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Presenting the Prison: The South African Prison Autobiography under Apartheid

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Thesis Presented for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in the Department of English
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
August 2007

ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates a range of South African autobiographical accounts of imprisonment, most of them by political prisoners under apartheid. Its principal focus is on the ways in which the prison as physical and ideological space intersects with a conscious literary construction of identity. The argument is that in these accounts, the prison features as both object and subject: it appears as one of the objects of description, a referent among others in a structured succession of events, but in fact it also serves as the very frame that enables and structures the consciousness that speaks about – and from within – the prison. In other words, the prison is one of the important coercive instruments that governed the forms of consciousness, literary and otherwise, that emerged in South Africa under apartheid. A broader topic engaged by this discussion is therefore also the role played by materially based disciplinary structures in the emergence of autobiographical literary forms. This approach rejects the idea that resistance is exclusively a matter of grappling with social injustice, and suggests that it resides also in moments of uncertainty, equivocation and tension in the construction of the “I” that speaks. A corollary aim of the thesis is to demonstrate how South African prisons produced various distinct forms of subjectivity, specifically because different prisons treated prisoners differently, often in accordance with apartheid understandings of race and gender. The South African prison is approached not as a monolithic, uniform structure, but as a formation that was originally inherited from Enlightenment Europe and then fractured and transformed under the pressures of colonialism and apartheid. While a wide range of autobiographies are referred to in the discussion, the most important memoirs include Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* (as prototype for the genre), Breyten Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Ruth First’s *117 Days*, Caesarina Makhoere’s *No Child’s Play*, Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Emma Mashinini’s *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*.

I am indebted to the National Research Foundation for funding that helped me to complete this thesis.

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ONE: INTRODUCTION

When Van Riebeeck confined Autshumoto to Robben Island in 1658, he also introduced the prison as one of the principal methods of social control and coercion under successive colonial and apartheid regimes. After 1948, under apartheid rule, the prison and its myriad subsidiary institutions increasingly occupied a central role in South African society. Pass laws effectively ensured that most black South Africans spent some time in prison: between 1920 and 1986, when pass books were abolished, 20 million people were arrested for pass law infractions (Worger 63). Detention Laws, the Suppression of Communism Act (1950), the Sabotage Act (1962), the Terrorism Act (1967), the Internal Security Act (1976) and successive States of Emergency between 1960 and 1990 ensured that incarceration or exile were the only available options for at least two generations of political activists and freedom fighters.

Political leaders, artists, writers, intellectuals, and rights campaigners were routinely imprisoned, often under the flimsiest pretexts. Between 1960 and 1990, approximately 80 000 people were detained without trial, in addition to the large numbers of charged and sentenced political prisoners (Gready, "Writing as resistance" 1). When the first democratic cabinet was announced under Nelson Mandela's presidency in 1994, nine of its thirty members had spent time in prison, and most had lived in exile at some point to avoid imprisonment. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that for at least the

second half of the twentieth century, the prison served as a master signifier that determined the boundary of all the different articulations of activism, of political attitudes and even, at a certain level, for the majority of South Africans, of ideas of citizenship. As Gready points out,

[c]entral to apartheid's design were the layered spaces of confinement and exclusion: lives were lived within an evolving crosshatch of mutually enforcing insides and outsides, behind bars and borders. Opponents of apartheid provided only the most obvious manifestation of lifetimes of harassment that could be framed in these terms. The prison extended from the various prisons of the mind and pervasive state interference and control in daily life, to house arrest, banning (a measure which variously restricted freedom of movement, association, and expression), detention, and jail, through the occupied and terrorized townships to the Bantustans, the borders of South Africa, and beyond... (*Writing as Resistance* 1-2)

Actual imprisonment aside, ordinary civilian life in South Africa shared some of the characteristics of a prison environment. A 1978 Amnesty International report observes:

Over the years, several commentators have made the point that the restrictions imposed by *apartheid* on the individual's freedom of movement, association and expression, have effectively made political prisoners of all South Africa's

population. In some senses this is perhaps true, for the introduction of discriminatory *apartheid* legislation has imposed new and artificial limits on each individual's activity and behaviour. Even members of the dominant white group are restricted in that, for example, they may not enter certain areas without official permission or marry the person of their choice if such a person is not a member of the same racial group. Blacks are subject to restrictions on all aspects of life. (Amnesty International 37)

The cultural imaginary cohered around the prison; those South Africans who never encountered it in reality were haunted by it in their dreams. The absolute centrality of the prison to recent South African history is figured in the erection of the Constitutional Court on the site of the old Fort, where countless people had been detained over the years predominantly for pass offences, and by the construction in the buildings of parliament in Pretoria of a replica of Mandela's cell on Robben Island. In this way, the enduring legacy of the prison is poignantly figured in the actual architecture and topography of the parliament and of the highest judiciary authority in post-apartheid South Africa.

Against this background, this thesis investigates a range of South African autobiographical accounts of imprisonment, most of them by political prisoners under apartheid. My principal interest is in the ways in which different subjectivities are constructed in response to the exigencies of life in prison – in other words, in the ways

in which the prison as physical and ideological space intersects with a conscious literary construction of identity. My argument is that prison narratives became a kind of laboratory for the construction of South African selves. The basic coordinates of contemporary post-apartheid South African debates about personal and collective identity as well as the grounds for a particular ontological awareness of the nature and duties of the self were laid down with specific reference to the prison, which became a synecdochal representative of society in general: as Mandela observes in *Long Walk to Freedom*, “[w]e regarded the struggle in prison as a microcosm of the struggle as a whole” (464).

To understand the role of the prison in the construction of self, it is necessary to dispense with the idea of what Bruner calls a “natural genre” of artless autobiography (48), where some autonomous, authentic and transcendent voice describes and evaluates the reality of life in prison. This view recurs often in popular accounts of prison memoirs as “triumphant illustrations of the human spirit” (Moseneke iv), but also recurs in some academic appraisals of this important South African genre.¹

Against such a view, we should insist that identity is always contingent on the conditions of its emergence. There are very particular socio-historical structures that

¹ See for example Dietche’s “Voyaging Towards Freedom”, where she claims that “Mashinini’s voice at the end of her book rises up above her fatigue, her infirmity, the losses she has suffered. Her voice carries with it the weight of her undaunted spirit...” (68) This is not to say, of course, that all academic appraisals of South African prison writing advance such a romanticised and simplistic understanding of the narrating voice: Coetzee, Dimitriu, Driver, Gready, Jacobs, Reckwitz and Schalkwyk, to name only a few examples, offer readings that are attentive to the mediated quality of the narration in prison autobiographies. My thesis is heavily indebted to their various insights.

govern how the individual subject becomes knowable. Importantly, these structures include the *structures of the prison itself*. At the most fundamental level, even the assumption of a singular, introspective “I”, one of the cornerstones of an autobiographical account, realises the prison’s project of isolation and individualisation. In addition to factors such as the global appetite for narratives of personal witnessing², the ideologies and cultural capital that prisoners enter prison with, particular culturally and politically inflected understandings of the structure and function of autobiographical accounts, dominant social understandings of the trope of prison, and the “higher truths” (Gready, “Autobiography” 522) that prisoners consciously address themselves to, the prison is itself a “machine for altering minds”, to use Foucault’s famous formulation (125). An important point of departure, for this thesis, is that the prison *produces the voices that speak from it*: it is not an objective phenomenon that becomes assimilated into and mediated by pre-existing local and global information flows, but is itself productive of particular subjectivities. To put it simply, the prison is both object *and* subject: it appears as one of the objects of description, a referent among others in a structured succession of events, but in fact it also serves as the very frame that enables and structures the consciousness that speaks about – and from within – the prison. I return to some of these arguments below, but would like to make clear the central premise of my thesis: the language, rituals and proscriptions of the penal institution do not merely number along a range of discursive practices that “destabilise” the speaking subject, as the clichéd topos of autobiographical theory would propose,

² As Gilmore points out, the publication of books identified as “autobiography or memoir” tripled between the 1940s and the 1990s (1).

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but is itself the discourse that organises, locates and supplies meaning to all other discursive practices. Even when the trauma of prison is artfully remembered in answer to particular literary, cultural or therapeutic needs, the prison itself ultimately plays a central role in the production of memory.

One of the few academic studies of the South African prison that proceeds from an analogous assumption is Fran Buntman's *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. Buntman's text stands out from other histories of Robben Island for its willingness to engage the key role of political imprisonment in forming – and sustaining – strategies for resistance. Moreover, the text is attentive to the ways in which the prison's "impact resonated beyond antiapartheid opposition to the politics of negotiating a transition and creating and governing a democratic state" (*Robben Island* 4).³ While Buntman's interest is primarily historical and sociological, however, this thesis focuses not so much on memoirs and testimonies as corroborative historical evidence as on the conscious, literary production of subjectivity. My interest is really a *literary* one, concerned with the emergence of a constellation of influential discourses of subjectivity from the apartheid prison, and on the conditions that governed and shaped these representations.

Another important aim of this thesis is to suggest that post-apartheid subjectivities remain inextricably bound to the kinds of selves that emerged in reference to the

³ See also Fran Buntman and Tong-Yi Huang's "The Role of Political Imprisonment in Developing and Enhancing Political Leadership".

apartheid prison. In the sense that life in the apartheid prison represented a kind of focalised, acute version of civilian life under the apartheid state – a point made by almost every prison diarist – this is also to suggest that there is a more general continuity between apartheid and post-apartheid constructions of individuality, community and notions of care. I return to this observation in more detail in the third chapter (“On Robben Island”) and in the conclusion, where I discuss some of the links between the concept of “self” in prison and the selves addressed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

By insisting on a certain historical connection between the South African landscape before and after the first democratic election of 1994, this thesis endeavours to avoid the convenient division between “apartheid” and “post-apartheid” literary and social forms that seems to have become a standard postulation in South African literary and cultural theory. While such a periodisation is obviously inevitable and necessary, its naturalisation in academic language seems to encourage readings that rest on a model of history as the displacement of one synchronic way of life with another almost incongruous synchronic totality: what is lost here in the name of a kind of pseudo-Foucaultian “historicism” is precisely *history* itself; the diachronic strands of *continuity* between the past and the present. By making the apartheid period into an enclosed object of study, we run the risk of writing an epitaph for our very recent traumatic history so that it can be buried and forgotten.

On the one hand, following theorists such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, we could argue that certain successive historical moments tend to respond to (and try to resolve) *the same* traumatic impasse, what Lacan would call the kernel of the Real⁴. Thus, for instance, Žižek notes that “class struggle is *real* in the strict Lacanian sense” (*For They Know Not* 100), since it represents a persistent, particular impediment to the smooth operation of the social totality. Different historical epochs correspond to different attempts to symbolise and resolve the impasse of class struggle, which is figured as an unsettling manifestation of the Real at the heart of the social symbolic precisely because it frustrates all attempts to contain and defuse its effects:

This kernel of the Real encircled by failed attempts to symbolize-totalize it is radically *non-historical*: history itself is nothing but a succession of failed attempts to grasp, conceive, specify this strange kernel. (Žižek, *For They Know Not* 101)

⁴ In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the domain of the Real is distinguished by its resistance to representation. In his seminar of 1954-1955, Lacan characterises the Real as “the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *per excellence*” (*Ego* 164). While it is certainly not the object of this thesis to provide a detailed exposition of Lacanian theory, it is worth pointing out that while the Lacanian Real resists symbolisation, it is also seen as the *cause* of the symbolic, an absent centre that language attempts to contain. Elsewhere, Lacan refers to a vase to explain this apparently paradoxical status of the Real, noting that it is “an object made to represent the emptiness at the centre” (*Ethics* 121). Slavoj Žižek provides a somewhat less whimsical explanation in his *Indivisible Remainder*: “the symbolic order (the big Other) is organized around a hole in its very heart, around the Traumatic thing which makes it ‘non-all’; it is defined by the impossibility of attaining the Thing; however, it is this very reference to the void of the Thing that opens up the space for symbolization, since without it the symbolic order would immediately ‘collapse’ into the designated reality – that is to say, the distance that separates ‘words’ from ‘things’ would disappear. The void of the Thing is therefore *both things at the same time*: the inaccessible ‘hard kernel’ around which symbolization turns, which eludes it, the cause of the failure, *and the very space of symbolization*, its condition of possibility” (*Indivisible Remainder* 145).

Žižek's rejection of historicism, paradoxically, insists on the importance of a properly materialist concept of *history* as a way of expressing the relationship between one historical moment and another.

In the South African case, this irresolvable "kernel of the Real" that articulates the succession of historical epistemes could refer particularly to the problematic of subsuming fractured, economically – and previously legally – divided communities under the same communal modality, to the traumatic relationship between the individual and the collective as centres of meaning and authority, and to the conflict between ideas of "modernity" and those discourses that have resisted such a classification. While these fissures, collisions and ideological deadlocks were important points of reference and crisis for the struggle against apartheid, they are equally insistent today as problems of civic governance and nationhood: in this particular sense, the current symbolic order is connected to the past in the sense that they both attempt, and fail, to address the same fundamental predicaments.

On the other hand, following Fredric Jameson, one could point out that even where a revolutionary shift takes place in the mode of production, the encounter with the past necessarily involves and destabilises the present. Jameson comments that once the meeting between past and present is seen not as an encounter between individual subjects and the inert object of the past, but rather as an encounter between two modes of production, then

... it is not we who sit in judgment of the past, but rather the past, the radical difference of other modes of production (and even the immediate past of our own mode of production), which judges us, imposing the painful knowledge of what we are not, what we are no longer, what we are not yet. ("Marxism and Historicism" 175)

In other words, the subjectivities that arise in prison memoirs have urgent questions to pose to nascent post-apartheid conceptions of self and other, as, indeed, to the global readership of these autobiographies. The prison memoir presents a fractured mirror where post-apartheid subjectivities encounter *both* their troubled genesis *and* their difference from themselves; where they are invited to recognise themselves as *projects* that are interminably in the process of becoming.

To understand something of the origin and development of the voices that speak in prison memoirs, this thesis uses a wide range of texts, published between 1948 and 2003, to examine how the penal institution mediates, obstructs and produces particular discursive strategies for self-presentation. This in no way suggests that there is a homogeneous "prison voice": in fact, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, the South African prison under apartheid was uncertain of its principles and aims, attempted to reproduce and entrench the racial partitioning of the apartheid state, created and nurtured status hierarchies, employed techniques of surveillance and

control that differed hugely from one particular institution to another, shifted its mode of operation according to rapidly changing historical circumstances, and existed in dispersed and fractured localities that ranged from the complete invisibility and terrifying insecurity of detention without trial, to the “ordinary” prison sentence, to “house arrest”, where a particular carceral logic bled into the domain of ordinary civilian life.

Moreover, prisoners entered gaol with remarkably diverse histories, beliefs, knowledges and self-conceptions. Robben Island, South Africa’s premier political prison under apartheid, serves as a good example of the kinds of differences that could traverse a single penal institution. Firstly, as in other prisons, prisoners were ranked according to four categories: A, B, C or D. Prisoners in the A category enjoyed the most privileges, while prisoners in the D category enjoyed the least. Political prisoners rarely moved up from the D or C classification, since the prison board that evaluated prisoner classifications favoured interrogating prisoners about their political beliefs rather than looking at their behaviour in prison (Mandela 474). After some early experiments with mixing common-law prisoners and political prisoners, common-law prisoners started being removed from the island after 1965. The general cells were separated from the “leadership section”, where individuals regarded by the state as leaders of the resistance struggle were kept in single cells (Buntman, “Resistance 1963-1976” 99). In 1967, thirty-five Namibians joined the single-cell section but were not allowed to communicate with the other inmates. The treatment of prisoners in the

single-cell section differed from the treatment meted out to those in the general section.

Referring to the somewhat less inhumane period after 1971, Neville Alexander

comments:

The prisoners in the single-cells section are treated much more politely (albeit grudgingly so) than those in the general section, and these in turn are treated much better than those in the 'Terrorist Section', the inmates of which are even now treated with the most offensive contempt imaginable. (26)

Communication between the leadership section and the general section was an arduous process. Mandela describes how, for instance, notes between the two sections were written in milk and taped inside the rim of the toilet bowl so that inmates from the general section who were sentenced to solitary confinement could obtain them (500). Robert Sobukwe, the charismatic leader of the Pan Africanist Congress, was kept in a completely separate bungalow. He managed to communicate with other prisoners only when they passed his cell on their way to work. Mmutlanyane Mogoba describes how he would sometimes acknowledge greetings from other prisoners with a salute, or by picking up soil and allowing it to run from his hand in deference to the Pan Africanist Congress' emphasis on the theft of land from the African people (30-31). Other prisoners were not permitted to look at him as they walked past: Indres Naidoo claims that "[t]he warders shouted at us all the time to look straight ahead and not at him" (72). Diet and clothes were racially differentiated. Although there were no officially white

people on Robben Island – Dimitrio Tsafendas, Hendrik Verwoerd’s assassin, was formally reclassified as black and could consequently be incarcerated on the Island – differences between black, coloured and Indian diets and clothes were enforced. In addition, political tensions between the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress created further divisions in the prison, as did internal party splits, for instance between the “nationalists” and the “communists” in the African National Congress (Buntman, *Robben Island* 100-102).

Given such differences, even in one institution, it becomes difficult to generalise about penal forms of control and about the kinds of identities that emerge from prison. However, I would also like to avoid a form of postmodern particularism where every experience becomes inassimilable to any larger narrative about the conditions governing the emergence and transformation of subjectivities.

One way of approaching this difficulty involves placing the demands of a particular narrative in a productive and unresolved *tension* with larger, more generalising insights about prison life under apartheid. To use Robben Island as example again: Mogoba points out that Sobukwe was never counted with the other prisoners, but appeared instead as a kind of addition:

He was kept in complete isolation without companionship. Even on the main board in the prison that showed the daily roll he was referred to as “Plus One”.

If there were 988 prisoners in jail on a specific day, the board would read:

987+1. He lived a lonely life with his jailers as his only human companionship.

(30)

We could read beneath Sobukwe's "special" nomination a more general ideological truth about prisons: *every* particular prisoner is a "Plus One", both part of the general prison population and in some way held apart, individualised under the abstract and inhuman signifier of "one". To say that the prison contains either a mass of 987 prisoners or merely one prisoner would both be false: the addition mark is a way of conjoining all prisoners, although it also serves the function of separating, of marking off. Even as the prison institutes its mark of surplus/deficit, the mark itself becomes a locus of agency and struggle for the prisoner. Every prison memoir recounts, on the one hand, the experience of the "one", and every prison memoir insists, on the other hand, on the task of addition, on the necessity of community in the face of separation and isolation. The addition mark stands for the sense in which the prison imposes a *particular* experience in the name of and in the interests of a single and more *general* ideological totality, but it also stands for the way in which particular experience is incessantly returned by the autobiographers themselves to a more general sense of political solidarity. A prison memoir necessarily reflects the experience of a single individual, but it is also itself the bridge that tries to link that experience to something beyond the self.

When I claim that the activity of self-representation is governed by the prison, I am of course not discounting the world that prisoners bring *with* them to the prison, nor am I dismissing the importance of the context which regulates the production and reception of the text. My point is that the penal institution opens the discursive space for self-narration, and in important ways continues to mediate that narrative. In a properly Jamesonian sense, the material reality of the prison forms the “political unconscious” of the prison narrative – not because these memoirs are “about” prison, but because the prison, in ways that are often invisible, structures the text and conditions the aesthetic representation of consciousness. When Molefe Pheto, director of the Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute at the time of his arrest in 1975, is raided by the security police, he describes how his books are examined and bagged as “evidence”:

I saw Wole Soyinka thrown head first into the pillow slip; the Imamu Barakas that had escaped banning by the Publications Board; Chinua Achebe staring at Purple Suit with his strong eyes suffered the fate of Soyinka; Serote, Mtshali, Senghor, Césaire, Okigbo, the two Diops, Mphahlele, E.R. Braithwaite, Ngugi; my own poems and the first manuscript of my novel joining that august company of Black writers going to jail in a pillow case and six brown South African government-supply envelopes. (38)

Pheto picks up here on the bizarre way in which the prison apparatus tends to reify its metaphorical operation. Pheto’s world of ideas is literally sent to gaol with him in a

pillow case. On one level, this scene can be read as a metaphor which indicates that individuals do not enter prison as blank slates, but as subjects in a pre-existing literary and ideological matrix. By allowing a picture of Chinua Achebe to stare at the security police “with his strong eyes”, Pheto also underscores the point that ideas represent and inhabit *bodies*: to put it simply, nobody goes to prison alone. Even in solitary confinement, the existence of an interior world of literary references, beliefs, personal memories and affections sustain a kind of intersubjectivity that the prison labours incessantly, and with varying degrees of success, to pull apart.

However, while the Pheto extract points towards the existence of a fully-formed subjective interiority that encounters the prison as an intelligible *object* that can be mapped onto an extant world-view – and it is certainly true that Pheto seems sustained throughout his ordeal by the ideas that are imprisoned with him – I would suggest that there are also factors that complicate such a conception.

Firstly, the books are “imprisoned” so that they can be deployed as *evidence* against Pheto. In other words, from the outset, the apparatus of imprisonment introduces an impossible split between the “empty” subject and the rich fullness of his or her inner life, represented in the example by Pheto’s books. While Pheto’s description denotes the conjoint imprisonment of himself and of his literary world, it also denotes a violent incursion on his mental life: when his books are bagged, they are also in a sense *stolen* from him, and become available only through the tenuous process of remembering. A

range of prison writers recount how this form of remembering becomes particularly difficult to sustain in prison, where one suffers the privation of *aides-mémoire*, of normal community, and of the kind of dignity and approval that sustain a stable sense of self. Reflecting on his experience of solitary confinement, Albie Sachs comments:

You know what is right and wrong, yet feel powerless to act accordingly. Being useless and inactive for so long drains my will so that after a while I begin to feel useless and discarded. At first I semi-consciously identify myself with the mat in the cell. I felt depersonalised and anonymous. My political ideas, the philosophy and aspirations of so many years, seemed remote and cold in this situation. They were words, formulations, phrases, not descriptions of a life that bore any relation to the one that I was experiencing. (166)

What Sachs describes here is the aphanisis of the subject, a fading of the internal life and an attendant self-objectification that is in fact characteristic of the experience of imprisonment, especially of solitary confinement. In his memoir *Bandiet*, Hugh Lewin remarks in a very similar way on the colonisation by the prison of his interior life:

I was bemused by the sudden new world I was in. During that first day and night they had not only broken me, they had changed me. They had taken me from my world, and made me a part of their world. I felt too scared, too alone, too ashamed to fight the change. I was now part of their world and there was

nothing I could do to change that. It was easier to do nothing, not to worry, easier to accept that all was finished, easier to feel uninvolved and dependent – numb, cold like the winter outside. (21)

While this disintegration of self is discontinued once more normal subjective bonds become possible, any later organisation of the experience of imprisonment into narrative form is forced into an encounter with this traumatic self-splitting and subjective destitution. A large part of this thesis is preoccupied with what is at stake in such an encounter for various writers, but the more general point is that any later remembering occurs on, recovers, translates, or actively attempts to occlude the site of this abjection, where the prison's construction of reality becomes all-encompassing. As Sachs comments in his conclusion to his *Jail Diary*: "I write and I write, just as once I sat and I sat" (285). The scene of writing echoes the scene of incarceration.

At the end of his memoir, Pheto returns to his books – more specifically, to his own novel, which he manages to finish in New York. He describes the prison autobiography as a narrative about "a chapter of my life I want to forget as soon as possible because there is still so much ahead of me, so much to achieve, that to be harping back on those days would be an unproductive waste of time" (216). His prison memoir, in other words, is written as much in the service of memory as of forgetting: it is a detour, a supplement, that allows him to rejoin the trajectory of his life which was interrupted when his books were bagged.

However, his attempts to put the past behind him are frustrated by an incessant ringing in his ears, apparently poised somewhere between memory and nerve damage:

Somewhere within my inner right ear, some nerve had been damaged, brutally bruised, as the Johannesburg ear specialist, Mr Joe Seeger, told me after he had examined the ear. Joe Seeger examined me without charging any fee. He advised me to return so that he could keep a check on the bleep-bleep sounds the ear had somehow recorded during the time I had spent at the Hillbrow Police Station, where some machines behind my cell kept on bleeping day and night, and decided to store for all eternity. Whenever I am in a place that is very quiet, such as Portia's apartment, the ear begins to ring with the bleep sounds. Very early in the morning, very late at night, such as now as I am writing. The bleeps remind me of the first brutal assault, of the blow that landed on the ear.

(Pheto 216-217)

If one follows Pheto's logic closely in this decription, his declaration that he has "at long last... finished the narrative of a nightmare" (216) is immediately undercut by his description of a sound, both disembodied and profoundly embodied, that interrupts the very consciousness that allows the act of writing.

I would argue that any attempt to assimilate the experience of prison back into a pre-existing body of ideas, or to use it in the service of some historically determined goal – advocacy, nation-building, self-exculpation – will necessarily encounter the eternal return of the prison itself, an inescapable and totally idiosyncratic noise that brings with it the full unbearable weight of unmediated memory. South African selves are centred around precisely such an iteration, an intrusion of noise into the ordinary and the ordered. The prison, ultimately, represents this incursion that incessantly bears us back into the past. Pheto's books are returned – and his uncompleted book is completed – but they are no longer the same books, precisely because of the noise that now supplements the act of reading or writing.

In addition, even before the raid on his house, Pheto's books are selected to ensure they are not on the government's banned list:

Over the years, I had checked and made sure that all the books on the shelves and elsewhere in the house were not on the banned list, difficult as it was to be absolutely certain about that in South Africa, because there was not a week in which a book or a journal or some such publication did not come under the hammer of the Publications Board. (Pheto 38)

In the sense that his books represent an aspect of Pheto's world of ideas, they are always already constrained in expectation of imprisonment. The prison generates a

shifting logic of inclusion and exclusion that simultaneously dictates the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge, and ensures that the boundary remains indistinct and anxiety-provoking. In other words, as much as the prison rewrites and marks out memory, it also leaves its stamp on the inner lives of people living under apartheid through a tyranny of *anticipation*.

While the language of self in the autobiographies that I examine in this thesis inevitably becomes entangled with the discourse of the penal institution, it is interesting to note that certain memoirists encounter prison with much more fidelity to a fully internalised, relatively stable and pre-existing world of ideas than others. Thus Albie Sachs in his *Jail Diary* (1990) and Breyten Breytenbach in *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) appear much more uncertain about their foundational beliefs while in prison than, for instance, Molefe Pheto in *And Night Fell* (1985) or Caesarina Makhoere in *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988); in *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989) Emma Mashinini wages an anxious struggle to avoid being drawn into the prison's modes of self-disclosure while Moses Dlamini's account of imprisonment in *Hell Hole, Robben Island* (1984) is an indictment of prison in the name of an entirely coherent, stable self that simply refuses the prison's attempts to interpellate him; and so on.

The reasons for these differences are, in many ways, particular to the author.

Nonetheless, there are a few broad factors that obviously govern the relationship

between the narrating subject and the subjectivising functions of the prison. These are explored in close detail in subsequent chapters, but a brief overview follows below.

Firstly, and most importantly, the South African prison simply did not address all subjects in the same way. The Benthamite notion of a “modern” prison as a space that provides forced solitary self-reflection in the interest of reform appertained specifically to white prisoners, while black prisoners often encountered a carceral model based on the desire for punishment and a simple desire to remove them from society. The salutation “*Dis die Eiland – this is the Island. Hier julle gaan vrek [sic] – here you will die*” (Naidoo 65) that many prisoners were greeted with upon arrival at Robben Island really summarises the apartheid regime’s attitude towards black political activists. This racially differentiated attitude to prisoners is of course as old as the history of racial segregation in South Africa, but became a systematically imposed aspect of South African prison life only towards the end of the 19th century (Bernault 9). Prisons for blacks resembled something between feudal dungeons and mine compounds, and reflected a more general colonial understanding of African bodies as bodies to be broken and subjugated. As Achille Mbembe notes:

The whip and the cane also served to force upon the African a concocted identity, an identity that allowed her/him to move in the spaces where she/he was always being ordered around, and where she/he had unconditionally to

show submissiveness – in forced labor, public works, local *corvée* labor, military conscription. (113)

In practice, this meant that black political prisoners were less likely to be isolated from one another in a continued way, more likely to be tortured physically, experienced much harsher conditions than white prisoners in terms of diet, uniform, health care and general living conditions, and were much less likely to be addressed as “reformable” subjects with a fully formed interiority by the police, the guards or the Security Police interrogators. The systematic flogging of black prisoners was a practice inherited from the colonial period, when whipping was defended as a suitable punishment for people who were regarded as incapable of the abstract reason required to see deprivation of liberty as a punishment (Peté and Devenish 8). Chapter 5, “Solitary Confinement”, discusses the particular ways in which the notion of the prison as a reformatory institution was imported into South Africa in the early 19th century, and subsequently became transformed in the new context – in particular, by the colony’s racial politics and economic requirements. In practice, this transformation effectively split the prison into two. One prison was for white subjects, and was really a militarised, isolated version of the Benthamite penitentiary, which maintained the European model’s rhetoric of rehabilitation and its focus on skills training (Smit 31). The other was for black prisoners, and looked more like other prisons elsewhere in Africa during the colonial period: prisoners were used as labourers, corporal punishment was regularly and viciously employed, and there was little or no interest in rehabilitation (Bernault 1-

26). While such prisons might have incorporated panoptical elements in the architecture, or sometimes strategically used an imported language of reform and reintegration, the spatial arrangement and discourse were in fact radically uncoupled from any rehabilitative function. As Florence Bernault points out, the 19th century Benthamite prison was an organic response to the extension of rights and economic developments in Europe, while its imported colonial version worked simply to consolidate colonial power:

Instead of seeking to rehabilitate criminals and promote social stability through popular consent over legal punishment, Europeans used the prison... to secure control over a subaltern, racially defined social category that comprised the majority of the population. The juxtaposition of archaic and modern elements in the colonial prison did not derive, as in the West, from a long penal history. It grew out of colonizers' systematic reliance on confinement as a device that could allow, behind the façade of rational, disciplined architectures, the use of pre-penitentiary punitive practices. (26)

The formalisation of racial segregation under apartheid did little to change this situation. The 1959 Prisons Act consolidated racial and ethnic divisions in South African prisons (Smit 31), and by the mid 1960s prisons had become one of the principal modes through which the state controlled political unrest (Smit 32). While there were obvious exceptions – most notably in the single cells on Robben Island,

especially in the period after 1971 – black prisoners occupied the position of the other, while white prisoners were more likely to be treated as errant but reformable members of the same community as the police and the warders. At least in the 1960s, the unbearable privation of ordinary human company and the absence of books or writing materials were bizarrely juxtaposed, for some white prisoners, with home-cooked meals and intimate (and often Kafkaesque) conversations with warders, in addition to a cell cleaning service: white prisoners were not allowed to clean their own cells. Albie Sachs's solitary detention cell in Wynberg, for instance, seemed to become a grotesque extension of the station commander's home. For these reasons, black prisoners often found it easier to maintain a distance from the discursive apparatus of the prison: they were regarded as other, and could in turn regard the prison and its functionaries as other. White prisoners, on the other hand, were more frequently enjoined to participate in a ritual of mutual recognition: maintaining a *distance* from the prison's forms of interpellation became a relentless, anxiety-provoking aspect of self-representation and self-understanding.

Nonetheless, even the most agonistic relationship towards the prison, the most severe rejection of its functionaries' claim to humanity, still *responds* to the conditions of the prison itself. In other words, especially where the prison is antagonistically experienced as entirely other, the prison sustains and galvanises a particular rhetoric of self that is recognisably more community-centred than individual-centred, and more sustaining of a stable ideology that is imported from outside its walls. It does so by rejecting a

prisoner's claims to individuality, both discursively and in the material organisation of space, and by neglecting to fulfil its "reformatory" function, which relies on individualising the prisoner and entering into a conversation with him or her. What this thesis rejects is really the idea that the experience and the description of prison relies exclusively, or predominantly, on the politico-ideological lens through which it is perceived. This kind of reading very easily slips into a simplistic understanding of some forms of South African autobiography as inherently more "communal" than others – often based on pseudo-anthropological references to cultural capital, political background and a poorly defined idea of "culture" or "cultural background". Against this, we should insist that the ideological understandings that prisoners appear to bring to the prison are invariably *sustained* by the prison's forms of interpellation, even if this is against the background of an explicitly and fiercely antagonistic relationship to the prison. Identity is born first of all out of the material conditions that necessitate its narration, and the constellation of political positions that we have inherited from apartheid-era South Africa are produced, refined and situated through reference to its materially-based ideological apparatuses. In some ways, the prison can be regarded as a machine that regulates the flux of ideology: the culture that emerges from prison is always connected to the material demands, privations and exigencies of the prison space. These observations are explored in more close detail throughout the thesis, but especially in Chapters 3 ("On Robben Island") and 5 ("Solitary Confinement").

Another factor that determines the relationship between the autobiographical voice and the prison relates more closely to the imagined audience of the memoir, and can be encompassed under the idea of *fidelity to the truth*. Here the imagined affiliation between reader and writer, which includes also the historical and social context of the communicative act, brings its own set of demands and expectations to bear on the way the self is rendered – although even here, I would suggest that the penal institution itself ultimately still determines the horizon of subjectivity and brings into play the forms of resistance available to the narrating self.

Different figurations of truth coexist across the range of South African prison diaries, often even in the same text. For a writer like Albie Sachs, to speak the truth implies a scrupulous commitment to memory, a painstaking devotion to rendering every detail of his life in prison, even those that cast him in a less than heroic light. In other words, his memoir is properly speaking *confessional* in the traditional sense that one might apply to Rousseau's *Confessions*. His autobiography relies on describing the vicissitudes of the narrating self in such detail that he emerges from the text as absolutely individualised: what his text strives for is a form of self-presence. At the end of his memoir, he indicates his reason for writing about his time in gaol:

I must record my story as accurately and honestly as I can. Then should they take me in again I will know that there is something of me outside which will continue to exist whatever they do to me. (Sachs 285)

For Sachs, the autobiography is *something of himself*; an external repository for his subjectivity which is tasked with surviving the prison. To recast this in Alain Badiou's terms, we could say that Sachs's self-presence is "supernumerary" to the situation of the prison: the prison relies, for its operation, on the systematic erosion of Sachs's ability to sustain a realistic narrative of self, to record his experiences in the interest of survival, to strive towards a coherent and meaningful sense of self-presence. From the point of view of the prison, such a "full" subjectivity would obviate its interrogative function as well as, more generally, its "reformatory" ideal: in the Benthamite prison, the inmate is removed from his or her old symbolic universe precisely so that he or she can be reborn in a new symbolic constellation.

The moment Sachs arrives in prison, he draws a map of the gaol on the wall, together with his initials. One could assert that this constitutes a zero-point autobiography: the location of a subject in space under the sign of a proper name.⁵ The final autobiography is simply an extended iteration of these first desperate marks. At a certain point, he realises that it is possible to write on a piece of cardboard with a tube of tomato-flavoured cheese that he was allowed to keep. With great labour, he uses the cheese to try to record the details of his life in gaol:

⁵ By "zero-point" autobiography, I mean an autobiography in its most irreducible form.

It is nearly five o'clock. At a quarter past five it will be time to try to write with the cheese. I must think of a few key words: *Caterpillar*, if they do discover my writing they will never know what I am referring to. *Song* – that will help me to remember my singing, and *Always*. What else is there? I must not forget the policemen, what they were like. I can write *Cops*. It is getting darker now and cooler. I stand up, reach for my long pants and jersey and put them on. Back between the blankets I try to remember what I had been thinking about. It had something to do with my next activity. Now what was that? It was not draughts... oh yes, now I remember, it will be writing with cheese. I was thinking of words. What were those words again? It does not matter, they will come back to me later. Perhaps I will not be able to write at all. (Sachs 75)

This description illustrates the material and psychological exertion that attends on even the most elementary attempts to structure and record memory in prison, especially in solitary confinement. When Sachs is finally allowed a pen and paper because of a court judgement, he is at first reduced to child-like, idiosyncratic scribbling. “[T]here is an unseen rein holding my hand in check,” he comments, “stopping it from crossing the page in the bold, sweeping movements that would more accurately represent the conscious excitement of my mind” (160).

The point is that the prison relentlessly interposes itself between consciousness and expression, destroying the very matrix that sustains even simple recollections. Sachs’s

diligent attempts to hold onto the events of his life in conditions so adversarial to the technologies of memory are in fact momentarily courageous. What he manages to sustain, resulting in the final published autobiography, is a loyalty towards truth: not in the sense of a determinate, transcendent and universal truth-category, but in a rather different way to the truth as the uncountable exception that the prison must exclude in order to exist. To state it differently, Sachs insists on counting, and in the process evoking, a presence that exists only as an impossibility or an *absence* in the logic of the prison: the prison's organisation of knowledge relies on the exclusion of a coherent inner life and a carefully recorded personal history.

The popular poststructuralist dismissal of the "metaphysics of presence" that supposedly underpin confessional autobiographies, epitomised by Paul De Man's call to "deface" this most questionable of literary genres (De Man 67-81), ignores the existence of contexts where the production of self-presence can work to displace an inflexible and restrictive system of knowledge, rather than to "normalise" a "transparent self" in the name of a purportedly Cartesian subjectivity.⁶

In contrast to Sachs, a writer like Caesarina Makhoere does not seem overtly concerned with the specificity of personal recollection. Her voice is more properly a *representative* voice. In her Postscript to *In Prison Under Apartheid*, she states:

⁶ In fact, the Cartesian model of subjectivity, which underpins the logic of solitary confinement, becomes in a certain sense the very site of the most dire threat to this same logic. In other words, Sachs's fidelity to the faithful rendition of self is simultaneously premised on the philosophy that produced his particular form of imprisonment *and* a manifestation its own aporic internal limit – a point that is really consonant with De Man's project.

We learned some lessons in their prisons. They thought they could attack us: they failed. We first learned that we could win against them. Even with nothing; even with only our hands and our comradeship and our determination, we could defeat them. We have faced their viciousness before and won. (120-121)

Here the self who narrates speaks not only as an “I”, but also as a “we” (and, of course, to an “us”). Makhoere consciously ignores the dimension of the *specificity* traditionally associated with the memoir form in order to act as witness to a collective event. What she instates in the space of the prison is really a narrative of a generation, rather than a confessional record of private insecurities, setbacks, triumphs and so on. In Leigh Gilmore’s words, she utilises the opportunity presented by the autobiography to present herself as a subject who stands for others (“Limit Cases” 129). Makhoere’s major aim is not to be recognised in her narrative – it is for her readers to recognise their *own* experience in her narrative, either literally or potentially, often through the modality of the shared principles of the post-1976 Black Consciousness movement. What characterises her memoir is *fidelity to the signifier of “the struggle”*, her insistence on the existence of such a category, with its own demarcated history and value system.

One of the characteristics of the apartheid state and its media was that it simply discounted the existence of a mass uprising against its laws. Where evidence of the anti-apartheid struggle was not banned, it was localised and counted as random

irruptions of irrationality in a generally well-ordered and benign state. Political prisoners were never *overtly* counted as a separate category in public discourse: the official narrative tried to represent them as a category of criminal who engaged in anti-social activity for personal gain or as a consequence of keeping “bad company”. The Amnesty International report on political imprisonment in South Africa, released in 1978, notes:

Political prisoners have no special status, and from time to time, Government ministers and senior police officials have even denied the existence of this identifiable group of political prisoners, claiming rather that those convicted under security laws such as the Terrorism Act and Sabotage Act are merely criminal offenders. In April 1977, for example, Deputy Commissioner of Prisons, Major General Jannie Roux, was reported to have told a group of South African and foreign journalists, ‘There are no political prisoners on Robben Island. They have all been convicted of criminal offences.’ (78-79)

Obvious public signs of a popular insurrection were ascribed to “black on black violence”, random acts of terrorism, and so on. Evidence of a systematic state response to revolutionary activity – brutal acts of torture and the existence of death squads – were explained through reference to “rogue elements” in an otherwise law-abiding and respectful police force.

When Makhoere opens her memoir with the Freedom Charter, and organises even the most minute and apparently unrelated events under the sign of the struggle, she effectively introduces a frame of understanding that cannot be accommodated by the state. To use Badiou's terms: until the disparate series of events that constitute the struggle are *named* as "the struggle", they remain simply the innumerable multiple of a sequence of events that belong to a certain historical frame. Makhoere's autobiography relates precisely such a multiple sequence, but she erects "the struggle" as pivotal self-relating concept, thereby simultaneously *producing* the struggle as a historical event and making "the struggle" a central term of the struggle itself. The naming of the struggle is properly speaking an *event*:

The event is thus clearly the multiple which both presents its entire site, and, by means of the pure signifier of itself immanent to its own multiple, manages to present the presentation itself, that is, the one of the infinite multiple that it is.

(Badiou 180)

By presenting itself as "evental site" which contains its own inaugural act of naming, Makhoere's struggle autobiography insists on a form of understanding that is unnamed and unnamable in the site of apartheid. In his article "Chronotypes of the Self", Schalkwyk claims that Makhoere's discourse is underpinned by "an unshakeable conception of moral order" ("Chronotypes" 33). This conception not only allows Makhoere a stable speaking position, but is strictly speaking a historically located

paradigm that literally cannot exist in the same space as the ideology of apartheid: its erasure is one of the ontological conditions for the existence of apartheid ideology.

For the reader of Makhoere's autobiography, this implies that the event that she describes appears as such, to use Slavoj Žižek's phrasing, "only to those who recognize themselves in its call" (*Parallax View* 167). For a reader who does not see the replacement of normal prison windows with punctured steel plates as an example of the brutality of apartheid in general, or the hunger strike that results from this action as a part of the broader struggle against apartheid (Makhoere 40-42), such an episode remains simply an anecdote about the harshness of prison life and prisoners' attempts to secure better living conditions. In such a reading, Makhoere's references to the lack of democracy in South Africa (41) simply seem supernumerary, a kind of ideological noise that interrupts the mimetic narrative.

Makhoere's fidelity to the truth, in other words, relates not specifically to the faithful recording of experience (as in the case of Sachs), but to the faithful recuperation of experience to a revolutionary event. The unifying signifier of struggle and the insistence on recognition and identification produces a more stable narrative subjectivity in Makhoere than in Sachs, who is concerned precisely with recording in intimate detail the flux of consciousness and the erosion of self in prison.

Finally, there is a genre of prison autobiography – increasingly popular after the 1980s – that has no interest in the kind of fidelity to truth described above. These would include, for instance, Jan Coetzee’s *Plain Tales From Robben Island* (2000), a collection of interviews with former political prisoners on Robben Island. This text serves to add to the new democratic dispensation’s archive of historical life narratives, and strives to provide an inclusive and factually accurate picture of past events. Simultaneously, it relies heavily on a teleological understanding of the past as a site of tribulation and strife that opens to a democratic, multi-cultural present: in other words, it adds to a dominant post-apartheid understanding of struggle history without introducing substantially new or disquieting frames for understanding subjectivity or nationhood. Speaking of the transformation of Robben Island into a heritage site, Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph notes that the divorce of the island from its historical function allows it to begin functioning as a site where the past can be rendered intelligible and distinguished from the present:

As an unlived space in the present, the island and its historical representations can be domesticated; its spaces and its narratives are packaged all the more as a foreclosed past. (200)

Similarly, some more recent prison autobiographies are located under the “unlived” or empty signifiers of the struggle, democracy and so on, and serve ultimately to render the past as something *distinct* from the present but also wholly *intelligible* in the

present. Such memoirs might exercise commitment to a very broadly understood factual truth, but not to truth as a locus of undecidability and radical transformation.

To draw these kinds of distinctions is of course not to suggest that all prison autobiographies can be firmly categorised in terms of their loyalties and obligations. Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, for instance, is born out of multiple contexts and addresses itself to a range of objectives. To use Philippe Lejeune's phrase, the exact delimitations of the pronouns in its "autobiographical pact" remain uncertain: if an autobiography draws up an implicit pact with the reader that the narrating "I" is identical to the author on the cover, and that the narrative refers to a real person's existence and personality (14), the exact nature and context of the "I" that produces *Long Walk to Freedom* is never entirely decided. Mandela speaks simultaneously as an individual compelled to record the facts of his life and the history of his personality in a situation that denies the legitimacy of a black person's experience, as a subject-instrument in the service of freedom, and as a venerable leader who needs to consolidate a new state and translate his personal experiences into a kind of parable to render recent South African history intelligible. In the text, the signifier that binds together these different texts is Mandela's "missing manuscript": the original version of the autobiography, written under the most difficult circumstances on Robben Island and buried in the prison courtyard. As David Schalkwyk points out,

A Long Walk to Freedom displaces or acts as a substitute for the original, which, unlike the later work, was forged in the actual conditions of incarceration. The later memoir thus represses or suppresses the former. It is a product of a different time, changed circumstances, even altered authors. (“Mandela’s ‘Missing’ Manuscript” 207)

Whether the original manuscript is in fact significantly different from the canonised autobiography is immaterial: the fact that its existence is noted in the final text effectively produces a mark of displacement that compels us to read *Long Walk to Freedom* as a substitute text. If we are the intended readers of this text, we might not have been the intended readers of the original. If Mandela’s commitment in the text is to the consolidation of a peaceful state, the original was probably committed to the overthrow of the state. If the one text explains the present in terms of the past, the other is located in a past where our present is an imagined Utopian future. If the one defers to the Western publishing industry’s obsession with the “lives and loves” of exceptional individuals (even if only in its packaging and marketing), the original was unmediated by such economic concerns. The fact that *Long Walk to Freedom* is essentially a repetition, and marks itself as such, is a symptom of a provisional and variable fidelity.

If, as this thesis contends, the prison narrative is always in some sense related to the prison’s modes of interpellation, the obvious question arises: how do we understand *resistance* in the prison memoir? If prison *produces* subjectivities, to what extent does

it produce and contain resistance as well? This remains one of the key questions of this thesis. Indeed, one of its aims is precisely to theorise, in a highly contextualised way, the relationship between a text and its base.

In particular, I would like to steer clear of the tendency to read every prison voice as authentically transgressive. Broadly speaking, this critical propensity reflects a larger academic obsession with marginality and subversion which has become an almost meaningless end in itself: every second text, it seems, is bursting with radically dissident voices, poses profound questions to the status quo, and so on. In fact, this preoccupation with subversion has become so normative in the current global production of knowledge in the humanities that one should ask whether it might not in fact be *sustaining* rather than challenging dominant relations of power. Prison literature, and particularly political prison literature, provides a narrating voice that is so patently in revolt, so effortlessly subsumable to the current hegemonic critical attitude, that it becomes particularly easy to ignore not only the ways in which these texts' emancipatory projects in fact remain unrealised, but also to become blind to the genuinely revolutionary moments in these memoirs.

However, following Althusser, it is also necessary to guard against a kind of Hegelian "expressive causality" where the autobiographical text is seen as a mere expression of its social base. While one might associate such a reading with a Lukácsian Marxist tradition (as in *History and Class Consciousness*), Foucault's brand of historicism also

sometimes collapses into a similar homologising logic: the governing episteme produces subjectivities, discursive practices, and resistances that ultimately mirror and sustain the sign-system they derive from. Even the most cursory reading of South African political autobiographies will belie such an understanding: the friction between the apartheid episteme and the voices that emerge during this historical juncture evidence an unpredictable wave of historical becoming that simply cannot be described as the self-sustaining processes of subjectivation of apartheid discourse.

The understanding of resistance that is developed throughout this thesis can be approached first of all by way of Frederic Jameson's notion of *mediation*. Jameson asks a similar question to the one posed above in relation to resistance in the prison autobiography:

... is the text a free-floating object in its own right, or does it 'reflect' some context or ground, and in that case does it simply replicate the latter ideologically, or does it possess some autonomous force in which it could also be seen as negating that context? (*Political Unconscious* 38)

Jameson returns to the Althusserian insistence on the "relative autonomy" of the various levels of society – economic, political, juridicial, ideological and cultural – in order to reject the idea that each level simply expresses the other. However, unlike Althusser, Jameson recuperates the dialectical idea of mediation, which Althusser saw

as a form of unreflected immediacy, where one level simply folds directly into another.

Jameson notes:

To describe mediation as the strategic and local invention of a code which can be used about two distinct phenomena does not imply any obligation for the same message to be transmitted in two cases; to put it another way, one cannot enumerate the differences between things except against the background of some more general identity. Mediation undertakes to establish this initial identity, against which then – but only then – local identification or differentiation can be registered. (*Political Unconscious* 42)

In other words, a particular superstructural phenomenon would be *related* to its material base, the two levels are interdependent, but the relationship is understood in terms of *difference* in an overall structure rather than in terms of an immediate structural homology or parallelism.

In the case of prison writing, one could claim that the prison space *per se* connects the ideological and material realities of prison to the cultural forms that arise in the penal space, including those forms that explicitly reject the prison and its entire mode of production. In fact, the prison memoir as a form of resistance can be read simultaneously as a kind of reflection of the prison's subjectivation and as a symbolic

compensation for the privations of life in prison, for the impossible poverty of the kinds of identities that it offers to its subjects.

The “relative autonomy” of the prison memoir from its object and *raison d’être* relates specifically to the kinds knowledges and political beliefs that prisoners bring with them to prison, to the context of the production of the memoirs, and ultimately to the operation of the sign system itself, which would include considerations of genre, syntax and the play of difference intrinsic to language. The apartheid prison’s incessant attempts to render autobiographical writing impossible, and in fact its general (and futile) hostility towards anything resembling a prisoners’ culture, evidence its awareness of and deeply rooted animosity towards the relative autonomy of prisoners’ cultural production. Indeed, the prison often seems dedicated precisely to the erasure specifically of literary culture. As some of the examples above illustrate, even the simplest attempt to record experience demands a remarkable practical and psychological resourcefulness, and can often only be successfully concluded outside its walls, sometimes only after many years of psychological readjustment.

While it would therefore be true to say that the prison memoir emanates from the prison, and draws on its organisation of space and its understandings of identity, it is also true that the prison memoir compensates for, transcodes and displaces the prison. At this point, however, one should proceed with caution. If the prison produces compensatory voices – in other words, if the reality of life in prison produces a utopian

vision of a free society, a dream of personal freedom, a certain militant outrage, this is in fact not entirely incommensurate with the ideological aim of a “reformatory” penal institution – or, to put it differently, such a response *utilises* a demand that is in fact made by the prison itself. In short, a prison functions because it produces, through calculated deprivation, a desire for fundamental human needs: community, personal liberty, dignity, culture and belonging. The efficiency of the discipline of the prison rests on the production of these desires. In Hugh Lewin’s *Bandiet*, Lewin describes an incident in Pretoria Central in the 1960s. A black prisoner who is condemned to death walks through a central Hall that has been designated a non-smoking area. The prisoner lights a cigarette and is reprimanded:

Jonker advanced towards him, shouting: ‘Jy rook, kaffir, jy rook/You’re smoking, kaffir, smoking! – and pointed a quivering finger at the infidel. All the weight of Jonker’s authority went into that gesture: he could charge the culprit; he could take his meals, his privileges; put him in solitary, get a black mark on his record. He could point a finger at him and shout ‘kaffir!’ The young black man smiled at Jonker and blew a puff of smoke into his furious face. Then he brushed him aside and walked off with his guard to his visit. Jonker returned to his box and switched off the light. We could laugh quietly. (113)

The warder’s authority becomes completely meaningless because in this instance freedom, or the dream of freedom, can no longer be harnessed to the prison’s

disciplinary apparatus. The penal institution's coercive and interpellative power is rooted in the production of a future-directed fantasy of liberty – a fantasy that has no value for a man who is condemned to death. In other words, the *absence* of a utopian narrative of freedom incapacitates the everyday disciplinary authority of the prison, while its *presence* allows the prison at least a minimal power over its subjects. When we speak of a “compensatory” discourse, it is therefore necessary to understand that such a desiring discourse is not *per se* inimical to the prison's mode of operation, even though it is antagonistic to the penal space. In the same way that the prison works by producing an Inside that is continually haunted by its self-generated opposite, the Outside, the existence and authority of the prison are intimately conjoined to the voices that seek to displace it. This is not to say that oppositional voices are somehow perfectly contained by the way the prison effects power, but to suggest that the “relative autonomy” of the accounts of the self born in prison are, indeed, *relative* to the prison – they are related to it, even if they do not function as mute reflections of the prison's ascendancy.

To disentangle the voices that speak from prison from the prison's modes of understanding and of exercising power is in many ways an impossible task. However, this thesis suggests that beyond the notion of a “relative autonomy”, or perhaps inherent to and submerged in this concept, such an “impossible” negation of the grounds of self-relation in fact *constitute* the subject. In the prison memoir, we find moments in the construction of self that entirely obliterate the prison's epistemology – not because the

“self” that speaks manages to smuggle some external ideological arsenal into gaol, but because the prison itself produces a sign, a ritual, a demand, that begins to function in an entirely unpredictable and self-annihilating way. To be clear: this is not a kind of slow deconstructive displacement of the prison’s forms of address *qua* the grain of the autobiographical voice, but the sudden and radical disruption of the entire cultural, philosophical and ideological underpinning of the prison and the carceral society that it reflects and embodies. Such an “impossible” revolutionary element is what Lacan refers to as the Real, and what Badiou develops under the rubric of the *event*. My argument in this thesis rests on the assumption that the prison, as an extreme, concentrated form of a historically situated cultural moment, produced subjects both intimately connected to the penal space and, at least potentially, in excess to it – not necessarily because these subjects were “bigger” than the prison, but because the prison, like any ideological apparatus, was *in excess to itself*. To talk about certain continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid subjectivities is therefore not to suggest some seamless historical connection, but to suggest that *especially* the most profoundly altered subjectivities, the most revolutionary historical moments, are in fact born out of a kind of impasse, a misfired signifier, a sudden aporetic crisis, in a previous and superseded constellation of world-views.

I attempt to provide examples of this tricky notion throughout the thesis. In particular, the third chapter, “On Robben Island”, looks at Mandela’s description in *Long Walk to Freedom* of his decision to enter into negotiations with the apartheid government as an

example of such an undecidable event. However, at this point another small example might be appropriate to clarify some of the discussion in subsequent chapters. In 1966, Mmutlanyane Mogoba was held in solitary confinement for his part in writing an account of conditions on Robben Island and trying to smuggle it out to be published in *The Cape Times* and *Cape Argus* newspapers. While he was in the isolation cell, he read a booklet called *The Human Christ* that Dennis Brutus managed to pass on to him and experienced a religious conversion. When he returned to the general cells, his comrades responded to his new beliefs with some incredulity:

They could not begin to understand my language – ‘met Jesus in the cell!’ or ‘had a conversion’ or ‘a call to the ministry’. What is all this stuff? They asked. Was this not a madness or a betrayal of the struggle? I tried to explain that I had not changed my political views. On the contrary, I was more committed than ever to the liberation struggle – only perhaps purified for the struggle. Like the Israelites in captivity in Egypt, I now felt that God was on our side – a great feeling for one involved in a struggle against impossible odds or against a strong and ruthless regime. (Mogoba 51)

The “madness” that Mogoba returned with acted simultaneously to alienate him from his political allies – he returned from solitary confinement individualised in a way that they found unintelligible, even potentially traitorous – but also to galvanise his commitment to the struggle. His political views remained unchanged on the surface, yet

they also became suffused with a kind of ineffable excess that allowed him to persist in the struggle against apartheid despite the sense of hopelessness that his comrades sometimes expressed. Ultimately, Mogoba articulates his conversion on Robben Island to the birth of a democratic nation:

But just as God had moved in his own way as I was beaten in the ‘stockade’ of Robben Island, so he moved in his mysterious way to use men and women of God to contribute to the foundation of peace in a changed, beloved country. (78)

The irony of this situation is of course that, at a certain level, Mogoba realises exactly the traditional Christian-inflected reformatory ideal of the Enlightenment prison. The tableau is almost a sentimental cliché: the criminal alone in his cell with only the (hard-won) Bible and his conscience for company, the shaft of moonlight in the depths of the night, the dramatic conversion, and the amazement of his unconverted companions. Simultaneously, the effect is the exact *opposite* of what the prison intended: suddenly a powerful, “mysterious” or irrational force experienced as both immanent to and in excess of ideology stabilises and strengthens the prisoner’s revolutionary fervour; the deeply personal, individual encounter of an individual with his own interiority is directly related to a collective insurgency and a reborn national identity. The Bible, in other words, is absolutely *necessary* to the “reformatory” prison’s mode of operation, its self-justification and the legitimacy of its claim over the interior life of its subjects. Simultaneously, in this instance, it starts to act as a marker of the very limits of the

ideological reach of the prison, a testimony to its *failure* to subjectivate, producing a kind of hard kernel of subjectivity that refuses in a disturbing way to be assimilated into the symbolic of the prison or the apartheid state.

Of course, there is nothing new to the idea that a sacred cultural text begins to undermine the field it is supposed to stabilise, as Homi Bhabha reminds us in his discussion of 19th century hybridity and the Bible in India in “Signs Taken for Wonders”. In his *Jail Diary*, Albie Sachs recounts his long Bible-reading sessions and comes to the strange realisation that, as a Jew, he is more “Christian” than his Christian fundamentalist station commander and confidant:

It is ironical that I, the Jew, am more interested in the later prophets, especially Isaiah, and in the Christian doctrine of love, whereas he, the Christian, is obsessed with the tribal nationalism and fierce hatreds of the early Jews. Quite clearly he regards Israelites as being merely the precursors in history of the Afrikaners, who after their long sojourn in the desert have at last entered the land of milk and honey. (137)

Sachs’s realisation that he is always already a Christian, despite being a Jew, is entirely consonant with a specific reformatory ideal that characterises the modern prison space (although of course his acerbic irony also maintains a crucial distance from this ideological mechanism). Nevertheless, his perfectly logical corollary insight into the

obverse truth of the situation, that his captors are always already Jewish, despite being Christians, delegitimises the entire moral claim on which the prison and the apartheid state attempts to base its authority. In short, his prolonged forced encounter with the Bible allows Sachs to obtain a penetrating insight into his captors' psychology and motivation, as well as to identify an instance of textual *repression* or denial that is essential to the constitution of their identity.

In a more mechanical way, Hugh Lewin, like many other prisoners, simply uses the Bible as a kind of palimpsest to record a secret diary, which later becomes the source for his published autobiography. Each page of the Bible represents one day inside prison, and events are recorded in minuscule text between the lines of Bible verses (Lewin 193-196). The choice of the Bible is based on the fact that it is the text least likely to be confiscated by prison officials. In this way, the Bible begins to function as a kind of Trojan horse that is used to convey experience from the world inside to the world outside.

In other words, the prison is almost compelled to allow prisoners access to the Bible – it is immanent to its coercive (and self-exculpating) project – but at the same time, the Bible is potentially a supernumerary element, a foreign text that constantly threatens to disrupt processes of interpellation in the penal space. As such, it participates in the logic of the event, producing meaning and realigning subject-positions in a completely unpredictable way. Slavoj Žižek notes:

The undecidability of the Event thus means that an Event does not possess any ontological guarantee: it cannot be reduced to (or deduced, generated from) a (previous) Situation: it emerges 'out of nothing' (the Nothing which was the ontological truth of the previous situation). (*Ticklish Subject* 136)

There is, in other words, no way to predict the radical ontological displacement effected through reference to the Bible in terms of the logic of the penitentiary itself.

In the case of the radical conversion experience described by Mogoba, it is of course necessary to ask the rather gauche question: how do we know he is telling the truth? In the sense that Robben Island has become, in the post-apartheid moment, a signifier that confers weight and significance to experience, is it not possible that Mogoba has firmly located his conversion as an event that took place on Robben Island, whereas the truth of his assumption of a Christian identity might be more complex and diffuse? What is at stake in this question is really the entire project of reading the prison itself as an important ground of self-relation, rather than as a mythical space invoked through and mediated by post-apartheid narratives about hardship, survival and triumph. Can we really talk about the prison itself providing the Bible as an "undecidable", excessive element that helps to structure narrative identity – which means adhering to the autobiographical pact in a rather narrow and literal way – or should we more properly

consider it as at least potentially an anachronistic textual import, a signifier from/of a future identity, drawing on a context that has little to do with the realities of prison life?

The wager that this thesis makes is to claim that *it does not matter* if the conversion experience is mapped onto the description of life on Robben Island in the service of some historically distant agenda: it is *still* the prison itself which provides the term. In other words, the fact that Mogoba returns to the classic signifiers of solitary confinement – the isolated subject, the small cell and the Bible – in order to find the undecidable event that ultimately brings about an entirely new order demonstrates the sense in which the new understands itself, and through self-understanding constitutes itself, as the result of a curvature of the symbolic surface of the old. Post-apartheid subjectivities are rhetorically constructed out of the experience of the carceral apartheid state: properly speaking, resistance in the prison memoir is grounded in an understanding of a historical moment – past, present or future – as potentially open to the disruptive power of a revolutionary event. As one of the most potent instruments of apartheid ideology, the prison provides the symbolic frame that must be superseded for a post-apartheid identity to emerge, and that emergence is rhetorically constructed through reference to the prison.

In order to approach the wide range of South African prison diaries, this thesis generally adopts a thematic rather than a chronological approach, returning frequently to the theoretical concerns outlined above. The primary interest of the thesis is not

really to provide a historical outline of conditions in South African prisons, but to explore an interrelated range of perspectives on the relationship between autobiographical self-construction and the prison as total institution. Even so, it is important to understand that some important historical changes occurred in terms of the conditions of imprisonment and the legal processes governing the imprisonment of political prisoners, particularly between 1963 and 1994.

The passing of the General Law Amendment Act in 1963, which allowed for detention without trial for an extendable period of ninety days, effectively removed even the appearance of legality from the process of arrest and imprisonment. People arrested under the Ninety-Day Detention Law had no definite prospect of a trial, no certainty about their release date, had no access to a lawyer, were not protected against self-incrimination, and were kept in solitary confinement under conditions that were fairly arbitrarily determined by the police. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela notes:

The law helped to transform the country into a police state; no dictator could covet more power than the Ninety-Day Detention Law gave to the authorities. As a result, the police became more savage: prisoners were routinely beaten and we soon heard reports of electric shock, suffocation and other forms of torture.

(402)

As the armed struggle escalated, so did illegal police activity – torture, kidnappings and murders in detention became increasingly commonplace. The power of the courts diminished throughout this period, especially with the formation of P.W. Botha’s State Security Council and the National Security Management System, both nefarious, secretive organisations designed to circumvent the authority of cabinet and the judiciary while combating political activism. In the 1980s, the military became increasingly involved in repressing political uprising and performing functions until then associated with the police. The South African Defense Force started to restructure itself in order to carry out its new counter-insurgency role, creating new units specifically to fulfill “unconventional” functions. As Jacques Pauw notes,

[t]he Rhodesian war was a valuable source of manpower for the SADF’s special units, especially after Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980, when large numbers of Selous Scouts joined the SADF. It was out of this realm that specialised military units were born to deal with the revolutionary onslaught against South Africa. Highly trained commandos hunted down the enemy, blew up strategic installations and assassinated ANC members. Targets, aside from military, included civilians and members of the administrative and political structures of the ANC, PAC and Swapo. As the military began to play an increasingly aggressive role, the traditional divide between the military and the police became blurred around dealings with ANC activities. (124-125)

In *And Night Fell*, Molefe Pheto describes something of the political climate during this time, and its psychological effects on activists, their friends and family:

Many people had disappeared and nothing was heard from them again except perhaps by the immediate relatives, who in most cases 'preferred' to keep things quiet, in the hope that they were easing the hardships of the disappeared detainee. After some such detention, everything would return to 'normal', and life would go on. 'Who's next?' would be on everyone's lips. We would live in the ghetto, following our usual habits, waiting in silence, horror-stricken, hoping all the same to hear more news of the detainee, if we were lucky, because no one knew what happened as soon as one of us was taken away and locked behind those massive prison doors. Detention in South Africa is incommunicado... Detainees live and survive on suspension, tension and hope. The cut-off is as complete as a black night. Many break down not out of cowardice, but out of concern for their loved ones left to fend for themselves.

(18)

In addition to political prisoners who had been charged and sentenced by the courts, a swelling number of prisoners were effectively deprived of even the most rudimentary rights – by the 1980s, they were routinely held in secret, tortured and murdered. In

1985 alone, for instance, Murphy Morobe of the United Democratic Front reported that 8000 United Democratic Front members had been detained, and that most of their national and regional executives had disappeared, been murdered or fled into exile (Davenport and Saunders 510). While official conditions of imprisonment might have improved in certain instances, especially after Harold Strachan published a series of articles in the *Rand Daily Mail* in 1965 about conditions in South African prisons,⁷ such changes seem almost meaningless when seen in the context of increased Security Police entitlement and brutality.

Two prison worlds were becoming increasingly disparate by the 1970s: one “official”, comprised of people who had been charged, found guilty in a court and sentenced by a judge, and another, sinister “unofficial” world of prisoners who had simply disappeared from society – many of whom never resurfaced. The notorious Vlakplaas Security Police unit, tasked in the 1980s with capturing and arresting activists, made almost no official arrests, despite being heavily funded by the government. This is because its real job, under the leadership of Dirk Coetzee, was to train a clandestine hit squad, who carried out political assassinations, particularly barbarous acts of torture and Nazi-like medical experiments on prisoners. No written record of these activities existed at the time. As Antjie Krog notes in *Country of my Skull*:

⁷ As Hugh Lewin notes, “[t]he Strachan articles... revolutionized the entire South African prison service, breaking open for the first time what had in fact become a secret society, subject to no sanctions beyond itself... Everything related to prison reform in South Africa is post-Strachan” (73).

The orders were given orally, one-to-one. No diaries, no written reports.

Amongst ourselves, says Coetzee, we developed our own body language. The wink of an eye, the nod of a head, could spell someone's end. (60)

Because the real activities at Vlakplaas enjoyed no official existence, voices that could comment on or describe their experience of this death farm were ruthlessly silenced.

Descriptions of more "official" imprisonment in the 1980s were haunted by these silences: activists were aware of the existence of places like Vlakplaas, and suspected that death squads existed, but their exact nature and intention remained open to speculation. It was really only during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings from 1996-1998 that detailed stories about the hit squads and activities at Vlakplaas emerged, often told by the perpetrators. Simultaneously, stories were filtering back into the country about terrible conditions of detention and torture in the African National Congress's Quatro camp in Angola: another shadowy story in South Africa that few people are prepared to discuss even at the present moment.

As the apartheid state turned to more and more desperate and illegal activities in its attempts to curb political change, and as the possibility of imprisonment became a pervasive reality for even moderate political campaigners, activists were learning more from one another about conditions of imprisonment and arriving in prison with a kind of psychological preparedness and ideological resolve that earlier prisoners were not really equipped with. The consequences of these historical changes are referred to

throughout the thesis, even though they do not form the basis on which the material is organised.

Notwithstanding the theme-oriented structure of the thesis, the second chapter deals with the earliest memoir, and also the only one that has no relationship with activism under apartheid – Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*. When Bosman was imprisoned for murder in 1926, the idea of the prison as “total institution” was relatively new in South Africa. Pretoria Central, where Bosman was held for most of his sentence, was one of the first institutions designed along “modern” lines: prisoners were placed under constant surveillance, an institutionalised, military-like discipline characterised day-to-day life, a nuanced classification system was used to separate, punish and reward different classes of prisoners, the outside world was all but completely shut out, “scientific” ideas about diet and exercise were applied to prisoners and a nominal idea of “reform” became articulated with the prison’s function. With the completion of Pretoria Central, the South African prison completed its shift in focus from corporeal deprivation and punishment to the subjective interiority of prisoners: instead of publicly shaming and punishing disruptive members of society, the prison started to regard itself as analogous to a *school*, an institution for inculcating acceptable behaviour and guiding the reformation of consciousness. In many ways, Bosman’s prison memoir, published almost two decades after he was imprisoned, forms the blueprint for subsequent gaol diaries: it clears a particular discursive space in South African literature, and marks the first real encounter between the forms of interpellation

of the modern prison in South Africa and the narrative forms of autobiographical writing. Its date of publication, 1949, also happens to follow a year after the National Party's ascension to power, so it is also poised at a consequential historical instant in South African history: at this moment, South African society began its transformation into a form of a police state, with the prison at the very heart of its strategies of coercion and control. This chapter explores some of the ways in which the prison as total institution lends itself to narrative, and some of the consequences and problematics of rendering the self in such a context.

The third chapter uses Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1996) as central text, although reference is also made to Moses Dlamini's *Hell Hole, Robben Island* (1984), D.M. Zwelonkes's *Robben Island* (1989), Indres Naidoo's *Island in Chains*, Michael Dingake's *My Fight Against Apartheid* (1987) and a few other memoirs, many of them now out of print. The aim of this chapter is to examine representations of self and community on Robben Island, South Africa's most important and mythologised apartheid prison, and the one that has been most essential to the production of the image of Nelson Mandela in the global popular imagination. Part of the aim of the chapter is to highlight the diversity of experience on the island, and to take note of the ways in which this diversity is registered in autobiographical accounts. A related aim is to examine the kinds of silences, exclusions and repressions that attend on the production of Robben Island identity. These prohibitions and ellipses are related to the construction of a new hegemonic national identity, located in a specific ideological and

ethical matrix, with Robben Island as an authoritative and stabilising point of reference. In this way, the third chapter extends the discussion of the nature of the modern South African prison to suggest that this “modernity” was at best fractured, uneven and diverse, and also to suggest that the prison autobiography became a template for the production of national identities: even now, Robben Island functions as a stand-in for nation and national history.

The fact that Robben Island was, in addition to being a black prison, also an all-male prison, obviously creates a further complication to its important representative function: one of the signal characteristics of discussions about prison identity in South Africa is the occlusion of women’s voices and experience. In many ways, the prison space in South Africa, as elsewhere, is regarded as a *male* space, and the subjectivities that it produces are regarded as highly masculine. To be a prisoner, for many autobiographers, activists, commentators and penal functionaries, means to be a man. The fourth chapter, then, looks at women activists who were imprisoned under apartheid, and considers the ways in which the apartheid prison engaged femininity and constructed it as a special category, an anxiety-provoking supplement to the universalised masculinity of prisoners. The construction and experience of femininity in prison is afforded a separate chapter for two reasons. Firstly, women were compelled by the prison to occupy a separate material space, with distinct rituals and preoccupations. In other words, the logic of this chapter follows the logic of the prison’s arrangement of space (as is generally the case with the chapter divisions of the thesis). Secondly, the prison’s

ambivalent insistence on and simultaneous effacement of the femininity of women prisoners obliged prison autobiographies written by women to foreground and interrogate the intersection between the performance of gender and the exercise of power in ways that male autobiographical accounts often simply failed to do. The broader question that animates this argument, then, appertains to the production of and experience of gender in the penal institution. Specifically, this discussion is interested in the ways in which feminine roles are expected and enforced by the apartheid prison, but also in how, under certain conditions, the signifiers of femininity start to collect an oppositional force. Prison diaries discussed in this chapter include Ruth First's *117 Days* (1965), Jean Middleton's *Convictions* (1998), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989) and Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *No Child's Play: In Prison Under Apartheid* (1988), and a few others.

One theme that runs throughout the discussion in this thesis relates to the experience of solitude and the desire for community in prison. The fifth chapter identifies the prison's relentless drive to individualise its inmates as the fulcrum of the entire configuration of the penal institution, and relates some of the broader national apartheid- and post-apartheid era tensions around community, communal responsibility and the nature of the individual voice to the prison's deployment of space to separate and to combine people. In particular, in the same way that chapter four considers the raced nature of gender in the apartheid prison, Chapter 5 suggests that race played an important role in the prison's understanding and use of solitude as a mode of domination and control.

The prison's use of solitary confinement allows us a kind of cross-section view of the more abstract social and ideological individualising pressures that existed under apartheid, and particularly to understand how these pressures engaged understandings of race and culture in order to form identities. This chapter revisits earlier discussions in order to elaborate on ideas related to solitude and community in prison, but focuses specifically on Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) as one of the most self-consciously "literary" texts to deal with memories of solitary confinement.

Finally, the last chapter draws on some of the conclusions reached by previous chapters to look briefly at the role of the prison, its rituals and forms of address in the post-apartheid moment. Firstly, it considers the ways in which the post-apartheid prison memoir has become increasingly subsumed by the language of social agencies: psychologically inflected "self-empowerment" writing workshops, and interviews by sociologists and journalists. At the same time, conditions in South African prisons seem to be deteriorating, and government rhetoric around prisons frequently seems uncompromisingly punitive. This chapter asks what is at stake in this simultaneous emergence of more collaborative and less overtly "political" prison memoirs and the relegation of the prison to an increasingly invisible and vilified social space – what are the consequences of this shift in the role of the prison for the production of identity in contemporary South Africa? Jonny Steinberg's exceptional book, *The Number: One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (2004), is used in

this chapter both as an example of a new kind of collaborative prison (auto)biography and as a remarkably astute self-reflexive commentary on the social and historical context that enables and complicates its production. Secondly, the concluding chapter looks at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's appropriation (and even, in some cases, re-enactment) of the processes of interrogation, confession and judgement that played such a powerful oppressive role under apartheid. These acts of repetition can be regarded as both an illustration of the persistent power of a historically established judicial and penal epistemology, and as an attempt to supersede such a penal logic. The ambiguity of the Truth and Reconciliation's mode of operation is related to the central questions of this thesis: how can a social and historical frame give way to new forms of understanding? What is the relationship between narrative identity and its material and ideological ground? When can we term an operation an *event*, and when is it simply the reiteration of established forms of understanding?

The thesis uses a range of terms to describe the various primary texts, including "memoir", "autobiography" and "novel". The exact distinction between especially the first two terms remains hotly debated by scholars in the general field of life writing,⁸ and it is not really the intention of this thesis to enter the debate. Generally, I rely on an understanding of autobiography as a genre that derives from Western Romantic notions of the confessional subject: in autobiographies, the primary focus is on the self-reflexive, individual consciousness of a single author. Autobiographical texts are

⁸ Most notably recently by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography*. See also Helen Buss's *Reproducing the World* and Julie Rak's article "Are Memoirs Autobiography?"

typically carefully researched, and recount an *entire* life rather than *episodes* that illuminate aspects of a personality, a culture, or a larger politico-historical moment (characteristics more closely associated with the memoir). In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson offer a similar distinction, while also drawing attention to the emphasis on intersubjectivity and dialogism in the memoir form:

Whereas autobiography promotes an ‘I’ that shares with confessional discourses an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority, memoirs promote an ‘I’ that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others. The ‘I’ or subjectivity produced in memoirs is externalized and dialogical. (198)

While this thesis attempts a loose adherence to this categorisation, South African prison writing incessantly challenges rigid classification. The apartheid context means that even the most conventionally “autobiographical” texts make reference to social and historical events, and tend to relate the lives of individuals to collective activism. *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, for instance, signals its status as “autobiography” in the title – “true confessions” is a direct reference to the Western canon of confessional autobiographical writing from Augustine to Beckett – even as the text incessantly interrogates the status of both “truth” and “confession”, opting for a memoir-like “telling of a person’s life in terms of an event” (Rak 305). It also includes impressionistic train-of-consciousness digressions, poems, political manifestoes, and so

on. Zwelonke's *Robben Island* is clearly autobiographical (the author establishes this fact in an introductory note), but is presented in fictional form. Bosman gives his prison a fictional name, and invents characters, but bases his memoir closely on his actual experiences, rendering "autobiography", "memoir" and "novel" equally deficient as descriptive nouns. In general, I have opted for "autobiography" as the inclusive term, and used "memoir" and "novel" where I would like to draw attention to particular formal aspects of the texts.

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TWO: BIRTH OF A GENRE: BOSMAN'S *COLD STONE JUG*

In November 1926, Herman Charles Bosman appeared before the Johannesburg Magistrates' Court for the murder of his stepbrother, David Russell. Apparently Bosman had murdered Russell in an argument about closing the window in their shared bedroom. Although the judge characterised the case as "very sad and pathetic" (Gray, *Life Sentence* 120), he found no legal reason to reduce the crime from murder to manslaughter, and sentenced Bosman to death. A few weeks later, the sentence was commuted to ten years' imprisonment, allowing Bosman to be released on probation in 1931. His account of his years in the Pretoria Central prison was published to mixed reviews long after the event, in 1949 – a year after the Nationalist Government came to power in South Africa.

The semi-autobiographical novel, titled *Cold Stone Jug*, was only broadly recognised as a classic of South African literature in the decades to come. In many ways, it cleared the ground for subsequent South African prison writing, both in terms of its disquieting realism¹ and in its anecdotal, non-chronological form.

¹ In fact, censorious reviews of the book at the time of its publication often ignored its humorous aspects and referred to its gratuitous emphasis on the "sordid side of prison life" (*The Rand Daily Mail*) and dismissed it as "unpleasant" and "grotesque" (*The Star*). See Stephen Gray's *Life Sentence* (321-323).

Bosman was really also the first South African prisoner to write about a prison that was designed to be a “total institution” with an explicitly reformatory, rather than a punitive, function. When Bosman was imprisoned in 1926, the Benthamite prison had a history of shorter than thirty years in South Africa. For many South Africans, public executions were still in living memory. At the time, most prisons for whites were still based on military barracks, while prisons for black inmates resembled something between a medieval dungeon and a mine compound. In fact, residues of the compound model have remained prevalent in South African prisons throughout apartheid up to the present day: as Sarah Oppler notes, “remnants of the past are visible in the large communal cells filled with rows of metal bunk beds in which prisoners are housed” (1). Against this background, Pretoria Central was one of the first recognisably “modern” prisons in South Africa:

... the Benthamite concept of the prison as a total institution, in which every facet of the inmate’s daily existence may be controlled until such time as he has changed his attitudes to authority, to work and to the society outside, and where the benefits of literacy training and religious instruction may be inculcated, arrive in Transvaal only with the building of the Fort in Johannesburg (where Bosman was held while awaiting trial), and then with Pretoria Central Prison as the prime example. (Gray, “Introduction” 16)

When Hugh Lewin entered Pretoria Central some decades later as a political prisoner, the institution had hardly changed at all. In *Bandiet*, Lewin notes:

Forty years before we arrived there, Bosman had been sent to Central for murdering his step-brother: condemned to be hanged, he was later reprieved and spent eight years in Cold Stone Jug. He wrote an absorbingly funny book of his experiences at Central – *Cold Stone Jug*, which I read for the first time inside Cold Stone Jug. In forty years, very little had changed. (83)

Lewin's comment invites a number of observations. First, it shows the influence of Bosman's account on subsequent South African prison writers. Lewin's account of Pretoria Central, and his memory of the space, is constructed through self-conscious reference to Bosman's memoir. As much as Lewin inhabits the same prison as Bosman, he also takes up residence in his predecessor's literary form. Second, it shows the extent to which the apartheid state sustained pre-apartheid forms of control and coercion with only small amendments. The apartheid government did not really invent new modalities of discipline and punishment to reflect its new ideological disposition, it simply used the forms of compulsion that it inherited and extended their use dramatically. As the state's actions became more violent and illegal, it sustained a recognisably Benthamite façade that screened the existence of other, more sinister rituals of punishment and oppression: the interrogation room, secret death farms, police holding cells, and so on. It never abandoned the outward show of the reformative

penitentiary: even Robben Island, one of the apartheid state's harshest prisons for black inmates, could be transformed overnight, like a Potemkin village, into a benign rehabilitative institution for the benefit of visitors from the Red Cross. The apartheid government had a particular iniquitous genius for preserving and using the material and ideological resources that it had become heir to on its accession to power. In this sense, Herman Charles Bosman could write about his experience of prison in South Africa in the 1930s in a way that is entirely resonant with the experiences of (mainly white) prisoners throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Bosman's particular ability lies in his adoption of an oral-style narrative form, narrowly associated with a self-consciously organic, artless literary tradition that stretches back to A.W. Drayson, Frederick Boyle and J. Forsyth Ingram,² and inflecting it through an encounter with the institutionalised disciplinary culture of the modern penitentiary. Time in the Benthamite prison bends back on itself: every day is similar to every other day, so that any sense of an extended chronology becomes difficult to sustain. Narrative conventions that rely on continuous linear time, where events unfold in clear historical succession, are inimical to the structure of the modern prison. The oral-style story provides a stylistic technology that can incorporate the experience of space and time in the penitentiary: its use of episodic, anecdotal narrative corresponds to the experience of time in gaol. Moreover, the production of culture in prison is essentially *oral*: prisoners have very limited access to the written word and few opportunities to produce

² See Craig MacKenzie's *The Oral-Style South African Short Story in English* (15-43).

writing, so any concession to mimesis makes it necessary for the autobiographer to find written forms that reproduce oral structures. In this way, two apparently diametrically opposed cultures – the culture of the “fireside tale”, associated with a rural frontier colonial tradition, and the quintessentially modern, soulless culture of the penitentiary, become conjoined in Bosman’s narration. Bosman’s style is in fact characterised by the interpenetration of the “modern”, with its focus on interiority, and its use of irony and ambiguity, and the more traditional, anecdotal and episodic oral-style narrative with its strong emphasis on the situation of telling. In Bosman’s memoir, the prison is a material structure that sustains this interpenetration.

The opening episodes of *Cold Stone Jug* provide a good illustration of the disconcerting movement from humorous, anecdotal narration to complex self-reflexivity that is characteristic of Bosman’s style. In the first chapter of the memoir, Bosman recounts his stay in the condemned cell through a series of droll anecdotes told at the expense of the warders. One particularly dull-witted warder, for instance, is persuaded by Bosman and his cellmate to demonstrate his dancing abilities. While he is prancing about in his stockinged feet, the night head-warder arrives and guffaws at the ridiculous sight. The absurdity of an eruption of laughter in the most serious of places is amplified by the night head-warder’s ridiculous admonition:

‘You condemned men mustn’t laugh so loud... The hard-labour convicts got to sleep. They got to work all day. You two don’t do nothing but smoke cigarettes

all day long and crack jokes. You'll get yourselves in serious trouble if the Governor finds out you keep the whole prison awake night after night, romping about and laughing in the condemned cells.' (Bosman 54)

Humour functions here as counterpoint to and as a barrier against the grim reality of the setting. Bosman's wry wit and intelligence create an illusion of autonomy in an environment that is adversative to the very idea of agency. In this scene – as in many others – Bosman's irony elevates him above the terror of what he describes.

However, Bosman immediately calls into question the very basis of this apparent distance:

We spent much of our waking hours in pulling the warders' legs. We didn't know, then, that we were in actual fact engaged in a time-honoured prison pastime. We didn't know that 'kidding' the warders was a sport regularly indulged in by prison lags, and that this form of recreation had venerable traditions. We didn't know that. We merely followed our natural bent of trying to be funny, and we found, afterwards, that we were all the time conforming to accepted prison custom. (53)

By remarking that a "natural bent" has always already been "prison custom", Bosman makes a central aspect of his style function in a remarkably complex and interesting

way. What appears on the surface as idiosyncratic humour, a form of detachment from the serious reality of penal life, is in reality integrally part of the functioning of the prison. The memoir's incessant production of comic detachment becomes prescribed by the "venerable tradition" of the prison itself: every instance of ironic distance is haunted by the possibility of being, after all, the voice of the prison. The laughter in the condemned cell is not exceptional – it is normal. In fact, when Henrietta Mondry celebrates the subversive "carnavalesque" features in *Cold Stone Jug* (87-92), she is in fact ignoring precisely this dimension of Bosman's self-construction. If Bosman is indeed operating in the carnivalesque mode, it is always with a kind of Todorovian attentiveness to the potential for carnival to serve the interests of the dominant ideology. Bosman's insight at this point relates directly to the status of *resistance* in and to the structures of the prison: the prison is not only a material space, encountered as one object amongst others, but directly constitutive of a form of subjectivity. What starts off in the memoir as a description produced from a semi-autonomous narrative position bends back on itself, in an Escher-like fashion, until the storyteller encounters his own subject-position as an effect of the material density of the space that he occupies. In this way, Bosman renders his irony doubly ambiguous. Not only does it serve the conventional function of marking a certain equivocal distance between the narrating subject and the events that are described in the narrative, it reinscribes the distance as potentially an effect of the same narrative events. Prisoners, as Bosman incessantly reminds us, tell stories, and in the telling become written as prisoners.

The final chapters of the memoir, which deal with Bosman's struggle against madness, further question the possibility of a point of view that unambiguously supersedes the environment that it describes. While under medical observation, Bosman befriends a safe-blower called Parkins, who explains to Bosman how to act insane in order to enjoy the relative luxury of the prison hospital. Characteristically, Bosman is captivated by the possibility of such a cynical manipulation of the system. "I reasoned," he writes, "that a man couldn't be as good a safe-blower as Parkins and not know a thing or two about life" (183). He even goes so far as to imagine that "this was the exact course that I was myself pursuing, unconsciously, and just out of perversity..." (183). Parkins's main ploy is to tell the doctor that he believes he has hidden one and a half million pounds worth of Kruger sovereigns in an old mine dump. However, at the very moment Bosman seems most impressed by Parkins's ingenuity, Parkins admits that he genuinely believes the sovereigns are hidden under the mine dump, and outlines his plan to dig up the treasure once he is released from prison. Bosman writes: "I walked away from him then. And I know my footsteps were unsteady..." (184). This incident reveals how Parkins consciously exploits the doctor's credulity – rather in the way Bosman and his companion "kid" the warders in the opening chapters – while *at the same time* believing his own shrewd lie. Parkins's voice is vertiginously divided against itself, apparently "playing the system" while in reality conforming to the institution's diagnosis. Bosman encounters in Parkins a reflection of himself – an "Ideal-I", who promises to stage a form of narration that guarantees a minimal degree of separation between the self and the harsh regime of penal life. However, following the logic of

reflection, when Parkins reveals his self-deluded nature, Bosman is led to a devastating encounter with his own delusions. The “lie” that is offered as evidence of madness turns out, in fact, really to be evidence of madness, so that the idea of a calculated ironic distance between narrator and narrative collapses: the eminently “sane” distance between self and world, subject and self-representation, is revealed as nothing other than the void of madness produced by the privations of the prison.

Throughout *Cold Stone Jug*, Bosman is interested not merely in describing the prison, but in how the prison inscribes *him*: he is incessantly preoccupied with the ways in which the prison marks and contains the voices and bodies of the prisoners. It is this self-reflexivity that makes *Cold Stone Jug* into a document that, in many ways, opens the discursive space for later South African prison autobiographies. Bosman is one of the first South African writers to write about the experience of the prison as a *total system*, one which generates and contains the interior consciousness of the “I” that writes. One consequence of this remarkably modern focus on the technologies that underpin self-construction is a preoccupation with the signs that mark and categorise prisoners. The memoir’s preamble opens with Bosman telling informing his cellmates that he is in prison for murder. At his confession, they all move to the opposite side of the cell. The label “murderer” renders him visible in a particular way, both accounting for his presence in the cell and excluding him from the other prisoners. Moreover, his answer immediately reorganises the space of the cell, so that he becomes doubly excluded: on the one hand, there is the physical exclusion of the prison cell from the

world outside (made all the more apparent by its almost unbearable proximity to the city street, the activity of cadging cigarettes from passers-by), and on the other there is his physical distance from his cellmates. The memoir opens by underscoring the relationship between space and identity, architecture and labeling. This episode is further complicated by Bosman's insinuation that he *deliberately* provokes fear and respect through his answer, that he plays the *role* of the murderer:

'Say, what are you pinched for?' he asked, eyeing me narrowly.

'Murder,' I said. And in my tone there was no discourtesy. And I did not glower much. I only added, 'And I'm not feeling too good.'

'Struth!' my interrogator remarked. And his jaw dropped. And that bunch of prisoners in the cell, the whole dozen of them, moved right across to the other side, to the corner that was furthest away from me.' (46)

From the outset, there is a confusion between a role that is imposed and role that is adopted: it is uncertain whether Bosman consciously creates a distance between himself and others, or whether his exclusion is beyond his control, an effect of the way the prison and the courts have categorised him. This is especially important when we consider that the first word of the novel is his answer, "murder". In a sense, he introduces himself not only to his cellmates, but also to his reader, as a murderer: in one respect the reader's first experience of the novel is one of dialogic inclusion, as a participant in a conversation with Bosman, but in another the reader is rebuffed along

with the cellmates. This places Bosman in an ambiguous position with respect to his audience: to what extent does he rhetorically construct himself, and to what extent is he constructed by some process outside himself? It seems that where he is most self-consciously in control, “pulling a fast one”, he is often in fact most thoroughly subsumed by a discourse that he exercises little control over.

The narrative often focuses on incidents where the prison’s inscription of identity is invisible, unconscious, or visible to others, but not the self. In this sense, Bosman is interested precisely in the operation of *ideology* as an invisible force that determines the individual while remaining inaccessible to apprehension. For instance, Bosman introduces Swartklei Prison through a lengthy description of the Dutch Reformed Church service in honour of mothers’ day. Prisoners are issued with paper labels – green for prisoners whose mothers are alive, and purple for prisoners whose mothers are dead. It soon becomes apparent that this anecdote in fact deals with the difference between “inside” and “outside”, between the sign system of the prison and the sign system of “ordinary people”:

No pins were provided, but the backs of these strips of coloured paper were gummed. So we stuck the labels on with spit. And we sat there, on the wooden benches, straight up and very proud, feeling not only that we were doing homage to our mothers, but that we were participating in a ceremony that was on that day being observed in the magical world known as ‘outside’. (47)

Bosman's point here is of course that no "normal" adult in the outside world would wear a label like this, or for that matter celebrate mothers' day in this way. The labels are specially modified for their surroundings – no pins for the prisoners to put to nefarious use – and in any case act as *substitutes* for real mothers. Moreover, the absurd colour classification is redolent of the prison's obsession with categorisation and distinction, what Foucault terms "penal accountancy" (180). The labels have exchange value between the men in prison, not really between the men and their mothers. However, the very signs that betray the men's captive status, that inscribe them in the institution, are *mistaken* by them as evidence of their participation in the world outside the prison. It is not just that the labels are in a sense "misrecognised", but that they are misrecognised as their exact opposite, as signs of freedom and normality where they are in fact markers of bondage and deviance. Bosman includes one anomalous category of prisoner who is not successfully interpellated by the labeling procedure:

(The Predikant pointedly made no reference to those convicts in his congregation who, through ignorance or misguided zeal, had stuck whole rows of labels, purple and green mixed up just anyhow, on to their jackets, like they were military ribbons.) (47)

In a sense, it is these prisoners who are not successfully formed into classes who threaten to betray the silliness of the entire ceremony as much as their own foolishness:

in consequence, they simply become unmentioned and therefore invisible. Bosman does not tell us what class of prisoner he belongs to – instead, this entire episode is narrated in the first person plural, an ironic “we” that occasionally becomes a “they”: Bosman is both inside and outside this narrative, both one of the prisoners and somehow beside the scene, a lone ironic eye.

Bosman returns explicitly to the notion of the “invisible” signs that inscribe penal identity in his description of a typical prisoner’s appearance:

Because he is, in the first place, abnormal, the average convict is less good-looking than the average healthy minded citizen who is too clever to manifest his criminal tendencies to the point where he gets landed behind bars. Then, you’ve just got to think how a convict is dressed. Those battered, shapeless boots; those ridiculous kneebreeches surmounting legs encased in black stockings variegated with horizontal red stripes... and your towel: oh, I have forgotten to mention that funny white linen towel: it is easy to realise why I had forgotten about that apology for a towel until this moment. You are not allowed to leave your towel in your cell, because it gets grabbed and burned as tinder, so they have got this regulation that you have got to carry your towel on your person all the time: you have got to carry it folded, *with part of it tucked into your breeches at the back, the other part to hang out three inches below your jacket.* That is why I had forgotten about the towel until this moment: how can

you remember something that you don't see, because it hangs out from the back of your breeches, underneath your jacket? But you see the other man's towel, of course – whenever he turns his back on you. (91)

The description progresses here from natural features (a kind of “degeneracy” which is manifested in the physical appearance of prisoners³) to the more artificial signs of the institution. Finally, he comments on the part of the prison uniform that is *invisible* to the prisoner himself – while the towel is an unmistakable part of the prison uniform, the prisoner's own towel is not available to his gaze. Interestingly, Bosman dramatises how this imperceptibility threatens to become a gap *in memory* and therefore an omission in the text. It is not merely that the prisoner is identified and produced through signs that are invisible to him, but that his own autobiographical narrative – produced outside the prison, decades after the experience – remains potentially constrained by the prison's configurations. In other words, the fact that the towel cannot be seen makes it difficult to remember, suggesting that memory itself is structured by its material objects. Ideology is first of all realised in a material way; the abstract characterisation of prisoners as looking “abnormal” is underpinned by the concrete reality of the clothes prisoners are forced to wear.

³ Of course, Bosman is not adopting this Darwinian-sounding discourse seriously. His “average healthy minded citizen” is simply more adroit at *concealing* “criminal tendencies”. In Bosman's world, everyone is deviant at some level, some people just hide this fact better than others. He makes a similar point with respect to insanity later on:

... I had learnt one thing. And that was that I was mad, stone mad. And that all the other people in the world were mad, also. And I learnt that what I had to do was to play-act sane. (184)

Another way in which Bosman highlights the ways in which the prison produces identity is through his preoccupation with the transformation of the material reality of the prison – its architecture, its regulation of time – into subjective consciousness. The one obvious example is the gallows chamber:

Disguise it how one will, the fact is that the Swartklei Great Prison is dominated, spiritually as well as architecturally, by the gallows chamber, the doors of which rise up, massive and forbidding, at the end of the main wing in the building – the penal corridors. (51)

Like many other prison writers, Bosman is acutely aware of the relationship between the “spiritual” and the “architectural”; the ways in which the experience of prison and self attend on the prison’s demarcation, circumscription and regulation of space. In one telling scene, he explains that during his time in prison, he had seen people leave prison in only two ways: if they were dead, through the mortuary gate, and if they were alive, through the front gate. When a warder dies, and Bosman doesn’t see him leave the prison in either one of these conventional ways, he can’t bring himself fully to believe that the warder is dead:

Because he had died while in the prison service, I expected to see him come out through the mortuary gate, on a wheel-barrow and with sacking over all of him

If prison space is highly regulated, so is prison time. Bosman contrasts penal time and “outside” time in his account of the convict Botha, who is instructed to sort the type that is discovered beneath the floorboards of the printers’ shop. When Bosman asks him how long he imagines the job will take, Botha replies that he should be busy for about seven years. This prompts Bosman to ruminate on the meaning and value of seven years:

What doesn’t happen to a man outside prison in seven years? The good years and the bad years. The adventures that come his way. The triumphs and the heart-breaks that are bound up with seven years of living... And during this time Botha the convict would be sorting the type out of the box. Only after seven years would his fingers close around the last pica space. And nothing would be happening to Botha during these years. Just nothing at all. (131)

Botha’s time is essentially circular – the same thing happens to him every day – while time in the outside world unfolds in a linear, progressive way. This sense of “nothing happening” of course poses a range of problems for a prison autobiographer, since an autobiography is traditionally a linear narrative. Indeed, the prison memoir has to find new ways to deal with time. When Bosman is about to be released, he comments on the way prison time, which drags on so inordinately slowly, seems like no time at all in retrospect: it is visible only as a kind of gap:

And they said, yes, that was the marvel of doing time; the longest stretch came to an end, they said; and when you found yourself on the last lap, like I was now, it was difficult to believe that those years actually had been served, one by one, in prison. You didn't know what had happened to those years, they said. It was only when you got back into the world outside that you realised that the years had indeed gone by.... (191)

Bosman's memoir is exceptional in the way it both starts and ends in prison. Bosman never constructs a chain of cause and effect, explaining how he ended up in prison, or what he did once he was freed: essentially, he refuses to open prison time up to history, and experiments with a narrative that is claustrophobically enclosed – and produced – by the signs and temporality of the penal institution.

While *Cold Stone Jug* displays a remarkable self-reflexive awareness of the ways in which the prison produces subjectivity, the memoir is also attentive to the kinds of culture and the types of texts that convicts make. There are complex tensions between the prison's manufacture of meaning and the meanings produced by the prisoners. *Cold Stone Jug* can in fact be read as a text about texts: in the absence of a clear linear progression of events, it becomes a memoir dealing with the memories, confessions, petitions, traditions, stories and dreams of the convicts. Describing a “wave of culture consciousness” that overruns the prison at one particular point, Bosman comments in a

rather superior way on the autobiographies that illiterate convicts begin to produce. He lists the kinds of “snappy titles” that the prisoners come up with for their work:

... *Put in Boob by a Nark, or Twenty Years in Jug for Bugger-All, or I Don't Care Now, Much, or Why I Done Time, or Cold Stone Jug.* (155)

By calling his own autobiography *Cold Stone Jug*, he effectively classes it alongside the other prisoners' texts. The memoir functions ambiguously both as a transcendent narrative, focused around a stable, somewhat detached narrator, *and* as a prison story among other prison stories, each jostling for space, erecting its own chronology, its own actors and its own account of reality.

One aspect of convict culture that interests Bosman in particular is the “venerable institution” of dagga smoking. Dagga is overprovided with names, reflecting, as Bosman points out, its “important place in prison life,” (72) and entrenching it in prison argot. It is written into the language of the prison, which is so mysteriously invisible from the outside:

It was incredible that here, in South Africa, there was actually a class of person who spoke an argot that was known only to his kind... I had never known that there really was a world such as this, here in our midst, with its own criminal parlance, and its own terribly different, terribly mysterious way of life. (65)

The ritual of naming and consuming dagga in prison is part of an entirely separate, underground culture, a “secret language” invented and spoken by prisoners. Labeling, mixing and smoking dagga in a particular way signifies belonging to prison: dagga is at the centre of a *collective, inclusive* construction of identity. As Bosman observes, “[t]he real place for smoking dagga was, of course, inside a cell with a whole lot together” (75). Bosman admits that his main reason for taking “a pull or two at a zol” was that he “didn’t want to be thought to be acting in a superior way” (73): he participates in the ritual in order to be included in the community of prisoners. This is rather ironic in light of convicts’ claim that dagga allows them to *escape* from the world of the prison, and the dull monotony of its rules: it affords a kind of freedom of affect and indifference to power:

‘The tree of knowledge,’ the bluecoat would repeat, ‘Give me a few pulls every morning with the mealie-pap and I’ll tell the Governor that he can go and bugger himself, every morning with the mealie-pap.’ (74)

Dagga simultaneously opens a space outside incarceration – an inner freedom – and functions as one of the instruments through which an incarcerated identity is produced, as one of the signs of a convict.

One prisoner underscores this irony when he comments on how dagga frees him from the reality of prison, thereby *enabling* him to be a prisoner:

‘The tree of knowledge. When I is blue like what I is now, then I says you can maar keep me locked up in the boob as long as you blerrie like.’ (74)

This paradox is extended when another prisoner answers:

‘What do you want to pick on us for, Boet? What you want to say for we keep you locked up? It’s not us, man. We ain’t keeping you here. It’s the walls and the screws (warders) and the john what pinched you. Why blame us blokes?’ (74)

He reads his partner’s ‘you’ as literally referring to the other prisoners, invoking in a free-associative way the possibility that the prisoners are “walls and screws and warders”, that the convicts in some sense collude in their own internment. The point here is that one of the most transgressive offenses in prison, smoking dagga, is in actual fact involved in the prison’s exercise of power. To what extent is dagga culture invented by the prisoners, and to what extent by the prison? As always, the stories and rituals of the convicts are ambiguously enmeshed with the prison’s imposition of its authority.

Bosman further complicates issues by understanding the drug according to his own romantic preconceptions, some of them derived from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. This is one of few instances where Bosman allows clear evidence of his life before imprisonment to intrude in the narrative: dagga, a principal signifier of “inside”, has for Bosman connotations with “outside”, with another world and other texts. He reveals his attraction to dagga’s associations with decadence and abandonment, an attraction which precedes his incarceration. For Bosman, dagga therefore becomes a meeting-place between his consciousness as it is shaped by the prison, and the consciousness that he brings to the prison.

In the memoir, dagga is poised precariously between inside and outside, the past and the present, and freedom and captivity – it can be read both as an example of and a metaphor for all texts produced in prison, an exemplification of the confusions and tensions that mark the manufacture of convict culture. It is a disruptive enjoyment that threatens the very order of prison, a secret ecstasy in a world violently opposed to the pleasures of the body, but it is also an enjoyment that is necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of prison life. It is both tacitly acknowledged by officials as a part of prison culture and officially disallowed.

We find a similar pattern of excess and incorporation in Bosman’s anecdote about the warder Marman’s novel, *Die Liefdesgeskiedenis van Bloubaadjie Theron* (*The Love History of Bluecoat Theron*). Marman’s book, about an innocently convicted bluecoat,

is “full of slush and sentiment and melodrama and bad grammar” (131). Both in theme and in style, the warder’s novel seems remarkably similar to the prisoners’ literary endeavours, perhaps again pointing to an affinity of experience and values between guards and inmates. Marman gives the prisoners working in the printers’ shop a tin of tobacco apiece to print the book for him illegally. After Marman takes delivery of the books and leaves the prison, the prisoners realise that they have forgotten to distribute the type back into cases. Rather than risk discovery, they prise the floorboards up:

And the remaining chapters of Discipline-warder Marman’s novel, in the form of column after column of loose type set by hand, were shot through the hole in the floor. (132)

In this case, the printing room becomes the location of an unlawful materialisation of enjoyment: a guard and the prisoners collude to create a forbidden text. The novel alludes to both history and love, dimensions of time and experience typically unavailable in prison, with its cyclical time and its (official) proscription of sexual relationships. The printing of the novel breaks prison rules, but the *content* of the novel exceeds the prison’s epistemological frame.

However, when the text is buried beneath the floorboards, it is not merely hidden from the view of authority. It becomes reintegrated into the industry of the prison; the novel literally *becomes* prison labour. These are, after all, the very same floorboards that

concealed the type that Botha has to spend seven years sorting. Hiding the type beneath the floorboards provokes the most tedious, repetitive kind of solitary labour; the epitome of prison work. In a sense, the “history” is transformed into unremitting repetition and the “love” into solitude. While the text beneath the surface of the printers’ room bears testimony to the covert culture and the secret stories of the warders and the prisoners, it also serves as a vehicle for the power of the penal institution.

The “craze for culture and erudition” (156) that sweeps the prison is another case in point. On the surface, it seems like an original and spontaneous convict practice, but the ridiculous controversy over the difference between a quagga and a zebra betrays its immersion in and dependence on the discourse of the prison. Being able to recite the dictionary definitions of the two words becomes a measurement of erudition:

And if you couldn’t recite those two definitions off pat, no matter how you mispronounced the words, or how ignorant you were of their meaning, then you were regarded as a person with no educational attainments. (156)

Ultimately, this new “culture” is entirely formal, concerned not so much with acquiring knowledge about the world as with constructing hierarchies – a process surprisingly similar to the prison’s characteristic obsession with the invention and supervision of status categories. In other words, prison culture, at a certain level, borrows from and reflects the culture of the institution.

There is one description of a convict ritual in *Cold Stone Jug* that strains against such a Foucaultian notion of convict culture as inescapably recuperated and contained by the hegemonic discourse of the institution. One night, during Bosman's descent into insanity, scores of prisoners start howling at the full moon:

The noise each convict made, while it differed from the sounds emitted by his neighbour, nevertheless had one thing in common with this general howling, and that was that it had a warm, animal ring; but it wasn't so much like an animal on heat as like an animal dying – or an animal smelling the stink of death. I know I didn't join in with this general howling. I pulled the blankets over my head and lay on the concrete floor of my cage and shivered. I was very frightened, that night. (168)

Fearing that he hallucinated the event, he asks Pym, a fellow inmate, whether he heard anything. Pym at first denies having heard the noise – apparently to tease Bosman – and then laughingly confesses:

'... Of course I heard them howlings. I would have been mad, all right, if I hadn't. And so would you. But you won't find any of the boys talk about it. Especially not them that howled. It don't happen very often. Not more than once about every five or seven years, I reckon. It only happened about three times, I

think, during all the years I been in the boob. The boys just sort of let themselves go. One bloke starts them off and then they all join in. And they dunno what they're doing. The first time I heard it, when I was a youngster, I got crap-scared. I thought as the whole boob was going mad, and me also.'

(170)

The howling is a macabre upsurge of something utterly atavistic, unregistered in the symbolic order except as a refusal to speak. It is certainly *occasioned* by the prison – it clearly has the status of a “prison tradition” – but at the same time, it uncannily exceeds the prison. There is a core of “inhumanity” that cannot be contained or addressed by the penal system, since this system is ultimately based on notions of reform and contrition, on a particular brand of individualising subjectivation. Men who howl like beasts at the full moon cannot be transformed into subjects: the very brutality that is deployed in the service of penal individualisation produces an inhuman kernel that resists the prison’s attempts to reduce its inmates to reformable individuals. The uncanny noise is an indivisible remainder to the operation of the prison, a supernumerary event that cannot be accounted for and remains unmentioned by both the authorities and the prisoners.

In some respects the howling might serve the interests of the prison, functioning as a powerful shared secret that helps to shape a homogenous “convict identity” in the same way that a prison uniform does. The howling could be read as one of the prison’s

invisible marks. However, a homogenous “convict identity” can very easily turn into “convict solidarity”, as when the food demonstrations start breaking out (135-150). The howling is properly speaking *unconscious*, a point where the prison is unavailable to itself, where penal discourse fails to realise self-identity. If the howling were named and discussed among the prisoners, it would be drawn into and contained by the inexorable sign system of the prison. Precisely through their *silence*, the prisoners maintain the howling as a radical, potentially destabilising practice, an aspect of what Bosman terms “the mass mind” (138).

Bosman is always intensely aware of the ways in which “convict culture” both resists and submits to the structures of the prison. *Cold Stone Jug* is remarkable for the way it brings this awareness to bear on itself, fully aware of its own status as a prison artifact: the text posits a narrator whose implicit sense of intellectual superiority and critical detachment is always potentially a form of delusion occasioned by the prison itself.

Throughout the memoir, Bosman places a high premium on individuality. In some ways the memoir invents Bosman as romantic outsider, dramatising his rebellious, idiosyncratic nature. There are myriad scenes that praise originality and condemn the thoughtless reproduction of received ideas. One small example is where the convict Slangvel starts a fight with Bosman. Bosman responds by asking him to wait a moment while he takes off his jersey. Slangvel begins to take off his own jersey:

I don't suppose he really wanted to discard his jersey. I think it was merely some sort of moron imitativeness. Perhaps he thought it was a more official sort of thing to do, taking off his jersey before beating up a man. (128)

Bosman takes advantage of Slangvel's "moron imitativeness" by beating him senseless while his jersey covers his eyes.

However, the memoir is just as happy to question the possibility of an original, spontaneous voice, constantly deflating the authenticity of the narrative "I", and drawing attention to the insidious encroachment of the signs and rituals of the prison in its self-construction. In fact, *true* "interiority" and separateness are experienced as a form of disintegration – it is an unbearable and unsustainable state.

For instance, Bosman finds the possibility that he imagined the convicts howling – that it was a private fantasy – unbearable. The howling becomes associated for Bosman with an intolerable interiority, a torment that can be diffused only through contact with others. Eventually, he can act "normally" only when he is looked at. The moment he is in private, he gives in to the madness:

And every time, at night, when the steel door was banged shut on me by the warder, and I heard the key grate in the lock, then my head would start spinning, and I would crawl round and round on the concrete floor of my cage, round and

round, with great difficulty, on my hands and knees, because of the narrowness of the walls of the cage. I would crawl round and round, like that, until I would drop down from exhaustion. And yet I had a strange cunning, with all this. I would time myself. The warders, coming along the corridors at hourly intervals and looking in through one peephole after another, would never catch me out crawling round and round the steel cage. Whenever I sensed that the warder was almost due I would grab up a book, any sort of book, and I would sit down on the floor and pretend to read. (186)

His sanity becomes carefully spaced to accord with the regular intervals during which he falls under the gaze of the warders. In the interstices, when he is alone, he is completely mad.

Towards the end of the memoir, it is increasingly apparent that the rational, separate “I”, supposedly free of intersubjective bonds and allegiances, is in fact a locus of madness and disintegration. Real “interiority” is no island of calm, separate from the ideologies of the world – instead, it is a radically disruptive, violent and formless nightmare. In this sense, the Benthamite prison is both the realisation of an Enlightenment ideal and its aporetic limit. Individualisation and isolation, rather than disclosing the autonomous, reasonable subject behind the distortions of history and culture, in fact reveal, to use Slavoj Žižek’s formulation, that the “pure transcendental” subject is nothing other than “the empty Nothingness of pure self-relating” (*Indivisible*

Remainder 124). When Bosman is in his cell, he splits into two – on the one hand, he presents a façade of rationality – a static, passive body engaged in the profoundly individual, introspective activity of silent reading. On the other hand, when not under the gaze of the warders, he reveals the truth beneath the façade: the uncontrolled body of the madman, with a fragmented, paranoid consciousness. These can be read as the two faces of the Cartesian subject: the rational self is a consequence of the prison's Benthamite interpellation of the prisoner as a reformable individual, while the disconnected lack of consciousness attends on the same process of individualisation, where the individual is severed from the intersubjective bond. Paradoxically, Bosman makes a “rational” – and subversive - choice to hide his irrational side from the prison: in other words, he renders his madness, which is a direct consequence of his imprisonment, invisible (and therefore irresolvable). The madness functions as mute testimony to the excess of the prison; of the remainder of the Real that attends on its process of subjectivisation.

Ultimately, *Cold Stone Jug* is an interesting memoir not because it talks about “prison experience” or “prison identity” in some generic way, but because it talks about prison *as a place where subjectivity is produced*, where no “I” can be taken for granted. It takes the narrating self and systematically reveals its connections and dependencies, the machinery behind its production. In the process, it also reflects on the complexities of *resistance* in prison: for Bosman, subversive acts always seem in danger of serving the penitentiary in some way. Perhaps the most genuinely transgressive moments in the

memoir are those where Bosman seems to *agree* with the way he is constructed by the prison – as a murderer, as deviant, as lacking in intelligence and ordinary morality – and *fully assumes* the role of the prisoner. While the rich ironic tone of the text suggests that this identification is not really serious – that there is in fact a gap between his inner self and the projection of the penal institution – this gap is never filled in with some determinate content, some appeal to a subjective autonomous “substance”. Moreover, the very idea of an “inner self” is radically unsettled by the fact that when we encounter Bosman alone, he seems completely deranged. In this sense, the narrator never performs a judgment on behalf of the reader: he never exposes the culpability and error of the penal institution through reference to his own innocence and authentic interiority. This means that the *reader* is forced to formulate a position with respect to the operation of power in the prison. There is simply no explanatory text to fall back onto in order to judge the prison, or to judge Bosman’s actions. In this sense, the unarticulated excess of subjectivity – the suggestion that Bosman is not coterminous with his determination by the prison, even while the text refuses to explain, evaluate or concretise the difference – introduces a radical form of undecidability to the memoir that is perhaps its most subversive attribute.⁴ In fact, not one of the other memoirs discussed in this thesis places the same kind of burden of decision with the reader, suggesting that Bosman’s memoir was not only the first of its kind, but in some ways

⁴ In many other prison memoirs, the older narrator looks back on events in order to evaluate and judge the actions of the narrated self. In Bosman’s text, the narrator *is* the gap: he introduces an ironic distance without a determinate content.

also the most sophisticated and genuinely unsettling. Bosman's strange refusal to resist the prison's interpellation becomes a potent form of resistance.

As a text, *Cold Stone Jug* occupies a significant transitional moment in South African politics. It was published in 1949, during the embryonic stages of the "penalisation" of South African society under the Afrikaner Nationalist government. The modes of control, classification and surveillance associated with the prison would increasingly come to echo the modes of operation of the State. Indeed, for many later political prison writers, the difference between "inside" and "outside" is not as stark as one would imagine.

In *Cold Stone Jug*, the world outside is like a dream, a world of infinite freedom and possibility. The convict Donald Hughes provides one of the memoir's images of "outside":

'I been discharged several times,' Donald Hughes reassured me, 'And you can take it from me, it's ----- marvelous, the feelings you get when you walk out there. No matter if you've done only six months. And it doesn't matter, either, how often you've been in the boob. You get those same feelings every time. And when you sit in a tram, and a girl comes and sits next to you. Or you go into a bioscope café, and you sit next to a girl, and you are allowed to, and she doesn't move away, but lets you go on sitting there...' (119)

Of course, for black South Africans, the kind of freedom of movement described by Hughes had always been difficult under white rule, and would become impossible as apartheid legislation intensified in the 1950s. Hughes' celebration of "outside" describes a reality that belonged to only a few, in a country where the rule of the prison was steadily expanding. The next chapters of this thesis deal with memoirs that reflect the growing *continuity* between the prison and the world outside, where the prison simply focalises and intensifies the technologies of subjectivation and control that appertain more broadly in society.

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THREE: ON ROB BEN ISLAND

Of all prisons under apartheid, Robben Island was certainly the most infamous. In his *Robben Island Dossier*, written in 1974, Neville Alexander claims: “Whatever the public stance of officialdom, there is no doubt that they realise, as everyone else does, that Robben Island Prison is the most important prison in South Africa” (11). Both as a symbol for the injustices and hardships suffered under the apartheid regime, and as a potent symbol of resistance, Robben Island was a place apart, a significant point of reference in the construction of an oppositional identity. In 1992, Jacobs could claim accurately that Robben Island “has grown into a central trope for the displacement of Nationalist Party dominance” (74). This special status of Robben Island has survived the demise of apartheid: Robben Island, now an officially sanctified heritage site, has become one of the principal signifiers of a post-apartheid national identity. The Island itself is visible off the coast of Cape Town, an inescapable visual coda that serves to confer a marketable, unifying identity onto a fractured nation, even as it remains a memorial to the trauma and divisiveness of apartheid.

The enduring symbolic importance of Robben Island has lent a particular significance to the voices that have spoken from it. Under apartheid, Robben Island became a privileged site for the construction of emergent notions of citizenship and leadership, a kind of testing-ground for new notions of South African identity. One of the most important documents for reworking the concept of the freedom fighter into a model for

post-apartheid citizenship is undoubtedly Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, South Africa's first democratically elected president's account of his life and his long incarceration on Robben Island. This text is central to the present discussion precisely because it is governed by two conditions of emergence: on the one hand, it is marked by and reacts to the prison, but on the other it answers also to the post-apartheid moment and the requirements of nation-building. The experience of prison is reappropriated in the service of a new national identity.

As Riouful points out, post-apartheid representations of Robben Island have tended to background painful and divisive aspects of life on Robben Island in favour of descriptions of the prison as a place of community, resistance, survival and triumph (24-27). Riouful's division between apartheid and post-apartheid understandings of the prison is echoed in a great deal of the critical literature on Robben Island (see, for instance, Grunebaum-Ralph; Nuttall). While it is clear that Mandela in many ways domesticates the Robben Island experience, and uses it in order to develop a new post-apartheid value system, it is dangerous to insist that there is some impermeable boundary that separates apartheid and post-apartheid Robben Island narratives. New models for subjectivity under the post-apartheid state did not, after all, arise *ex nihilo*, but always in dialogue with the apartheid past. The very fact that Robben Island continues to be revisited, re-explained and reconstructed shows that a particular aspect of apartheid interpellation, exemplified by the prison as institution of control, remains unresolved and retains significance under the new dispensation. Indeed, *Long Walk to*

Freedom is interesting as much for the ways in which it *differs* from earlier Robben Island memoirs as for the ways in which it is *the same*. If we ask how the experience of prison and the exigencies of the post-apartheid moment *collude* to produce a particular kind of citizen and subject, we are suggesting that post-apartheid identities remain ineradicably linked to apartheid formations – the new inclusive, conciliatory “multicultural” subject valorised in post-apartheid discourse retains a dialectic relationship to the kinds of subjectivities that emerged under the ideological institutions of the apartheid state. To insist on a point of diachronic connection is to insist on the continued relevance and value of apartheid-era prison memoirs in our understanding of post-apartheid South African identity. In this sense, *Long Walk to Freedom* is an important mediating document, since it demonstrates how, through shifts in emphasis and subtle displacements, oppositional voices are transformed into the dominant voice. In order to analyse *Long Walk to Freedom*, it is necessary to compare it to some other texts that reflect on the experience of incarceration on Robben Island. While this chapter does not aim to provide a sustained analysis of these earlier texts, it refers to them in order to show how *Long Walk to Freedom* echoes and transforms many of the themes and issues that they introduce.

For this purpose, this section refers to a range of Robben Island memoirs. Most important for this chapter is Moses Dlamini’s *Hell Hole, Robben Island*, first published in 1984 while Dlamini was living in exile in Tanzania. Dlamini was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1963 to 1966 for furthering the aims of the Pan Africanist

Congress (PAC). In his *Robben Island Dossier*, Neville Alexander identifies the years from 1962 to 1966 as particularly brutal and dehumanising (11-12). He observes that “[f]rom 1962 to 1964 assaults, very often brutal and mass assaults, of political prisoners was a weekly, often a daily, occurrence.” (20) The hardship of life on Robben Island during this time was compounded by the use of criminal prisoners to demoralise and intimidate the political prisoners. Dlamini’s memoir, then, reflects on a remarkably violent and ruthless chapter of Robben Island’s history, and does so from a perspective informed by the politics of the PAC, whose members substantially outnumbered supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) during 1963-1965. Dlamini published his memoir in 1984, at the inception of the most successful and wide-ranging mass mobilisation against the apartheid state in South Africa under the auspices of the United Democratic Front. In this sense, the memoir is not just reflecting on life under apartheid in the 1960s, but is fully engaged in the turbulent politics of resistance that characterised the early 1980s. While *Long Walk to Freedom* also recounts the early years of imprisonment on Robben Island (Mandela arrived on the island in 1964), its account is mediated by what Alexander calls the “relatively humane” (14) conditions of life on Robben Island after 1973, and by the need for nation-building and amity during the time of its publication in 1994, after the demise of apartheid. Moreover, the ANC’s politics have always been more receptive to compromise and in some senses more inclusive than the PAC’s generally hard-line Africanist ideology. In many respects, Dlamini’s account is focused much more on the day to day misery of life on Robben

Island: its tone is essentially pessimistic, and it is more explicit than *Long Walk to Freedom* about ideological tensions and personal ambivalence.

There are strong similarities between Dlamini's account of the early years on Robben Island and other autobiographies reflecting on this period and published in the 1970s and 1980s. D.M. Zwelonke's *Robben Island*, a semi-fictional narrative based on his incarceration on Robben Island, is if anything even bleaker and more cynical than Dlamini's memoir. While Zwelonke notes that prisoners who, like the narrator, arrived late in 1964 had an easier time than their predecessors (14), the novel – which revolves around the life of Bekimpi, a leader of Poqo (the armed wing of the PAC) – is an unremittingly grim catalogue of tortures. It ends with a graphic description of Bekimpi's dead, mutilated body. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this memoir is its strong personal voice and its focus on interiority: on dreams, fantasies, anxieties and the general process of remembering. Zwelonke's prison is characterised by descriptions of the weather, the gait of the warders, the expression on people's faces: his narrative is textured by the minutiae of personal observation. Indres Naidoo's *Island in Chains*, first published in 1982, and ghost-written by Albie Sachs, recounts his incarceration from 1963-1973 in a similarly grim fashion, although this memoir also contains a few humorous anecdotes and is ultimately a more optimistic text. In Naidoo's account, Robben Island is represented not only in terms of torture and degradation, but also as a place of debate and learning: the outlines of the influential

trope of Robben Island as “university” are sketched by Naidoo in his memoir (but certainly without the sanguinity or nostalgia of some later accounts).

In contrast to these memoirs, the Robben Island that Michael Dingake describes in *My Fight Against Apartheid* is much closer to the prison that Mandela describes in *Long Walk to Freedom*. Dingake was imprisoned on Robben Island between 1966 and 1981, and published *My Fight Against Apartheid* in 1987, two years before the release of most of the ANC’s senior leadership from prison in 1989. He arrived at Robben Island after the removal of criminal convicts in 1965 and during the immediate aftermath of the successful 1966 hunger strike, an important turning point for an improvement in conditions on the island. For Dingake, Robben Island afforded opportunities to strengthen political solidarity and for personal growth. At the end of his memoir, Dingake declares that he “... was leaving Robben Island in one piece, unbroken in spirit and in flesh” (Dingake 1987: 227). At least some of this optimism attends on Dingake’s sense in the 1980s that apartheid was in an inescapable state of decline, a view that he links explicitly to improvements in prison conditions:

The granite was crumbling right at its heart. Prison is the heart of oppression in any oppressive society. And once any ‘heart’ assumes a new complexion or gets a ‘pacer’ then some life is in danger – the end is in sight. Imprisonment, thou has lost much of thy sting! (Dingake 228)

The impression of incessant repetition – in Denis Brutus’s words, of being “embalmed in time” (72) – that characterises Dlamini and Zwelonke’s accounts of imprisonment opens up in Dingake’s memoir to a more linear sense of progress and transcendence. Although Dingake is often more candid than Mandela in his robust descriptions of the frictions and stresses that typify life in prison, Robben Island is identifiable as the same place of survival, progress and victory as it is in Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*.

Perhaps the most important difference between Robben Island memoirs written during apartheid and those written after the democratic election in 1994 is a shift in the addressee. In memoirs written during apartheid, the person who is being addressed is frequently foregrounded: the texts dramatise a contextualised self, and they explicitly serve a specific social function. Thus in the 1993 introduction to his *Robben Island Dossier*, Neville Alexander explains how the style and the content of his account are informed by the political context and the intended audience of the dossier:

The intended readership to a very large extent co-determined the content and style of presentation of the report. Besides a genuine commitment to reporting strictly only that which I knew to be true, I realized, of course, that any material produced in anger and without due regard to accuracy and probability would not be treated seriously by the men and women I was attempting to reach.

Consequently, a certain pedantic meticulousness is there for all to read even

though, on occasion, my real emotions broke through the screen of academic precision. (viii)

D.M. Zwelonke prefaces his fictional account of his incarceration, *Robben Island*, with a chapter entitled “Why I Write”, where he speculates on his aversion to discuss his experiences on Robben Island with anyone, and recounts his search for an appropriate audience:

I did not know whom I should address, the businessmen, the intellectuals, the clergy, the students or the masses. The student was the person I always respected: I always remembered the number of students on the Island, whisked off there from the classrooms. (3)

The very fact that this memoir is presented as a work of *fiction* introduces a reservation to the sense of spontaneity and authenticity that typically accompanies a first-person autobiographical narration.

Even where the intended reader is not so overtly foregrounded, as in Moses Dlamini’s *Hell Hole, Robben Island*, there is a very strong sense of the memoir itself as part of an ongoing struggle, as a socially *useful* document. In *Hell Hole, Robben Island*, the dedication suggests the nature of the intended audience:

Dedicated to Sobukwe, to all Azanian patriots who are languishing in prison, and to those who died at the hands of the police and in prison in their noble struggle for a free Azania.

In his introduction to *Island in Chains* (2000), Indres Naidoo gives some indication of the social uses of his prison autobiography, originally published in 1982:

Island in Chains was immediately banned in South Africa. However, ANC underground units managed to smuggle hundreds of copies of the book into the country. It was much sought after. In the Western Cape activists used the book in their underground political study groups. In the Johannesburg and Pretoria area comrades made photocopies of the book which went from hand to hand all over the country. (xii-xxii)

In contrast to this strong sense of audience and social context, the addressee of post-apartheid memoirs is often much more tenuous. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela's original reason for writing the memoir is unambiguous, and his intended audience obvious:

One day, Kathy, Walter and I were talking in the courtyard when they suggested that I ought to write my memoirs. Kathy noted that the perfect time for such a

book to be published would be on my sixtieth birthday. Walter said that such a story, if told truly and fairly, would serve to remind people of what we had fought and were still fighting for. He added that it could become a source of inspiration for young freedom fighters. (567)

The themes here are familiar ones: the autobiography is in a sense *collaborative* (Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu enjoin Mandela to write his story, and help him to edit it, hide it and smuggle it out of prison), it is designed as an instrument of struggle, its realism serves a political end, and its readers are “young freedom fighters”. However, who is the addressee of *Long Walk to Freedom* in 1994, in the post-apartheid moment? Mandela explains that while the original notebooks were smuggled out of prison, they were lost in Lusaka:

I heard nothing from Lusaka about the manuscript and still don't know precisely what Oliver did with it. Although it was not published while I was in prison, it forms the basis of this memoir. (572)

These “lost notebooks” function as a kind of interposition in the text, they mark the memoir as *reiteration*, a *repetition* that carefully maintains the imprint of its original historical conditions of its production even as it raises itself above these original incentives. The memoir maintains a complex ambiguity where it is both acutely conscious of the historical contingencies that govern it, *and* in excess of these

contingencies. It is not so much that the original context has been erased, as that it has been supplemented. In the process, both the narrator and the addressee become *universalised*; the voice that addresses the reader arises for no particular reason from some indefinable, interior space, and it addresses a vague, inclusive readership. It should also be noted that if the more recent autobiography contains vestiges of its “collaborative” authorship on Robben Island, this collaboration is supplemented by the fact that it is also in part *ghost-written* by Richard Stengel: that is, the earlier collaborative voice is extended to a form of collaboration that is by its very nature invisible, and directly related to the requirements of marketing the text.

We see a similar process at work in a text like Jan Coetzee’s *Plain Tales from Robben Island*. The very title implies that earlier tales, for all their claim to veracity, were *not* “plain tales”: that they served an ideological purpose, that their narrators enjoyed some kind of special status. This book carries all the trademarks of a poststructuralist reappraisal of history that seeks to denounce metanarratives and resurface the localised, textured experience of ordinary life. Coetzee claims that his book “focuses on individual people” (1), that it provides “a door to understanding the grassroots experiences of the large number of ‘ordinary’ Robben Island political prisoners” (4). In fact, the stories are of fairly limited interest, and hardly surprise with new, startling revelations. Many of Coetzee’s claims are exaggerated and some are simply wrong.¹

¹ For instance, his claim that “[n]ever before has it been documented that 361 young political prisoners underwent customary circumcision on Robben Island” (11) is off the mark – while Mandela certainly de-

The stories have the appearance of spontaneous autobiography, but on closer reading they are obviously cobbled together from interview responses, as evidenced by comments such as “You ask me where did it all start?” (14) The theoretically fashionable focus on the ordinary and the everyday creates the illusion of voices that speak in some unprompted way about the everyday micro-politics of prison life, about their interior lives, about their friendships, about their “traditional culture”, and so on. In its attempt to escape from metanarratives, *Plain Tales* falls prey to one of the signal Western metanarratives: the naturalisation of the autobiographical voice, which it achieves through the suppression of the conditions that govern the emergence of the “I” that speaks.² In his foreword to the book, Mandela betrays some of the ironies that underpin *Plain Tales* when he comments that “[t]he stories themselves are re-told by the author in such a way as to capture the authenticity of the spoken word” (v). The “authenticity” of the spoken word has to be *represented* in a *re-telling* of the “original”.

Ultimately, what distinguishes post-apartheid memoirs from apartheid memoirs is not so much a determinate difference in content as this shift towards a naturalised

emphasises the practice of circumcision on Robben Island, he does mention it in *Long Walk to Freedom*, and notes that “[i]t was a rite that strengthened group identification and inculcated positive values” (511).

² In fact, any attempt to uncover the everyday texture of life on Robben Island, to penetrate the demagoguery and censorship that obscure “real life” on the island, is necessarily misguided. In the South African parlance of resistance, Robben Island enjoyed importance as an almost spiritual site of pilgrimage and suffering, as attested to by stories like Matshoba’s “A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana” (1979). Prisoners were well aware that they were entering a space of exceptional symbolic significance, a “place of martyrs” (Zwelonke 13). From the outset, they adapted their identity to accord with the status of the island: as much as the island is retrospectively reinvented in prison memoirs, the lives that are described by these autobiographies are *always already invented*, their subjectivities oriented towards the role imposed by the island as metaphor for resistance and survival. It is simply not possible to isolate some anterior, authentic experience of Robben Island, because such an “authentic” experience is from the outset anticipative of historical judgment and marked by an element of the fictional.

autobiographical voice addressing a universal audience. As the role of social context becomes de-emphasised in post-apartheid memoirs, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the social and historical moorings of the voice that speaks, to notice the particular tensions that produce it. It is not so much that more recent accounts of Robben Island are historically “incorrect” as that their compelling promotion of a normative self, a “good” New South African citizen, belies the specific conditions that allowed and conditioned the emergence of such a self. It is therefore necessary not to read post-apartheid memoirs “against” apartheid memoirs, but to read them *alongside* one another.

A first important point of commonality across Robben Island memoirs is the *agonistic* nature of the identity that they posit. Robben Island comes to embody apartheid ideology – metonymously, the rules of Robben Island represent the rules of apartheid, and the struggle for rights and dignity on Robben Island exemplifies the struggle for rights in South Africa. As Mandela observes:

I was in a different and smaller arena, an arena for whom the only audience was ourselves and our oppressors. We regarded the struggle in prison as a microcosm of the struggle as a whole. We would fight inside as we had fought outside. The racism and repression were the same; I would simply have to fight on different terms. (464)

Seemingly, identity on Robben Island is constructed through a systematic rejection of every aspect of apartheid ideology as it is manifested on Robben Island: prisoners simply refuse all attempts to interpellate them. However, a closer reading of the texts soon reveal a more complex interrelationship between the discourse of power and the forms of resistance that inform many Robben Island autobiographies.

An incident that occurs during the early years of Mandela's incarceration on Robben Island provides a useful demonstration of this point. The prison officials give the prisoners some worn jerseys to fix, instead of their normal hammers for work in the courtyard. The prisoners soon discover that the reason for this change in routine is a visit from two journalists from the London-based *Daily Telegraph*. Mandela observes that the prisoners treated this visit with skepticism, since "they were brought in under the auspices of the government" (470) and since the *Daily Telegraph* had a reputation as a conservative paper. Mandela comments that "it was in the government's interest to show that we were not being mistreated" (470). Nonetheless, Mandela consents to be interviewed, and talks candidly about the Rivonia Trial and about prison. When he is asked whether the photographer could take his picture, he reluctantly consents because he feels that friendly publicity abroad might do the liberation cause some good. On an earlier occasion, he invokes prison regulations in order to refuse that a warder take his picture "on the ground that it is generally demeaning to be seen as a prisoner" (469).

What makes this brief encounter interesting is the way it shows Mandela's preoccupation with the gaze and control over representation. In the first interaction with the warder, Mandela simply refuses to have his image appropriated and used by the prison. He insists on maintaining control over his own representation. The second encounter is less clear-cut. On the one hand, Mandela insists on a degree of influence over the picture by insisting that Walter Sisulu should join him (470): in this, he refuses the individualising operation of the prison and composes an image of solidarity and co-operation (a gesture that underpins the entire autobiography). On the other hand, his acerbic remark that "the reporters were barely out of sight when the warders removed the jerseys and gave us back our hammers" (471) serves as a reminder that the picture is ultimately staged by the prison, and the fact that he "never saw the article or heard anything about it" (471) underscores his lack of control over the use of the picture and the meanings it was made to generate. In this instance, it is difficult to say with finality who has power over the image, or whose agenda is ultimately being served: the picture is marked by a worrying ambivalence, an uncertainty appertaining to ownership and control. It demonstrates how even the most oppositional model for identity invariably threatens to become entangled with the operation of power.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the agonistic identity constructed across many Robben Island memoirs is the insistence on a collective identity against the prison's attempts to individualise prisoners. Mandela's description of the role of solidarity is echoed in almost every account imprisonment on Robben Island:

Our survival depended on understanding what the authorities were attempting to do to us, and sharing that understanding with each other. It would be very hard, if not impossible, for one man alone to resist. I do not know that I could have done it had I been alone. But the authorities' greatest mistake was to keep us together, for together our determination was reinforced. We supported each other and gained strength from each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing whatever courage we had individually. (463)

As Schalkwyk notes: "It is one of the reiterated and paradoxical platitudes of prison writing and its criticism that prison both depersonalizes the individual and renders communality indispensable" ("Writing from Prison" 280). Throughout *Long Walk to Freedom*, the "I" of the narrator slips into a collective "we": Mandela constantly speaks on behalf of a community, in direct contrast to the prison's explicit injunction that prisoners are allowed to speak only on their own behalf.³ In *My Fight Against Apartheid*, Dingake writes in some detail about the censorship of letters from Robben Island, and focuses in particular on the prohibition against the use of the word 'we'. After recounting the frustration caused by this kind of censorship, he notes:

³ According to Naidoo, "[d]epartment policy for warders was the same as it was for us: no one talked in terms of 'we'. Only in terms of 'I.'" (230) In many ways, the warders on Robben Island were treated rather like the prisoners, with severe punishments for infractions and a poor diet for bachelor guards (Naidoo 230). James Gregory, one of the Robben Island warders, points out: "Robben Island was more than just a prison for criminals and subversives, it was also a place of hardship for the warders. Being assigned to '*die Eiland*' was seen as a punishment transfer or the place where the prison department sent young recruits to judge how they could handle themselves" (147).

The problem with restrictions or prohibition of any sort is that they hardly ever achieve their purpose. Every measure has its own countermeasure, every weight has a counterweight, every action has a counteraction. The victims of self-censorship developed styles of letter writing that meant absolute nonsense to the censors and yet were sensible and informative to the correspondent. If 'we' was objectionable as the plural of 'I', many ways, varied construction in syntax and grammar existed to convey the same 'we' concept. It was an exercise in futility.

(168)

Dingake's point here is astute: as much as the separation of prisoners from one another is effected *physically* (through isolation cells and prohibitions against communication), it is effected *symbolically*, through language. But language is flexible and inexhaustibly expressive: in this case, resisting individualisation takes the form of a grammatical detour, a form of expression that inhabits the oppressive grammar of the prison even as it eludes it. A subversive communal voice is in a sense always available in the interstices and equivocations of the language of the prison.

In order to ensure the coherence and stability of this imagined oppositional community, prison memoirs often underplay divisions among political prisoners and produce fairly static subjectivities. Mandela's description of watching films on Robben Island illustrates something of this process:

The authorities seemed to have a weakness for historical films, particularly ones with a stern moral message... We were intrigued by *The King and I*, for to us it depicted the clash between the values of East and West, and seemed to suggest that the West had much to learn from the East... Later, we were permitted to select documentaries – a form that I preferred – and I began to skip the conventional films... I was particularly affected by a documentary we saw about the great naval battles of the Second World War... What moved me most was a brief image of Winston Churchill weeping after he heard the news of the loss of the British vessel. The image stayed in my memory a long time, and demonstrated to me that there are times when a leader can show sorrow in public, and that it will not diminish him in the eyes of his people. (596-597)

On the one hand this anecdote suggests the possibility of multiple reader positions and divergent interpretations. The “stern moral message” the prison authorities hoped to impart by screening *The King and I* was almost certainly not that “the West had much to learn from the East”. This departure from the “preferred reading” is, however, not idiosyncratic but consensual. It is not Mandela offering this reading, but the ubiquitous “we” who apparently agree on this “dissident” understanding. While the subversive polysemy of the text is acknowledged and utilised, the range of possible readings is curtailed in the service of a communal understanding. Where Mandela reintroduces an

interpreting “I”, one who “skips conventional films”, it is soon subsumed by the figure of the leader, undiminished under the gaze of his people – an eminently public “I”.

When Mandela receives the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize not as a tribute to his personal contribution to the struggle, but on behalf of “all South Africans and especially... those who had fought in the struggle” (Mandela 734), the collective is extended to the level of the nation. It is for precisely this reason that *Long Walk to Freedom* functions as both an exemplary South African prison memoir and a seminal post-apartheid nation-building document: in the face of a history of division and individualisation, it posits an “us” that in due course became a kind of blueprint for a new national identity – one that is ultimately so expansive that it includes even the former oppressors. However, as in the case of the photograph, the collective retains an ambiguous relationship to the discourse of the prison, and remains haunted by a sense of uncertainty and division.

Black activists were not individualised successfully by the apartheid prison partly because they resisted the process, but also because the prison resisted interpellating them as individuals, and largely refused to concede that they had a subjective interiority at all. While a leader like Mandela was still accorded a minimal “special status”,⁴

⁴ Neville Alexander explains the way this hierarchy operated by the mid 1970s: “... the prisoners in the single-cells section are treated much more politely (albeit grudgingly so) than those in the general section, and these in turn are treated much better than those in the ‘Terrorist Section’, the inmates of which are even now treated with the most offensive contempt imaginable. Moreover, even within sections there are often great variations of response. The same warder who might have been swearing and cursing at one prisoner could the very next moment approach one of the more well-known or ‘influential’ prisoners in a completely different manner” (26).

ordinary prisoners were frequently physically brutalised (at least until 1967) and constantly verbally abused and denigrated. Neville Alexander points out in his *Robben Island Dossier* that “there is no doubt that until 1965 in its intention, and until 1967 in practice, South Africa’s penology was largely retributive” (12). As Buntman maintains:

In theory, imprisonment is meant to rehabilitate a prisoner... In the case of political prisoners in South Africa, the state had little hope of ‘rehabilitating’ them. This would have involved a renunciation of the anti-apartheid struggle and an acceptance of the racist perspective of the gaolers. (“Resistance 1963-1976” 111)

The gaolers did not in general regard political prisoners as distinct individuals who could be “reformed”, but tended to see them as an amorphous, threatening mass, as wholly other. In his rather awkward tale of political conversion, *Goodbye Bafana*, James Gregory, one of the warders on Robben Island, describes his original impression of the political prisoners:

The dreaded Poqo: the band of criminals who had turned our beautiful land into a desperate battleground. Who were responsible for turning black man against white man. Who had made it very clear that they wanted what we had, earned by the blood and sweat of our forefathers... I wanted them to be hanged, for my

country to be freed from their evil. (8)

If it was possible for political prisoners to invoke the sense of the collective, it was in the context of a punitive prison discourse that was not entirely inimical to the idea of collective identity.⁵ In the Benthamite model, individualisation is closely tied to the ambition to reform, and the apartheid prison was at best inconsistent in its pursuit of this goal. To a certain extent, the almost feudal attitude of the warders on Robben Island encouraged an awareness of commonality among the political prisoners, a sense of shared aims and ideals. While the official discourse of the prison promoted the notion of the penal institution as a site for the production of rational, reformed individuals, the prison often adhered to a completely different model in private: in fact, it is one of the characteristics of the apartheid prison that it is split in this way between a façade that seems consonant with Enlightenment notions of imprisonment while its true operation proceeds in a completely obverse manner. As Chapter 5, “Solitary Confinement”, illustrates, such a split operated both within single penal institutions and *between* institutions. Since at least the end of the 19th century, the racial segregation of prisons supported two completely different models of incarceration: one that was essentially punitive and one that was at least nominally preoccupied with

⁵ This kind of characterisation of prison warders’ attitudes appears consistently over a wide range of prisoners’ texts. For instance, Neville Alexander cites a warder saying that “rehabilitation is a swear word. No prisoner has ever been rehabilitated, not even White prisoners. The people at headquarters are merely playing housey-housey when they come with all their bird-brained, unrealistic schemes. A prisoner is a pig and he must be treated as such!” (96) In *Plain Tales from Robben Island*, Joseph Faniso Mati notes that for the warders, “a kaffir was a kaffir – you have got to mistreat him” (Coetzee 19). He goes on to explain that the warders “never made any effort to try and change us. What happened was that we were the people who tried to change the warders. We told them point blank that a prison sentence cannot rehabilitate us” (Coetzee 19).

“rehabilitation” and “reintegration”. In this sense, Dingake’s ability to enunciate a shared identity by varying syntax and grammar construction is enabled not merely by the polysemic quality of signs, but also by the fundamental *indifference* of the prison to the purported purpose of its own rules. The prohibition against the use of “we”, in other words, is purely *formal*: as Dingake implies, the rule is enforced in a mechanical way so that its purpose is more to inflict “humiliation upon humiliation” (Dingake 167) on the prisoners than to effect individualisation.

In other ways as well, the prison often inadvertently facilitated the sense of group identity eroded outside its walls by banning orders and the difficulties of living “underground”, on the run from authorities, and by general divisive apartheid legislation. Mandela describes the cell he shared with other political prisoners in Johannesburg in 1956, when he was charged with treason:

Suddenly there were no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or Africans, no rightists or leftists, no religious or political leaders; we were all nationalists and patriots bound together by a love of our common history, our culture, our country and our people... In that moment we felt the hand of the great past that made us what we were and the power of the great cause that linked us all together. (235)

A similar sense of the prison as a place where imposed differences are collapsed runs through many of the Robben Island memoirs, although not always with Mandela’s

idealism. The idealism is almost entirely absent from Dlamini's *Hell-Hole, Robben Island*, and much more complexly described in Dingake's *My Fight Against Apartheid*. When Dingake is locked in a communal cell in the Johannesburg Fort, he expresses a modest pleasure at being among people:

Now here I was in a dim-lit No. 4 cell crowded with fellow awaiting-trial prisoners who had appeared in court that day and were remanded in custody. It felt good to be among so many people after almost 12 weeks of isolation. I knew it was a matter of time before I would recognise an old acquaintance, maybe a former friend, in the cell crowd. That would be super. (125)

However, Dingake also describes the Fort as a "crime factory" (123) and describes the chaos and intimidation that characterised his weekend in the communal cell:

During the weekend I witnessed some of the most callous bullying of prisoners by fellow prisoners in the communal cells. Hardened prisoners, for sheer sport, bullied, terrorized and assaulted newcomers to prison... When the ganging up against the cheeky ones took place, an impromptu choir would be organised to sing some tune. Harmony or discord in the music did not matter, what mattered was the noise to drown the heartrending cries of the victims of assault. I escaped

the assaults, not through Saint's intercession but thanks to the 'clevers' who knew me in Sophiatown or Alexandra (124).⁶

Dingake's community is fractured and constantly shifting – the prison affords the possibility for a kind of community, but it is a community held together by strategic alliances and pulled apart by power play. While singing often serves to forge a sense of comradeship in South African prison memoirs, the singing in Dingake's cell in fact disguises an assault. To a certain extent, Mandela's ideal community reflects a certain *potential* for affiliation enabled by the prison (a potential registered also by Dingake), but de-emphasises the complex reality of this kind of fellowship. It is worth remembering, in this respect, that Mandela spent a large part of his sentence on Robben Island in a single cell, and was therefore somewhat inured from the day-to-day negotiations between people who are forced to share an enclosed space.

While the prison's drive towards individualisation was actively resisted through the constant hard labour of manufacturing a cohesive collective identity, the prison ambiguously also *occasioned* and *demande*d a kind of communality. While it would be incorrect to claim that the sense of solidarity portrayed in *Long Walk to Freedom* and

⁶ The apartheid government's experiment of mixing non-political criminal convicts with political prisoners was abandoned on Robben Island in the mid-1960s. The apparent aim, namely to demoralise political prisoners, seemed to be backfiring (see below). Nonetheless, the presence of non-political prisoners was clearly a source of distress and apprehension for the political prisoners. One is struck by the vehemence of Dlamini's description of criminal convicts as "wretches – dregs of humanity who had been crushed by the system and had been brought by our political opponents to come and demoralise us, turn us into homosexuals and make us opt for Bantustans" (165). In his account, the non-political prisoners seem to function as screens for the projection of fantasies of alterity – he hardly allows them any humanity whatsoever.

other prison writing is simply an immediate epiphenomenal reflection of the discourse of power in the prison – in Jameson’s terms, an “unreflected unity” (*Political Unconscious* 41) – it would also be misguided to claim that it exists in a completely autonomous or entirely adversarial relation to this discourse. In fact, neither the formation of a transgressive unity nor the discourse of the prison are stable practices: both are haunted by structural antinomies and moments of equivocation, and both ultimately refer to and emanate from the same contradictory inner logic of apartheid.

If the utopic communality espoused and enacted in *Long Walk to Freedom* and in other Robben Island memoirs generally seems stable and cohesive, this is often undermined by moments of uncertainty and tension.

Firstly, it is not always clear who is included under the rubric “we”. One of the most problematic lines of demarcation is between the political prisoners and the general prisoners. While the prison occasionally mixed political and criminal prisoners in order to undermine and intimidate political prisoners, this practice eventually became less common and stopped altogether with the removal of gang members from Robben Island in 1965 (Dlamini 164). As Buntman points out, most prisoners believed that non-political convicts were eventually removed “because the political prisoners had begun to neutralize, politicize, and even recruit them into political organizations” (*Robben Island* 41). For Mandela, the criminal prisoners occupy a tenebrous position

on the very periphery of his sense of communal identity. He describes his intermittent contact with criminal convicts near the lime quarry:

Although our work at the quarry was meant to show us that we were no different from the other prisoners, the authorities still treated us like the lepers who once populated the island. Sometimes we would see a group of common-law prisoners working by the side of the road, and their warders would order them into the bushes so they would not see us as we marched past. It was as if the mere sight of us might somehow affect their discipline. Sometimes out of the corner of an eye we could see a prisoner raise his fist in the ANC salute.

(480)

Here Mandela outlines the equivocal way in which the prison locates political prisoners: on the one hand they are simply “criminals”, ostensibly the same as the common-law prisoners on the island. On the other, they are anxiously separated from the criminal convicts, and accorded a special status. For Mandela, who is suspicious of all the prison’s attempts to divide and classify,⁷ the criminal convicts’ ANC salute betokened the possibility of solidarity, a sense of a community that transcends the prison’s categories. Nonetheless, in this extract and throughout *Long Walk to Freedom*,

⁷ He notes: “We despised the classification system. It was corrupt and demeaning, another way of repressing prisoners in general and political prisoners in particular” (Mandela 473).

the criminal prisoners remain a “them”, “raw material to be converted”, (484) but at the same time never trustworthy, always potentially in collaboration with prison officials.⁸

In many earlier prison memoirs, the situation is less ambiguous: the criminal prisoners are simply entirely other; the collective identity of the political prisoners is formed as much in opposition to the criminal convicts as to the racist warders. Zwelonke describes the criminal convicts as “servile, ignorant, selling each other for favours, full of fear, every man for himself” (68), and his descriptions naturalise their criminality through reference to physiognomy:⁹

He had drawn features which told of his long years in prison, and thuggery was spelt out glaringly on his face, so that you might be inclined to agree with that Italian professor who said that incorrigible criminals are distinguishable by their features. His feet were crippled; they had permanently assumed, perhaps from childhood, the shape of a woman’s high-heeled shoe. (61)

For Dlamini, the criminal convicts are simply the servile agents of the warders, willing to relinquish all dignity and integrity for the sake of self-interest. His original sympathy

⁸ For instance, Mandela recounts how he tried to help a convict called Bogart, who was assaulted by a warder at the quarry. However, Bogart was bribed and denied that the assault ever took place, humiliating Mandela in front of the commanding officer (485-486).

⁹ For more on Robben Island political prisoners’ recourse to criminal physiognomy in their self-definition, see Schalkwyk’s “The Rules of Physiognomy: The Convict in South African Prison Writing” (1998).

for their predicament as “products of apartheid justice” (23) is eroded throughout the memoir. He describes the constant fear of sexual assault on Robben Island (an aspect that is entirely overlooked in *Long Walk to Freedom*), and conjoins homosexuality to criminality. When he discovers that two PAC members are having what appears to be a consensual homosexual relationship – one which in fact stems from before their imprisonment – he comments that political comrades “are prepared to die rather than be made homosexuals” (132), and conducts some “research” into their background which reveals that they had been arrested for criminal offenses on an earlier occasion. He suggests that they joined the PAC in 1963 because “[t]hey had hoped that... there was going to be countrywide looting and burglaries and they had hoped to join the gang of looters and burglars, or possibly to lead them.” (133) The two men are severely beaten and ostracised by the other political prisoners. In this way, the division between political prisoners and convict prisoners is incessantly reasserted and policed. The political prisoners enforce a remarkably repressive and conservative notion of criminal delinquency, reinforced by physiognomical categories and beliefs about sexual orientation that are entirely consonant with apartheid criminology. The recoil from homosexuality of course also highlights the sense in which heterosexual masculinity is upheld as an implicit (and, certainly in prison, very idealised) norm both for the political prisoner and, by extension, the political activist. In fact, Dlamini’s memoir is of interest precisely because he occasionally renders explicit the more general unspoken understanding that tends to universalise heterosexual masculinity. In this sense, he reflects on and participates in the assumptions and exclusions that govern the

construction of political identities under apartheid as essentially *masculine* and *heterosexual*.

While Mandela seems to accept that criminal convicts become comrades when they become politicised, Dlamini never allows for the possibility of such a conversion. He refers to criminal prisoners who join the PAC in prison as “Poqo-criminals” (Dlamini 128), maintaining them as a separate category through hyphenation. He describes one such “Poqo-criminal”, Dum-Dum (the same criminal that Zwelonke describes above), at some length:

He appeared to me to be an imbecile. At school, he had been unable to catch up with other children in the grades and had early become a drop-out. Life as a thief had proved more attractive, since little intelligence was required there... He had not mastered the rudiments of speech. He lisped his words and was always incoherent. We did not understand what he said and I doubt whether the warders did... His physical shape was repugnant. Take a child suffering from kwashiorkor and turn it into an adult and you have a good picture of Dum-dum. He had tiny legs, a big extended belly, protruding but unequal buttocks; he had a big head with an ugly-shaped forehead, tiny lurking eyes, a small flat nose, with nostrils just big enough to inhale and exhale air. That was the complete outfit of the human phenomenon Dum-dum. (128-129)

What is conspicuous about this description is the complete absence of any sympathy, understanding or social analysis: Dum-dum embodies the grotesque condition of the hybrid. He is excluded by his lack of intelligence and lack of speech from any kind of belonging, and serves to mark, through his monstrous nature, precisely the impossibility of being both criminal *and* comrade.

The constant insistence on the line between political and criminal prisoners in these memoirs betrays, perhaps, an uneasiness about the legitimacy and elasticity of the boundary. Despite its use of stereotypes, Dlamini's *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* is characterised by an astute analysis of the origins of criminality and delinquency under apartheid. Dlamini's father's contention that "all the gangsters here in Jabavu... are... the products of the present system" (90) is echoed throughout the memoir. In Dlamini's father's account, the desire to join a political movement and the proliferation of crime in the township respond to the same root cause: the economic inequalities enforced by apartheid. While Dlamini chooses to join the ANC Youth League, his cousin Abel responds to his hatred of apartheid injustice by turning to crime. He frames his life as a gang leader as a form of action against oppression, in contrast to the apparent passivity of Dlamini's political involvement (94-95). When the criminals leave Robben Island, Dlamini uncharacteristically refers to them as "our fellow brothers" (166) and recalls his cousin. He comments: "I was never to be totally free of him. He would not be a thing of the past which would no longer gnaw at my thoughts." (166) In Zwelonke's *Robben Island*, Bekimpi explains how criminals are made by the system:

‘If you are not a sissy, if you are a toughy, that is, on a criminal offence, don’t hope you will get out when your term expires. So be happy that you are in for a political offence... That is the plight of the common African prisoner... A jailbird might start in on you, and if you turn to bash his jaws you invite a further charge. A raw criminal wants to compel you to a homosexual act. You lift your hand in desperation and commit murder. You’ll never see the outside again.’ (46)

In this account, the harsh conditions of the prison under apartheid *produce* criminality: being a political prisoner is in fact a defense against a process that would otherwise be inevitable. Read in this way, the differences between political and criminal prisoners are not quite as straightforward as they might appear at first. Dlamini transcribes the words of one of the prison songs sung by criminal convicts:

‘It is I who is the rogue – because I was born Black. I’m White society’s scourge – condemned to live under harsh prison conditions. And prison is the only place for me where every day in the morning our only consolation is to sing about parole – to yearn for parole – and to wait for the guerillas to release us from Robben Island Security Prison...’ (56)

If being black is a crime, then all the prisoners on Robben Island are in fact “criminal” convicts. *Hell-Hole, Robben Island* is extraordinary also for the way in which it intimates a kind of internalisation of this racist construction of “criminality”:

Last night I had a bad dream. It was so bad that I woke up at night and sat up, wondering about its meaning. It was the dominee again preaching... He was the only holy man and we were all rogues... The dominee was right. I'll have to turn my black heart to the White God. That is the only way in which I and those of my ilk can be saved. And the dominee will help us to repent. (104)

What Dlamini discloses here is the sense in which his demonisation and rejection of the criminal convicts attend on an uncomfortable unconscious identification with the criminals, on a recoil not so much from the apartheid prison's attempts to criminalise political prisoners as from the possibility of his own acquiescence to this interpellation. Dingake alludes to the same process of criminalisation in *My Fight Against Apartheid*:

Blacks are always in one prison or other. They cannot escape imprisonment for one moment. Blacks also know the prison of fear. They fear the whites. They fear the terrorist laws, the laws that terrorise them, brutalise them and turn them either into common-law criminals, political rebels or cringers and fatalists... All blacks are criminals, the interned and the uninterned. (123)

Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* does not really reflect on the origins of the criminal convicts. In general, *Long Walk to Freedom* takes pains to demonstrate an underlying commonality between all people – a commonality that implicitly extends to the common law prisoners. However, the realisation of sameness is frequently located at some future point, a utopic moment that will arrive once the differences are resolved. For writers like Dlamini and Zwelonke, the sameness is located in the *past*, in a common point of origin. The gesture that informs their descriptions of the common law criminals is one of *disavowal*, a horrified recoil from a deeply repulsive potential similitude. For Dlamini and Zwelonke, this recoil is all the more powerful for the fact that they constantly have to negotiate a relationship with the criminal convicts – in the leadership cells, where Mandela was kept, this was simply not an issue. To some extent, Mandela's more idealised account of the relations between people is assisted by his relative isolation from the sometimes vicious politics of the general section of the prison.

While the collective voice dominates almost all narration in the Robben Island memoirs, the collective is by no means a self-evident, stable category, but is a fraught and mutable concept, constantly troubled by the possibility of schism and dissolution. If communality implies inclusion, it also entails exclusion, and what is excluded inevitably maintains a threatening presence at the boundaries of identity. In his memoir *Memoirs of a Saboteur*, Ntoko Babenia reflects on the Afrikaans notion of "saamwerk", or "working together":

The term 'saamwerk' is old as the racial settler colonial rule. In English it probably means 'co-operation' or 'let's work together'. The Afrikaners got a narrow, twisted and sinister interpretation. To them 'saamwerk' means inform or pimp on your friends. For that you get treated a bit better and may even end up sleeping on a bed at the prisons hospital. The Big Fives, other gangster criminals, and even some politicians without commitment became pimps and had cozy work. (140)

When "cooperation" is given an Afrikaans inflection, the possibility of employing the terminology of communality or collaboration to create schisms, to instate hierarchies of power and privilege, and to exercise disciplinary surveillance over others suddenly becomes glaringly obvious.

Another obvious problem with the shared "we" of political prisoners on Robben Island is that political prisoners did not necessarily have a common ideology. In fact, there were sharp differences between ANC and PAC prisoners on Robben Island. Mandela takes care to point out the many points of commonality between political prisoners, but frequently also comments on what he considers shortcomings and errors in the PAC position. He characterises the PAC as "competitive rather than cooperative" (523), and "unashamedly anti-communist and anti-Indian" (523). Indres Naidoo is much more blunt in his appraisal of the PAC:

Politically there was never any chance of uniting with the PAC; their whole philosophy was totally opposed to the ANC vision of a totally liberated and non-racial society. They were hopelessly organised and penetrated by informers, split into a dozen factions. They had no coherent strategy; they simply reacted emotionally to situations. But we were prisoners together, had daily contact with each other and had to get on together socially. (218)

Naidoo's uneasy belief that they "had to get on" is imperiled by his sense of the PAC as factionalised and enfeebled by emotion: in effect, he tentatively extends the first person plural to include the PAC and simultaneously denies them the capacity to belong to a community at all. Buntman cites Sath Cooper's particularly pessimistic analysis of the feud between political parties on Robben Island:

When the sordidness of prison behaviour is examined there is little difference between common law and political prisoners generally. Where the former are often organized into deadly rival gangs, the latter are organized into often warring political groupings. (*Robben Island* 142-143)

Moreover, *Long Walk to Freedom* tends to downplay differences of opinion among ANC members. In particular, Mandela makes no mention of his long feud with Govan

Mbeki around the issue of participation in apartheid structures (Mandela believed that the ANC should entertain the possibility of supporting participation, while Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba firmly rejected this stance). (Buntman, "Resistance 1963-1976" 125)

Where Mandela describes differences of opinion, it is frequently in the context of a debate that results in consensus, or in order to make the point that the choice for unity should supercede localised conflict. For instance, Mandela decides not to act as a character witness on behalf of ANC colleagues who were beaten up by PAC and Black Consciousness Movement members in the general section on the grounds that "[i]t was more important to show the young Black Consciousness men that the struggle was indivisible and that we all had the same enemy" (580). While this comment seems to suspend judgement, it is of course framed as the expression of an inclusive ANC policy, with the ANC in a rather didactic and superior role. Mandela frequently represents himself in the objective role of a mediator. When confronted with the militancy of the young Black Consciousness prisoners after the Soweto riots of 1976, Mandela notes:

... just as we had outgrown our Youth League outlook, I was confident that these young men would transcend some of the strictures of Black Consciousness. While I was encouraged by their militancy, I thought that their philosophy, in its concentration on blackness, was sectarian, and represented an intermediate view that was not fully mature. I saw my role as an elder statesman

who might help them move on to the more inclusive ideas of the Congress Movement. (578)

In the face of ideological opposition, Mandela represents his own ideological view, which is fully conflated with that of the ANC, as the more mature, transcendent resolution. By presenting the Black Consciousness point of view as a kind of inchoate manifestation of the ANC position, he is in effect universalising ANC ideology. His role becomes to help others realise that their standpoint is always already the position of the ANC, which in turn is simply a resolved reflection of all possible points of view. In this way, the ANC's specific political stance starts to function as a stable position *above* the political, a position that might serve as the collective voice of a *nation* rather than a political faction. In *My Fight Against Apartheid*, Dingake positions the ANC in a remarkably similar way:

These apparently incorrigible criminals were very ordinary human beings playing brutes in a brutal environment. From the moment one of them recognised me as an ANC member and the subsequent talk I had with them about our obligations to each other as an oppressed group, our cell was transformed into a new cell, where peace and sensible social intercourse became the order of things... The principle of harmonious relations was further entrenched and consolidated by a series of talks I gave on the ANC, its aims and objectives. (128-129)

The apparently immutable difference of the “incorrigible criminals” is removed through reference to the aims and objectives of the ANC; the cell becomes a “new cell”, a harmonious society, only when Dingake is recognised as a spokesperson for the ANC. What is eroded is precisely the sense of the ANC collective as a distinct grouping with contestable principles: instead, the “we” on whose behalf Mandela and Dingake speak are also always implicitly “they”.

For Mandela, solidarity is ultimately about a kind of organic consensus, an inclusive agreement based on universal values. Other accounts of Robben Island, however, remind us that communality is forged against enormous difficulties and is by definition unstable and contingent.

This is not to say, however, that *Long Walk to Freedom* fails altogether to register these inconsistencies and contradictions. One of its most lubricious and complex categories is the first person singular, and many of the memoir’s most significant moments of tension occur in the passage from an individual to a collective voice.

From the outset, *Long Walk to Freedom* posits the self as inherently unsubstantial, and the experience of individuality as essentially negative. An early example is where Mandela describes his circumcision:

I looked down and saw a perfect cut, clean and round like a ring. But I felt ashamed because the other boys seemed much stronger and firmer than I had been; they had called out more promptly than I had. I was distressed that I had been disabled, however briefly, by the pain, and I did my best to hide my agony. A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain. (32-33)

As he is symbolically inscribed with a cultural identity, his individuality surfaces as an experience of shame – his transformation into Xhosa manhood attends on an act of concealment. This sense of individuality as a site of trauma is powerfully reinforced in the experience of solitary confinement in prison:

... I found solitary confinement the most forbidding aspect of prison life. There was no end and no beginning; there was only one's own mind, which can begin to play tricks. Was that a dream or did it really happen? One begins to question everything. Did I make the right decision, was my sacrifice worth it? In solitary, there is no distraction from these haunting questions. (494)

In fact, the trauma of solitary confinement is one of the few consistent themes across all prison memoirs: to a large extent, the craving for community that is so central to prison writing as a genre attends on the need to obviate the painful experience of institutional isolation. Subjective interiority does not offer some sort of humanist respite from the pressures of the public world: instead, the prison constructs interiority as the greatest

and most tortuous pressure. The interior life of the subject removed from all intersubjective bonds is experienced as the grounds of disintegration and madness. Implications of solitary confinement for the prison autobiography are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, “Solitary Confinement”.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela tends to avoid the realm of the private, and constantly translates the personal into the political. Even an innocuous private enjoyment of gardening is extended to a metaphor for public responsibility:

While I have always enjoyed gardening, it was not until I was behind bars that I was able to tend my own plot... A garden was one of the few things in prison that one could control. To plant a seed, watch it grow, to tend it and then harvest it offered a simple but enduring satisfaction... In some ways, I saw the garden as a metaphor for certain aspects of my life. A leader must also tend his garden; he, too, sows seeds, and then watches, cultivates and harvests the result. Like the gardener, a leader must take responsibility for what he cultivates; he must mind his work, try to repel enemies, preserve what can be preserved and eliminate what cannot succeed. (582-583)

In this passage, the direct experience of an “I” becomes the experience of a more general “one”, until the subject disappears entirely in a noun clause and re-emerges as the pastoral leader discharging his duties. Mandela only very intermittently voices his

personal feelings without articulating them to a conjoint sensibility or persuasion. When he does, it is mostly when he cites letters to his wife, Winnie, and one of his daughters, Zindzi. This is hardly surprising, since overtly political statements were censored from prisoners' letters by the prison censors. In an ironic twist, the reproduction of these letters becomes a way of smuggling the private and the personal out of the relentlessly "political" *Long Walk to Freedom*.¹⁰

Occasionally, the memoir registers some uneasiness with the assumption of a collective perspective. For instance, Mandela describes an occasion when Walter Sisulu brought Evelyn's brother to the office to discuss problems in Mandela's marriage:

We were discussing this issue cordially among the three of us, when either Walter or I used a phrase like 'Men such as ourselves', or something of that sort. Evelyn's brother was a businessman, opposed to politics and politicians. He became very huffy and said, 'If you chaps think you are in the same position as myself, that is ridiculous. Do not compare yourselves to me.' When he left, Walter and I looked at each other and started laughing. (241-242)

¹⁰ While Dlamini's *Hell Hole, Robben Island* also strives towards communality, it is often more candid about private fears and fantasies, and the adoption of a strong collective point of view is often quite strategic and contextualised, as, for instance, when Dlamini tells Captain Fourie that his views are "synonymous with those of the PAC" (135) in response to Fourie's clumsy attempt to "reason" with him. Dlamini's memoir remains preoccupied with the confusing immediacy of experience at the expense of a carefully deliberated ideological coherence.

While this rather inconsequential incident points to the folly of presuming a communal viewpoint, it also suggests that Mandela's brother-in-law had an inflated sense of self-importance. More often, Mandela stresses the importance of placing the group before the individual, even where there is a difference of opinion. For instance, when Mandela discusses hunger strikes in prison, he mentions that he found them personally counter-productive, but was often outvoted by his colleagues:

Once the decision was taken, however, I would support it as wholeheartedly as any of its advocates. In fact, during the strikes I was often in the position of remonstrating with some of my more wayward colleagues who did not want to abide by our agreement. (503)

Here Mandela not only concedes to the will of the group, but also becomes its active voice. Mandela represents this process as an entirely natural response to the prison's attempts to brutalise and divide its inmates. Through solidarity, the weak become strong:

Men have different capacities and react differently to stress. But the stronger ones raised up the weaker ones, and both became stronger in the process. (463-464)

It is interesting to contrast Mandela's notion of the collective as a space of safety and inclusion to Dlamini's somewhat harsher appraisal of the stakes of a shared identity. He describes being inspected on the morning after their first arrival on Robben Island:

The warder then moved up and down the lines looking us in our faces. We looked right in front of us pretending that we were ignoring him with our defiant faces. And then he stopped. He had found the weakest link in the chain. It was old man Tolepi. Years of working as a farmhand had tamed him. I'm sure when their eyes met, he smiled and blushed apologetically. He shouldn't have looked at the warder – he should have avoided his eyes. Since he was one of us, he had to observe our code of conduct towards the enemy. (Dlamini 23-24)

In Dlamini's narrative, the weak compromise the integrity of the group. Despite his obvious sympathy towards Tolepi, the modals of obligation imply a coercive relationship between the collective and the individual – what is missing here is Mandela's prominent sense that individuals *choose* to belong to a group. In Dlamini's world, the group asserts itself against the individual, sometimes even through physical violence.

Ultimately, however, Mandela's promotion of a shared identity should not obscure the ways in which the narrator of *Long Walk to Freedom* in fact incessantly strains *against* the idea of an unassailable collective. Often, the ennobling of the communal serves

precisely to mask the sense of individual agency which animates the memoir. After all, it is first of all a story about Mandela's escape from his destiny in traditional Xhosa society, and his refusal to submit to the will of others.

Where Mandela acts in ways that are really entirely idiosyncratic, he often displaces the "I" with the figure of the third-person figure of the leader who is, in a sense, the agent of the people. "As a leader," he notes, "one must sometimes take actions that are unpopular, or whose results will not be known for years to come." (Mandela 1996: 464) Mandela puts this philosophy into practice when he starts negotiations with the apartheid government. His description of how he takes this decision is quite extraordinary:

I chose to tell no one what I was about to do. Not my colleagues upstairs nor those in Lusaka. The ANC is a collective, but the government had made collectivity in this case impossible. I did not have the security or the time to discuss these issues with my organization. I knew that my colleagues upstairs would condemn my proposal, and that would kill my initiative even before it was born. There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way. Finally, my isolation furnished my organization with an excuse in case matters went awry: the old man was alone and completely cut off, and his actions were taken by him as an individual, not a representative of the ANC. (627)

In retrospect, *Long Walk to Freedom* can posit this deeply individual decision as the realisation of the will of the ANC, or the “right way” of historical necessity. The profoundly unrevolutionary (or perhaps post-revolutionary), nation-building agenda of *Long Walk to Freedom* necessitates this kind of understanding of South African history, where the “will of the people” is exercised in a logical, progressive and intelligible way through its individual agent-instruments. However, Mandela’s decision becomes the will of the people only *after* it has been made; it is the collective will only from the post-apartheid framework that this very same decision *inaugurates*. The individual choice, in a sense, creates the context that will allow the decision to be reinterpreted as communal. In fact, his “splendid isolation” (Mandela 626) from the ANC enables these negotiations, which he presents to Oliver Tambo, the actual leader of the ANC, as a *fait accompli* (Mandela 632). Mandela could act in a unilateral way because he was effectively isolated from the structures of the ANC:

I had concluded that the time had come when the struggle could best be pushed forward through negotiations. If we did not start dialogue soon, both sides would soon be plunged into a dark night of oppression, violence and war. My solitude would give me an opportunity to take the first steps in that direction, without the kind of scrutiny that might destroy such efforts (Mandela 625-626).

Both Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada agree “not to stand in his way” (Mandela 638), even though they feel strong misgivings about the path he is embarking on – hardly a ringing collective endorsement of his role as instrument of the people’s will.¹¹ At the moment of agreeing to negotiations, Mandela is alone – his decision deviated from the dominant principles informing the struggle against apartheid. Mandela’s decision is essentially excessive and unpredictable, an imminently – and perhaps characteristically – individual choice, in part enabled by the physical space of the prison.

In general, *Long Walk to Freedom* promotes a belief in rational individuals who are capable of making decisions for the common good from a standpoint elevated above ideology. In many respects, Mandela’s understanding of subjectivity accords with a typically *liberal* understanding, as propagated for instance by David Miller in his analysis of the position of the individual with respect to national identities:

... we always begin from values that have been inculcated in us by the communities and institutions to which we belong; family, school, church and so

¹¹ Lacan’s understanding of evolutionist and creationist thought is instructive here. For Lacan, evolutionist thought understands history as a “continuous process” that operates through “ascending movement” towards a “summit of consciousness and thought” (Lacan, *Ethics* 213). Creationist thought regards the historical signifying chain as a distinct order with its “own specific dimension of the memorable and the remembered” (Lacan, *Ethics* 214) brought into being through a disruptive act. Lacan sees evolutionist thought as in fact fundamentally misguided, a “form of defense, of clinging to religious ideals” (Lacan, *Ethics* 126), since it rests on the assumption that the summit of consciousness and thought was “there at the beginning” (Lacan, *Ethics* 213). In evolutionist thought, “Being [*l’être*] [is] always implied in being [*l’étant*]” (Lacan, *Ethics* 214). While Mandela’s act here can best be understood under the creationist heading – it is the disruptive founding of a new order – he represents it as an evolutionary moment, where Being (the inevitable logic of struggle) is implied in being (the actual decision to negotiate).

forth. As we come to reflect on these values, we find we can no longer adhere to some, we find tensions and contradictions between others, and so forth. Finally, we reach a point where we have established the competing demands upon us and established our own scale of priorities between the different values. At that point we have worked out our own distinct identity... we now have an independent vantage point from which we can define our relationship to the various communities and other sources from which our values were first taken. (Miller 44-45)¹²

The *Bildung* of *Long Walk to Freedom* is based on precisely such an awareness of the “tensions and contradictions” between different values – in Mandela’s case, the traditional values of his Transkei upbringing, the values of the mission school, the values of communism, African nationalism, and so on – that progresses through the exercise of reason towards the development of a “distinct identity” which occupies an “independent vantage point”. For Mandela, the culmination of such independence is, ironically, his isolation cell in Pollsmoor prison. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, the collective struggle for rights concludes with Mandela’s experience and exercise of *individual* autonomy: a pattern that Étienne Balibar identifies as the emblematic gesture of citizenship in the Europe of Enlightenment thought: “the property of the human

¹² Miller’s *On Nationalism* is purportedly written from a socialist perspective, but arrives at an analysis of nationalism that constantly uses classic liberal arguments (such as the one above). He does, however, reject the liberal notion of cosmopolitan individualism. In this uneasy fusion of liberal ideology and nationalism, Miller sometimes comes remarkably close to the point of view that Mandela develops in *Long Walk to Freedom*.

being is the *collective* or transindividual construction of his *individual* autonomy.” (12)

As much as the Mandela of *Long Walk to Freedom* is a product of a revolutionary movement of the African people, he is also a product of the liberal rationalism of the mission school – the same rationalism that underpins the Enlightenment fantasy of the prison as a space for the manufacture of individuals through a process of isolation, self-reflection and reform.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela never fully rejects this underpinning Enlightenment ideology of the prison, although he speaks passionately against its “pathological” excess. Frequently, Mandela’s sounds more like the Cartesian subject interpellated by the Benthamite prison – a man called before the inner Law – than like a committed revolutionary speaking on behalf of the people. When the generation of the 1976 uprisings arrive at Robben Island, Mandela comments:

These young men were a different breed of prisoner from those we had seen before. They were brave, hostile and aggressive; they would not take orders, and shouted ‘*Amandla!*’ at every opportunity. Their instinct was to confront rather than cooperate. The authorities did not know how to handle them, and they turned the island upside down... They chose to ignore our calls for discipline and thought our advice feeble and unassertive. (576-577)

Mandela's bewilderment at their "impertinence" (577) reveals the extent to which his agenda on Robben Island was *reformist* rather than *revolutionary*. The post-'76 freedom fighters' aim to make the country ungovernable extended to the prison. The idea of rejecting the very foundation of social order – in this case, the social order of the prison – is in many ways quite alien to Mandela's more restrained aspiration for change through debate, consensus, and localised noncompliance. To a certain extent, this reflects Mandela's roots in the more moderate ANC of the 1940s and 1950s,¹³ but of course it also reflects a leader's anxiety at the thought of an ungovernable populace: as much as *Long Walk to Freedom* recounts a struggle against oppression, it also establishes a framework for order and compliance that has to serve a new political dispensation. In the passage above, it is striking that Mandela positions the ANC leadership, for a moment, alongside the prison authorities: "The authorities did not know how to handle them... They chose to ignore our calls for discipline." One should not ignore, however, the underlying *admiration* that comes across in Mandela's description: this section of *Long Walk to Freedom* is marked by the dissonance that attends on a voice that speaks both on behalf of and against a particular principle of order.

¹³ Although it would be a mistake to see the historical difference in such simplistic terms. A writer such as Dlamini, for instance, constantly categorically denies the prison any kind of epistemological legitimacy. In his introduction to *Hell-Hole, Robben Island*, Bennie Bunsee summarises Dlamini's prison as a place where "your spirit is broken to accept the perverted logic of the oppressor" (Dlamini 9) and claims that Dlamini's memoir "describes a struggle between the temptation to acquiesce or to say NO" (Dlamini 11). This kind of binary logic simply does not exist in *Long Walk to Freedom*: in part it is consequent on the harsh conditions of Dlamini's imprisonment, and in part on the PAC's militant political stance. The '76 generation's refusal of order is simply more *visible*, in large part because Robben Island authorities were not governing Robben Island with the kind of brutal authority that they exercised in the early 60s.

Throughout *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela struggles against the obscene excess of violence that underpins life in prison, sometimes by invoking the rules of the prison, as when he refuses to have his picture taken:

I motioned to my colleagues not to move, and I addressed the warder: 'I would like you to produce the document from the commissioner of prisons authorizing our pictures to be taken.'... It was always valuable to be familiar with regulation, because the warders themselves were often ignorant of them and could be intimidated by one's superior knowledge. (469)

Mandela insists on a kind of enlightened disciplinary space, a prison that adheres to its own rules, its own purported reformatory goal. What makes the behaviour of the 1976 generation so shocking is their absolute rejection of the structure of the prison, their refusal to treat any of its disciplinary mechanisms with anything other than contempt. Mandela rejects what Foucault calls "the discipline blockade, the enclosed institution, established at the edges of society, turned inwards toward negative functions" (209) in favour of a "discipline-mechanism" (209), where coercion is more subtle and discipline is internalised and self-imposed. "In a way that even the authorities acknowledged," Mandela observes, "order in prison was preserved not by the warders but by ourselves" (464). The problem with such a notion of the prison as a benign space regulated by the prisoners themselves is that it allows the prison a kind of ontological priority and inevitability – in fact, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, the prison as a space of reform, where

both prisoners and warders strive towards a form of normative “humanity” under the gracious and understated guidance of the ANC, becomes the blueprint for a new nation. Such a concept of the prison appears in a number of Robben Island texts: Neville Alexander’s *Robben Island Dossier*, for instance, is more or less a plea for a rehabilitative rather than a punitive prison. He notes that even political prisoners, who do not need to be “rehabilitated”, would benefit from such a system:

Except possibly in certain prisons, the claim enshrined in the Prisons Act that rehabilitation is the goal of incarceration remains a dead letter... The term ‘Rehabilitation’ is used in its technical criminological sense here. In this sense, of course, it is not relevant to the treatment of political prisoners who, in general, are not anti-social. However, in South Africa, since the category “political prisoner” is defined by the authorities, such prisoners have always had a vested interest in the adoption and proliferation of programmes of rehabilitation in South African prisons, not only because of the intrinsic value of such programmes for many non-political prisoners, but also because the ethos and the spirit of rehabilitation have implications which positively affect the treatment of all prisoners. (12-14)

Foucault frequently reminds us that it is the *individual* who is isolated and addressed by the rehabilitative discipline-mechanism.¹⁴ In this respect, it is also remarkable to what an extent prison memoirs “individualise” when they adopt the language of rehabilitative criminology (especially with respect to the warders). Neville Alexander, for instance, employs the characteristic language of the prison biography in his description of Head Warden Carstens in an addendum titled “An Extreme Case of Bigotry” (96-98). In a more implicit way, the many stories of warders who are won over to the principles of non-racialism often involve a process of separation (where the warder is addressed alone) and individual conversion, an accession on the part of the warder to a minimal degree of humanity. In *My Fight Against Apartheid*, Dingake points out that “below the official level, individual inmates went on a systematic campaign to educate individual warders on our human dignity.” (150) James Gregory’s *Goodbye Bafana* (1995), the autobiography of one of Mandela’s warders, is in some ways a full realisation of this kind of “systematic campaign”.¹⁵ Rather than *rejecting* the underpinning philosophy of the prison, *Long Walk to Freedom* seeks in a sense to *universalise* it, so that all its inmates, from all political persuasions, both prisoners and guards, become fully subjected to its mode of operation.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Foucault 124-125; 170; 236.

¹⁵ In contrast, Zwelonke and Dlamini tend to resist the language of rehabilitation and individualisation. In their memoirs, the guards are rarely awarded the kind of humanity and interiority that would allow reform. Dlamini’s comment that they had to “tame the warders” (27) is a far shot from Mandela’s focus on the guards’ inherent but concealed humanity. Dlamini does speculate that after apartheid psychiatrists would be needed to “cure” hardened criminals, but his notion of “special rehabilitation camps” (165) sounds ominously Stalinist rather than rehabilitative in a Benthamite sense.

More significantly, towards the end of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela is himself completely individualised, separated from his comrades and under constant surveillance. Describing the panopticon, Foucault notes:

... in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy... they are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible... the arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order. If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences... (200)

In some respects, this is a perfect description of Mandela's incarceration in the 1980s, imprisoned in rooms that increasingly efface their status as prison cells, highly visible to authority and completely isolated from his colleagues:

Though my colleagues were only three floors above me, they might as well have been in Johannesburg. In order to see them, I had to put in a formal request for a visit, which had to be approved by the head office in Pretoria. (626-627)

It is interesting that his house in the Victor Verster prison becomes the floor plan for his house in Qunu after his release:

People often commented on this, but the answer was simple: the Victor Verster house was the first spacious and comfortable house that I ever stayed in, and I liked it very much. I was familiar with its dimensions, so at Qunu I would not have to wander at night looking for the kitchen. (728)

In the sense that the prison inscribes and effects its ideology through its architecture, Mandela's assertion that he built his Qunu house in imitation of his house in prison – because he was “familiar with its dimensions” – accrues a disquieting significance. The house at Victor Verster occupies a strange intermediary location: in some ways it marks the penetration of “normal” civic life into a prison that seems increasingly permeable and diffuse, and in other ways it marks the *spread* of the prison *into* civic life, the distortion of life “outside” by the logic of “inside”. At the end of *Long Walk to Freedom*, the model for a new South African nation seems similarly intertwined with the logic of a reformed prison, a kind of Benthamite utopia. Mandela seems to posit the transformed prison – a space for self-reflection, for reasonable co-operation with others, for responsible action and befitting diffidence, with the individual at its very core – as a model for the nation. In the same way that it is difficult to locate Mandela's house at Qunu – is it inside or outside? – it is difficult to assess whether Mandela's idea of a democratic nation interpenetrates his memory of prison, or whether it is precisely the experience of prison that generates a particular carceral model of the nation.

Ultimately, then, *Long Walk to Freedom* is traversed by disquiet and equivocation. The rather restrictive fantasy of the self-disciplining Cartesian subject plays a central role in

this memoir's construction of citizenship. Nevertheless, *Long Walk to Freedom* also reminds us that the individual understood as a point of *refusal* and *dissidence* has a radical potential: the "I" of *Long Walk to Freedom* is caught between an understanding of the subject as inherently docile and submissive, and an understanding of the subject as a locus of transgressive agency. Simultaneously, Mandela's autobiography is divided, despite its eloquent and influential attempts to downplay the difference, between the adoption of the individual and the collective as centres of meaning. These are ultimately antinomies and tensions that confront new understandings of the South African nation: on the one hand, the nation as a totalised, imposed category, and on the other, the nation as something that is invoked in spontaneous and constantly shifting performative acts of self-definition; on the one hand, an understanding of the South African citizen as an autonomous individual, and on the other, as a committed member of a revolutionary collective. The point is that these tensions are not *new* – they do not arrive from nowhere at the moment of the inception of democracy in South Africa – but are present already in apartheid-era prison memoirs, where we find the specific material practices that helped to give rise to the consciousness of nation that now seeks to name and naturalise itself.

FOUR: WOMEN IN PRISON

This chapter discusses the prison memoirs of a range of women prisoners incarcerated for various lengths of time between 1964 and 1982. Particular attention is paid to Ruth First's *117 Days* (1965), Jean Middleton's *Convictions* (1998), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989) and Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *In Prison Under Apartheid* (1988). Reference is also made to Helen Joseph's *If This Be Treason* (1998), Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1996) and Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary* (2001). Ruth First was detained in solitary confinement for 117 days in 1964, and wrote the diary soon afterwards while living in exile. Middleton was detained under the 90-day law in 1964 and sentenced to three years in prison in 1965. Emma Mashinini was the secretary of CCAWUSA, the shop and distributive workers' union, from 1975 to 1986. She was arrested under section 6 of the Terrorism Act in 1981 and spent six months in solitary confinement in Pretoria Central Prison. Caesarina Makhoere belonged to the younger militant generation of students that protested in 1976 against the government's plans to introduce Afrikaans as medium of instruction in schools, leading to the 1976 Soweto uprisings. She was arrested in 1976 and held for almost a year in solitary confinement before being convicted in 1977. She was released from prison in 1982. Of these memoirs, Makhoere's is perhaps the least conciliatory, reflecting the fully developed language of Black Consciousness that enjoyed pre-eminence in the later phases of the struggle against apartheid. Middleton's memoir, in

contrast, employs a more self-reflexive and analytical tone. This might, of course, be ascribed to the fact that the memoir was published three decades after her imprisonment, after the demise of apartheid rule. In this sense, it reflects a more general tendency in memoirs published after 1994 to shift the focus away from the necessity of ending apartheid rule towards a more historicising, investigative inclination (Meer's diary is another example).

As outlined in the introduction, this chapter is devoted specifically to women's experience in prison because the prison *manufactured* a separate domain for women, with its own rituals and rules. In this space, the femininity of the prisoners generated a range of anxieties, particularly because the sentimental ideal of femininity, in South Africa as elsewhere, never really accommodated the possibility of women as criminals or political prisoners. As I discuss in detail below, penal logic *linked* the "criminality" of women prisoners explicitly to their femininity: they were not womanly enough, or, in contrast, their femininity was seen as in some way constituting a pathological *explanation* for their "unruliness". Simultaneously, many male activists tended to see the struggle against apartheid as a confrontation led by men, despite obvious evidence to the contrary, such as the 1956 pass law march. Molefe Pheto, for instance, in discussing the roots of his identity as an activist, dismisses his grandmothers by observing that "they were two old sweet women I adored, but we boys belonged to the company of men" (215). Women autobiographers, then, find that their femininity arises as a troubling supplement to the imposed, universalised masculinity of the identity of

both prisoners and freedom fighters: in a certain sense, they are obliged to engage their femininity explicitly because it is so clearly entangled with, and also an obstruction to, the exercise of power.

Given the generalisations above, it is striking how remarkably *differently* the writers discussed in this chapter experience and recount their imprisonment. Part of this difference is ascribable to differences of historical context and personal background, but the divergence in experience and description attends also on the very different ways in which the prison treated prisoners from different cultural and racial backgrounds. Indeed, one of the functions of the apartheid prison was precisely to reinscribe notions of separate cultures and discrete races in the face of a mass struggle that attempted to remove these barriers. Thus Fatima Meer comments:

We were all women, but so classified and separated that we could not be women together: we were divided by the impregnable barriers of law and custom, in addition to race. (209)

One collective category that extended the possibility of transcending the prison and the apartheid state's division was precisely the category "woman", and all the writers discussed in this chapter test the oppositional power of this collective notion. However, the prison also *imposed* its own notions of a racialised and class-based femininity,

firmly imbricating these notions in the rituals and discipline of the institution. One problem confronted by these prisoners was precisely the problem of extracting the apartheid state's conception of femininity from an empowering, conscious appropriation of shared womanhood. In this sense, the problems collecting around the use and imposition of the idea of womanhood in the apartheid prison opens up to more general questions concerning the use of a culturally burdened collective concept in the practise of subjectivity and citizenship. On the one hand, "woman" is a *contested* signifier, a site of struggle. On the other, as this chapter will try to show, it is a sign of *membership*, in Raymond Williams's sense of the word as "describing an individual's positive identification with the society in which he [sic] lives" (75). Prisoners use the term in positive, strategic (and shifting) terms in order to counter the culture of the prison.

The prison addresses both First and Middleton as white and middle-class subjects, routinely linking these categories to their femininity. Consistent with the racial hierarchy of the apartheid state, both these women occupy positions of relative privilege in the arrangement of the prison. First is allowed to retain her suitcase, which contains a range of prohibited items: a tweezer, a mirror, a needle and cotton, her wrist-watch and her glass bottles of medicine (First 15). First implies that the male Commandant overrules the wardress's protestations and allows her to keep these items partly as an act of consideration that stems from his embarrassed reaction to her underwear:

The cell warden went off at the double. Red suitcase appeared in the doorway, tied up with pink tape. The Station Commandant started to finger through it, then recoiled when he touched the underwear.

‘She can have the lot!’ he said. (15)

From the outset, First’s status as a long-term political detainee, her middle-class background and her femininity are articulated – in this case, through the concessions allowed by the authoritative and manifestly male voice of the Commandant.

Throughout their detention, First and Middleton are accorded a special status.

Describing her cell at the Gezina police station, Middleton notes:

On the concrete floor were four felt mats and some blankets. In this, I was privileged, since the black men who generally occupied these cells got only one mat and one blanket each. I was there because I opposed apartheid, but it still worked in my favour. (38)

Later, she comments that the warders’ upbringing “had taught them to speak to whites as equals, in a courteous, friendly way” (88) and recalls a wardress who burst into tears because she couldn’t bring herself to treat Middleton and her colleagues with contempt,

since they were “just ordinary women” (88). In her memoir, First expounds on a similar theme:

I, a prisoner held under top security conditions, was forbidden books, visitors, contact with any other prisoner; but like any white South African Madam I sat in bed each morning, and Africans did the cleaning for the ‘missus’. (36)

It is clear from the writing of women like Helen Joseph, First and Middleton, imprisoned in the 1960s, that the apartheid prison found it difficult to interpellate them as delinquent or iniquitous. In fact, their very presence in prison precipitated a crisis of perception: one of the sentimental justifications of racial oppression hinged on the figure of the vulnerable white woman, a kind of bearer of civilised culture, whose protection necessitated the practice of apartheid. In the figure of the white woman freedom fighter, the apartheid state encountered an impossible conflation of the object of its self-justifying chivalric fantasy and the very enemy it had sworn to safeguard her from. During First’s disastrous attempt to make a statement, one of her interrogators loses his self-composure and rages at her:

‘You can count your lucky stars that we still have respect for women in our country. You could have been charged in the Rivonia case. But we didn’t want a woman in that case. We still have some feeling for women. We picked our accused... We picked our witnesses...’ (First 120)

The fact that First is a white woman, in this detective's eyes, places him in an absurd position where he is compelled to protect her against himself and the legal process that he serves. This deference to white women, of course, increasingly evaporated as the apartheid carceral system became more entrenched and the pretense of legality was abandoned in the 1970s and 80s, as shockingly evidenced by the letter-bomb that killed First in 1982.

If the prison tends to accord white political women prisoners an ambiguous middle-class status, First and Middleton vacillate between recognition of the artifice of their position and a kind of passive concurrence with this construction. Both memoirs disclose an uncomfortable awareness of the plight of other, less fortunate prisoners, but this awareness is also recurrently pushed aside. Thus Middleton, describing doing the laundry in Barberton prison, notes:

Nearly every week, at least one of the shirts – and usually a pair of shorts too – a came in caked and stiff with dried blood over the kidneys, from floggings.

There were also caked deposits of the yellow sulphur ointment that was applied after floggings. It was evidence of dreadful suffering, a sign that, while life was bad for us, it was far worse for others. I remember one morning when, faced with a shirt like this, Mollie couldn't stop crying. (85)

Like the sign that First sees reading “dead man banned” (First 87), these traces of suffering and deprivation intrude into a sphere that is generally carefully bordered by the architecture and discipline of the prison. They suggest other narratives, other experiences, that can often be recovered only from outside the prison. First, for instance, includes the story of Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle, the “dead man banned”, as a journalistic parenthesis narrated in the third person. Middleton’s description of the bloodied shirts is interesting for the way it displaces the reaction to the evidence of violence to someone else: it is Mollie who “couldn’t stop crying”, while Middleton simply remembers. In this way, she retains a sense of the narrating self as principally objective and impassive. Throughout Middleton’s memoir, and to a lesser extent First’s, there is a kind of detachment from the plight of others: it is registered, but it doesn’t seem to gain visceral presence in the text.

In contrast, Ellen Kuzwayo’s entire experience of detention is shaped by her awareness of the young women in the cell next to hers who, as section 6 detainees,¹ could not receive visitors, were denied proper medical attention and were subject to interrogation:

It was an invidious position, at my age, to listen to these young girls talking among themselves about their very terrifying plight... It was a heart-rending situation. Some days, hour after hour, I sobbed in vain, when the conversation of these children penetrated my cell. If I had my way, I would have fled from

¹ Section 6 of the Terrorism Act of 1967 allowed the security police to hold a detainee indefinitely without recourse to lawyers, their own doctors or their families.

hearing those innocent voices... There I was, with my own problem of being detained, as well as having to live beside these young girls – with all their thinking and suffering – when I had nothing to offer them. (Kuzwayo 203)

For Kuzwayo, the predicament of her own detention is placed on a level with the unbearable awareness of the presence of others who are treated with even more contempt than she is.

Of course, this is predicated at least in part on the conditions of detention. White women political detainees comprised an exceptionally small group of prisoners – especially during the early period of 90 day detention laws – who were therefore easily isolated and susceptible to scrupulous surveillance and control. First and Middleton were simply not in a strong position to forge bonds of solidarity with other prisoners.

Even so, it is remarkable how their often incisive cognisance of the prison's forms of interpellation is counterbalanced by an unexamined adoption of the role that the prison sets aside for them. Middleton, for instance, takes care to distinguish herself from prisoners convicted for common-law offences:

There are a few ways in which political prisoners are better off than those convicted of common-law offences. For one thing, they feel pride, not shame, at what they have done. In most cases, friends or families, or both, share this

feeling, and are happy to give what support and encouragement they are able to. In this way, our group was fortunate – more fortunate, certainly, than the often pathetic prostitutes, petty thieves and vagrants we'd known in the Fort. (112)

While Middleton justifiably attempts to draw a distinction between common-law and political prisoners in the face of the Department of Prisons' public refusal to differentiate between them, it is significant that she does it around the concepts of shame and community. Her logic implies that common-law prisoners *should* feel shame for their deeds, and don't deserve the support of their friends and families. In stark contrast, Caesarina Kona Makhoere declares: "all prisoners, black and white, are political prisoners, irrespective of the crimes that land us in the prison. It is the system that makes people hungry and illiterate. It makes people desperate" (103).

Ultimately, the prison ritualises identity in a manner that reproduces the performance of identity – of gender, of race, of status – in South African society. Women are separated from men and divided into different races. Middle-class women are interpellated differently to working-class women. Women perform "women's work" in prison – specifically, washing, ironing, sewing and cleaning the prison. They are placed under constant scrutiny, and are more likely than men to be held in solitary confinement. As Middleton points out, "women political prisoners suffered more hardship [than men], not less, because the fact that they were few made it possible for prison authorities to isolate them, singly or in small groups" (118). Fatima Meer also notes that while her

male comrades at Modderbee prison were allowed to be together, the women prisoners at the Fort were held in isolation: “Do they consider us women more dangerous, hence our isolation from each other?” (58) Especially for white women, there is an intersection between notions of imprisonment and hospitalisation: thus when Middleton is moved to the Fort, she learns that her communal cell is called a “hospital cell” and the nearby administrative room is called the “surgery”, which allows the doctor to state under oath that the women detainees were held in hospital (54). First provides a graphic description of a common-law prisoner being confined in a strait-jackets despite her desperate insistence that she is not mad (32). Makhoere draws an explicit connection between the prison and a mental asylum, claiming that “[t]hese people had decided to treat us like mad people, but all identically mad, a uniform insanity.” (21) She describes how prison officials threaten to put an ill hunger striker in a strait-jacket, “as if she were mad” (33).

In their empirical study *The Imprisonment of Women* (1986), Dobash *et al* observe that the relentless surveillance, frequent use of solitary confinement and pathologisation of prisoners is in fact typical of women’s prisons under Enlightenment-influenced prison regimes:

It is clear that women in prison are more closely observed and controlled, more often punished, and punished for more trivial offences than are men in prison.

The options that are open to women in prison are limited. Domestic work has

been and still is the main work available to women in prison, whether its proposed aim has been to produce good servants, good wives, or most honestly, to keep the prison going... [W]omen offenders gradually came to be conceived as 'disordered' and 'abnormal', the yardstick of normality often being a stereotype of femininity. (207-208)

The memoirs discussed in this chapter constantly show how the rituals of prison are also rituals of femininity. The docile prisoner becomes conflated with a "properly feminine" subject: submissive, isolated, scrutinised and preoccupied with domestic routine. In this sense, it is interesting that while femininity is a kind of troubling *supplement* to the discourse of the prison – the prison is not a "woman's place" – the ideal compliant subject of a penal regime is a feminised subject. The technologies of control that characterise the prison space reflect the broader patriarchal social structures that govern the performance of being a woman. In this sense, the interrogation of the meanings and uses of femininity articulates with the scrutiny of the prison's specific forms of subjectivisation: thinking through the meanings of being a woman in prison becomes a way of engaging the manner in which the prison presents and disciplines the subject.

First and Middleton are perceptive in their analysis of the prison's construction of gender roles and hierarchies, even if they are curiously loath to resist the prison's roles.

First, for instance, often displays subtle insight into the ways in which gender roles and the exercise of power intersect. Her description of the “prize exhibits” that women prisoners are forced to wash is a case in point:

On the last line three large pairs of aertex underpants with nifty American-type press studs hung side by side. They were marked P.K. Le Roux. P.K. Le Roux is South Africa’s Minister of Agriculture. Suddenly the shot went home. The prisoners were earning the jail’s keep by taking in the washing of Cabinet Ministers, important civil servants, and well-to-do Pretoria families who were having a good laundry job done cheaply and were at the same time aiding the rehabilitation of the country’s reprobates. The women scrubbed for their sins the sheets of the Director of Prisons and the hand-towels of the myriads of civil servants who stamped, cancelled, and countermanded their passes and their permission to remain in the city; and I took my exercise amidst the underpants of the Minister of Agriculture. (66)

The burlesque focus on the Minister’s underpants simultaneously draws attention to the phallic nature of power and deflates its sanctimonious seriousness. First here connects the performance of women’s duties, prison labour, the exercise of bureaucratic and penal authority, and the prison’s hidden collusion with capitalist modes of production. If she literally takes her exercise amidst the underwear of apartheid functionaries, being surrounded by their washed underwear takes on a figurative dimension as well. In fact,

one of First's skills as a writer is her ability to recognise that the material practices and spaces of the prison are in reality coterminous with the figurative reality – the subjectivity – that the prison invents.

First is also conscious of the ways in which the prison's understanding of women prisoners' roles reflect, extend and realise a broader social "disciplining" of women. This is clear, for instance, in her description of the "Key Man": following a breach in prison security, double locks are installed on all the prisoners' doors. The wardresses are no longer allowed direct access to the cells of political prisoners. Instead, a special warder – the Key Man – is employed to guard the key to these cells. First notes:

The wardresses locked the prisoners in their cells, but were themselves powerless to regulate their incarceration. They had degenerated into skivvies, into messengers sent to fetch a man carrying a key ring. (26)

As First remarks, the double lock fulfils a dubious function in terms of utility, since the locks had always been impassable. She notes that "[i]t was human frailty, not steel, that had proved invincible" (26). Properly speaking, the apparent utility of the double lock system disguises an *ideological* arrangement where a male officer is put in a position of authority over the wardresses, keeping them under surveillance and dictating the kind of access they have to the spaces of the prison. First points out that all the actors in this arrangement are disempowered: the wardresses, since they have to ask for the key

whenever a political prisoner needs to leave the cell, and the Key Man, since “all he did was turn keys in locks, at the beck and call of those who might have yielded to temptation” (26). In this way, despite the variations in symbolic status, both the Key Man and the wardresses are subjected to a purely formal ritual which deploys social understandings of gender and uses the prison space in order to control the wardresses. Throughout the memoir, First is sensitive to the ways in which not just the prisoners, but all the officials in control of her incarceration are made to play particular social roles. In her memoir, Fatima Meer also comments on the way gender and race hierarchies determine the status of prison officials:

Within the prison, authority was exercised through women – through the superintendent down to the wardresses and vangaashes, but the line of command went beyond the prison and there it was all male, albeit invisible, from the State President to the lowliest police officer. (209)

For First, there is always the possibility of *using* the roles and structures imposed by the prison to her own advantage. Like many other prisoners, for instance, she points out that the key-hole that the prison officials use to look in at her, can also be used to look out (27). Similarly, she describes attempting to use conventional understandings of femininity to her own benefit. Thus when she decides to pull back from her decision to make a statement to the security police, she endeavours 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” (126).

If the prison creates particular “feminine” roles for its middle-class white political prisoners, it is notable that the prisoners often experience the rituals and masks of femininity as a form of *resistance* to the authority of the prison. Thus while the prison condones a specific notion of femininity – by, for instance, allowing prisoners to keep their make-up, read women’s magazines (Middleton 90) and encouraging “tidiness”, the façade of middle-class femininity is experienced as a barrier against dehumanisation and deviance. In an exceptionally complex way, the role that the prison demarcates for white women prisoners is seen by the prisoners as both an artificial imposition *and* a defense against the prison, a repository of authentic humanity.

Middleton describes the difficulty of maintaining a feminine appearance in prison and recounts the decision to appear “presentable” in court:

The Communist Party had been banned for nearly fifteen years, and we felt that, in the media and in popular mythology, communists figured as maladjusted, unreasonable and dangerous, different from ordinary, decent people. Looking presentable in public was a matter of pride. We were going to wear high-heeled shoes, sheer stockings, our most elegant dresses and appropriate jewellery. (62)

Part of Middleton's strategy of defence, in other words, is to appear in "ordinary, decent" (and, incidentally, middle-class) feminine apparel, resisting the popular fantasy of a "criminal", deviant physiognomy. Normative femininity functions here to refuse the logic of the prison, even while the "ordinary, decent" feminine subject is purportedly the reformatory goal of the prison. Middleton and her colleagues' calculated use of a conventionally middle-class feminine façade betrays their split interpellation by the prison: on the one hand, they are disciplined into particular normative feminine roles, but on the other hand they are constructed by the prison as in some sense outside the ambit of normality. Nonetheless, it is notable that their right to present themselves in this "feminine" role is never in doubt. In contrast, Caesarina Makhoere fights a legal battle around the issue of being allowed to wear "normal" clothes instead of the prison uniform of overalls and *doek* in court. When the magistrate orders her to wear a *doek* in court, she exclaims: "Why don't you tell white prisoners to wear *doeks*? What is it you are trying to hide on my head – or are you expecting me to hide my head from something?" (58) White women prisoners are allowed more control over their self-representation than black women prisoners: for white prisoners like Middleton, a middle-class feminine role is accommodated by the penal institution, while this role is entirely proscribed for most black women prisoners.

Femininity is also connected to humanity and normality in less calculated ways. First's mounting depression is symptomatically registered when she forgets to apply make-up before one of her interrogation sessions:

Van der Merwe was with Viktor, driving the car, and on the way through the city he said, ‘Why no I –’ and stropped himself. I knew what he was asking. Why had I put on no lipstick, no make-up that morning? This was the first time even in my detention, apart from the first day when I had no make-up because my suitcase was locked away, that I had permitted anyone to see me without make-up. I had simply forgotten that morning. (First 122)

Interestingly, First introduces the omission through the eyes of Lieutenant Viktor, one of her interrogators. Even though the import of her description is that she had stopped caring what she looked like to others, it is through her attention to the gaze of another that the lack is registered in the text. The ambivalence is carried through to her explanation of why she forgot to apply make-up: “I had simply forgotten” implies a lack of volition and agency that is belied by the intention suggested by the earlier “this was the first time... I had *permitted* anyone to see me without make-up”. Her failure to wear a feminine mask in point of fact draws attention to her femininity, evoking Viktor’s half-sympathetic, sexualising gaze. The rituals of femininity are constantly ambiguously poised as either a locus of agency and control, or as a form of social and penal coercion. In the instance above, even the failure to perform the ritual remains a radically equivocal act.

The ambivalence that governs femininity – is it an effect of the prison's interpellation, or evidence of some inner core of self that resists the prison? – is reduplicated in Middleton and First's broader relationship to *privacy*, to the notion of an interior self. When First is first imprisoned, she notes:

Aloneness and idleness would be an unutterable prolonged bore, but it was early to worry about that, and for as long as I could, I would draw satisfaction from the time I had, at last, to think! Uninterruptedly, undistracted by the commands of daily living and working. (16)

The prison compels First's withdrawal into subjective interiority by isolating and immobilising her, but she manages to regard this forced inward turn as a form of freedom. To her surprise, her inner life in fact fails to deliver a coherent or sustainable alternative to the public life of the prison:

This was the time I should have been able to feed on the fat of my memory, but I had always had a bad memory... and had relied all my life on pencil, notebook, Press clipping, the marking in the margin of a book to recall the source, a fact, a reference. Poetry that I had learned at school fled from me; French verbs were elusive... I put myself through a concentrated self-scrutiny but in a scattered, disorganized fashion and I found myself not with clearer insight into myself in this abnormal situation, but with a diffused world of the

past diverting me from the poverty of the present. I was appalled at the absence of my inventive and imaginative powers. (70-71)

Middleton finds that her inner life is similarly limited:

Before I was arrested, I'd thought I'd be able to keep my mind occupied in solitary by reciting poetry to myself, and by singing songs. I know a good deal of poetry by heart, and quite a few songs but, in that cell, I found the poetry had all gone, and so had the songs. (Middleton 40)

Indeed, as Schalkwyk points out, the isolated prisoner's recourse to interiority is anticipated and used by the modern prison with its emphasis on self-scrutiny, contrition and confession ("Chronotopes" 15). First and Middleton preserve a sense of subjectivity, a sense of an "inner self" that retains at least a minimal distance from the demands of the prison, insofar as the prison addresses them as if they have subjective depth. This is precisely what Žižek aims at when he asserts that

... an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: 'not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I

am also a human person' is *the very form of ideology*, of its 'practical efficiency'. (*Plague of Fantasies* 21)

Thus it is specifically when First begins to interpret her relationship with Viktor, her interrogator, as implicitly *romantic* that Viktor comes closest to fulfilling his interrogative function. Viktor treats her as someone with subjective depth who is not identical to her role as political prisoner, sexualising both First's mockery of him and the violence and inequality implicit in their relationship:

When his fist clenched I tilted my chin upward in mock acceptance of the blow.

He had regained control. 'I'd rather kiss it,' he said. (First 138)

A kind of *je ne se quoi* arises as a supplement to their relationship as interrogator and prisoner, an excessive, sexual quality born out of the mutual recognition of each others' inner qualities. However, it is this same excess, this sexualised fantasy of subjective depth, that brings First dangerously close to confession:

I loathed myself but it seemed I could not resist taking part in this exchange with another human being, talking, responding, proving I was not a caricature, a prototype, but a person. (138)

In this instance, First's femininity and her "inner self" are simultaneously excessive to the "normal" relationships that govern the prison *and* the very forms through which the prison fulfils its particular purpose. It is precisely by treating First as more than "just" a prisoner and by suggesting that he is more than "just" her interrogator that Viktor compels First to comply with the interrogation sessions.

In contrast, Emma Mashinini and Caesarina Makhoere are rarely allowed this kind of interiority. As black prisoners, they are subjected to a particularly brutalising, dehumanising treatment.

Mashinini's experience of prison is marked from the outset by humiliation. The most basic markers of politeness and reciprocity that would allow her some sense of dignity and self are lacking from the language of the prison officials and the security agents. "I was nothing but a Kaffir," she comments (74), occasionally contrasting their actual words to what she would normally expect another person to say: "Nothing like, 'Get yourself ready to go' or whatever. It was just 'Out' and out I went" (64), or, "Then, at the end of the questioning, they would just leave me. They wouldn't say goodbye or anything" (74). She understands the language of the prison through what it constantly *fails* to do. While she is never physically assaulted, she characterises her interrogation sessions as "emotional battery" (76). Although she is detained in order to talk, she is never really accorded a position to talk *from* in the same way as First or Middleton: she is essentially treated as an object rather than a subject, someone who is incapable of

functioning in a meaningful, autonomous way in discourse, who is at best capable of a kind of mimicry of human attributes and desires:

I put my hand out to say, 'Please, I'm dying,' you know, of thirst, and she made a joke out of this. 'She wants to chew because we are chewing.' She made a joke and she never gave it to me. (65)

Moreover, while the prison registers and responds to First and Middleton's femininity, one of Mashinini's first experiences of detention is of losing her status as a woman:

This was my first time of being handcuffed. I wasn't handcuffed the time when I left home. And I just asked, 'Has any woman been handcuffed before?' I had never seen a woman walking in the streets with handcuffs on. (65)

Similarly, Makhoere's memoir catalogues her consistent angry attempts to force the prison officials to treat her with humanity. She is acutely aware of the differences between the treatment of black and white prisoners, bringing it up at her trial for assaulting a prison wardress (Makhoere 70) and commenting on the kind of agency enjoyed by white prisoners: "they were feeling at home" (21). She unequivocally rejects the prison's construction of black femininity, refusing to wear the prison uniform of men's shoes and a *doek* "like housemaids" (21). She remarks that "a normal,

reasonable person could see that this was insane” (21). Throughout the memoir, she sustains a remarkable consistent notion of a “normal, reasonable person”, simply inverting the prison’s attempts to construct her as deviant by labeling the prison itself as mad. “I am not a prisoner” (45), she claims, disallowing the fundamental way in which the prison positions her. For both Mashinini and Makhoere, the prison and prison officials are relentlessly other. They are never addressed as individuals, and there is only very rarely a sense of recognition of a shared humanity between prison officials and prisoners.

Since the prison never invites individuated voices from Mashinini or Makhoere, or appeals to the interiority of self-reflection and contrition, it makes sense that prison is not experienced or recorded in an interiorised and interiorising way. In addition, the tradition of Black Consciousness writing that informs Mashinini and Makhoere’s writing de-emphasises individual experience in favour of collective experience. In this sense, the particular philosophical matrix that governs the writing of these memoirs colludes with the prison’s forms of interpellation to create a more communal sense of identity than in First and Middleton’s memoirs.

However, there are also significant differences between Mashinini and Makhoere’s accounts of imprisonment. Mashinini’s memoir contains more moments of ambiguity and uncertainty, and, as Driver points out, there is a distinct difference between the

older, narrating self and the younger self in prison that is altogether lacking in Makhoere's account ("Review" 352).

One of the most striking features of Mashinini's memoir is her intense sense of groundlessness and isolation. Unlike Makhoere, Mashinini was never formally charged, and spent her detention in solitude. Moreover, as part of an older generation of activists, she did not have access to the same practiced rhetoric of Black Consciousness as Makhoere, or share the uncompromising spirit of defiance that characterised the politics of the younger 1976 generation. Throughout Mashinini's memoir, one finds a struggle to identify an imaginary collective point of reference, a sense of a communally located self that is equipped to counter her isolation in the alienating world of the prison. Unlike First or Middleton, she simply finds no common ground with any of the prison staff. The prison functionaries, amalgamated by their whiteness, are almost indistinguishable, and Mashinini routinely rejects any attempt by security agents or prison officials to interact with her, refusing to respond even to routine enquiries about her needs, claiming "... they knew all was not well with me. They did not need to ask what was wrong" (64).

If Middleton finds that an impoverished external life leads to inner experiences adopting "a stronger, clearer reality than that of the external world" (Middleton 101), Mashinini experiences the inner world as impoverished and amorphous. When she is taken to prison, she comments that "Pretoria Central Prison was a place for people who

have been sentenced to death” (55), and indeed seems to experience her solitude as a kind of symbolic death, a state of complete abjection and estrangement:

I was cold. Everything was taken. I had a gold chain which my daughters had given me for my fiftieth birthday. That was taken. Everything was removed, up to my rings. I sat in that place with nothing to read. Just with myself. The bare me. (61)

While she catalogues the physical effects of confinement, she rarely narrativises her inner experience, avoiding what Schalkwyk terms “freely discursive and speculative modes” of self-consciousness (“Chronotopes” 25). Instead, she tends to represent her inner life through tautology (“I was myself” (62)) and repetition (“And the days went by. The days went by.” (70)). Her self is experienced essentially as a locus of passivity and discomfort: agency is recuperated only when it is possible to invent a collective identity, as when Neil Aggett’s death allows her to realise that she is not the only detainee:

And I started realising that there were many of us inside here. It made me feel braver. I all of a sudden just gained strength. (80)

Her moment of greatest abjection arrives when she forgets her daughter’s name (86), effectively losing one of her most visceral bonds with another person: the struggle to

remember the name, the sense of absence and obsessive longing exemplifies the experience of being a self without others in Mashinini's memoir: it is a state of loss and desire.

However, communal experience does not offer an entirely unproblematic ground for self-experience. When Mashinini's interrogators offer her food and coffee, she remarks that she "didn't want to be seen drinking coffee with these people" (74). On the one hand, she is refusing the possibility of any kind of reciprocity or community with her interrogators. On the other, she invokes in the passive voice an interlocutor who might see her drinking coffee with the police and judge her: the gaze of what she refers to elsewhere as "the community" (94). Throughout the memoir, there is a sense of being subjected to the penetrating gaze of the prison, of being constantly visible and exposed. Here, however, the scrutiny of the community – comrades, friends and family – is experienced in almost the same anxiety-provoking superegoic way as the depersonalising panoptic gaze of the prison. In fact, while Mashinini often invokes the collective as a space of agency and solidarity, it also sometimes appears as an oppressive power that seems to apply a coercive, internalised pressure very similar to that of the prison. Thus the frightening experience of lying in bed, trying to sleep, and then seeing "two eyes piercing" at her through the aperture in the door as if she is "an animal... in a cage" (64) – a powerful invocation of the disembodied, individualising gaze of the prison – is later echoed by the gaze of her own grandchildren, which is described in remarkably similar terms:

I had a picture of my grandchildren. I was excited to see this the first time. It came out of the books my husband brought me. But afterwards when I looked at the picture it seemed as though those children were talking to me and saying, 'Granny, what are you doing here?' You know what it is to be a grandmother. It's a very important thing. I became very anxious and I was ashamed to look at that picture. I put it right underneath the blankets and slept on top of it, and when I did that it was as though I was squeezing the life out of my own grandchildren. I just did not have anywhere to hide them. I didn't want to destroy this picture, but at the same time I didn't want to look at it because it hurt me. Their eyes were so pressing, as though asking me what I was doing there. (85-86)

Here the appeal to a shared understanding of what it means to be a grandmother is accompanied by the accusatory stare of her grandchildren. While Makhoere represents herself as an embodiment of the people's will, Mashinini often experiences the expectations of her family and her community as a difficult, external pressure, fearing that she might fall short of expectations and be rejected. There is always the possibility of straying outside the boundary of her symbolic community and not being allowed back in. When she is first detained, she is followed by a group of people from Khotso House:

They were singing and chanting, ‘*Siphe Amandla Nkosi Okunge Sabi*’ – ‘God Give Us Courage’ – about fifty of them black and white, singing ‘Give her strength, Lord, not to be scared. Give her strength, Lord, for her to stand up and face whatever they are going to expose her to.’ I was strengthened by these people, and all the goodbyes, the waving at me, and the good things they were saying, that there will come a day when all this will be over, one day. (53)

In contrast to this moving description of finding strength in the support of the community, her reaction to her father telling her to be strong is more ambivalent:

My dad told me. ‘I know you will be all right and you will come home, and I know you have not committed any offence. Please be strong.’ Everybody always said I must be strong. (77)

In this instance, being told to have strength is experienced more as a burden than as a comfort, a demand made by people who do not fully grasp the difficulty of her private experience.

Indeed, Mashinini represents the social space as complex and fraught, and she is candid about the difficulty of negotiating an identity in the face of contradictory demands. In part, her solitude is unbearable precisely because she experiences herself as *already* in some senses isolated from her community, inexorably drawn as a trade union activist

into the male world of the white “bosses”, straddling the divide between middle-class and working class, between the traditional and the modern, unable to maintain a coherent social identity. Her early career as a shop steward in the 1950s illustrates some aspects of her awkward subject position:

It was not easy to act for the workers at that time. A lot of awareness had been created over the last years, but then they were also frightened to say aloud that they were not happy with their salaries. Also, they didn't always tell their plans to me, as shop steward. They would always be surprising me. They would say to each other, without my knowledge, “Tomorrow we are not going to start work until a certain demand is met.” I would always be early at work, because I would arrange things before the workers came in, and when I got there I would see people were not coming to start work, and I would stand there like a fool. I, a black person and a worker, would be inside with all these whites standing around with me and saying, “Why aren't they coming in to work?” And when the whites would address the workers and say, “What is your problem?” perhaps somebody would answer, “We do have a problem.” So they would say, “Who are your spokespeople? Let your spokespeople come in and talk to us.” And they would say their spokesperson was Emma, meaning me. So the whites would think I had instigated the stoppage, that I was playing a double role, making the workers stand outside and pretending I didn't know. (21-22)

She stands “inside with the whites”, ignorant of the workers’ plans, yet intimately identified with (and in fact responsible for) them: her “double role” here becomes in many ways emblematic of her entire trade union career.

The prison harnesses, exacerbates and refracts tensions that already threaten her stability as a subject. The very form of her memoir is poised somewhere between a confessional individualised autobiography and a more didactic Black Consciousness document which focuses on collective experience. In her foreword, Nomalizo Tutu frames the memoir as “a triumphant record of a woman’s resilience in the face of men’s oppression” (Mashinini xi). In her own preface, Mashinini makes no reference to patriarchy, but foregrounds the collaborative nature of the autobiography, and frames it as a book about “the struggle to uphold human rights” in the context of trade unionism (xv). In the same preface, she claims that writing the memoir was painful because it forced her to remember traumatic moments, but that “putting on paper some of these terrible times was therapeutic” (xvii). The idea of talking about the self as therapeutic is raised again when her doctor in a clinic for ex-detainees insists that she talk about her experiences, but Mashinini sees the clinic as “yet another detention” (91) where she is isolated and interrogated, (literally) in danger of losing her name (she is expected to register under a pseudonym).

In fact, Mashinini writes a document that intersects at least in part with the memoir as part of her interrogation in detention:

Always they wanted the truth, when I had no more truth to tell. I don't think they ever understood that in fact there was nothing to give away. But they always tried to find it, this nothing. They'd make me sit down and write, and perhaps in my writing they wanted me to say things, but there was nothing I could write that would give anybody away, because I'd write about my trade union matters. I would sit and write, and write, and this was better for me.

Maybe it was a way of being able to think what to say without for once anyone pushing me and going on – 'Come on, come on, now. Speak.' And being rough about it. (75-76)

Driver's assertion that this passage illustrates how "writing offers itself as a space for the kind of subjectivity allowed her in prison" ("Transformation" 46) and serves as an example of how Mashinini sees "the act of writing as a place of thinking, sometimes also dreaming" ("Transformation" 46) patently misses the point. The interrogation space *occasions* the writing; it sets a particular demand that both *produces* the writing and is *deferred* by the writing. Mashinini "escapes" the threat of physical violence, the overbearing proximity of the voice and the violence of the other, by producing a document about her "trade union matters": an exact *realisation* of the ideal of interrogation, to displace the dialogue between the interrogator and the interrogated with a spontaneous private self-confessing "discipline". Mashinini's narrating voice is by no means unambiguously simply the collective voice of Black Consciousness: the

confessional demand of the prison and the psychiatric institution (explicitly linked by Mashinini) becomes entangled with the demands of a Black Consciousness “conduct book”. Similarly, Thomas Thale’s assertion that Mashinini’s trade union involvement is “pivotal to the development of self and provides the structural framework for the narrative of the self” (619) foregrounds one aspect of her memoir, but fails to recognise the complex ways in which the experience of imprisonment grounds and mediates the experience of the self as a trade union leader.

While First and Middleton automatically fall back on an individualised confessional voice in order to discuss their experience of prison, Mashinini is painfully conscious of the ways in which such an autonomous voice is born out of the demands of the institution. The prison and the psychiatric clinic open a painful void of confessional subjectivity that Mashinini simply refuses to fill, but can nevertheless not escape. The split between the experiencing self and the narrating self in fact relocates and temporalises this irresolvable fissure in the narrating “I”.

Makhoere, however, simply forecloses the dimension of a private subjectivity altogether. Where she speaks about private experience, it is immediately related back to a collective level: thus when she recounts growing up in a small house, she explains that most houses in Mamelodi township are small, and remarks: “they do not comply with the Freedom Charter” (3). In many ways, the Freedom Charter serves for Makhoere as what Lacan would call the Other: “the locus of Speech” which “imposes

itself... as witness to the Truth” (Lacan, *Écrits* 305). The Freedom Charter, which prefaces Makhoere’s autobiography, represents the collective will on whose behalf Makhoere speaks, and confers meaning on her individual experience. In contrast, it is precisely this fantasy of meeting the desire of a coherent Other that begins to disintegrate for Mashinini. For Makhoere, even looking at the stars and fantasising is an incontestably communal experience:

It grew dark. We looked up at the stars. It was the only time in six years in prison that I was able to gaze at the stars. Being outside my cell, standing beneath the stars, dreaming, dreaming of freedom. If only we could climb that wall, if they could find us gone, if we could touch the sky, if... (Makhoere 20)

The shift from a private experience to a collective experience is signaled by the duplication of the word “dreaming”: the first use of the word intuitively refers to the subject “I” in the previous sentence, and the second use of the word anticipates the “we” who dream of freedom. The grammatical subject of the verb “dreaming” is occluded: one could say that Makhoere’s subjectivity is located in such an interstitial position, where the individual opens up effortlessly to the collective. This logic is carried through the memoir: thus, for instance, Makhoere’s pain at not being able to see her son is immediately interpreted in terms of the suffering of the masses under apartheid:

I could not take it. My heart was so sore, the pain was so severe. Apartheid, how I hate you, you must be crushed once and for all. You have caused so much pain to human beings. (27)

The active voice (“I hate you”) is conjoined to a passive sentence with an implied collective subject (“you must be crushed”), with the repetition of the object (“you”) marking the shift from singular to plural.

As Schalkwyk points out, Makhoere glosses over her time in solitary confinement, devoting most of her memoir to the five years she spent in the company of other prisoners in Kroonstad and Klerksdorp (“Chronotopes” 31). It is in a sense precisely through solidarity and conversation with others that she is able to obtain such a stable sense of self and such a coherent notion of the other: her time alone is next to absent in the text, while Mashinini, in contrast, is forced to find some way of representing the self alone, since she spent her entire detention in solitary confinement. Thus Makhoere’s ability to resist is frequently predicated on intersubjective bonds. Her anti-individualist ethic is made possible by the fact that she shares the prison space with other prisoners:

When they see us fighting for others, as in this case where newly convicted prisoners were differently treated, they are taken by surprise. They themselves really believe, and they try to poison our people’s minds into believing as well,

that what you fight for must be yours only, never mind about the next person. And we completely defeated that poison in prison. We are here as sisters, fighting for one thing; we are united by oppression, by apartheid, united by the imperialists, united by the exploiters. And when we stand so united, we can break these exploiters. Totally. (Makhoere 47)

While Mashinini is simply totally alienated in the symbolic universe of the prison, Makhoere draws on a collective understanding in order to render the prison itself alien, to insist on her own normality and the aberrance of the prison space. Her constant aim is to imprison the prison officials, to entrap them in their own logic:

Immediately I arrived at that prison the prison staff started to serve my sentence with me. Each prison had its role to play. It is not nice to serve a sentence alone, the warders must not be allowed to think you are unearned wages. I used to tell them that they must not think they would enjoy those fat cheques as easily as all that. After all, we were all in this prison together. Uh huh. (77)

As Schalkwyk observes, Makhoere insists on experience as collective, and extends this sense of the collective to include the antagonistic relationship between prisoners and warders ("Chronotopes" 33): she simply does not allow the prison officials to use their power in order to disregard the social bonds that tie them to her. Her constant strategy is one of reversal: in this sense, she borrows the language of the prison and of the

apartheid state and turns it against itself. If prisoners have to ask permission to fulfill basic human needs such as eating, so should the warders: thus Makhoere and her friends force the wardresses (and the male prisoners) to ask permission before they pick peaches from the tree in the exercise yard (19-20). If the prisoners are treated “like mad people” (21), it is in fact the prison system itself that is insane (23). If she is dehumanised and physically assaulted, she refuses to acknowledge the humanity of the warders, and physically attacks one of them (64), and so on.

She refuses any attempt by the prison to individualise her or to interpellate her as a confessional subject: even the psychiatrist arranged by Helen Suzman is angrily rejected. Makhoere links the psychiatrist’s attempts to make her talk to colonial attempts to create special “cultural” spheres unconnected to the “political”:

This psychiatrist started by asking me questions such as who I was, where I was from, why I was in prison and what tribe I belonged to. Yerrah ma, I hit the roof! How could she come and ask me about what tribe I belonged to, what language I spoke at home? Did she think I didn’t know why I was in prison? Besides, whoever told her I wasn’t normal? I was angry because first these people had put me into segregation for a long period and then they brought this character here to ask me stupid questions, implying I must be insane. (105)

Throughout the memoir, Makhoere traverses the fantasy of the prison as a reformatory space: there is nothing of the carefully deliberated rejection of guilt found in, for instance, Middleton's memoir, or the sense of private contemplation and personal growth found even in Mashinini's autobiography. Makhoere is uncompromising in her focus on the prison as a place where bodies are tortured, contorted and controlled: whenever an attempt is made to draw her into a confessional, contemplative conversation, she rejects it immediately. The chaplains who preach the virtues of obedience and contrition are dismissed with the same contempt as the psychologist (Makhoere 48-49). Attempts by the Red Cross to make the prison space more humane are represented as a carnivalesque "nice break" and the Red Cross's "neutrality" is read as a form of collusion with the logic of the apartheid state and the prison (25). Unlike a great many writers, including Nelson Mandela, Makhoere refuses to distinguish between a potentially benign, reformatory prison and the prison as a place of torture and injustice. For Makhoere, attempts by the prison to engage with her humanity are underpinned by the obscene obverse of torture and humiliation: her constant activity in the narrative revolves around forcing the penal system to betray the nonsensical, malicious truth behind its ostensibly reasonable actions. Indeed, there is something exceptional about Makhoere's unapologetic refusal to enter into any civil discourse with the prison officials, or to treat them with any humanity. Her description of stabbing one of the prison guards, Mbomvana, is a case in point: there is not even the older, more experienced voice – almost *de rigeur* in prison memoirs – that interposes to

mediate or explain the experience. The hatred is allowed a shocking immediacy in the text, heightened by the present tense of “let us kill her”:

And we went for Mbombvana. We stabbed her several times with those mathematical instruments. We had made up our minds that this person was not going to treat us like this; we wanted to kill her, there and then. Let us kill her and they can hang us. Because we have had enough of her. We assaulted her for a long time, stabbing her in the face, on the head, on the body, all over. She was bleeding on the passage floor. After we had satisfied ourselves we went back to our cells. (64)

The roles that she occupies are rarely even clandestinely permitted by the prison (although they are agonistically produced by it). Like First and Middleton, Makhoere insists on “dressing like a lady”. However, while First and Middleton are at some level permitted to occupy this position in prison, Makhoere maintains this subject position in the face of the prison’s overwhelming negation of her normality and femininity. Her insistence on dressing “normally” manifestly defies the way the prison interpellates her, and causes a crisis in the symbolic functioning of the apartheid prison, where black prisoners are simply not expected to make these kinds of demands. If First and Middleton identify femininity with their inner core, Makhoere insists on her femininity in relation to social equality and reciprocity.

While Makhoere's capacity to resist in this assertive way is predicated on a coherent notion of a collective will, there is also a degree of fluidity in the notions of the collective that she advances. The following excerpt illustrates something of the negotiated nature of communal agency in the memoir:

And all the other sisters resisting inside the prisons, who were my strength when times were hard – here I'm talking about aus Joyce, aus Esther and Thandisa – deserve special mention together with Mama Dorothy. They fought an inimitable war in the dungeons of the hellish racists. We fought inside the cold, damp walls that kept us locked in, away from our fathers and mothers, husbands, sisters, brothers and children who are on the streets taking and giving hell to the military monster that is waging war to preserve its ugly past. We, the people, fighting for a glorious future for the beauty of all. But now I'm talking about the sisters who threw away the kitchen apron for cold steel in their hands – the hands which are capable of caressing and loving, oh so well. (Makhoere 18)

Here the most immediate communal "we" refers to women in prison, and more broadly to women who become resistance fighters. Elsewhere, she speaks with admiration of Thandi, an MK soldier who had broken away "from the traditional role of the female in our society of supporting the male" (88-89). Makhoere clearly sees women's struggle

as in a sense a separate struggle (against patriarchy and traditional, subservient roles) and as a part of the larger struggle against apartheid. However, the “we” transmutes to “we, the people” (echoing the opening line of the Freedom Charter), and is potentially extended to include even the oppressor in the phrase “for the beauty of all”, and then returned to women resistance fighters with “but now I’m talking about...” Something of the duality of this role is suggested by the hands that carry the “cold steel” of weapons but are also capable of “caressing and loving”: the mutability of the “we” is strategic and contingent. The point is not that these roles are necessarily in conflict with one another, but that Makhoere’s appeal to a collective identity is strategic and performative. It is perhaps only in the figure of her father that a kind of tension emerges in Makhoere’s notion of membership to a group. Thus her father belongs to “the people” – “he was one of those people who got along well with others – a simple man, respected by most people in our neighbourhood” (1), but he is nonetheless a policeman, and the person who betrayed Makhoere. She clearly loves him, and is devastated by his death, but also recounts how he tore the family apart, and how her mother blamed him “for forcing his will on us to decide our future” (2). In her ambivalent feelings towards her father, and in his guilty stammer and his pathos, Makhoere confronts the aporic limits of her attempt to fashion a collective identity: her father belongs both to “the people” and to the enemy, he is a part of the family but threatens to tear it apart, he is both oppressed and a patriarchal oppressor.

If one feels a sense of disquiet at Makhoere's lack of self-doubt and the absence of an "interrogative" self-reflexivity, as Driver does in her review article of the book, one should also be careful not to fall into the trap of demanding a conventional self-evaluating confessional memoir in the service of the subject's "knowledge of self-in-the-world" (Driver, "Review" 353). Such an appeal to knowledge of self fails to take into account the ways in which a carceral space such as the prison works to *produce* a form of "knowledge of self", and the very *conscious* ways in which Makhoere refuses to occupy such a position.

Ultimately, while it is true, as Driver notes, that Makhoere "systematically reverses the Manichean self-other dichotomies formerly controlled by white authorities" ("Review" 351), it seems injudicious to suggest that this means she remains subjected to the values and structures of apartheid society. The space of the prison, so closely identified by Makhoere with apartheid society in general, *by definition* does not allow such a reversal. When Makhoere refuses point blank to parade in prison, she states:

I couldn't stand some of the rules and regulations the wardresses kept preaching about, and this was one of them. When these so-called rules and regulations were made, I wasn't invited to help set them up, anyway. (34)

Such an insistence on agency obviates the fundamental asymmetrical distribution of power that the prison is based on: it is not the switching power positions, but the *belief*

that these positions are exchangeable that negates the symbolic contract that underpins the culture of the prison. In other words, while Makhoere in a sense derives her language from the language of the prison, it is precisely her relentless insistence on *repeating* its dichotomies and procedures, with herself in the ascendant position, that augurs an ontological crisis in the *nature* of the prison.

Finally, it is clear that none of the writers discussed in this chapter manages to speak from some neutral space outside the prison. The prison's terms and procedures are duplicated in the language that is used to remember, understand and defy the prison: even (and perhaps especially) the most inward-turning reflection relies on notions that are derived and contested in complex ways. What is perhaps most striking about these prison autobiographies by women is that they reveal the close collaboration between the language of "mental health", the space of the prison, the idea of race and the social rituals of femininity. In autobiographical prison writing by women, the structures that define the "I" which speaks as feminine, and therefore as disempowered in a patriarchal society, encounter the analogous discursive and material structures of the prison. The subjectivities constructed in these prison autobiographies are mediated by, but also strive to supersede, three interlocked systems of control: the apartheid language of race, the deprivations of the prison and the cultural devaluation of women.

broader 18th century intellectual project: it promised economic efficiency, the reform and principled education of its inmates, and the inculcation of an individual-centred ethos in sites where unruly crowd behaviour traditionally rendered control difficult. In Bentham's plan, inmates are arranged in separate cells around a tower, where they are visible to a centrally located authority that they themselves cannot see. In this way, control is dissociated from the actual bodies of the functionaries of power, and becomes associated with the intangible possibility of the gaze. Moreover, the gaze inevitably becomes internalised for the simple reason that it emanates from an *invisible* point: the inmate has to imagine the gaze, or the agency behind the gaze, since it can never be located in the outside world with any certainty. For Bentham, "the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves *as if* under inspection" (Bentham 44): in fact, the inspector, for Bentham, becomes not so much a human being as an omnipresent "inspective force" (Bentham 44).

The panopticon also provides one of the clearest illustrations of Lacan's proposition that the gaze is an *objet petit a*, a "left-over" object-cause of subject formation in the symbolic: for the inmate to accept the call of the Law, an incorporeal gaze has to detach itself from the field of the visible. Moreover, this gaze is intimately associated with a fantasy of punishment: properly speaking, it is the sadistic and perverse support of the entire "reasonable" edifice that it supports. For the subject to be seized by the symbolic of the panopticon prison, for it to *matter* to him or her, the gaze first has to intercede. Contrary to the popular understanding, it is not so much the morality promoted by the institution that stands in the place of the conscience or the super-ego: it is the perverse

agency of the part-object, simultaneously interior and exterior to the subject, that exercises a superegoic role. At the risk of over-simplifying, an inmate of the panopticon is more likely to behave according to the “neutral”, “reasonable” rules of the institution if the imagined agency behind the gaze is a brutal madman who takes pleasure in the act of punishment. In such a Lacanian understanding, the more carefully the rules are followed, the more troubling the persistence of the dark peephole becomes to the inmate, the more obscene its desiring presence and the more unreasonable its requirements: the fact of its existence itself is read as a continued demand. For psychoanalysis, the panopticon functions as a material manifestation of the process of subject-formation: to become an individual subject, the subject has to encounter such an anxiety-provoking, derealising stain of the Real. The fact that the panopticon is so clearly a product of a particular historical moment in the West of course poses a number of questions to the universalising tendencies of Lacanian theory. Nonetheless, such a psychoanalytic understanding of Bentham’s architectural innovation is useful in alerting us to the role of an invisible, anxiety-provoking excess in the process of subjectivation facilitated by the panopticon.

The structure of the panopticon also reveals a number of assumptions that underpin the more general drive towards individualisation in the Enlightenment period. Bentham’s enthusiastic description of his own project is quite instructive in this regard:

Morals reformed – health preserved – industry invigorated – instruction diffused
– public burthens lightened – Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock – the

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gordian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut, but untied – all by a simple idea in Architecture! – Thus much I ventured to say on laying down the pen – and thus much I should perhaps have said on taking it up, if at that early period I had seen the whole of the way before me. A new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example: and that, to a degree equally without example, secured by whoever chooses to have it so, against abuse. – Such is the engine: such the work that may be done with it. How far the expectations thus held out have been fulfilled, the reader will decide. (40)

The first and most obvious point is of course that the individualising process is linked here to economic requirements, to a certain ideal of fiscal efficiency or thrift. Not only does a panopticon require fewer personnel than a more traditional institution, but it is also a site of *production*: prison labour serves the twin function of disciplining the inmates and of producing wealth. The second point is that the subject is *constructed*; a properly rational, self-regulating individual does not arise *ex nihilo*, but through the intervention of an agency that is in some ways purely mechanical and in other ways entirely social. To individualise a person requires “power of mind over mind” – in other words, at least two people are necessary to produce one self-regulating subject. If the great Enlightenment project of attaining full knowledge of the self can be expressed as a desire “to see oneself seeing oneself”, then the panopticon introduces a qualification that has troubled this undertaking from the outset: in its architectural economy, one sees oneself only because someone else is looking; the self-distance or self-objectification required to become available to one’s own gaze requires an intrusive other.

While the law did not impose racial segregation in prisons during the 19th century, the treatment meted out to black prisoners was certainly very different from the treatment received by white prisoners. As Florence Bernault points out in *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa*, the principal purpose of the prison encountered by black subjects in South Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, was to “promote the reproduction of the dominant power” (26), and not the reform and reintegration of prisoners. Corporal punishment remained one of the cornerstones of the colonial prison’s control of its black subjects (Peté and Devenish 24). The apartheid prison inherited this practice, and used it extensively and enthusiastically until it was outlawed in 1996. The widespread use of corporal punishment on black offenders in South Africa often came into conflict with colonial authorities’ ideas about prison reform. In their Natal case study, Peté and Devenish characterise this discrepancy between penal practice in South Africa and the imported reformatory ideal as one symptom of larger frictions between white settlers and the colonial government in the 19th century: the colonial authorities saw the excessive whipping of black offenders in Natal as barbaric and out of step with the humane reform-oriented system of punishment applied in the mother country. The settlers, however, insisted that flogging was the only suitable means to punish black offenders, and stubbornly defended their right to impose this form of punishment freely. Their insistence that they be allowed to continue flogging black offenders was part of an attempt to assert Natal’s independence from Britain, and affirm what the settlers regarded as their right to control African subjects and labour (Peté and Devenish 5).

The tendency to flog rather than to incarcerate black offenders reflects the development of a disciplinary technology in South Africa that saw black and white subjects as belonging to entirely different moral, social and legal spheres. As Peté and Devenish point out, “African subjects in the colonies were separated from the realms of law, civilisation and social contract... which governed the development of ‘modern’ penal ideas in Britain. Under indirect rule, black criminals, unlike their white counterparts, did not belong to a ‘shared moral universe’” (12). Notions of “reform” were simply not applied to black prisoners, but remained an important rationale for the imprisonment of white subjects. In fact, the social stigma of being incarcerated with black prisoners was seen as a serious obstacle to the prison’s rehabilitative function (Peté and Devenish 17).

The birth of the “modern” prison in South Africa, then, applied primarily to white subjects. The treatment of black prisoners rested on an overriding tendency to regard black subjectivity as somehow outside the compass of reason, contrition and reform, and the appeal to a developed interior life that these categories depend upon. Black prisoners were more likely to be physically assaulted, their diets were poorer, and they were kept in crowded communal cells¹. By the turn of the nineteenth century, as Bernault points out, “Montagu’s rehabilitation ideals had degenerated into a racialized, differential treatment that split amendment procedures into hard labor for blacks, and reformative treatment for whites” (9). Attempts to reform this situation, most notably by

¹ One of the recommendations of the 1943 Ballinger and Simons report is that the communal cells in which black prisoners are housed should be abolished and replaced with single cells. This was never implemented (Smit 27). Serious cell overcrowding remains a problem in South Africa after apartheid.

the Lansdown Commission in 1945, were scuppered once and for all by the Nationalists' ascension to power in 1948, and the formalisation of racial segregation under apartheid. Many safeguards that protected prisoners' rights were removed with the passing of the 1959 Prisons Act, including the provision for regular visits to prisons by magistrates and boards of visitors and the right to report freely on prison conditions, including the taking of photographs (Smit 31). Conditions in South African prisons became generally more militarised and sheltered from public scrutiny after 1959, and the racial segregation of prisoners was both continued and consolidated.

When South Africa inherited the idea of a prison as a reformatory institution during the colonial period, it also inherited its philosophy of individualisation, and something of its Benthamite structure – perhaps more so than elsewhere in Africa (Bernault 7-8). The South African prison countered the formation of group identities and punished infractions of its rules with the deployment of reward-based classificatory systems and with the use of solitary confinement. It attempted, in a rather haphazard way, to apply a system that atomised its inmates, used their labour, and combined punishment and reform. Pretoria Central, where Herman Charles Bosman and Hugh Lewin served their sentences, was one of the first “total” penitentiary institutions. Stephen Gray points out that the blueprint allocated single cells to longtimers, and provided for workshops where prisoners could also receive skills training (16). However, as the preceding discussion makes clear, the Benthamite “reformatory” model was also radically transfigured by the realities of the South African political and economic landscape, and specifically by its racial policies. The idea of the prison as a potentially benign site

working to individualise and reform its inmates in the service of the public good never really took root, and was all but abandoned by the apartheid government, who used prisons largely as a means to enforce a dictatorial form of social control.

Prisoners for black inmates, in particular, could not be described as modern penitentiaries by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, they were more closely modeled on mining work compounds, which were in turn simply prisons under a different name. As Worger points out, “free” black workers were compelled to live in the compound “for the duration of their six-month contracts, fenced and guarded and not permitted to leave the company premises at any time except to enter the mines” (76). This blurring of the distinction between prison and ordinary labour accommodation also points towards the more general penalisation of black subjects’ everyday lives under colonial and apartheid rule.

One consequence of these differences is that it becomes difficult to generalise about the technologies of isolation employed by the apartheid prison. At one end of a spectrum of penal practice, isolation was employed in ways that gestured towards Bentham’s ideals: the function was to remove prisoners from “bad influences”, to facilitate supervision and control, and to create conditions supposedly conducive to reflection, contrition and rehabilitation. At the other end of the spectrum, prisoners were isolated as simply another form of physical torture. The apartheid state used some of the technologies of the modern penitentiary in ways often radically uncoupled from their original aims, and applied them in uneven and improvisatory ways.

It would therefore be misguided to look at South African prisons as reflections of some Benthamite ideal: in fact, in a way analogous to the structure of apartheid ideology in general, the South African penal system consisted of a distorted pastiche of some of the themes of modernity, often divested from their original context and aim, and unevenly applied. This applies particularly to solitary confinement, which was widely used, but to remarkably different ends, and in entirely different contexts. Moreover, the way in which solitary confinement was imposed – its delimitations, its role and its day-to-day implementation – relied heavily on apartheid understandings of race. White prisoners were more likely to encounter a “modern”, reformative prison than black prisoners; isolated white inmates were often regarded as more “reformable” than black inmates, and women more than men. Where for black prisoners isolation often served a function identical to torture, the isolation of white prisoners frequently became entangled with other considerations: poorly defined ideas of reform, a desire for their repentance, some notion of their “protection”, a fascination with the spectacle of their imprisonment, or simply as a way to keep them apart from one another and from the other prisoners.

In other words, if the Benthamite idea of individualisation through solitary confinement originally worked in the service of an ideological and philosophical preoccupation with the production of an individual-centred society and ethics, its transplantation to South Africa also effected a transformation and a fracturing of this ideal. Solitary confinement in South Africa remained a form of interpellation – it produced certain forms of subjectivity, of self-understanding – but it would be a mistake to recognise a

homogenous philosophical idea or cultural desire at play in the way South African prisons exercised this form of incarceration. Nonetheless, in the same way that solitary confinement in the Benthamite panopticon discloses something of the mechanism of 18th century subject-formation, solitary confinement in South African prisons reveals something of the material processes and the different forms of subjectivation in South Africa under apartheid. To put it simply, when we read “I” in a prison autobiography, we need to read it in relation to the experience of solitude in prison. An “I”, by its very nature, circumscribes and confines its referent. When this “I” emerges through the memory of imprisonment, we are inevitably confronted by its material counterpart in the prison space: the confined, isolated body of the prisoner².

Because solitary confinement plays such an important role in the apartheid prison, the problematic of the relationship between self and other, the individual and the group, emerges as one of the most important distinguishing features of the prison memoir during this time. The way in which the apartheid prison reforms prisoner identities through its deployment of space, and specifically by enforcing solitude, provokes an understanding of identity, a form of self-relation, that exercises a kind of gravitational force even on broader post-apartheid understandings of personal identity and obligations.

² As Benveniste points out, the pronouns “I” and “you” belong to an exceptional discursive instance in their appeal to a “reality of discourse” (218). The pronoun “I” is properly speaking an “indicator”, because it derives meaning from its context of production: it describes the “the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I” (218). Its meaning is therefore entirely contingent on the situation in which it is uttered. To say that the sign “I” has as counterpart the isolated body of the prisoner is therefore not really a statement of *analogy*, but literally true: the use of the first person pronoun in the prison autobiography immediately invokes the material context in which it is produced. It is the umbilical cord that links language to discourse, the signifier to its instance of enunciation.

One signal theme that runs through all South African memoirs is the desire for community that is inculcated by the prison's rejection of ordinary forms of human companionship. In solitary confinement, this desire becomes especially acute: almost universally, prisoners refer to it as one of the worst forms torture, often resulting in profoundly depressive states and mental disintegration. Thus Herman Charles Bosman becomes tormented by paranoid fantasies while he is in isolation. Albie Sachs suffers from a deepening depression and hallucinatory experiences. Emma Mashinini suffers from a terrible, vertiginous panic when she forgets her own daughter's name. Mmutlanyane Mogoba finds the solitary experience of grief at his daughter's death almost unbearable, and wishes for death. Even Nelson Mandela, normally careful to present an image of patient, rational forbearance, notes that solitary confinement was "the most forbidding aspect of prison life", and suggests, using a somewhat self-distancing conditional, that "one's own mind... can begin to play tricks" (494). Sachs provides a vivid and informative description of his mental state after prolonged solitude:

My limbs, my trunk and my head lie in an inert vegetable mass on the mattress, while my soul floats gently to the ceiling, where it coalesces and embodies itself into a shape which lodges in the corner and looks down at my body. Usually the shape is that of an owl that stares at me, calmly, patiently, and without emotion. It is my own owl, my own I. It is I staring at myself. What is more, I am aware of the whole process as though there is yet another self which watches the I staring

at myself. I am a mirror bent in on itself, a unity and yet an infinite multiplicity of reflections. (252)

It is difficult, in this description, to avoid noticing the metaphoric presence of the panopticon. If the modern prison uses solitary confinement to obtain power over the mind, it needs to separate the mind from the body: what Sachs describes here is a hallucinatory literalisation of the Cartesian project, a disembodied, rational mind that looks down at the “inert vegetable mass” of the body. The philosophical ideal of seeing the self seeing the self is realised here in a macabre way: a third eye watches the soul watching the body, each of the actors caught in an abyssal and infinite play of reflection. Sachs’s description also underscores precisely the obstacle to the dream of rational self-presence that the panopticon is predicated upon: such self-presence is possible only against the background of self-fragmentation. In other words, the moment in which the self encounters itself does not result in synthesis and unity, but is instead a profoundly fragmenting, derealising moment. In solitary confinement, the obscene converse side of this logic of individualised, rational self-reflection becomes visible: it is experienced as self-alienation and fragmentation, the most agonising psychological torture.

Under such conditions, it becomes almost impossible to hold onto a coherent inner world. Chapter Four, “Women in Prison”, discusses the rapid disintegration of a stable interiority in solitary confinement. In solitude, memories disappear, cherished beliefs and ideals become meaningless, and the mind loses its capacity for invention and play.

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela notes that in prison, “you must find consolation in being true to your ideals, even if no one else knows of it” (464). In practice, such a solitary adherence to a coherent belief system is a gargantuan and sometimes impossible task, since a principled world-view is at some level inevitably communally constructed and maintained. Sachs notes that “ideas alone would be worthless without the will to utilise them”, and that prison directs its destructive energies precisely at the will (168).

At the same time, one should take care not read the deprivations imposed by solitary confinement in terms of a simplistic binary, where those who are in positions of power consolidate their authority by divesting their captives of even the small potential for resistance afforded by a coherent interior life. While this is undoubtedly very often precisely the intention and the effect of solitary confinement, we would do well to remember that power is ultimately a name for the way relationships are structured in a social space, that it refers to a system of differences that remains open to various appropriations. In his book *The Number* (2004), which the concluding chapter of this thesis refers to in some more detail, Jonny Steinberg describes the experiences of Magadien Wentzel when he is first imprisoned for political activism in the early 1980s. The vast numbers of young people imprisoned during the post-1976 waves of protest made it impossible for prison authorities to separate the political activists from the general prison population, leading to much closer interaction between prison gang members and political prisoners. Through his contact with the 26s and 28s – the notorious “numbers” gangs still found throughout South African prisons – Wentzel is

won over to their culture and aspirations. In order to join one of the gangs, he has to undergo an induction ceremony which consists of stabbing a warder, surviving the ensuing beating administered by the prison guards, and then spending time in solitary confinement (Steinberg 142-153). Solitary confinement, in other words, becomes employed by the prison gangs as an integral part of their initiation ceremony: in addition to acting as a symbolic rite of passage, the disorientation and vulnerability that attend on this form of confinement become harnessed to the recruitment psychology of the gangs. The lesson that Magadien learns during this time: "feel all the pain on the inside, and show nothing on the outside" (145) has obvious utility in gang culture. It would be myopic to suppose that political prisoners did not sometimes attach an equivalent ritual value to the deprivations of prison life, or use the prison's organisation of space to construct meanings that had nothing in common with the purpose intended by the prison authorities.

Nonetheless, solitary confinement renders prisoners exceptionally defenseless against their captors, both physically and psychologically. In South African prison memoirs, this vulnerability is often felt most acutely during interrogation sessions. The intense desire for companionship, coupled with the sense of meaninglessness and the disintegration of a stable interiority inculcated by solitary confinement, means that the process of interrogation can be both feared and desired. A few days after his incarceration, Albie Sachs finds himself overwhelmed by a desire for knowledge and communication:

At times I have felt an urge to call for the interrogators simply for the sake of relieving the tension. In the seven years of my practice as an advocate I never could understand why even hardened criminals made full and detailed confessions to the police, thus providing the information needed for their conviction. Now I realise that isolation produces an almost irresistible urge to communicate. Any fate is better than continued uncertainty. (28)

Hugh Lewin describes a similar overpowering compulsion to confess to his interrogators:

I wanted to talk. They were the only people I knew now in the world and I wanted to talk to them. I wanted to ease off the load and tell them what they wanted to hear. It wouldn't matter because they knew most things already, but they said they wanted to hear it all from me myself. That didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. It was all over now, all over, with everybody gone (the others must have had time by now to get across) and those that weren't gone they knew about now anyway. Nothing mattered any more except that it would be so nice to stop, to sit and talk. So nice not to feel so tired. So nice not to care, not to have to care about anything at all. (20)

Solitary confinement, in other words, creates conditions that on the one hand nurture a kind of Utopian ideal of community, and on the other hand invite a confessional

narrative.³ It exposes, in an immediate and compelling way, the impossibility of subjective autonomy, of living a life without others. As Mandela notes in *Long Walk to Freedom*, “nothing is more dehumanizing than the absence of human companionship” (397).

As this thesis demonstrates, South African prison memoirs describe, and in some ways enact, the incessant labour that characterises the fabrication of community against the prison’s drive to individualise, to impose a solitary identity. At the same time, the desire for community, born out of the unbearable destitution of isolation, is undercut by the sometimes unpleasant realities of communal life in prison, the sense in which the visceral reality of others can be as aggravating as it is inspiring and strengthening.

In his *Jail Diary*, Albie Sachs describes how he escapes from his sense of complete isolation by whistling a duet with a mysterious prisoner. He speculates that the whistler might be a young woman who belongs to the Alexander Group, a movement he characterises as “rather theoretical, paperborne and cut off from the mainstream of African politics” (21). Reflecting on the difference between solidarity inside and outside prison, Sachs notes:

If, oh dark girl, you belong to the Alexander Group, and if you are the whistler,
well, so much the more valuable our present bonds. Outside prison our

³ It is perhaps no accident that the rise of the confessional autobiography in the West coincides with the rise of the Enlightenment penitentiary: as John Bender points out, the consciousness-centred novel per se is rooted in the same cultural and philosophical conditions that gave rise to the modern prison (Bender 11).

differences are sharp, but we stand for the same things; inside, let us meet and hold fast to each other. How marvellous it is to be able to speak to someone again, even if we are compelled to use this indistinct tenuous language of whistling. (21)

Solitude, in other words, demands a closer appreciation of community: differences between people become almost immaterial in solitary confinement. Sachs's relief at finding companionship, even in such a tenuous way, is soon undermined by the way camaraderie is transformed into a *demand*:

I find, however, that I am subjecting myself to the uncertainties of another's will. The routine which I am carefully trying to build up is being undermined. Sometimes, I am trying to sleep when the whistler calls me. Sometimes I am in the middle of activities with which I attempt to sustain myself. (25)

The problem is solved when Sachs manages to impose a schedule to the whistling by responding only at night. In these opening pages of his *Jail Diary*, Sachs touches on a central dilemma of life in prison: the desperate manufacturing of a communal bond, the desire for company, brings one face to face with the "uncertainties of another's will". This irresolute suspension between two extremes is perhaps typical of the subjectivity produced by the prison: the contrary desire for the presence of others and the recoil from their presence in the interests of sustaining the self is an irresolvable dilemma that attends on the prison's individualising drive. As David Schalkwyk points out, as much as

prison discloses the absolute necessity of human companionship, “communal life may be a different form of tyranny, itself a prison from which there seems to be no escape” (“Hamlet’s Dreams” 12). In *Memoirs of a Saboteur*, Ntsoo Babenia foregrounds a somewhat different but related problem with community in the apartheid prison: one never knew whether one was sharing a cell with police informers:

We were all in it together but I only knew David, Mdalose, Simelane and Phungula by face. No one really knows who the others are, what you have said and whether you are already an *impimpi*. It was terrible. You could talk as much as you wanted. There were no cops to stop you. But no one spoke because we did not trust each other. When David Ndawonde came in he would not answer any of us. (96)

In this case, the companionship of a communal cell becomes the very foundation of solitude, a telling example of the sense in which solitary confinement is not merely a description of the body in space, but relates to a more abstract severing of the bonds of intersubjectivity. Life with others can be the most powerful catalyst for paranoid withdrawal into the self.

One of the prison memoirs to engage in the most sustained and self-reflexive ways with the experience of solitary confinement in a South African prison is probably Breyten Breytenbach’s memoir *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. The remainder of

this chapter relies heavily on this text to pursue some of the general points raised above in closer detail.

Breytenbach, one of South Africa's best known Afrikaans poets, was arrested at the airport as he was about to flee the country, and sentenced to nine years in 1975 for activities relating to a somewhat obscure (and short-lived) political group called Okhela. His imprisonment was particularly significant since Breytenbach was at this point a feted and anthologised poet, and also the brother of Jan Breytenbach, the most decorated soldier in the South African Defence Force and a close friend of several apartheid government ministers. Breytenbach's harsh sentence suggests that his political activities were seen as a form of betrayal of the Afrikaner establishment by one of its sons. While in prison, he penned a number of almost impenetrably idiosyncratic semi-fictional autobiographical sketches that were later published under the title *Mouiroir* (1983), and wrote *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1994), a baroque and experimental autobiographical account of his experiences in prison, soon after his release and exile. Of his nine years in prison, he spent two in solitary confinement, and these are also the years that are described in the most fractured, convoluted and self-reflexive prose. The later part of the memoir, which chronicles his life at Pollsmoor Prison, seems more willing to employ the mimetic conventions of realist narration.

True Confessions stands out from other South African prison memoirs for its refusal to represent its narrator as a homogenous self acting as a representative of a coherent

ideology. From the outset, it challenges the reliability and constancy of the narrator by foregrounding the fictitious nature of the text and of the "I" which addresses the reader:

You know that we're always inventing our lives. You know that what I'm confessing now is also the instantaneous invention of what might have happened.

(Breytenbach 17)

The self-questioning opening pages of *True Confessions* reads almost like a methodical negation of Rousseau's famous declaration in his *Confessions*: "I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself" (1). As Jolly notes, "... the *Confessions* is, ultimately, not a conventional autobiography; if anything, it is a parody of that convention" (92). For Breytenbach, the self is immanently mutable; it is not organised around some stable kernel. By extension, the memoir seems formally, philosophically and ideologically protean. At one moment, it invokes the space of the prison in order to interrogate the nature of language and identity; at another, it looks like a political manifesto; at another, it seems to be a factual account of life in prison.

When the memoir first appeared in South Africa, it was most often criticised precisely for this fractured, ambiguous quality. It was dismissed by some for not being "literature", for having a "diffuse focus", for being too "deconstructive" and for trying to have "a foot in two camps" (Galloway 295-306). In particular, it did not seem to fit the mould of "struggle literature": Breytenbach's voice was simply too self-conscious

and individual to act as a cohesive narrative focal point for the aspirations of the oppressed masses of South Africa. While it speaks eloquently about the dehumanising effects of prison, it does not speak on behalf of any particular ideology or group of people, nor does it extend a reliable account of specific historical conditions. As literature, it was too documentary, and as documentary, it was too literary.

Breytenbach never speaks comfortably on behalf of a collective. In fact, *True Confessions* stands out from most of the other memoirs that this thesis deals with for its resolute refusal to indulge in even the most provisional romanticisation of solidarity. Breytenbach regards the self as essentially isolated, and the voice that emerges in the memoir is one that anxiously and persistently insists on its difference from others. One of the most potent images of the narrator's isolation occurs at the beginning of the memoir, where he describes giving testimony at his trial:

And then, this same process is an open-ended one; I can hear the echoes. As it continues – this jumbletalk, this trial, I can go on searching, and I can hear the reverberation of my own voice. I'm sitting here – I have this little instrument in my hand; I have the earphones on my head and I speak to you and I listen to the voice coming back. And I learn from these words the reality as it is being presented at the moment of emitting the sounds. That is perhaps as close as I can come to what identity is considered to be. That is as close as I come to the truth. Here I am. Here is the truth also. (13)

Two things are striking about this passage. First, the voice that addresses us is a *coerced* voice, immediately calling into question the spontaneity and reliability of the confession in court and, by extension, the confessional project of the memoir itself. Second, Breytenbach's real audience is himself: he speaks and hears his own voice through the earphones. The second person "you" merely relays the voice back to its origin: the speaking "I" encounters its own alienated voice, always a split second behind itself.

It is telling to contrast this passage to various instances where Mandela describes court proceedings in *Long Walk to Freedom*, where he constantly speculates on the effect of words on the judges and the prosecutors. For instance:

As I listened to Conco and Luthuli, I thought that here, probably for the first time in their lives, the judges were listening not to domestic servants who said only what they knew their masters would like to hear, but to independent and articulate Africans spelling out their political beliefs and how they hoped to realize them. (277)

Here Mandela listens to and feels solidarity with Conco and Luthuli (who in turn, if we follow Mandela's logic, represent all Africans), and reflects on the transformative power of the words of the addresser on the perceptions and consciousness of the addressee. For Mandela, the fact that a court is by its very nature public, and compelled to record testimony, can be used in the service of a revolutionary agenda. The subject who speaks under such conditions fulfills a *representative* function: the single voice is

also the voice of the masses, reflecting communal desires. Mandela habitually provides transcripts of court proceedings and long excerpts from public speeches in *Long Walk to Freedom*, so that the autobiography becomes a kind of extension of the court-room, a public space where statements can be made for the record, where collective identity is forged, and where communication becomes possible across sharp cultural and historical divides.

In contrast, in the courtroom scene cited above, Breytenbach appears to be his own addressee. For him, communication is a claustrophobic self-addressing circle: the self, and by association the truth, reside in a moment of repetition, when the self encounters its own utterance after a detour through the other of the courtroom and the machine. In some ways, Breytenbach offers us a bleak parody of rational reflection: the self arriving at a moment of self-presence, encountering its own voice through the act of confession. By focusing on the specific material technologies and the social context that underpin this endeavour, Breytenbach portrays such “self-presence” as a frightening form of alienation. Not only is the “I” who speaks in the memoir trapped in a solitary self-addressing circuit, it does not recognise itself in its own address: the very act of making the voice audible in a public space, of demanding recognition, robs the speaker of self-recognition. For Breytenbach, the court-room is a machine designed to enforce the worst kind of solitude and alienation, and the voice that speaks in the court-room has no determinate coordinates, no stable point of reference. While Breytenbach’s self-consciously philosophical style tends to lend his descriptions a universalising existentialist gravity – sometimes it seems he is talking not so much about his own

experience as about the human condition – it is worth remembering that his solitude in the courtroom is also predicated on his own very particular social and historical position. As an Afrikaner, his loneliness in the courtroom is underscored by the fact that the system sitting in judgement of him is doing so in defense of Afrikaner domination. For Breytenbach, there is no unambiguous solidarity with a revolutionary group, because his very cultural and familial proximity to the same Afrikaner power that imprisons him for his beliefs also drives a wedge between him and his revolutionary compatriots. As Lewis points out, “while Afrikaner nationalists might have wanted to claim him as torchbearer for the language and its expressive capabilities, the international literary community... expected him to fulfill the role of the dissident, disowning the politics associated with Afrikanerdom” (441). In a sense, he is not merely deprived of a literal community in the courtroom, but also of an imaginary community: from the outset, his solitary confinement refers as much to his psychological isolation as to his physical seclusion.

Breytenbach experiences the self as a fundamentally *negative* category, available only through absence and isolation. His perception of freedom after his incarceration reflects some of this:

Ah, Mr Investigator, don't you think I'm guilty? Yes, I have the guilt of the survivor. All my friends are dead because they are still alive, locked in the cleanliness of asexual and dehumanised space. And I, I'm outside alive in the deadness of my surroundings. (27)

In this description, being alive and being dead become interchangeable: the subject appears as such only against a contextual backdrop, and then only as an effect of contrast or difference, expressed here as a form of guilt. To be a “survivor”, in other words, is not simply to be, but to be not-dead; to exist, by definition, because of the production of a relative term.

A version of this abyssal expanse which separates self and other recurs throughout the memoir. Breytenbach’s desire for communication and community is constantly undercut by his sense of physical, emotional or ideological distance from others. He is trapped in a kind of limbo, catching glimpses of solidarity in adjoining rooms, but unable to participate in it:

The trial of the SASO student leaders (South African Student Organization) was going forward at the same time as mine, in an adjoining courtroom. Sometimes, during recesses, I passed by them in the stairwell or corridor. They were all dressed in complementary African shirts – very flashy. I envied them their warm and rumbustious camaraderie. (67)

Unlike many other political prisoners, Breytenbach does not focus on the courtroom as a place of contact, but rather as a place that produces distance. “From time to time,” he notes, “I spotted the presence of friends; so close they were and yet out of touch –

moving in another world altogether” (68). In contrast, during Hugh Lewin’s court case, he cannot help finding common ground even with the comrades who betrayed him:

Diane, in the box, diminished the roles of others and increased her own. As she walked back from the box, on her way out, she looked across at me, as if pleadingly – and I couldn’t help but nod slightly at her, and wink. (Lewin 53).

For Lewin, the courtroom is situated in the domain of the social – contact is made, messages conveyed, alliances shift, friends are rejected or forgiven. For Breytenbach, the social aspect of the courtroom simply serves to foreground his absolute isolation from his family and friends: it is a place where he encounters nothing other than a distorted version of his own voice.

Like other prisoners in solitary confinement, Breytenbach is driven by a desperate need for contact with the outside world and with other prisoners. However, his descriptions of contact with others often terminate in a painful re-emphasis of his solitude. For instance, he describes how, in Pretoria Central, one of the Black cleaners would wriggle the wire loop that led to the toilet in his cell:

I would bend and squint down the wire through the conduit and just barely perceive, pressed to the other end, a friendly black eye. I would jiggle it and he would respond likewise. It was like touching a finger. We communicated. It was also like a monkey groping behind a mirror after its own image. (141)

What Breytenbach forecloses in this description is precisely the domain of community, of solidarity forged through a joint desire to communicate. The isolated “I” communicates with an inaccessible “eye”. The pronoun “we” appears only once in the entire description – “we communicated” – but any effect of commonality is immediately erased with the suggestion that the reality of the other is a kind of illusion, that the self merely encounters itself in a mirror. The mirror, in other words, provides an appearance of something beyond the enclosed limits of the self while it in fact *instates* the very limit that separates the self from the world.

Remarkably, once Breytenbach is moved to Pollsmoor and integrated into a prison community, he takes as much care to *re-invoke* the distinction between self and others as he does to subvert it. Breytenbach endeavours, through his actions and his narrative strategies, to ensure that he remains essentially separate from the other prisoners. For instance, he describes being asked by other prisoners to help them write their letters:

At the outset it was strange that people should approach me and ask me to answer their letters for them – it impinged on my sense of privacy. I soon learned that a letter in prison is public property. Those who do not get any mail, even the poor ‘social cases’, can thus also vicariously have an outside dimension to their lives. No major decisions concerning love or family problems are made without being discussed widely among the prisoners. (163-164)

In this instance, the relationship that Breytenbach establishes with the other inmates is described as a form of uncomfortable literary forgery, an incursion on his “sense of privacy”. The prisoners’ request obviously blurs the distinction between self and other in a way that is alien to his sensibilities. Breytenbach rejects this troubling collapse of the boundary between self and other by affecting the voice of the social sciences:

If I had to typify the genus ‘prisoner’, I’d say that it is someone who is socially weak, who has no control over his own desires and impulses, who has really no means of making a separation between the real world and the imaginary ones.
(167)

What is missing in this description is any acknowledgement that he himself is also a prisoner, that despite the gulf of learning and ideological commitment, he shares a common predicament with the other inmates. Even Herman Charles Bosman, who is careful to maintain the satirist’s distance from his subjects, acknowledges that the shared reality of the penitentiary compels him to satirise not just others, but also himself – in fact, much of the dark humour of *Cold Stone Jug* derives from the moments where Bosman remembers to count himself under the genus “prisoner”. Despite Breytenbach’s insistence on the split and fragmentary nature of narrative subjectivity, he is remarkably consistent in maintaining an equivalence between the self who narrates and the self who is the subject of narration. The highly individualised narrator of *True Confessions* encounters an exact duplicate of himself in the narrative; the Breytenbach who pens his autobiography in a foreign country, with a sense of distance from the world of the

prison, seems no different at all from Breytenbach the prison scribe, always already separated from the world he inhabits.

If he does not feel that he belongs to the community of prisoners, he feels a similar distance from the prison guards (the *boere*):

I had to write love letters for the *boere* too, or applications for promotion...

Sometimes I was asked to write essays for their kids... I absolutely lapped it up, sir; I loved it because I could use their need to obtain, illegitimately, material on the subject they wanted me to write about. Sometimes I would be asked to do their homework for them. Quite a few were attempting to finish matric or obtain their junior certificates by correspondence courses, and I would complete their tasks. I became involved to the point of holding thumbs when it became examination time, and analyzing afterwards why 'we' did not succeed... (169)

In this instance, he hardly distinguishes between the guards and the prisoners.⁴ If inmates have no concept of plagiarism, nor do the guards. As prison scribe, Breytenbach belongs to neither camp, yet both seek to include him in an uncomfortable "we", using his words in order to forge their own identities and achieve their own ends. When he describes the guards, he employs a normalising clinical voice very similar to the one he affects when he characterises his fellow inmates as "socially weak": "...

⁴ The sense of affinity with the guards (Breytenbach "holds thumbs" when it becomes examination time) is obviously ironic, as evidenced by the quotation marks around "we" in the same passage.

some warders... should definitely have been in an institution for the mentally retarded” (224).

Any camaraderie is laden, for Breytenbach, with tension and contradiction. On the one hand he desires escape from the confined isolation of the self, but on the other he deliberately reinstates the distinction between self and other, inside and outside, insisting on a difference that sets him apart from those that surround him in the prison space.

This sense of unease with the incursion of the other into the “private” space of the self is felt most acutely in his relationship to language, which is simultaneously the ground of individuality in a confessional autobiography and the foundation of intersubjectivity. Language individualises, but it also connects: in this way, the narrative medium of the autobiography reflects something of the tension that Breytenbach identifies with the social space of the prison. Explaining his reasons for writing the memoir, Breytenbach comments:

Which is why I turn back to you, Mr Investigator, Mr I, and I talk because you must give me sounds. You must allow me to regurgitate all the words, like the arabesques of a blind mind. I am the man on the corner, with dark glasses, waiting for your coin. I am the lift attendant in Security Headquarters. Don’t ask me any questions. You don’t have to. You will not be able to stop the answers in any event. The black vomit must be spewed out. (27)

Language is equated with “black vomit”, an abject interiority. In this sense, Breytenbach’s confessional project is conventional – speaking becomes a form of purging, a way to externalise a secret private burden. However, the addressee “must give him sounds” and “must allow” him to speak: in a fundamental way, the words do not really belong to the narrator, but are always already the words of another, contained by and invoked by his imaginary interrogator. Moreover, the words are “regurgitated”, suggesting that they have been used before and are not unique to this occasion. In this sense, Breytenbach’s confessional project is constantly thwarted. The desire to construct an authentic record of personal experience is frustrated by the realisation that his words are never entirely his own; that the very act of speaking in order to delineate a self inscribes the speaking subject in a symbolic order which is inexorably intersubjective.

Undoubtedly, this experience is intensified and consolidated by Breytenbach’s specific predicament: he is a writer writing about being forced to write. He associates writing with privacy and inner freedom:

In the dark I am not in the way. There is nobody to look over my shoulder. I am relieved! Then, like an irrepressible urge, there would be the need to write. In the dark I can just perceive the faintly pale outline of a sheet of paper. And I would start writing. Like launching a black ship on a dark sea. I write: I am the writer.

(154)

Here writing is enabled by privacy and simultaneously confers an at least minimally stable symbolic identity: the act of writing makes him into a writer, functioning as a kind of autochthonous, autotelic act of self-creation which militates against the prison environment's incessant desire to dehumanise prisoners through pejorative labels and systems of classification. Writing is "irrepressible", a spontaneous, liberating act of the body enabled by the absence of others. However, he is also forced to write his confession: in this sense, the "irrepressible urge" becomes an injunction from outside, and writing becomes associated with the prison's absolute humiliating negation of privacy:

They can wait for you to start contradicting yourself, and they can relay themselves; you, you have to stay awake because you have to write, scribbling, filling page after page, repeating, altering, having it torn up, starting anew. *They* leave, they are replaced by two fresh interrogators and you sit there. 'May I go to the toilet, sir?' They do not answer, they wait. You write. You become desperate. 'May I go to the toilet, please?' And you're accompanied to the toilet where you are stripped of the last vestiges of privacy or the dignity you may have thought you had, because you are not allowed to close the door of the closet and you have to do whatever nature calls you to do in full view of the cynical man standing there, observing you, picking his teeth. (30)

Breytenbach claims that his life is "eaten up by words" (28); that "[i]t is all surface" (28). In the context of interrogation, language forces an intolerable intimacy, bringing

self and other in unbearably close proximity. For Breytenbach, writing is *simultaneously* the instrument that enables an inner life, a private self, and the very tool that his interrogators use to destroy every last vestige of privacy. By forcing one of the doyens of Afrikaner literature, a figure who is essentially *defined* through his writing, to write as part of the interrogation process designed to incriminate and imprison him, Breytenbach is placed in an intolerably contradictory position: the very foundation of his self is also the instrument that the state uses against him. As Schalkwyk points out, “the very compulsion to write, which underpins the most secure of Breytenbach’s identities, that of the writer or ‘scribe’, ... also underlies his abiding sense of self-disgust, entrapment and dissolution” (“Confession and Solidarity” 28). Again, the point should be made that this anxiety-provoking split relation to language, while perhaps characteristic of the confessional genre in general, is based in this case on particular material circumstances. In fact, Breytenbach’s interrogators were using a standard interrogation technique, used also on Emma Mashinini – confessions are written and rewritten in order to check for inconsistencies. In Breytenbach’s case, his interrogators were certainly sophisticated enough to understand that his status as an important Afrikaans writer would force him into a particularly difficult psychological predicament.

The memoir’s anxiety about plagiarism is a corollary of its more general anxiety about language. Plagiarism is precisely the point where the language of the self becomes confused with the language of another. One of Breytenbach’s quarrels with the other prisoners revolves around their tendency to plagiarise, their inability to fix an “owner”

to language (or even experience). Discussing one prisoner's manuscript, Breytenbach claims:

It was clear at that stage, judging only from the handwritings, it had already been written by five different people – all giving free reign to their diverse fantasies.

(166)

Despite (or perhaps because of) his condemnation of prisoners' use of the "extremely predictable and second-hand" (167), Breytenbach is persistently preoccupied with the originality and authenticity of his *own* thought and writing. In "plagiarism", one of the poems appended to the memoir, Breytenbach invokes the figure of a man who writes himself a poem for his birthday:

he scraped and scrounged, aped what he found,
and tried to turn the leftovers
into something with his breath – (365)

The desire here is almost for an alchemical transformation of the second-hand into something original. The poem is both a birthday gift and a form of giving birth, an attempt to create something new from the old. However, the poem is destroyed by the wrapping paper:

having used up everything to hand
 he wrapped it circumspectly in fresh paper
 meaning to write it out neatly later that evening
 but when around nightfall he unfolded the present
 the damned paper had already gobbled up the poem... (366)

It appears that it is impossible, in prison, to produce and sustain particularised, authentic language. What belongs most characteristically to the self – the very language it couches itself in – is always already compromised by its involvement in the speech of another. The act of putting pen to paper extends the promise of a cohesive identity while simultaneously repudiating the possibility of a unified self by reproducing the radical dependence of the self on the other.

How do we account for this fragmented, insistently individualised narrative voice of *True Confessions*, which anxiously rejects solidarity even as it appears to long for it, declares its independence even as its autonomy is questioned at every turn? To what extent does the tension between individual identity and the claims of community in *True Confessions* reflect Breytenbach's cultural, philosophical, literary, or psychological predilections, and to what extent is this tension inherent to performance of subjectivity demanded by the prison?

On the one hand, Breytenbach's experience of prison is clearly mediated by his literary and philosophical disposition. His early works, including *Katastrofes* (1964) and *Die*

huis van die dowe (1964) associated Breytenbach with a group of writers working in Afrikaans in the 1960s referred to as the “Sestigers” (Writers of Sixty). Brink goes so far as to identify Breytenbach as the principal figure of the “Sestigers” (Brink 5). This movement, spearheaded by writers such as Etienne Leroux, André Brink, Chris Barnard, Bartho Smit, Ingrid Jonker and Jan Rabie, was characterised by its departure from the localised realism that typified a great deal of previous literature in Afrikaans. Drawing heavily on French existentialist thought, the Sestigers rejected the notion of a rational, comprehensible world that makes itself available to mimetic representation in art. In the sixties, Afrikaans writing became increasingly modernist, interested in subjective interiority at the expense of realist description. It was distinguished by

... self-conscious experimentation with time and chronology, referentiality, a variable point of view, the *monologue intérieur*, myth as organizing authority, typographical effects. We find elements of the anti-novel with its anti-hero, its anonymous, faceless figures, its ‘outsiders’... while the language itself is affected in more than one way in an attempt to invoke a fragmented world, or to follow the illogical course of the *monologue intérieur*. (Grové 5. My translation.)

While Breytenbach originally aligned himself with this movement, his growing commitment to the liberation struggle in South Africa made him increasingly cautious of the New Critical formalism of a number of the Sestigers. In this, he is joined by some of the other leading writers and theorists of this period – most notably by Brink, who

criticises his predecessors for their lack of political engagement and questions the morality of a purely “aesthetic struggle” in a country beset by the violence of apartheid rule (Brink 43-45). Nonetheless, Breytenbach’s writing retains a strong reliance on a strong subjective voice, a rejection of the conventional registers of documentary realism and a preoccupation with a “deeper reality” underlying – or adjoining – the ordinary and the everyday. The self-reflexivity, philosophical digressions, formal experimentation and the insistence on the deeply personal nature of experience that characterise *True Confessions* are all evident in his earlier work in Afrikaans. To a certain extent, in other words, his experience of incarceration is inflected through the literary sensibility that he brings to prison.

However, in many significant ways, *True Confessions* also marks a departure from Breytenbach’s earlier oeuvre. This departure is signaled first of all by the fact that *True Confessions* was the first book that Breytenbach wrote in English.⁵ It is in many ways clearer and more descriptive than his other work. The experience of alienation and disintegration of the narrating “I” is intense and overtly linked to specific material circumstances. The transactions between the inner and the outer world, between self and other, have a kind of immediacy and urgency that are lacking in Breytenbach’s pre-prison writing.

⁵ Simon Lewis makes the interesting point that *True Confessions* in fact advances Afrikaans by forcing it into a hybridising encounter with the English language: for Lewis, *True Confessions* might be written in English, but it remains an Afrikaans text (Lewis 446-450).

Moreover, from the outset, Breytenbach explicitly links his narrative strategies to the specific material realities of courtrooms and interrogation sessions. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the memoir is its self-reflexive insistence on a link between the rituals of the prison and the production of an autobiographical voice. Beyond the question of Breytenbach's pre-existing philosophical and aesthetic inclinations, the prison itself clearly shapes Breytenbach's narration, and brings a particular form to his experience. There is a sense in which Breytenbach's highly developed literary sensibility becomes *invaded* by the prison, and particularly by the technology of solitary confinement. *True Confessions* incessantly attempts to read the prison as a kind of metaphor, where the incarcerated "I" represents a universal truth about human identity. However, the inescapable material force of the apartheid prison, the weight of history behind it, insists in turn that the "I" is the metaphor, a fantasmatic reflection of the reality of the penal institution. Jameson's development of the idea of the "relative autonomy" of literary and other cultural production, discussed at some length in the introductory chapter, is germane here. In one sense, Breytenbach self-consciously assembles the "I" as a representative of a particular philosophical and literary constellation of ideas, and gains a form of distance from the traumatic reality of life in prison through this endeavour. In another sense, the prison relentlessly organises and circumscribes the ideas that are used to describe it, constantly eroding the distance that the narrating "I" attempts to create from the context that provoked the narration in the first place. One could, in fact, claim that this play of attraction and repulsion between the autobiographical text and its ground is, in fact, the actual subject of *True*

Confessions, and the foundation of its strange shapelessness and its anxious self-reflexivity.

One way to begin addressing the question of the relationship between the narrating subject and the condition of incarceration is to look at the memoir's frequent allusions to mirrors. When Breytenbach is first detained, he is asked to clean up by one of his interrogators:

There was no mirror; just a metal sheet screwed into the wall. In this surface one could see a vague reflection of yourself. Just enough to shave by. Like looking at a memory of yourself through an opaque sheet of glass. (32)

Later, he describes cleaning his cell in Pretoria Central Prison:

The floors... were covered with plastic tiles... and these had to be polished and kept shiny... You had to be able to mirror your face in it. That was my Sisyphus task: making of my floor a mirror which could capture and return my real face – which would be immediately walked over and sink back into greyness... (142)

What is striking about these passages is not just the opacity of the mirror image, but the sense in which the image is the result of prison labour: it is an image constructed in answer to an *order*. Becoming visible to oneself is, in both these instances, a kind of by-product of submission to the rules and regulations of the prison system. Indeed,

Breytenbach's account of himself in *True Confessions* is ineradicably linked to his security police interrogators' practice of forcing him to write confessions for days on end. They constantly destroy his efforts and demand that he start over:

'Write', they say, and you write. Two sheets. 'What must I write about, sir?' 'You know: just write.' And they come and they read the two pages, and they smile and they tear it up. 'Write', they say, and you write. You write the same two pages. You want to please them: you don't want to annoy them. (28-29)

Rather like the mirror image in the polished floor, a self-representation is repeatedly produced and erased in answer to an unyielding demand. What Breytenbach foregrounds here is the way in which the act of rendering a self is not some effortless, spontaneous effect of subjectivity, but arises in response to the relentless and terrifying demands of police interrogation. There can be no moment of self-recognition or self-presence in the construction of such an autobiography because the desire of the prison intercedes: what the subject encounters in the metal sheet, the polished floor or the written confession is not self-presence, but a profoundly alienating and futile attempt to provide an adequate response to a demand that is never fully formulated. As Chapter Four, "Women in Prison", points out, Emma Mashinini describes a similar sense of abjection and self-loss during her interrogation sessions:

Always they wanted the truth, when I had no more truth to tell. I don't think they ever understood that in fact there was nothing to give away. But they always tried to find it, this nothing. (Mashinini 75)

For Mashinini, the impossibility of providing a version of her life that would satisfy her interrogators gains an almost material reality: what her interrogators demand under the rubric "truth" is actually an impossible concretisation of absence. The kind of confessional identity that is produced under such circumstances clearly intersects with the demands of a more "literary" confession – the production of a truthful account of an individual life – but at the same time it removes the belief in the possibility of self-presence, spontaneity, agency and authenticity that has traditionally animated the construction of a confessional autobiography.

While critics like Jolly would like to read Breytenbach's unstable "I" as a form of resistance to the prison's attempts to name and fix (Jolly 90), it is indisputable that the "de-stabilised" self in *True Confessions* attends at least in part on the way in which the narrator is addressed by the structures of the prison. The "destabilising" effects of solitary confinement aside⁶, the autobiographical "I" is persistently fragmented by its

⁶ Breytenbach describes solitary confinement as "... having all objectivity taken away from you":

You watch yourself changing, giving in to certain things, becoming paranoiac, staring at the wall, living with an ear at the door and yet cringing at the slightest noise, talking to the ants, starting to have hallucinations – without ever being able to ascertain the extent of these deviations or this damage precisely because you have nothing against which to measure it. (130)

It is difficult to square this terrifying sense of a loss of constancy with Jolly's claim that "... the autonomy of the subject – its power to resist violation – lies in the de-stabilization, not the assertion, of the concept of the unified subject" (90).

genesis in a coerced confession. In his autobiography, Breytenbach invents a self which arises in a complex dialogic response to the structures of the prison – structures which simultaneously demand visibility and erode the self. The modern penitentiary requires the production of “life narratives”: prisoner confessions, the biographising of prisoners’ lives by the courts, by criminologists, by priests, by social workers, by psychologists, by parole boards, and so on. At the same time, and perhaps particularly in the apartheid prison, the prisoner is an anonymous nobody, severed from meaningful social and familial links, eroded by the brutality of life in prison, or psychologically fragmented by the deprivations of solitude. Like so many other prisoners’ accounts, Breytenbach’s text is suspended between these two polarities – on the one hand the prison’s demand for a truthful portrait of an individual’s personality and life, and on the other its inexorable assault on the very cornerstones of a stable identity.

If the processes of interrogation and confession constitute the material underpinnings of the unstable and indefinite nature of the “I” in *True Confessions*, the rituals of interrogation are similarly implicated in the text’s disquieting production of difference between self and other, its concomitant craving for a connection with others and its recoil from the language of community.

The memoir is addressed to an imaginary interlocutor referred to, in turn, as “Mr Investigator”, “Mr I”, “Mr eye” and “you”. Early on in the memoir, Breytenbach writes:

Now I must get rid of the unreality. I must vomit. I must eject this darkness. I must plead with you, Mr Investigator, to not stop asking me questions. Do not desist, do not turn away from me. (27)

Here the interlocutor is ambiguously positioned between being a police interrogator, a priest, a psychoanalyst, and the reader of the text. The compulsion to write is both internal (as a writer, he writes to overcome the trauma) and external (the act of writing itself attends on a traumatic injunction), blurring the distinction between inner and outer pressure, between compulsion and compunction. The ubiquitous “eye” which surveys and controls becomes associated with the “I” which speaks. What we find here is in fact the structure of the panopticon outlined at the beginning of this chapter: the external eye that functions as an invisible centre to life in the Benthamite penitentiary derives its authority through a process of projection and internalisation. At some level, the imagined desires behind the gaze need to become internalised by the inmates of the panopticon. The shift from behaving *as if* the eye is always looking to *identifying* with the eye requires a minimal modification of consciousness, and is in fact central to the avowed reformative goal of Bentham’s architectural discovery. In solitary confinement, the surveillance of the eye is experienced as a particularly anxiety-provoking intrusion, because there is no ameliorating recourse to a social identity and no crowd to attenuate

its focus. The authority of the gaze rests on the fact that it makes a demand of consciousness rather than (merely) of the body: it engages and reorganises the interior life of the subject. During interrogation, the desire of the interrogator and the existence of such a ubiquitous gaze become interchangeable.

For Breytenbach, the confusion between the narrating “I” and the other, the incorporation of an alien desire to the self, attends first of all on the logic of interrogation, on the interrogator’s claim to intimacy in a modern penitentiary. However, it also extends to addressee of *True Confessions* in the most general sense: every reader inevitably becomes an interrogator. The very act of scrutinising the memoir implicates the reader in the panopticon’s mode of control and surveillance – and in the case of this memoir, it implicates the reader specifically in a mode of control exploited by apartheid. For the Breytenbach who speaks as an “I” in *True Confessions*, there is simply no real difference between, on the one hand, the “literary” confession with its general, abstract audience, and, on the other, the process of self-scrutiny and confession, coupled with the demand for repentance, that is demanded by the penitentiary. The general, abstract form of the reader of confessional autobiography is simply the universalising façade of authority in the prison. Any confession produces an anxiety-provoking confusion between an inner world and an external demand, between self and other. Even where Breytenbach addresses an activist community, he tends to locate them as interrogators:

I must tell you that I cannot hold my criticism, my disaffection, in abeyance; that I cannot condone your (our) agreements and compromises – not even tactically. I love you too bitterly for that. I hear you chuckling, you who are Black... (260)

Here the “your” of the addressee is followed by an uncertain parenthesised “our”, suggesting an ambivalent wavering between identifications that is more characteristic of the demands of the prison than of a rhetoric of struggle and solidarity. The fact that Breytenbach self-consciously finds literary forms to represent these moments of uncertainty and split identification of course alerts us to the difference between the “I” in the text and the figure of the author: even as the prison imposes one form of consciousness, the act of writing an autobiography, which implies a form of self-reflection and self-doubling, always already opens that consciousness to scrutiny and interrogation.

One way of apprehending Breytenbach’s itinerant addressee (is he speaking to himself, to us, to his interrogators, to a general abstract audience?) is to read *True Confessions* as a staged encounter between the legal confession and the religious or psychoanalytic confession.⁷ Peter Brooks points out that these two confessional models in fact “emerge simultaneously, in a reciprocal influence” in Western thought (3). In many ways, the panopticon, with its focus on reform, its deployment of solitary confinement and its belief in the power of reason and self-reflection, functions as one of the material sites

⁷ Brooks treats religious and psychoanalytic confessions as a distinct category because these confessional forms are, at least potentially, uncoupled from judgement and punishment. They are more typically aligned to self-knowledge and the alleviation of a private burden.

where these two confessional forms are both produced and connected to one another. Seen in this light, Breytenbach's confusion of addressee simply surfaces something of the ideological and material grounds of the confessional form in literature. On the one hand, *True Confessions* paridocally reproduces a coerced police confession, and on the other it participates in a different tradition of confessional writing that is essentially self-examining and is associated with the authentication of inner truth – in J.M. Coetzee's formulation, this tradition begins more or less with Rousseau and is defined by “an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” (J.M. Coetzee, “Confession” 194). For Breytenbach, the act of confession, whether it is in a literary autobiography or in a prison cell, is inescapably entangled with a particular mode of interrogation.

Through the constant confusion of the interrogator and the self – “image and mirror-image”, in Breytenbach's words (56) – the confession of a “crime” to another becomes the confession of guilt to the self. In the chapter titled “I Found Myself Confronted By”, Breytenbach speaks in the first person as the interrogator:

I am the rock, the flatfoot. I am stupid, not so? But you *know* of me. Here we are, today, still today, still this interminable dark day, days and days for ever. I am with you. I never let go of you again. You are programmed. I cleanse you. I break you in. I break you down to the pure outcome of spontaneous confession and give-away and self-oblivion. Since I love you so. (57)

In the “pure outcome of spontaneous confession”, the legal confession turns into the religious confession, and becomes fully internalised: in other words, the act of confession seems *freely chosen*, and arises from an inner compulsion to be absolved of sin. The more Breytenbach confesses, the more guilty he becomes of playing into the hands of the enemy, and the more he needs to confess in order to be absolved of the guilt.

If Breytenbach is catapulted into this imaginary relationship between “I” and “you”, self and mirror image, interrogated and interrogator, it is to a certain extent because the apartheid prison and its Afrikaner functionaries address him as an individual, and concede that he has subjective interiority. In the case of most black activists during apartheid rule, the prison had little interest in functioning as a “machine for altering minds” (Foucault 125). For them, the prison system remained radically other, treated them as radically other, and was far more interested in torturing bodies than in reforming minds. For Breytenbach, the idea of physical torture is entirely fantasmatic, a terrifying potential that emerges in speculative digressions, footnotes and an addendum on “Torture in South African Cells and Interrogation Rooms” (349-352). The function of torture here is properly *superegoic*. Breytenbach tortures himself with fantasies of torture, even though torture is never raised in an overt way as a possibility by the police interrogators in the memoir – in fact, he points out that his “hosts weren’t violent in any

way” (21). Torture functions to produce a particular form of psychological interiority, characterised by fear and dependency, rather than to punish.⁸

In contrast, during Molefe Pheto’s interrogation sessions, he is viciously assaulted and belittled. While they are torturing him, his interrogators lose any vestige of humanity:

‘My kaffertjie, you will call me baas!’ (‘My’ here was pronounced in Afrikaans which in English would be like ‘May’). The new one had gone berserk. He was a complete beast. Wild. ‘You will fly like a kite with a motor karr without wheels!’ as he wheeled around with his hands and body simulating the motor car he was talking about. He had looked really funny, more ugly and beastly than he had been. (Pheto 101)

Pheto’s reproduction of his interrogators’ strange pronunciation, his focus on their absurdity, his insistence that they are beasts rather than people, simply reflect the regard in which they hold him. They are represented as people who are essentially incapable of coherent action or speech, beyond the pale of humanity. He points out that his attempts to confess are in fact impeded rather than facilitated by the torture: “But just as I was about to tell them I was ready to talk, they started again” (101). In this way, both torturer and victim are divested of language and incapable of dialogue. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes:

⁸ This was certainly not the case for all white political detainees and prisoners. For instance, Hugh Lewin describes his beating at the hands of his interrogators in graphic detail in his memoir *Bandiet: Out of Jail* (23-27).

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (4)

For Pheto, there is no possibility of confusing self and other. In fact, the brutal, single-minded attack on his body allows him to retain a kind of independence of mind: there is no demand, in his description, that can be internalised, no possible confusion of voices and desires, because the exchange takes place beyond the parameters of reason and of ordinary speech.

For the prison's individualisation process to work, at least a minimal level of *recognition of sameness* is necessary – a point implicit in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, but never explicitly spelt out. In Breytenbach's case, the apparatus of the state *recognised* him as a subject, and to a certain extent Breytenbach recognised the subjectivity of his interrogators. Throughout *True Confessions*, he is haunted by the familiarity of the houses the prison warders take him to, the familiarity of the language they use, the nostalgia they feel towards the South African landscape. His interrogators feel the need to reform him rather than to punish him, to rationalise their own behaviour.

An uncomfortable reciprocity and mutual recognition characterise many of his exchanges with prison and police officials. He observes about his security police interrogators:

They are dangerous also because, despite the fact that they are conditioned to their work and believe blindly that they are justified in doing their thing, and questioning authority or the validity of an order has never been part of the Calvinist tradition, they are nevertheless very human with the same brittleness and the same doubts that you or I may have. The danger then comes from the internal conflicts they have to struggle with. The dichotomy is between doing what they have been conditioned to do unquestioningly and the leftover feelings of humane compassion, and – as they are not mentally or culturally equipped to resolve these contradictions or even to recognize them – they tend to become very violent in an unconscious effort to blot out and perhaps to surpass the uneasiness. However strange it may sound, Mr Eye, I am convinced that some of the people they have killed in detention probably died when the interrogator was in a paroxysm of unresolved frustrations, even that the interrogator killed in an awkward expression of love and sympathy for a fellow human being. (49-50)

Breytenbach's insight that people might have been murdered in detention as an expression of "love and sympathy for a fellow human being" relies, I would suggest, on the fact that Breytenbach was never physically harmed by his interrogators. For writers

such as Molefe Pheto and Caesarina Makhoere, apartheid functionaries never present themselves in ways that invite understanding or identification: there is, on the whole, no ideological or cultural common ground between prisoner and interrogator, essentially because the interrogators do not allow or even conceive of such a possibility.

Breytenbach's recognition of the humanity of his interrogators is carried through to his relationship with the *reader*, who is posited as someone both deeply familiar and intolerable. Throughout *True Confessions*, Breytenbach attempts to maintain alterity against the relentless inner and outer demand for the recognition of sameness, for identification with his interrogators. If he finds the security police "entirely unreasonable", they can nonetheless "smile at one another and joke", sometimes over a cup of tea (46), human gestures that Breytenbach cannot help but identify with.

Unlike writers like Nelson Mandela, Indres Naidoo or Moses Dlamini, Breytenbach finds it difficult to evoke a discourse *outside* the discourse of the prison, which seems to invade even his most private spaces. He finds it difficult to fix a purpose to his incarceration, or to find a cohesive ideological standpoint from which to comprehend and contain the experience of prison. His relationship to the African National Congress and the armed struggle is at best contradictory. The memoir takes care to deconstruct what he calls a "romantic view of underground work" (84):

Have we veritably thought *through* all the negative connotations and results of armed struggle, and the dangers to the political ideas, which we cherish, of underground work itself? Isn't it very often just a Boy Scout Game? (85)

It is notable that one of the few sections of the book which uses the plural “we” is riddled with questions, qualifications and doubts. In contrast, when Mandela affects this pronoun in *Long Walk*, it often serves to obviate and negate doubts and uncertainties that attend on speaking as an individual. In addition, for Breytenbach, there does not seem to be a notion of an alternative future that might legitimise his experience in prison. If anything, the future presents itself in images of disaster or as a re-emergence of the present moment:

The African national Congress – or some organization still called the ANC for I am now projecting my mind into the distant future – will eventually rule the country. What’s left of it. Judging from its practices in exile, inside the organization and towards other South African political groupings, its alliances and its ideological examples and commitments – it is conceivable that the present totalitarian State will be replaced by one which may be totalitarian in a different way, and intolerant of alternative revolutionary schools of thought, more hegemonic but minus the racism. (359)

Either the future will hold nothing, or it will be substantially the same: apocalypse or repetition.

For Breytenbach, the world of the present and the prison are all-encompassing. His escape to a private reality is marred by the sense in which that reality is always already

engaged and colonised by the prison. Language, time and space are endlessly reduplicated:

Excuse me for taking refuge in my own language: there's always another language behind the present one; there's always another world living in the shadow of the one we share; there's for ever another room behind this one and in this other room there's another man sitting with a little tape recorder whispering in his own ears, saying, 'There is another world living parallel to this one, there is another language on the other side of the wall being spoken by another man holding a little instrument, etc. etc.' (40)

One could say that Breytenbach's physical solitary confinement becomes extended to a more abstract solitary confinement in a world of continual replication. Breytenbach occupies a kind of narrative deadlock at the furthest extreme of the discourse of the prison itself: there is no "alternative story" or a "we" beyond the individualised "I" that might allow him the illusion of breaking through to the "other side".

The question is whether a voice which is located in a place of endless repetition is capable of any meaningful protest. Coetzee's criticism of Breytenbach's *Mouir* is apposite here:

Turning the gaze from the window to the mirror has never been a *way out* or a *way past*: it has always proved to be what Breytenbach in *Mouir* discovers it to be: a diversion. (“Breytenbach” 84)

Indeed, the individualising logic of the penitentiary is *designed* to be self-enclosing and total. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela notes that in solitary confinement, “the mind begins to turn in on itself, and one desperately wants something outside oneself on which to fix one’s attention” (397). Such an inward turn erodes the conditions that allow a sense of autonomy and collapses the difference between subject and ground. In effect, in the absence of any external points of reference, the mind itself becomes a projection of the prison.

The question of Breytenbach’s ability to resist the power of the prison gains a broader importance when it is seen as a more general question about the ability of the subject to resist the individualising power of the modern penitentiary, which is designed specifically to suppress resistance at the level of consciousness itself? In other words, what are the modes of resistance available to prisoners such as Ruth First, Albie Sachs and Hugh Lewin, who encounter the more “modern” face of the apartheid prison? In the sense that white prisoners were far more likely to be interpellated by a recognisably Benthamite institution, the question in fact extends to an even more general level, where it relates to the subjectivation of white identities under apartheid: one should remember that the panopticon is ultimately a coercive, material realisation of a much broader social form of interpellation..

In Breytenbach's case, I would suggest that there is in fact no immediate, significant moment of resistance present in the autobiographical text. The fluidity of narrative identity and the anxious self-questioning simply realise, in a fairly direct way, a subject position that is manufactured by the penal institution. The philosophical digressions and flights into poetry mask a kind of subjective destitution, a terrifying self-loss or aphanisis. They emerge as an aestheticising screen against the Real, a hole that is ripped into the subject's symbolic universe by the prison.

At an ontological level, however, one could claim that Breytenbach's *existence*, both as the cause of his writing and as its retroactive effect, poses a challenge to the structure of the prison. If Breytenbach is trapped in a kind of traumatic aporetic impasse which attends on the prison's mode of interpellation, it is interesting that the prison seems to reach a similar limit in the figure of Breytenbach. His sense of self is thrown into crisis by his confinement, but his confinement also poses an ideological crisis for the apartheid system. This is evidenced by the constant clumsy attempts on behalf of security police agents and prison officials to "convert" him, which often collapse into nervous attempts at self-justification. Breytenbach's description of a Security Agent's attempts to convince him of the validity of apartheid is a case in point:

There was Hendrik Goy, tortured, chain-smoking, again ambivalent; capable of fierce hatred, a chip on his shoulder, aware somehow of being a pariah in society, but being allowed to cover this knowledge with the veneer of the power of being

able to terrorize others. I still hear him in his crude way trying to bring me to other insights, trying to argue into the silence that what they're doing is right.

(43-44)

If Goy is arguing “into the silence”, then Breytenbach becomes the embodiment of that anxiety-provoking silence, a traumatic void in the self-construction of a particular kind of Afrikaner identity. The panopticon rests on the idea of rehabilitation, but rehabilitation is also one of its points of structural weakness. In order to effect the “reintegration” of its subjects, it needs to acknowledge the existence of the other, and enter into a conversation with him or her.

In a South African context, where the idea of anti-social behaviour is simply not consonant with the principled actions of political activists, the rehabilitative drive of the prison inevitably reaches a moment where it has to justify itself in the face of the profound skepticism of both the national resistance movement and the international community. For this reason, the prison in apartheid South Africa was inevitably only ever a distorted part-version of a Benthamite reformatory institution: at the most crucial moment of its ideological interpellation it is compelled to render an account of itself, essentially to exculpate itself, and in the process to lose its veneer of dispassionate universality. In the face to face encounter with the political prisoner, the “reformatory” prison has to disclose both its deployment of power and its particularity, threatening the collapse of its entire justificatory scaffolding.

Again, Breytenbach serves as focus of anxiety not because of his otherness, but because of his sameness. His brother, Jan Breytenbach, serves as a kind of shadowy alter-ego in the memoir, linking Breytenbach by blood to the very centre of Afrikaner power. One of the memoir's deepest ironies is that Breytenbach, imprisoned for his rejection of Afrikaner hegemony, is allowed to write in prison in the interests of Afrikaans literature:

Soon after my sentencing I applied in writing, as always in prison, in duplicate, to the authorities for the permission to paint and to write. Without me knowing about it similar requests were being made from outside, emanating from the South African milieu of writers and academics. People who absolutely rejected me and my ideas and what my life stood for but who, perhaps from an obscure sense of uncomfortableness, if not guilt, and also, surely, because of a true concern for my work, applied to the minister to allow me to continue writing. 'For the sake of Afrikaans literature.' Was it a way for some of them to establish in their own minds their evenhandedness? (159)

In a way analogous to Breytenbach's inability to forge a stable self because of the over-proximity between self and other, the Afrikaner establishment struggles to maintain a coherent, justifiable sense of its own identity precisely because Breytenbach is too closely identified with it. Breytenbach both belongs and does not belong; he writes in order to consolidate a particular Afrikaans identity, but his writing simultaneously

threatens to destroy that identity. To identify with Breytenbach as an Afrikaner introduces a disquieting supernumerary element to Afrikaner identity.

In a sense, then, Breytenbach's critique of the prison is most interesting precisely where he struggles to distance himself from its modes of operation, where he identifies most closely and uncomfortably with his own interrogators, and they with him. It is in fact where the process of interpellation – with its sustaining mechanisms of isolation, mutual identification and projection – proceeds in an unimpeded way that the apartheid prison is forced to confront the structural limitations of its *modus operandi*, where the panopticon becomes most clearly inadequate to the task it is required to perform in South African society. To put it differently, resistance in *True Confessions* resides in the production of an author rather than in the narrative itself.

Solitary confinement, and particularly its use in South African prisons under apartheid, is one of the most total and unremitting forms of imprisonment. It leaves little room for resistance because its object is explicitly the mind of the inmate; it appropriates the interiority of the subject. Especially where it is employed under the guise of "reform", it invades and permeates any attempt at self-narration, since its efficiency is in fact based on the production of narratives of self.

However, for an institution based on Bentham's panopticon to work, its operation must proceed in a way that is at least in theory invisible. To return to the model outlined at the beginning of the chapter, the gaze of the central authority must ultimately be

apprehended as the freely chosen exercise of reason; its literal presence must remain in the shadows. One of the gestures of resistance available to writers who recount their experience of solitary confinement is precisely to *traverse* the pacifying fantasy of a neutral, ubiquitous power, and to insist on including the anxiety-provoking, self-distorting presence of the gaze as *objet petit a* in their narrative reconstructions. In some ways, this remains possible because the panopticon exists in a fraught and difficult relationship to apartheid, an ideology that was incessantly forced to justify itself by internal and external pressures.

As this thesis tries to illustrate, white prisoners were much more likely to encounter the traditional Benthamite prison because the prison recognised their subjectivity and saw them as participants in the project of modernity. The problematics of a confessional autobiography, so closely associated with the emergence of a modern individualising penitentiary, becomes in the field of the prison memoir predominantly a form of “white writing”. However, solitary confinement was at the same time widely applied in all South African prisons. The experience of being deprived of community and of the sustaining stability of a freely assumed shared symbolic marks the “I” of every voice that describes imprisonment. At the heart of every South African prison autobiography is an awareness of the individual subject as a vanishing point. The prison memoir, and by extension the subjectivities that it gave rise to, is compelled to establish a relationship with the echo of abjection and disintegration that is invited by every use of the word “I”. Without acknowledging the role of solitary confinement in the apartheid

prison, it is very difficult to grasp the contours of subjectivity in the South African prison memoir.

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SIX: CONCLUSION: THE PRISON AFTER APARTHEID

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Louis Althusser points out that Repressive State Apparatuses – which would include the police, the courts and the prisons – are determined by a double functioning. While they function primarily by repression, a secondary *ideological* function guarantees their cohesion and reproduction (19). One of the main aims of this thesis has been to focus on the ideological performance, rather than the repressive agency, of the prison in South Africa before 1994. My primary interest has been in the connection between the material practices and rituals of the apartheid prison and the (ideological) construction of subjectivity, or, to use a more properly Althusserian phrasing, the construction of an imaginary relation between the subject and the real relations of production.

The massive influence of the prison on every sphere of existence in South African society has meant in effect that the prison defied narrow delimitation as a repressive institution, and started functioning as an influential instrument in the production of ideology. It produced ways of thinking about the self, it presented influential ways of apprehending collective agency, it demarcated the boundaries and the rules of the struggle against apartheid, and it generated more general ideas around ethics and citizenship. Nowhere is this more clear than in autobiographical writing about the experience of imprisonment: in this literary form, the “I” emerges relative to the

experience of incarceration; the imagining of a self is inexorably entangled with the experience of the penal institution.

As the introductory chapter emphasises, the apartheid prison's forms of subjectivation have retained currency after the democratisation of South African society: to understand ideas of "self" in the post-apartheid moment, we need to understand something of the ideological demands of the apartheid state's repressive apparatuses. The prison autobiography serves to provide an image of the national subject as ontologically undecidable – in other words, still engaged in the process of becoming – and also, after apartheid, to consolidate a new hegemonic national subjectivity.

Specifically, the utopian concept of community as a site where differences are overcome, reconciliation becomes possible and individual talent is fostered and valued is galvanised by the apartheid prison's drive towards individualisation and segregation. As this thesis has demonstrated, the regenerative potential of communal life emerges as a powerful theme across a broad spectrum of prison autobiographies, where the value of a solidarity emerges in an agonistic relationship to the penal system's forms of control: community is, in a very real sense, defined through reference to the segregation and alienation that characterised life in South African prisons and in the broader social arrangements that the prison reflected and sustained.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final report in 1999, the concept of “Ubuntu” featured prominently in its description of its philosophical and ethical grounds in both the first and the fifth volumes. The report explains this concept through reference to the proverb “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which it translates as “one only is a person through other persons” (1.5: 39). In effect, the TRC instated this term at the very centre of national self-relation: it has, in fact, become difficult to follow any discussion of communal responsibility in a South African context without encountering this term.¹ Its use in actuality links post-apartheid emphases on communalism and nation-building to a kind of organic traditional African wisdom, despite the fact that, as Christoph Marx observes, “no historical evidence has been produced to substantiate this alleged community culture” (52). In fact, the contours of a communal ideology, and specifically the association of community with nation, were forged at the height of the struggle against apartheid, and apartheid prisons were important laboratories for the production of ideas about collective agency and responsibility. The reliance on the vague concept of “Ubuntu” masks some of the specific material – and relatively modern – foundations of post-apartheid communalism.

If the prison helped to supply a model for community, prison memoirs also reveal the experiences that had to be excluded in order to forge powerful national tropes such as

¹ See, for instance, Sharlene Swartz’s “A Long Walk to Citizenship: Morality, Justice and Faith in the Aftermath of Apartheid”, Desmond Tutu’s *The Rainbow People of God: A Spiritual Journey from Apartheid to Freedom*, Dirk Louw’s *Ubuntu and the Challenges of Multiculturalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Augustine Shutte’s *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*, Mfuniselwa Bhengu’s *Ubuntu: The Essence of Democracy*, Lovemore Mbigi’s *Ubuntu: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*, and so on.

Ubuntu. Chapter Three, "On Robben Island", examines in some detail the forms of violence, and the processes of exclusion, that attended on the construction of communal identities in prison. The prison memoir reminds us of both the origin and the spectre of conflict and prohibition that haunts the utopian idea of community. In addition, prison autobiographies show us how a collective identity is ultimately a refuge from the deprivations of enforced solitude: the desperate desire to perform an intersubjective identity stems, in the first place, from a form of torture that produces alienation and madness. If the prison memoir incessantly extols the virtues of a collective life, it is also marked by a recoil from a terrifying loss of self that is bound up with Enlightenment technologies of individualisation. Solitary confinement remains simultaneously a kind of supernumerary excess to and an important foundation of contemporary forms of national identity.

At present, the experience of the apartheid prison is progressively harnessed to serve and to legitimise the emergent hegemonic ideologies of the democratic state. Recently published texts such as Mac Maharaj's *Reflections in Prison* (2001) and Ahmed Kathrada's *A Free Mind* (2005) indicate the sense in which the apartheid prison memoir has become almost seamlessly connected to the language of mainstream politics: these texts are not so much autobiographies as policy statements, a collection of philosophical and political essays that serve to disclose the continuity between the principles and opinions of apartheid prisoners and government policy in the present post-apartheid moment. While the apartheid prison is mythologised as a space of

struggle, transformation and reflection, conditions in real prisons in South Africa remain dismal. The 2005 Jali report on corruption and violence in South African prisons outlines a calamitous situation in the Department of Correctional Services, with widespread corruption, maladministration and routine infractions of prisoners' constitutional rights. Prisons are overcrowded and inmates are "subjected to torture and other treatment that would be deplorable in any democratic or civilised society" (Republic of South Africa 333). Solitary confinement remains widespread as a form of punishment (336). The C-Max Prison in Pretoria, constructed under the new democratic government, is characterised by the report as an institution designed to "punish and even torture" its inmates (365). Prison rapes are common and warders either turn a blind eye to sexual assault or actively participate in the sexual exploitation and rape of prisoners (390-462). In effect, the promotion of the apartheid prison as the birthplace of a democratic nation is paralleled by a scandalous neglect of deteriorating conditions in existing prisons – a situation that is exacerbated by a public outcry about spiraling crime rates in South Africa and the consequent demonisation of criminal offenders. A series of public promises made by the Department of Correctional Services in 1997 to ensure even harsher conditions for prison inmates met with little resistance from the public or from political parties (Oppler 46).

Against this background, life stories that have been emerging from post-apartheid prisons are marketed as survival stories or as anthropological studies: with the demise of apartheid, the prison autobiography rapidly lost its significant status in South

African letters. Texts such as Heather Parker Lewis's *The Prison Speaks* (2003) and Julia Landau's *Journey to Myself: Writings by Women from Prison in South Africa* (2004) are typical of the new prison autobiographies. They straddle the line between biography and autobiography, and represent the experience of prison in a frame loosely defined by the Social Sciences: located somewhere between a confessional narrative and a biographical investigation, they use prisoners' stories in the service of therapy, to disclose something about the hardship of life in prison, and to reflect on the social conditions that have governed the lives of prisoners. For all their reformatory zeal, they sometimes come perilously close to fulfilling a function identified with the penitentiary apparatus: the production of biographical, individualising knowledge about prisoners. As Foucault notes:

The introduction of 'biographical' is important in the history of penality. Because it establishes the 'criminal' as existing before the crime and even outside it. And, for this reason, a psychological causality, duplicating the juridical attribution of responsibility, confuses its effects. At this point one enters the 'criminological' labyrinth from which we have certainly not emerged: any determining cause, because it reduces responsibility, marks the author of the offence with a criminality all the more formidable and demands penitentiary measures that are all the more strict. (252)

These kinds of auto/biographies effectively mark the depoliticisation of imprisonment after apartheid, or at least the strategic relegation of the political to the globally marketable realm of personal suffering and survival.

One of the most interesting and self-reflexive texts to emerge from and in fact to critique the genre of post-apartheid prison narratives is Jonny Steinberg's *The Number* (2004). Steinberg's book chronicles the life story of Magadien Wentzel, whom he meets in Pollsmoor prison in 2002 and follows after his release in 2003. Wentzel is introduced to Steinberg by Johnny Jansen, the prison head, who clearly sees Wentzel as an advertisement for the post-apartheid prison's ability to reform its inmates. In other words, Wentzel is presented by the highest authority figure in the prison as a representative subject, the product of a new national and institutional culture. As a complex intimacy is established between interviewer and interviewee, Wentzel starts to exceed the frame provided by the prison. On the one hand, the idiosyncrasies of his life militate against such a representative role, and on the other the "new" culture of the prison seems inextricably bound up with traditions and rituals that extend to at least the end of the nineteenth century.

In some ways, Steinberg's book participates in a more general post-apartheid shift away from political prison autobiographies towards a more collaborative, interview-driven memoir. (Another example is Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003), an account of Gobodo-Madikizela's interviews with Eugene de

Kock, the commanding officer of the apartheid death squads.) One material catalyst for the prevalence of this kind of auto/biography is perhaps the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where the testimony of the victims and perpetrators of apartheid were assembled in a social and legal space that foregrounded the idea of personal testimony as collective endeavour. Autobiographical narratives were produced under court-like circumstances, with interlocutors posing specific questions working towards a clearly defined goal. Moreover, the TRC reached the bulk of the South African public through the media, so that journalists essentially became the editors of and commentators on the life stories that they were recording. Steinberg, in other words, draws on a dominant post-apartheid understanding of narratives of personal suffering and transformation as a form of public dialogue. In the process, as with Gobodo-Madikizela's account, it becomes difficult to locate the subject of the narrative: as much as Steinberg recounts Magadien's life story, he is of course also producing an autobiographical narrative about his own encounter with Magadien and his world.

One consequence of such a collaborative approach to the construction of a life story is that the interviewer appropriates and potentially misrepresents the subject's narrative.

As Steinberg notes:

I have used the words 'I' and 'me'. 'I say to Magadien...' 'Magadien tells me...'

As if we are equals. We are not. The relationship between a journalist and his subject is never a relationship between equals. The 'I' in the pages of the book the

journalist pens is not a flesh-and-blood being with a soul to be bared and a heart to be scorched. He is a cipher, an abstraction; he is a pair of eyes that sees all. The subject, on the other hand, the 'Magadien', he is the one with the bared soul and scorched heart. The 'I' is capable of doing him violence. (240)

In the same way that the prison head attempts to use Magadien to make a point about his prison, Steinberg uses Magadien in the service of his own narrative about South African culture and identity. The point is not, of course, that this erodes the spontaneity and authenticity of the narrative: as this thesis has argued, even the most confessional autobiographies are shaped by the public roles that they play. Rather, the point is that different uses of the same life narrative become entangled with one another. Magadien is interested in a kind of therapeutic retrieval of memory, while Steinberg is interested in writing a popular analysis of South African society at a particular historical juncture. One could say that post-apartheid auto/biographies are marked by a kind of fracturing of purpose, an uncertainty about the frame and utility of self-narration. Steinberg is perhaps unusual in foregrounding this anxiety, but the interweaving of voices in any collaborative autobiography necessarily highlights the fact that self-construction is governed by socially located relations of power and undermines some of the traditional autobiography's claim to artless transparency.

Where Steinberg departs from some of the conventions that are emerging around post-apartheid prison life narratives is in his refusal to draw a well-defined demarcation

between political imprisonment and other forms of incarceration. In this sense, Steinberg rejects the idea of a clear line that marks off post-apartheid criminal “confessions” from the valorised autobiographical narrative space of political prisoners under apartheid – a line that is absolutely essential to emerging myths about South African nationhood.

First of all, he notes that Wentzel is initially imprisoned in the late 1970s for his involvement in anti-apartheid politics. During his spell in Victor Verster prison, he is recruited into the 28s, one of the three Numbers gangs (the others are the 26es and the 27s). The movement from fighting against apartheid to becoming a criminal gangster seems almost seamless in Wentzel’s account: in his reconstruction of events, the struggle against the white government and his embrace of gang culture are nearly synonymous. As Steinberg points out, a material contributory factor to this slide from political to criminal activity had to do with prison conditions. Unlike activist leaders, rank-and-file demonstrators were thrown into overcrowded open cells with the Number gangs (Steinberg 141). For someone like Wentzel, who had grown up on the periphery of gang culture, the shift from political activism to gangsterism was not really extraordinary:

The truth is that, culturally and socially, Magadien was far closer to the prisoners on the other side of the divide than to his fellow political detainees. They were

from neighbourhoods like his; they had broken into the homes and factories of the Cape Flats, just as he had. (Steinberg 142)

In other words, Steinberg insists on recognising the complex interstitial, itinerant nature of the identities of people disenfranchised by apartheid, and resists Magadien's attempts to glamorise himself as either a gangster or a political activist by pointing out the moments of dissonance and fissure in his self-construction. After Steinberg records Magadien's version of crowd violence during the post-1976 protest marches, he comments:

When Magadien describes the scenes, you can make out the complex strands of his identity; the activist, celebrating the memory of white retreat, the haunted soul remembering the fallen figures who were once merged into a crowd, and the gangster who watches with glee as the world was turned upside down. (140-141)

In this way, Steinberg's book constructs a subjectivity that is increasingly fractured precisely in its subject's attempts to create a coherent, integrated identity: the dialogic way in which Wentzel's story is presented interweaves the activity of self-representation with deconstructive critical reflections on the nature and uses of autobiography and confession.

One of Steinberg's most penetrating insights relates to the way Wentzel appeals to the language of myth in his *bildung*. Thus he points out that Wentzel's claim that he was imprisoned for the first time in 1976 is unlikely, but remarks:

That he fiddled with his own formative moment, placing it in June 1976, one of the most formative moments in recent South African history, is poignant and telling. For he is doing with his personal history exactly what a nation does with its own; it freezes a moment in time, paints it in bold and gaudy brush strokes, and uses it as a device to explain where it has come from and why it has turned out the way it has. (137)

Steinberg picks up here on an entanglement between personal history and the construction of a national identity that is in fact typical of many of the political prison memoirs discussed in previous chapters of the thesis. However, instead of enlarging his own life story in order to produce a kind of national history, in the way Nelson Mandela does in *Long Walk to Freedom*, Wentzel uses South African history as a way to provide coordinates and significance to his personal memories. To put it differently, the political is used in service of the personal, rather than the personal in service of the political. The significance of 1976 as an important turning point in South African history becomes articulated with Wentzel's recollection of a private crossroads. This is perhaps indicative of a larger shift in the prison memoir, and in South African autobiographies in general: as the exigency of political change diminishes, the tropes

and myths of national history start to function as indices in the construction of individual lives. Concomitantly, communal history becomes reduced to a somewhat dis coherent collection of mythologised events.

In addition to the orthodox public history that informs Wentzel's story, he also draws on the parabolic history of the Numbers gangs, which can be traced back to the story of Nongoloza and his lieutenant Kilikijan, two bandits in Johannesburg in the early 20th century. Steinberg takes care to distinguish between the "real" history of Nongoloza and the fable-like history, "an odd hybrid of Homeric and Talmudic tales" (Steinberg 43) that Numbers gang members are forced to memorise as part of their induction into the gangs:

The first is a real-historical figure who walked the actual streets of early Johannesburg. The second is the mythical Nongoloza, whose story was invented and transmitted by thousands of South African prisoners. (Steinberg 35)

As much as Wentzel's self-construction is framed by the real events of the South African transition to democracy, it is also informed by a kind of parallel, mythologised and orally transmitted prison history. By commenting on the collusions and frictions that are generated between these two different understandings of history, Steinberg both resists the homogenisation of history that is typical of many apartheid-era memoirs and demonstrates how "ordinary criminals" in fact also draw on a language of

identity that is eminently political. On the one hand, the secret mythical history of Nongoloza is understood as a story about black resistance to colonial law: Nongoloza's banditry is seen as a rejection of migrant labour on the mines and as an attempt to wrest power and wealth from white exploiters. On the other hand, the Numbers gangs offer a kind of "official" account of themselves that translates gang activity into a form of communal activism. Steinberg transcribes a speech that Wentzel plans to deliver to the Minister of Correctional Services when he visits Pollsmoor prison:

'I salute the 26, 27 and 28 groups for showing courage. They stood up and fought for our rights under the apartheid regime, for us to be treated in a humane way. But when democracy came to South Africa everyone forgot the blood that we shed in prison for the sake of democracy. Instead we were labelled as gangsters. Let me put the record straight: we were never gangsters. With our souls and our minds we were freedom fighters. We put our bodies and lives on the line for democracy, and we are doing it yet again for change.' (18)

The echoes between Wentzel's self-construction and the forms of self-presentation employed by many anti-apartheid campaigners is disturbing on a number of levels. First, it suggests that the language of political activism and communitarianism is eminently appropriable. If a gang member can construct his or her subjectivity using the language of self-sacrifice and the struggle for political freedom, it implies that the language lends itself to cynical abuse. Wentzel's oratory draws attention to the

discursive, rhetorical element that this form of language in fact needs to conceal in order to work effectively. Second, it intimates that the rigid border between political prisoners and criminal prisoners might not be as self-evident as many anti-apartheid activist autobiographies suggest. By offering even a tenuous link between gang activity and the struggle against apartheid, the self-justificatory public rhetoric of the gangs threatens to dispel the idea of a criminal other against which the new democratic order has to define itself. As Chapter Three (“On Robben Island”) points out, the “two prisons” model is absolutely essential to the construction of a hegemonic model of citizenship through sacrifice and struggle: the idea that gangsters might be animated by notions of the public good removes the ontological premise of normative post-apartheid concepts of “self” that emerge in memoirs of political imprisonment. The idea of a subject who is both a criminal and an activist is properly speaking grotesque, as this thesis discusses in relation to Moses Dlamini’s “Poqo-criminals” in his *Hell Hole, Robben Island* (1984).

Through his careful recording and scrutiny of Magadien Wentzel’s life story, Steinberg creates a post-apartheid collaborative auto/biography that manages to deconstruct some of the premises of canonised anti-apartheid political memoirs. Specifically, he returns to ideas surrounding the unity of self, the construction of a homogenous public history, the unassailable dignity and integrity of struggle, and the link between the story of a self and the story of a community, in order to ask penetrating and unsettling questions about the assumptions that underpin these constructions.

Simultaneously, he offers new possibilities for the prison memoir in the post-apartheid moment precisely by *retaining* many of the strengths of the apartheid prison autobiography. Instead of producing a semi-voyeuristic victim narrative, Steinberg manages to perpetuate the tradition of radical social analysis and criticism forged under apartheid. For Steinberg, the prison remains a privileged explanatory space in a society that remains deeply marked by the mass criminalisation and imprisonment of its citizens. *The Number* insists that the construction of identity in prison discloses the play of power in society in general. Nonetheless, it is attained at the expense of wresting ownership of the story that the book recounts away from its original teller. Considering the book's erosion of Wentzel's autonomy and transparent self-presence, the reader remains haunted by the possibility that the text ultimately serves to represent not Wentzel's narrative, but the more privileged voice and values of the journalist. Even at its best, the post-apartheid prison life story seems caught between subreption and radical critique.

Steinberg's insistence on the prison's central role in understanding post-apartheid subjectivity and social arrangements, however, stands out in a social context where the existence and role of the prison is generally disregarded. After decades of living under a police state, South Africans seem anxious to return the prison and its apparatuses to the margins of visibility.

The only dominant social institution that has insisted on sustaining the language of the prison and its judiciary apparatus in a clearly visible, public way has been the TRC. In some ways, the logic behind the TRC has been precisely to invoke the spectre of imprisonment, the logic of interrogation, the drive towards reformation and the processes of public trials in order to escape from a history defined by imprisonment. As such, its wager is that a kind of iteration of the defining processes of a police state, but inflected through the desire for reconciliation and public accountability, will constitute an event that will untie the nation's bonds to its oppressive past. The TRC is really a machine for producing autobiographical accounts that serve a communal or national interest. In this way, it fulfils a function remarkably similar to the function that the apartheid prison inadvertently served. If, in other words, the prison autobiography has become a diminished and marginalised form in the post-apartheid moment, the TRC has until recently retained specific penal technologies in a role that is central to and productive of post-apartheid national identity.

I mention the TRC because it is so clearly a post-apartheid continuation and a radical reevaluation of a certain penal logic – and, moreover, its orientation is towards the manufacture of narratives about the self. However, it falls beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in a sustained and thorough way with the work and role of TRC. I will remark briefly on a few aspects of the TRC in order to return to one of the central preoccupations of the thesis: to what extent does a penal logic allow for resistance? In

other words, does the TRC simply reproduce the material agency of the prison in a new context, or does it unsettle the power of the prison and its institutions?

One of the most important ways in which the TRC revises the juridical and penal logic that it appropriates is by transforming what were essentially private rituals into public displays. In this way, the element of *secrecy* that governed the apartheid prison and its institutions is eroded. Thus, for instance, the idea of confession is moved by the TRC from an essentially clandestine, classified domain to the public arena, where the confessional narratives of both victims and perpetrators become social acts that escape juridical and penal circumscription. Consequently, they can be used, disseminated and translated across a range of social institutions.

A remarkable example of this repetition and publicisation of one of the most concealed elements of detention under apartheid – police interrogation and torture – can be found in the TRC's questioning of a former Security Policeman, Captain Jeffrey Benzien, on July 14, 1997 during his amnesty hearing. A South African Press Association release describes how Benzien is asked by ANC MP Tony Yengeni to simulate his technique on a colleague, Mncebisi Sikhwatsha:

A hush fell over the amnesty hearing venue in Cape Town and the audience craned their necks to better see the demonstrated torture.

Benzien, his voice breaking, returned to the witness stand and under persistent questioning from Yengeni admitted there was always the possibility that people might lose consciousness. (SAPA, “Former Policeman”)

In this instance, it seems the tables are turned between the former interrogator and his victim: Benzien is the one who is interrogated and potentially humiliated, largely because of the public nature of the hearings. As Antjie Krog points out in *Country of my Skull*, however, Benzien uses the occasion to expose Yengeni’s betrayal of his comrades while he was under torture:

‘Do you remember, Mr Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jennifer Schreiner? Do you remember pointing out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?’ And Yengeni sits there – as if begging this man to say it all; as if betrayal or cowardice can only make sense to him in the presence of this man. (73)

This public repetition of the act of interrogation both repeats and explodes the logic of a legal confession. On the one hand, the intimacy of the relationship between torturer and victim is reinvoked in order to produce a narrative that relates to factual evidence, motivation and culpability in ways that are consonant with a security police interrogation. On the other hand, the unrestricted civic nature of the hearing ensures that the roles of witness, interrogator, jurist and judge become entirely communal, transforming notions of guilt and innocence into matters of public debate, where they

are never conclusively decided or resolved. The *jouissance* of torture, a sinister, veiled support for the ostensibly neutral and dispassionate operation of justice, erupts in full public view during one of the most publicised hearings in South African history. As Slavoj Žižek points out, the moment the foreclosed dimension of perverse enjoyment becomes visible in the symbolic field, the symbolic itself loses its coherence and credibility (*Totalitarianism* 160-165). By instating the act of torture as a spectacle in a juridical context, the entire symbolic edifice of law and punishment is denaturalised: something “goes wrong” with the rituals of justice. In “Renegotiating Responsibility after Apartheid”, Mark Sanders points out:

To a certain extent, we, as interdisciplinary scholars of law, want things to go awry, to “go wrong”. When operating boundaries are transgressed and quasi-judicial conventions are renegotiated, other dimensions of responsibility may be broached. Once that takes place, however, one cannot anticipate what will unfold.
(592)

In other words, the sense of the uncanny that arises during the Benzien trial, of an unraveling of the appropriate procedures, catapults the questions of accountability and guilt into the domain of the undecidable. In Alain Badiou’s terms, the Benzien hearing participates in the logic of an *event*. Elements of the apartheid penal system – interrogation, confession, standing trial – are removed from their original context and brought together in a public way under a new name, resulting in a moment of extreme

ambivalence. In this way, the apartheid penal and juridical system *confronts itself* in the TRC, which is essentially a mirroring device, an apparatus for effecting transference. As Mark Sanders points out, “[t]ransference is a way of staging in the present a past set of experiences, and is an alternative to direct confrontation with figures who are linked to traumatic events” (591). Thus even though Benzien is still the same man who tortured Yengeni, the TRC also forces him to play the *role* of the man who tortured Yengeni: transference is achieved because Benzien is and is not himself, he effectively *stands in* for himself in the juridical space provided by the TRC. Through this process of redoubling, mediation and symbolic substitution, the TRC’s “staging in the present” of the penal logic of apartheid becomes a way of returning to the past while maintaining a form of temporal and spatial distance. The same actors, the same material spaces, are irrevocably fractured through the act of re-presenting the past.

One of the TRC’s most important instruments for escaping from the retributive apartheid logic of surveillance and punishment was the process of amnesty. In some ways, the need for amnesty was a practical necessity rather than an abstract desire for restorative justice. As Charles Villa-Vicencio points out, an important consideration for the new regime

... was the need for amnesty to ensure a peaceful transition from the old to the new. Not least was the need to ensure the support of the security forces in

safeguarding the elections and the emerging democracy against those intent on destroying it. (2)

In other words, amnesty was introduced in order to *conserve* order, specifically by maintaining the loyalty of the security forces. In this sense, it is possible to consider amnesty not so much as a process designed to break from the materially based procedures and structures of the past as to ensure, at least at a minimal level, their *continuation*.

While amnesty plays a conservative role, it also promises a kind of interruption of history, a new beginning. Erik Doxtader points out that the Western use of the idea of amnesty, as it was developed in antiquity, had less to do with forgetting than with a form of *acting*:

Amnesty... is less an outright forgetting than a *foreclosing* on the ability of individuals to use a past event as grounds for a certain behaviour. It requires that we act *as if* that which we remember – and which is delineated explicitly in some kinds of amnesty decrees – is no longer available as a justification or reasonable cause for action. (127)

Following this definition, amnesty is equivocally situated between forgetting, or acting “as if” something has been forgotten, and a memory of the past which is formally

recorded in the very act of granting amnesty. Amnesty therefore allows a “new beginning” by carefully blocking off – and, in the process, preserving – the past.

In the case of the TRC, one of its conditions for granting amnesty was full disclosure by the perpetrators of human rights abuses. These disclosures became a matter of public record, an attempt to provide, in broad strokes, an accurate picture of recent South African history. The TRC therefore generated and recorded public memory even as it attempted to produce forgetting. While the confessions of perpetrators were produced and chronicled, they were placed under erasure: the nation, in some ways performatively constituted through the very act of witnessing these confessions, was tasked with acting as if the acts referred to in the testimonies had never occurred.

In the practice of amnesty, we find another example of an ambiguous return to past events. It would be a mistake to think of amnesty as an element that is utterly foreign to apartheid penal logic. In fact, apartheid police interrogations often relied precisely on a provisional, individualised form of amnesty: once the detainee confessed, and implicated his or her colleagues, there was always the tantalising possibility of being set free, of the police acting “as if” what they know is no longer reasonable grounds for the prosecution of the individual. As with other elements of the TRC, amnesty gains a restorative function because it is the *public* expression and application of a term that the apartheid penal system applied in a private and idiosyncratic way.

Amnesty therefore does not figure a radical break with the past, but is instead an appropriation and translation of an extant juridical and penal concept. Its function is inherently *conservative*: the texts that are produced in the service of amnesty cannot rip apart the social fabric precisely because they are under erasure, serving both as records of memory and as instruments that serve forgetting.

Where amnesty does escape from the logic of the past is in its refusal of agonistic identities, probably one of the most characteristic features of identities generated in prison. As this thesis has argued, it is precisely through the fact that prisoners recoil from the prison and its procedures that they remain in some sense bound to it: amnesty promises to excise the prison from South African life both materially and psychologically, particularly by refusing the logic of antagonism and othering that is so central to the oppressive agency of the apartheid prison.

The TRC, in other words, retained the juridical and penal structures of apartheid in the service of escaping from its penal logic. Its efficacy remains in doubt: partly because it simply never managed to become *public enough*, and partly because its success depends on a form of ambiguous duplication, a break with the oppressive past through a replication of some of its rituals.

We are left, then, at the present moment, at a moment of uncertainty. Real prisons are increasingly forgotten as the material space of the prison loses its power to shape

notions of self and nation. At the same time, the TRC has ensured that a certain judicial and penal structure remains at the kernel of political life in South Africa, where it has become entangled with concepts of forgiveness, national duty, responsibility towards others and with the construction of a communal history. As South African notions of accountability, the contours of communal existence, of duty towards others and the nature of self and citizenship become increasingly abstract, it is worth remembering that such abstractions are forged through material institutions and share a specific, local history. The prison memoir is a reminder of the material forces that have determined South African subjectivities and in many ways still govern their direction.

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