

# **“The Very House of Difference”: Race, Gender and the Politics of South African Women’s Narrative in *Poppie Nongena***

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Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

The day after Christmas during South Africa’s “year of fire,” when the Soweto uprising of 1976 was still shaking the country, a black woman whom we have to call “Poppie Nongena” though that is not her real name, arrived at the door of Elsa Joubert, a white Afrikaans writer and mother. Nongena was in great distress. The township from which she had fled was in turmoil. Conservative vigilantes armed by the police were on the rampage, and thousands of people had taken flight into the bush and surrounding townships. The police were searching for Nongena’s brother on charges of “murder,” and she had spent the night huddled with her children in the wind-torn bushes of the Cape Flats.

While the black townships burned, Joubert herself was about to go on holiday with her family. For some time previously, she had been casting about for the topic of a new book. During the unsettling days of the rebellion, the idea of writing something about the “bantustans” had sent her to pass offices, hospital clinics, schools and churches, interviewing and watching, but nothing had struck her with quite the force of Nongena’s story. So the two women came to an agreement. Joubert would transcribe and edit Nongena’s life-story, and, should the book sell, the proceeds would be divided equally between them. Nongena needed money for a house, and Joubert’s cautious estimate of a couple of thousand rands was an undreamed-of windfall. Over a period of six months, Nongena returned three times a week to tell her story in a series of taped interviews. The story emerged in fragments and patches, pieced together by Nongena’s unflagging and extraordinary memory. Two years later, it

was published in Afrikaans under the title *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (*The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*).<sup>1</sup> The book reappeared in English in 1980, translated by Joubert herself, and became an overnight sensation.

In many respects, it is a scandalous book. Nothing like it had ever appeared in South Africa. Firstly, it is a political scandal, for it speaks of the life of a very poor black woman: her childhood shuttling from shanty-town to shanty-town, child-labor in a white fish-factory, reluctant marriage, the births and miscarriages of her children in wind and sand, the bad infinity of work for white families, her husband's health broken by poverty and fatigue, the domestic violence of despairing men wedded to drink, the tightening of the influx and pass laws for women, the police raids and evictions, the refusals to leave, the ignominies and ordeals at the pass offices, forced removal to the desolation of the Ciskei bantustan, the forbidden returns, the dogged perseverance, the family loyalties and survivals — and then finally the nationwide rebellion of 1976, “the revolt of the children.”

If the book is a political scandal, it is also a literary scandal. All stories of genesis are stories of political power and all publication involves a delegation of authority. Edward Said points out that the word *author* itself springs from the same etymological roots as *authority* and is attended by potent notions of engendering, mastery and property. The entry into autobiography, particularly, is seen to be the entry into the political authority of self-representation. The narrative of a very poor black woman taking possession of her history in the privileged male sanctum of the South African publishing world was a scandal in itself. At the same time, the book tramples underfoot any number of aesthetic expectations. At once autobiography, biography, novel and oral history, the narrative is also none of these; it is a generic anomaly. Moreover, as the doubled-tongued collaboration of two women, it flouts the western notion of the individual engendering of narrative. Finally, it is a female collaboration across the forbidden boundary of race, if a decidedly problematic one. So the book's unruly political substance, its birth in the violent crucible of the uprising, its doubled and contradictory female authorship, its violation of racial, gender, class and aesthetic boundaries, all amounted to a flagrant challenge to a number of white male certainties.

Yet the book was met by a standing ovation in the white community. Within a week it won three major literary awards, was reprinted three times in six months, and was soon translated into English, French, Spanish and German — an astonishing welcome for any book in Afrikaans, let alone a book by two women. *Rapport*, an Afrikaans Sunday paper serialized the entire narrative, as did some white English women's magazines.<sup>2</sup> Conservative cabinet ministers read it, business leaders read it, housewives and schoolteachers read it. Well over a hundred reviews, articles,

letters and reports debated, discussed and analyzed it. It has never been banned. Most black readers and critics have applauded it. Yet for the most part the white left has ignored it. What is the meaning of this paradox?

The most striking feature of the articles and reviews that flooded the newspapers and magazines was the unanimous stridency with which the book was declared to be *apolitical*. In an important paper David Schalkwyk garnered a sample of the reviews which urgently blare the book's 'lack' of politics.<sup>3</sup> I offer a summary handful:

"Elsa Joubert's book is *never* political," roundly declared Maureen Pithey of the *Cape Times*.<sup>4</sup> ". . . (I)ts honesty is apolitical," approved Lynne Burger of the *Eastern Province Herald*.<sup>5</sup> "The book is furthermore no political accusation," Audrey Blignaut hastened to assure his readers.<sup>6</sup> ". . . (P)olitics do not enter in," agreed Colin Melville of *The Star*.<sup>7</sup> Other examples abound.

Yet the unanimity of these reviews is riven with inconsistency. On the one hand, Audrey Blignaut could offer the book's *literariness* as evidence that it is "no political accusation." As he put it, the book is "not a sociological report. It is a work of literature."<sup>8</sup> Yet a letter to *Die Burger* could offer as *its* evidence for the book's lack of politics precisely the opposite view. The book is apolitical, not because it is literary, but because it is not. It is "a fairly objective report rather than a novel."<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I will refute the national whitewash of the narrative as apolitical by exploring the contradictory politics of the book's reception and the ambiguous politics of female collaboration across the boundaries of race and class difference.<sup>10</sup>

## The Politics of Reception

The mortal sin in criticism is not so much to have an ideology as to be quiet about the fact that you have one.

— Roland Barthes

The public reception of *Poppie Nongena* as apolitical had its own political logic. The separation of politics and literature is a political separation with a real social history. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, the flight into aestheticism is "above all related to a version of society: not an artistic consciousness but a disguised social consciousness in which the real connections and involvements with others could be plausibly overlooked and then in effect ratified."<sup>11</sup> In South Africa the cleavage of politics and literature has taken a peculiarly paradoxical form, and it is out of these paradoxes that the anomalous reception of *Poppie Nongena* arose.

What South African novelist, Andre Brink has called *Poppie Nongena's* "unique topicality," arose in part from the fact that the "group of people in the center of the story are not only Afrikaans speaking Xhosas, but in actual fact refer to themselves as *Afrikaners*."<sup>12</sup> Ampie Coetzee, an

Afrikaner himself, noted that most of the Afrikaans reviewers gave the book prominence first and foremost because it was written, not in English, or in an African language, but in Afrikaans. The *Cape Times* agreed: "In this book black Afrikaners speak with their own authentic voices...Poppie Nongena...was born Afrikaans."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, for Joubert, who did not know any African languages, the fact that she and Nongena shared Afrikaans as their first language was the enabling condition of the book. "Elsa Joubert emphasizes that Poppie is Afrikaans-speaking, and how through her she became acquainted with the Afrikaans of Afrikaans-speaking blacks."<sup>14</sup> Yet as a collaboration in Afrikaans between a black and white woman the book straddles some of the deepest fault-lines of Afrikaner nationalism.

It has never been easy to ban or dismiss an Afrikaans book, however irksome. The Afrikaans language carries an almost mystical potency in the Afrikaans mind. After the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), the tattered remnants of the bloodied Boer communities had to be forged into a national counter-culture if they were to survive in the new British capitalist state.<sup>15</sup> Ernest Gellner has made the point that "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist."<sup>16</sup> Nations are not organic, natural givens, flowering spontaneously into history as the teleological unfolding of a national spirit, but are, as Benedict Anderson puts it, "imagined communities."<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that nations are allegorical phantasmagoria of the mind, but that they are intricate social fabrications invented through daily contest — in newspapers, schools, churches, presses and popular culture. In the early decades of the twentieth century a revamped Afrikaans became the unifying 'national' language for a white brotherhood of embittered farmers and workers, a frustrated petite bourgeoisie and a small, ambitious clique of capitalists.<sup>18</sup>

In this society the Afrikaans writer stands in an ambiguous position. Afrikaans writers such as Joubert are seen as the mid-wives of the 'national soul,' and are accorded unusual power. Both revered and feared, the Afrikaans writer is granted a great deal of social importance and a certain political immunity. One of the most famous of Afrikaans writers, Brink, could comment in the sixties, at the end of a decade of bannings, detentions, censoring, murders and suicides of black writers: "The Afrikaans writer. . .still has the uneasy knowledge that although the authorities loathe his guts, no official action has been taken against an Afrikaans book (yet)."<sup>19</sup>

There is a second dimension. The fact that Afrikaans was also the first language of a couple of million so-called "coloreds" would remain a stubborn thorn in the flesh of Afrikaner nationalism. In 1976 the black community rejected with unmistakable vehemence a state decree that math and social science be taught in Afrikaans. A few years later, the Nationalists would attempt their most ambitious, and fatal, attempt to

draw into the laager a brethren of the Afrikaans-speaking so-called “coloreds.” Thus a book in which a black Xhosa woman and her fragmented family speak Afrikaans as their first language could not simply be tossed into the flames. Rather, a far more difficult task of political disinfection had to be performed.

A country-wide effort of white nationalist hygiene began. The few voices which attempted to investigate the book’s complex and ambiguous politics were drowned out in the unanimous hubbub that the book had no politics at all, that it was universal, that it dealt with “family issues” and therefore lay beyond the provenance of politics and history proper. At the same time, a well-established critical discourse that defined great literature as apolitical lay ready to hand. In terms of the prevailing white South African liberal aesthetic based in the universities and white literary journals, politics was seen as a squalid activity made up of venal party polemics and pamphleteering, riven with prejudice, self-interest, cliché and mundanity. Great literature, on the other hand, was seen to transcend the mediocre noon of everyday, inhabiting an inscrutable, hermetic realm of essential and timeless truths. Works of art that embody these truths are the gifts of individual genius, exemplifying a unity of vision, wholeness of experience, immanent and universal value, irony of tone, complexity of form, cultivated sensibility, and a moral discrimination untainted by the platitudes of political dogma — the familiar liberal aesthetic inherited by white academics trained in the Leavisite school.<sup>20</sup>

Most important for my purposes, however, was the argument that *Poppie Nongena* is apolitical because it is primarily concerned with a woman’s attempt to keep her family together. If politics has been separated from art, it has also been separated from the family. As one newspaper put it, the book is apolitical because people in it are intent only “on obtaining a pass, keeping the family together somehow.”<sup>21</sup> On this view, the family is seen to inhabit a sphere set apart from organized politics and history. Thus women’s resistance to the bantustan policy, to the passes, to domestic violence and the plunder of their labor, could be dismissed as beyond the proper provenance of organized politics and beyond the realm of history. In what must be one of the most risible comments on the book to date, *Die Burger* announced that the book was apolitical because “Poppie’s problems are generally human ones, they are universal.”<sup>22</sup> But the problem of being a minor in the eyes of the law under the permanent tutelage of a male relative, the problem of being ‘endorsed out’ of one’s home on marriage, and forced to depart for the strangeness of one’s husband’s “bantustan” lying often hundreds of miles away, the problem of being ineligible for residence rights without the signature of a male relative, the problem of carrying babies to term, giving birth and raising children under the most perilous of circumstances, these are problems that are not faced by white men or white women. They are not even faced by

black men. Far from being universal problems, they are problems that face black women alone, and are written into South African statute books at identifiable historical moments. Only by the most contorted efforts can they be whitewashed as the universal dilemmas of "Greek tragedy."<sup>23</sup>

Arguably, the most disturbing act of complicity with the book's reception was Joubert's own insistence that the book is apolitical. She has been widely ventriloquized as calling it nothing more than "a pure human interest story."<sup>24</sup> "The point is," she avows, "it is not a political book. I wrote it because the theme was one that interested me. I wanted to bring across the person as a human being. And that is as far as my interest goes." A headline in *Die Oosterlig* happily assured its readers: "Politics Not Her Motive," as if clearing Joubert of some sordid misdemeanor.<sup>25</sup> Again and again, major papers trumpeted the evidence of 'authorial' intention (what, one wonders, did Nongena think?). One cannot wish Joubert's prevarications away as the tongue-in-cheek caution of a writer in fear for her life or craft. Unlike Nongena she was in no imaginable danger. Rather, her life as a woman and mother lent her a gender affinity and a very genuine empathy for Nongena; but her recently won place in the world of the white male intelligentsia underscored her loyalty to an ideology of aesthetic detachment from politics. She could go so far and no further. Moreover, Joubert's contradictory position was shaped by a general crisis in the liberal intelligentsia. During the seventies one witnessed for the first time a courting of black writers by white writers and critics, who attempted to borrow on the authenticity of black writers to compensate for their own dwindling legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> The privilege of education can breed isolation and a sense of unrepresentativeness — sharpened into urgency by the Soweto rebellion. Speaking through the voice of the disempowered becomes, in part, a way of lessening the marginalization of privilege.

The public whitewash of *Poppie Nongena* as 'apolitical' arose, then, from the ways in which the contradictions of the moment fused and shaped each other: Joubert's conflicting gender and class loyalties, the peculiar immunity of the Afrikaans writer, the contradictions within Afrikaner nationalism, the black rejection of Afrikaans, the ambiguous position of the liberal intellectual, the historical separation of the political realm from the aesthetic realm, and the historical definition of 'the family' and the female as outside politics proper.

Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian feminist writing about the power of interpretation, has the following to say: "A feminist engaged in the act of representing women who belong to a different culture, ethnic group, race, or social class wields a certain power over them; a power of interpretation. However, this power is a peculiar one. It is borrowed from the society at large which is male centered."<sup>27</sup> In what follows, I wish to explore the relations of interpretive and narrative power that hold between Joubert and Nongena, and will do so by exploring the vexed politics

of autobiography and oral history. What are the relations of power between a black and white South African woman, when an oral narrative is transcribed, selectively edited, and published? In exploring this question, I am aware that I, too, am inevitably and problematically implicated in the politics of interpretation. In the pages that follow I wish to explore the implications for feminism of this contradiction, a contradiction that enters the book initially as a generic riddle.

### **Poppie Nongena: Narrative Production and Social Identity**

Duke: And what is her history?

Viola: A blank, my lord. — Shakespeare

Forme is power.

— Hobbes

The reception of *Poppie Nongena* is eloquent of the degree to which a text is an *event under contest*. Reading is a dynamic practice that occurs across time, and takes the form of a relation between the text and different readers' class, race and gender loyalties, educational, cultural and personal histories, and different expectations and habits of thought. Literary texts are historical events, which differ from other events in that they are organized according to aesthetic as well as other criteria. Every text is in this way a *situation in progress*.

Despite their unanimity in applauding *Poppie Nongena*'s lack of politics, critics have been vexed by their inability to tuck the book into the procrustean bed of male tradition. Soon after the narrative's publication, a small squabble broke out in an Afrikaans literary journal over its style. The Afrikaans critic Gerrit Olivier lambasted Joubert for "her" muddled narrative mode, her slipshod, uneven and fragmented style. Richard Rive, a black critic, countered by accusing Olivier of being petty, of trafficking in trivia, of dwelling on niceties of form when what mattered was the political power of the book.<sup>28</sup> Olivier's charges of formal impropriety are charges that have been thrown at women's heads for some time: the absence of a centered narrative voice, the lack of closure, the failure of formal finesse and finish. Rive's defense, on the other hand, dismisses the book's narrative form as an aesthetic irrelevancy, and rehearses thereby the cleavage of politics and aesthetics. I wish to refute both positions, and argue that the book's narrative mode is inseparable from its social and political concerns.

What, then, are we to call this text? Is it a novel? an autobiography? a biography? an oral history? an oral autobiography? Its chameleon quality has perplexed its readers. It has been claimed for fiction, and has been dubbed "a human novel,"<sup>29</sup> "a religious novel,"<sup>30</sup> a "novel" with "a revolutionary perspective,"<sup>31</sup> and "*literature proper*."<sup>32</sup> It has also been claimed for non-fiction: defined as "a sober report,"<sup>33</sup> "good reportage,"<sup>34</sup>

"based solely on facts."<sup>35</sup> Andre Brink offered a compromise, and borrowed Norman Mailer's term "faction" — a label summarily rejected by Jean Marquard on the grounds that it insinuated inauthenticity: 'Faction,' Marquard writes, is "a mixture (as the name suggests) of 'fact' and 'fiction,' whereas Poppie does not depart from 'truth' (as defined by Poppie's rendition) at any stage. . . The novel therefore is of a documentary kind."<sup>36</sup>

The contradictions in the book's status are most visible where they are most vigorously repressed: on the cover and copyright page. As if the spectacle of a black and white woman collaborating across race and class were too unseemly, not one publisher has published the book as a collective narrative, nor given Nongena co-authorial status. The story has been marketed as a novel *by* Joubert *about* Nongena. Except for a woefully inadequate and easily missed prefatory note, Nongena's crucial engendering role is entirely erased and she is contained in the title page as nothing more than Joubert's fictive creature. Readers might be forgiven for assuming (as many do) that Nongena is no more than Joubert's novelistic invention. Indeed, this has often been given as a reason on the white male left for dismissing the book as a suspect, if well-intentioned, fabrication by a white woman.

Yet the narrative is riven by contradiction. Paradoxically, Joubert's claim to the authenticity of "her novel" entails erasing her own role as novelist. Her "novel," she claims, is authentic since it is no more than a factually accurate record of Nongena's own life-history: "I kept myself out of the story, held it up as a kind of mirror to reality."<sup>37</sup> "I knew at once: no travelogue, no allegory, but the stark truth, the story of this woman's life. This was where my study, my research, my travels in my own country had been leading to."<sup>38</sup> If the book is "no allegory, but the stark truth," on what grounds can Joubert call the book a "novel" and claim the status of single author?

Joubert's use of the Aristotelian metaphor of art as mimetic surface to life's truth, and her image of herself as merely holding the "mirror" to the "reality" of Nongena's life, evades the political and aesthetic questions raised by her own editorial interventions, and obscures thereby the ambiguous politics of female collaboration with which the narrative is inscribed and visibly marked.

Moreover, Joubert's claims are contradictory. She insists she is nothing more than a mimetic reflector, delivering the stark truth of Nongena's authentic speaking voice without mediation or intrusion. Yet when she wishes to argue the book's lack of politics, she arrogates to herself the privilege of authorial intention. This contradiction appears most strikingly on the copyright page. Joubert's prefatory note reads as follows:

This novel is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today. Only her name, Poppie Rachel Nongena, born



Matati, is invented. The facts were related to me not only by Poppie herself, but by members of her immediate family.

The prefatory note and the copyright on the same page are thus entirely at odds. The prefatory note testifies to Joubert's absence of invention. The copyright, however, grants her legal entitlement to the narrative as sole creator. To call a narrative a novel is to raise expectations of a fictional or inventive treatment of events. Yet Joubert claims that her "novel" is based only on the "facts" of an actual life story. "Only her name, Poppie Rachel Nongena, born Matati, is invented." Can the invention of one name turn a life-history into a work of fiction? By the same token, what fiat of white arrogance allows Joubert to claim the engendering status of author for herself? What legal concept of narrative ownership entitles her to sole possessive power of copyright, when the narrative is manifestly and in every way the collective production of two women? Indeed, the contradiction between the concept of individual possession of a text (a concept of individual textual property that emerged in the 18th century as writers for the first time found themselves able to earn a livelihood from the sale of their books to the public) marks a general historical contradiction within South African culture between a decidedly imperialist notion of individual textual authority, and indigenous notions of communal and performative culture which entail a dispersed sense of narrative creativity.

Nongena did indeed insist on a pseudonym, presumably out of fear for herself and her family. And Joubert has kept Nongena's real name and identity secret, despite being hounded by international interviewers and journalists to divulge her identity. Yet it would have been perfectly feasible to publish the narrative as a collaboration. Instead, the erasure of Nongena's identity and name, in contrast to Joubert's instant access to an international literary name, bears eloquent witness to the imbalances in racial and class power between the two women and their different relations to the state. In publishing this troublesome narrative as a white woman's novel about a black woman, the scandal of female collaboration across race is hushed, the hierarchy restored, the boundaries redrawn. The cover and copyright page are thus fully expressive of the politics of excision and amnesia that has marked the extraordinary reception of the book as a whole.

To dismiss the narrative as a white woman's "apolitical novel" is, therefore, to be complicit in the conservative politics that shaped the publication and reception of the book, and to acquiesce in the erasure of Nongena's engendering role. Such an erasure of what Abena Busia has called "the endangered body" of the black woman, preempts any serious discussion of the deeply problematic theoretical, political and cultural issues the book raises.

The marketing of the book as a novel is directly contradicted by the narrative itself, which is deeply scored by its collective engendering, as well as by textual signs of the imbalances of racial and class power that govern the collaboration. What then are we to call this text? Since *Poppie Nongena* appears to be the life-history of a woman as told by herself, it is in many important respects an oral autobiography transcribed to print. Yet the narrative does not observe Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" between the identity of the speaking "I," the main character and the author.<sup>39</sup> It retains the personal texture and idioms of Nongena's first-person voice, but is also a thing of print, mediated by Joubert's editorial interventions and a second narrative voice. Nor can it simply be subsumed under the category of biography. As a biographer might, Joubert checked and re-checked every detail of Nongena's life-story; she travelled to every place mentioned in the story, interviewing wherever possible everyone who is mentioned in the story, and speaking when possible to Nongena's family members. But, unlike most biographers, she constantly read the narrative back to Nongena, who corrected her and advised changes and revisions. Moreover, unlike most biographies, at least a third of the narrative is in the first person. What then are we to make of this paradoxical text? What are the politics of female authorship, and what are the politics of race and gender when women collaborate across the boundary of race from positions of unequal power? If the paradoxes of the book's ambiguous politics are to be examined, the text's status as a collaborative narrative needs to be explored.

### **Poppie Nongena: The Politics of Gender and Social identity**

The first word of *Poppie Nongena* is "we." To open the book is immediately to notice an absence — the centered, univocal speaking "I" of canonized male autobiography has vanished. This is how the book begins:

We are Xhosa people from Gordonia, says Poppie. My mama used to tell us about our great-grandma Kappie, a rich old woman who grazed her goats on the koppies this side of Carnarvon. . . She told our mama about the old days. . . We saw the Boers coming on horseback, she said. . . And then Jaantjie rode away with them. . . Jaantjie, take the horses and flee, the Boer shouted when he saw the English soldiers. . . but by then, old woman — so he came and told our great-grandma Kappie — your child was dead (11).

From the outset, the book denies the reader a privileged point of observation, a center such as the voluble "I" of autobiography once afforded. Opening the book, one hears a polyphony of female voices, the ancestral reverberations of great-grandmothers, grandmothers and mothers, mingling, redoubling and echoing almost indistinguishably within each other. The story-recorder's voice encloses Nongena's voice; Nongena, speaking in the narrative 'present' remembers her mother's voice,

who remembered in turn the voice of great-grandma Kappie who remembered the words of the Boers, and the man who came to tell her son had died, long ago in the old days during the upheavals of the white people's wars. *Poppie Nongena* differs in this respect from the black male mission-school autobiographies of the sixties, which generally open with the "I" of individual, if embattled, male identity.<sup>40</sup> In *Poppie Nongena* the life-history does not flow from an originary moment in the birth of the individual. Rather, Nongena's birth is announced obliquely, in the third person, only after the larger community of women shaping her identity has been identified: "Lena's fourth child was brought to ouma Hannie who called her Poppie" (13).

The opening pages of Nongena's narrative are eloquent of the *unnaturalness* of individual identity. From the outset, the construction of identity as collective enters the reader's experience of the narrative as *form*. Poppie Nongena's oral memory, bequeathed through the mother's line, recalls what the state would erase: the stubborn collective memory of precolonial plenty as rich great-grandma Kappie grazed her goats in the hills of the Karoo. But after the turn of the century, Nongena's family, like millions of other black South Africans, were forced off the land by the ruinous land and hut taxes. Buffeted by the Anglo-Boer war, losing their livestock to disease and their men to the white people's wars, they were reduced to migrant laborers, landless and rightless, shuttling from shantytown to shantytown, selling their labor for pittance on the white farms and fishing ports.

Ouma Hannie's children scattered — one to the farms, one to the white people's war — the broken trajectory of the remainder of the family following the inexorable economic logic of the railway looping together the fishing ports on the Atlantic, the merchant port at Cape Town, and the mines in the interior. It was a family in transition, suspended between the remembered bounty of pastoral autonomy and the immiseration of wage labor. In the contradictions of this transition different social forms of identity emerged.

The opening pages are a bewildering welter of family names, places and kin relations. Voices merge, separate and merge again with other voices. The difficulty of the reading comes to mirror the singular ordeal of keeping the family together. One struggles to remember who everyone is, identify who is speaking, remember in which place they are now living. One is constantly obliged to turn to the female genealogy at the opening of the book for guidance, and is thus at every moment reminded that familial and social identity are laborious constructions. What holds the community of identity together is the labor of oral memory, borne through the women's tenacious will to remember and to speak. Oral memory is thereby a refusal of the dismemberment of history, a laborious life-giver.

Memory, in Don Mattera's words, is a weapon.<sup>41</sup> It is a device against oblivion, a strategy for survival.

The permeable, collective construction of identity in *Poppie Nongena* is most visibly marked by the absence of any quotation marks to distinguish one voice from the other. As the narrative progresses, the reader is obliged to adjust rapidly to a welter of voices and narrative identities. Identity comes to be experienced as a constant reshaping of the boundaries of selfhood; indeed, it comes to be seen as the shifting outcome of community experience rather than any singularity of being.<sup>42</sup> To continue reading, one is obliged to abandon the liberal nostalgia for a centered, sovereign perspective and a single, presiding consciousness. Rather one is invited to yield to an alternative notion of reciprocal, relational and unstable identity. This unsteady metamorphosis of boundaries is quite different from the fractured, dismantled identity of western postmodernism. Rather than the static, postmodern dissolution of the self (which has as its silhouette a tragic nostalgia for the centered, humanist individual), identity is experienced as communal, dynamic and shifting, rather than as fractured, immobile and solitary. The boundaries of the self are permeable and constantly open to historical change. In this way the narrative offers a number of challenges to hegemonic theories of autobiographical narrative and identity.

From the beginning, Nongena's narrative renders untenable any notion that identity is a natural category. Obedient to tradition, all Ouma Hannie's daughters were married by force, including Nongena's mother, Lena: "that was the way the parents used to do it in those days. My mama didn't want my pa" (12). Machine Matati paid lobola to ouma Hannie, fathered four children, abandoned the family, went to war, and was never seen again. "He never looked after my children like a father should, (Lena) told ouma Hannie. I have no tears to weep for Machine Matati" (33). Machine Matati was not exceptional. It is estimated that during the early decades of the twentieth century three quarters of all black men lived apart from their families for over half the year, driven by land hunger, poverty, taxes and desperation to the towns and cities. Yet the consequences for women of this massive dismembering of their families were contradictory.

On the one hand, the structure of labor within the black homestead enabled women to resist proletarianization longer than men. Since they were the traditional agriculturists, they could stubbornly remain to work the land and fend for their communities, while the men scattered to sell their labor on the wage markets. Women remained independent of the axis of capitalist formation for longer periods, and so were capable of greater militancy and refusal. Thus it happened that women and not men successfully refused the passes in 1913.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, however, black women bore the brunt of their families' efforts to survive, and suffered

most intimately the cruelties of poverty, starvation and disease, the unemployment, malnutrition, and infant deaths of the countryside. Men might appear once a year at the most, briefly and transiently for a couple of weeks, then vanish, perhaps for years, perhaps forever. Yet in the absence of men, women became more autonomous and self-sufficient. This is how it was in Poppie Nongena's family.

In the narrative Ouma Hannie presides as a ragged matriarch over the marriages and births of her children and grandchildren, taking in her grandchildren and rearing them as she had reared her own. Lena, Nongena's mother, is forced to work for a white family in a town over a hundred miles away, so Nongena and her brothers live with their grandmother among the chicken coops and sandy streets of the shanty-towns, selling rags and bones or doing laundry for whites. Ouma Hannie is "very strict with her children" (14); it is she who wields authority in the family. She decides the marriages, she controls the ceremonies of lobolo (bride-price), she takes the lobolo money for her daughter's marriage.

Nongena's family becomes a constantly changing locus of struggle and division both within the family over women's domestic work, and between the family and the state. The boundaries of the family shift ceaselessly; kinship relations are fluid. It is a family without fathers and there is no 'natural' mother: "We loved ouma more, more than our own mama," says Nongena (17). The identity of 'motherhood' is multiple and shifting — as is the case for most South Africans. As Johanna Masilele, child-minder, says of the children in her charge: "They took me as their real, real mother. Because they don't know their mothers. They used to see their mothers late in the afternoon. I was their mother."<sup>44</sup> When ouma Hannie takes sleep-in domestic work with a white family, Nongena and her brothers are farmed out among relatives in different towns. When Nongena's mother eventually returns to try to reassemble the family, her son, Mosie, "called kleinma Hennie mama because he had lived with her so long" (36); and Lena scolds Poppie: "Ag now, don't you know your brother, that's Mosie, over there" (35). The idea of the natural nuclear family presided over by a single male, loses all semblance and splinters out into the world. Grandmothers are mothers, cousins are sisters, brothers are forgotten, there is no father, mothers are strangers, then mothers again. Together and apart, Nongena's loose family shuttles from town to town — then settles briefly at Lambert's Bay on the icy Atlantic, where they sell their labor in the white fish factory.

The fluidity or multiplicity of identity born of this situation does not represent a mutilation or deformity of identity. Rather it is eloquent of a resilient and flexible capacity to cross the uncertain boundaries of self and community. The fluidity and reciprocity of narrative identity in the story, the merging and division of voices, arises therefore neither from formal ineptitude, nor from some organic *jouissance* of the female body,

but rather from a social situation where identity is experienced as reciprocal, constructed and collective. Identity emerges from a community of experience, rather than from a transcendent unity of being. The narrative shiftings and slidings manifest this reciprocity and fluidity of collective identity.

Here one might invoke in passing the work of Nancy Chodorow, who argues that cultural patterns of childrearing give rise to different boundary experiences in males and females. In households where women are the primary caretakers, girls "come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation."<sup>45</sup> For Chodorow the young girl comes to experience a sense of "self in relationship."<sup>46</sup> While Chodorow undoubtedly does not pay sufficient attention to cultural variations in family relations, she makes an important departure from theories of archetypal gender difference by locating different boundary experiences in the historical, and hence mutable, social structures of child-rearing and domestic divisions of labor.

Nevertheless, the narrative's polyphony of identities does not reveal a utopian democracy of story-telling. The story does not express the disappearance of power, but rather its redistribution under contest. Identity does not transcend power; it comes into being through ceaseless contest, and results in a dispersal and realignment of power rather than a vanishing of power.

This realignment of power is visibly expressed in the matrilineal genealogy that appears on the frontispiece, a reinvented family tree that bears at its head a single matriarch, and reckons descent through the female line. Genealogies are less accurate records of family relations than they are records of political power. Generally it is the victors who record history; it is they who inscribe their genealogies; generally these genealogies are male. The opening pages of *Poppie Nongena*, however, reckon history through the female line of grandmothers and mothers, dispersing authority through a female community, and figuring thereby a different engendering of hierarchy and a different notion of who authors history. The reinvention of genealogy is summed up in Nongena's Xhosa name: "Ntombizodumo, which means girl born from a line of great women" (13). The reckoning of family genealogy through the mother's line marks in this way the beginning of a new contest for familial and historical power.

The dispersal and realignment of female power is most vividly manifested in the dispersal and realignment of the authority of narrative voice. Much of the interest of the narrative lies in its blurring of all distinctions between "truth" and "fiction," "autobiography" and "biography," "novel" and "oral history." An autobiography, conventionally, raises expectations that the self who recounts the tale and the author of the autobiography are

at least referentially the same. Yet, as we have seen, the "I" of Nongena's tale and the "Joubert" of authorial copyright are not identical. Moreover, there are at least three narrators in what is essentially a heteroglossic and collective tale. Nongena speaks in the first person with the immediacy of oral story-telling as if recorded verbatim during the interview: "Auk! when it rained, we had to take off our shoes. . . Ag, but it was so sad to be back in my house again. . ." (80, 168). On a number of occasions, her speaking voice explicitly evokes Joubert's presence as interviewer and listener, explaining Xhosa or Afrikaans words or customs that she knows are unfamiliar to Joubert: "Grootma means a sister of you ma that's older than she is, and kleinma is her younger sister" (12). Sometimes her comments bear vestigial traces of Joubert's questions: "At what time we started work? Now that was just when the boats came in" (50). Thus Joubert's cultural ignorance, and the dialogic and public context of the narrative beginnings are inscribed in the text. The second narrator is not identical with Joubert's interviewing voice, but functions in some sense as an omniscient narrator: "Those years, 1966, 1967, the police were very hot, says Poppie." Nevertheless, this intermediary narrator is not strictly speaking always an omniscient narrator, for it functions, on occasion, as an echo of, without being identical to, Joubert's interview voice:

The three sons of Lena had English names as well. Philip. Stanley and Wilson. Perhaps it was Machine Matati from Mafeking, who went to war for the English, who chose these new names. No, says Poppie, it was not just our pa who was educated, our ma had some learning too.

The first three sentences could be either Nongena's testifying voice, or the intermediary narrator, but because of the unusual syntax, they lean towards Nongena's voice. The fourth sentence ("Perhaps it was Machine Matati. . .") is an oblique narrative echo of a question by Joubert, but is not recorded verbatim as her direct speech. At other moments the intermediary narrator frames the voices of other members of Nongena's family, taken from Joubert's interviews, and not from Nongena: "It's too much for Poppie, says Lena, to work in the factory and to look after her brothers and nurse her grandmother. She's not even fifteen years old (60). . . I wasted my time at the Catholic school, Mosie says later" (40).

In the narrative these voices merge and alternate rapidly, sometimes blending indistinguishably, sometimes separating and becoming relatively distinct, without being distinguished by quotation marks. Sometimes voices merge within a single sentence, sometimes they vacillate rapidly from sentence to sentence or paragraph to paragraph. Sometimes the narrator switches without warning from first to third person within a single paragraph:

I left the job at Mr Pullens because of the baby and so I had to stay at home to look after it. The child was breast fed and it's hard to give a suckling child to someone else to look after. This child was only four months younger than my ma's last child, her girlchild called Georgina,

whom we still call Baby. Poppie's child was born in the house. A Xhosa district nurse, nurse Bam, helped her. It was a girl and they christened her Rose in the Holy Cross church. Her Xhosa name was Nomvula, meaning child born on the day it rained.

The first three sentences are obviously first person, the fourth changes abruptly to third person, as does the fifth, but the last two sentences could be either. Often the narrative switches person without warning from paragraph to paragraph. A paragraph in the third person begins: "When Poppie grew too big. . ." (15), and is followed without announcement or identification by a paragraph in Nongena's first person voice: "Our house was built partly of reeds and clay. . ." (15). At certain critical moments the narrative switches to second person: "You have to weep. You take it so much to heart" (73). More infrequently, an intermediate narrator emerges that has been alternately dubbed "free indirect speech," "erlebte rede," and "narrated monologue," a transitional narrative form which hovers between first and third person: "She did not trust this earth; it looked dark and wet (198). "Poppie was a big girl now" (26). Here the present tense deictics ("this," "now,") mark the narrator as not identical with an omniscient narrator, but rather tinged and colored by the point of view of the first person voice.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, tenses slide constantly and unpredictably throughout the narrative. Sometimes the first person is in the past tense: "I was scared of the strange people and didn't look around too much. . ." (78). Sometimes the first person is in the present tense: "I cannot move, my feet are stone. I can see his blood on the road, but I cannot do anything" (128). Sometimes tenses switch in mid-sentence: "It was a horrible place, I'm not used to such houses" (78).

The lack of quotation marks throughout the narrative places a great responsibility upon the reader to make rapid adjustments in identity and time. Quotation marks testify to an ideology of language as individual property. As textual markers they enclose and fence certain arrangements of words as the property of a single speaker. Language enters the provenance of possessive individualism and distinct identity. In contrast, *Poppie Nongena*, rather than embodying isolated and separate identities, invites one to experience narration along a dynamic, collective continuum of voices and identities, which are at moments distinct and at moments inseparable. More than anything, the narrative is deeply inscribed by its oral and dialogic conditions of production, and by the fluctuations of person and time that characterizes oral memory: instead of a single, individual style, it establishes what Jameson has called a collective "interpersonal rhetoric."<sup>48</sup>

The narrative began as an oral narrative, and oral memory is from the outset collaborative and multi-tongued. In addition, the conditions under which Nongena's story came into being were public, performative and dialogic. The narrative form is, therefore, neither the expression of a



damaged consciousness nor the mark of female aesthetic ineptitude. If, therefore, one is to understand the confusion and reinvention of narrative and identity boundaries in *Poppie Nongena*, one must situate the narrative in the social conditions under which it emerged, particularly the ruptured shapes of family and community life. The narrative unsteadiness bears witness to the onslaught on black communities by the state, and is neither the sign of formal ineptitude, as Olivier argued, nor of formal irrelevance, as Rive argued. Nor can the narrative ruptures be seen as simply eloquent of an archetypal, preoedipal jouissance of the word, as figured in some western feminist literary theories. Rather the ruptures and reinventions of narrative boundaries coincide with the ruptures and reinventions of the black community, emerging out of the social conditions of the time. The narrative's originality reveals a resistant, dynamic, protean and collective identity, expressing in its stubborn reinvention of collective identity a tenacious refusal to break.

### **"This Pass Business": Marriage and the Pass Laws<sup>49</sup>**

The narrative ruptures in *Poppie Nongena* bear witness in part to the collision of two economies in the familial household: residual divisions of labor and power remaining from the pre-colonial domestic economy, existing alongside and in contradiction with the industrial economy of waged domestic work. Households are ruptured by a gendered conflict within the domestic economy over women's work, and by an over-determined and uneven racial, class and gendered conflict between the household as a dynamic community and the apartheid state. The household economy thus remains paradoxical for women, for if it can be a locus of collective racial struggle against the state, it can also be a locus of internal gendered struggle between men and women over women's work, sexuality and power. Family households are thus situations under contest. As Heidi Hartman argues, the family is much less a social unit with shared interests, than a "locus of struggle,"<sup>50</sup> a changing constellation of power that takes different shapes in different social moments.

In South Africa women's social identity is deeply mediated by the marriage relation. Nongena's marriage is a threshold ceremony, a metamorphosis that takes symbolic form in the ritualized changing of clothes. The symbolic crossing of clothes marks an economic crossing — the transfer of Nongena's labor from her mother's family to her husband and through him to his family.<sup>51</sup> "You know you have not married only the man, you have married into his family (72). . . They expect you to work for them" (74). Marriage for Nongena is fundamentally, in Christine Delphy's phrase, "a contract into unpaid labor."<sup>52</sup> The unsteadiness and in-betweenness of her new identity within the marital relation is expressed within the narrative itself by rapid shifts in person. At this transitional point, the narrative begins to slide uncertainly between detached omni-

scient narration, first person, to second person, a threshold mode suspended between 'I' and 'she' which emerges here for the first time.

As soon as Nongena marries Stone, her legal status changes irrevocably. Her individual identity is erased; henceforth her civic status is secondary, relational and mediated, yoked by law to her husband's status. This dependent status is most calamitously expressed in her relation to the pass laws. Yet at the same time, Nongena's determination to keep her marriage and family together represents a long refusal of the migrant labor system on which apartheid has been based. Women's efforts to keep the family together thus cannot be dismissed as "anti-social" or conservative in any simple sense.<sup>53</sup>

These were the years of the turbulent fifties. The Nationalists swept triumphantly into power in 1948 and began to systematize the bantustan system. By the Land Acts of 1913 and 1936 a scant 13% of the most arid and broken land was allocated to black South Africans, though they comprise 75% of the people. The bantustans consist of eighty one scattered scraps of land, parcelled along entirely invented 'national' lines into ten so-called 'independent homelands.'<sup>54</sup> The migrant labor system of apartheid depends on a gendered division of labor in which the majority of women, defined in the notorious official terminology as the "superfluous appendages" of men, are penned up in the bantustans, forcibly barred from the wage economy or permitted to enter it under parlous conditions.

As early as 1913 the state saw fit to issue women with passes, but women responded with such unexpected, vehement and organized fury that the idea was hastily dropped, and would not be broached again for another four decades. In the 1930s laws were passed which forbade a woman entry into a town unless she was certified as the wife or daughter of a man who had been working in that area continuously for two years.<sup>55</sup> In 1937 even the wife or daughter of a legal resident could be certified only if she could prove that housing was available, and since housing had been deliberately frozen, this became virtually impossible. In 1952 the first real attempt was made to bring women to heel. It was mostly women who faced the unexampled trauma of constant arrests, forced removals, evictions and banishments. As Nongena put it: "They were keen on catching the women" (88). Women's refusal to go was met by unswerving police violence. The women were arrested, shunted onto trains and buses, their frail cardboard and corrugated iron shanties smashed. Nongena herself is hauled off by the police.

The fundamental state strategy was to close its pincers on the black families. The migrant labor policy was at heart a policy about the family, and about controlling the reproduction and division of labor within the family. The intentions were blunt and succinct: "The policy of this government is to reduce the number of African families in the Western Cape.

...<sup>56</sup> The conflict was, at base, over the control of women's 'surplus' and reproductive labor.

The institution of marriage became in this way a direct weapon of state control. Any woman's right to remain in an urban area became dependent on a male relative, and the consequence of marriage for a woman like Nongena was often catastrophic. Despite the fact that she had been born in the Cape and had lived there all her life, she was now, in the eyes of the law, the "superfluous appendage" of her husband, and could remain in the Cape only if he had work and a house to shelter her. Failing that, she would be summarily endorsed out to the bantustan to which her husband had been allocated.

Born and raised in the Western Cape, Nongena's marriage makes her a perpetual foreigner in her own part of the country. She is stripped of residence rights. For five years, in the exhausted hours of her time off domestic work, Nongena trudges to pass offices to plead for a permit to stay, waiting for buses, standing heavy with pregnancy in queues, appealing, negotiating with the white bureaucrats, granted a week perhaps at a time, returning a week later, then a month, then seven days, then two months, then nothing, then returning again, wearing out her feet, trudging home through the dark and threatening bushes at night, shaking with fatigue, with papers for perhaps another week, then perhaps a month, or only a handful of days. Her years are measured out according to the fickle, despotic calendar of the white bureaucrat's stamp. "The dates, carved on the ridges of the stamp, can be turned by a twist of his fingers. . ." (184). Every successful bus-ride, every fresh stamp is one more rite of defiance, one more act of refusal.

For seven years, then ten, she stakes out her precarious, stubborn refusal of state decree, until in the late sixties she is finally and unanswerably told to leave. In 1964, in an act of inexpressible cruelty, amendments were made to the Urban Areas and Bantu Labor Act, which made it virtually impossible for a woman to qualify for the right to remain in an urban area. Now wives and daughters of male residents were no longer permitted to stay unless they too were legally working. F.S. Steyn, member for Kempton Park, put the matter bluntly: "We do not want the Bantu woman here simply as an adjunct to the procreative capacity of the Bantu population."<sup>57</sup>

It became a life of running to hide. Nongena and the other women hid under beds, in lavatories and wardrobes, or took cover in the bushes until the police were gone. Finally, Nongena's permit is torn to little pieces and thrown at her. Nine months pregnant with her last child, Nongena yields, gives birth, is sterilized, and agrees to leave for Mdantsane camp, stark and sterile in the Ciskei, and still empty of people, where she is allocated a one-roomed, raw cement house with no ceilings, no water, no electricity, fourteen miles by bus to the white city of East London.

At this point in the narrative, the paradoxes of Nongena's relation to her family become perilous. Her sense of identity, always inextricable from her relation to community, begins to unravel. Her isolation becomes a searing and private martyrdom, unseen and unacknowledged, and the narrative registers her perceptual crisis and rending of selfhood in mixed tenses, sudden unpredictable shifts and slidings in person, and mergings of voice.

Nongena's life becomes an increasingly desperate and increasingly futile attempt to shield her scattered family from the conflagration about to overwhelm the country. Finally, during the country-wide turmoil of the Soweto rebellion, the 'year of fire, year of ash,' she discovers that her plight is also a national plight. For the first time, her sense of community extends beyond her own embattled family: "Let the roof of the goal cover the whole location, let the whole of the location become a goal" (353). Finally, Nongena affirms that the "the revolt of the children" is inevitable and unavoidable: "And if my children had to be drawn into this thing, then that is what they were born to. And who can take from their path that to which they were born? (355)

The stubborn presence of women outside the bantustans represents in this way a flagrant and sustained political challenge to the foundations of apartheid. For this reason, women's struggles over housing, rents, passes and families cannot be cordoned off, as they so frequently are, as apolitical "women's issues" or "family issues." The women's creation of the forbidden squatter communities, their refusal to leave their children, men and families, signals a profound refusal of the state, a massive act of political resistance, written untidily but indelibly across the face of white South Africa.

### The Politics Of Women's Narrative And Difference

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.

Audre Lorde, *Zami*

In South Africa very little is known about how ordinary women like Nongena lived out the ruptures and changes in apartheid, and even less is known about how women resisted these changes, and engaged in contests for power.<sup>58</sup> Oral narratives such as Nongena's are thus of great importance in expressing, in however oblique or mediated a form, some insight into the myriad, hidden experiences of women. At the same time, such narratives offer deep-reaching challenges to a number of western theories about the formation of selfhood, narrative authority and social identity.

In the history of the west, autobiography is the genre most closely associated with the idea of the potency of self-identity — metonymically expressed in the signature: the emblem of a unique, unrepeatable and

and expertise at the service of the communities. Thirdly, there are histories produced by non-academics, workers and students for worker publications and community broadsheets such as Fosatu Worker News, and Izwi lase Township, as well as popular comic-book representations of history, which attempt to put the writing and reading of history in the hands of the communities themselves. Crucial to the development of these latter forms of social history has been the emergence of oral history.

Oral history, both in South Africa and elsewhere, offered the delirious promise of brushing history against the grain, in Walter Benjamin's justifiably famous phrase. It promised to restore the vivid, ordinary lives of those who saddled the colonial's horses, who hammered out the railways and dug up the diamonds, who washed the settlers' babies and cooked the evening meals. Oral history promised a more democratic history. As Paul Thompson argues: "It gives back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place."<sup>82</sup> New areas of social life, particularly family histories and domestic power relations, the myriad forms of popular culture, the dynamics of informal social groupings such as squatter communities and shebeens, hitherto secret, taboo, or neglected were opened to public history.

Oral history is not simply a new technique for recovering the past in its purity. Rather, it invites a new theory of the representation of history. Not only is history produced as much by miners, prostitutes, mothers and farmworkers, but the recording of history is itself both the outcome of struggle and the locus of struggle itself. Without doubt, oral history is potentially a technology for reproducing political memory, accessible for the first time to the silenced, the inaudible, the disenfranchised, women, the working-class, ordinary people. But oral histories themselves are not necessarily progressive, nor are all the uses to which oral narratives may be put, as the reception of *Poppie Nongena* exemplifies. The representation of history, including oral history, is itself a contested historical event. The collection and preservation of human memory is less a technique for increased historical 'accuracy,' than it is a new, contested technology for historical power.

'Accuracy' in history is a *genre*. Empiricism is a mode of ordering past experience according to certain rhetorical and disciplinary conventions. The quest for the 'real' past is as utopian as Alice's quest for the white rabbit, which glances anxiously at its watch before vanishing. History is always late. Empirical oral history, if defined as the effort "simply to preserve and collect human memories"<sup>83</sup> is a mode of historical taxidermy, a technology of reproduction for rendering past events in a permanent stasis of life-likeness. Empiricism privileges the idea of history as a series of pure, recoverable events, a notion that can be upheld only by radically depoliticizing the dynamics of power that underlie the activities of history-making. As Frantz Fanon put it, "For the native, objectivity is

to being through community, rather than as the individual heroics of the self unfolding in solitude.

Yet, I would argue that the fluidity, unsteadiness, achronology and obliqueness that do indeed characterize such texts as *Poppie Nongena* cannot be understood in terms of a theory of an *écriture féminine* arising from a poetics of the flesh, nor as eloquent of a preoedipal, libidinal insurgency and unbounded female selfhood as argued by a certain tendency of western feminism.<sup>70</sup> Rather, the narrative offers a number of challenges to the Eurocentric assumptions of this particular theory.

Some feminists have been justly skeptical of the idea of a universal, female gynesis, fearful that it runs the risk of being fatally essentialist, formalist and utopian.<sup>71</sup> There is a very real danger in baptizing certain texts with the holy water of a new female privilege, erasing historical and cultural variations, and subsuming the multiplicity of women's lives into a single, privileged, and, as it happens, white, middle-class vision. The category of "woman" is a social construction, and the visible ruptures in women's narratives are expressive of ruptures in social experience. Narrative differences are eloquent not of anatomical destiny and design, but of the daily difficulties women experience in negotiating their lives past the magisterial forms of male selfhood.<sup>72</sup>

It is important to note, therefore, that many of the characteristics of autobiographies that have been defined as 'female,' are shared by autobiographies written by people of color, female *and* male, and by working-class men. Thus Mason's claim that nowhere do we find men's autobiographies exhibiting the features of female texts, is true only of the privileged tradition of empowered European males. Susan Stanford Friedman has pointed out that community identity frequently marks both women's and minorities' autobiographies.<sup>73</sup> It becomes important, therefore, not to speak of autobiographies in terms of essences or experience: "women's autobiography," "lesbian autobiography," "black autobiography." Identity is not an essence that can be distilled and revealed in a single genre or category. Such terms make it very difficult to articulate differences among members of different communities or within communities themselves. Identity is socially constructed, and men of color, for example, sharing many of the conditions of deprivation and dismissal faced by white women, evince comparable difficulties negotiating their way around the privileged conventions of sanctioned selfhood.

As Nellie McKay points out, "in all aspects of its creation, early black autobiography altered the terms of the production of Western autobiography as they had been defined by the dominant culture."<sup>74</sup> Audre Lorde, the Afro-Caribbean/New York lesbian writer and poet, suggests in the title of her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* the fundamental inadequacy of the term 'autobiography' and of western conventions of selfhood for rendering the lives of women of color. She calls *Zami* a "biomythogra-

phy," and thereby invites the reader into a new relation to the idea of a life-story.<sup>75</sup> The neologism "biomythography" yields a rich number of glosses. 'Mythography' dispels at a stroke any nostalgia for autobiographical exactitude.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, the term suggests life through mythography, the life of the future born from the collective re-fashioning of the past. Moreover, as significant as what the term biomythography includes, is what the term leaves out. Lorde's refusal to employ the prefix "auto" as the single, imperious sign of the self, expresses a refusal to posit herself as the single, authoritative, engendering voice in the text. Rather her life-story is the collective, transcribed life of a community of women — not so much a perfect record of the past, as a fabulated strategy for community survival.<sup>77</sup>

*Poppie Nongena's* narrative can perhaps be seen as most closely akin to the Latin American testimonios. In an important article Doris Sommer argues that the "testimonial," a life told to a journalist or anthropologist for political reasons, cannot simply be subsumed under the autobiography, and she has identified a number of distinctive features which closely resemble *Poppie Nongena*. The testimonial's most salient feature, she notes, is "an implied and often explicit 'plural subject,' rather than the singular subject we associate with traditional autobiography."<sup>78</sup> As is the case with *Poppie Nongena* the narrator's "singularity achieves its identity as an extension of the collective." Yet the plural voice is plural not in the sense of speaking for, or being representative of the whole, but in the sense that it cannot be seen out of relation to communities (as in Nongena's case, the family, church, and finally the national revolution). The reader is thus invited to participate in a branching network of relationships which spread away from all centers, and across many dimensions of time. The testimonial is always dialogic and public, with a collective rather than individual self. As in Nongena's narrative, testimonials visibly present a staging of social difference in which a privileged scribe records the unprivileged oral testament. Testimonials thus have an oral and performative quality that other autobiographies do not, bearing the imprint of both speakers' voices, the doubled nature of the writing and the dispersed authority of voice. "For unlike the private and even lonely moment of autobiographical writing, testimonials are public events."<sup>79</sup> By the same token, "testimonials are related to the general text of struggle...(and) are written from interpersonal class and ethnic positions."<sup>80</sup>

Because of the collective and public nature of the testimonial narrative, the reader's identification with the narrative persona is always deferred. In *Poppie Nongena* the rapid vacillation of person and voice prevents any easy identification with one single perspective. Nongena's relation to her probable readers is inevitably problematic, involving as it does transgressions of class, racial and gender affinities, not to mention language and country. No simple unanimity of readership is remotely imaginable and

the narrative acknowledges this historical imbalance in its refusal to yield a single consoling point of identity. What this effectively does is call on the reader to enter into collaboration with the collective history. The reader is invited to extend the historical community, and that extension is not simply the embrace of a given community, but involves active participation, the labor of identification, and, above all, hard choices about the politics of social transformation.

Had Joubert dispensed with the intermediary narrator and rendered the narrative entirely in the first person, she would effectively have erased a crucial dimension of the narrative's condition of production, concealing her own interventions and selections, and masquerading as a far more innocent and passive amanuensis than she really is — although she does this in the self-contradictory prefatory note. As it is, the narrative reveals itself to be profoundly paradoxical in its beginnings, production and reception. It preserves its doubled production and heteroglossic nature far more visibly than many other oral histories that seek to diminish or erase entirely the interventions and selections of the oral historian. The relation between the two women is undeniably one of racial and imperial power, cross-hatched and contradicted by empathy and identification based on gender, shared language and motherhood. To will away Joubert's voice and yearn for Nongena's unmediated voice is to hanker after an anachronistic western notion of individual purity and creative singularity. We may balk at being refused identification with a single self, but through this refusal we are invited into an altogether different notion of identity, community, narrative power and political change.

Jean Marquard has pointed out that *Poppie Nongena* predated by a number of years the emergence in South Africa of what has been dubbed "history from below," "people's history" and "oral history."<sup>81</sup> Yet, largely because of the politics of the book's marketing and reception, the narrative has not received the serious attention as an oral testimony that other later forms of oral history have received.

In South Africa the "new history" emerged largely in response to the massive growth of extra-parliamentary activism, in the independent unions and in community organizations that have been mobilized irrepressibly around the country over the issues of rent, transport, housing, and education. The new history has taken at least three directions. Largely empirical, politically radical academic histories have explored, for example, the rise and fall of the African peasantry, the making of the black proletariat, the different histories of Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, and so on. These are written by highly trained white academics for a specialized academic readership. On the other hand, histories such as those produced by the Labor History Group, illustrated booklets in English, Zulu and Xhosa, ILRIG, Learn and Teach, are written for a popular mass readership by intellectuals or community activists committed to putting their training



and expertise at the service of the communities. Thirdly, there are histories produced by non-academics, workers and students for worker publications and community broadsheets such as Fosatu Worker News, and Izwi lase Township, as well as popular comic-book representations of history, which attempt to put the writing and reading of history in the hands of the communities themselves. Crucial to the development of these latter forms of social history has been the emergence of oral history.

Oral history, both in South Africa and elsewhere, offered the delirious promise of brushing history against the grain, in Walter Benjamin's justifiably famous phrase. It promised to restore the vivid, ordinary lives of those who saddled the colonial's horses, who hammered out the railways and dug up the diamonds, who washed the settlers' babies and cooked the evening meals. Oral history promised a more democratic history. As Paul Thompson argues: "It gives back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place."<sup>82</sup> New areas of social life, particularly family histories and domestic power relations, the myriad forms of popular culture, the dynamics of informal social groupings such as squatter communities and shebeens, hitherto secret, taboo, or neglected were opened to public history.

Oral history is not simply a new technique for recovering the past in its purity. Rather, it invites a new theory of the representation of history. Not only is history produced as much by miners, prostitutes, mothers and farmworkers, but the recording of history is itself both the outcome of struggle and the locus of struggle itself. Without doubt, oral history is potentially a technology for reproducing political memory, accessible for the first time to the silenced, the inaudible, the disenfranchised, women, the working-class, ordinary people. But oral histories themselves are not necessarily progressive, nor are all the uses to which oral narratives may be put, as the reception of *Poppie Nongena* exemplifies. The representation of history, including oral history, is itself a contested historical event. The collection and preservation of human memory is less a technique for increased historical 'accuracy,' than it is a new, contested technology for historical power.

'Accuracy' in history is a *genre*. Empiricism is a mode of ordering past experience according to certain rhetorical and disciplinary conventions. The quest for the 'real' past is as utopian as Alice's quest for the white rabbit, which glances anxiously at its watch before vanishing. History is always late. Empirical oral history, if defined as the effort "simply to preserve and collect human memories"<sup>83</sup> is a mode of historical taxidermy, a technology of reproduction for rendering past events in a permanent stasis of life-likeness. Empiricism privileges the idea of history as a series of pure, recoverable events, a notion that can be upheld only by radically depoliticizing the dynamics of power that underlie the activities of history-making. As Frantz Fanon put it, "For the native, objectivity is

always directed against him.”<sup>84</sup> Oral history may for this reason also conceal a poetics of nostalgia. In its empirical guise, oral history fulfills the nostalgic desire to represent history whole, to preserve, to embalm: it is a politics of reproduction. It represents the aggressive desire for historical completion and coherence that characterizes all archives. The oral archive can thus become a political instrument for the bureaucratization of working lives, serving as a visible monument to the power of the bureaucracy as a system of ordering knowledge and delegating authority.

The production of oral history is a technology of power under contest, which cannot be seen in isolation from the contexts of power from which it emerges. Oral history involves the technological reproduction of people's memories, the unstable life of the unconscious, the deformations, evasions, and repressions of memory, desire, projection, trauma, envy, anger, pleasure. These obscure logics cannot be wished away as the irksome impurities of oral history, but should be integrated into oral history as a central part of the process. No oral history is innocent of selection, bias, evasion and interpretation. Very real imbalances of power remain in current contexts. Frequently oral histories perpetuate the hierarchy of mental and manual labor of the societies from which it emerges: the hierarchy of those who work and speak, and those who think and write. In many oral histories, the multiple authorship of the narrative is submerged in the executive, choreographing authority of the “historian.” The oral narrator becomes a Svengali's Trilby, at the beck and call of the master of ceremonies, bestowing prestige and glamour on the historian's professional name, without herself benefitting one whit.

In the cover, packaging and presentation of *Poppie Nongena*, Nongena is undoubtedly Trilby to Joubert's Svengali. Nongena is presented as Joubert's fictional creature, and most people who are unaware of the circumstances of the book's production, read it as a white woman's novel, and dismiss it on those grounds as deeply suspect. Nevertheless, to accept this at face value is to accept the woeful whitewashing politics of the book's publication, and to acquiesce in the erasure of Nongena's creative authority. Indeed, the narrative itself expresses a far more complex hierarchy of relations, and much of the great value and interest of the book lies in the way in which these shifting imbalances of power, the paradoxes and ambiguities arising from its doubled authorship, the contradictions between the two women's relation to apartheid, are integrated into the texture of the narrative itself.

While it seems that Nongena's does most of the ‘talking,’ in fact only thirty per cent is her own voice, the rest comprises Nongena's ventriloquizing of her family's voices, and Joubert's record of her oral interviews with these family members, all orchestrated by Joubert's narration. To some extent, the inequity of Joubert's orchestration of a virtuoso performance of Nongena's story is offset by the textual record of Joubert's own

questions, her queries, her ignorance. There are moments inscribed in the narrative when Nongena corrects Joubert for incorrect assumptions or questions: these moments are not elided from the narrative as they so often are in oral history. The constant shifting of voices in the narrative refuses us identification with one voice. At no point can empowered readers assume an easy identification with Nongena, and thus forget their own privilege in a cathartic identification with the voice of the disempowered. The imbalances in power between the two women scores the narrative, and the reader is obliged as a result to experience the discomfort of these imbalances as a central experience of the reading itself, and to be conscious at every moment of the contradictions underlying the process of narrative collaboration. No one, not even Joubert, is allowed a finally privileged perspective. The reader is thus equally denied a consoling organizing perspective, and is forced to yield to a sense that all narrative and all history arises from a community of effort and a community of social construction, which is shaped by uneven social relations of power. Most oral histories do not record these contradictions, erasing the historian's editorial interventions and preserving the 'voice' of the narrator in artificial purity, while giving executive authority to the invisible historian. Unlike most oral histories, the imbalances between Nongena and Joubert are inscribed in the narrative itself, becoming an integral part of the reading experience, and hence avoiding the politics of concealment which generally operate in 'empirical' oral histories. The imbalances are flagrantly there, unavoidable and vexing, contradictory and unsolvable, insisting on interpretative contest and political analysis. Moreover, the narrative resists any effort to imagine that the imbalances between the two women could be resolved by a more equitable redistribution of purely narrative identity. Rather, the uncertainty of its ending acknowledges finally that narrative transformation has to be attended by full social transformation.

As Teresa de Lauretis argues, to pose the question of gender as arising from a fundamental sexual difference between men and women, or as arising more abstractly from signification and discursive effects, from *Differance*, where "woman" comes to figure difference tout court" — to pose the question of gender in such a way has the effect of universalizing gender opposition and making it impossible to articulate differences among and within women. She calls rather for a "subject constituted in gender, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; as subjects en-gendered in the experience of race and class, as well as sexual relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted."<sup>85</sup> Gender is thus the representation of changing social relations: "it presents an individual for a class."<sup>86</sup> The "subject of feminism" is therefore "one whose definition or conception is in progress,"

and which cannot be found in identities alone — but rather in the politics of alternative social, political and communicative forms, in political practices of self-representation which illuminate the “contradictory, multiple construction of subjectivity.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Biddy Martin writes of “recent autobiographical writings that work against self-evidently homogenous conceptions of identity,” writings in which lesbianism, for one, comes to figure as something other than a totalizing self-identification and something other than exclusively psychological.<sup>88</sup> Here the appeal is to institutional analyses of social and cultural power, rather than a focus on identity alone. The importance of these points is that they allow us to examine women’s narratives in the context of theories and politics of social transformation, rather than as ahistorical psychology, or poetics of identity.

Neither the identity of gender, race, class or sexual preference guarantees political correctness. Feminist agency should be sought not in a homogenous psychology of identity alone, (the lesbian, woman of color, working-class female life), but through a politics of organization and strategy which takes into account the myriad differences and loyalties that criss-cross women’s lives with conflicting passions. As Audre Lorde has said: As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find that I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.<sup>89</sup> Feminism should be enacted where these conflicting loyalties emerge and intersect under specific historical circumstances. Thereby we can avoid the reduction of politics to a poetics of the flesh, an erotics of power mysteriously transcending historical difference, that itself masks differences of power among women as well as similarities of power and disempowerment between women and men (of race, class, nation).

This means that narrative itself cannot be the only tool for transforming the master’s house. Rather the social and political context of the engendering of narrative has to be massively transformed: which involves a radical, active, political transformation. The politics of memory and authorship are inextricably entangled with the politics of institutional power in all its forms: the politics of family households, domestic labor, education, publishing and reception. History is a series of social fabulations which we cannot do without. It is an inventive practice, but not just any invention will do. For it is the future, not the past, that is at stake in the contest over which memories survive.

## Notes

1. Elsa Joubert, *Poppie Nongena*, (London: Coronet, 1981). All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.
2. David Schalkwyk, "The Flight From Politics: An Analysis of the Reception of 'Poppie Nongena'", in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 12, #2, April, 1986.
3. Schalkwyk, *ibid*.
4. *The Cape Times*, 7 August, 1980.
5. *Eastern Province Herald*, 17 April, 1979.
6. *Beeld*, 20 November, 1978. trans. Schalkwyk.
7. *The Star*, 1 October 1980.
8. *ibid*.
9. *Die Burger*, 16 January, 1979.
10. In a forthcoming article, "Dismantling the Master's House: The Politics of the Family and Women's Resistance in South Africa," I examine in detail the politics of the family and women's resistance to forced removals in South Africa as embodied in the narrative.
11. Raymond Williams, *George Orwell*, (New York: 1971), p. 56.
12. *Rapport*, 3 December, 1978.
13. *The Cape Times*, 6 December, 1978).
14. *Rapport*, 3 December, 1978.
15. The creation of this Afrikaans constituency demanded the conscious invention of a single print-language, a popular press, a literate populace, and an active intellectual class. As Isabel Hofmeyr has shown, the *taalbeweging* (language movement) of the early twentieth century represented just such an invention, refashioning the myriad Boer vernaculars into a single, identifiable Afrikaans language, while purging it of its working-class, rural associations.
16. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p. 169.
17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).
18. During the sixties, with power confidently clenched in Afrikaans fists, an unabashedly phallic monument to Afrikaans was erected as testimony to the engendering potency of the language.
19. Andre Brink, *Writing in a State of Siege*, (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 36.
20. It should also not be forgotten that the historical separation of literature and politics began at that moment in western history when women began to read and write in large numbers. As the "damned mob of scribbling women," in Hawthorne's dyspeptic phrase, inveigled themselves into literature, literature was defined as separate from politics. Similarly, as colonized countries wrestled their way into independence after the second world war, and as women and men of color entered the universities in significant numbers, insisting on defining an alternative subjectivity to the enshrined white male subjectivity, at just that moment, the requiem was rung on 'the subject.' At just that moment when disenfranchized voices forcibly clamoured for the privilege of defining their own identity and authority, 'the author' was declared dead.
21. *The Cape Times*, 6 December, 1978.
22. Letter to *Die Burger*, 16 January, 1979. Trans. Schalkwyk.
23. Letter to *The Argus*, 14 March, 1978.
24. *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 January, 1979.
25. *Die Oosterlig*, 9 March, 1979.
26. See my article, "Azikwelwa (We Will Not Ride): The Politics of Value in Black South African Poetry" in *Politics and Poetry*, ed. Robert van Hallberg, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
27. Mamia Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing As A Woman On Women In Algeria," *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1, Spring 1988, pp. 81-107.
28. Jean Marquard, "Poppie," *English Studies in Africa*, p. 137
29. *The Sowetan*, 18 July, 1981.
30. *Die Beeld*, 22 March, 1979.
31. *Die Oggenblad*, 28 February, 1979.
32. *Rapport*, 3 December 1978.
33. Dust jacket to 1980 edition.
34. *Sunday Times*, 3 December 1978.
35. *Rapport*, 14 February 1979.
36. Marquard, p. 137.
37. *ibid*, p.
38. Elsa Joubert in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lentia, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), p. 60.
39. Philippe Lejeune, "L'Autobiographie en France (Paris: Ammand Colin, 1971), subsequently modified in *Pact autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1976).
40. Both Es'kia Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane's autobiographies attempt, in different ways, to reinvent a trajectory of selfhood compatible with the liberal notion of the (white, male) individual self. Both fail; both their autobiographies end with the abandonment of their families, and flight into exile. By no means was this necessarily an easier choice; but it was a choice shaped in part by their mission school inheritance, their class positions as educated men, and the traitorous heritage of western liberalism which did not fulfil its promise to them. See Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*, (London: Faber, 1959); Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me On History*, (Cape Town: A.D. Donker, 1986).
41. Don Mattera, *Memory Is The Weapon*, (New York: Beacon, 1988).
42. This is not the same phenomenon as the "frame narratives" in Conrad, where the speaking voices remain distinct.
43. See Julia Wells, "Why Women Rebel: A Comparative Study of South African Women's Resistance in Bloemfontein (1913) and Johannesburg (1958)," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, 1, 1984, 55-70.
44. "Let Me Make History Please": The Story of Johanna Masilela, Childminder," in *Class, Community and Conflict*, ed. Belinda Bazzoli, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), p. 472.
45. Nancy Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 169.
46. *ibid*, p. 169.

47. See Ann Banfield, "The Formal Coherence of Represented Speech and Thought," in *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature*, 3 (1978) pp. 289 - 314; Dorrit Cohn, "Narrated Monologue: Definition of a Functional Style," *Comparative Literature* (1966) 14, 2, pp. 97 - 112.

48. See Doris Sommer, "Not Just A Personal Story": Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self," in *Life/Lines. Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, eds. Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenke, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 118.

49. An expanded version of this section is forthcoming as a separate article.

50. Heidi Hartman, "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework," in *Signs*, (Spring, 1981), 6, 3, pp. 366-394.

51. The subjugation of female labor to males and elders within the ceremony of marriage is enshrined in a Zulu proverb that sums up the symbolic meaning of the change of clothing: "*akuqhala-qhala lahlul' isidwaba*"—no defiant woman ever defeated a leather skirt.

52. As Christine Delphy has argued, a married women's class is typically defined not by her economic relation to production, but by her social relation to her husband: "women's relation to class is indirect: mediated by the marriage relation." Thus marriage for women is fundamentally an entry into a "labor relation": "Marriage is the institution by which gratuitous work is extorted from a particular category of the population, women-wives." Marriage is the institution which legalizes the domestic appropriation of women's work. Christine Delphy, *Close To Home. A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*, trans. and ed. Diana Leonard (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984, pp. 68, 87, 63, 77).

53. As Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson put it: "In the context of racist oppression, black families are often not 'anti-social' in the sense used by Barrett and McIntosh but can become not only a base for solidarity but also a struggle against racism." Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, "Transforming Socialist Feminism: The Challenge of Racism," in *Feminist Review*, 23, (June 1986), p. 89. Similarly, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar in an article called "Challenging Imperial Feminism" point out that black women have very different relations to welfare, to immigration, to schools, to the police. Not all family households are equal in the eyes of the law. Sheila Rowbotham's *Beyond the Fragments*, for example, was accused of "racism by omission," and the Egyptian feminist el Sa'adawi has charged western feminists with what she calls "maternalism." See also Barrett and McIntosh, "Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory," *Feminist Review*, 20, (June 1984).

54. Here nearly twelve million people, most of whom are women and children, live under conditions of deprivation that are barely possible to describe. The euphemistic term "national homeland" serves the ideological function, moreover, of providing a language of legitimization founded in an invented discourse on the family.

55. See Josette Cole, *Crossroads. The Politics of Reform and Repression 1976 -1986*, Ravan: Johannesburg, 1987, for an important account of the politics of women's squatter communities in the Cape.

56. S.A. Rogers, quoted in Cole, p. 7. The policy for limiting the African presence, as it unfolded between 1962 and 1969, had a double strategy directed specifically at women: no more houses would be built, and work for women would be made virtually impossible. Between 1966 and 1976 less than 4000 houses were built. In 1974 the (Orwellian) Department of Community Development set the shortage of houses as 40,000 for coloured people alone. At this time, the squatter presence swelled: by 1974 there would be an estimated thirty seven squatter camps in the Peninsula alone.

57. Quoted Simons, *ibid*, p. 282.

58. A brilliant exception is Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, London: Onyx Press, 1982. See also Jo Beall, Shireen Hassim, and Alison Todes, "A Bit on the Side?: Gender Struggles in the Politics of Transformation in South Africa," *Feminist Review*, 33, Autumn, 1989. Frene Ginwala, "ANC Women: Their Strength in the Struggle," *Work In Progress*, 45, Nov/Dec, 1986, 11-14. Cock Jacklyn, Maids and Madams, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980. Mamphela Ramphele, and Emile Boonzaaier, "The Position of African Women: Race and Gender in South Africa," in Boonzaaier and J. Sharp, eds. *South African Keywords*, Cape Town: David Philip, 1988, pp. 153-66.

59. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Chapter One, for the metaphor of writing as phallic power.

60. George Gusdorf, often regarded as the premier don of autobiographical theory, calls autobiography an "apologetics or theodicy of the individual being," and speaks of autobiography's affinity with the silver-backed Venetian mirrors: henceforth the mirror-text would reflect back the narcissistic image of the master self. Gusdorf, pp. 39, 32.

61. Olney defines the autobiographer in terms of a separate and unique (male) selfhood. The autobiographer is "surrounded and isolated by his own consciousness, an awareness grown out of a unique heredity and unique experience. . ." in *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 22 - 23.

62. Falling under the racist spell of the nineteenth idea of progress, Gusdorf claims that "primitives" (lacking autobiography and fearful of their image in the mirror) lag behind the western "child of civilization" and reveal thereby that they have not yet emerged from "the mythic framework of traditional teachings. . . into the perilous domain of history," pp. 30, 33.

63. *ibid*, p. 29.

64. Leila Ahmed, "Between Two Worlds. The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Feminist," in Brodski and Schenke, p. 54.

65. As Carolyn Heilbrun observes, it has only been since 1980 in America that male critics have even bothered to speak of the innumerable women's autobiographies that do exist. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Women's Autobiographical Writings: New Forms," in *Prose Studies*, (September 1985), 8, 2, p. 14. James Olney's 1980 collection, for example, devotes one solitary essay to women's autobiographies, while fifteen essays were devoted to male autobiographies. Paul Fussler's account of First World War autobiographies neglects to mention a single female autobiography, though by one estimate there were at least thirty substantial female accounts of the war. See Lidwien Heerkens, "Becoming Lives: English Women's Autobiographies of the 1930's," unpub. M.A. University of Leicester, 1984.

66. Mary Mason, for one, claims, "Nowhere in women's autobiographies do we find the patterns established by the two prototypical male autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau; and conversely male writers never take up the archetypal models of Julian, Margerey Kemp, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet." *ibid*.

67. Estelle C. Jelinek, ed. *Women's Autobiography. Essays in Criticism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 17. Neither, it is argued, do women's autobiographies flourish at the high points of male history—revolutions, battles and national upheavals, but wax according to the climactic changes of other histories. Typically, male autobiographies reinvent the lives of military leaders, statesmen, and public figures, while, as Conway points out, there

are no models for women recounting successful political lives, no models for the public admission of ambition, no models for the 'proper' stages of a career.

68. Mary Mason, p. 210.

69. *ibid.*, p. 210.

70. French feminist critics such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous have, in different ways, discerned in women's writing a female bodily residue of insurgent pleasures and rebellions, which evade cultural edicts and erupt mutinously in semiotic discourse: unruly, gestural, rhythmic, repetitive, oral, preoedipal and unbounded. See Julia Kristeva, "Oscillations," *Tel Quel*, #59, (Fall, 1974), trans. in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Luce Irigaray, "Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un," trans. in Marks and Courtivron; Helene Cixous, "Sorties," *La Jeune Née*, trans. in Marks and Courtivron.

71. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'écriture féminine," in *The New Feminist criticism. Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter, (New York: Pantheon, 1985) The notion of an unbounded *écriture féminine* is entrained in the selfsame binary opposites it claims to be opposing—preserving the dualism of the male as rational, solipsistic and centered, the female as organic, cosmic, rhythmic and unbounded, but only reversing the values. Paens to a female language of anatomy, are eerily akin to ancestral male dogmas that idolize woman as body, nature, unreason, empathy, selflessness.

72. Ann Jones asks, for example, whether women of color, who have been marginalized in very different ways from white women, experience body and language as white women do? Which women will be allowed to write the new body? What would the idea of refashioning the world through a semiotic *jouissance* of the written word mean to women from oral cultures, to women going blind over microchips, to women without access to abortion or contraception, to the millions of genitally mutilated women in the world? Jones, p. 371.

73. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Woman's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self. Theory and Practice in Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 38.

74. Nellie McKay, "Race, Gender and Cultural Context in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in Brodski and Schenck, p. 176.

75. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1982).

76. All autobiographies are, in de Beauvoir's term, "fictions of selfhood." Any life-story is, as Colette knew, a fabulation of arranged fragments, involving a welter of caprice, whimsical omissions, and crafted inventions, governed overall by the contrivances and transformations of genre.

77. Similarly, Bemice Johnson Reagon, has called black women's writing "cultural autobiography" in the sense that a black women's identity is inseparable from her relations to her community. Bemice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or On Beginning a Cultural Autobiography," *Feminist Studies*, 8, (Spring, 1982), p. 81. Stephen Butterfield writes: "The 'self' of black autobiography... is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. It is a conscious political identity, drawing sustenance from the past experience of the group." Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), pp. 2-3.

78. *ibid.*, p. 107.

79. *ibid.*, p. 118.

80. *ibid.*, p. 129.

81. *ibid.*, p. 139.

82. Paul Thompson, "History and Community," in *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), p. 39.

83. Samuel Hand, "Some Words on Oral Histories," in Dunaway and Baum, p. 52.

84. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 77.

85. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 1-2.

86. *ibid.*, p. 5.

87. *ibid.*, p. 9 - 10.

88. Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]," in Brodski and Schenck, p. 82.

89. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Woman Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 120 -121.