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## Women Writing Africa: Southern Africa as a Post-Apartheid Project

### **Abstract**

Early in 1996 a group of Southern African women came together to compile the first historical anthology of Southern African women's writing.<sup>1</sup> The decision was made possible partly because the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa had brought an end to the time when most feminist academics and activists preferred to focus their energies on topics and issues relating to racial rather than gender inequalities. Partly, too, South Africa's entry into democracy and the end of the armed struggle against apartheid (this had involved all Southern African countries in one way or another) meant new geopolitical identifications became possible. Primarily, however, the decision was made through the enterprise of the African-American feminist and academic, Tuzyline Allan, who motivated the New York publisher, Florence Howe of Feminist Press. They, with others on her team, envisioned a series of anthologies under the general title *Women Writing Africa*, intended to represent women's oral and literary production through the African continent. The publisher and series editors, wished the Southern African volume to be the first in the African series and had in mind as their major market the North American educational system.

DOROTHY DRIVER

## *Women Writing Africa: Southern Africa* as a Post-Apartheid Project

Early in 1996 a group of Southern African women came together to compile the first historical anthology of Southern African women's writing.<sup>1</sup> The decision was made possible partly because the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa had brought an end to the time when most feminist academics and activists preferred to focus their energies on topics and issues relating to racial rather than gender inequalities. Partly, too, South Africa's entry into democracy and the end of the armed struggle against apartheid (this had involved all Southern African countries in one way or another) meant new geopolitical identifications became possible. Primarily, however, the decision was made through the enterprise of the African-American feminist and academic, Tuzyline Allan, who motivated the New York publisher, Florence Howe of Feminist Press. They, with others on her team, envisioned a series of anthologies under the general title *Women Writing Africa*, intended to represent women's oral and literary production through the African continent. The publisher and series editors, wished the Southern African volume to be the first in the African series and had in mind as their major market the North American educational system.

To some, an anthology with an exclusive focus on women will seem dated. Moreover, even to select texts on the basis of gender — and on race, as we did to some extent — is to posit a relation between the text and its author or authors in a way that flies in the face of contemporary poststructuralist theory, if not yet poststructuralist feminist practice.<sup>2</sup> Yet in the Southern African context an anthology of women's writing is, in contrast, belated. Whereas other countries with a comparably well-established record in literary production have already devoted historical anthologies solely to women, South Africa has produced only two, and the other countries of the region none, although there have been anthologies of contemporary writing by women. Moreover, there are so far no historical anthologies linking the entire Southern African region; and, apart from a relatively recent spate of feminist revisionist texts and occasional writing on masculinity, most Southern African literary and historical accounts pay unequal attention to women and men, and exclude gender as an analytical tool, so that political and cultural agency is still generally seen as male, and male writers and performers still tend to be more widely known than women, apart from the few 'canonized' white women.<sup>3</sup> Hence the ability of Feminist Press to interest the editors in a fundamentally feminist anthology, whatever our concomitant belief in the need for other anthologies of other marginalised writings: Southern African

women's cultural and political agency has been minimised since their voices have been insufficiently heard, their actions often sidelined, and their understandings of their own historical situations, and indeed of gender, largely ignored, and only when all this has been taken into account can Southern African political and cultural history start falling into place. We wished to destabilise the terrible truth of what was once said by writer and critic Lauretta Ngcobo — '[M]en had (and still have) the exclusive right to initiate ideas' (137) — even if we knew there would be many ways in which women's voices and women's cultural and historical contributions would have to remain insufficiently acknowledged. How to uncover, for instance, the ways in which women's ideas have directly but quite privately fed into male creativity, as Es'kia Mphahlele says of his wife Rebecca Mphahlele, who told him the story for 'The Suitcase'? (217)

As the seven editors began meeting as a group, it soon became accepted among us that in order to offer the necessary redress, our anthology should not — as some of us had initially envisaged — limit itself to literary writing, since a literary anthology would too readily repeat old dominations (white over black; South Africa over the rest of the region; the educated, literate class over those mainly dependent on word of mouth) and should for the same reason cast as wide a generic net as possible over available material. Including a range of material, and paying attention not only to formal oral production ('orature') both from the past and the present, but also to oral presentations other than those shaped for performance or intended for publication — testimonies in court cases, for instance — would more likely change the contours, it seemed to us, of Southern African literary and political history. We were keen to show women in a variety of situations especially other than the domestic, as well as to foreground political voices — individual and in groups — as well as any others which gave a significant perspective that had not yet entered academic accounts or popular awareness. We were under no illusion that the anthology would in itself produce a history of resistance to colonisation or apartheid or to what Belinda Bozzoli has called the 'patchwork quilt of patriarchies' (155) that made up the region, for Southern African women's heterogeneity obviously works across any such monologic account. Yet we wished to trace something of the complexity of responses that both individual and groupings of women make to the different situations around them — the intricate combinations of acceptance, refusal, complicity, resistance and revolt — and, concomitantly, the subtle psychological formations of 'self', the political, economic, social, and psychic positionings whereby the terms 'woman' and 'women' take on their various meanings (and help give meaning to the terms 'man' and 'men') in the different Southern African geographic, temporal and cultural contexts. We felt the need also to produce the kind of anthology that would help bring to view at least some of the historical relations between individual women's material production, their access to power, and their signifying practices, and thus facilitate a more informed approach to both literary criticism and more general cultural and historical analysis than had hitherto been possible.

Although there are some literary entries (extracts from novels, poems, short stories) it may be thought that in the documentary rather than literary focus of the anthology, to use these terms in their standard formulation, we fall into what some feminists have called the problem of gynocriticism: in which literature is taken as valuable to the extent to which it tells us about 'women's experience', where the value of the words is reduced to issues of 'authenticity', and the text is taken as a piece of anthropology or sociology rather than as a piece of writing. However, if the documents are read in a certain way, as I argue in this essay, through being placed in juxtaposition with other documents so that they invite textual interpretation, drawing attention to the fashioning of subject positions in anthropological as well as fictional texts, for instance, and accrue significance from one another in something of the way in which words in a literary text begin to form their own symbolic, they themselves take on a literary rather than documentary status.

Through a variety of procedures, the seven editors, working closely with a group of associate editors and, on many occasions, interested colleagues and friends, found and brought forward to the table hundreds of entries, from which were chosen one hundred and twenty of very varying lengths to make up roughly four hundred pages.<sup>4</sup> (With introductory and other material, the volume runs to five hundred pages). We decided to arrange the anthology chronologically and thus to avoid the regional, thematic or generic organisations that sometimes tempt anthologists, which in our view would have imposed a structure on the entries we preferred them to be free from. A thematic arrangement might, for instance, have eclipsed other themes not immediately visible or significant to us, or might have gathered the women writers into one or other kind of stereotyping, which would vitiated the sense of individuality we wished our entries to retain: in local social histories, Yvonne Brink has argued, women are too readily arranged into categories of slave women, frontier women, gay women, fallen women, prostitutes. The chronological organisation of our anthology involves readers in a constant cross-border movement: geographically, generically, and even temporally, given the fact that time is not divorced from history. Readers move between the rural and the urban, the public and the private, the fictional and non-fictional, the oral and the literary, the individual and the group, in ways that underwrite the heterogeneity with which this anthology is fundamentally concerned. On the other hand, chronologies often imply teleologies of 'progress' which we were mostly, I think, keen to avoid, although it is true that there was a certain pressure on us, partly from ourselves, or aspects of ourselves, partly from the publishers' consideration of the needs of a U.S. readership, to provide a certain optimistic 'post-apartheid' tone, especially in order to counteract our movement at the volume's conclusion into a literature about HIV-AIDS. Furthermore, Southern African chronologies also inevitably recall the time-line of colonialism, and (however much one keeps in mind Fabian's comment in *Time and the Other* regarding the different temporalities of colonial histories) our chronological arrangement gave temporal

precedence to the countries that had been 'developed' first, thus threatening to reproduce the South African domination of the region that we were otherwise at pains to redress. Thus, once we had (with some disagreement, and residual qualms on the part of some of us) agreed to exclude early white colonial women writers, we were pleased to find — for our earliest entry — a song performed in 1836, and doubtless many times before, by war widows in Lesotho which appeared to pay no attention to colonial history or imagery, although the English translation from the French, itself translated from the Sesotho, uses the classical Greek term 'underworld', where 'world of the ancestors' would seem more appropriate.

'Song of the Afflicted'

*Older widows:*

We are left outside!

We are left to grief!

We are left to despair,

Which only makes our woes more bitter!

Would that I had wings to fly up to the sky!

Why does not a strong cord come down from the sky?

I would tie it to me, I would mount,

I would go there to live.

*The new widow:*

O fool that I am!

When evening comes, I open my window a little,

I listen in the silence, I look:

I imagine that he is coming back!

*The dead man's fighting sister:*

If women, too, went to war,

I would have gone, I would have thrown darts beside him:

My brother would not be dead:

Rather, my mother's son would have turned back half way,

He would have pretended he had hurt his foot against a stone.

*All the women:*

Alas! Are they really gone?

Are we abandoned indeed?

But where have they gone

That they cannot come back?

That they cannot come back to see us?

Are they really gone?

Is the underworld insatiable?

Is it never filled?

As the editor and headnote writer, Leloba Molema states, 'Song of the Afflicted' falls within the nexus of warfare rituals whose songs and poems go by the generic name of *mokorotlo*, described by Thomas Mofolo in his novel *Chaka* (1925) as songs of men, songs of war.

Particularly striking, for the purposes of this essay, is the song's performance of gender, to use Judith Butler's term: the situation of war as the generative staging of masculine warriors and feminine mourners. Also presented, and refused is the possibility of gender transgression, as the dead man's sister imagines an alternative role for her brother: 'Rather, my mother's son would have turned back half way, / He would have pretended he had hurt his foot against a stone'.

In our editorial work, our intention was not to select the best or most representative samples from all the material available nationally and internationally (both our time and our budgets were too limited for the kind of comprehensive search that might properly form a basis for such a selection) but — in opening up the archives of Southern African women's cultural and political history to different ways of understanding both the region and the women, and in allowing for the emergence of at least some of the actions and thoughts that had hitherto been obscured — we hoped, rather, to give a new foundation and direction to further primary and archival research. We were very busy indeed, apart from the anthology project, in our various lives as academics/administrators/writers, and in the early days of the project's formulation were not able to meet often enough or for long enough to develop a coherent and binding philosophy, even if a group as diverse as us had been able ideologically to do so. This meant that we worked unsystematically, even haphazardly if perhaps also intuitively, in the discovery of material. Thus, although we often thought in terms of 'representation' and 'gaps', and continually strove to re-balance as best we could the imbalances caused by the standard regional and racial dominations, we also allowed ourselves not to worry about what was clearly emerging as the impossibility among us of a stable and absolute principle of selection. Necessity is the mother of invention. It seemed that we gradually came to agree among ourselves that these somewhat ad hoc procedures were appropriate to the heterogeneity of the editorial group, and would allow the project to slip out of any overarching principle that any one of us, or small grouping of us, might otherwise have imposed. An aim was established, then, even if after the fact (as aims so often are). In some ways this procedure might seem to be a cop-out, even while it was born of necessity. Certainly there were many times when I myself continued to worry about the lacunae and contradictions in our practices of selection. Yet any of the principles we might have devised seemed more and more undesirable, in comparison with the actual selection being produced, and I think it is true to say that there were major benefits in the very unevenness of the selection process. We came up with some unexpected entries, and the overall text reveals juxtapositions and connections which were never planned and, therefore, out of which entirely new theses might emerge — the variety of relations between women and land, for instance, is a provocative one opened up by several of our entries, and the representation of women as landowners themselves, often in legal dispute, usefully contradicts the female passivity deployed in colonial metaphors of woman-as-land. Certainly in the actual editorial selection practice there were major benefits to us as editors and academics:

we were able to listen to one another's impassioned pleas for the inclusion of something or other, on the basis of a principle both absolutely necessary and just devised, and we learnt a good deal from one another as, in discussion sometimes heated and hostile, and sometimes sympathetic, we juggled one entry against another. Our grounds of selection remained contradictory to the end, although we did strive to consider geographical spread, historical continuity, linguistic coverage, cultural and historical representativeness, while trying to avoid thematic repetitiveness; as well as aiming for readability, accessibility, and at least a degree of aesthetic pleasure. Much, we knew, was being left out of the anthology, whether by irresolvable disagreement, error or design, and I am sure we all look forward eagerly to readers' alternative suggestions and, later, to the publication of other historical anthologies that give different perspectives of the cultural and political history of the region.

In the publishers' model, established through the precedent set by the two-volume anthology, *Women Writing in India*, each entry was to be introduced and contextualised in a headnote. The headnotes in the Indian volumes were entirely written by the two editors, and at one time the publishers may have envisaged that the seven Southern African editors would write the headnotes to our volume's entries, too. Indeed, as we brought possible entries forward for the others to consider, some of us were in the habit of writing informal or draft headnotes, to justify our choice. But for publication, it was important to us to commission a wider variety of voices than those we ourselves could provide. Thus the headnotes are written by a range of people (and usually only by one of us when there was a special interest, or a commissioned contribution fell through): sometimes by colleagues who had found entries for us, or from whose critical or theoretical writing we had identified possible entries; sometimes by experts commissioned by us after we had selected entries; sometimes by writers or academics to whose voices we wished to give space, including younger figures who had not yet had the opportunity to publish much or at all. One of the major advantages to our procedure (if sometimes also causing editorial nightmares) was that we received a set of vastly different headnotes, written from varying ideological positions, in varying styles and with varying agendas. Often, they were highly informed essays in brief, making original critical points, and sometimes revealing an important personal connection with the primary material. Unfortunately we often had to submit to the publishers' radical cuts (unless we were willing to do without more of our entries), and the overall effect is a flattening out of some of the headnotes' diversity and contradictoriness. The substantial introduction, too, was a group project, put together from submissions — short and long essays, paragraphs, notes and queries, irritable amendments — made by the larger group of editors and associate editors, altogether eleven of us, at various stages of the process. (It was particularly in relation to the compilation of the introduction that Feminist Press seemed most to regret choosing so many editors, and not designating an editor-in-chief, and it was in this area too that we ourselves had most difficulty as a

group.) In its final stages, the introduction was rewritten and edited for coherence and univocality, because of the demands of readability, but it too has the heterogeneous at its core.

In sum, then, the *Women Writing Africa: Southern Africa* anthology is the project of a group brought together by means of a publishers' commission rather than by prior association or by specifically shared interests. To say this is not to deny that there were some shared interests from the start, or that shared interests were forged during the process, but all that held us together, ultimately, was a desire to produce an anthology. Its finished shape is certainly something that not any one of us, or even two or three or four or five or six of us, could have devised on our own but it is also something that each one of us would, I think, privately wish to correct, taking out one or more entries and substituting others that had been accepted/discarded by the group, adding to or even reshaping the introduction and headnotes. Heterogeneity — a heterogeneity not of harmony but of conflict — is at its core. Even in its being, as Feminist Press devised, an anthology of the written and oral production only of women, it had a fraught history: although one of us wished to exclude men, or at least established, white, male academics, from contributing, the anthology does include headnotes written by men. As Zoë Wicomb has so acutely put it:

The search for a literary/cultural theory to suit the South African situation must surely take as point of departure a conflictual model of society where a variety of discourses will always render problematic the demands of our relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs. (36)

Despite our immense gratitude for the Feminist Press initiative, which was generously enough funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations to allow contributors to be paid and local researchers to be employed, as well as facilitating workshops, plus an extended, overseas workshop, occasionally some of us worried about the imperialism of the project as a whole: Were we creating a literature for export? Were we packaging Southern Africa in a way palatable to outsiders keen to take from our countries a vision of social progress and especially inter-racial harmony that they themselves might not be experiencing at home? Were there ways (of which we could not afford to be aware) in which we were obedient to an outsiders' vision of the project rather than to our own? Embedded in the anthology as one of our major entries is a hitherto unpublished essay by Bessie Head, ironic about an anthropological gaze which, in producing an 'Africa' of others' ideologies, desires to minimise its human and political complexities. Yet Head's dependence on a foreign readership (as in the case of so many other Southern African writers, her first three novels were published in Britain and the U.S. long before they were published at home) in combination with that critique gives an appropriateness to the anthology's dependence on foreign funding and even on foreign enthusiasm (in despair at one or other problem relating to the project, we often became tired or apathetic, and had to be cajoled and threatened into action by the formidable

publisher and editor, Florence Howe). Such ambiguities must be seen as appropriate, too, to any sociology of Southern African writing, for both the editorial and economic facilitation and the consequent difficulties of patronisation and misrepresentation are symptomatic of the differentials of power/knowledge that define relations between the 'First' and 'Third' worlds.

Of course, these labels are not necessarily to be seen as ways of naming the Euro-American world versus the Southern African world but as naming 'worlds' within Southern Africa itself, with its extreme economic differentiation. As suggested above, practical difficulties relating to the kind, detail and style of information provided in the headnotes and the introduction were usually conceptualised by us as difficulties regarding the dual audience projected for the volume, given that the audience projected by Feminist Press was primarily a U.S. student population, whereas the editors preferred to envisage a Southern African student readership, including aspiring writers who might use the anthology as sources for their own work. There were also some difficulties regarding content: what would be new to a U.S. audience (we said to ourselves) would not be new to a Southern African one, for instance; or what would be readily accessible to a U.S. audience, through U.S. publication, would be less accessible — and often impossibly expensive — to a Southern African audience than are locally produced publications. However, what no local, Southern African publication can deal with satisfactorily are the very different audiences within Southern Africa too, with different needs, demands, knowledge, expectations, and ideological positions (a rift between activists and academics is but one of the defining conflicts). Our felt difficulties in discussion with Feminist Press may sometimes have been a symptom of unspoken and irresolvable difficulties as regards this extraordinarily heterogeneous Southern African world. The residual power imbalances of imperialism and colonialism — including those within the Southern African region — remain one of the continuing facts of Southern African existence, which — if postcolonial — is only so in the temporal sense.

Insofar as our anthology is an address to — rather than simply marketed for — both an audience abroad and a not-very-different audience at home (and insofar as it is, too, an address to itself as a conflictual representation), it invites its audience to take new account not only of the ways Southern African women transform neo-colonial and even postcolonial assumptions and stereotypes but also of changing configurations of gender. Much of the literature on African women is written by non-Africans, and most of the theoretical foundations on which women's studies are based emanate from studies of women in Western societies. The specificities and nuances of the Southern African situation have for too long been left out of the narratives of postcolonialism and of feminism published abroad; both feminism and postcolonialism have also been too much driven by theoretical essays written by well established academic figures, and too little by the productions of those who have experienced colonial and other oppressions and their ramifications first-hand. It is, after all, first-world academics who are given

grants to travel to Africa and to write about Africa, while third-world academics remain in the classroom, teaching — too often — elementary English. Revisionist historical accounts of gender from Southern African historians and cultural critics depend, on the whole, on micro-analysis (significantly to the argument in this essay about the need to preserve heterogeneity), and have not issued in generalised theorisations about Southern African gender configurations. In offering primary writing and orature and also critical perspectives from Southern African women from widely varying localities, temporalities, and political and cultural positions, our anthology serves to render in more nuanced ways the historical relations within and between various Southern African social groupings than can be done through those still used but tired terms ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘white’ and ‘black’, ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’, for instance, and even through the more fashionable or current abstractions whereby subjects and positions are known as ‘multiply organised’, ‘hybrid’, ‘dispersed’, ‘ambivalent’ and ‘fragmentary’. While these terms are bound to be useful in many analyses of the anthology entries, their own limitations or at least their provisionality will also often be apparent, and certainly too the entries constantly demand that such terms be historically substantiated so that they are seen as specific to the situation and are not either generalised into abstraction or celebrated as liberatory in themselves. In contrast to current fashion, on the other hand, readers may sometimes feel the need to respect the felt political necessity for the ‘authentic’ or ‘singular’ or ‘unified’ subject. Moreover, as regards that often problematised stance in postcolonial criticism, ‘speaking for’, many of our entries make visible a greater variety and complexity of ways than usually conceived in which critics need to address issues of representation and accountability: for instance, it is not always the case that those with cultural power are middle class and white, as for instance examined in Zoë Wicomb’s short story, ‘Another Story’, one of our anthology entries.

As regards both Euro-American and our own projected Southern African audiences, we wished particularly to invite new understandings of the development of a Southern African feminism. Some critics have argued that South African feminist analysis has been too much driven by white academic feminists for it to be acceptable to black academic critics and activists (see, for example, Lewis and Maqagi). The texts we have in our anthology change how we understand the history of feminism over the last eighty years or more, and they also demand attention to the enormous variety of conditions both facilitating and inhibiting women’s speech and women’s writing. For instance, even after political and economic independence from colonial rule, and even where material conditions considerably improved for black people after political independence, as in Botswana and Zimbabwe, patriarchal conditions continue to militate against women’s writing in alarmingly basic ways, and some of our texts exist despite the prohibitions of husbands and fathers, and also sometimes mothers and sisters. On the other hand, early political essays from two Xhosa (South African) women, Charlotte Manye Maxeke and Nolwandle Jabavu, are set in a context of uxorial

support, mission-educated men and women tending to marry one another and thereby advancing both their careers. These essays, along with other anthology entries from black spokeswomen in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, reveal a manifest if partial indebtedness to Euro-American feminism; from the mid-1970s, with the rise in Black Consciousness, such indebtedness would be disavowed, and feminism would be conflated with Eurocentricism. Many of our entries, too, give more nuanced understandings of the now standard polarity of academic versus activist.

Arguably, the heterogeneity of the anthology — that is, the set of internal conflicts woven into its composition, along with the multiplicity of perspectives, many of which contradict received opinion — will work towards creating a kind of critical self-consciousness and debate in Southern African audiences in which voices or perspectives once marginalised or repressed now surface to awareness, and in which the differences and remaining hostilities between Southern Africans consequent on our divergent economic, cultural and political locations are not obscured — as they tend to be in current sentimentalising concepts, ‘rainbow nation’ or ‘national reconciliation’, for example — but are aired in open and reciprocal discussion. To quote Julia Kristeva’s remarkable essay ‘Might Not Universality Be ... Our Own Foreignness’ in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, the diversity of the anthology might encourage Southern African readers to become ‘familiar [...] with our own ghosts’ (191).

Not surprisingly, it became evident during the anthology compilation and the composition of the introduction that the terms at the very heart of our anthology, ‘woman’ and ‘women’, meant something different to all those involved in the production of the anthology, whether to the seven of us in the central editorial group, or to those in the larger working group that included associate editors, series editors and publisher, or to the larger community of writers involved, including not only the women whose words we gathered for the anthology, which range from the middle of the eighteenth century into the early twenty-first century, but also the numerous headnote writers. We knew that different readers, too, would understand the terms differently. And for me, at least, these differences came to be part of our point. As I saw it, the anthology would most usefully show an interest not just in what has after all come to be a truism in poststructuralist cultural studies — that what it is to be a ‘woman’ continually fluctuates, depending on the historical context, and on the political demands of the time; not just in the fact that gender, so crucial to the articulations of identity, social aspiration, and voice, continually changes meaning in relation to different understandings or experiences of class and race, themselves shifting categories, and to age and seniority, geographical location, religion, and so on; but also that gender is continually in process, and that the performance of gender (to return to Butler’s phrasing) depends on the actual or the projected audience, since in the illocutionary act of self-presentation the presented self varies with audience and address. This is why, for instance, it is productive to see gender not simply as oppositional (as the binary

categories of gender have it), and not simply as 'tethered to' its other (as Homi Bhabha so usefully amends the dynamic) (44), but as a category always in a process of being read or received or acted on. Gender is not just a performance nor (as Butler also says) 'a performative' but a performance and a performative both mediated by the 'other' to whom it is either explicitly or implicitly addressed, and also the 'other' who is interpellated by it.

This understanding of gender comes into focus and is given particularly interesting substantiation in our anthology through our selection of two early political petitions, a petition against residence tax signed by the Indian Women's Association (1908) and a petition against passes from the Native and Coloured Women of the Orange Free State (1912), signed by 5,000 women. In political petitions, women do not speak from a pre-existing position but stage themselves as a category or group, formulated for a particular purpose in a specific historical moment. Political petitions (along with charters) are thus an important genre in the anthology, not least because — showing women grouped in political action — they show that in the moment of political petition the question of what it means to *be* a woman comes to be deeply tied (in a way that Freud did not contemplate) to the question about what women *want*. With this kind of focus (one which is offered in our anthology also through court testimonies, although there the focus is on the individual), what women want can less readily be addressed simply to the issue of sexual desire, itself too readily founded on the definition of women through the phallogentric category of sexual difference. While the representation of sexual desire is by no means left out of our selected anthology entries, which thus allow for the momentary or occasional conflation of women with their bodies, such entries are contextualised through the anthology's recognition that political desires — which is to say, human desires — are also constitutive of women, and indeed of 'woman'.

Nonetheless, in the petitions' address, the category of (racialised) sexual difference inevitably plays a part. The 1912 Petition of the Native and Coloured Women of the Province of the Orange Free State asks for the repeal of an 1893 Pass Law. African men over the age of 16 were already carrying passes, and the petition against the extension of these passes to women was couched in a language that both worked in terms of, and rejected, current understandings of femininity. Inhibiting women's movements had the intention, in the words of the petition, of making 'the native and coloured women in the Province of the Orange Free State ever feel their inferiority'. The signatories also objected (or, it was objected in their name) to the fact that women wanting to remain in urban areas were allowed to do so only if they took up paid domestic labour, while also noting that the police examination of passes put them at risk of being harassed and raped, their homes ransacked and their families separated. While the conventional association between women and the home is confirmed (passes for men were not rejected on the basis of family values), the gendered subordination of women — riven here with racial subordination — is rejected, through the references to women's

confinement to domestic work, and their physical vulnerability to policemen. Since it stands at a moment of historical transition between colonial discourse and the discourse of universal human rights, the petition is discursively contradictory as regards, also, the relation between women and the law. In order to provide a contrast with the kind of law that produces pass laws, the petition describes 'just, progressive and protective law' as law that would be responsible for women's 'elevation in the scale of civilisation' while it also abandons the tones of colonial discourse for a more modern, economic discourse of human rights, in which just law for women is defined as that which would 'improve their social status'.

In the 1908 Petition of the Indian Women's Association (an association of women who had themselves immigrated or were descended from immigrants from India), again, the context is one in which a larger group, women and men, are discriminated against. The tax, a residence licence, was directed at indentured Indians who had completed their contracts with their employers, and were not being re-indentured or returning to India; it was a means of enforcing either repatriation or prolonged indentured labour. Although the petition complains that the sum is too high for Indians, 'irrespective of sex [...] owing to their helpless and indigent state', the petition focuses exclusively on women, 'weak and gentle' by nature, who wish 'to ameliorate and elevate the condition of their sex' by avoiding this taxation. As in the 1912 Petition, femininity is also defined partly through the risks of 'domestic infelicity'. Moreover, more strikingly, and differently, it is said to be 'with great shame and sorrow' that the Indian Women's Association makes the following social threat: women in default of payment would be tempted 'to barter their female modesty and virtue' in order to avoid the horror of going to court. Such a threat plays both on sexual and racial difference, and has considerable force in a context of the official forging of a white nation, and of white women's anxieties about their white husbands straying into the arms of 'exotic' women. Southern African history often focuses on what was commonly known as the 'black peril'; our anthology shows the 'peril' to be decidedly white, although here, of course, the reversal is a gender reversal, rather than one of race, as the Indian women mockingly inhabit the position of the perilous black.

What it means to be a woman is proposed, in these petitions, in a highly specific, contingent and provisional way by the signatories, and then somewhat differently by the headnote writers in a way that extends our understanding of gender as a performative act. This is to say that petitions are constitutive of more women than the 'women' who sign them. Interestingly, both headnote writers, Devarakshanam Govinden regarding the 1908 petition, and Rirhandzu Magweza regarding the 1912 petition, draw connections between the political moment under respective discussion and the later mobilisation of black women in 1956, from which so many Southern African women take at least an aspect of their self-image. Says Govinden: 'In 1952, when Africans and Indians organised the fourth Passive Resistance Campaign, a Multiracial Conference of Women was held in

Johannesburg. This culminated in the historic march by South African women of all race groups on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, on August 9, 1956'. Magweza writes: 'On 9 August 1956, in the same spirit as the OFS women, 20,000 women marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, singing: 'You have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock'. It is with these two groups of women that we should venture proudly into the new African century, upholding the rights our foremothers claimed for us.'

The performance of femininity inheres in its reading, which is inevitably also to a greater or lesser degree a misreading, and is, in the case of these two petitions at least, racially conflictual. A major difference between the two identifications suggested above is that, although both identify with the broader multiracial political movement of women, Magweza deploys a discourse of black motherhood consequent on the discourse of the Black Consciousness movement as she explicitly interpellates herself into the 1912 Petition rather than the 1908 Petition. Of the later petition, she says, 'the women do not grovel. Their assumption of motherhood lends them strength, authority and agency, a characteristic of black women's struggles in South Africa up into the 1990s'. For her, its primary importance lies in the fact that 'a multitude of women of different ethnicities and social backgrounds could mobilise around a single issue, and that they could do so without presenting themselves as the weaker sex'. Thus, whereas Govinden's analysis uses the performance of Indian women to project an amalgamation of women from Indian and African and other race groups, Magweza's analysis projects an absorption into the 'African' of a heterogenous group of women in racial and class terms. They are similar, however, in that their own performance of gender responds to the performative act of the petition (which is in each case somewhat ambiguously gendered) through a reading, or misreading, that minimises the gender ambiguities and focuses on the racial configuration.

When it was decided to include women's petitions, the anthology came up against a problematic of authorship that the editors had elsewhere felt we had quite resolved. For example, we had easily if regretfully decided to exclude an early eighteenth-century court record referring to an enslaved woman, known to us simply as Trijntje of Madagascar, since we could not establish in the record her presentation of testimony through the use of the word 'I'.<sup>6</sup> If the word 'I' appeared, we decided, the testimony would be hers. In these two petitions, where of course 'we' substitutes for 'I', the anthology's representation of 'women' is complicated in that both petitions were both obviously drafted at least in part by lawyers, perhaps male, and the later petition at least, with the telling use of the phrase 'their women-folk', shows evidence of male mediation. For example, Clause 3(a) reads: 'That this law is a source of grievance to your petitioners in that: — It renders them liable to interference by any policeman at any time, and in that way deprives them of that liberty enjoyed by their women-folk in other Provinces'.

The problematic of authorship, therefore, was this: the petitions may not have actually been written by the women signatories themselves; the precise wording of the petition may not have been formulated even by one of the women organisers of the petition; the formulation and the writing may have been the responsibility, rather, not simply of male lawyers acting on the women's behalf but even, as part of that process, of male lawyers imagining what would be appropriately voiced by women and thus of putting words into women's mouth. While some degree of mediation occurred in virtually all of our inclusions, and while our entire project is itself a form of mediation, the kinds of mediation either evident or simply likely in these petitions (the origins of these petitions are not for the moment traceable) throws into focus that pronoun 'we'. What, then, of our reasoning regarding the exclusion of Trijntje's reported testimony yet the inclusion of other court testimonies which, only through a different orthodoxy, included the pronoun 'I'? If the 'I' in the court record is as mediated as the word 'we' in the petition, how much difference does it make to include a court record using the word 'she'? In the petitions, although the legal language effaces any conventional signs of individual creativity, the desires of women are evident in the targeted social change, and femininity is both performed, in the sense of being staged, and is a performative, in the sense of being enacted at the moment of enunciation, in a configuration that gives it specificity as a race-gender category which is then taken up and reshaped by a younger generation. These political petitions thus invite an interrogation of the category 'woman', the relation between 'woman' and 'women', and the relation between 'women' and 'men'; correspondingly, too, they invite an interrogation of the race categories that enter their discourse or are part of their mediation, whether at the moment of composition or at the moment of reception.

Anthologies tend not to question the essentialist grounding of their categorical limits, and certainly not when these relate to gender, and since it was generally felt inappropriate to do so in our introduction we were able to shelve the problem. Nonetheless, a crucial point is being made through our anthology, by virtue of its more obviously mediated entries, and this is to do not only with the impossibility of the question of women's 'own' voices, but also with the precariousness and provisionality of the ongoing production, through the signatures and voices of multiply situated women, of what come to be known as 'Southern African women'. Just as the anthology makes the implicit point that a legal advisor might write for — or 'speak for' — a group of women whose voices we as readers now receive as their 'own', so too does it make the point that a political situation, or a cultural one, might equally decisively shape a woman's voice, and that — in that moment of shaping — a man's voice, or men's voices, or racially/ethnically 'other' voices, might be actually, if not officially, involved. Questions of hegemony continually arise to destabilise the notion of 'own' voice, yet this point remains insufficiently recognised, whether in postcolonial projects of 'speaking back' or in anthology projects like our own. Nevertheless, it remains true that the political petition signed by women — or any other text so signed — substantiates the concept 'women' in specific ways, and serves to produce for the

external world a stance recognisably 'female', creating a speaking position others are able to identify with or to measure themselves against.

If the kinds of substantiation given to the concept 'women' through the various different entries in the anthology depends not just on the specific ways the signatories place themselves — or are placed — through the linguistic gestures they make and on the political contexts that give rise to and are put in place by their stances, but also on the different shapes given them, and the different identifications they give rise to, in the very different acts of reception to which they are subject, then the performance of 'women', and the performative of gender, includes the reading that this anthology will undergo. I myself liked to think (though found no acceptable way of saying so in the introduction, and here too struggle for the words to make my meaning clear) that the title, *Women Writing Africa*, used the present participle 'Writing' to denote an ongoing process of creation which included all the women engaged in the project, as well as the readers (whether women or men, but, if men, positioning themselves provisionally and sympathetically as 'women'), and I liked also to suppose that the participle carried within it a kind of bi-directionality — 'women' write 'Africa', and 'Africa' writes 'women' — as if the participle 'writing' could hold the two concepts, 'women' and 'Africa', in a precarious, mutually dependent signification in which both terms remain open to meaning even as they are being launched on a trajectory of bounded reciprocity (the 'Africa' that women have been and are in the process of writing, and the 'women' continually being produced in that 'Africa' being written). In this regard it is possible to see in the terms 'woman' and 'Africa' something yet to be discovered, the 'woman'/'Africa' always in the process of becoming, in a way that promises to transcend the land/woman metaphor that has relegated women to passivity, and also the social, historical, and geographical divisions that have hitherto been definitive. Thus, as regards the problematically oversimplified relation between the text and its author or authors referred to earlier, this anthology arguably recognises the continuing volatility of this relation by foregrounding the ways in which the authorial positions are constantly being 'engendered' and 'raced' (rather than starting from a fixed or stable position) depending on the cultural demands and possibilities of the time. Current readings of them will re-perform them in different ways, comprehending the entries in the context of a variety of ideologies — or at least preconceptions — about gender. Different readers will inhabit, adjust, appropriate and misread these voices and their performances of identity very differently, perhaps reflecting them with idiosyncracies that themselves await social comprehension and assimilation into the 'Africa' known and understood.

Much of the point of the anthology, then, for me, is its production of a democratic environment in which readers may freely and independently engage with each entry, assisted by a headnote but not overpowered by it, not in total command of its meanings but rather in dialogue with it. The very heterogeneity of the volume, its temporal and spatial juxtapositions and connections, its multivocality and multi-generic form, will encourage, I hope, a reading for nuance, obviating what has too easily — at least in Southern African academic life — been a reading for stereotype, in which picking out

instances of racist or sexist stereotyping substitutes for close reading. This ability to see the complexity and 'otherness' of the text is to read with respect.

Furthermore, in that this kind of reading opens up new identifications for readers, it may in itself perform some kind of change in consciousness. Acts of writing and reading create a space shared but also not shared by writer and reader: writers are not in full control of their meanings, and readers are actively engaged in creating meaning from the writing rather than being positioned as consumers of a pre-digested world. In this regard reading is an act of creative engagement, and insofar as it helps constitute both new ways of imagining oneself as an individual and new ways of imagining groups, it is a potentially transformative act. The anthology as a whole is best thought of, it seems to me, not as the retrieval of an authentic Southern African past, but as a way of forging Southern African consciousnesses (political, cultural, communal, ancestral) which take their inspiration from the voices of women. These voices are, or may be, important not because they are the voices of women (beings defined by sexual difference) but because they are voices of a heterogeneity hitherto eclipsed.

Recently, many writers and critics have been speaking of writing in relation to transformation. André Brink has argued that fiction — which he conceptualises as existing at the margin of what has happened and what can be newly conceived — is the best means of exploring possibilities of cross-cultural intercourse. South African writers, he observes, continue to feel the need, experienced so deeply during the 1970s and 1980s during the era of Black Consciousness and its particular mode of realism, to tell the 'truths' of apartheid history. However, he argues that writers need to look for a form of narration capable of acknowledging difference without fearing it and without fetishising it. Now that liberation is on its way, said Albie Sachs a year later, culture should no longer be seen as a weapon of the struggle, but should open itself to differently targeted representations; the new value of art lies in its capacity to act as a vehicle of ambiguity. As Brink's term, 'cross-cultural intercourse', and Sachs' particular examples suggest, the post-apartheid reconciliation that critics propose is specifically to do with racial reconciliation, and with the role played in reconciliation by recognising and representing the ambiguities of racial affiliation. What of gender reconciliation? While public discussions of South African social transformation are linked to race, transformations in gender relations are kept specific to gender rather than being seen as affecting society as a whole. Yet, in arguing through this anthology that women's voices need to be more closely attended to than they have been at present, an argument is being made about other social differences as well, for the issue of gender reconciliation necessarily incorporates the issue of reconciliation across race and class and other differentiating categories; in this regard gender is a category ontologically quite different both from class and from race. The argument is not that the selected texts bring to the fore in any immediate way the possibilities (or impossibilities) of reconciliation between women and men, and between women of different races and ethnicities, of different educational and economic backgrounds and statuses, and of different religious and political affiliations; for one thing, most of them are simply not about reconciliation. Instead, it is that, both by virtue of having been historically

suppressed and of representing (at their moments of speaking or writing and at their moments of being read) a multiplicity of positions that gather, precariously, under the name 'woman', they reveal those 'ghosts' without whose recognition social transformation is impossible. Conceivably, an anthology of writings by men, or by women and men, could achieve the same effect, but only if there were a comparable estrangement, where men's voices were seen to be constructed in conditions of heterogeneity, and thus to draw attention to themselves as constructions.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Southern African volume will be published by Feminist Press (New York) in November 2002, and probably by a South African publisher shortly thereafter. Among the larger group of women brought together in an initial meeting by the publisher and series editor, seven of us stayed the course for the subsequent meetings, and thus the editors for the volume are: Margaret Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford, and Nobantu Rasebotsa. The only editor actually appointed at the early stage was Nobantu Rasebotsa, as regional co-ordinator. Although much that is said in this essay may be shared by the other editors, and — as acknowledged at specific moments — is sometimes drawn from their research, it must be stressed that this essay offers a personal view. My thanks to Margie Orford and to Meg Samuelson (editorial assistant) for useful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and to Flinders University for affording me the time and the space to complete the essay for publication.
- <sup>2</sup> For instance, two recent critical books by Julia V. Emberley and Gillian Whitlock written from a poststructuralist feminist perspective, both of them excellent, focus solely on women writers or almost altogether on women writers, respectively.
- <sup>3</sup> In English Southern African literary criticism, the 'canonised' white women writers are Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing (all but Pauline Smith are represented in our anthology, and in each case by relatively unknown writing). There are also 'canonised' black women writers — for instance, Bessie Head and Tsitsi Dangaremba — who are represented in the anthology by unknown pieces, but these writers are less widely known than the white writers. For discussion of the gender blindness of much historical analysis, see Helen Bradford. Both in historical and in literary analysis, however, the picture is changing.
- <sup>4</sup> In the text that follows, I quote and cite the anthology entries (a poem, petitions, and a short story) as well as the headnotes from the manuscript of our anthology, and thus no page numbers are available. The texts of the headnotes may change somewhat in the final version, which has been cut for reasons of space.
- <sup>5</sup> Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* defines gender not as a set of free-floating attributes, but as 'performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence [...], constituting the identity it is purported to be' (24–25).
- <sup>6</sup> For information on Trijntje, see Nigel Penn..

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