kuzwayo (1985: 18) insists it is the "child's mother" who must grab "the sharp end of the knife," according to the old seTswana proverb with which she ends her narrative (263).

Like Call Me Woman, Part of My Soul consistently evokes African motherhood as the panacea for black woundedness. The evocation of the Mother Africa trope, which conflates the body of the individual mother with the tolerant and nurturing landscape of the African continent, frequently underlies such portrayals. In his introductory tribute to her memoir, Bishop Manas Buthelezi figures Nomzamo Winnie Mandela as the " 'Mother of Black People' " by highlighting the seemingly limitless capacity of the mother to bear the suffering of her children

(1985: 19). Informing her own notion of identity with the conception of *ubuntu*, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela herself summons the Mother Africa trope with statements like “I have ceased a long time ago to exist as an individual,” and “[w]hatever they do to me, they do to the people in this country” (26).

Closely linked with the ‘I’ who derives authority to speak from her position as wife and mother is the textual production of a powerful matrilineage which bolsters the narrator’s position within the extended family. ‘Many daughters have amassed achievement, but you surpassed them all,’ extol the admiring husband and children of ‘*Aishes Chayil*,’ evoking a coherent procession of ancestral women stretching back into eternity, each generation progressively more accomplished than the next (line 20). Against the idyllic pastoral landscape of Thaba’Nchu, acquired by her “maternal grandparents” in the 1880s (1985: 56), Kuzwayo inscribes her own matrilineage: a feisty grandmother, whose “housekeeping could not be faulted” (62), her loving mother, who emphasized the importance of “personal hygiene” and “correct conduct in public in speech and manners” (66), and her sister, Maria Dikeledi, later to become “a mother with four sons and four daughters” (67). Nomzamo Winnie Mandela does not flow with the predictable current of tradition here, but interestingly aligns herself with a patrilineage of defiant Xhosa warriors in a chapter entitled ‘When My Father Taught Me History I Began to Understand.’ Ruth First, however, like many Jewish women activists, truncates herself from both patriarchal pasts and real or imaginary matrilineages, and in the process curtails sisterhood as a potential site of history in 117 Days. While her productions of selfhood strive towards the communal I (as I discuss in Chapters Two and Three), Ruth First approaches its construction through inscriptions of polyphony rather than representations of unified nationhood which the Mother Africa trope is

frequently made to signify. Retreating to create room for the imagined voices of other individuals rather than stepping forward to contain them, Ruth First shies away from assuming figures of group identity.

Ruth First's textual choice not to identify with her ancestry finds a frequent echo in other struggle autobiographical works by white activist women. Helen Joseph, for instance, glosses over the circumstances of her birth and elides her family history in her trilogy of autobiographical works: If This Be Treason (1963), a diary of the treason trial, in which she mostly refers to herself in the third person, Tomorrow's Sun: A Smuggled Journal from South Africa<sup>4</sup> (1966), what she terms a "very personal account" of interviews with Africans impoverished and banished by the regime (11), and her final memoir, Side by Side. Hilda Bernstein similarly makes bare reference to her personal ancestry in The World That Was Ours. Black women writers like Kuzwayo in Call Me Woman (1985: 55) and Ramphela in A Life (1996: 1), however, carefully mark not only the exact date and the location of their births, but also their specific placement within both matriarchal and patriarchal ancestral lines. I interpret these differences as stemming from the varied positioning of these women within South African culture: while most black women activists perceive resistance to oppression as part of a continuing family tradition, many white women anti-apartheid protesters view their involvement in the struggle as disruptive of inherited values. Furthermore, because activism for white South Africans usually means flouting the accepted norms of the communities of their birth, white women revolutionaries frequently perceive distance from their own families as desirable rather than repugnant. Ray Alexander presents an anomaly here, perhaps because her extended family

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Tomorrow's Sun.

circle was already steeped in radical activism by the time she was four years old.<sup>5</sup> Included at the beginning of her autobiography All My Life and All My Strength (2004) is a family tree going back three hundred and fifty years (1994: 25). Notwithstanding Ray Alexander's exceptional approach to her genealogy, the ancestral map spanning five generations which Ramphele includes at the start of A Life and the harmonious extended family which Kuzwayo depicts in a chapter titled 'My Lost Birthright' may be read against Ruth First's reticence to disclose her heritage in 117 Days and Joseph's embarrassed dissociation from her own mother in Tomorrow's Sun.

Dismissing her English mother's "cherishing of an aristocratic family tradition" as largely imaginary, Joseph portrays her girlhood and youth in England as redundant to her present self in this first memoir (1966: 17). In Side by Side, too, Joseph makes scant reference to relatives, mentioning her own mother merely in passing as a nameless figure, indistinguishable from other "wives and mothers" who endured the 1940 blitz in England (22). In both texts, Joseph constructs the white conventionality of her childhood as a foil against which she speaks her coming to political consciousness. Instead of the predictable details of her birth, Side by Side opens with the date of Joseph's rebirth: 9 August 1956, the day the women marched on the Union buildings to protest carrying passes (1). Brushing aside her own ancestry which has failed to prepare her for a life of challenging the status quo, Joseph focuses instead on creating a tentative new community powered by the "indomitable spirit" of women from all races (2). In her memoir A Far Cry: The Making of a South African (1989),<sup>6</sup> Mary Benson relates more

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<sup>5</sup> Ray Alexander's elder stepsisters Anna and Tanya were members of a "revolutionary group" in Riga, while later her sisters Mary and Dora joined *Arbeiter Heim* (literally 'The Workers' Home'), "a communist-aligned grouping left of the Bund, which was banned by the Latvian government" (Suttner 1997: 30).

<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as A Far Cry.

ambivalently to her ancestry than Joseph: initially imbibing her father's boastful claim that the family were descended from an Irish king (11), Benson finds her early pride in her British heritage is painfully eroded by what she later perceives to be its failure in confronting apartheid.

As their genetic genealogies map pasts which stand at a disjuncture to the political present, white political women frequently relate to them uneasily. The fractured ethnic and familial histories of many Jewish South African women activists compound the discomfort associated with speaking about heritage. Diminishing the importance of the past by failing to remember or discuss it in their autobiographical texts, Jewish South African women activists frequently replicate the taboos of their immigrant homes. "Our dinner-time conversation was always of the present; the past did not appear to have a place at all," writes AnnMarie Wolpe of her childhood in The Long Way Home (74). An exception to the rule is again Ray Alexander, who narrates apocryphal details of her childhood in the *shtetl* as events which positively prefigure those of her adulthood. In her memoir, Podbrey also vividly evokes her *shtetl* upbringing, but her stance in relation to it is far more ambivalent than Alexander's. While Podbrey revels in the family warmth and cohesion generated by the preparation for the Passover festival at "Grandma's house" in the year prior to leaving Lithuania (1993: 6), she also recalls what she describes as the more "sinister" aspects of *shtetl* life (7): the "deplorable" and "vulgar" wailing of "two spinster daughters" on the death of their "ancient" mother, the barbarity of a village doctor (8), fear of "the extraordinary, strange, menacing Goyim [non-Jews]" (3) and her mother's seemingly unquestioning adherence to grotesque convention. Nevertheless, in interviews with Tim Robbins in 1993 and 1994, Podbrey insists that the "morality of Judaism, the ethics of the religion, the history of the Jews" led to what she perceives as her "sense of justice" (Suttner 1997: 60), her

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willingness to fight for “the most oppressed” (66). In 117 Days, Ruth First seeks validation not from her ancestral heritage, nor her immediate family, but from a multi-racial group of political colleagues, “her friends” whose “abandonment” she admits she “would not be able to face” (1965: 130).

Leveson’s observation that Jewish men in Western literature are generally depicted as carriers of negative ethnic attributes to a far greater extent than Jewish women (1996: 13) goes some way towards explaining why Jewish male memoirists more overtly incorporate their own ethnic heritages into their views of themselves. Positing that European writers generally “treated Jewish women more favourably than Jewish men” due to factors such as women’s exclusion from finance and their reputed “beauty,” Leveson suggests a partial neutralization of Otherness as a possibility for women which is unavailable to men (1996: 13). Far less able to mask their ethnic identity through specific bodily postures and decorations, Jewish male struggle autobiographers frequently broach the subject immediately and openly. For example, in his memoir Into Exile (1963), Segal devotes much of his first chapter (9-29) to a discussion of his Jewish heritage, the precarious situation of Jews in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s, and the torn relationship of that community to black oppression. Contemporaneous with 117 Days, Into Exile also aims at convincing readers to challenge apartheid through the narration of personal experience, but, unlike the former, openly declares an identity “bounded by Jewish horizons” even as it transgresses them (19). Overtly declaring “the nature of my origins” on the third page of Nothing but the Truth, Turok similarly occupies the subject position of an ethnic Jew from which to negotiate his political alignments (2003: 13). Writing of his mother’s struggle to maintain himself and his brothers by hawking linen from door to door in Libau, Latvia while his

father was trying to make a home for the family in Cape Town, Turok depicts her as “a young woman alone” working hard to meet financial and domestic responsibilities (14).

Unlike Turok’s brave, hardworking mother, subsequent generations of Jewish immigrant women largely rejected the ideals of ‘*Aishes Chayil*,’ exchanging former aspirations of Jewish womanhood for those of whiteness. As opposed to Hilda Bernstein’s mother, Dora, who was born in the Pale and was sent to London to “become an unpaid maid in her brother’s house” (Bernstein 2002: 14) or Tilly First, who had arrived in South Africa as an impoverished Yiddish girl, Norma Kitson’s mother, Millie Stiller, was raised to be “a beautiful butterfly,” an emblem of her family’s newfound wealth (Kitson 1986: 8). Concurrent with desires to hide markers of an “off-white” heritage (Brodkin 1998: 1) and fractured family relationships, exacerbated by long periods of separation and the stresses of immigration (Campbell 2002: 105), emerge aspirations to ascend in social class. These ambitions frequently find expression in endeavours to replicate constructions of gender underlying mainstream white culture. A second-generation South African in a family who “prided themselves on being aristocrats,” Norma Kitson reveals in Where Sixpence Lives that her “mother and her sisters never worked” (1986: 9). Anxious to distance herself from a working-class heritage, Millie Stiller “slept during the day,” and socialized at night (9-10). In The Long Way Home, AnnMarie Wolpe similarly portrays her mother, Polly Kantor, as a woman who was expert at looking beautiful and “extremely well dressed,” aspiring to lead “a life of ease, even when money was so obviously tight” (1993: 75).

Norma Kitson remarks that compulsions to disguise their past drove her mother and her relatives to imitate what in their minds constituted British “upper-class” feminine appearance and

behaviour: “Rosenthal cups were held high, little fingers crooked (by the book), perfect nails – painted, hair all set in the same style” (1986: 74). Yet the attempts of the Stiller women to reproduce the disciplinary practices of white femininity “by the book” culminate merely in clumsy mimicry. Exposing themselves as belonging to the “ ‘noovo reetch’ ” (“*nouveau riche*”) class they so reviled, the women are blind to the social implications of their personal ornamentation, “the garish floral sleeveless dresses, the vivid eye make-up, the perfectly shaped cupid lips on powdered faces,” and their vocalization, which Norma Kitson alludes to as “harsh laughter trying to be a ladylike tinkle” and “strident accents.”

While signs of the shift from a working-class to a *nouveau riche* lifestyle were apparent amongst Jewish activist women of Ruth First’s generation, they too, like their grandmothers, would “arise while it was yet nighttime.” Yet their work was different, driven usually by political commitment rather than economic necessity, sustaining at times a newly configured “household” or community of unlike others unimagined by the accomplished woman of the previous century. While generally aspiring to join the middle classes, most revolutionary white Jewish women of Ruth First’s generation simultaneously undertook far greater labour and financial responsibility than their contemporaries, who were often fulltime wives and mothers. While assuming the role of breadwinner was a fact of life for most black activist women, revolutionary Jewish women took up this task later, largely as a function of exile and their partners’ activism. Some men, like Joe Slovo, served the Movement in a semi-voluntary capacity, while others, like David Kitson, were in prison. In exile, Ruth First assumed much greater financial pressures than she had during her Camelot years, filling the role of “family breadwinner” by continuing to work “as a freelance journalist and author, travelling Africa” (Gillian Slovo 1997: 109). When Tilly First became to

too old to care for her daughters, however, Ruth First was forced to stay home while Joe Slovo “took up the long-distance baton” (112).

In Where Sixpence Lives, Norma Kitson writes that when she went into exile alone with two children in 1966, she found herself overwhelmed by the labour of mothering, volunteering for the Movement, and struggling to maintain her family financially while working as a typist. Arriving each morning “to mounds of work,” Norma Kitson describes “thumping it out on an ancient typewriter, sitting on a crooked old typing chair” (212). When she searched for a permanent job, Norma Kitson found that she was discriminated against because she no longer had the body of a young woman: “I was forty years old,” she writes, “the secretarial world had closed down on me.” Ill-equipped to support her family alone, Norma Kitson left school at the age of fourteen because her relatives “believed that if girls were educated, it would be hard for them to get husbands” (73). Electing to learn typing and shorthand, Norma Kitson chose to refigure herself as proudly working-class by the time she reached adulthood. (In an interview with Hilda Bernstein in The Rift, Robyn Slovo reflects similarly that she chose to change social classes as part of her rebellion against her mother. Desiring to demonstrate that “this great heroine in my life” nevertheless held class prejudices (1994: 445), Robyn admits she chose a working-class Irish boyfriend as a way of raising her mother’s ire). Norma Kitson further distances herself from her female relatives by claiming that her exposure to feminism as well as politics came through her male relatives. Designating her brother Ronnie as the first “feminist I met,” and her husband David as “the second,” she records proudly that David Kitson did all the housework and cooking in the first years of their marriage (1986: 121). Involved in the struggle as a contact person, a typist and a printer of underground posters, pamphlets and documents,

Norma Kitson would later offer to members of the Movement classes in typewriting and other technical skills. According to Norma Kitson, it was she who taught Ruth First to type in 1962 (134).

Like Norma Kitson and Hilda Bernstein, both of whom admired the philosophical questioning of their educated fathers rather than the adherence to conventionality epitomized by their mothers, Pauline Podbrey aspired from an early age to gain entry to what she constructed as the male world of political idealism. In the mid-1930s, after her “exhausted mother” (Podbrey 1993: 10) had retired to bed after a long day serving customers in her small shop, Podbrey would creep onto the balcony in their Durban flat to overhear the discussions of her father’s circle of communist friends, who included Eddie Roux and Lazar Bach (Suttner 1997: 51). Despising her semi-literate mother Henneh’s “foreignness” and “ingratiating manner” when dealing with officialdom of any kind, Podbrey idealizes instead her father’s assumption of a high-handed morality (Podbrey 1993: 13). Placing his so-called principles above the practicalities of earning a living, Podbrey’s father would lose one bookkeeping job after another due to his refusal to submit to his employer’s authority. It was only after Podbrey herself was forced to assume the role of sole breadwinner in her own family following the physical and mental breakdown of H.A. Naidoo that she was able to appreciate her mother’s “enormous strength and vitality,” a realization triggered significantly by the act of writing her past (Suttner 1997: 62).

While growing up, AnnMarie Wolpe, too, idealized her “dapper” father Hooks (Wolpe 1994: 73). As opposed to Simon Watts or Berl Podbrey, Hooks Kantor was a financial speculator who dressed “impeccably” and assumed the air of an “English gent,” abandoning an early interest in

Nationalist politics in order to pursue an affluent lifestyle (75). Viewing her father as enchanting yet distant, AnnMarie expresses the internal dissonance with which she relates to her Jewish heritage through her relationship with her mother. Imbibing her mother's unarticulated desires for "a good marriage to a wealthy, attractive, personable, interesting man," AnnMarie Wolpe simultaneously finds herself confused by Polly Kantor's criticism of "conventional Jewish society" (44). As a young woman, AnnMarie Wolpe had desired to become a physician, but was discouraged by her mother, who evoked the spectre of their house doctor, "unfashionable" Dr Getz, as a warning of what her daughter could become: a plain woman with short hair who walked brusquely and "wore sensible dowdy suits and sensible shoes." Later, however, AnnMarie Wolpe would resentfully attribute "the seed of discontent" regarding her discarded personal ambitions to her mother's ambivalence about femininity. Returning to university in England when her children were older, AnnMarie Wolpe counters her mother's history of subservience with a doctorate in the sociology of education and a lecturing position in the Department of Women's Studies at Middlesex Polytechnic. Nevertheless, she writes that in "the background" she felt herself "dictated" to "by Harold's wishes, Harold's options," as if her mother's unrealized potential were eclipsing her own life, as if "[s]hades of the past" had been cast forward into her future (17).

As opposed to Polly Kantor, Heneh Podbrey, Miller Stiller and Dora Watts, Tilly First provided Ruth with an excellent library and encouraged her daughter to achieve intellectually from girlhood. In adulthood, Ruth First was able to pursue her political goals in part because she was able to rely heavily on her own mother for childrearing. In 117 Days, Ruth First figures her mother as a reliable source of practical and emotional support, writing of the great "comfort" she

found while imprisoned with her “mother as substitute” (1965: 55). In her mid-sixties at the time, Tilly First also drove to Pretoria every day to deliver cooked food to her daughter while she was detained there. With no extended family or sympathetic neighbours to rely on, Ruth First writes of her dread at the very real possibility of her mother’s detention, and her “heartache” at the thought that her children could be “abandoned.”

Ill-prepared for a life of financial anxiety and domestic toil, Ruth First, Norma Kitson and AnnMarie Wolpe are bereft of the support of an extended family like the one extolled in the praise song with which Ramphele introduces A Life. The voice of her paternal grandmother, Ramaesela Christina Ramphele, “shrilly” resonates through Ramphele’s text, enunciating an oral narrative which celebrates variety between generations even as it affirms maternal cohesion amidst apparent adherence to traditional patriarchy (1995: 10). Chanted to welcome relatives as they arrived each year at the communal homestead in Uitkyk, in the then northern Transvaal, the song venerates the unique qualities of family members, accompanied by the ululation and dancing of everyone present. Weaving the “honourable mention” of other female family members into what was for the most part “predictably” a tale of male “heroes,” Ramaesela Christina nevertheless applauds a tradition of successful contraventions of patriarchies, both black and white. Discerning also “that her [own] enterprise is good,” Ramphele’s grandmother praises herself as capable and tough (12). Her song constructs a matrilineage which functions as an anchor in the text for Ramphele’s role as “a transgressive” of convention (221).

The assertion of the “philosophical position” of *ubuntu*, of communal togetherness, in texts by black activists does not always signify its realization, however, as Driver points out (1988a). Writing at times of her yearning “for the opportunity just to curl up in bed undisturbed for hours

on end,” Ramphele indicates the distance between on the one hand her aspiration towards *ubuntu*, or what she terms “living in community,” and on the other hand “the pleasures of privacy,” which is to say, between balancing her “professional responsibilities” with “the expectations” of others (1995: 105). While for Ramphele *ubuntu* was at times a reality, Driver observes that Kuzwayo recognizes this concept “only as a cultural ideal” (1988a: 234). Declaring in Call Me Woman that “[m]y childhood had been a happy time, full of the warmth and security of a traditional country life” (1985: 75), Kuzwayo’s description of “rejection” by members of her extended family proclaims otherwise (Driver 1988a: 244). Fractures in the network of family cohesiveness hinted at by Kuzwayo’s mother, who “firmly believed she was a Zulu by birth and a Motswana only by adoption” (Kuzwayo 1985: 80), find confirmation in the teasing of Kuzwayo’s cousins, who sometimes singled her out by her father’s name ‘Merafe,’ communicating a lack of belonging which left her “more hurt than words could tell” (65). But it is the inexplicable expulsion of Kuzwayo in 1938 from the family homestead at Thaba’Nchu by Aunt Blanche, her mother’s younger sister, that destroys Kuzwayo’s already fragile sense of place within the extended family, and with it her sense of self-esteem. Kuzwayo ends the chapter entitled ‘Physical and Emotional Shocks’ with an anxious search for both a new home and job (106).

Mashinini, too, tells a tale of a joyful childhood suddenly disrupted by circumstances beyond her control. As opposed to the rural upbringing of Kuzwayo and Ramphele, Mashinini’s childhood was an urban one. Growing up in Soweto in the 1930s, Mashinini describes the home she shared with her dressmaker mother, her milkman father and her six brothers and sisters as emotionally harmonious, aesthetically pleasing and generally “happy,” in spite of financial constraints and

poor living conditions (1989: 3). Her precarious idyll is “shattered” when her parents separate, possibly due to her father’s long hours away from home (6). Mashinini’s mother seemed to have aspired to a Western lifestyle, proudly going to town every week in “gloves and high-heeled shoes” to return home always “holding a bunch of flowers and a cake” (5). Mashinini herself seems to idealize this lifestyle, justifying her preference in terms of Black Consciousness by aligning her inheritance of her mother’s “dark skin colour” with her mother’s love of “beautiful [Western] things” such as “blue Delft china cups,” “crystal glasses” and “shining brass vases.” Although she writes of her abandonment by her father when he loses contact with the family after her parents’ divorce, he is resurrected in the narrative by his provision of “a home and shelter” for Mashinini after her first marriage ended in 1959 (7).

Suddenly alone in exile in 1966, Norma Kitson finds herself in a position analogous, in some important respects, with Kuzwayo’s. Having rejected the Stiller dynasty of her birth in favour of the Movement, Norma Kitson discovers her hopes of a new extended family based on loyalties of political affiliation bitterly disappointed. For younger (and less affluent) communists during the 1950s, “the Fischers, Bernsteins, Slovos and Harmels” constituted an élite group, sometimes referred to as the “ ‘Northern Suburbs Clique’ ” (Frankel 1999: 62). Tensions between middle-class and working-class activists became more pronounced when the Party Leadership moved to London at the end of 1963, according to Norma Kitson, who describes the SACP in London, perhaps unfairly, as the “very small, powerful group [. . .] of mainly middle-class whites who left South Africa before the going really got tough” (1986: 214). Most of the central committee members of the SACP, except Bram Fischer,<sup>7</sup> left for London between 1962 and 1964. In

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<sup>7</sup> Fischer decided to stay in South Africa to face trial, while Molly Fischer was killed in an apparently freak car accident in the Orange Free State in 1964.

particular, Norma Kitson names Brian and Sonia Bunting<sup>8</sup> as members of this group, which she calls the “Chevre.” A Yiddish epithet with layered meanings, *chevre* denotes both “comrades,” and also the abridged form of *Chevra Kadisha* (literally, “Blessed or Holy Friends”) in reference to the Jewish Burial Society (214-215). Accusing the “Chevre” of attempting to metaphorically bury their opponents within the solidarity movement, Norma Kitson ironically evokes the dashed ideal of comradeship in terms of *ubuntu*, accusing Sonia in Where Sixpence Lives: “ ‘David is your comrade! I’m your comrade! My children are supposed to be your children!’ She looked at me as if I were mad! What had she to do with my kids?” (212).<sup>9</sup> Adopting a conception of motherhood which is communally rather than biologically conceived, Norma Kitson is outraged to discover the nuclear family paradigm to be pervasive amongst white communist revolutionaries.

Disenchanted with the inadequate realization of variously nuanced conceptions of *ubuntu* in their communities, some black women activists write of producing the home as a “sanctuary against exclusion,” even if this meant holding down “a double shift of domestic and wage labour” (White 1994: 37). Kuzwayo writes of desiring to make “a home in the best way I could afford” (1985: 21), even if that meant arising “while it is yet nighttime.” In Strikes, Mashinini narrates similarly that she would strive conscientiously to create a kitchen which “glittered like mirrors”

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<sup>8</sup> Sonia was Jewish, while Brian was not. The son of renowned communist activist Sidney Percival Bunting, Brian was editor-in-chief of the Guardian (and its successive incarnations) from September 1948 until March 1963, when the newspaper was forced to close. He became a member of the Party’s central committee in 1948. When the Buntings were placed under house arrest for five years at the end of October 1962, they went into exile in London until 1991, when they returned to South Africa.

<sup>9</sup> I cannot verify or disclaim Norma Kitson’s statement, but note that she has been excluded from the Looking Back exhibition and much canonical struggle literature. In ‘End of an Élite’ (1996), a review of Joe Slovo’s autobiography which appeared in the London Review of Books, R. W. Johnson writes too of David Kitson’s absence from official histories. In a reply to subsequent letters to the editor from Hilda Bernstein and Gillian Slovo, Johnson suggests that entrenched leadership hierarchies within the Party expelled David Kitson on his release from jail in 1984 because they felt threatened by his status as a “senior resistance fighter [. . .] with a record of heroic sacrifice none could match” (1996a: 4).

(1989: 10), waking as early as four o' clock in the morning to get to work by seven. Arriving back home when it was already dark to begin a long evening of serving her husband, taking care of the children and engaging in household tasks, Mashinini describes a life which is closer, in many ways, to those of late nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish women than to the daily routine of her white political contemporaries. Bleached of the consoling resonances it held for black women by different worldviews, housework was usually perceived as plain drudgery by Ruth First and her Jewish female contemporaries, who frequently looked outside the home for creative fulfillment.

For Ruth First, writing, teaching and researching was work which she willingly undertook, as much as to express her creative potential and political conviction as to earn a living. In 1977, Ruth First relinquished her lectureship post at Durham to relocate to Maputo in order to lead a research team in the sociology department of the local university. Surrendering the staid security of London, Ruth First embraced an exciting new life in a landscape where the street names themselves resonated with a "who's who of great [communist] revolutionaries" (Gillian Slovo 1997: 7). Initially, she went alone, but by the early 1980s, both Ruth First and Joe Slovo were living in the Mozambican ministerial compound in that city. Writing that she was "disturbed each morning by the sound of Ruth's fingers hammering on her Hermes typewriter," Gillian Slovo expresses her ambivalent admiration of her mother's discipline, a quality she figures as praiseworthy but disruptive of domestic order (18). Removed from duties to the biological extended family, and sometimes emotionally distant from her own daughters, Ruth First is not the ideal wife of '*Aishes Chayil*,' but a descendent of exemplary Jewish women revolutionaries who similarly flouted domestic and religious conventions in order to enact change within the

secular world. Valuing intellectual nourishment above emotional or nutritional sustenance, Ruth First cannot help but disappoint her daughters, who crave her attention in more conventional ways.

*Motherhood and activism, sacrifice and anger*

Her children arise and praise her, her husband, and he lauds her:  
'Many daughters have amassed achievement, but you surpassed them all.'  
Proverbs 31.10-13, lines 19-20.

In his Introduction to 117 Days, Joe Slovo unequivocally “lauds” Ruth First, whom, he writes, excelled in her many roles as “liberation publicist” (1988: 6), academic, “social worker, journalist, author, public campaigner and underground activist” (1988: 4), amongst others. In the same breath, Joe Slovo praises his wife for having “carved out the time and the energy to be a caring mother to our daughters Shawn, Gillian and Robyn, and the space for our thirty-three years of warm, albeit, spirited, companionship in marriage” Joe Slovo’s metaphor of ‘carving out’ speaks of mothering as a secondary pursuit, one which had to be wrought from the solid lumber of intellectual and political life. Recalling a discussion with Ruth First in Maputo about “the problems” their children shared, Ray Alexander evokes Shawn Slovo’s A World Apart as a way of introducing the tensions which inevitably arose between mothering and political work (Suttner 1997: 46). Acclaiming Ruth First as a “remarkable person” of whom she was “very fond,” Ray Alexander emphasizes that the practice of keeping secrets (against which Molly Roth rails), was essential to protect both their families and the Movement. Yet Ray Alexander is also careful to evoke what she terms the “wonderful certificate” of domestic accomplishment bestowed upon her by her son Johan when he was four years old. When Johan was questioned by police about her activities, Ray Alexander recounts, he would “praise her” unequivocally: “ ‘My

mother is a wonderful cook, she bakes lovely cakes,” he would say, once showing off a lumber jacket that she had sewn for him. Frequently away on trade union business, Alexander nevertheless accentuates the fact that she spent “many evenings at home.” Good mothering remains a pivotal value in her discourse about her political involvement, a disclaimer perhaps against those children of activists who had become judgmental of or punitive towards their parents.

In 117 Days, written in a political climate of which she would later say that “ ‘making it’ ” meant “proving your ‘equality’ ” with men, Ruth First does not emphasize mothering as her primary role (see Appendix: 303). Yet, importantly, she acknowledges the significance of her children in her memoir. Of their initial visit in detention, Ruth First writes of wanting to comfort her daughters by diverting their attention to domestic concerns, talking “not of being locked up but of school and the cat, library books, and holidays” (1965: 50). Later, in the privacy of her cell, Ruth First mulls over the “heartache” she senses she and Joe Slovo had caused the children by their political choices, worrying that she had “abandoned” them (55). Contemplating suicide, Ruth First worries again about her daughters’ futures (130). While constructing her roles as wife and mother as secondary to her activist identity in 117 Days, Ruth First does not dismiss her function of caregiver. Before swallowing a phial of pills inadvertently left in her cell, Ruth First pens a note apologizing for what she terms her “cowardice,” “loved the children once more,” and “tried to say words that would have a special meaning for Joe.” Fearing “abandonment” by her comrades when released and wanting to prove that she had not betrayed them, Ruth First attempts to take her own life in an act which would later be inscribed by her daughters as an archetypal desertion.

Just as Jewish activist women like AnnMarie Wolpe and Norma Kitson frequently present the mother-daughter connection as a site of ambivalence and fracture, so too do all three of Ruth First's daughters portray their relationships with their mother as nervously unresolved. From one point of view, Gillian Slovo's entire opus of fiction, including five detective novels, a family saga, three thrillers and a weighty historical novel read as a thinly disguised search for answers to questions raised by her mother's activism and violent death. Gillian Slovo's first novel Morbid Symptoms (1984), published two years after Ruth First's murder in Maputo, focuses on the uncovering of circumstances surrounding a mysterious death, as do her subsequent novels featuring feminist detective and journalist Kate Baeier - Death by Analysis (1986), Death Comes Staccato (1987), Catnap (1995) and Close Call (1996). In an interview with Sarah Nuttall in 1992, Gillian Slovo admits that eavesdropping during her "childhood full of secrets" led to an abiding interest in the detective genre (1997: 79). Ties of Blood (1989), her epic novel about the intertwined fates of four generations of two South African families, one predominantly Jewish and the other black, is also filled with self-admitted "autobiographical elements" (Braude 1994: 264).

Gillian Slovo's three thrillers The Betrayal (1992), Façade (1993) and Red Dust (2000) conjure up intertwining themes of political involvement, duplicity and suicide. The Betrayal, advertised by Virago as a "stunning political thriller of love and loyalty" (1992: cover) and set in the South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia of 1989, explores a liberation movement beset by lack of trust and riddled with spies. The interrogation scenes in which the South African Special Branch question Sarah Patterson, an Englishwoman who became involved in MK, are strongly reminiscent of

Ruth First's descriptions in 117 Days. Overshadowed similarly by the twin threats of madness and suicide, Sarah does not take her own life, but two colleagues, Wentworth and Thembi, kill themselves. Death by the ingestion of barbiturates is the fate of Judith, the pale-skinned, dark-haired sculptor mother of actress Laura Weber in Façade. Daughter of a celebrated mother and a foreign father who is an international negotiator, Laura, like Gillian Slovo, is marked by both her parents' fame and her mother's untimely death. Representations of a grotesque Jewish femininity converge in the "dumpiness" (1993: 37) and "moon face" (39) of Rachel, Laura's loud, brashly dressed grandmother, from which Judith, slim and "calm in contrast," distances herself (37). The plot doubly mirrors the fraught legacy of mother to daughter, firstly through the deterioration into delusion and self-destruction of the theatrical character Hedda Gabbler, whom Laura plays in a dramatic production, and secondly through Laura's private urges to repeat her mother's actions. Gillian Slovo's latest work, a historical novel titled Ice Road (2004), presents an ingenious counterpoint to Ruth First's choice of historical agency in politically turbulent times. Rebuffing heroism and embracing the "commonplace," the central character, a nondescript Russian cleaning lady called Irina Davyodovna Arbatova, watches, waits and says little (5). Considering it her "good fortune" that "nobody powerful even interested themselves in me," Irina attributes her survival in the tumultuous Leningrad of 1933 to her skill at blending into the background (19).

Describing the moment when the Sunday Times photographer snapped the picture of her, her sister Robyn and her mother boarding an airplane for London (see fig. 51) in Every Secret Thing, Gillian Slovo juxtaposes her own image, "half-turned away" and "caught [. . .] between confusion and blank incomprehension," against Ruth First's "immaculate" one (1997: 104).

Swiveling away from the camera, from her mother, Gillian Slovo enacts a refusal to adopt not only Ruth First's political commitment, but also her mother's frequent acquiescence to the disciplines of femininity. In A Death in the Family (1996), the documentary she made about events surrounding Ruth First's murder, Gillian appears wearing no make-up, sensible shoes and a plain dress. Although seemingly seeking to resist conventional methods of patriarchal control, Gillian is "caught" by them at certain moments, reacting with rage when Eric Pugen, "Ruth's dress designer of old," comments insensitively that she is a lot larger physically than Ruth First (1997: 193).

While outwardly appearing what she terms a "pretty, jolly little girl," Robyn Slovo describes a relationship with Ruth First that was similarly fraught with dislocation (Bernstein 1994: 445). In an interview with Hilda Bernstein, Robyn Slovo blames Ruth First's total absorption in politics for her feelings of inadequacy, while at the same time credits her mother with teaching her "to use words and to be articulate" (1994: 447). Like her younger sisters, Shawn Slovo views Ruth First's suicide attempt while in prison as a defining moment in their relationship. Accusing Diana of abandonment in A World Apart, Molly yells: "You tried to leave us. You don't care about us. You shouldn't have had us" (1988: 107). Diana's reply ("Listen to me...I was breaking apart...what good would I have been to you in pieces...") [ellipses in original]), echoes Ruth First's introspection in 117 Days: "I was anguished when I thought of the children, but what good would I be to them in mental pieces?" (1965: 130). In the dialogue that follows, Molly's placement of herself and her sisters in juxtaposition to Ruth First's dedication to South Africa and the Movement encapsulates the Slovo daughters' central conflict regarding her mothering.

Initially eschewing politics, Gillian Slovo became involved with the ANC after Ruth First died. In 1990, she co-authored a pamphlet for a London-based anti-apartheid organization, the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF). While Ruth First's daughters frequently articulate their distance from her politics, some children of activists seem to have embraced their parents' political commitments from the outset. For instance, as a teenager of fifteen, Hilda and Rusty Bernstein's daughter Toni became a member of the Young Democrats, which the Fischers' daughter Ilse termed " 'a kind of baby COD' " (Sisulu 2003: 124). Amongst at least nineteen children of activists who had been left without either parent due to political detention (142), Toni Bernstein organized a demonstration outside the Johannesburg City Hall in May 1960 together with Barbara Harmel, Ilse Fischer and Mark and Sheila Weinberg. Arrested with their placards, the children, including twelve-year-old Lungi and eleven-year-old Beryl Sisulu, were taken to Marshall Square, from where they were rescued by Bram Fischer. Pleased about "the many newspaper reports on the incident," Toni and Ilse celebrated (at least outwardly) their parents' political commitment

In The World That Was Ours, Hilda Bernstein perceives motherhood ambivalently (as Ruth First must have sometimes), writing that in times of crisis "the children became both an added burden and a steadying anchor" (4). Like Ruth First and Ray Alexander, Hilda Bernstein writes of stretching herself to balance the demands of work, family and politics. Throughout the 1950s, Hilda Bernstein's family was reliant on the income she derived from her job as editor of Childhood, a monthly magazine (19), which partly explains why "Ruth's political profile grew while Hilda's began to shrink" during this period, according to Frankel (1999: 43). Resenting the weight of "imposed domestic duties," Hilda Bernstein hankers to be "free to come and go

without accounting for actions, to stay away from the house for long periods if necessary without having to think about children, meals, school routines and all the rest” (1989: 4-5). Ruth First equally yearned for the kind of freedom Joe Slovo took for granted, “barking resentfully” at him when she felt she had been left with too much responsibility (Gillian Slovo 1997: 120). Ray Alexander, however, reminisces repeatedly about motherhood as a fulfilling experience (2004: 181-198), despite difficult pregnancies and dramatic interventions by her daughter Mary to prevent her mother from leaving home to attend conferences (227). Praising her husband Jack as an “emancipated comrade,” Ray Alexander recalls that he would assume her duties in “the kitchen” when people came to their home to consult her on trade-union matters (Suttner 1997: 47).

In Where Sixpence Lives, Norma Kitson similarly describes a close and harmonious relationship with her son Steven and daughter Amandla, and her husband David. With David Kitson in jail, Steven and Amandla assisted their mother in running what she terms “a highly organized household” (Kitson 1986: 193). Both became involved in anti-apartheid activities from an early age. The photographs in her memoir reinforce Norma Kitson’s presentation of a family united in political commitment. Carrying a placard almost as large as himself declaring, “I want my Dad David Kitson out of Jail!” (see fig. 55), nine-year-old Steven smiles at the camera in a march to Trafalgar Square in 1969 (Kitson 1986: 191). Fourteen years later, Norma Kitson appears at an anti-apartheid demonstration flanked by an adult Steven and Amandla (see fig. 56.). All are holding large boards which list apartheid atrocities. Near the bottom of Norma Kitson’s one, it reads: “My Friend, Ruth First – Murdered!” (Norma Kitson 1986: 269). Affected by Ruth First’s death, Peta, AnnMarie Wolpe’s eldest daughter, confesses that the incident intensified her

anxieties about losing her parents (Bernstein: 1994: 466). While professing to be “proud” of Harold and AnnMarie, Peta Wolpe nevertheless vows to put her own child before “politics” (467). Criticizing her mother for deserting her sister Tessa, herself and her brother Nicholas, who was “just a tiny little baby” when she fled South Africa (467), Peta Wolpe implies that AnnMarie did not properly meet her motherly “responsibility” (468), while Tessa too speaks of similar “anger,” even though the sisters joined their parents in London a month later. Spending time with Shawn Slovo after Ruth First was killed, Tessa ruminates that being “uprooted” (469), together with her strange accent, traumatic past, and “being Jewish” (468) compounded her sense of difference from other children. Of her daughters’ censorious accounts, AnnMarie Wolpe writes in her memoir that she found them “spine-chilling and very sad” (275). It is probable that Ruth First felt similarly about her own children’s accusations. Ostensibly arguing with Ruth First a month before she was killed about the theoretical underpinnings of her life “choices” (namely, struggling “for recognition in a man’s world” as opposed to a opting for “feminism”), Gillian Slovo recognizes that the underlying quarrel was really about whether Ruth First “had been a good enough mother” and whether her daughters were willing to “release her from the anchor of her past mistakes” (1997: 6). The impression Gillian Slovo evokes of arguing with Ruth First outside “the plate glass of a slick Soho shop” stands in stark opposition against the picture of familial cohesion presented by the Kitson family on the picket line in front of a London tube station. Although she had “amassed achievement” unsurpassed by others in the public arena, Ruth First’s daughters diminish her in the domestic realm; unrecognized in political circles, Norma Kitson returns home to children who “arise and praise her” and her husband, “he lauds her.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Norma Kitson describes her relationship with David Kitson as consistently loving and supportive of her political involvement. In a letter he sent her from prison in 1964, David Kitson praises his wife as “wonderful,” thanking her

*Interlocking lives: Ruth First, Alexander, Luxemburg, Schechter and Schreiner*

Give her the fruits of her hand  
and let her be praised in the gates by her very own deeds  
Proverbs 31.10-13, line 22.

Before Ray Alexander's father Simon died, he gave her a series of "Yiddish booklets" published by "Jewish publishing houses in Vilna and Warsaw" containing biographies of female communist leaders such as Vera Figner<sup>11</sup> and Rosa Luxemburg (Suttner 1997: 25). Read together, they formed a non-canonical history which influenced Ray Alexander's conceptions of a possible future. The assertive ingenuity of her cultured mother, Doba-Liebe, together with her intellectual inheritance from her father, allowed Ray Alexander imaginings of an alternative matriarchal heritage. I invoke the figure of Rosa Luxemburg here as a central pivot in Ruth First's metaphorical matrilineage for two key reasons. Firstly, Luxemburg's writing and life cast a profound influence on Ruth First, on her contemporaries, and on First and Scott's conception of Olive Schreiner's activism in a local context. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the ways in which Ruth First has been made to mean historically coalesce compellingly at times with inscriptions of Luxemburg. Portraits of Ruth Schechter, who was born in a religious Jewish home and later joined the communist party in London, intersect too at interesting junctures with my construction of Ruth First's matrilineage, as do those of Ray Alexander and Olive Schreiner (who, although not Jewish, is inextricably bound in this production of the past). I propose here

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for taking "on the whole state [. . .], so bravely, so steadfastly." "For this I shall always love you," he writes (Kitson 1986: 164).

<sup>11</sup> According to Alexander, Figner was "a Moscow aristocrat" who became a leader of the People's Will, a "populist" group dedicated to assassinating Czar Alexander II (2004: 35).

no stereotype of a typical Jewish woman activist, but suggest the possibility of interconnections amongst and between generations not only via shared theoretical meditations and political “deeds,” or through the fame which some of them belatedly achieved, but also in the awkward positionings these women frequently assume vis-à-vis their ethnicity and within conflicting currents of mainstream femininities.

Born of Jewish parents in the small Polish town of Zamość in 1870, Luxemburg later became a founder of the Spartacist League, a German communist revolutionary group. In A Price below Rubies, Shepherd boldly designates Luxemburg as “the most famous and intellectually the most gifted of all the Jewish women revolutionaries,” while simultaneously characterizing her as “a difficult and controversial historical figure” (1993: 107). Recent South African histories delineate Ruth First in similar terms, but often ignore some of the implications of Shepherd’s first proposition; namely, that a tradition of Jewish women revolutionaries exists in which Ruth First can be made to assume a prominent place. Ruth First’s distanced relationship to her own Jewishness finds several resonances with Luxemburg’s similarly detached stance. Although fifteen generations of her maternal ancestors were rabbis and her mother tongue was Yiddish, Luxemburg rejected Judaism as a relevant belief system as well as any identification with her Jewish ethnicity, and devoted herself to Marxism instead.

Like most Eastern European Jews of Ruth First’s parents’ generation, Luxemburg witnessed at least one *pogrom* whilst growing up in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw between 1874 and 1882, an experience which Shepherd suggests may have led her to renounce her Jewishness (116). When she immigrated to Germany at the age of nineteen, Luxemburg changed her name from

Luxenburg to its current spelling, a gesture with strong assimilationist overtones of (Moses Ruben Fürst, Ruth First's paternal grandfather, and Rachel Alexandrovich would undertake similar orthographical transformations). Eschewing links with the country of her birth, Luxemburg claimed to be an "internationalist" (Shepherd 1993: 119). Her concept of community, akin to Ruth First's much later one, rested on a "belief in the solidarity of the international working class," rather than affiliations amongst those of the same ethnicity or gender. Although distanced theoretically from Jews and Judaism, Luxemburg was popular with "old Eastern European Bolshevik type[s]" in the CPSA, at least one of whom named her daughter Rosa while still adhering to cultural norms of Yiddish culture.<sup>12</sup>

Luxemburg's refusal to separate women's issues from the broader socialist agenda set a precedent, in certain ways, for Ruth First's political focus. While she supported "the abolition of all laws discriminating against, and full political freedom and equality for, women," Luxemburg was virulently opposed to middle-class feminist movements such as the "*Frauenrechtlerinnen* (women's righters)" of Germany, whom she perceived as separatist and uninterested in the greater revolutionary struggle (Shepherd 1993: 129, 127). In an article titled 'Ladies and Women,' published between 1902 and 1904 in the People's Gazette (a paper which Luxemburg co-founded), she rebukes the participants of an international women's congress in Berlin as ladies who, " 'bored with the role of doll or husband's cook, seek some action to fill their empty heads and empty existence' " (qtd. in Ettinger 1988: 113). Herself a middle-class intellectual, Luxemburg appears to perceive genuine women's rights as the domain of the working class here.

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<sup>12</sup> In his autobiography, Joe Slovo recollects a humorous anecdote concerning a stereotypical Yiddish mother, Mrs. Woolf, who could not resist feeding "her daughter Rosa (you can guess after whom she was named!)" during a hunger march in the early 1930s (1985: 36). His anecdote indicates both the widespread familiarity with (and admiration for) Luxemburg within communist circles.

At the same time, Luxemburg adhered to standards of bourgeois culture by attentively decorating her lodgings and dressing with care (Shepherd 1993: 111). In *Every Secret Thing*, Slovo notes that Ruth First, too, was very particular about the décor of her surroundings, creating interiors that were “open-plan,” filled with “bright lighting, elegant furnishings, all arranged in wide spaces” (178). In contrast to Luxemburg, Ruth First did not actively oppose women’s movements and in some cases tacitly supported them. In her speech on 9 August 1978 to commemorate South African Women’s Day (see Appendix), Ruth First acknowledges “several different tendencies in the [women’s] movement” and states that “while it is true that many of these feminists are not revolutionaries,” nevertheless finds value in their activities (307).

Part of the reason why Luxemburg refused to co-operate with those whom she termed the “bourgeoisie emancipationists” was the widespread and not unfounded socialist fear that selective franchise might be granted to these women alone (qtd. in Shepherd 1993: 127). Luxemburg’s apprehension about the exclusion of working-class women from the voters’ role was realized in 1930 in the context of South African politics. When the Women’s Enfranchisement League of the Cape Colony chose to campaign solely for the rights of white women more than twenty years earlier, Olive Schreiner resigned her post as vice-president. First and Scott reproduce her handwritten comments, scrawled across a pamphlet advertising the League’s political objectives: ‘The women of the Cape Colony[,] all the women of the Cape Colony. These were the terms on which I joined’ (1980: 262-263). Receiving the pamphlet as an explanation for Schreiner’s resignation, Ruth Schechter spoke in favour of universal female suffrage three years later during a visit to the United States (Hirson 2001: 62). Born in London thirty-seven years before Ruth First, Schechter was an alluring woman deeply immersed in literature, current issues and the arts (Hirson 1992:

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58-59). In a talk she gave at the Oheb Shalom Congregation, Schechter highlighted the “social ostracism” of both the Jewish and the black races, stating that Jewish women should “hardly hesitate about extending to the negro women equal rights with ourselves” (qtd. in Hirson 2001: 64). While the selective franchise question in South Africa had already been fought and won by the time she was six years old, Ruth First obviously knew of the subtleties surrounding the issue as she had researched it for Olive Schreiner: A Biography with Scott. She was sensitized, through her study of Schreiner’s writings (amongst other factors), to “the exact and specific concerns of women’s oppression,” and to the necessity of devising “a policy accordingly” (see Appendix: 302). However, Ruth First stopped short at emulating Schreiner’s notorious disregard for dress in the bluestocking tradition of “strong-willed, imperious, tenacious” protestors like Schreiner’s contemporaries Emily Hobhouse, an English women’s rights activist who sympathized with the Boers during the South African War, and Eleanor Marx, an avant-garde feminist.

Whether or not Schreiner’s reported refusal “to go corseted” and fondness for “old blue serge” was a function of the political (Horton 1995: 60), or of mere comfort and convenience, her “unfashionable costume” when she spoke at public gatherings was frequently lampooned in the press (Schoeman 1992: 137).<sup>13</sup> Ray Alexander, whose insistence on wearing her hair in girlish plaits wound round her head well into her seventies (see fig. 41) is comparable only to Schreiner’s habit of wearing “virtually nothing but her ‘immortal green suit’ for ten years,” first encountered Schreiner’s views on women’s suffrage through Schechter (Horton 1995: 60). Inquiring from Schechter about “an organization for women” two weeks after she arrived in

Cape Town on 6 November 1929, sixteen-year-old Alexander was “shocked” to discover that women in the country did not yet have the vote (Simons 1994: 52). Daily visiting the public library during her lunch hour from Bragin’s dress shop, Alexander diligently studied Schreiner’s Woman and Labour (1911), as she had a booklet titled ‘Letters from Rosa Luxemburg to Sonia Liebknecht’ as a young girl (Simons 2004: 35).

In 1913, Luxemburg published The Accumulation of Capital, an analysis of capitalism in which she clarifies links between colonialism and the need for expanding markets to absorb surplus production.<sup>14</sup> Referring to her thesis as “brilliant,” First and Scott draw attention to the pertinence of Luxemburg’s reading of the South African War as a competition between the capitalist British and peasant Boer economies for black land and labour in their biography of Schreiner (244). In The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid, Ruth First, together with co-authors Steele and Gurney, develop Luxemburg’s theory further, linking the investment of Britain, the USA and Germany in the South African economy to the maintenance and perpetuation of apartheid. In Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant,<sup>15</sup> Ruth First connects the destruction of third-world markets by colonialism and imperialism to the dependence of “Europe’s industrialised economies” on “millions of migrant workers, the majority from former colonial territories” (1983: 1). Highlighting Mozambique as the most important source of migrant workers, Ruth First writes that even before the South African War,

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<sup>13</sup> Schreiner once sought commiseration with her friend Isie Smuts, describing her close associates Betty Molteno and Alice Greene as “such dear simple souls who hate dress and fashion as much as you and I do” (Schoeman 1992: 76).

<sup>14</sup> According to Luxemburg, new markets in foreign countries, or less developed parts of the same country, are necessary for capitalism to function. Capitalist infiltration tended to decimate these locations as independent markets by rendering less sophisticated methods of production obsolete. Luxemburg predicts that capitalism would ultimately collapse when its adherents could no longer find new markets in which offload the surplus of continued increased production.

<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, I shall refer to this work as Black Gold.

sixty per cent of black miners came from that country. Ruth First's analyses of the economic forces that fueled political volatility in mid-to-late twentieth-century Africa in these three texts build solidly upon Luxemburg's earlier theories, plausibly rendering her Luxemburg's ideological daughter.

As intellectual theorists and political journalists, both Ruth First and Luxemburg spent various periods in prison for their revolutionary beliefs. Luxemburg's acute articulateness, like Ruth First's "razor-edged" banter, consistently incurred official wrath (Gillian Slovo 1997: 111). Stylishly dressed, Luxemburg entered Zwickau, the women's prison in Berlin, on 26 August 1904 to serve a three-month sentence for publicly insulting Emperor Wilhelm II (Ettinger 1988: 116-117); sixty years later, Helen Joseph would admire "the crisply intellectual Ruth" for her "chic foresight" in coming to goal "in elegant black underwear," whereas the rest of the women had merely packed their "oldest clothes" (1986: 56). Luxemburg was imprisoned for various periods between 1914 and 1918 in Breslau and Wronke jails, amongst others, mostly on charges related to inciting public disobedience. Her Letters from Prison, a memoir published posthumously in 1920, contains valuable insights into political theory, her relationship towards her Jewish ethnicity and women's rights. Feminist biographer Elzbieta Ettinger confirms that "generations of young radicals were brought up on a volume of Rosa Luxemburg's letters" (1988: 119). Similarly, Ruth First's 117 Days served for some time as prescribed reading for MK cadres in Mozambique (Kasrils 1993: 115). Both Luxemburg and Ruth First were assassinated by counter-revolutionary forces. As one of the leaders of the Spartacist uprising in Berlin, led by the German Social Democrat Party [SDP] which she had co-founded, Luxemburg was killed by the military in January 1919. Posthumously lauded as a martyr of class struggle, Luxemburg's image proliferated internationally after her death much as Ruth First's would more than half a century

later. At a lavish memorial service in Maputo, Ruth First's "immense black and white portrait" dominated the stage in front of which "was seated almost the entire Mozambican cabinet" (Gillian Slovo 1997: 14), in what was the modern equivalent of having her glories shouted from the rooftops of Biblical cities, or being "praised in the gates by her very own deeds."

In 1967, when she left her home in Zambia to attend the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Soviet Union as an honoured guest, Ray Alexander viewed an exhibition glorifying the history of communism at the prestigious Smolny Institute in Leningrad. Amongst the photographs of both "men and women leaders," Ray Alexander recognizes the portrait of her "cousin Rose's elder sister" (Suttner 1997: 30). Reinscribed into a secular history, the sisterly likeness on which Ray Alexander gazes represents the "fruits" of an untraditional kind of 'woman's work,' the sort that Luxemburg, Ruth First and Schechter would (not uncritically) emulate and come to exemplify for many. Ruth First's willingness to question accepted ideologies places her within a lineage of like-minded Jewish women, who were born into a comparable marginal culture that (ambivalently) valued dissent.

*Androgyny and achievement: usurping masculine roles*

With strength she girds her loins, and invigorates her arms.  
She discerns that her enterprise is good – so her lamp is not snuffed out by night  
Proverbs 31.10-13, lines 8-9.

If to be feminine means to be in the background, then it is not surprising that masculine characteristics are frequently attributed to women who enter the arena of political activism. Sometimes, women activists themselves adopt masculine subject positions as a way of indicating their special status. For instance, in a letter to a friend in 1979, Ruth First describes herself as "another one of those male chauvinists," intolerant of any display of weakness (qtd. in Gillian Slovo 1997: 118). Ramphele writes similarly that she would publicly participate in what were regarded by some as "manly activities" (1995: 105) at Zanempilo, the community health centre near King William's Town which she helped to establish with

Steve Biko. Ramphele recounts relishing “sheep heads after braais,” which is traditionally the preserve of men in African culture. Faced with objections from Seolo, a black male colleague who struggled to accept her “position in the community,” Ramphele suggests that he either share the meat with her or abstain from participating in the ritual. By inverting masculine and feminine roles in her dialogue with her colleague, Ramphele renegotiates traditional gender hierarchies. Later in her narrative, Ramphele writes of the “awkwardness” of becoming “willy-nilly an honorary man” in professional situations (211). Using humour as a tool to negotiate the discomfort of being the only woman in certain rarified echelons of power, Ramphele writes that one “has to learn to laugh at oneself in order to remain sane.”

While seizing masculine roles, Ruth First, by her elegant dress, and Ray Alexander, by her anxious references to domesticity, highlight their conformity to at least some practices of femininity as a way of deflecting criticism and legitimizing their unconventional positions. Nomzamo Winnie Mandela also demonstrates a nervous shuttling between conventional masculine and feminine subject positions in Part of My Soul. During her stay in Brandfort, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela physically broke the neck of a sergeant who had entered her bedroom unannounced. As if to mitigate the assumption of masculinity implied by her application of brute force, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela couches the assault in tropes of feminine modesty: “ ‘Such disrespect! [ . . . ] I had my skirt half-way up – heavens! – and he walked in like that” (1985: 88). Outside the courthouse where she is to be tried for assault, advocate George Bizos advises her to appear demure: “ ‘I want you to behave like a lady in front of the magistrate and not like an Amazon!’,” he reprimands her. Recounting Bizos’ words, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela slips into the subject position of a naughty girl who is being chastised by a male “authority,” listening respectfully to him as she would “my father” or “Nelson.”

In a discourse of masculinity as emasculated under apartheid, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela has the phallus, but she is nevertheless at pains to show that she is not a feminine grotesque. For example, Dr Nthatho Motlana’s praise of her as being “more than a man” in her role as the “only woman on the executive” of

the Black Parents Association (115) is followed immediately in the text by a testimonial from Motlana's wife Sally, who mitigates the stigma of a potentially unnatural masculinity by the re-presentation of Nomzamo Winnie Mandela as (curiously) both a "girl" and "motherly" (117).<sup>16</sup> Nomzamo Winnie Mandela's ability to glide between the roles of militant cadre and traditional African wife finds visual expression in Magubane and Lazar's album (1993: 124-125): facing a photograph of Nomzamo Winnie Mandela in a magnificent African headdress, smiling shyly next to a newly-released Nelson Mandela (see fig. 57), is another picture of her taken just the day before. Wearing a khaki military uniform, her eyes narrowed and jaw tightened, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela bears the coffin of a comrade on her shoulder while displaying the clenched fist of the Amandla salute (see fig. 58). Hinting at her mother's conception of clothes as theatrical costume, whether they are composed of "beads and kaftans" or "a khaki outfit and men's boots and a beret," Zindzi Mandela is quoted in Part of My Soul as follows (91-92): "I think I will get her a toy gun and a holster for her to walk around and appear in court like that" (92). Perhaps to remedy the phallic imagery of the "gun," Zindzi Mandela quickly refers to her mother as "a very sweet person."

Ray Alexander also assumes masculine dress at times in order to inspire political action. In a photograph in Looking Back (45) taken while campaigning for the post of Native Representative in 1950,<sup>17</sup> Ray Alexander wears a black fedora hat and jacket with lapels, her androgynous appearance blending in with those of the black men who surround her (see fig. 59). Ruth First did not don masculine dress like some of her contemporaries, although her adherence to the disciplines of femininity diminished as she got older. Relinquishing her penchant for "chunky silver jewellery" in Johannesburg and London in favour of more practical requirements like " '2 pin plugs, mop for kitchen surfaces, thermos flask, desk diary,

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<sup>16</sup> An activist in her own right, Sally Motlana was detained with Nomzamo Winnie Mandela in the Fort in Johannesburg in 1976. She reminisces: "But that girl was motherly, down to earth. To the young, to the old, she was the same."

<sup>17</sup> Ray Alexander won the majority of votes, but was unable to assume the post due to the restrictions imposed upon her by the Suppression of Communism Act of the same year.

hairbrush and Vim' " in newly liberated Mozambique, Ruth First continued to express her activism through assertive behaviour (Gillian Slovo 1997: 116). Describing herself in "a state of buoyant aggression" at the beginning of her detention, Ruth First considers herself armed by her "tongue" which she uses to bully the magistrate, "a neat little man," outrageously (1965: 44-45). While the accomplished woman of the Old Testament " 'girds her loins' to run quickly to the mitzvah [pious deed]," and " 'invigorates her arms' to perform it" (The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: 389n), political South African women appropriate constructs of masculine dress or conduct in order to execute or incite revolutionary action. Crossing the boundaries of gender, these women periodically discard perceptions of themselves as erotic vessels and bearers of children for men (implicit, still, in the girdled loins of the Hebraic ideal) and, by discerning "that her enterprise is good," mimic the confidence of masculine action.

*Rethinking the past: from communism to feminism*

She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
and a lesson of kindness is on her tongue.  
Proverbs 31.10-13, line 17.

A rainbow-hued, post-apartheid present facilitates the charting of "wisdom" developed and "lessons" learned from a past narrowly constricted by the dictates of revolutionary ideologies. Frequently modulating their altered perceptions through the prisms of Western feminisms, activist women autobiographers write of a coming to a new awareness of self through an increased consciousness of gender politics, a willingness to appraise existing gender roles, and the articulation of individual desires and needs. While Ruth First may have chosen to place consciousness of race and class before that of gender in 117 Days, she spoke openly of her own needs, abilities and shortcomings, both in prison and outside. Ruth First's "tongue" was always a critical one, both towards her own faults and those she saw in the Movement. Although she is silent regarding the latter in 117 Days, perhaps due to both the constraints of the memoir form and the fraught political situation in South Africa, Ruth First would question Party lines in public once she went into exile, risking expulsion for what would be perceived by some as "the

accumulated crimes of heresy against accepted truths” (Gillian Slovo 1997: 109). According to Joe Slovo, at the time of her death she was “out on a limb” ideologically “because of her outspoken aversion to the ghastly crimes of Stalin and the tragic consequences they brought for the kind of socialism in which she so passionately believed” (1988: 6).

In A Life, Ramphele retrospectively celebrates her own ability to make personal and professional decisions that fall outside of communal wisdom or the sharp reversals of accepted ideologies, as in private Ruth First may have of her own controversial choices (221). Enacting the repossession of her personal space through the physical, Ramphele proclaims by the end of her autobiography that she enjoys a “weekly manicure and pedicure,” even though she is aware that these activities may be seen as “American decadence,” and hence as part of a narrative of self that is potentially un-African (223). Ramphele nevertheless affirms her right to exist separately from the collective. Feminism, for Ramphele, means paying attention to her personal needs, which (ironically, for some) include the production of her body as a decorated surface.

In her latest memoir A Life of One’s Own (2002), Hilda Bernstein similarly reassesses her personal past and its intersections with revolutionary ideologies. Critiquing her father Simeon’s dedication to communism through feminist understandings of ingrained domestic hierarchies, Hilda Bernstein writes:

Like many communists, my father’s belief in equality for women was not carried into the life of his own home. For all his progressive views he was a man of his time, subject to the conventions of the society in which he lived, a time when women did not have the right to vote, and were excluded from any positions of power. He went to meetings; Dora stayed home and looked after the children (2002: 17).

Feminism, for Hilda Bernstein, would begin to eclipse communism as early as 1964, when she and Rusty escaped to London. Reading literature by American feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hilda Bernstein would start to perceive her “devotion” to “the male-controlled movement she had served” as a sacrifice of her own “personality and her interests” (Frankel 1999: 306). In 1968, Hilda Bernstein resigned from the

SACP after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, despite the fact that her decision placed a strain on her relationship with Rusty, who defended the incursion. AnnMarie Wolpe, who never joined the communist party (1994: 66) and pursued an academic career in Women's Studies in exile, documents a long history of ideological disagreements with Harold in The Long Way Home. A founding member of the journal Feminist Review, AnnMarie Wolpe appears oddly unsympathetic to Ruth First's difficult predicament as one of the only woman leaders in the CPSA during the 1950s. Although praising Ruth First as "an incredible woman - witty, beautiful, intelligent" (65), AnnMarie Wolpe admits that underneath her "admiration" for her colleague festers "a moral anger at what I regard as Ruth's neglect of her due maternal responsibility" (66). Recalling her "anguish" at working hard to produce the "perfect" meal for a dinner party with "the Slovos and the Mandelas," only to be insulted by Ruth First's lack of appreciation, AnnMarie Wolpe diverts her own resentment at having to play maidservant to men onto Ruth First, whom she figures here as the honorary male (66).

Not one of the "feminist stalwarts amongst the leaders in the liberation struggle," as Joseph later would classify Ray Alexander and Hilda Bernstein in Side by Side (1989: 3), Ruth First was a leader who was stalwart in addressing what she saw as more universal concerns. While, for Ray Alexander, feminism and communism were inextricably linked, and feminism was eventually to replace communism for Hilda Bernstein, charting the global implications of capitalism and race discrimination remained firmly at the centre of Ruth First's political vision. She did, however, come to appreciate some of the issues which were of concern to feminists. In her Women's Day speech (see Appendix), Ruth First acknowledges the "danger within the liberation movement as a whole" of "neglecting the importance of women's oppression within our own rank" (303). Reflecting that during the 1960s, carving out a niche for herself as "the only woman" in a group of men meant not only great labour, but also appearing emotionally tougher than them, Ruth First admits that she "treated others (mostly men) like fools when they acted stupid, and was quite unaware of the resentment" she caused. Openly identifying her previous position as

“elitist [sic],” Ruth First frankly admits that she was “a late developer” in recognizing the importance of women’s issues, what she terms “the revolution inside the revolution” (emphasis in original).

Beginning her political life in the “youth movement,” she confesses that she “spurned the women’s movement,” conceiving of herself rather as “a political activist in the movement as a whole.” Introspectively, she catalogues the reasons for the shift in her ideological position as fourfold: firstly, she was impressed by the literature of the socialist feminist movement, which “conceptualised women’s oppression” powerfully and therefore “could not be ignored” (304); secondly, she cites the influence of criticism from her own daughters; thirdly, she refers to her study of Olive Schreiner; and fourthly, by analyzing conditions for women in countries like Algeria where a communist revolution had already taken place, she concludes that usually women’s inequality persisted despite pre-revolutionary assumptions to the contrary. Acknowledging that orthodox Marxist theory, while advocating “equal pay for equal work,” does not sufficiently address the “division of labour in the household,” Ruth First emphasizes that sexism, just like racism, must be proactively “fought within our ranks” (emphasis in original: 306). Issuing a corrective against feminist separatism, Ruth First emphasizes that demands for women’s rights “cannot be met without social change” in conjunction with men in the context of the national struggle for liberation (307).

Ruth First’s Women’s Day address, given at the age of fifty-three, contains the penetrating, systematic and multi-faceted observations of a woman who had spent the last thirty years of her life self-critically immersed in a struggle not only against apartheid, but against accepted orthodoxies that had become stagnant. A year earlier she had left London for an exciting research position in Maputo, where the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) encouraged intellectual work as an instrument of revolution and promoted the analysis of problems arising from socialist transition. With her daughters grown into adulthood, Ruth First was able to relinquish some of the responsibilities of motherhood and focus more acutely on her creative work, an easing of duties which led to a concurrent reduction of domestic tension

(Gillian Slovo 1997: 120). Feeling validated for “her talents, her brilliant mind, her fierce commitment and her long experience” in Maputo, Ruth First taught students who hung admiringly onto every word (4). Yet, as ever, she was open to new ideas: “This was something I liked very much about Ruth,” said her colleague Alpheus Manghezi to Hilda Bernstein in 1989 (Bernstein 1994: 28). When Manghezi, who was working with her on Black Gold, initially approached Ruth First about the inclusion of the work songs of miners and their wives in the book, she was reportedly “very doubtful,” but allowed Manghezi to pursue his idea. Later, hearing the songs that Manghezi had caught on tape, Ruth First instructed him to go home immediately and translate them. Like the persistent polyphony of 117 Days, Black Gold is peppered with the transcribed hopes and fears of the miners and the women they left behind. Wielding her “tongue” as a weapon in 117 Days, Ruth First would also use it with “kindness” to encourage innovative ideas, imparting the “wisdom” of her accumulated experience and insights to a new generation of activists who collect them like valuable pearls.

### *Conclusion*

Of the historical archive belonging to an elderly Afrikaans woman called Sarie van Wyk, whom she had befriended in Odendaalrus, a mining town in the Orange Free State, Norma Kitson writes: “Her Boer heroes hung on the walls of her little house, faded sepia prints in thin wooden frames” (1986: 79). Critical feminist readings of constructions of ideal womanhood, like that of the *volksmoeder* figure in Afrikaner history,<sup>18</sup> or the Mother Africa trope, challenge reproductions of conventional historical narratives. While feminist deconstruction is one way of contesting patriarchy, another form of resistance is enacted by the construction of alternate histories. Kuzwayo, for instance, composes a new lineage of heroes by listing the names of black women medical doctors (1985: 264-265) and lawyers (266) as appendices at the back of

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<sup>18</sup> For example, ‘The National Women’s Monument Brochures: A Rhetoric of Male Supremacy’ (1992) by Elsie Cloete and ‘Afrikaner Woman and Her “Prison”: Afrikaner Nationalism and Literature’ (1992) by Marlene van Niekerk.

her memoir. Buchi Emecheta pronounces the achievement of women a silenced part of African history, and proclaims a need to “start singing about our own heroic deeds” in a way which does not exclude the domestic sphere (1988: 181). Kuzwayo’s text rises to meet Emecheta’s challenge, as does ‘Praise to Our Mothers,’ a traditional praise poem performed in 1989 by Gcina Mhlophe for Nokukhanya Luthuli, wife of Chief Albert Luthuli (Daymond et al. 1989: 414-415). Mhlophe writes:

If I were to stand on top of a hill  
And raise my voice in praise  
Of the women of my country  
Who have worked throughout their lives  
Not for themselves, but for the very life of all Africans  
Who would I sing my praises to?  
I could quote all the names  
Yes, but where do I begin?!

Do I begin with the ones  
Who gave their lives  
So that we others may live a better life  
The Lilian Ngoyis, the Victoria Mxenges  
The Ruth Firsts  
Or the ones who have lost their men  
To Robben Island and their children to exile  
But carried on fighting  
The MaMotsoaledis, the MaSisulus  
The Winnie Mandelas? (5-22)

Exalting women heroes in the tradition of *izibongo*, Mhlophe’s voice challenges the grand oral narratives of the public domain usually recited by *imbongi*, or Xhosa court poets, which relegate women to the sidelines of history both as performers and as historical characters (Gunner 1995: 188).<sup>19</sup> Even popular *izibongo* performed socially by both men and women tend to constrain women within particular types, such as “the mother-in-law; the courted woman; the good woman; the bad or tempting woman” (189). Mhlophe instead draws women from the margins to the centre, from the private to the public, from

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<sup>19</sup> Whereas men frequently perform *izibongo* in public in front of a large mixed audience, women’s popular praises are usually recited in private, at home or in the field, at times when only other women will be present (Gunner 1995: 192). Gunner’s observations, rendered here in relation to Zulu praise poetry, hold equally true for Xhosa *izibongo*, as is borne out by the indexing of this term in a volume of essays on the subject which she co-edited (Furniss and Gunner 1995: 290).

comedic or romantic roles to epic ones. “[A]dept at recasting family narratives” by invoking traditional and unconventional figures of feminine achievement side by side, Ramphele’s grandmother, too, destabilizes gender stereotypes in “poetic language” (Ramphele 1995: 11): thus the figure of the “fertile daughter,” Ramphele’s mother, occupies the same communal and textual spaces as the configuration of the speaker herself “as a ‘jack’ that lifted all implements, large and small.” Duplicating her grandmother’s transgressions through her appropriation of masculine roles, Ramphele contravenes boundaries of form, too, through her inclusion of a Sotho transcription of ancestral praise songs (a black, rural, oral, communal narrative) in the English text of her autobiography (a Western form of individual self-expression). The praise songs of Ramphele’s ancestors, proclaimed every December, like the Biblical ‘*Aishes Chayil*’ intoned every Sabbath evening, may be read as similarly defiant narratives even as they intertwine alternative ideals of femininity with more conventional ones.

In an era which recognizes the multiplicity of histories, I propose that the chronicle I produce of Ruth First as the descendent of Jewish immigrant revolutionaries may have a modest place alongside Sarie van Wyk’s faded portrait gallery of Boer heroes or Mhlophe’s production of a primarily black South African matrilineage. Through my reading of ‘*Aishes Chayil*,’ I suggest that traditional constructions of femininity include active and dynamically challenging roles. The re-reading and the re-writing of oral forms produce new formulations of feminine accomplishment, through which representations of transgressive women, who do not wish to purchase conventional feminine identities, may nevertheless be ascribed a value “far beyond rubies.”



## *Chapter Five*

### *Figures and Photographs*



Lord of peace, King to Whom peace belongs, bless me with peace, and consider me and my entire household, and Your entire people, Israel, for a good life and for peace.

O King Who is exalted above all the heavenly legions, our Molder, Molder of the creation, I beseech Your luminous countenance that You privilege me and all my household to find favor and good understanding — in Your Eyes, and in the eyes of all descendants of Adam and Eve, and in the eyes of all who see us — that we may perform Your service. Privilege us to receive Sabbaths amid abundant gladness, amid wealth and honor, and amid fewness of sins. Remove from me, from all my household, and from Your entire nation Israel, every manner of illness, every manner of pain, and every manner of need, poverty, and destitution. Give us a virtuous desire to serve You with honesty, with awe, and with love. May we be honored in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us, for You are the King of Glory — for to You it is seemly, for to You it is fitting!

Please, O King Who reigns over kings, instruct Your angels, the ministering angels, servants of the Exalted One, that they consider me with mercy and bless me when they enter my home on our holy day, for I have kindled my lights, spread my bed, and changed my clothes in honor of the Sabbath day. I have entered Your house to cast my supplication before You that You banish my sighs; I have witness that in six days You created the entire universe. I repeated it and will again repeat it over my cup amid my gladness as You commanded me to recall it, and to take pleasure in the additional soul which You have placed within me. On it shall I rest, as You have commanded me, to serve You, and so shall I relate Your greatness with joyous song. I have set HASHEM before me that You should further show me mercy in my exile, to redeem me and to inspire my heart to Your love. Then I shall observe Your laws and Your decrees without suffering and I shall pray correctly as is fitting and right.

O, Angels of peace, may your coming be for peace. Bless me for peace. Pronounce 'Blessed' upon my prepared table. May your departure be in peace, from this time and forever. Amen. Selah.

AISHES CHAYIL (Proverbs 31:10-31)

## Fig. 54

**אשת חיל** An accomplished woman, \* who can find? —

Far beyond pearls is her value.

ב Her husband's heart relies on her and he shall lack no fortune.

ג She repays his good, but never his harm, all the days of her life.

ד She seeks out wool and linen, and her hands work willingly.

ה She arises while it is yet nighttime, \*

ו and gives food to her household and a ration to her maidens.

ז She envisions a field and buys it,

ח from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard.

ט With strength she girds her loins, and invigorates her arms. \*

י She discerns that her enterprise is good —

so her lamp is not snuffed out by night.

יא Her hands she stretches out to the distaff,

יב and her palms support the spindle. \*

of the same twenty-two letters (Yalkut Mishlei).  
 יח — Accomplished. The word חיל as used in Scripture has various connotations: organized military force, strength, wealth, skill, general competence, or devoutness. It implies the presence of whatever skills or attributes are needed to carry out the task at hand. The wife described here is energetic, righteous, and capable, hence an accomplished woman.

יג — She arises while it is yet nighttime. With enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility, she arises before dawn to be sure that she can prepare adequately for the needs of her household. She recognizes that only by caring for the physical well-being of her family can she be sure that they will grow spiritually.

יד — תורה כוח מותיק ותאמר ורועתיה she girds her loins to run quickly to the mitzvah, and invigorates her arms to perform it.

יז — Distaff ... spindle. The תבשר כישור

ארון השלום. מלך שהשלום שלו. ברכני בשלום, ותפקוד אותי באת כל בני ביתי, וכל עמך בית ישראל, לחיים טובים ולשלום.

מלך עליון על כל צבא מרום, יורגנו יוצר בראשית, אהלה פניך הפאירים שהתנזה אותי ואת כל בני ביתי למצוא חן ושכל טוב בעיניך. ובנינו כל בני אדם וחוה, ובנינו כל רואינו, לעבודתך. ונכנו לקבל שבתות מתוך רוב שמחה, ומתוך עשר וקבוד, ומתוך מעוט צונות. והסר ממני ומכל בני ביתי ומכל עמך בית ישראל כל מיני חלי, וכל מיני מדות, וכל מיני רלות ועציות ואביונות. והן בנו יצר טוב לעבדך באמת ובראה ובאהבה. ונהיה מכבדים בעיניך ובנינו כל רואינו, כי אמת הוא מלך הכבוד. כי לך נאה, כי לך נאה.

אנא מלך מלכי המלכים, צוה למלאכיך מלאכי השרת, משדתי עלינו, שותפךוני ברחמים, ויברכוני בבואם לביתי לקרענו. כי הדלקתי נרותי, והצעתי מפתח, והחלפתי שמלותי לכבוד יום השבת. ובאתי לביהק להפיל תחנתי לפניך. שתעביר אונתי, נאעיד אשר בראת בששה ימים כל היצור. נאשנה ואשלוש עוד להעיד על כוסי בתוך שמחתך, כאשר צויקני לזכרו, ולהחצננו ביתך נשמתי אשר נתת בי. בו אשבות כאשר צויקני, לשדתי. וכן אניך גדלתיך ברנה. ושדתי יהיה לקראתי, שתרחמני עוד בנלותי, לנאלי ולעודר לבי לאהבה. ואז אשמור פקדונך וחקך בלי עצב, ואתפלל בדת בראוי וכנכוני.

מלאכי השלום, בואכם לשלום, ברכוני לשלום, ואמרו ברוך לשלונך הערוה, ואתכם לשלום. מעמה וער עולם. אמן סלה.

אשת חיל (משלי לא:י"ח)

**אשת חיל** מי ימצא, ורחק מפניגים מקרה.

בטח בה לב פעלה, ושלל לא יחסר.

גמלתהו טוב ולא רע, כל ימי חייה.

דלשה צמר ופשתים, ותעש בחפץ פפיה.

היתה כאניות סוחר, מפרקת תבוא לחמה.

ותקם בעור לילה. ותמן סרף לביתה, חק לנערתי.

זממה שרה ותקחה, מפר כפיה נטעה ברם.

חגרה בעור מתניה, ותאמן ורועתיה.

טעמה כי טוב סודה, לא יבה בלילה נדה.

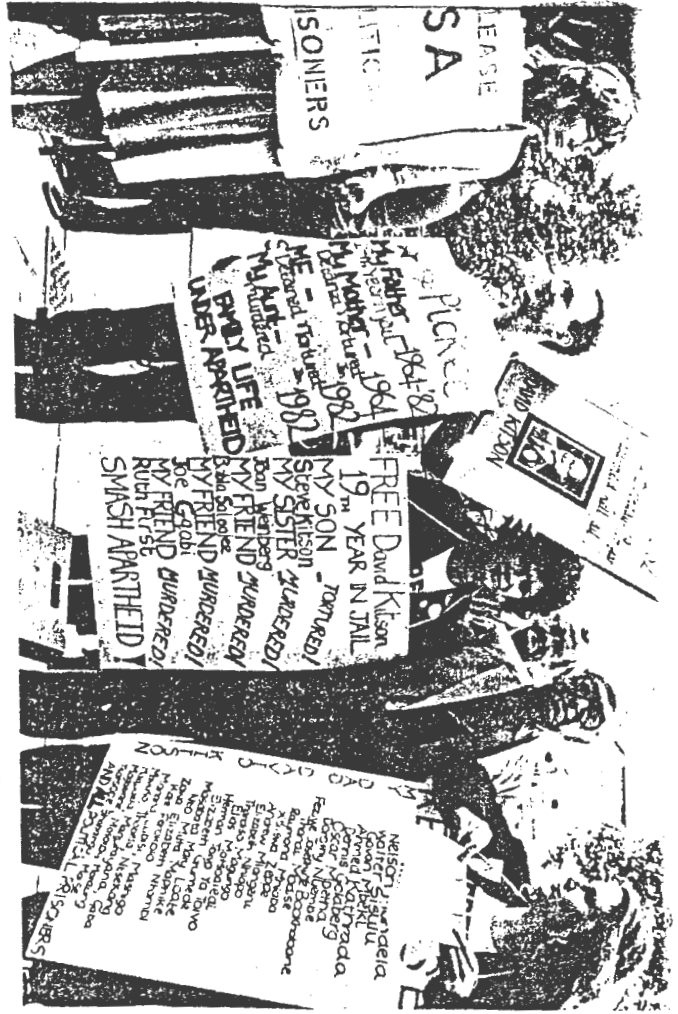
ידיה שלחה בכישור, וכפיה תמכו פלך.

in the succeeding days as well. Much like a businessman bringing his accounts up to date and assessing his future prospects, one should take an account of past blessings and project through which to describe such lofty concepts in future ones. All derive from the Sabbath and for them he should thank God (Bais Aharon).

אשה חיל / Aishes Chayil

The commentators agree that this passage — means of the twenty-two letters [of the alphabet] on the surface a hymn to the perfect wife who is [brilliant], so He praises righteous women by means





On the picket line: Vanessa Redgrave, Steven, me, Ian Mikardo, Amanda.

Fig. 56

Fig. 55



Steven on the Ruskin Kitson Committee march from Oxford to Trafalgar Square, 1969.

Fig. 57



Fig. 58



Fig. 59





In 1963 Ruth First, a militant member of both the ANC and the South African Communist Party, was detained under the 'ninety-day' law. There was no warrant, no charge and no trial. This is her account of her months in prison, her solitary confinement, interrogation and instantaneous re-arrest.

In 1982 Ruth First was killed by a letter bomb in Maputo, Mozambique.

In 1988 *A World Apart*, a film written by Ruth First's daughter, Shawn Slovo, herself just a small girl at the time of her mother's imprisonment, is being shown in theatres all over the world, except in South Africa. 1988 is also the year of Nelson Mandela's seventieth birthday.

'Ruth First was one of the most committed opponents of apartheid, a rare person who could combine sharp incisive analysis of the system's evils with inexhaustible energy as an activist against them.'  
- Jonathan Steele, *Guardian*

Designed by Fitch & Company



Fig. 60

## *Conclusion*

In the ante-room where he waited for the Gestapo to interrogate him, the “Zweig character” to whom Ruth First compares herself at one point in *117 Days* (72) articulates his “hunger for the printed or written word” (Zweig 1942: 28). Transfixed for two hours by the numerals and lettering of a page from a calendar hanging on the wall, the main character of Viennese novelist Stefan Zweig’s short story ‘*Schachnovelle*’ (1942), or ‘The Royal Game,’ speaks of having “devoured” the only words he had seen in months of solitary confinement. Dr B., as he is cryptically named, is an aristocratic solicitor who confides his story of torture and detention during World War II in a fellow chess-lover while sailing on an ocean liner from New York to Buenos Aires. Yet another male alter-ego in Ruth First’s pantheon, Dr B. succeeds in outwitting the Nazis by memorizing famous chess games and playing them mentally while he was being questioned. Noting that she “chanced upon no chess manual in the Gestapo headquarters” to keep her mind occupied, as Dr B. serendipitously had, Ruth First disarmingly discloses what she terms her “bad memory” (1965: 72). Relying all her life on “on pencil, notebook, Press clipping, the marking in the margin of a book to recall a source, a fact, a reference,” Ruth First irrevocably links writing to remembering and reading to the verification of her ontological place in the world.

When pressured by the police to reveal what she knew of the underground workings of the Movement, Ruth First retreats into silence and half-truths in order to avoid complicity in the possible conviction of her comrades, as I discuss in Chapter One. Focusing on factual and social truths, and touching also upon personal and restorative truths, I address some of the elisions in Ruth First’s story in this initial chapter. As a forum which questions what

constitutes truth, memory and forgetting, the TRC provides an apt location for the prevarications of former Commissioner of Police General Petrus Johannes Coetzee about his (lack of) complicity in Ruth First's murder. Coetzee had associated with Ruth First as far back as the Treason Trial, when he was an ordinary security policeman with an extraordinary skill at transcribing witnesses' statements, according to advocate George Bizos, who represented the Schoon<sup>1</sup> and Slovo families at Coetzee's amnesty hearing in September 1998 (TRC Amnesty Hearings 10 Sept. 1998). While both Craig Williamson, who admitted to masterminding Ruth First's murder, and Jerry Raven, who manufactured the parcel bomb which killed her, applied for amnesty, Coetzee, who was suspected of authorizing her murder, did not. Cross-questioned by Bizos, Coetzee purported not to remember many details of her case, claiming to come to know of the complicity of the men serving under him in the murder of "Mrs. Slovo" only "about ten years" after his retirement in 1987 (TRC Amnesty Hearings 9 Sept. 1998).<sup>2</sup>

Adding her own voice to the questioning of Ruth First's killers, Gillian Slovo had confronted Raven on camera several years earlier at his new place of work, a shop in Sunnyside Park, Pretoria called Mattress World. Interpolated with Raven's answering of telephone queries

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Schoon and her six-year-old daughter Katryn were killed in Labongo, Southern Angola in June 1984 by a bomb later confirmed to have been sent by the South African Security Forces.

<sup>2</sup> MR COETZEE: I became only aware of the deaths by South Africans of both the Schoon's [sic] and Mrs Slovo, about ten years after my retirement sir.

CHAIRPERSON: Sorry, are you saying you only became aware of their deaths ...

MR COETZEE: By agents of South Africa, Mr Chairman.

MR BIZOS: Yes. Well, when did you hear about Ruth First's death?

MR COETZEE: Soon after it happened, it was in the newspapers, I must have read it there.

MR BIZOS: Didn't you have a meeting every Monday morning?

MR COETZEE: Yes sir, that was quite possibly so.

MR BIZOS: And was not the death of Ruth First reported at that meeting?

MR COETZEE: Yes, that is quite possible that - I don't remember [ . . . ].

(TRC Amnesty Hearings 9 Sept. 1998).

about the different types of beds for sale in A Death in the Family are his vehement denials of responsibility for Ruth First's death. The interfacing of the mundane (buying and selling furniture) with the criminal (concealing a bomb in a stolen United Nations envelope) chillingly dramatizes Raven's later claim that he was merely doing his job by manufacturing a device which would shatter Ruth First's body. Configured by a dissonant polyphony of voices in Gillian Slovo's documentary and the TRC, posthumous representations of Ruth First may be seen to resonate with the interspersed fragments of 117 Days, which I examine in detail in Chapter Two. As composer and conductor of a chorus of diverse voices, I argue, Ruth First nevertheless stands firm as the subject of her memoir. A member of the literate "ruling classes" in whose hands rests "the network of communication of the printed word" (Lejeune 1989: 197), Ruth First could not have remained unmarked by the imbalance of power relations in her relationships with the usually black, illiterate and impoverished subjects of her investigations, as with the poor, usually Afrikaans-speaking whites whose households she visited as a social worker in Fordsburg, "questioning them about what they did with their money to justify an application for State-aided butter or margarine" (1965: 116).

Even within Jacobs "prison house," a place where her "redefinition" of her incarcerated self is most clearly articulated, Ruth First fights to maintain her sense of an individual self (1991c: 8). She enters into a "battle" of wills with the Station Commander in order to win from him her "red suitcase" (First 1965: 18), which she subsequently "enthroned on the wall shelf" in her cell (30). The suitcase contains her "supplies" from home, holding "lipsticks," "combs" and other possessions which assert her pre-incarceration self. The contents of the suitcase constitute the literal and psychic baggage which Ruth First carries with her throughout her confinement, neglected only when she has a nervous breakdown and forgets to wear make-

up. The suitcase is symbolic of Ruth First's insistent individuality: "Throughout my stay at Marshall Square," she writes, "my suitcase was the difference between me and the casual prisoners" (18). It is an individuality which will anxiously strive to include the communal, yet one which ultimately resists Jacobs "collective implied authorship" (1991c: 12).

What sets *117 Days* apart from the works of women like Norma Kitson, Ellen Kuzwayo, Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, Emma Mashinini, AnnMarie Wolpe and even Mamphela Ramphele is that the text locates Ruth First's identity firmly within her relationship with the written word. A skilled writer before detention, like Breytenbach and Sachs, Ruth First's overriding "intellectual function" circumscribes her responses to physical confinement also (Harlow 1995: 121), both reproducing and resisting peripheries of culture through her recording of the past. Reflecting upon "the difficulty," which she felt "acutely," of "thinking and composing systematically without the aid of pencil and paper," Ruth First turns her body into a site of inscription, shaping her eyebrows, uprooting grey hairs (1965: 73). As I explore in Chapter Three, the panoptical gaze of the male connoisseur becomes magnified internally in the stark terrain of the prison-house. While she day-dreams about her role as hero in revolutionary culture, Ruth First, like the other prison writers whose work I read closely here, cannot help perceiving herself at times through the harsh eyes of her interrogators (1965: 71). As a "mirror bent in on itself," the infinite rebounding of the prisoner's distorted inner perceptions ultimately result in the dissolution of self through the convoluted interplay of Manichean allegories (Sachs 1966: 252).

Figuring himself and Other as black and white chess pieces on an imaginary board, Dr B. too tracks the frenetic "complete split in one's consciousness" that occurs when "Black and White" become resident in "one and the same person" (Zweig 1942: 34). Tellingly, the

“worst part” of Dr B.’s imprisonment was not “the interrogation,” but what he describes as “being returned afterwards to my vacuum, to the same room with the same table, the same washbasin, the same wallpaper” (26). The desire for human interaction, as Schalkwyk points out, frequently leads to the dangerous seeking of companionship and affirmation by the isolated prisoner from her interrogators (2000: 280). In 117 Days, Ruth First poignantly describes her vacillation between “paranoic suspicion and naïve gullibility” in response to the manipulations of Lieutenant Viktor, who “sexualized the dependency of the jailer and jailed, interrogator and interrogated” (Schalkwyk 2000: 280) through his alternate desires to hit her chin with his clenched “fist” and to “kiss it” (First 1965: 140). In his amnesty hearing of 9 September 1998, Coetzee also professes an intimacy with Ruth First, claiming that he “would not have authorized” her murder because he “knew her well.” Two days later, the Johannesburg Star reported that “an Afrikaans daily” had erroneously interpreted Coetzee’s statements as a insinuation that he had shared an inappropriate relationship with Ruth First (Zwane 1998b: 2).<sup>3</sup> Consistently subject to appropriations, sexual and otherwise, by the inscriptions of others, the body of Ruth First remains public property even after her death, its boundaries still vulnerable to transgression by others.

In his testimony to the TRC about their “chats” during the adjournments of the Treason Trial (TRC Amnesty Hearings 10 Sept. 1998), Coetzee evokes a picture of an earnest Ruth First optimistically trying to convince him of the ideological fallacies of apartheid. She even gave him a book, Time Longer Than Rope: A History of the Black Man’s Struggle for Freedom in

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<sup>3</sup> In his testimony on 10 September 1998 to the TRC, Coetzee was at pains to point out that “I did not imply, nor do I want an inference to be made that I meant by that [sic], that there was any improper relationship, either on a personal level or on a work level, between Mrs Ruth Slovo and myself.”

South Africa (1948) by Eddie Roux.<sup>4</sup> Written in an era when “South African history was still universally understood to be the history of the white minority,” Roux’s volume is a hybrid text, “less than a balanced history of SA in the twentieth century, and more than a political memoir,” according to Philip D. Curtin, who introduces it (v). Roux’s book is contiguous with 117 Days in that both can be seen to constitute what Harlow terms “counter-historiographical murals,” or works which were published with the intention of changing political presents by challenging canonical pasts (1995: 123). Positioning herself as a reader of history in her discussions with Coetzee, Ruth First emerges in Roux’s 1964 edition of the same work as an actor who participated in the making of that past. Recollecting the famous celebration held at the Slovo residence for the acquitted treason trialists in 1958, Roux writes that it was raided by the Special Branch (1964: 401). As a photographer from Die Vaderland, a conservative newspaper, jumped on their dining room table to snap a “the scandalous scene of white and black drinking together, dancing together and embracing,” Joe Slovo recalls Ruth First rushing to save a “large, beautiful vase” which was balanced on a narrow ledge (1995: 103). Dressed “impeccably as usual,” her “lustrous” black hair “well styled, controlling an unruly, almost frizzy mop,” as AnnMarie Wolpe would describe her in a different setting (1994: 64), Ruth First expertly performs the role of the perfect hostess, which here appears completely congruent with her activism.

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<sup>4</sup> MR BIZOS: Yes. And during the period of the preparatory examination [of the Treason Trial], in those days was the relationship between the Security Police and the people participating in political activity as sharp as it was in the ‘60’s or ‘70’s or not?

GEN COETZEE: No, I would say that it was much better than later on.

MR BIZOS: Much better than later on. And did you have chats with Ruth First during the adjournment, as you have here with members of the bar and the attorneys that are appearing against your side, so to speak?

GEN COETZEE: Yes, that is true. Mr Chairman, on very many occasions, and in addition to that, she occupied offices which [sic] just around the corner from the offices of the Security Branch.

MR BIZOS: Yes. And she went as far as to give you Doctor Roux’s book, Time Longer Than Rope?

GEN COETZEE: That is correct.

(TRC Amnesty Hearings 10 Sept. 1998)

Continually re-read in terms of the contemporary, the past glides kaleidoscopically to another era in Every Secret Thing, in which Gillian Slovo describes the last photograph she received from her mother: a snapshot of Ruth First with “frizzed-out hair” (see fig. 60) beneath “an incongruous miner’s tin hat” taken at a rally in Mozambique in the year of her death (1997: 23). Letting her hair down metaphorically as well as stylistically, Ruth First seems to have resigned herself, in that moment, from the realm of contrived European femininity. As “next to skin colour,” hair texture is considered “one of the most reliable markers of racial heritage” in discourses of scientific racism (Erasmus 2000: 380), Ruth First was perhaps also (unconsciously) enacting a reconciliation with her ethnicity as both a Jewish woman and an African one, denoted here by her wiry, non-Anglo-Saxon hair.<sup>5</sup> Omitted from The Jews of South Africa, but re-emerging in Looking Back nearly two decades after her death, images of Ruth First appear and disappear across time, visually conveying the malleability of ethnicity in historical as well as autobiographical discourses, as I suggest in Chapter Four. An identification marked irrevocably by the disruptions of persecution and immigration, Jewishness becomes an impetus for articulateness as well as silence for the women of Ruth First’s generation. Speaking in an interview about the impact of her immigrant past on the creation of her political future, Pauline Podbrey observes that the humiliation she suffered as a Yiddish-speaking child led to her determination to acquire a high level of literacy in the dominant tongue of her new country (Suttner 1997: 65). Later to work as an English journalist on the Guardian together with other Jewish women writers such as Ray Alexander and Naomi Shapiro, Podbrey clearly places her literary impulse within the socio-economic

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<sup>5</sup> Writing in Where Sixpence Lives of her Jewish family’s denial of the so-called coloured ethnicity of her father, Bill Cranko, Norma Kitson and her sister Joan attribute their “frizzy hair” (8) to “Dad’s side of the family” (6). Conflating whiteness with Jewishness, Norma Kitson apprehends her hair, similar in texture to Ruth First’s, as denotive of a non-white ethnicity (1986: 8). Challenging their mother Millie Stiller’s claim that “our father was ‘of Spanish extraction’ ” by evoking Cranko relatives buried in “the Coloured cemetery” in Cape Town (8), Joan refers to Bill’s habit of oiling his hair every morning “to make it lie down flat, but by the time he’s had breakfast, it’s all crinkled up again” (6). Distanced twice from whiteness by her father’s so-called colouredness and her mother’s Jewishness, Norma Kitson would only later come to recognize her identity as African through her activism.

context of the time. Amongst several left-wing Jewish press correspondents who were active between 1937 and 1952, it is Ruth First whom South African historian Les Switzer singles out as “the most celebrated of the women journalists” (1997: 281).<sup>6</sup>

The celebration of achievement in the realms of activism, domesticity and motherhood frequently finds conflicting representation in traditional prayers and praise-songs, as well as in the memoirs of revolutionary women and their daughters, as I discover in Chapter Five. Recalling the torrent of official speeches which rained down upon her at Ruth First’s state funeral in Maputo, Gillian Slovo records an intense disjunction between personal and canonical memory. Subjected to the relentless onslaught of words, Gillian Slovo sees herself, her father and her sisters as rendered “mute” by uniformed others who speak for them, powerless to stop the creation of “a cardboard heroine” whose death was to become part of an abstract narrative. By juxtaposing public recollections with her own memories, Gillian Slovo draws attention to the constructedness of historical representations, and finds them inadequate and inaccurate renditions of her mother’s complicated character: “no one talked about the silk underwear that she had packed to take to goal in 1956; about the way she would fall asleep if she was bored; or her recently developed, and inexplicable passion for overblown jigsaws” (1997: 25). Juxtaposing the personal with the political, Gillian Slovo speaks against the relegation of individual identity to the annals of an idealized history, while at the same time seeking periodically to create her own resistant form through exploring the biases of her own subject position in her reconstruction of an alternative past.

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<sup>6</sup> The largely undocumented lives of the female editors and journalists of left-wing papers in twentieth-century South Africa constitute another alternate history that awaits inscription. Baruch Hirson (1989) began this task with his research into the life of Claire Goodlatte, a nun until the age of fifty-four. From June 1935 to August 1939, Goodlatte was the editor of the avant-garde newspaper of the Communist Workers Party of South Africa called Spark (not to be confused with the identically named final incarnation of the Guardian).

Remarking on the effect of representation on memory, Gillian Slovo juxtaposes her initial apprehension of actress Barbara Hershey, who was to play Ruth First in A World Apart, with a later view of her: on first meeting Hershey, who spoke about “the kind of woman our mother had been, and about the kind of clothes she would have worn,” Gillian Slovo recalls thinking that “she is nothing like my mother,” yet years later, when she caught an accidental glimpse of Hershey’s face in a promotional poster for another film in a London subway, Gillian Slovo remembers thinking, “ ‘[T]here’s my mother’ ” (1997: 25-26). Revealing her own resistance to relinquishing authority over her mother’s image, Gillian Slovo acknowledges in a moment of acceptance that perceptions of Ruth First outside of, and at times contrary to, her own exist concurrently within the minds of those who knew and who knew of her mother, that each person who mourned Ruth First’s passing conceived of “a different woman” (25).

For Williamson and others, the portrait of “Ruth Slovo” was merely one of many in the “Terrorist Album” which the Security Branch compiled to jog the memories of the detainees it interrogated (TRC Amnesty Hearings 14 Sept. 1998), while for Sachs, her image is contiguous with that of the legendary Mumtaz-i-Mahal, the beloved wife of the seventeenth-century Indian ruler Shah Jahan. In his latest memoir (written with partner Vanessa September) titled The Free Diary of Albie Sachs (2004), Sachs writes of his visit to the Taj Mahal in Agra shortly after the assassination of Ruth First in 1982. Hoping to attain “some relief” from his own “terror,” as well as from his feelings of “dismay and grief” at her death, Sachs attempts to immerse himself in the beauty of the huge architectural monument built by a Mogul king in memory of his wife (213). Instead, Sachs finds that he is cheated by history. Discovering that the king mutilated the builders so that they could never again recreate the same structure, Sachs finds that, for him, the monument signifies not “love” or sacrifice,

which he implies that Ruth First represents, but “feudal power and vanity.” Encountering an alternative past to the popular tourist tale of immortalized beauty and undying romance, Sachs departs in disappointment. Seeking to escape the horrific events of the recent past, he is confronted instead with ones which seem to duplicate them. In such a location, images of Ruth First as representative of a lost age of youthful enthusiasm and honour which would become so prolific two decades later, elude him.

As a woman who viewed struggles pertaining to gender as secondary to those for racial equality, Ruth First nevertheless insisted on maintaining her own name throughout her life, asserting her individuality in a world in which many women were anxious to accept the designation of ‘Mrs.’ In an anecdote about the Treason Trial, Joe Slovo writes of returning to his “vacant chair among the Ss towards the back next to Ruth (who had not yet won her battle to sit among the Es)” (1995: 100). Recognizing the significance of the positioning of woman’s bodies, Ruth First opposes attempts to control her own through protesting its automatic placement next to that of her partner. Again, Ruth First figures resistance through an emphasis on naming, on her positioning within alphabetical order. By recollecting the incident, Joe Slovo inscribes Ruth First into a textual position of never conceding defeat, of one who is eternally struggling against the status quo. She herself frequently gave this attitude voice, writing in her Foreword to the 1973 edition of Nelson Mandela’s No Easy Walk to Freedom that “in time,” the apartheid system will come “toppling down” (xi). No lonely prophet in the wilderness, Ruth First based her prediction of the future on logical analysis of the past, listing strategic gains already made in the context of an African struggle for independence.

Constructed as a target by the South African Security Police as much for the courageous face of opposition she represented as for the intellectual influence she cast on scholars in South

Africa and students in Maputo, who “were cadres from the Party and the government” (Joe Slovo 1988: 7), Ruth First continues to be multifariously inscribed within different histories. In Chapter Five, I contribute to this ongoing discourse by placing Ruth First within a matrilineage of Jewish women whose activism, I propose, was as much a product of their cultural and historical environments as of their personal courage and ingenuity as agents of history. Historical agency, for Ruth First, is infinitely bound up in its inscription, just as “physical nourishment” in the form of the cone of brown sugar she periodically received in prison is inextricable from the “mental and intellectual energy” promised by its torn newspaper wrapping, as Harlow suggests (1992: 150). Supplied with “pencils” indelibly printed with the words “Property of the South African Administration,” Ruth First configures writing itself as duplicitous and double-edged in 117 Days (126): formerly an effective tool in organizing her thinking, in communicating revolutionary ideas, the act of inscription comes to imply also the penning of a suicide note on the “flyleaf” of a book (130), and the writing of the official “statement” her captors so desired (124).

Fearing to mark the “dazzling white” expanse of an empty page in Jail Diary (160), Sachs confines himself to a series of tiny pencil dots. Eventually expanding the dots into the penciled cubes of a new selfhood, Sachs transforms the cubes into letters, and writes himself as the hero of a short story, an advocate, who meets his nemesis in the form of “pretty young lady” (248). In 117 Days, Ruth First doubles her subjecthood to assume the object of Sachs’ stereotyped fiction. Embroidering herself on the margins of an apartheid fairytale, she construes her captor-rescuer as “a smug Father Christmas” (138) who baits her not with red roses but the many-paged tomes of European classics. Fulfilling her “longing” for The Charterhouse of Parma (1839) by Stendhal but not that for Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace (1904), Ruth First’s jailors surprise her also with the gift of a Penguin crossword puzzle book

(First 1965: 138). As an alternative to his romantic fiction, Sachs devises his own crossword puzzle “dominated by words relating to prison life” (1966: 247). Conceiving of the cubes as “growing cells” (246), Sachs inscribes himself into a new identity in prison, just as Dr B. devises a new selfhood from the “sixty-four squares” of his improvised chessboard (Zweig 1942: 31). Like Zweig, who regulates himself to a fixed number of games per day, Ruth First resists indulging in more than one crossword puzzle daily, lest she succumbs to what she calls the “gluttony” of consuming them all at once (1965: 129).

A highly productive writer, Ruth First was also a booklover who longed “to withdraw to read” not only within the prison, but also within the bounds of ordinary family life (First 1963: 141). Figuring her hankering for printed words as a physical craving in *117 Days*, Ruth First writes of being “ravenous” for “reading matter” (71). A scrap of discarded paper in a dustbin at Pretoria Central becomes an “archeological find” which she unearths in order “to devour the words” (72). Feasting her eyes upon what she discovers to be the record of another prisoner’s “name, number, crime, and sentence,” Ruth First reads the mundane lettering as an affirmation of her own belonging to the literate civilization outside the prison, as opposed to the barren desert of the jailed world to which she had grown accustomed. Arrested in the library of Wits University in 1963 and assassinated at her researcher’s office at Mondlane University in 1982, Ruth First’s life was defined, to a large extent, by her competence in crafting words: as Harlow proposes, Ruth First’s interlude in the ‘criminal’ institution of the prison is made contiguous with her tenure in approved repositories of cultural knowledge by her desire to record in language alternative readings of the present as well as the past (1995: 122).

## *Appendix*

### Transcription of Ruth First's Speech on South African Women's Day, August 9<sup>th</sup> 1978

A certain nostalgia is inevitable today.

I think of that Women's Demonstration – 22 years ago in front of the Union Buildings in Pretoria – South Africa's White House. A sea of black women, babies on their backs, sunshades up, in the great sunny amphitheatre, sat for hours in the broiling sun. They were silent mostly, and their discipline was enormous as the police, guns and batons at the ready, police dogs, kwela kwela vans, circled round them. Those women had already braved enormous obstacles just to get there, from all over the country.

For me, that was the single most memorable demonstration. But there have been many others from the 1913 women's opposition to cattle culling, sheep dipping and land enclosure and the 1917 anti-pass campaign to the strikes of more recent times.

These demonstrations bore witness to the inspired community leadership of the women militants of the ANC. They were political activists, but they never cut themselves off from the people. I remember those 'stokvels', burial societies, women's self-help groups, that are on the one hand a way of survival at a practical level and at the same time gave the women a sense of self-worth and helped them organise until they are ready to attack the structures that directly oppress them.

I remember Diana Maile, she had a hatstand in the hall of her tiny Springs municipal township house, and she pointed to each of her hats in turn: "That is my church hat; that is my party hat; that is my wedding hat; that is my funeral hat; this one is my riot hat."

The women of Southern Africa are of a very special kind. And that goes for South Africa, for Zimbabwe, and for Namibia, because the system of exploitation is common between all three countries.

It is a system of cheap labour, of migrant labour, which first drags the men out of the rural reserves to serve the white economy, then shovels them out of that economy when they are too old and sick to work; sends them out of the way, back to the reserves when they are unemployed. Thus the white rulers simultaneously absolve themselves of any responsibility for the old, the sick, the unemployed and their families; and remove the source of rebellion of working class revolt.

And this is not a declining but a growing system – soon there will be no resident black population in ‘White’ South Africa at all: blacks will simply be conscripted for labour and sent ‘home’ to starve.

It is the women who carry the heaviest burdens of this migrant system. They are left behind with the burden of the family; and they are left behind as producers, to keep the agriculture going. So they are responsible for both family and production.

The migrant system leads to a huge disproportion between the sexes in the reserves; the so-called Bantustans. In the Ngutu district of Zululand (Kwazulu), for instance, there are 38 men between the ages of 14 & 55 for every 233 women. In Lesotho, 60 out of every 100 women see their husbands less than three months in every year.

What hope has the family of surviving this?

‘The fabled extended family now usually consists of one old woman in a hut on a hill, too decrepit to work, who is forced to carry on the backbreaking struggle of caring for small children. If Granny sickens or dies, the children must go to even more unsuitable relatives.’  
(ref ?) [sic].

It was more than twenty years ago that Phyllis Ntantala first wrote about the widows of the reserves, and described the adolescent girls and young women in the flower of their lives turned into lonely widows.

even if the members of that family are entitled under their own rights of domicile to stay. And I mean other forms of violence against women. African women in South Africa have no rights of inheritance, and in law they are classified as perpetual minors.

In the labour market, African women are at the bottom of the pile of exploited labour. They are the domestic servants, the human dishwashers, the substitute mothers at whose expense white women purchase their own liberty.

In the factories, the women do the lowest paid jobs. In the textile industry, for instance, women workers have been used by the employers to undercut black male labour. Employers are able to divide the work force not only by colour, but by sex.

These conditions of exploitation and oppression have produced a women's movement of a very special kind, and activists of a very special kind. They are to be found in prisons, on strike pickets, in the townships, in the factories, in the reserves, on trial before the courts, and at the heart of the armed struggle, in the ranks of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

These women are individuals of extraordinary strength.

How many women, in detention or before the courts, have agreed to give evidence for the State? We have among us the Shantis, the Lindiwe Sisulus, the women who refused to break, the next generation of women activists...

I am rather ashamed to have put the question like that: to have compared the sacrifice and struggle of women with that of men. It is not the basis on which women need to fight our struggle for liberation, and a wrong way to state the uneven contributions of the sexes.

Yet I maintain that there is a problem here. We have to face the implications of the mobilisation of women for the liberation struggle, for the liberation revolution – for we already know that liberation in our country cannot be realised without a social change of the order of a revolution, a restructuring of the society.

How then does women's subordination link with the general pattern of oppression in Southern Africa?

The liberation movement of our countries has explicitly or implicitly conceived of our task as a double revolution. It recognises that the end of national oppression – the 'colonial' aspect of Southern Africa and the oppression of Africans as Africans – is impossible without a restructuring of the whole society; that it requires a policy on the structures of exploitation, an economic and social policy. Our task is not just to invert the colour pyramid, but to remove the basis of national oppression by dismantling the structures of economic exploitation.

We already know, in other words, that South Africa's oppressed are under a double oppression – class and national. But women carry an additional burden. Theirs is a triple oppression. They are oppressed as Africans; oppressed as workers, as the worst paid, and they are oppressed as women.

From this it is clear that it is impossible in our conditions to isolate the women's problem from the generalised problem; and that the liberation of women will be impossible without the success of the revolution. Women's movements that do not see this are not confronting the sources of women's oppression – it's no good concerning yourself with the family, for instance, if you don't tackle the migrant labour system. Even church women's organisations know that, and issue one condemnation of migrant labour after another.

But what about a distinct women's organisation?

It has been necessary to organise political movements of women because women have problems of a special kind, arising out of the triple oppression already described. These organisations give their minds to the special requirements of working with women.

But there are certain dangers, in recognising the separate organisation of women, for the liberation movement as a whole.

One danger is that the national movement may treat the women's movements as merely auxiliary forces to the revolution, to be called on as reinforcements perhaps, but not as central to the struggle. Organised women have a very real responsibility to study specially [sic] carefully the exact and specific conditions of women's oppression, and to devise a policy accordingly.

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Another danger within the liberation movement as a whole is that of neglecting the importance of women's oppression within our own rank; of forgetting or ignoring the revolution inside the revolution.

In my view, the liberation movement's policy and record on women's issues must be gauged [sic] in several ways:

1. by the strength of the liberation women's section/movement.
2. by the way in which we all conceive, in a political sense the problem of women's oppression and its solutions – ie the ideological [sic] record.
3. by the participation and the place of women in the general movement including the leadership.

On this I concede I'm a late developer.

I started my political life in the youth movement – I'd spurned the women's movement saying, "I'm a youth not a woman." I didn't think about my politics except as a political activist in the movement as a whole.

I sat at underground meetings in the 1960's often the only woman there. I treated others (mostly men) like fools when they acted stupid, and was quite unaware of the resentment I caused. Or I put it down to other things than sexual politics.

It was an elitist view, a matter of 'making it' by proving your "equality" as a woman.

Why did I change?

I read the literature of the socialist feminist movement.

It was coherent, powerful. It could not be ignored, for the way it conceptualised women's oppression.

I listened to my own daughters.

I studied the writing of Olive Schreiner, and wrote a book about her.

And overall I was concerned about the quality of life within the revolution in alternate societies than ours, and for the future under socialism.

What implications has [sic] the new thinking for our theory?

From the literature on women, it becomes clear that the theory on women's oppression doesn't satisfactorily answer all the problems.

Engels in the Origin of the Family proposes that women's oppression originated with the development of private property and the monogamous family, which separated women from the processes of production and relegated them to the household to reproduce the family.

From this analysis, it used to be concluded that the socialisation of private property would release women, that this would be automatic. That was the orthodox approach.

But I believe that the solution is not that easy. The orthodox approach does not consider several aspects. First, it gives insufficient weight to the sexual division of labour as such: to the roles of men as producers and of women as reproducers and child carers. Our experience has shown us that the entry of women into work does not automatically remove the obstacles to our full participation in society, and in politics.

Releasing women into the labour market under conditions of equal pay for equal work is part of the battle. But what of the division of labour in the household? Women in fact do double

jobs, one outside the home and one inside it. In many socialist countries, while there have indeed been improvements in women's position as workers outside the home, there has been little change in the structure of the family. There are creches [sic], but they are still staffed by women; communal kitchens, and they too are staffed by women. The concepts of women's work and women's roles persist.

There has been some attempt among feminist theorists to theorise sexual exploitation as exploitation in the Marxist sense. They haven't really carried this off, but it is undeniable that the sexual division of labour segregates women into special areas of work. And we can't ignore the fact that women are not only subordinated and ----- [sic] in the labour market, but in the household and in the family as well.

Second, the orthodox approach does not account for the ideological overhang: for the fact that it remains difficult to convince some women, and most men, that there is a problem, although the problem itself has many practical effects.

- a) it affects women's freedom to take part in political work. (Many British organisations recognise this and organise creches [sic] for children these days so that women can take part as equals
- b) it affects the conception men have of women's disabilities – makes them believe that this state of affairs is natural to women, like childbirth, and makes them unwilling to rethink or alter responses to women.
- c) It affects women's belief in their own capabilities and confirms their sense of their own inferiority. This continued sense of inferiority helps to explain why women find it so difficult to speak up at meetings, and why we are so under represented on committees except in money-raising and backroom catering.

All this adds up to the conclusion that we have to look at the subordination of women, not only in the labour market, but in the household and in the family. We have to revolutionise the position of women not after but during the revolution.

Numbers of objections may be raised to this case I am making. The most common is "We can deal with that after the revolution."

Well, I'm not so sure. Take Algeria, where the women are back behind the veil. DJAMILA BOUPACHA, herself a heroine of the liberation struggle, says that women are no more liberated now than they were before the revolution. Now we're being told we must wait for the old values to die out. But values don't die: they have to be changed by our direct intervention.

In other words, the condition of the revolution has to be prepared beforehand. If a movement has an unliberated attitude to women's questions, it will take them with it into the post-liberation period. (In the same way, a movement that has bureaucratic methods of work will carry these with it when it has state power. [sic])

Our movement has a special experience of and special sensitivity to these issues precisely because our country has a national question. We know very well that the humiliation of one national group by another has to be fought within our ranks – we have to be careful of chauvinist attitudes, of chauvinist behaviour. It matters how white comrades talk to black; how Indians talk to Africans. The rights of minorities, or oppressed majorities have to be guarded, protected, asserted, even among ourselves.

The second major objection to my case is that women's demands and their assertion are divisionary; they take attention away from the principal question. But this objection has much to do with misunderstandings about what women's demands are. There is a great deal of prejudice against the women's movements of the west, and for this the stereotype created by the capitalist press has much to answer. This stereotype denigrates the women's movement as being committed only to issues such as men washing the dishes the same as women, or being against marriage and hence indulging in sexual promiscuity.

Women are concerned with the marriage institution, because it can conceal such unhealthy and unhappy relations between the sexes.

Women are concerned when the rights of women to take critical decisions about ourselves – for instance, when or whether to have children, because it changes so much else in our lives.

Women are talking about relations between the sexes, out of a belief that revolutions are not only to change material conditions of life, but to make happier, healthier, better adjusted

lives. Men as well as women can, for instance, be sensitive to the problems of growing children.

The truth is that there are several different tendencies in the movement. The socialist feminist movement is trying to link women's oppression with the exploitation of capitalism, and to achieve a societal change. Even in other branches of the movement, while it is true that many of these feminists are not revolutionaries, it is a fact that many of the demands they raise for women's rights cannot be met without social change.

We might recognise a parallel with the national movement in our own country, where many who did not start with a revolutionary programme became drawn into the liberation movement because their demands could not be met in any other way.

If we neglect the revolution inside the revolution, we shall have unequal conditions among our members, some more equal than others. Because our movement is the microcosm of our revolution, and of the new society we wish to build, that matters.

When we have new women in our movement, we shall have new women in our society at large.

We are talking about the release of human creativity.

Revolutions are to allow people to fulfil themselves.

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RUTH FIRST MEMORIAL TRUST  
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